

By Order of the League

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

Published: 1886
in »Chambers's Journal«

❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧

Table of Contents

Chapter I ... thru ... Chapter XX

❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧

Chapter I

THE shades of evening had commenced to fall; already the slanting sun shining through the open window glittered on the array of crystal glasses, turning the wine within them to a blood-red hue. The remains of an ample dessert were scattered about the bare polished table, rich luscious-looking fruits and juicy pines filling the air with their fragrance. A pleasant room, with its panelled walls and quaint curiosities, with here and there a modern picture framed; and again other works standing upon easels or placed against the wainscot. From the Corso below came the sounds of laughter and gaiety; while within, the delicate scent of the pines was overpowered by the odour of tobacco which rose from the cigarettes of the three men sitting there. They were all young—artists evidently, and from the appearance of one of them, he was of a different nationality from the others. Frederick Maxwell was an Englishman, with a passion for art, and no doubt had he been forced to gain a living by his brush, would have made some stir in the world; but being born with the traditional silver spoon in his mouth, his flirtation with the arts never threatened to become serious. He was leaving Rome in a few days, and the dessert upon the table was the remains of a farewell dinner—that custom dear to every English heart. A handsome fair-haired man this Englishman, his clear bright cheek and blue eyes contrasting with the aquiline features and olive-hued complexions of his companions. The man with the black moustache and old velvet painting-jacket, a man with bohemian stamped on him indelibly, was Carlo Visci, also an artist, and a genius to boot, but cursed with that indomitable idleness which is the bane of so many men of talent. The other and slighter Italian, he with the melancholy face and earnest eyes, was Luigi Salvarini, independent as to means, and possessed, poor fool, with the idea that he was ordained by Providence for a second Garibaldi.

There is an infinite sense of rest and comfort, the desire to sit silent and dream of pleasant things, that comes with tobacco after dinner, when the eye can dwell upon the wax lights glittering on glass and china, and on the artistic confusion the conclusion of the repast produces. So the three men sat listlessly, idly there, each drowsily engaged, and none caring to break the delicious silence, rendered all the more pleasing from the gay girlish laughter and the trip of little feet coming up from the Corso below. But no true Briton can remain long silent; and Maxwell, throwing his cigarette out through the window, rose to his feet, yawning. 'Heigh-ho! So this pleasant life is come to an end,' he exclaimed. 'Well, I suppose one cannot be expected to be always playing.'

Carlo Visci roused himself to laugh gently. 'Did you ever do anything else, my friend?' he asked. 'You play here under sunny skies, in a velvet painting-jacket; then you leave us to pursue the same arduous toil in the tall hat of Albion's respectability, in the land of fogs and snows. Ah! yes, it is only a change of venue, my philosopher.'

‘Not now,’ Salvarini corrected gravely. ‘Remember, he has vowed by all in his power to aid the welfare of the League. That vow conscientiously followed out is undertaking enough for one man’s lifetime.’

‘Luigi, you are the skeleton at the feast,’ Visci remonstrated. ‘Cannot you be happy here for one brief hour without reminding us that we are bound by chains we cannot sever?’

‘I do not like the mocking tone of your words,’ Salvarini replied. ‘The subject is too earnest for jesting upon.—Surely, Maxwell, you have not so soon forgotten the solemnity of the oath you took last night?’

‘I do remember some gibberish I had to repeat, very much like the conspirators’ chorus at the Opera,’ Maxwell returned with a careless shrug. ‘It is not bad fun playing at sedition.—But for goodness’ sake, Luigi, do not keep harping on the same string, like another Paganini, but without that wizard’s versatility.’

‘You think it play, do you?’ Salvarini asked almost scornfully. ‘You will find it stern reality some day. Your hour may not come yet, it may not come for years; but if you are ordered to cut off your right hand, you will have to obey.’

‘Oh, indeed. Thanks, most earnest youth, for your estimation of my talent for obedience.—Come, Luigi! do not be so Cassandra-like. If the worst comes to the worst, I can pitch this thing into the Tiber.’ He took a gold coin from his pocket as he spoke, making a gesture as if to throw it through the open lattice.

Salvarini stood up, terror written in every line of his face, as he arrested the outstretched arm. ‘For heaven’s sake, Maxwell, what are you thinking of? Are you mad, or drunk, that you can dream of such a thing?’

Maxwell laughed as he restored the coin to his pocket. ‘All right, old fellow. I suppose I must honour your scruples; though, mind you, I do not consider myself bound to do anything foolish even for the League.’

‘You may not think so; indeed, I hope not; but time will tell.’

Maxwell laughed again, and whistled carelessly, thinking no more of the little episode. The League, the coin, everything was forgotten; but the time did come when he in his hour of need remembered Luigi’s words, and vividly realised the meaning of the look on his stern earnest face.

Visci looked on at the incident, totally unmoved, save by a desire to lead the conversation into more pleasant channels. ‘When do you leave, Maxwell?’ he asked. ‘I suppose you are not going for a few days?’

‘In about a week probably, not sooner. I did not know I had so many friends in Rome, till I was going to leave them.’

‘You will not forget your visit to my little place? Genevieve will never forgive me if I let you go without saying good-bye.’

‘Forget little Genevieve!’ Maxwell cried. ‘No, indeed. Whatever my engagements may be, I shall find time to see her; though, I daresay, the day will come when she will forget me easily enough.’

‘I am not so sure of that; she is a warm-hearted child. I tell you what we will do; and perhaps Sir Geoffrey and his daughter will join us. We will go down the day alter to-morrow, and make a day of it—Of course you will be one, Luigi?’

It was growing dark now, too dark to see the rich flush that mounted to the young Italian’s cheek. He hesitated a moment before he spoke. ‘With pleasure, Carlo. A day at your little paradise is not to be lightly refused. I will come gladly.’

'You make a slight mistake, Visci, when you speak of Genevieve as a child,' Maxwell observed reflectively. 'She is seventeen—a woman, according to your Italian reckoning. At any rate, she is old enough to know the little blind god, or I am much mistaken.'

'I hope not,' Visci returned gravely. 'She is quick and passionate, and somewhat old for her years, by reason of the seclusion she keeps. But let the man beware who lightly wins her heart; it would go hard with him if I crossed his path again!'

'There are serpents in every paradise,' Maxwell replied sententiously; 'and let us hope little Gen is free from the curiosity of her original ancestress. But child or not, she has a woman's heart worth the winning, in which assertion our silent friend here will bear me out.'

Luigi Salvarini started from his reverie. 'You are right, Maxwell,' he said. 'Many a man would be proud to wear her gage upon his arm. Even I—But why ask me? If I was even so disposed to rest under my own fig-tree, there are ties which preclude such a blissful thought'

Maxwell whistled softly, and muttered something about a man drawing a bow at a venture—the words audible to Salvarini alone.

'I am tied, as I told you,' he continued coldly. 'I do not know why you have drawn me into the discussion at all. I have sterner work before me than dallying by a woman's side looking into her eyes—'

'And not anything like so pleasant, I dare swear,' Maxwell interrupted cheerfully. 'Come, Luigi; do not be so moody. If I have said anything in my foolish way to offend you, I am heartily sorry.'

'I am to blame, Maxwell, not you. You wonder why I am so taken up with this League; if you will listen, I will tell you. The story is old now; but I will tell you as best I can remember.'

'Then, perhaps you will wait till I have found a seat and lighted my cigarette,' exclaimed a voice from the background at this moment. 'If Salvarini is going to oblige, I cut in as a listener.'

At these words, uttered in a thin, slightly sneering voice, the trio turned round suddenly. Had it been lighter, they would have seen a trim, well-built figure, with head well set on square shoulders, and a perfectly cut, deadly pale face, lighted with piercing black eyes, and adorned by a well-waxed, pointed moustache. From his accents, there must have been something like a sneer upon his lips. But whatever he might have been, he seemed to be welcome enough now as he drew a chair to the open window.

'Better late than never,' Maxwell cried. 'Help yourself to wine, Le Gautier; and make all due apologies for not turning up to dinner.'

'I will do so,' the newcomer said languidly. 'I was detained out of town.—No; you need not ask if a pair of bright eyes were the lodestars to my ardent soul, for I shall not tell you; and in the second place, I have been obtaining your permit as a Brother of the League. I offered up myself on the shrine of friendship; I lost my dinner, *voilà tout*;' and saying these words, he put a narrow slip of parchment in Maxwell's hands.

'I suppose I had better take care of this?' the Englishman answered carelessly. 'I got so exasperated with Salvarini, that I came near ditching the sacred moidore out of the window. I presume it would not be wise?'

‘Not if you have any respect for a sound body,’ Le Gautier returned dryly. ‘I gather that Luigi has been talking largely about the sacredness of the mission. Well, he is young yet, and the gilt of his enthusiasm does not yet show the nickel beneath, which reminds me. Did my ears deceive me, or were we going to hear a story?’

‘It is no story,’ the Italian replied, ‘merely a little family record, to show you how even patriots are not exempt from tyranny.—You remember my brother, Visci? and his wife. He settled down, after fighting years for his country, not many miles from here. Living with him was his wife’s father, an aged man, universally beloved—a being who had not a single enemy in the world. Well, time went on, till one day, without the slightest warning, the old fellow was arrested for compliance in some so-called plot. My brother’s wife clung round her father’s neck; and there, in my brother’s sight, he saw his wife stricken brutally down by the ruffianly soldiers—dead; dead, mind—her only crime that little act of affection—killed by order of the officer in charge. But revenge followed. Paulo shot three of the scoundrels dead, and left the officer, as he thought, dying. Since then, I have never heard of Paulo.—And now, do you wonder why I am a Socialist, with my hand against all authority and order, when it is backed up by such cowardly, unprovoked oppression as this?’

For a time the listeners remained silent, watching the twinkling stars as they peeped out one by one, nothing to be seen now of each but the glowing tip of his cigarette as the blue smoke drifted from the casement.

‘You do not think that your brother and Paulo Lucci, the celebrated brigand we hear so much of, are the same men?’ Visci asked at length. ‘People have said so, you understand.’

‘I have heard such a tale,’ Salvarini replied sardonically. ‘The affair created quite a stir in the province at the time; but the peasants do me too much homage in connecting my name with so famous a character. Our Italian imagination does not rest at trifles.’

‘Pleasant for the officer who ordered them to strike down your brother’s wife,’ Le Gautier drawled, as he emitted a delicate curl of smoke from his nostrils. ‘Did you ever hear the name of the fellow?’

‘Curiously enough, his name is the same as yours, though I cannot be sure, as it is five years ago now. He was a Frenchman, likewise.’

‘Moral—let all Le Gautiers keep out of Paulo Lucci’s way,’ Maxwell exclaimed, rising to his feet ‘We do not pay you the compliment of believing you are the same man; but these brigands are apt to strike first and inquire after. Of course, this is always presuming Salvarini’s brother and Paulo Lucci are one.—I am going as far as the Villa Salvarini. Who says ay to that proposal?—The ayes have it’

They rose to their feet with one accord, and after changing their coats for something more respectable, trooped down the stairs.

‘You will not forget about Friday?’ Visci reminded. ‘I shall ask Sir Geoffrey and his daughter to come. We are going down to my little place on that day.—Will you make one, Le Gautier?’

‘A thousand thanks, my dear Visci,’ the Frenchman exclaimed; ‘but much as I should like it, the thing is impossible. I am literally overwhelmed in the most important work.’

A general laugh followed this solemn assertion.

'I am sorry,' Visci returned politely. 'You have never been there. I do not think you have ever seen my sister?'

'Never,' Le Gautier replied with an inexplicable smile. 'It is a pleasure to come.'

Chapter II

WITHOUT the city walls, hidden by the umbrella pines, and back from those secluded walks where young Rome takes its pleasure, stood the Villa Salvarino, almost under the shade of the walls, and hard by the gate of San Pancrazio. In the more prosperous days of the Eternal City, it might have been, and indeed was, the residence of some great Roman family; but aristocracies decline and families pass away; and the haughty owners were by no means averse from making a few English pounds by letting it to any traveller who had the inclination or the means to spend a few months there. The present tenant at this bright Easter-time, Sir Geoffrey Charteris, of Grosvenor Square, London, W., and Haversham Park, in the county of Dorset, Baronet, Deputy-lieutenant, and Justice of the Peace, was a man of long descent. The pale azure fluid in his veins was not the blood of us poor mortals; his life-giving stream had been transmitted through succeeding generations from a long line of gallant warriors and gentle dames; from fearless ancestors who followed their sovereign at the call to arms, marched with Richard of the Lion-heart to the Holy Sepulchre, and maybe crossed swords with the doughty Saladin himself. The title, conferred upon a Charteris by the Black Prince in person after the glorious field of Crécy, had known no tarnish as it passed down the long line of great and good men, soldiers, statesmen, and divines, to the present worthy representative of all these honours. Not that he had greatly distinguished himself in any field, save as an Under-secretary in a short-lived inglorious Ministry, where he had made a lasting name as the most incompetent individual ever appointed to office, though he dated every subsequent event and prefixed every after-dinner story by an allusion to the time when he was in the Earl of Muddleton's Ministry.

The reception rooms of the villa were crowded when our friends arrived. It was a kind of informal after-dinner reception, attended by most of the English visitors lingering after the Carnival, with some sprinkling of the resident aristocracy; for Sir Geoffrey liked to gather people round him, birth and genius being equally welcome. Sir Geoffrey looked every inch an English gentleman, standing there among his guests. He was apparently about fifty years of age, tall and straight, thoroughbred from his stiff gray hair to the small shapely feet, as yet untroubled by the family gout. His eyes were pale blue, and somewhat weak; his face, clear-cut and refined, with an aquiline nose and a high white forehead, but the whole marred by a mouth weak and nervous to the last degree. A connoisseur of art, a dabbler in literature, and last, but not least, a firm believer in spiritualism.

Enid Charteris, his only daughter and heiress, a girl about eighteen, must be taken for granted. Imagine in all your dreams of fair women what a golden-

bronzed-haired girl should be, and you have Enid, with all her charms of manner and person, with that perfect expression without which the most classic features are cold. She smiled brightly as the new-comers entered. It is not given to everyone to be able to disguise their likings and antipathies, and it did not need a practised eye to see her cold greeting for Le Gautier, and the instantaneous glance for Maxwell.

'I really began to think you were going to fail me,' she said; 'and this is the last of our receptions too. I shall always have pleasant recollections of my visit to Rome.'

'We have been dining with Maxwell, Miss Charteris,' Visci explained. 'Could we forget you, if we tried! And now, before you are so engaged that you can have no word for poor me, I want to ask you a favour. We are going to my country retreat on Friday, and my sister Genevieve is dying to see you. Do persuade Sir Geoffrey to come.'

'Here he is to answer for himself,' she replied, as the baronet sauntered up to the group.—'Papa, you must promise to take me to see Signor Visci's country-house on Friday.—Do you hear?'

'Anything you say is law, my dear,' Sir Geoffrey answered with comic resignation. 'Anything you desire.—Le Gautier, I wish to speak to you,' he whispered quietly; 'come to me presently.—Salvarini, you here? I thought you had forsworn gaieties of all descriptions. Glad to see you are thinking better of your misanthropy.'

Le Gautier turned off with the baronet somewhat impatiently, leaving the rest together. Salvarini, looking on somewhat thoughtfully, almost fancied there was a look of relief on Enid's face as the Frenchman left; certainly, she was less constrained.

'We shall look forward to Friday with great pleasure, then, Signor Visci,' she said. 'I have heard you speak so much of the Villa Mattio, that I am expecting to see a perfect paradise.'

'With two Eves,' Maxwell whispered in English. Visci was not a man to misunderstand the meaning of true company, so, with a bow and a little complimentary speech, he turned aside, taking Salvarini by the arm, and plunged into the glittering crowd.

'I do not understand the meaning there,' Salvarini remarked as they walked through the rooms. 'If Maxwell means—'

'Orange blossoms,' Visci interrupted laconically; 'and right, too.—Let us get into the music-room. Le Fanu is going to play.'

Maxwell remained by Enid's side, toying with her fan and discoursing in their native language in a low voice. From the expression on his face and the earnest ring in his voice, there was no doubting the power of the attraction that chained him there.

'When do you leave Rome, Miss Charteris?' he asked, abruptly changing the conversation. 'This is your last reception, I know.'

'We shall leave in the middle of next week for certain. I shall be very sorry for some reasons, for I have been happy here.'

'I shall probably return with you,' Maxwell observed. 'I have deferred my departure too long already. It would be pleasant to leave together.'

‘After learning everything that Rome could teach you,’ Enid put in archly. ‘Then the Eternal City has no more artistic knowledge to impart?’

‘Yes; I have learned some lessons here.’ Maxwell replied with a tender inflection, ‘besides artistic ones. I have been learning one lately that I am never likely to forget. Am I presumptuous, Miss Enid?’

‘Really, Mr Maxwell, you are too mysterious. If I could understand you—’

‘I think you do understand me; I fervently hope you do.’

For a moment, a little wild-rose bloom trembled and flushed on the girl’s cheek, then she looked down, playing with her fan nervously. No reason to say she did not understand now. Maxwell did not follow up his advantage; some instinct warned him not; and adroitly changing the conversation, he told her of his life in Rome, each passing moment linking his chains the firmer. Gradually, as they sat talking, a group of men gathered round, breaking in upon their tête-à-tête, laughing and talking after the most approved drawing-room fashion.

In a distant corner, Sir Geoffrey had buttonholed Le Gautier, and was apparently deep in conversation on some all-absorbing subject. The Frenchman was a good listener, with that rare faculty of hearing all that was worthy of note and entirely ignoring the superfluous. He was not a man to talk much of himself, and consequently heard a great deal of family history; details and information that astute young man had found valuable on occasions. He was interested now, Maxwell thought, as he idly speculated upon his face.

‘Yes,’ Sir Geoffrey was saying, ‘I am firmly impressed with that belief.’

He had got upon his favourite topic, and was talking with great volubility. ‘There are certain gifted beings who can call spirits from the vasty deep, and, what is more, the spirits will come. My dear sir, they have been manifested to me.’

‘I should not wonder,’ Le Gautier replied, stifling a yawn in its birth. ‘I think you are quite right I am what people call a medium myself, and have assisted at many a *séance*.’

‘Of course you believe the same as I. Let unbelievers scoff if they will, I shall always believe the evidence of my eyes.’

‘Of course,’ Le Gautier returned politely, his thoughts wandering feebly in the direction of nightmare, and looking round for some means of escape. ‘I have seen ghosts myself, or thought I have?’

‘It is no imagination, Le Gautier,’ Sir Geoffrey continued, with all the prosy earnestness of a man with a hobby. ‘The strangest coincidence happened to me. My late brother, Sir Ughtred, who has been dead nearly twenty years, manifested himself to me the other night. Surely that implies some coming evil, or some duty I have neglected?’

‘Perhaps he charged you with some commission,’ Le Gautier observed, pricking up his ears for any scrap of useful information.

‘Not that I remember; indeed, I did not see him for years before he died. He was an eccentric man, and an extreme politician—in fact, he got into serious trouble with the authorities, and might even have been arrested, had he not removed himself to New York.’

‘New York?’ queried Le Gautier, wondering vaguely where he had heard of this Ughtred Charteris before. ‘Was he connected with any secret society—any Socialist conspiracy?’

‘Do you know, I really fancy he was,’ Sir Geoffrey whispered mysteriously. ‘There were certainly some curious things in his effects which were sent to me. I can show you some now, if you would like to see them.’

Le Gautier expressed his willingness; and the baronet led the way into a small room at the back of the house, half library, half studio. In one corner was an old ebony cabinet; and opening the front, he displayed a multitude of curiosities such as a man will gather together in the course of years. In one little drawer was a case of coins. Le Gautier turned them over carelessly one by one, till, suddenly starting, he eagerly lifted one and held it to the light.

‘Where did you get this?’ he asked abruptly.

Sir Geoffrey took it in his hand. It was a gold coin, a little larger than an ordinary sovereign, and bearing on the reverse side a curious device.

‘That came with the rest of my brother’s curiosities.—But why do you ask? You look as if the coin had burnt you.’

For a moment, Le Gautier had started back, his pale face aglow with suppressed excitement; but as he noticed the baronet’s wondering eyes upon him, he recovered himself by a violent effort.

‘It is nothing’—with a smile. ‘It is only the coincidence which startled me for a moment. If you will look here, you will see that I wear a similar coin upon my watch-chain.’

Sir Geoffrey looked down, and, surely enough, on the end of Le Gautier’s pendant was the facsimile of the medal he held in his hand.

‘Bless me, what an extraordinary thing!’ the startled baronet exclaimed. ‘So it is! Perhaps you do not mind telling me where you procured yours?’

‘It was given to me,’ Le Gautier replied, with an enigmatic smile. ‘It could not help you, if I told you.—Sir Geoffrey, may I ask you to lend me this coin for a short while? I will tell you some time what I want it for.’

‘Some other time, perhaps.’—Le Gautier threw the coin into its place.—‘You see, I regard it as a valuable curiosity and relic, or perhaps I might part with it. You will pardon me.—But I forgot all about our spiritualistic discourse. As you are a medium, I will ask you—’

‘At some future time, with all the pleasure in life,’ Le Gautier interrupted hastily. ‘Meanwhile, it is getting late—past eleven now.’

As they walked back to the salon, the Frenchman was busy with his thoughts. ‘What a lucky find!’ he muttered. ‘It is the missing insignia, sure enough, and the ill-fated Ughtred Charteris is mine host’s brother. I wonder what I can make out of this? There ought to be something in it, with a feeble-minded man who believes in spiritualism, if my hand has not lost its cunning. *Nous verrons.*’

He showed nothing of his thoughts, however, as he parted from Enid with a smile and neatly turned compliment. It was getting late now; the streets were empty as the friends turned homeward, Salvarini bidding the others goodnight and turning off in the direction of his apartments.

‘You had better change your mind, and come with us on Friday, Hector,’ Visci urged Le Gautier. ‘The baronet and his daughter are to be of the party. Throw work to the dogs for the day, and come.’

‘My dear Carlo, the thing is impossible. Do you think I should be chained here this lovely weather, if stern necessity did not compel? If possibly I can get over later in the day, I will not fail you.’

‘I am very sorry,’ Visci replied regretfully, ‘because this is the last time, in all probability, our friends will meet together for some time.’

‘I am sorry too, Carlo, but I cannot help it. Good-night’

Le Gautier watched his friend along the moonlit street, a smile upon his face not pleasant to see. ‘Ah, yes,’ he murmured, ‘it is quite impossible. Genevieve is a good little girl, but good little girls are apt to cloy. It is getting dangerous. If Visci should find out, it would be a case of twelve paces and hair-triggers; and I cannot sacrifice myself yet—not even for Genevieve.’

Chapter III

LE GAUTIER was not far wrong in his estimate of Carlo Visci. The game the former was playing was a dangerous one. He had met the youthful Genevieve in one of his country excursions, and, struck by her beauty, conceived the idea of finding some slight amusement in her society. It was not hard, in that quiet place, with his audacity and talents, to make himself known to her; nor did the child—for she was little more—romantic, passionate, her head filled with dreams of love and devotion, long remain cold to his advances. Friendship soon ripens into love in the sunny South, where temperaments are warmer, and the cold restraints of northern society do not exist. The Frenchman had no sinister intentions when he commenced his little flirtation—a mere recreation pour passer le temps on his side; but alas for good intentions; the moth may not approach too near the flame without scorching its wings. Begun in playfulness, almost sport, the thing gradually ripened into love—love such as most women never know, love encountered by keen wit and a knowledge of the evil side of life. When the story opens, Genevieve had known Le Gautier for six months—had known him, loved him, and trusted him.

But Le Gautier was already tired of his broken toy. It was all very well as a pastime; but the gilded chains were beginning to chafe, and besides, he had ambitious schemes into which any calculations of Genevieve never entered. He had been thinking less of dark passionate eyes lately than of a fair English face, the face of Enid Charteris; so in his mind he began to revolve how he could best free himself from the Italian girl, ere commencing his campaign against the heart and fortune of Sir Geoffrey Charteris’ heiress. Come what may now, he must file his fetters.

Filled with this virtuous and manly resolution, he set out the following afternoon for the Villa Mattio. It was Visci’s whim to keep his sister there, along with a younger sister, a child as yet, little Lucrece, both under the charge of a sleepy old *gouvernante*. In spite of his faults, Visci was a good brother, having too sincere an affection for his sister to keep her with him among the wild student spirits he affected, fearing contamination for her mind. And so she remained in the

country; Visci running down from the city to see her, each time congratulating himself upon the foresight he had displayed in such an arrangement as this, little thinking he had thus caused the greatest evil he had to fear.

Le Gautier walked on till the white facade and stucco pillars of the villa were in sight, and then, striking across a little path leading deep into a thick shady wood, all carpeted with spring flowers, threw himself upon the grass to wait. There was a little shrine here by the side of a tiny stream, with the crucifix and a rude stone image of the Virgin in a dark niche; evidently a kind of rustic woodland sanctuary. But Gautier did not notice these things as he lay there; and there was a frown upon his brow, and a thoughtful, determined look upon his face, which boded ill for some one.

He had not long to wait. Pushing the branches of the trees aside and coming towards him with eager, elastic step, was a girl. She was tall and slight; not more than seventeen, in fact, and her dark eyes and clear-cut features gave promise of great beauty. There was a wistful tender smile upon her face as she came forward—a smile tinged with pain, as she noted the moody face of the man lying there, but nevertheless a smile which betokened nothing but perfect, trusting, unutterable love. Le Gautier noted this in his turn, and it did not tend to increase his equanimity. It is not easy for a man, when he is going to commit a base action, to preserve his equanimity when met with perfect confidence by the victim. For a moment she stood there, looking at him, neither speaking for a brief space.

‘How ridiculously happy you look, Genevieve,’ Le Gautier said irritably. ‘It is a great compliment to me, but—’

The girl looked at him shyly, as she leant against a tree, the shafts of light through the leaves playing upon her lustrous coronal of dusky hair and showing the happy gleam in her eyes. ‘I am always contented when you are here, Hector,’ she answered softly.

‘And never at any other time, I suppose—’

‘I cannot say that I have many things to do, but I can always find time to think of you. I dwell upon you when you are away, and think what I should do if you were to leave me. Ah, yes, I know you will not do that; but if you did, I should die.’

Le Gautier groaned inwardly. Time had been when he had dwelt with pleasure on these outpourings of an innocent heart.

‘You are not one of the dying order of heroines, Genevieve. By no means. And so you often wonder what you would do if I were to leave you?’

The girl half started from her reclining position, with her scarlet lips parted, and a troubled expression on her face. ‘You speak very strangely to-day, Hector,’ she exclaimed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Precisely what I say. You are anxious to know how you would feel if I left you. Your curiosity shall be gratified. I am going to leave you.’

‘To leave me! Going away, Hector, and without me?’ Genevieve wondered vaguely whether she heard the words aright. She started and pressed her hand to her heart, as if to still its rebellious beating. Going away? The warmth seemed to have departed from the scene, the bright light grew dim as gradually the words forced themselves upon her; and the cold numbness of despair froze her trembling limbs.

‘Yes, I am going away,’ Le Gautier repeated in a matter-of-fact manner, but always with his eyes anywhere but on the girl’s face. ‘Indeed, I have no alternative; and as to taking you with me, it is impossible.’

‘I have dreamt of something like this,’ Genevieve intoned in a low vague voice, her look seemingly far away. ‘It has been forced upon me, though I have tried not to think so, that you have been growing colder day by day. And now you come and tell me that you are going to leave me! There is no regret in your voice, no sorrow in your face. You will go away and forget, leaving me here in my sorrow, mourning for my lost love—leaving me here heartbroken—deceived!’

‘You should go on the stage,’ Le Gautier replied sardonically. ‘Your talents are wasted here. Let me assure you, Genevieve, speaking as a man who has had a little experience, that if you can get up a scene like this upon the boards, there is money in it’

‘You are cruel!’ the girl cried, dashing her tears away impetuously—‘you are cruel! What have I done to deserve this from you, Hector? You wish to leave me; that you will not come back again, my heart assures me.’

‘Your heart is a prophetic organ, then, cara mia. Now, do look at the thing in a rational light. I am under the orders of the League; to disobey is death to me; and to take you with me is impossible. We must forget all our little flirtations now, for I cannot tell when I may be in Italy again. Now, be a sensible girl; forget all about unfortunate me. No one possibly can know; and when the prince appears, marry him. Be assured that I shall tell no foolish tales.’

Gradually, surely, the blood crept into the girl’s face as she listened to these mocking words. She drew herself up inch by inch, her eyes bright and hard, her head thrown back. There was a look of infinite withering scorn upon her as she spoke, sparing not herself in the ordeal. ‘And that is the thing I loved!’ she said, each word cold and clear—‘that is the thing to which I gave all my poor heart! I understand your words only too well. I am abandoned. But you have not done with me yet My turn will come, and then—beware!’

‘A truce to your histrionics,’ Le Gautier cried, all the tiger aroused in him now, and only too ready to take up the gage thrown down. ‘Do you think I have no occupation, nothing to dwell upon but romantic schoolgirls one kills pleasant hours with in roaming about the world! You knew well enough the thing could not last I leave for London to-morrow; so, be sensible, and let us part friends.’

‘Friends!’ she echoed disdainfully. ‘You and I friends! You have made a woman of me. From this moment, I shall only think of you with loathing!’

‘Then why think of me at all? It is very hard a man cannot have a little amusement without such a display of hysterical affection as this. For goodness’ sake, Genevieve, do be sensible!’

Stung to madness by this cruel taunt, she took one step towards him and stopped, her whole frame thrilling with speechless, consuming rage. It would have gone hard with him then, could she have laid her hand upon a weapon. Then all at once she grew perfectly, rigidly calm. She stepped to the little sanctuary, and took down the wooden cross, holding it in her right hand. ‘Before you go, I have a word to say to you,’ she said between her clenched white teeth. ‘You are a man; I am a poor defenceless girl. You are endowed with all the falseness and deceit that flesh is heir to; I am ignorant of the great world that lies beyond the horizon. You fear

no harm from me now; I shall evoke no arm in my defence; but my time will come. When you have nearly accomplished your most cherished schemes, when you have your foot upon the goal of your crowning ambition, when fortune smiles her brightest upon your endeavours—then I shall strike! Not till then shall you see or hear of me; but the hour will come. Beware of it!

‘Perfection!’ Le Gautier cried. ‘You only want—’

‘Not another word!’ the girl commanded. ‘Now, go!—mean, crawling hound, base deceiver of innocent girls! Go! and never look upon my face again; it shall be the worse for you if you do! Go! and forget my passionate words; but the time will come when they shall come back to you. Go!’ With steady hand she pointed to the opening in the wood; and without another word he slunk away, feeling, in spite of his jaunty air, a miserable, pitiful coward indeed.

As he turned to go, Genevieve watched him down the long avenue out of sight, and then sinking on her knees, she sobbed long and bitterly, so full of her grief and care that she was oblivious to her surroundings. Her face was deadly pale, her white lips moved passionately, as she knelt there weeping, half praying, half cursing herself in her despair.

‘Genevieve!’

The word, uttered in a tone of wonder and alarm, was repeated a second time before the agitated girl looked up. Salvarini was standing there, his usually grave face a prey to suspicion and alarm, a look which did not disguise entirely an expression of tenderness and affection. Genevieve rose to her feet and wiped away her tears. It was some moments before she was calm enough to speak to the wondering man at her side.

‘I have chosen an unfortunate moment for my mission,’ Salvarini mournfully continued; ‘I am afraid my presence is unwelcome here.—Genevieve, there is something behind this I do not understand. It must be beyond an ordinary grief to move you like this.’

‘There are some sorrows we dare not think of,’ Genevieve replied with an air of utter weariness.—‘Luigi, do not press me now. Some day, perhaps, I will ask you to help me.’

‘I am afraid a brother is the fittest confidant in a case like this. Pardon me, if I am wrong; but when I hear you talking to a man—for his voice came to me—and then I find you in such a plight as this, I must think.—Genevieve! my only love, my idol and dream since I first saw your face, to have given your heart to some one unworthy of you. What will Carlo say, when he hears of it?’

‘But he must not hear;’ Genevieve whispered, terrified. ‘Luigi, you have surprised me; but you must keep my secret—I implore you.’

‘I can refuse no words of yours. But one thing you must, nay, shall do—you must tell me who this man is; you must have an avenger.’

‘Luigi,’ the girl said, laying her hand gently upon his arm, ‘I shall be my own avenger—that I have sworn by the cross I hold in my hand. If it is for years, I can wait—and hope.’

‘That is a wrong spirit,’ Salvarini replied sorrowfully. ‘You are mad just now with your wrongs. Stay here at home, and let me be your champion. I love you too well to admire such sentiments from you yet. I shall not press you now; but all time, for good or for evil, I shall wait for you.’

‘Luigi, you are a good man, far too good for me. Listen! I must gratify my revenge; till then, all must wait. Things alter; men change; but when the time comes, and you are still the same, say “Come to me,” and I shall be by your side.’

‘I shall never change!’ he replied as he touched the outstretched hand with his lips gently.

Slowly and sadly they walked back towards the house—Genevieve calm and collected now; Salvarini, mournfully resigned; pity and rage—pity for the girl, and rage against her deceiver—alternately supreme in his heart. For some time neither spoke.

‘Will you come in?’ she asked.

‘Not now,’ he replied, feeling instinctively that his presence would only be an unwelcome restraint. ‘I had a message to bring from Carlo. He and Sir Geoffrey and Miss Charteris are coming to-morrow.—And now, remember, if you want a friend, you have one in me.—Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, Luigi,’ she said mechanically. ‘You are very good. I shall remember.’

Strangers coming to-morrow. The words bear on her brain like the roar of countless hammers. Strangers coming; and how was she to meet them now, with this wild sense of wrong burning within her vengeful Italian heart, bruised but not crushed? She walked slowly up-stairs and sat down in her room, thinking, till the evening light began to wane, and the lamps of distant Rome to twinkle out one by one. The very silence of the place oppressed her.

‘Are you coming down to supper, Genevieve?’

She aroused herself at these words, and looking up, saw a child standing there before her. She was regarding her sister somewhat curiously, and somewhat pitifully too; the latter, child as she was, did not fail to notice the pale face and dark-ringed eyes. She approached the older girl, throwing her arms round her neck and kissing her gently. ‘What is the matter, cara?’ she asked in her soft liquid Italian. ‘Have you one of your headaches again, sister? Let me comfort you.’

‘I have something more than headache, Lucrece—some pain that no soft words of yours can charm away. Run away down-stairs, child; I am not fit to talk to you now.’

‘Please, Genevieve, I would rather stay with you.’

Genevieve looked out again across the landscape, lit here and there now by twinkling lights, reflected from the happy firesides, till it was too dark any longer to see aught but the ghostly shadows.

‘Lucrece!’ she exclaimed suddenly, ‘come here.’

The child hesitated for a moment, and obeyed, taking her sister’s cold damp hand in her own, and waiting for her to speak.

‘Do you remember, Lucrece, the Golden City I used to tell you about when you were a little one, the blessed place far away, where there is no strife and no care, and every heart can rest?’

‘Yes, I remember, sister.’

‘And should you care to go with me?’

‘O yes, please. I would go anywhere with you and not be afraid.’

‘Then you shall go. When you go to your room to-night, do not take off your clothes, but lie awake till I come for you. Only, mind, if you say a word of this, you will not see the beautiful city.’

Through the rest of the hours, Genevieve moved about mechanically, getting through the evening meal she scarcely knew now. Gradually time passed on, one by one the members of the household retired. It was an hour later when Genevieve entered her little sister's room. 'Lucrece, are you awake?' she whispered.

'Yes, sister; I am waiting for you. Are we going now?'

'Yes, we are going now. Walk softly, and hold my hand. Come, let us hasten; we have far to go, and the way is weary.'

Silently they passed down the stairs, and out into the night air, along the path to Rome, walking on till they were lost in the darkness of the night; Genevieve's face stern and set; the little one's, bright and hopeful.

Gradually the east flushed with the golden splendour of the coming dawn; the birds awoke to welcome up the sun; and after them, the laggard morn. The orb of day saw strange things as he rose in the vault of heaven: he saw two tired wayfarers sleeping on the roadside; and then, later, the anxious faces of a party gathered at a pretty villa by the Tiber. As he sank to rest again, he went down upon a party searching woods and streams far and near; and as he dipped behind the shoulder of the purple hills that night, his last red glimpse flushed the faces of the stern sad-visaged group on their way to Rome. When he rose again there were no wayfarers by the roadside, but a brother on his knees praying for his lost darlings and strength to aid him in his extremity. In Sol's daily flight he saw hope lost, abandoned in despair; but as came each morn, he brought a gentle healing, but never Genevieve back to the Mattio woods again!

And so time passed on, bringing peace, if not forgetfulness.

Chapter IV

FIVE YEARS have passed away, bringing strange changes and startling revolutions—years, to some, fraught with misery and regret; years, to others, which have been pregnant with fame and honour; but to the suffering, patient world, only another step nearer to eternity. Five years later, and night in the small German town where honour is wrecked and lives are lost on the hazard of a die. The Kursaal at Homburg sparkling with the glitter of ten thousand lights. Men of all nations were gathered there, drawn together by the strongest cords which bind human destiny—the power of gold. No type of face was wanting; no passion, no emotion that the human visage is capable of, but had its being there: rage, despair, misery, exultation—the whole gamut of man's passions and triumphs. Women were there too. The bluest-blood recorded in the Almanack de Gotha did not disdain to rub elbows with the last fancy from the Comédie Française; my lord, cold, indifferent, and smiling, sat side by side with the reckless plunger who would have bartered his honour, had that commodity remained to him, for the gold to place upon the colour. On the long green tables, the glittering coins fell with a subdued chink sweeter than the finest music to the hungry ears; a republic the most perfect in the universe, where rich and poor alike are welcomed, with one great destiny—to lose or to gain. There were no wild lamentations there; such

vulgar exhibitions were out of place, though feeling cannot be disguised under the deepest mask, for a tremor of the eyelid, a flash of the eye, a convulsive movement of the fingers, betray poor human nature. As the game proceeded with the monotonous cry of the croupier, it was awful to watch the intentness of the faces, how they deepened in interest as the game was made, bending forward till at length '*Rouge perd et couleur*' came from the level voice again.

The croupiers raked in the glittering stacks of gold, silently, swiftly, but with as much emotion as a child would gather cowslips, and threw the winning on each stake as calmly, knowing full well that in the flight of time it must return. The piles were raked up, and then arose a murmur, a confusion of tongues, reminding the spectator of what the bewilderment at Babel must have been, a clamour which died away to silence at the enthralling '*Faites votre jeu.*'

How the hands clawed at the sparkling treasure; eager, trembling avarice in every fingertip; from the long, lean, yellow claw of the old withered gamester, to the plump little hand of the bride, who is trying her fortune with silver, fearful lest, driven by despair, some less fortunate player should lay felonious fingers upon the piled-up treasure.

Standing behind the all-absorbed group was a young man with pale, almost ghostly features, and a heavy dark moustache. From his attitude and smile, it was hard to say how fortune had served him, for his face was void of any emotion. He held one piece of gold in his hand, placed it on a colour, waited, and lost. A trifling movement of his lips, pressed tightly together under the dark moustache—that was all. Then for a moment he hesitated, pondered, and suddenly, as if to settle the matter quickly, he detached a coin from his watch-chain and leaned forward again. Under him, seated at the table, was a woman winning steadily. A pile of gold was before her; she was evidently in the luckiest vein. The man, with all a gambler's superstition, placed the coin in her hand. 'Stake for me,' he whispered; 'you have the luck.'

Mechanically, she took the proffered coin, and turned it in her hand; then suddenly a wave of crimson, succeeded by a deathly whiteness, came across her face. She held the coin, then put it carefully aside, and staked another in its place. Then, apparently forgetting her emotion in the all-absorbing interest of the game, she looked at the table. '*Rouge gagne, et couleur perd*' came the chant of the croupier. The stakes were raked in, and the money lost. Under his breath, the man uttered a fervent imprecation, slightly shrugged his shoulders, and turned to watch the game again. From that moment the woman lost; her pile dwindled away to one coin beyond the piece of metal tendered her to stake, but still she played on, the man behind watching her play intently. A little varying luck, at one moment a handful of napoleons, at another, reduced to one, the game proceeded. At length the last but one was gone, save the piece tendered to her by the man behind the chair; that she never parted with. As she sat there, words came to her ears vaguely—the voice of the man behind her, and every time he spoke she shivered, as if a cold breath were passing through her heart. A temporary run of luck came to her aid, and so she sat, listening and playing.

The new-comer was another man, evidently an Italian, fine, strong, with an open face and dark passionate eyes. He touched the first man upon the shoulder lightly, speaking in excellent English.

There were four actors there, playing, had they but known it, a ghastly tragedy. The two men were players; the listening woman was another; and across the table, behind the spectators, stood a girl. She had a dark southern face of great beauty—a face cleanly chiselled, and lighted by a pair of wondrous black eyes—eyes bent upon the two men and the woman, playing now with the keenest interest. She shrank back a little as the new-comer entered, and her breath came a little quicker; but there she stayed, watching and waiting for some opportunity. Her look boded ill for someone. Meanwhile, the unconscious actors fixed their attention on the game. The last arrival touched the other man upon the elbow again, a little roughly this time.

‘You have been playing again, Hector?’ he said.

‘I have been playing my friend—yes. It is not in my nature to be in such a place without. What would you have me do, Luigi? I am dying of *ennui* from this inaction—kicking up my heels here waiting for orders.’

‘I should have thought you could have found something better to occupy your time,’ the man addressed as Luigi returned. ‘Our work is too stern, too holy, to be shared with such frivolity as this. Gold, gold, with no thoughts of anything but this maddening scramble!’

‘My dear Luigi, pray, control yourself. Are you not aware that this sort of thing has been done to death? Do not, as you love me, descend to the level of the descriptive journalist, who comes over here to coin his superlative condemnatory adjectives into money—to lose at this very interesting game. John Bull holds up his hands in horror as he reads the description in his *Telegraph*, and then he comes to try his luck himself. I, Hector le Gautier, have seen a bishop here.’

‘How fond you are of the sound of your own voice,’ Luigi Salvarini returned. ‘Come outside; I have something important to say to you.’

‘Something connected with the League, I suppose,’ Le Gautier yawned. ‘If it was not yourself is talking to, I should say, confusion to the League.’

‘How rash you are!’ Salvarini returned in a low tone, accompanied by an admiring glance at his companion. ‘Consider what one word spoken lightly might mean to you. The attendants here, the croupier even, might be a Number in the League.’

‘Very likely,’ Le Gautier replied carelessly; ‘but it is not probable that, if I should whisper the magic words in his ear, he would give me credit for a few napoleons. I am in no mood for business to-night, Luigi; and if you are the good fellow I take you for, you will lend me—’

‘One Brother must always aid another according to his means, says the decree. But, alas! I have nothing.—I came to you with the intention—’

‘Oh, did you?’ Le Gautier asked sardonically. ‘Then, in that case, I must look elsewhere; a few francs is all my available capital.’

‘Hector,’ the Italian exclaimed suddenly, in a hoarse whisper, ‘where is the?’—He did not finish his sentence, but pointed to the watch-chain the other was idly twirling in his fingers.

Le Gautier smiled sarcastically. ‘It is gone,’ he said lightly—‘gone to swell the bloated coffers of the bank. Fortune, alas! had no favour even for that mystic coin. Sacred as it should have been, I am its proud possessor no more.’

'You are mad, utterly mad!' Salvarini exclaimed. 'If it were but known—if it has fallen into the hands of the bank, or a croupier happens to have a Number, think of what it means to you! The coin would be forwarded to the Central Council; the signs would be called in; yours missing—'

'And one of these admirable German daggers would make acquaintance with my estimable person, with no consolation but the fact of knowing what a handsome corpse I shall make. Bah! A man can only die once, and so long as they do not make me the posthumous hero of a horrible tragedy, I do not care. It is not so very serious, my Luigi.'

'It is serious; you know it is,' Luigi retorted. 'No Brother of the League would have had the sublime audacity, the reckless courage—'

'*L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace,*' Le Gautier returned. 'I sigh for new temptations; the sight of the gaming-table is to me what the smell of battle afar off is to the war-horse. I came here intending to risk a louis; I have lost everything. There is nothing like courage at the tables; and as it had a spice of danger in it, I risked—'

'Your life! You do not seem to comprehend the danger.'

'But, my dear friend, it is exactly that spice of danger that gives the thing its nameless charm. Come, you are hipped, out of sorts. You see the duties of the Order in every action; you see the uplifting of the avenging dagger in every shadow that trembles on the wall. Be a man!'

'I am all the more disturbed,' Salvarini observed with moody, uneasy face, 'that the orders have come. That is the principal reason I am here to look for you. We are translated to London.'

'That is good news, at any rate,' Le Gautier exclaimed briskly. 'I have been literally dying to get back there. By the bright eyes of Enid—What is that?'

Above the clamour of tongues and the rattle of the gold pieces, a low laugh was heard distinctly close to the speaker's elbow. He turned sharply round; but there was no one within a few feet of them. Apparently, it had not disturbed the enthralled players, though the croupier swept his cold eye around to discover the author of this unseemly mirth.

'Strange!' Le Gautier observed. 'I seem to have heard that laugh before, though I cannot remember where.'

'And so have I,' Salvarini whispered hoarsely—'only once, and I hope that I may never hear it again. It is horrible!'

Le Gautier looked at his companion, amazed to see the agitation pictured on his face. It was white and drawn, as if with some inward pain. Salvarini wiped his damp brow as he met the other's piercing gaze, and tried to still the trembling of his limbs.

'A passing fancy,' he explained—'a fancy which called up a remembrance of my boyhood, the recollection of a vengeance as yet unpaid.—But I am idling; let us get outside. The orders have come, as I tell you, for London. We are to meet the Head Centre at the old address.'

'And how did the orders come?' Le Gautier asked.

'The old mysterious way,' was the impatient reply; 'secrecy and darkness; no trust in any one, however worthy he may have proved—the old suspicion, which drags us down, and holds our hands even in the act of striking. I found them on

my table when I got in. You and I are to get to London, and there await orders. Our instructions bear the crossed daggers, indicating extreme secrecy and a mission of great danger.'

In spite of his *sang-froid*, Le Gautier could not repress a slight start; and a smile of covert sarcasm, pity almost, rose to his lips as he looked in his companion's eager, enthusiastic face; the same sort of pity the sharper feels for his unconscious victim when he has him within the toils. Not that the younger man noticed this; his eyes were full of some far-away project, something noble, by their expression.

'The old story of the monkey and the chestnuts,' Le Gautier observed with his most sinister smile; 'the puppets run the risk, and the Head Centres get the glory. If we fall, it is in freedom's name. That is sufficient epitaph for us poor, silly, fluttering moths.'

'But the glory of it!' Salvarini cried—'think of that!'

'The glory, yes—the glory of a felon's grave! The glory lies in the uncertainty. What do we gain, you and I, by the removal of crowned heads? When the last tyrant fell at our leader's dictate, how much did we benefit by the blow? He was not a bad man; for a king, he was just—'

'You are in a bitter mood, to-night, Hector,' Salvarini answered. 'What will you say when I tell you the appointment has come with your nomination as a Deputy, with a seat at the Council of the Crimson Nine?'

'My appointment at last! You are joking, Luigi. Surely they had need of better men than L What of La Fontaine?'

'Dead,' Salvarini responded grimly. 'Treachery was suspected, and it was necessary to remove him.—But what I tell you is true; you are ordered to be present at the next Council at Warsaw, two months hence, when you will give up your badge as an Avenger, and take the premier order.'

'And I have staked it to-night on the hazard of a die!' Le Gautier exclaimed, pallid even beyond his usual deathly whiteness. 'Fool, fool that I was! How can I prevent it becoming known? I am undone!'

'You do not know the worst,' Salvarini replied. 'Come closer, and let me whisper in your ears; even the walls carry such tidings. The Supreme Director is here!'

Le Gautier turned faint and sick as he looked furtively round the room, with its long mirrors and barbaric splendour.

'Suppose you lend me yours?' he suggested. 'You will not want it now. What a mad fool I have been! I wonder if there is any way of recovering it? For I must have it, come what will. With a penalty of—'

'Death!'

The word, abruptly, sternly uttered, was followed by the same low mocking laugh they had heard before. They looked around in alarm, but no trace of any one could be seen. Standing in the recess of a window, they looked out; but no sign of the mysterious warning, so strangely given.

'Let us get away from this,' Le Gautier groaned. 'I am stifled! Come outside into the open air. My nerves must be unstrung to-night.'

They walked out through the high folding-doors, and disappeared in the darkness. As they left, the woman who had been playing rose from her seat and followed them. Apparently, she was too late, for they had vanished; and with a sigh, she abandoned her evident intention, turning into the Kursaal gardens and

throwing herself into a seat. Directly she quitted the saloon, the woman with the dark eyes followed, and tracked the other to the quiet retreat. For some time she stood behind the shadow of a tree, watching her. It was a brilliant moonlight night—clear, calm, and peaceful. Without there, the lighted windows of the gambling saloon could be seen; and ever and anon the murmur of the croupier, the scrape of the rakes, and the subdued clink of the gold, might be heard. But the figure on the seat did not heed these things; she was looking at a coin in her hand, making out as she best could the devices that it bore, strange and puzzling to her.

It was merely a gold coin, in fine a moidore of Portugal; and upon the reverse side, the figure had been rubbed down, and an emblem engraved in its place. There was a figure of Liberty gazing at a rising sun, her foot upon a prostrate dead body, and underneath the words, 'I strike.' Over the rising sun, in tiny letters, was the device, 'In Freedom's name;' and at the top, two letters in a monogram. The seated figure noted these things, but, from the expression on her face, they represented nothing to her. Behind the shadow of the tree, the watcher crept closer and closer, trying in vain to get a glimpse of the golden coin. As the seated figure bent over it, tears began to gather in her eyes, overflowing at last, and the passion of sorrow seemed to rise, till her frame was shaken with the sobs she did not strive to master. The woman looking on stepped out from her shelter and crossed the open grass to the other's side. Her face, on the contrary, was eager, almost hopeful, as she bent forward and touched the weeper on the shoulder. She looked up, surprise mastering her grief for a brief moment

Chapter V

THE weeping woman looked up, and beheld the loveliest face she had ever seen. The girl standing before her possessed all the attributes of southern beauty. Her hair, which was long and luxuriant, hung in one thick plait down her back, and lay in careless waves upon a forehead pure as chiselled marble; her face was full, with deep red flushed under the transparent skin; her features exquisitely moulded; whilst her eyes, deep as running water, conveyed an air of pride and power—a sense of passion equally capable of looking implacable hate or fondest love. They were commanding now, as the woman looked up in the stranger's face.

'Who are you?' she asked wonderingly.

'Men call me Isodore,' the stranger replied in a voice singularly sweet. 'I have no other name. Will you let me look at the coin you have in your hand?'

Never dreaming of refusing this request, the woman handed over the gold piece to the girl, who looked at it long and intently. Her eyes were hard and stern when she spoke again.

'Where did you get this?' she asked.

'It was given me to stake at the table. I noticed that it bore some device, and I exchanged it for a coin of my own.'

'It has no meaning to you! It is not possible you are one of us?'

‘I do not understand you,1’ the woman replied. It is a curious coin. I have seen one once before—that is all I know of it—’

‘Listen!’ the girl said in a hushed voice. ‘You do not comprehend what its possession means to you. It is the symbol, the sign of membership of the strongest political Brotherhood in Europe. If it was known to be in your possession, your life would pay the forfeit; it would be regained at all hazards. If one of the Brotherhood knew another had deliberately parted with it, I would not give a hair for his life?’

‘And he is in danger of his life!’ the woman cried, starting to her feet. ‘Give it me, that I may return it to him.’

‘No!’ was the stern reply; ‘he does not get off so easily. We do not temper the wind thus to traitors.—Woman! what is Hector le Gautier to you, that you should do this favour for him?’

‘He is a man, and his life is in danger. It is my duty’

‘Mark me!’ Isodore replied with stern emphasis. ‘I have not the eyes of a hawk and the hearing of a hare for nothing. I was opposite you in the saloon, and I know that something more than womanly sympathy prompts you. I saw the struggle in Le Gautier’s face; I saw you start and tremble as he spoke to you; I saw you change the coin for one of yours, and I saw you weeping over it just now. Woman! I ask again what is he to you?’

Slowly the words came from the other’s lips, as if forced from them by some mesmeric influence. ‘You are right,’ she said; ‘for—heaven help me—he is my husband! I am Valerie le Gautier.—Now, tell me who you are.’

‘Tell me something more. How long has he been your husband?’

‘Nine years—nine long, weary years of coldness and neglect, hard words, and, to my shame, hard blows. But he tired of me, as he tires of all his toys: he always tires when the novelty wears off.’

‘Yes,’ Isodore said softly, ‘as he tired of me.’

‘You!’ exclaimed Valerie le Gautier, starting—‘you! What! and have you, too, fallen a victim to his treachery? If you have known him, been a victim to his perfidy, then, from the bottom of my heart, I pity you.’

‘And I need pity.’

For a short space neither spoke, as they sat listening to the murmur of the leaves in the trees, broken every now and then by the sounds of play or laughter within the glittering saloon. Isodore’s face, sad and downcast for a moment, gradually resumed its hard, proud look, and when she spoke again, she was herself

‘We have a sympathy in common,’ she said. ‘We have a debt to pay, and, by your help, I will pay it. Justice, retribution is slow, but it is certain. Tell me, Valerie—if I may call you by your name—how long is it since you saw your husband till to-night?’

‘Seven years—seven years since he deserted me cruelly and heartlessly, leaving me penniless in the streets of Rome. I had to live how I could; I even begged sometimes, for he has squandered the little money I brought to him.’

‘Do you think he knew you to-night?’ Isodore asked

‘Knew me?’ was the bitter response. ‘No, indeed. Had he known I was so near, he would have fled from my presence.’

‘He laughs at us, no doubt as poor defenceless women. But time will show. I can ever find an hour in the midst of my great work to watch his movements. I have waited long; but the day is coming now.—Would you know the latest ambition of your honourable husband? He intends to get married again. He has dared to lift his eyes to Enid Charteris.’

‘Hector dares to marry again!’ Valerie exclaimed, ‘and I alive? Oh, I must take vengeance, indeed, for this.’

She drew a long breath, shutting her lips tightly. The passion of jealousy, long crushed down, rose with overwhelming force; she was no longer a weak defenceless woman, but a fury, maddened and goaded to the last extremity.

Isodore watched her, well pleased with this display of spirit ‘Now you speak,’ she said admiringly, ‘and I respect you. All your womanhood is on fire within you to avenge the wrongs of years, and it shall be no fault of mine if they slumber again. Yes, your perfect husband designs to wed again.’

‘I believe you are a witch. You have roused my curiosity; you must tell me more than this.’

‘Hector le Gautier is in love,’ Isodore replied, a world of quiet scorn running through her words, ‘and, strange as it may seem, I believe true. An English girl—Enid Charteris, with the blue eyes and fair hair—has bewitched him, satiated as he is with southern beauty.—You look surprised! I have the gift of fern-seed, and walk invisible. All these things I know. The Order is to be betrayed when the pear is ripe, and the traitor will be Hector le Gautier. The price of his treachery will enable him to become respectable, and lead a quiet life henceforward with his loving fair-haired bride. Poor, feeble, calculating fool!’ The bitter scorn in these words was indescribable, and round the speaker’s lips a smile was wreathed—a smile of placid unrelenting hate and triumph strangely blended.

‘It shall never be,’ Valerie cried passionately, ‘while I can raise my voice to save an innocent girl from the toils of such a scoundrel!—Yes,’ she hissed out between her white clenched teeth, ‘it will be a fitting revenge. It would be bliss indeed to me if I could stand between them at the altar, and say that man is mine!’

‘He is ours,’ Isodore corrected sternly; ‘do not ignore that debt entirely. Be content to leave the plot to me. I have worked out my scheme, and we shall not fail. Five years ago, I was a child, happy on the banks of my beloved Tiber. It was not far from Rome that we lived, my old nurse and I, always happy till he came and stole away my heart with his grand promises and sweet words. Six short months sufficed him, for I was only a child then, and he threw away his broken plaything. It made a woman of me, and it cost me a lover worth a world of men like him. I told him I would have revenge. He laughed then; but the time is coming surely. I have a powerful interest in the Brotherhood; he knows me by name, but otherwise we are strangers. Tonight. I saw my old lover in his company. Ah, had he but known!—Come, Valerie; give me that coin, the lucky piece of gold which shall lure him to destruction. Come with me; I must say more to you.’

Mechanically, Valerie le Gautier followed her companion out of the Kursaal gardens, through the streets, walking till they got a little way out of the town. At a house there, a little back from the road, Isodore stopped, and opened the door with a passkey. Inside, all was darkness; but taking her friend by the hand, and bidding her not to fear, Isodore led her forward along a flagged passage and up a

short flight of steps. Opening another door, and turning up the hanging lamp, she smiled. 'Sit down,' she said, 'my sister that is to be. You are welcome.'

The apartment was somewhat large and lofty. By the light from the silver lamp, suspended from the ceiling in an eagle's beak, the stranger noticed the room with its satin-wood panels running half way up the walls, surmounted by crimson silk hangings, divided over the three long windows by gold cords; a thread of the same material running through the rich upholstery with which the place was garnished. The floor was paved with bright coloured woodwork of some mysterious design; and heavy rugs, thick and soft to the feet, scattered about sufficient for comfort, but not enough to mar the beauty of the inlaid floor. Pictures on china plates let into the hangings were upon the walls; and in the windows were miniature ferneries, a little fountain plashing in the midst of each. There was no table in the room, nothing whereon to deposit anything, save three brass stands, high and narrow; one a little larger than the rest, upon which stood a silver spirit-lamp under a quaint-looking urn, a chocolate-pot to match, and three china cups. There were cosy-looking chairs of dark massive oak, upholstered in red silk, with the same gold thread interwoven in all. A marble clock, with a figure of Liberty thereon, stood on the mantelpiece.

Isodore threw herself down in a chair. The other woman took in the scene with speechless rapture; there was something soothing in the harmonious place. 'You are pleased,' Isodore said with a little smile of pleasure, as she surveyed the place. 'This is my home, if I can call any place a home for such a wanderer; but when I can steal a few days from the cares of the cause, I come here. I need not ask you if you like my apartments?'

'Indeed, I do,' Valerie replied, drawing a long breath of delight. 'It is absolutely perfect. The whole thing surprises and bewilders me. I should not have thought there had been such a place in Homburg.'

'I will give you another surprise,' Isodore laughed, 'before the evening is over. I am the princess of surprises; I surprise even the followers who owe me loyal submission.'

'Ah! had I such a paradise as this, I should forswear political intrigue. I should leave that to those who had more to gain or to lose by such hazards. I should be content to let the world go on, so that I had my little paradise.'

'So I feel at times,' Isodore observed with a little sigh. 'But I am too deeply pledged to draw my hand back now. Without me, the Order is like an army deprived of its general; besides, I am the creature of circumstance; I am the sworn disciple of those whose mission it is to free the downtrodden from oppression and to labour in freedom's name.' As she said these words, the sad look upon her brow cleared away like mist before the sun, and a proud light glistened in the wondrous eyes. Half ashamed of her enthusiasm, she turned to the stand by her side, and soon two cups of chocolate were frothed out of the pot, filling the room with its fragrance. Crossing the floor, she handed one of the cups to her new-found friend. For a moment they sat silent, then Isodore turned to her companion smilingly.

'How would you like to go with me to London?' she asked.

'I would follow you to the world's end!' was the fervid reply; 'but there are many difficulties in the way. I have my own living to get, precarious as it is, and I dare not leave this place.'

‘I permit no difficulties to stand in my way,’ Isodore said proudly; ‘to say a thing, with me, is to do it. Let me be candid with you, Valerie. Providence has thrown you in my path, and you will be useful to me; in addition, I have taken a fancy to you. Yes,’ she continued fervently, ‘the time has come—the pear is ripe. You shall come with me to London; you have a wrong as well as I, and you shall see the height of Isodore’s vengeance.’ Saying these words in a voice quivering with passionate intensity, she struck three times on the bell at her side. Immediately, in answer to this, the heavy curtains over the door parted, and a girl entered.

She was Isodore’s living image; the same style and passionate type of face; but she lacked the other’s firm determined mouth and haughtiness of features. She was what the lily is to the passion-flower. Her eyes were bent upon her sister—for she was Lucrece—with the same love and patient devotion one sees in the face of a dog.

‘You rang, Isodore?’ she asked; and again the stranger noticed the great likeness in the voice, save as to the depth and ring of Isodore’s tones.

‘Yes, Lucrece, I rang,’ the sister replied. ‘I have brought a visitor to see you.—Lucrece, this lady is Hector le Gautier’s wife.’

‘Le Gautier’s wife?’ the girl asked with startled face. ‘Then what brings her here? I should not have expected—’

‘You interrupt me, child, in the midst of my explanations. I should have said Le Gautier’s deserted wife.’

‘Ah!’ Lucrece exclaimed, ‘I understand.—Isodore, if you collect under your roof all the women he has wronged and deceived, you will have a large circle. What is she worth to us?’

‘Child! Isodore returned with some marked emphasis on her words, ‘she is my friend—the friend of Isodore should need no welcome here.’

A deep blush spread over the features of Lucrece at these words, as she walked across the room to Valerie’s side. Her smile was one of consolation and welcome as she stooped and kissed the other woman lightly. ‘Welcome!’ she said. ‘We see both friends and foes here, and it is hard sometimes to tell the grain from the chaff. You are henceforward the friend of Lucrece too.’

‘Your kindness almost hurts me,’ Valerie replied in some agitation. ‘I have so few friends, that a word of sympathy is strange to me. Whatever you may want or desire, either of you, command me, and Valerie le Gautier will not say you nay.’

‘Lucrece, listen to me,’ said Isodore in a voice of stern command. ‘To-morrow, we cross to London, and the time has come when you must be prepared to assist in the cause.—See what I have here—’ Without another word, she placed the gold moidore in her sister’s hand.

Lucrece regarded it with a puzzled air. To her simple mind, it merely represented the badge of the Brotherhood.

‘You do not understand,’ Isodore continued, noticing the look of bewilderment. ‘That coin, as you know, is the token of the Order, and to part with it knowingly is serious—’

‘Yes,’ Lucrece interrupted; ‘the penalty is death.’

‘You are right, my sister. That is Le Gautier’s token. He staked it yonder at the Kursaal, giving it to his own wife, though he did not know it, to put upon the

colour. The coin is in my hands, as you see. Strange, how man becomes fortune's fool!

'Then your revenge will be complete,' Lucrece suggested simply. 'You have only to hand it over to the Council of Three, or even the Crimson Nine, and in one hour—'

'A dagger's thrust will rid the world of a scoundrel.—Pah! you do not seem to understand such feeling as mine. No, no; I have another punishment for him. He shall live; he shall carry on his mad passion for the fair-haired Enid till the last; and when his cup of joy shall seem full, I will dash it from his lips.

'Your hate is horrible,' Valerie exclaimed with an involuntary shudder. 'I should not like to cross your path.'

'My friends find me true,' Isodore answered sadly; 'it is only my enemies that feel the weight of my arm.—But enough of this; we need stout hearts and ready brains, for we have much work before us.'

Three days later, and the women drove through the roar and turmoil of London streets. They were bent upon duty and revenge. One man in that vast city of four or five million souls was their quarry.

Chapter VI

MR VARLEY, Sir Geoffrey Charteris' valet and factotum, and majordomo in the baronet's town residence, Grosvenor Square, was by no means devoid of courage; but the contents of the note he was reading in the hall one fine morning early in May were sufficient to put to flight for the moment any vengeful schemes he was harbouring against the wily gentleman who has just quitted the house, and that gentleman no less a person than our old friend Le Gautier.

Timothy Varley was an Irishman, and had been in his youth what is termed a patriot. In his hot blood he had even joined a League for the 'removal of tyrants;' but the League, in spite of its solemn form and binding oaths, had died a natural death. At times, however, the recollection of it troubled Mr Varley's conscience sorely. It was destined to be brought to his mind now in a startling manner.

'G. S. L You will be at the corner of Chapel Place to-night at nine. A girl will meet you, and show you the way. You are wanted; your turn has come. Do not fail.—Number XL'

Never did Bob Acres, in that celebrated comedy, *The Rivals*, feel the courage oozing from his finger-tips as did Timothy Varley now. He turned the missive over in his fingers; but no consolation was to be derived from that; and bitterly did he revile the juvenile folly that had placed him in such a position at this time of—

'It is no sham,' he muttered to himself. God save Ireland—that is the old countersign; and to think of it turning up now! I had forgotten the thing years ago. This comes of joining secret societies—a nice thing to bring a respectable family man to! Now, by the powers! who was Number Eleven? That used to be Pat Mahoney; and a mighty masterful man he was, always ready with his hands if anything crossed him. O dear, O dear! this is a pretty thing. Maybe they want to

mix me up with dynamite; but if they do, I won't do it, and that's flat. I suppose I shall have to go.'

Giving vent to these words in a doleful tone of voice, he betook himself to his private sanctum. His spirits were remarked to be the reverse of cheerful, and he declined a glass of sherry at lunch, a thing which roused much speculation below stairs.

Punctual to the moment, Timothy Varley stood in Chapel Place waiting for his unknown guide. Just as he was beginning to imagine the affair to be a hoax, and congratulating himself thereon, a woman passed him, stopped, and walked in his direction again. 'God save Ireland!' she said as she re-passed.

'Amen, not forgetting one Timothy Varley,' he returned piously.

'It is well,' the woman replied calmly, 'that you are here. Follow me!'

'With the greatest of pleasure.—But hark here; my legs are not so young as yours: if we are going far, let us have a cab, and I'll stand the damage.'

'There is no occasion,' the stranger said in a singularly sweet voice. 'We have not a great distance to travel.'

'Not good enough to ride in the same carriage with a gentleman's gentleman,' Varley muttered, for he did not fail to note the stranger's refined tones.

His guide led him along Tottenham Court Road, and thence to Fitzroy Square. Turning into a little side-street, she reached at length a door, at which she knocked.

In a room on the first floor, Isodore and Valerie le Gautier were seated, waiting the advent of Lucrece and the stranger. Varley began to feel bewildered in the presence of so much beauty and grace; for Isodore's loveliness overpowered him, as it did all men with whom she came in contact. Scarcely deigning to notice his presence, she motioned him to a chair, where he sat the picture of discomfiture, all traces of the audacious Irishman having disappeared.

'Your name is Timothy Varley?' Isodore said.

'Yes, miss; leastways, it was when I came here, though, if you were to tell me I was the man in the moon, I couldn't say nay to you.'

'I know you,' Isodore continued. 'You were born near Mallow, joined the United Brotherhood thirty years ago, and your Number was Twenty-six. If I am wrong, you will please correct me.'

'For goodness' sake, miss—my lady, I mean—don't speak so loud. Think what might happen to me if any one knew!'

'No wonder your countrymen fail, with such chicken-hearts among them,' Isodore observed scornfully. 'I do not want to do you any harm; quite the contrary. There is an advertisement in to-day's Times. Your mistress is in search of a maid. Is that so?'

Timothy Varley began to breathe a little more freely. 'Yes,' he answered glibly; 'she does want a maid. She must be honest, sober, and industrious; ready to sit up all night if necessary, and have a good temper—not that Miss Enid will try any one's temper much. The last girl was discharged—'

'Now, Mr Varley, I know a girl who must fill that vacancy. I do not wish to threaten you or hold any rod of terror over your head; but I shall depend upon you to procure it for my protégée.'

The conversation apparently was not going to be so pleasant Timothy Varley's mind turned feebly in the direction of diamond robberies.

'Well, miss—that is, my lady—if I may make so bold as to ask you a question: why, if the matter is so simple, don't you write to my young mistress and settle the matter that way?'

'Impossible,' Isodore replied, 'for reasons I cannot enter into with you. You must do what I ask, and that speedily.—You have a certain Monsieur le Gautier at your house often?'

This question was so abruptly asked, that Varley could not repress a start.

'We have,' he growled—'a good deal too often, to please me. My master dare not call his body his own since he first began to come to the house with his signs and manifestations.—You see,' he explained, 'servants are bound to hear these things.'

'At keyholes and such places,' Isodore smiled. 'Yes, I understand such things do happen occasionally. So this Le Gautier is a spiritualist, is he; and Sir Geoffrey is his convert?'

'Indeed, you may say that,' Varley burst out in tones of great grievance. 'The baronet sees visions and all sorts of things.'

'Is it possible,' Valerie whispered to her friend, 'that Hector has really succeeded in gaining an influence over this Sir Geoffrey by those miserable tricks he played so successfully at Rome?'

'It is very probable,' Isodore murmured in reply. 'This Sir Geoffrey is very weak in intellect—Tell me, Mr Varley,' she continued, turning in his direction, 'does the baronet keep much of Monsieur le Gautier's company? Does he visit at his rooms?'

'I believe he does; anyway, he goes out at nights, and always comes back looking as if he had seen a ghost Whatever his game may be—and sure enough there is some game on—it's killing him by inches, that's what it's doing.'

'And this change you put down to Le Gautier? Perhaps you are right And now, another question. Is not there another reason, another attraction besides discussing spiritualism with Sir Geoffrey, that takes him to Grosvenor Square?'

Varley so far forgot himself as to wink impressively. 'You might have made a worse guess than that,' he said. 'I am not the only one who can see what his designs are. Miss Enid is the great attraction.'

'And she?'

'Hates him, if looks count for anything.—And so do I,' he continued; 'and so do all of us, for the matter of that I would give a year's salary to see his back turned for good!'

'Mr Varley,' Isodore said in grave tones, 'I sent for you here to work upon your fears, and to compel you, if necessary, to do my bidding. That, I see, is not necessary, for we have a common bond of sympathy. For reasons I need not state here, we have good reasons for keeping a watch over this Le Gautier; but rest assured of one thing—that he will never wed your mistress. I shall hold you to secrecy.—And now, you must promise to get my protégée this situation.'

'Well, I will do my best,' Varley replied cheerfully. 'But how it is going to be done, I really can't see.'

'Irishmen are proverbial for their inventive powers, and doubtless you will discover a way.—The new maid is a French girl, remember, the daughter of an old friend. Perhaps you would like to see her?'

With a gesture she indicated Lucrece, who came forward, turning to the Irishman with one of her most dazzling smiles. The feeling of bewilderment came on again.

‘She!’ he cried; ‘that beautiful young lady a servant?’

‘When she is plainly dressed, as suitable to her lowly station, she will appear different.’

‘Ah, you may pull the leaves from the flowers, but the beauty remains to them still.’ Varley replied, waxing poetical. ‘However, if it must be, it must; so I will do my best.’

Varley’s diplomacy proved successful, for, a week later, Lucrece was installed at Grosvenor Square.

Chapter VII

IT was a little after five on the following afternoon that Sir Geoffrey walked from his house into the square. He seemed, by his uneasy air, as if he was afraid of having his movements watched, for he stopped, hesitated, and finally walked away quickly in the direction of Upper Brook Street. Calling a hansom, he was driven to one of the quiet approaches, half town, half country, beyond Paddington, where he dismissed his cab. He then walked quickly on till he reached his destination—a well-appointed though sombre-looking establishment; and there, after some hesitation, he knocked. The room he was shown into was laid out with preparations for dinner; and just as the little clock over the mantel struck the half-hour after six, Le Gautier entered. He greeted his guest quietly, almost coldly, and rang the bell to order the meal. It was a quiet little dinner, really irreproachable in its way—the appropriate wines being perfect, for Le Gautier by no means despised the pleasures of the table, and, moreover, was not the man to spare where he had a purpose to serve.

‘Well, Sir Geoffrey,’ he said, toying with his glass, when the meal had concluded—it was past eight now, and the light was beginning to fail—‘do you feel equal to the coming trial?’

‘O yes,’ the baronet replied eagerly, though his face was perturbed and the glass in his hand shook. ‘Let us get it over; this suspense is killing me. Sometimes I fancy you are playing some devilish arts upon me. I doubt the evidence of my senses.’

‘You do not doubt,’ Le Gautier answered sternly. ‘Listen!’

The light in the room was fading, and nothing distinctly could be seen save the glimmer of the waning day upon glass and silver. At the moment, the strains of music were heard, low and soft at first then swelling louder, but always melancholy. It was quite impossible to tell whence it came—it seemed to strike the ear as if the earth was full of the sweet sounds. Suddenly it ceased, and a sigh like a mournful wind broke the stillness.

‘It might be my dead brother himself playing,’ Sir Geoffrey said, in great agitation. ‘The organ was his favourite instrument. Strange that the music should be so familiar to me!’

‘Do you doubt now?’ Le Gautier asked. ‘Does your unbelieving mind still run upon trickery or mechanism, or are you convinced?’

‘I must believe,’ the weak old man replied; ‘I have no alternative. I put myself in your hands. Tell me what I am to do.’

‘Your own conscience must guide you, and what the spirits will to-night must be obeyed. It is no question for me to decide; I am merely the humble instrument, the medium between one world and another. I dare not advise you. When your nerves are sufficiently braced to meet the dead, I will restore the communication.—Are you afraid?’

‘No, no!’ cried the baronet; ‘I am not afraid.’

A cold, icy hand touched him on the cheek, and a low voice whispered in his ear the words: ‘You are!’

Trembling, frightened, he rose from his chair; and then suddenly the room was filled with a great light, showing the baronet’s set face, and Le Gautier’s pallid features wearing a sardonic smile. Hardly had the light appeared, when it was gone, leaving the room in double darkness at the change. A yell of harsh, discordant laughter rang out, dying away to a moan.

‘What is that, Le Gautier?’ Sir Geoffrey asked. ‘Is this all real, or am I merely dreaming?’

‘The spirits laugh at your audacity. You boasted you were not afraid, whilst you are trembling in every limb. You dare not say it again!’

‘I am alarmed, mystified,’ he said; ‘but I am not afraid.’

A mocking shout of laughter followed this speech, and the words, ‘You lie!’ as if uttered in chorus, were distinctly heard. A cold hand clutched Sir Geoffrey by the throat, holding him till he could hardly breathe. In his intense agitation, he snatched at a shadowy arm, and suddenly the hand relaxed its grip. Le Gautier struck a match and lighted the candles.

‘Are you afraid now?’ he asked quietly.

‘O yes, yes; anything to save me from that horrid grasp! My throat is aching with the pressure.’

Le Gautier looked at the finger-marks calmly. He was acting splendidly, not overdoing the affair in the slightest, and, on the other hand, not appearing altogether indifferent. He was playing for a high stake, and it required all his cunning, all his cool audacity, to win. To the casual observer, he might have been an enthusiastic believer.

‘You have seen enough,’ he commenced quietly, but with an air of the most profound conviction—‘you have seen enough to know that the time for delay is past, and the hour for action has arrived. The spirits to-night are incensed with you; they are furious at this delay; and unless you solemnly promise to carry out my proposals, I shall not risk our lives by any manifestation to-night.’

‘What am I to do?’ Sir Geoffrey cried piteously. ‘I put myself entirely in your hands. Tell me my duty, and I promise to follow it.’

‘So much the better for you,’ quoth Le Gautier sternly. ‘Listen! You know I am a member of a great Secret Society. In the first place, you must join that; and let me

tell you, your late brother was a member, and took the keenest interest in its movements. You must join!

'I knew my brother was embroiled in some rascally Socialist plots,' said Sir Geoffrey incautiously; 'but I really do not see why I—'

He stopped abruptly, for the same mournful sigh was heard, and a voice whispered in the air, 'Beware!'

With increased agitation, he continued: 'If that is part of my penance, I must do so; though it is on the strict understanding that I—'

'It is on no understanding at all!' Le Gautier thundered. 'Who are you, poor mortal, that you should make stipulations? We must have all or nothing. Take it, or leave it!'

He looked straight across into the other's face, his eyes burning with their intensity. For a moment they sat thus, striving for the mastery. Then Sir Geoffrey looked away. He was conquered.

'Let it be so,' he said. 'Your will has conquered mine. Proceed, for I see you have something more yet to say.'

Again the sigh was heard, and a voice said distinctly: 'It is well.' The music burst out again, triumphant this time. When the last pealing strains died away, Le Gautier continued: 'Your brother died at New York, as you know; but at that time, he was on the business of the Society. No man had his heart so firmly set upon the cause as he, no man has been so missed. You would never be able to take his place; but you can help us indirectly; you can aid us with what we most need, and that is money. You shall see the shade of Sir Ughtred presently, and hold converse with him; but, on the peril of your life, do not move from the spot where I shall place you.'

'Let us go now,' Sir Geoffrey cried eagerly. 'Why should we waste any more time talking here?'

'Because things are not prepared. The shades from another world do not come forth at a moment's bidding to show themselves to mortal eyes, though the air is full of them now.'

Sir Geoffrey looked uneasily around for any traces of these ghostly visitors, though he could see nothing; nevertheless, the idea of a chamber full of supernatural bodies was by no means pleasant.

'Then our pact is complete,' Le Gautier continued. 'Briefly, it stands thus: I am to show you such things as you wish to see; and in return, you become a member of our Brotherhood, swearing to promote its welfare by all the means in your power. Quick! say the word, for I feel the unseen influence upon me.'

'Yes, yes—agreed; only show me my brother.'

As Sir Geoffrey spoke, a change came over Le Gautier's face; the baronet watching him, perfectly fascinated. The medium's eyes grew larger and more luminous, his features became rigid, and he moved like a man who walks in a dream. His gaze was fixed upon the other, but there was no sense of recognition there—all was blank and motionless. He rose from his chair, moving towards the door, his hands groping for it like the action of the blind, and he beckoned to Sir Geoffrey to follow him out along the dark passage.

'Come!' he said in a strange hollow voice—'come with me! The spirits are abroad, and have need of me!'

The room they entered was situated at the back of the house, having a large old-fashioned bay window of the shape and form one sees in the banqueting-room of old country-houses—a long narrow room, draped entirely in black; and the only light in the place proceeded from two small oil-lamps held by white Parian statues. As the twain entered, the draperies were violently agitated, as if by a sudden wind; an icy current seemed to strike them full in the face. A chair, impelled forward by an unseen hand, was pushed across the bare floor, and Sir Geoffrey, at a motion from his companion, seated himself therein. Le Gautier stepped forward towards the window, and lighted a flat brazier, sprinkling some sort of powder upon it, and immediately the room was filled with a dense violet mist, through which the oil-lamps shone dimly. The weird music commenced again, and as it died away, a loud report was heard, and the curtains across the window were wrenched apart, disclosing an open space. As Sir Geoffrey gazed into it, a form began to appear, misty at first, then getting gradually clearer, till the watcher saw the figure of a girl, dim and slight, for he could see the woodwork of the window behind, but clear enough to see she was fair and young, with thick masses of long yellow hair hanging over her shoulders, and half hiding her face from sight. There was a look of sadness on the brow.

‘You may speak,’ the strange hollow tones of Le Gautier came through the mist ‘If you have any questions to ask, put them; but, at the peril of your life, do not attempt to move.’

With the most reverent and holy belief in the reality of the scene before him, Sir Geoffrey gazed at the downcast features. To his diseased mind, he was on the borderland of another world, and the very thought of speaking to the bright vision was full of awe.

‘Who are you?’ he said at length in tremulous tones. ‘Let me know who it is with whom I speak.’

‘I am your better self,’ the vision spoke; and the voice sounded faint and distant, yet very sweet, like music on the waters. ‘I am your good spirit, your guardian angel. I stand by you night and day, the presiding deity of the honour of the House of Charteris.’

This artful stroke gave the listener confidence, and flattered his family pride. ‘Has every man a spirit such as you?’ he asked.

‘Every man who is by nature noble—yes. To everyone who has courage and genius, one of my sisters belongs. I am the guiding star of your House. I have stood by you and yours in the hour of need. I saw your father die. I saw your brother’s deathbed. It is of him you would speak?’

‘It is,’ the baronet cried boldly. ‘What of him?’

‘You owe him a heavy debt of reparation,’ the vision continued sadly. ‘In life, you were not always friends; in death, you were not with him. He left a family. Are you aware of that, selfish mortal?’

‘I did not know; I never knew. But it is not yet too late to atone. Tell me where they are, and I will go to them.’

‘It is too late!’ the figure replied in tones of deepest sorrow. ‘They are dead—dead of neglect; nay, more, starvation. They will not dispute your sway now. While you had flattery and adulation, while you lived in luxury and splendour, your kith and kin lacked bread.’

‘But surely some atonement can be made?’

‘Too late—too late! Nothing can avail them now, no specious sophistry, no outward appearance of remorse. You can atone, though slightly, by completing the work your brother began in life. Know that at your very door, proud man, thousands of your fellow-creatures are starving, ground down in the dust by injustice and oppression. You can help to lighten this burden; you can help these men, who, poor and savage as they are, are yet men, and brothers.’

‘I will!’ Sir Geoffrey cried eagerly—‘I will! Only show me how; and let me see my brother, if only for a brief moment.’

‘That is well,’ the figure replied with a radiant smile. ‘As for the means, I must leave that to you. But you shall see your brother, if only for a moment—And now, farewell.’

‘But stay another minute. I—’

The farewell was repeated, coming to the listener’s ears as from afar off, fainter and fainter, as the violet mist rose again, filling the room with a dense fragrant smoke, through which the rigid figure of Le Gautier could be dimly seen erect and motionless.

When the mist cleared away again, the figure of a man grew visible. Perfect, yet intangible, he stood there, muffled in a long cloak, and his features partially hidden by a soft broad-brimmed hat. At this spectacle, Sir Geoffrey’s agitation increased, and great drops stood upon his forehead.

‘It is he—my brother!’ he groaned, starting from his feet; but again the word ‘Beware!’ seemed to be hissed in his ear. ‘My dear brother, do not look at me like that! It was no fault of mine, I swear.’

The figure answered not, but looking the wretched man in the face, pointed down to his feet, where two thin, emaciated children crouched, evidently in the last stage of disease and starvation.

‘What atonement can you make for this?’ was asked in the stern tones the listener knew so well. ‘Man! in the enjoyment of what should, under happier auspices, have been mine, what do you say to this?’ He pointed down to the crouching children again, sternly yet sadly.

‘Anything,’ the baronet exclaimed—‘anything, so that you do not torture me like this! It is no fault of mine. I did not know. But anything in my power I will do, and do gladly.’

‘Well for you that you have spoken thus! You shall complete the work I began in life, and the man called Hector le Gautier shall help you with his aid and counsel.—You have a daughter?’

‘I have—your niece Enid. What do you know of her?’

‘Much; perhaps more than you.—Listen! and interrupt me at your peril! You may have views for her; perhaps she has chosen for herself. Am I right? But this must not be! Hector le Gautier must wed her!’

‘But I have other views. There is already—’

‘Do you dare to cross me?’ the vision sternly asked. ‘Have not I and mine suffered enough at your hands? Promise, or—’

He stopped abruptly, and again the sighing voice whispered ‘Beware!’

In an agony of terror, the baronet looked round; but the dark eyes never seemed to leave him. So frightened was he, so stricken by this cunningly devised display, that he dared not defy the figure standing there before him.

'I promise,' he shouted at last—'I promise.'

"Tis well,' the vision said. 'From this moment, you are free. You will see me no more; but if you dare swerve a hairbreadth from our compact, then you shall find my vengeance swift and terrible. Geoffrey, farewell!'

'But, Ughtred; one moment more—I—'

A deep shuddering sigh broke the silence, and the figure was gone. Almost distracted, Sir Geoffrey rushed forward to the curtains, which had again fallen, but nothing was there. The smoke cleared away, and once again the room was quiet.

Le Gautier opened his eyes, and gradually life and motion came back to him, as he awoke like a man from a trance. 'Are you satisfied,' he asked, 'with what you have seen?'

'Wonderful!' the trembling baronet replied. 'It was my brother to the life—the very voice even. You heard the compact?'

'I, my dear Sir Geoffrey? No, indeed,' Le Gautier exclaimed in a voice of great surprise. 'Recollect, I heard nothing; my faculties were torpid; they formed the medium through which sights and sounds were conveyed to you.'

'And you heard absolutely nothing?'

'Absolutely nothing.—But, of course, if there happened to be anything which concerned me, you can tell me at your convenience.—And now, I think we have had enough of spirits for one night, unless you would like something to steady your nerves?'

Sir Geoffrey declined the proffered refreshment, pleading the lateness of the hour and his desire to get home. Le Gautier did not detain him, and after a few words, they parted; the one to dwell upon the startling events of the evening, and the other to complete his plans. It was a neat stroke of Le Gautier's to disclaim any knowledge of the conversation, the rather that the delicate allusion to his relations with Enid were mentioned, and besides which, it acquitted him from any awkward confidences.

'The game is in my hands,' the schemer mused an hour later, as he sat over his last cigar. 'Would any one believe that a man of education, I almost said sense, could be such a fool?—Hector, mon ami, you will never starve as long as there is a Charteris in the world. The opportunity has long been coming, but the prize is mine at last;' and with these words, the virtuous young man went to bed, nothing in his dreams telling him that his destruction was only a question of time, and that his life was in the hands of two vengeful women.

Chapter VIII

THE first act in the drama was about to be played—the puppets all arranged, all acting for themselves, never heeding the hand of fate in it. Hector le Gautier

triumphant, but troubled occasionally by the loss of his device, yet trusting to his own good fortune and matchless audacity to pull him through.

The curious in such matters, the idle folks who dream and speculate, had food for reflection in their *Times* next morning, for on the front sheet on the second column appeared an announcement It was vague; but one man understood it. It ran:

Moidore.—How reckless of you to throw away a life on the hazard of a die. They are all safe but yours. Where is that? In two months you will have to deliver, and then beware of the wrath of the Crimson Nine. It is not too late yet. Under the clock at C. x at nine—any night Use the sign, and good will come of it—Eastern Eagle.

The *Times* containing this announcement lay upon Isodore's breakfast-table in Ventnor Street, Fitzroy Square. As it rested upon the table, the words were readable, and Isodore smiled when they caught her eye as she entered. She took up an album from a side-table and turned over the leaves till she came to the portrait of a pretty dark girl of about seventeen. At this she looked long and intently, and then turned to scrutinise her features in the glass. There was nothing coquettish about this—no suspicion of womanly vanity, but rather the air of one who strives to find some likeness. Apparently the examination pleased her, for she smiled again—not a pleasant smile, this time, but one of certainty, almost cruelty; and a vengeful look made the eyes hard for a moment.

She turned to the photograph again, and then once more back to the mirror, as if to be absolutely certain of her convictions, that there might be no mistake.

While absorbed thus, Valerie le Gautier entered the room and looked at Isodore in astonishment. 'You have a grand excuse,' she said archly, 'though I did not know that vanity was one of your failings, Isodore.'

Isodore blushed never so faintly, not so much by being taken in the little act, as by the appearance of the thing. 'It is not on any account of mine,' she said; 'rather, on yours.—Valerie, look here carefully and tell me if you know that face.' She indicated the portrait in the album; and her friend looked at it earnestly.

After a few moments she looked up, shaking her head doubtfully. 'No,' she replied. 'It is a strange face entirely to me.'

'Then I have altered since that was taken five years ago.'

'Is it possible that innocent, childish-looking face could have once been you?' Valerie asked in unfeigned astonishment

'Indeed, it is. There is nothing like sorrow and hardship to alter the expression of features, especially of women. Yes, Valerie, that is what I was when I met him. You would not have known me?'

'No, indeed. They might be two different faces.'

'So much the better for me—so much the worse for him,' Isodore observed without the slightest tinge of passion in her tones.—'Read that paragraph in the *Times*, and see if you can make anything of it'

'It is Greek to me,' Valerie replied, when she had perused the advertisement with a puzzled air.—'Has it any allusion to my—to Hector?'

'To your husband? Yes. He will understand it in a moment, and only be too eager to regain his insignia. There will be a happy union of two loving hearts some night in Charing Cross Station. Little will the spectators know of the passions running riot there.' She laughed bitterly as she said these words, and threw the paper upon the table again. She was in a strange mood this morning.

'Then I suppose that C. x means Charing Cross?' Valerie asked, 'and you expect Hector to come there?—I do not quite comprehend your plan, Isodore. It will be dangerous to have another in the secret, and I suppose some one will have to meet him.'

'Some one will,' was the calm reply. 'And who, do you think, is the proper one to do that? Who better than his old friend and once passionate admirer, Isodore?'

'You meet him?' Valerie cried. 'How daring! Suppose he should recognise you, how then? All your schemes would be thrown to the winds, and we should be defeated. It is madness!'

'You forget I have his badge of membership; besides, I have a duty to perform beyond my own feelings in the matter—my duty to the League. But he will not recognise me after the lapse of years, and I must get to the bottom of his traitorous designs.'

'You are reckoning upon certainties, Isodore. Suppose you are wrong—suppose he is, after all, no traitor, and that your ideas are only fancies. How then?'

'He is a traitor—instinct tells me that. Wait and see what Lucrece has to say, when she comes. She is sure to have gleaned some information by this time.'

Hot revenge is apt to burn itself out quickly, from its very fierceness; but such hate as this never dies: There was a cool deliberation in Isodore's words which struck her hearer with great force; and much as she herself had suffered, she could not realise a passion such as this. It is probable that had she met her recalcitrant husband, a few words would have obtained for him forgiveness; but she was under the spell now, and her weaker will was swallowed up in a strong one.

'Do you expect Lucrece this morning?' Valerie asked.

'I am expecting her every moment,' Isodore replied. 'She promised me to come to-day and let me have her report.'

They sat in silence for a few moments, when Lucrece entered. She was quietly, almost plainly dressed, and wore an air of extreme meekness.

'You look the character,' Isodore said approvingly. 'You might have been a menial all your lifetime.—I am all impatience. Begin!'

'In the first place,' Lucrece began without further preamble, 'I like my situation; and as to my new mistress, to know her is to love her. You have no idea how gentle and thoughtful she is. Now, to begin with her. The dear Hector has a rival, and a powerful one; his name is Frederick Maxwell, and he is an artist. From what I can see, they are engaged.—Isodore, this Maxwell has joined the League, and will be introduced by Salvarini.'

'Frederick Maxwell! Carlo's old friend! Poor fool! Le Gautier has tools enough.'

'He is a fine handsome Englishman; honour and honesty stamped in every line of his face; just the sort of man to be made useful.—But to continue. Le Gautier is *l'ami du famille*. He has a wonderful influence over Sir Geoffrey, and has

succeeded in fascinating Enid—and she hates him notwithstanding. Isodore, Le Gautier is at his old spiritualistic tricks again.’

‘Ah!—Tell me something of Sir Geoffrey.’

‘I am coming to that Last night, my mistress was out very late, not getting home till past one. It has been my habit to wait for her in the back dining-room, and last night I was sitting there in the dark, dozing. I was awakened by the entrance of Sir Geoffrey. I could see his face was ghastly pale, and he kept muttering to himself, and some words at intervals I caught “I wonder if it was jugglery,” I heard him say—“if it was some trick of Le Gautier’s?—No; it could not be; and yet, if I am to have any peace, I must fulfil the compact—I must join this Brotherhood. And Enid, what will she say, when she knows? What will Maxwell think of me?—But perhaps Le Gautier is already married.” I could not catch any more. What do you think of it?’

Isodore was following the speaker so intently, and so engrossed in her thoughts, that she did not reply for a moment. ‘You can help us here, Valerie. Tell us what you think.’

‘Lucrece is perfectly right,’ Valerie replied. ‘I have hitherto told you that my husband used to dabble in such things; nay, more, as a conjurer he was probably without a rival. He made a great reputation at Rome before the thing exploded; and indeed, to a weak mind, some of the séances were awe-inspiring.’

‘It seems to me,’ Isodore put in reflectively, ‘that Le Gautier has worked upon Sir Geoffrey’s superstitious fears till he has him bound fast enough. And you say he is to join the Brotherhood. Really, I begin to feel an admiration for the man I am pledged to destroy. It is clear that he has promised his daughter to Le Gautier. Is she weak?’

‘On the contrary, though she is gentle and tractable, there is much determination of purpose underlying her gentleness.’

‘You have done wonders in this short time, my sister. But do not relax your vigilance now; let nothing escape you that may be of use to us.’

‘I must return,’ Lucrece explained, looking at her watch, ‘or I shall be missed. I will not fail to bring you such information as falls in my way from time to time.’

After she was gone, the women sat quietly for a time, each pondering over what they had heard. The information was not much; but it sufficed to show them in what way the influence over the weak baronet had been obtained, and every detail of Le Gautier’s movement might be of use. A wild plan formed itself in Isodore’s busy brain, as she sat thinking there. ‘Why should it not be?’ she thought.

‘Do you think it would be possible for any one to love me?’ she asked.

Valerie looked into the beautiful face and smiled. ‘How otherwise?’

‘Then it shall be so. Valerie, I am going to make Hector le Gautier love me as he never loved woman before!’

Chapter IX

HECTOR LE GAUTIER, all unconscious of the plot against his safety and peace of mind, sat over his breakfast the same morning. He was on remarkably good terms with himself, for all his plans were prospering, and for him the present outlook was a rosy one. His plans were well laid. He intended to keep his present position in the League, to go to Warsaw if necessary; and now that he had Sir Geoffrey in his hands beyond all hope of extrication, it was easy enough to send Maxwell upon some dangerous foreign mission, where, if he escaped with his life, he would henceforth be an outlaw and a fugitive. Sir Geoffrey, too, had bound himself to join; and with this lever, he could work upon Enid's fears to perfection.

He was in no hurry; he was far too consummate a rogue, too accomplished a schemer, to ruin the delicate combination by any premature move, preferring for the present to renew his forces and calculate his advance, as a chess-player might when he knows the game is in his hands. Then should come the crowning act, by which he should rid himself of the irksome chains which bound him to the League. All his plans were prepared for delivering the leaders into the hands of justice, always with a care to his own escape. As he turned these things over in his mind, he whistled a little air gaily, resumed his breakfast, and opened the broadsheet of the Times to see the news of the day.

Fortune seemed to be smiling upon him, he thought, as he read the mystic announcement in the second outside column. Here was the thing which had caused him so much anxious thought as good as delivered again into his hands. Some friend, perhaps, had discovered his loss, and had determined to return it thus. Perhaps—and here he showed his white teeth in a dazzling smile—some fair one, who had taken this way to show her admiration; for Le Gautier was, like most vain men, a great admirer of the sex, and fully impressed with the all-conquering fascination of his manner. He was not the first clever man who has held such opinions, and found, when too late, the fatal error of underrating the power of an injured woman.

He perfectly understood the advertisement. It was not the first time that newspapers had been employed to do work for the League; nor did he hesitate to avail himself of this golden opportunity. He had scarcely finished his breakfast and made up his mind to meet the mysterious Eastern Eagle, when Salvarini entered. He was moody and preoccupied, with a sombre frown upon his face, telling of much inward uneasiness.

'I do not like these new arrangements,' he commenced abruptly, in answer to Le Gautier's florid greeting. 'There is great danger in them, and they cannot lead to any good results. I shall oppose them.'

'Pray, explain yourself, my good Luigi; I am in Cimmerian darkness,' Le Gautier replied carelessly. 'You are so dreadfully in earnest; absolutely, you view life through the gloomy spectacles of the League.'

'It is folly, madness!' Salvarini replied passionately. 'Heaven knows, we have had bloodshed enough. What do you think the last proposal is?—Nothing less than the removal of ministers: dynamite is to be the agent, and a special mission arranged to Rome. Visci—our dear old friend Visci—is doomed!'

'They must be mad,' Le Gautier returned calmly. 'But tell me, Luigi, what of Visci?' he continued, inspired by a sudden thought. 'I presume you have been

holding a Council this morning. Visci used to be a friend of yours. How do they propose to get rid of him?’

‘The dagger!’ Salvarini answered with great agitation. ‘Visci was once a friend of mine, as you say, and yours too, for that Heaven save me from the task!’

‘But why need it be you? We have new members, new blood as yet untried. Let them show their mettle now. There is no reason why we should always be in the van of battle. But why this sudden determination?’

‘The old story,’ Salvarini continued bitterly—‘private grudges brought in; personal ends to be served where all should be of one accord, all striving for the good of the cause. I am heartsick and weary of the whole affair. Is our path always to be defiled with innocent blood?’

‘So long as I can keep my hands clean, it is nothing to me,’ Le Gautier replied with a careless shrug; ‘not that I hold with the present system.—But abandon your Cassandra vein, and be yourself for a moment. See what you think of that, and congratulate me upon a stroke of fortune I have not altogether deserved.’

‘I congratulate you,’ Salvarini grimly replied, when he had perused the paragraph. ‘You always contrive to fall upon your feet. Did I not tell you that night in the Kursaal you would hear of this again? Of course it is a woman. No man would have taken such trouble, especially if he happened to be a Brother,’ he concluded with significant emphasis.

Le Gautier drew his fingers airily across his throat, intending by this little playful action to allude to his own sudden death. In his petty vanity, he was not altogether displeased that his friend should hint at a conquest.

‘Undoubtedly from a woman,’ he said. ‘Mark the mystery and romance underlying it all. Some fair dame of the Order, perhaps, who has seen me only to become a victim to my numberless charms.—Luigi, my friend, this little affair promises amusement.’

‘I might have known that,’ Salvarini retorted with some little contempt. ‘I believe you could be turned aside from the most pressing mission by a glance from a pair of melting eyes.—Bah! your thoughts run on such things to the detriment of the Order.’

‘In such a charming situation as you mention, confusion to the Order!—Now, do not look so melodramatic! Pardieu! do you think a man should have no amusements? Now, as a penance, you shall bore me with the order of this morning’s proceedings.’

‘A woman will ruin you eventually.’—Le Gautier smiled; the sententious words read the wrong way.—‘We had not much transaction this morning, save what I have told you, and the initiation of a few members.’

‘Converts to the noble cause of freedom.—Any one I know?’

‘Several. Do I understand it is your intention to introduce Sir Geoffrey in person?’

Le Gautier nodded assent; and the friends proceeded to discuss other matters connected with their mission. When Salvarini had left, long and earnestly did Le Gautier sit silently there. Then he rose, and taking a pack of cards from a drawer, began to cut and shuffle them rapidly. He dealt them round six times, bringing the knave of clubs on the same heap each time. He put the cards away; an evil smile was on his face:

‘My right hand has not lost its cunning,’ he muttered. ‘Frederick Maxwell shall go to Rome, and—Well, fate will do the rest.’

With this humane remark, he put on his hat, struggled into a pair of very tight-fitting gloves, and passed out from Hunter Street into the Euston Road; for it is almost needless to say that the house beyond Paddington where we last saw him was not his ordinary lodging, his abode being a much humbler one, as consisted with his limited means; for Hector le Gautier, though moving in good society, and always faultlessly attired, was not endowed with that wealth that smooths so many paths in this vale of tears. Like other men of his class, he contrived to keep his head above water, though how it was done was alike a mystery to himself and his friends.

It was past two as he turned into Grosvenor Square and up the broad flight of steps which led up to the Charteris’ mansion. He had come here with more purposes than one: in the first place, to see Enid—this attraction a powerful one; and secondly, to have a talk upon general matters with the baronet, and perhaps get an invitation to luncheon. Sir Geoffrey he found in the dining-room, just sitting down to his mid-day meal in solitary state; and in answer to an invitation to join, asked after Enid, who, he learned, had gone with Maxwell and a kindly chaperon to a morning-party at Twickenham. He was, however, too much a cosmopolitan to allow this to interfere with his appetite, so, with a few well-chosen words of regret, he settled himself quietly to his lunch, discussing in turn the weather, politics, the last new beauty, anything—waiting for his host to speak upon the subject nearest his heart Sir Geoffrey’s patience being by this time exhausted, he commenced.

‘I think I am free, Le Gautier,’ he said at length.

The listener affected not to comprehend this enigmatic remark.

‘Free from what, Sir Geoffrey?’ he asked carelessly. ‘Is it gout, or headache, or a marvellous escape from dining with a notorious bore? Which of these things are you free from?’

‘I was thinking of nothing so worldly,’ was the serious reply. ‘I allude to the marvellous manifestations recently vouchsafed to me. Since you so kindly showed me through yourself the path of duty, I have felt like a different man. They are gone, I trust for ever. Tell me, do you think there is any possible chance of their recurring?’

‘So long as you fulfil your part of the contract, certainly not—But, my dear Sir Geoffrey,’ the Frenchman continued gaily, ‘let us have no serious conversation now, I beseech you. Let us forget for the time we are anything but friends. I am too light and frivolous to talk seriously. The last new play, a fresh picture, anything but the supernatural.’

Despite this appearance of bonhomie, Le Gautier had no intention of changing the conversation, though it was not his cue to introduce the subject himself; besides, an appearance of good-naturedly yielding to the others news seemed to tell better, and create a deeper feeling of obligation.

‘The longer I put the matter off, the more difficult my task seems to be,’ the baronet continued, not without hesitation. ‘Certain restrictions were laid upon me, certain commands given which I am bound to carry out. If you had heard the conversation, my task would be less difficult; but as you did not, I must do my best to explain.’

Le Gautier drummed with his fingers upon the table, shrugged his shoulders, and sighed gently, as a man yielding against his will upon the sacred ground of friendship, tempered with politeness.

‘If you have anything to say, it is perhaps better to say it. But if it pains you, if it gives you the slightest mental agony or discloses family affairs, then, my dear sir, be dumb;’ and the speaker glanced out of the window, as if he considered the matter settled.

‘But I must tell you. It is impossible I can fulfil my promises without your assistance. In the first place, I am commanded to join your League or Brotherhood; and here, you see, I cannot get any further without your good advice and countenance.’

‘You distress me,’ Le Gautier replied mournfully. ‘I wish that matter could have been settled without such a step being necessary. Our work, though a noble one, is attended at times with great hardship and danger. Think, my dear Sir Geoffrey—think if there is no middle course by which such an action may be avoided.’

The speaker created the impression he was most anxious to make. To the baronet, full of his scheme, this advice was unpalatable, the more that, like most spoilt, weak-minded men, he was intensely fond of his own way. He grew stubborn. Le Gautier was perfectly at ease as he studied the other’s face.

‘I see no middle course. The injunction was very strict I dare not disobey, if I would. I must become a member of your League, whatever the danger may be; and if called upon, I must take my part in the work. Do you not remember the vision?’

‘You forget my state,’ Le Gautier interrupted softly—‘that during the time I heard nothing, comprehended nothing going on around me. My faculties for the time being were torpid.’

This adroit interruption only served to increase the baronet’s uneasiness. He writhed in his chair, unable to continue.

‘And there is another thing,’ he stammered, ‘which I must tell you, though I scarcely know how. I daresay you have noticed my daughter?’

‘Is it possible to see her and not be conscious of her beauties!’ Le Gautier cried—‘to be in her presence and not feel the charm of her society! Ah! Sir Geoffrey,’ he continued blandly, throwing out a strong hint, ‘he will be a happy man who wins the treasure of her heart!’

At this helping of the lame dog over the stile, Sir Geoffrey looked grateful. ‘Has she ever impressed you, Le Gautier?’

‘Alas, yes,’ was the melancholy reply, but with some feeling too, for, as far as he was concerned, the passion was genuine. ‘Why should I strive to conceal my honest love? I may be poor and unknown, but I am at least a gentleman, and I offer the greatest compliment man can pay a woman—an ardent, loving heart.—But I am rambling; I dream, I rave! That I should aspire to an alliance with the House of Charteris!’

The baronet was somewhat moved by this display of manly emotion, and, moreover, his ride was tickled. The young man evidently new that what he aspired to was a high honour indeed.

‘But, Sir Geoffrey,’ he continued brokenly, ‘you will not breathe a word of this to a soul! In a moment of passion, I have been led to divulge the master-passion of

my life. Promise me you will forget it from this hour;' and saying these words, he stretched out a hand trembling with suppressed emotion to his host and friend. A good actor was lost to an admiring world here.

'But bless me!' Sir Geoffrey exclaimed, taken aback by this display, and, sooth to say, somewhat irritated that the necessary explanation must come from him after all, 'I want you to marry the girl.'

'Is it possible, or am I dreaming?' Le Gautier cried in a delirium of rapture. 'Do I hear aright? Oh, say these words again!'

Le Gautier was slightly overdoing the thing now, and Sir Geoffrey knew it. 'I mean what I say,' he added coldly. 'You are the man for Enid.'

'Who is talking about Enid?' asked a fresh clear voice at that moment, as the subject of discourse, accompanied by her escort, glided into the room. Le Gautier, in love as he was, thought he had never seen her look so fair as she did then, her face slightly tinged with colour, her eyes all aglow with pleasurable excitement. For a moment the conspirators were abashed, and it took all the Frenchman's cool equitable nerve to solve and explain what appeared to be a truly awkward question.

'When we are not with the rose, we love to talk of her,' he replied with one of these bold glances for which Maxwell longed to kick him on the spot—'I trust you have spent a pleasant morning?'

Enid answered as coldly as the dictates of breeding would allow. The man's florid compliments were odious to her, and his presence oppressive. Le Gautier, accustomed to read men and faces like open books, did not fail to note this.

'I have important news,' he whispered to Maxwell, after he had made his graceful adieux to Enid and his host. 'I want to say a few words to you, if you happen to be walking my way.'

Maxwell answered with studious politeness. 'With pleasure,' he said. 'If you will allow me, I will drive you in my cab.'

Enid's quick ears caught the whisper, and a feeling of approaching evil seemed to come over her—a cloud passed over the sun, and, to her fancy, for a moment Le Gautier looked like Mephistopheles tempting Faust. As the two men passed out, she called Maxwell back. 'Be careful,' she urged. 'Beware of that man; he will do you a mischief.'

Maxwell smiled down in the pretty fearful face tenderly. 'All right, little woman,' he answered carelessly. 'I shall take care. He is not likely to do any harm to me.'

Chapter X

BESIDES the consolation of recovering the precious insignia, the spice of romance in the affair appealed to Le Gautier's natural sentiment. He might, it may be thought, have had something similar made; but it must be remembered that he had no facsimile in his possession; and he knew, or suspected, that the coin bore private marks known only to the Supreme Three. At all hazards, therefore, the

device must be recovered, and perhaps a little pleasant pastime enjoyed in addition.

After long cogitation, Le Gautier decided to keep the appointment, and, in accordance with this determination, walked to Charing Cross the following night. He loitered along the broad stone platform for some time till the clock struck nine, idly speculating upon the people hurrying to and fro, and turning over the books and papers on the bookstall. At a few minutes after the hour he looked up at the clock, and then down again, and his heart beat a shade more quickly, for there, standing by the swinging door leading to the first-class waiting-room, was a long cloaked figure, closely veiled. Walking carelessly in the direction, and approaching, he looked at his watch as he muttered: 'Past nine—no sign of the Eastern Eagle.'

By way of answer, the mysterious stranger raised her hand to the clasp of her cloak, and there, in the centre of the fastening, was a gold moidore.

Le Gautier's eyes glistened as he noticed this. 'You wish to see me?' he said at length. 'I must thank you for—'

'If your name is Le Gautier,' she interrupted, 'I do want to say a few words to you.—Am I right, sir?'

Le Gautier bowed, thinking that, if the face matched the voice and figure, he had a treasure here.

'This is no place to discuss this matter. If you can suggest any place where we can hold a few minutes' conversation, I shall be obliged.'

Le Gautier mused a moment; he had a good knowledge of London, but hesitated to take a lady to any place so late. The only suggestion he could make was the Embankment; and apparently this suited his companion, for, bowing her head, she took the proffered arm, walked out from the station, down Villiers Street, and so on to the waterside. Le Gautier noticed how the fingers on his arm trembled, attributing this to natural timidity, never dreaming that the emotion might be a warmer one. He began to feel at home now, and his tongue ran on accordingly.

'Ah! how good of you,' he exclaimed, pressing the arm lying in his own tenderly—'how angelic of you to come to my aid! Tell me how you knew I was so rash, so impetuous?'

'Men who carry their lives in their hands always are,' Isodore replied. 'The story does not need much telling. I was in the Kursaal at the time, and had my eyes on you. I saw you detach the insignia from your watch-chain; saw you hand it to a woman to stake; in short, I can put my hand upon it now.'

'My protector, my guardian angel!' Le Gautier cried rapturously; and then, with a sudden prosaic touch, added: 'Have you got it with you?'

Isodore hesitated. If he could only have seen the smile behind the thick dark veil which hid the features so tantalisingly!

'I have not your insignia with me,' she said; 'that I must give you at some future time, not now. Though I am alarmed for you, I cannot but admire your reckless audacity.'

'I thought perhaps you might,' Le Gautier observed in a disappointed tone, and glancing at the clasp of his companion's cloak.

'That is mine,' she explained, noting his eager look. 'I do not part with it so recklessly as you. I, too, am one of you, as you see. Ah, Monsieur le Gautier, how truly fortunate your treasure fell into a woman's hands!'

‘Indeed, yes,’ he replied gravely, a little puzzled, nevertheless, by the half-serious, half-mocking tone of these last words. ‘And how grateful I am! Pardon me if, in my anxiety, ask when I may have it?’

‘It may be some days yet It is not in my hands; but be assured that you shall have it I always keep my promises—in love or war, gratitude or revenge, I never forget—And now must leave you.’

‘But you will at least tell me the name of my benefactor, and when I shall have the great felicity of seeing her again.’

‘If I disclose myself to you, my secret must be respected. Sometime, when I know you better, I will tell you more. I live in Ventnor Street, Fitzroy Square. You may come and see me any night at ten. You must inquire for Marie St Jean.’

‘I will come,’ Le Gautier exclaimed, kissing the proffered hand gallantly. ‘Nothing save the sternest duty shall keep me from Fitzroy Square.’

‘And you will respect my secret? I, too, am on the business of the League. You will guard my secret?’

‘On my life!’ was the fervid response.—‘Goodnight, and *au revoir*.’

‘On his life,’ Isodore murmured as she walked rapidly away in the direction of the Temple Gardens.

It was a beautiful night, the moon hanging behind Westminster, and throwing a glowing track along the swift rushing river, dancing like molten silver as it turned and switched under the arches of Waterloo. It was getting quiet now, save for the echoing footfall from a few hurrying feet or the shout of voices from the Surrey shore. Soft and subdued came the hoarse murmurs of the distant Strand; but Isodore heeded them not. In imagination, she was standing under the shadow of the grape-vines, the sunny Tiber down at her feet, and a man was at her side. And now the grapes were thorns, the winding Tiber the sullen Thames, and the hero standing by her side, a hero no longer, but a man to be despised—and worse. As she walked along, busy among the faded rose-leaves of the past, a hand was laid upon her arm, and Valerie stood before her.

‘I thought you were going to walk over me,’ she said. ‘I knew you would return this way, and came to meet you.—Have you seen him?’

‘Yes, I have seen him; and what I have heard, does not alter my feelings. He is cold and vain, callous and unfeeling as ever. And to think I once loved that man, and trusted him! The poor fool thinks he has made another conquest, another captive to his bow and spear. Under cover of my veil, I have been studying his features. It is well he thinks so; it will help me to my revenge.—Valerie, he is going to call upon me to-morrow night at ten o’clock.’

‘But consider what a rash thing you are doing. Besides, how is this going to benefit you or injure him? He will boast of it; he will talk of it to his friends, and injure you.’

‘Not while I have this,’ Isodore cried triumphantly, touching the clasp of her cloak.—‘Do not you see how he is within my power? Besides, he can give me some information of the utmost value. They hold a Council to-morrow night; the business is pressing, and a special envoy is to go to Rome. The undertaking will be one of extreme danger. They will draw lots, but the choice will fall upon Frederick Maxwell.’

‘How do you know this?’ Valerie asked. ‘I do not understand your mission; but it seems to me that where every man has a stake at issue, it is his own interest to see the matter conducted fairly.’

‘You may think so; but perhaps you will think differently when I tell you that Le Gautier is, for the evening, President of the Council. It does not need a vast amount of discrimination to see how the end will be. Le Gautier is determined to marry this Enid Charteris; and much as she despises him, he will gain his end if he is not crossed.’

‘But what are you going to do?’ Valerie asked, horrified at the infamous plot ‘You will not allow an innocent man to go to his death like this?’

‘I shall not, as you say, allow a good man to be done to death,’ Isodore replied with the calmness of perfect conviction. ‘The pear is not yet ripe. Le Gautier is not sufficiently hoist with his own petard. This Maxwell will go to Rome, but he will never execute the commission allotted to him; I shall take care of that.—And now, mind you are out of the way when Le Gautier comes to-morrow night’

Valerie silently shivered as she turned over the dark plot in her mind. ‘Suppose you fail, Isodore,’ she suggested—‘fail from over-confidence? You speak of the matter as already accomplished, as if you had only to say a thing and it is done. One would think, to hear you, that Frederick Maxwell’s safety, my husband’s life even, was yours.’

‘Yes,’ she answered calmly; ‘his life is mine. I hold it in the hollow of my hand.’

Chapter XI

IN one of those quiet by-thoroughfares between Gray’s Inn Road and Holborn stands a hairdresser’s shop. It is a good enough house above stairs, with capacious rooms over the shop; below, it has its plate-glass windows and the pole typical of the tonsorial talent within; a window decorated with pale waxen beauties, rejoicing in wigs of great luxuriance and splendour of colour; brushes of every shape and design; and cosmétiques from all nations, dubbed with high-sounding names, and warranted to make the baldest scalp resemble the aforesaid beauties, after one or more applications. But the polite proprietor of ‘The Cosmopolitan Toilette Club’ had something besides hair-cutting to depend upon, for Pierre Ferry’s house was the London headquarters of the League.

As he stood behind a customer’s chair in the ‘saloon’ snipping and chatting as barbers, especially if they are foreigners, always will, his restless little black eyes twinkled strangely. Had the customer been a man of observation, he would have noticed one man after another drop in, making a sign to the tonsorial artist, and then passing into an inner room. Salvarini entered presently, accompanied by Frederick Maxwell, both making some sign and passing on. Pierre Ferry looked at the newcomer keenly; but a glance of intelligence satisfied his scruples, and he resumed his occupation. Time went on until Le Gautier arrived, listless and cool, as was his wont, and in his turn passed in, turning to the barber as he shut the door behind him.

‘This room is full,’ he said; ‘we want no more.’

Ferry bowed gravely, and turning the key in the lock, put the former in his pocket. That was the signal of the assembly being complete. He wished his customer good-night, then closing the door, seated himself, to be on the alert in case of any threatened danger.

As each of the conspirators passed through the shop, they ascended a dark winding staircase into the room above; and at the end of the apartment, a window opened upon another light staircase, for flight in case of danger, and which led into a courtyard, and thence into a back street. The windows looking upon Gray’s Inn Road were carefully barred, and the curtains drawn so as to exclude any single ray of light, and talking quietly together were a few grave-looking men, foreigners mostly. Maxwell surveyed the plain-looking apartment, almost bare of furniture, with the exception of a long table covered with green cloth, an inkstand and paper, together with a pack of playing-cards. The artist’s scrutiny and speculations were cut short by the entrance of Le Gautier.

To an actor of his stamp, the change of manner from a light-hearted man of the world to a desperate conspirator was easy enough. He had laid aside his air of levity, and appeared now President of the Council to the life—grave, stern, with a touch of hauteur in his gait, his voice deliberate, and his whole manner speaking of earnest determination of purpose. Maxwell could not but admire the man now, and gave him credit at least for sincerity in this thing.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, in deep sonorous tones, ‘we will commence business, if you please. I shall not detain you long to-night, for I have business of grave importance myself. Will you take your seats?’

The men gathered round the table, drawing up their chairs, Le Gautier at the head, and every eye turned upon him with rapt attention.

From an inside pocket he produced a packet of papers and laid them before him. ‘Brothers,’ he asked, ‘what is our first duty to the League?’

‘The removal of tyrants!’ came from every throat there in a kind of deep chorus. ‘And death to traitors!’ added one, low down the board.

‘You are right, my friend,’ Le Gautier continued. ‘That is a duty to which none can yield. I hold evidence in my hand that we have a traitor amongst us—not in the room, I mean, but in our camp. Does any Brother here know Visci, the Deputy at Rome?’

The assembly looked one to the other, though without speaking; and Maxwell noted the deathly pallor upon Salvarini’s face, wondering what brought it there. The President repeated the question, and looked round again, as if waiting for some one to speak.

‘Yes, I know him. He was my friend,’ Salvarini observed in melancholy tones. ‘Let us hear what his fault is.’

‘He is a traitor to the Order,’ Le Gautier continued; ‘and as such, he must die. His crime is a heavy one,’ he went on, looking keenly at Maxwell: ‘he has refused to obey a mandate of the Three.’

‘Death!’ shouted the voices in chorus again—‘death to the traitor!’

‘That is your verdict, then?’ the President asked, a great shout of ‘Ay’ going up in reply.—‘It is proper for you to see his refusal; we must be stern in spite of our justice. See for yourselves.’

Saying these words, he passed the papers down the table from hand to hand, Maxwell reading them in his turn, though the whole thing was a puzzle to him. He could only see that the assembly were in deadly earnest concerning something he did not understand. He was destined to have a rude awakening ere long. The papers were passed on until they reached the President's hands again. With great care he burnt them at one of the candles, crushing the charred ashes with his fingers.

'You are all agreed,' he asked. 'What is your verdict to be?'

And like a solemn echo came the one word, 'Death!'

Salvarini alone was silent, and as Le Gautier took up the cards before him, his deathly pallor seemed to increase.

'It is well—it is just,' Le Gautier said sternly, as he poured the cards like water from one hand to the other. 'My friends, we will draw lots. In virtue of my office as President, I am exempt; but I will not stand out in the hour of danger; I will take my chance with you.'

A murmur of applause followed this sentiment, and the cards were passed round by each, after being carefully examined and duly shuffled. Maxwell shuffled the cards in his hands, quite unconscious of what they might mean to him, and passed them to Salvarini.

'No,' he said despondingly; 'there is fate in such things as these. If the lot falls to me, I bow my head. There is a higher Hand than man's guiding such destinies as ours; I will not touch them.'

Saying these words with an air of extremely deep melancholy, he pushed the cards in Le Gautier's direction. The latter turned back his cuffs, laid the cards on the palm of one hand, and looked at the assembly.

'I will deal them round, and the first particular card that falls to a certain individual shall decide,' he said. 'Choose a card.'

'The dagger strikes to the heart,' came a foreign voice from the end of the table; 'what better can we have than the ace of hearts?' He stopped, and a murmur of assent ran round the room.

It was a thrilling moment. Every face was bent forward eagerly as the President stood up to deal the cards. He placed one before himself, a harmless one, and then, with unerring dexterity, threw one before every man there. Each face was a study of rapt attention, for any one might mean a life, and low hoarse murmurs ran round as one card after another was turned up and proved to be harmless. One round was finished, containing, curiously enough, six hearts, and yet the fatal ace had not appeared. Each anxious face would light up for a moment as the owner's card was turned up, and then be fixed with sickening anxiety on his neighbour's. At the end of the second round the ace was still absent. The excitement now was almost painful; not a word was spoken, and only the deep breathing gave evidence of the inward emotion. Slowly, one by one, the cards dwindled away in the dealer's hands till only seven were left. It was a sight never to be forgotten even with one chance for each; and when the first of the seven was dealt, a simple two, every envying eye was bent upon the fortunate one as he laughed unsteadily, wiped his face, and hastily filled and swallowed a glass of water. Six, five, four; the last to the President, and there only remained three cards now—one for Salvarini, one for Maxwell, and one for the suggester of the emblem

card. The Frenchman's card was placed upon the table; he turned it up with a shrug which was not altogether affected, and then came Salvarini's turn. The whole room had gathered round the twain, Maxwell calm and collected, Salvarini white and almost fainting. He had to steady one hand with the other, like a man afflicted with paralysis, as he turned over his card. For a moment he leaned back in his chair, the revulsion of feeling almost overpowering him. His card was the seven of clubs.

With a long sweeping throw, the President tossed the last card in Maxwell's direction. No need to look at it There it lay—the fatal ace of hearts!

They were amazed at the luckless man's utter coolness, as he sat there playing with the card, little understanding as yet his danger; and then, one by one shaking his hand solemnly, they passed out.

Maxwell was inclined to make light of this dramatic display, ascribing it to a foreigner's love of the mysterious. He did not understand it to mean a last farewell between Brothers. They had all gone by that time with the exception of Le Gautier and Salvarini, the latter looking at the doomed man sadly, the Frenchman with an evil glitter and a look of subdued triumph in his eyes.

Highly dramatic, at any rate,' Maxwell observed, turning to Le Gautier, 'and vastly entertaining. They seemed to be extremely sorry for me.'

'Well, you take the matter coolly enough,' the Frenchman smiled. 'Any one would think you were used to this sort of thing.'

I should like to have caught some of those expressions,' Maxwell replied. 'They would make a man's fortune if he could get them on canvas. What do you think of an Academy picture entitled "The Conspirators?"—And now, will you be good enough to explain this little farce to me?'

His cool, contemptuous tones knocked Le Gautier off his balance for a moment, but he quickly recovered his habitual cynicism.

There will be a pendant to that picture, called "The Vengeance;" or, if you like it better, "The Assassination," he replied with a sneer. 'Surely you do not think I dealt these cards for amusement? No, my friend; a life was at stake there, perhaps two.'

'A life at stake? Do you mean that I am to play the part of murderer to a man unknown to me—an innocent man?'

'Murder is not a pleasant word,' Le Gautier replied coldly. 'We prefer the expression "remove," as being more elegant, and not so calculated to shock the nerves of novices—like yourself. Your perspicacity does you credit, sir; your arm is the one chosen to strike Visci down.'

'Gracious powers!' Maxwell exclaimed, falling back into his chair faint and dizzy. 'I stain my hand with an unoffending man's blood? Never! I would die first I never dreamt—I never thought—Salvarini, I did not think you would lead me into this!'

'I warned you,' the Italian said mournfully. 'As far as I dared, I told you what the consequences would be.'

'If you had told me you were a gang of callous, bloodthirsty murderers, I should not have joined you. I, like every Englishman, am the friend of liberty as much as you, but no cowardly dagger-thrust for me. Do your worst, and come what may, I defy you!'

‘A truce to these histrionics,’ Le Gautier exclaimed fiercely; ‘or we shall hold a Council, and serve you the same. There are your orders. I am your superior. Take them, and obey.

Refuse, and—’

He stopped, folding his arms, and looked Maxwell full in the face for a moment; then turning abruptly upon his heel, quitted the room without another word.

Maxwell and his friend confronted each other. ‘And who is this Visci I am to murder?’ the artist demanded bitterly.

Salvarini bowed his head lower and lower till his face almost rested upon his breast. ‘You know him,’ he said. ‘He was a good friend of mine once, and his crime is the one you are contemplating now—disobedience to orders. Is it possible you have not guessed the doomed man to be Carlo Visci?’

‘Carlo Visci—my friend, my more than brother? I must be mad, mad or dreaming. Lay foul hands upon the best friend man ever had—the noble-hearted fellow whose purse was mine, who taught me all I know, who saved my life; and I to stab him in the dark because, perchance, he refuses to serve a companion the same! Never! May my right hand rot off, before I injure a hair of Carlo Visci’s head!’

‘Then you will die yourself,’ Salvarini put in sadly.

‘Then I shall die—death comes only once,’ Maxwell exclaimed proudly, throwing back his head. ‘No sin like that shall stain my soul!’

For a moment the two men were silent Salvarini broke the silence. ‘Listen, Maxwell,’ he said. ‘I am in a measure to blame for this, and I will do what I can to serve you. You must go to Rome, as if you intended to fulfil your task, and wait there till you hear from me. I am running great risks in helping you so, and you must rely on me. One thing is in your favour: time is no particular object. Will you go so far, for your sake and mine?’

‘Anything, anywhere!’ burst out the Englishman passionately.

Chapter XII

COOLLY, as if the whole transaction had been a little light recreation, and untroubled in conscience, as if the fatal card had fallen to Maxwell by pure chance, instead of base trickery, Le Gautier turned his steps in the direction of Fitzroy Square. It was a matter of supreme indifference to him now whether Maxwell obeyed the dictum of the League or not; indeed, flat rebellion would have suited his purpose better, for in that case he would be all the sooner rid of; and there was just a chance that the affair with Visci might end favourably; whereas, on the other hand, a refusal would end fatally for the rash man who defied the League. Men can face open danger; it is the uncertainty, the blind groping in the dark, that wears body and mind out, unstrings the nerves, and sometimes unseats reason. Better fight with fearful odds, than walk out with the shadow of the sword hanging over one night and day. The inestimable Frenchman had seen what defiance to the League generally came to; and as he reviewed his rosy prospects,

his bright thoughts lent additional flavour to his cigarette. Nevertheless, his heart beat a trifle faster as he pulled the bell at the quiet house in Ventnor Street.

Adventures of this sort were nothing novel to him; but he had something more at stake here than the fortunes of the little blind boy and the light intrigue he looked for. Miss St Jean was in, he found; and he was shown up to her room, where he sat noting the apartment—the open piano, and the shaded waxlights, shining softly—just the proper amount of light to note charms by, and just dim enough to invite confidences. As he noted these things, he smiled, for Le Gautier was a connoisseur in the graceful art of love-making, and boasted that he could read women as scholars can expound abstruse passages of the earlier classics, or think they can, which pleases them equally. In such like case, the Frenchman was about to fall into a similar error, never dreaming that the artistically arranged room with its shaded lights was a trap to catch his soul. He waited impatiently for the coming fair one, knowing full well that she wished to create an impression. If such was her intention, she succeeded beyond expectation.

With her magnificent hair piled up upon her small shapely head, and its glossy blackness relieved only by a single diamond star, shining like a planet on the bosom of the midnight sky, with a radiant smile upon her face, she came towards him. She was dressed in some light shimmering material, cut low upon the shoulders; and round the corsage was a wreath of deep red roses, a crimson ribbon round the neck, from which depended a diamond cross. She came forward murmuring a few well-chosen words, and sank into a chair, waiting for Le Gautier to recover.

He had need of time to recover his scattered senses, for, man of the world as he was, and acquainted with beauty as he was, he had never seen anything like this before. But he was not the sort to be long taken aback; he raised his eyes to hers with a mute homage which was more eloquent than words. He began to feel at home; the dazzling loveliness threw a spell upon him, the delicious mystery was to his liking; and he was tête-à-tête.

‘I began to think I had failed to interest you sufficiently last night,’ Isodore commenced, waving her fan slowly before her face. ‘I began to imagine you were not coming to take pity on my loneliness.’

‘How could you dream such a thing?’ Le Gautier replied in his most languishing voice. His pulses began to beat at these last words. ‘Did I not promise to come? I should have been here long since, but sordid claims of business detained me from your side.’

‘It must have been pressing business,’ Isodore laughed archly. ‘And pray, what throne are you going to rock to its foundations now?’

Had Le Gautier been a trifle less vain, he would have been on his guard when the conversation took so personal a turn; but he was flattered; the question betokened an interest in himself.

‘How would it interest you?’ he asked.

‘How do you know that it would not? Remember, that though I am bound by no oath, I am one of you. Anything connected with the League, anything connected with yourself, cannot fail to interest me.’

The words ran through Le Gautier's frame like quicksilver. He was impulsive and passionate; these few minutes had almost sufficed to seal his thralldom. He began to lose his head.

'You flatter me,' he said joyously. 'Our business to-night was short; we only had to choose an avenging angel.'

'For Visci, I suppose?' Isodore observed with some faint show of interest. 'Poor man! And upon whom did the choice fall?'

'A new member, curiously enough. I do not know if you are acquainted with him: his name is Maxwell.'

'May he prove as true to the cause as—as you are. I have never had the fortune to be present on one of these occasions. How do you manage it? Do you draw lots, or do you settle it with dice?'

'On this occasion, no. We have a much fairer plan than that. We take a pack of cards; they are counted, to see if they are correct; then each man present shuffles them; a particular one represents the fatal number, and the president of the assembly deals them out. Whoever the chosen one falls to has to do the task in hand.'

'That, I suppose, must be fair, unless there is a conjurer presiding,' Isodore observed reflectively.—'Who was the president to-night?'

'I myself. I took my chance with the others, you must understand.'

Isodore did not reply, as she sat there waving her fan backwards and forwards before her face. Le Gautier fancied that for a moment a smile of bitter contempt flashed out from her eyes; but he dismissed the idea, for, when she dropped the fan again, her face was clear and smiling.

'I am wearying you,' she said, 'by my silly questions. A woman who asks questions should not be allowed in society; she should be shut away from her fellow-creatures, as a thing to be avoided. I am no talker myself, at least not in the sense men mean.—Shall I play to you?'

Le Gautier would have asked nothing better than to sit there feasting his eyes upon her matchless beauty; but now he assented eagerly to the suggestion. Music is an accomplishment which forces flirtation; besides which, he could stand close to her side, turning over the leaves with opportunities which a quiet conversation never furnishes. Taking him at his word, she sat down at the instrument and commenced to play. It might have been brilliant or despicably bad, opera or oratorio, anything to the listener; he was far too deeply engrossed in the player to have any sense alive to the music. Perfectly collected, she did not fail to note this, and when she had finished, she looked up in his passionate face with a glance melting and tender, yet wholly womanly. It took all Le Gautier's self-command to restrain himself from snatching her to his heart in his madness and covering the dark face with kisses. He was reckless now, too far gone to disguise his admiration, and she knew it. With one final crash upon the keys she rose from her seat, confronting him.

'Do not leave off yet,' he urged, and saying this, he laid his hand upon her arm. She started, trembling, as if some deadly thing had stung her. To her it was a sting; to him, the evidence of awaking passion, and he, poor fool, felt his heart beat faster. She sat down again, panting a little as from some inward emotion. 'As you please,' she said. 'Shall I sing to you?'

‘Sweeter than the voice of the nightingales to me!’ he exclaimed passionately. ‘Yes, do sing. I shall close my eyes, and fancy myself in paradise.’

‘Your imagination must be a powerful one.—Do you know this?’

Isodore took a piece of music from the stand, a simple Italian air, and placed it in his hands. He turned over the leaves carelessly, and returned it to her with a gesture of denial. There was a curious smile upon her lips as she sat down to sing, a smile that puzzled and bewildered him.

‘Do you not know it?’ she asked, when the last chords died away.

‘Now you have sung it, I think I do. It is a sentimental sort of thing, do you not think? A little girl I used to know near Rome sang it to me. She, I remember, used to imagine it was my favourite song. She was one of the romantic schoolgirls, Miss St Jean, and the eyes she used to make at me when she sang it are something to be remembered.’

Isodore turned her back sharply and searched among the music. If he could only have seen the bitter scorn in the face then—scorn partly for him, and wholly for herself. But again she steeled herself.

‘I daresay you gave her some cause, Monsieur Le Gautier,’ she said. ‘You men of the world, flitting from place to place, think nothing of breaking a country heart or two. You may not mean it, perhaps, but so it is.’

‘Hearts do not break so easily,’ Le Gautier replied lightly. ‘Perhaps I did give the child some cause, as you say. Pardieu! a man tied down in a country village must amuse himself, and a little unsophisticated human nature is a pleasant chance. She was a little spitfire, I remember, and when I left, could not see the matter in a reasonable light. There is still some bitter vengeance awaiting me, if I am to believe her words.’

‘Then you had best beware. A woman’s heart is a dangerous plaything,’ Isodore replied. ‘Do you never feel sorry, never experience a pang of conscience after such a thing as that? Surely, at times you must regret?’

‘I have heard of such a thing as conscience,’ Le Gautier put in airily; ‘but I must have been born before they came into fashion. No, Miss St Jean, I cannot afford to indulge in luxuries.’

‘And the League takes up so much of your time. And that reminds me. We have said nothing yet about your insignia. I may tell you now that it is not yet in my hands; but I shall obtain it for you. How bold, how reckless you were that night, and yet I do not wonder! At times, the sense of restraint must bear heavy upon a man of spirit’

‘Thank you, from the bottom of my heart,’ Le Gautier fervently exclaimed. ‘You are too good to me.—Yes,’ he continued, ‘there are times when I feel the burden sorely—times like the present, let us say, when I have a foretaste of happier things. If I had you by my side, I could defy the world.’

Isodore looked at him and laughed, her wonderful magnetic smile making her eyes aglow and full of dazzling tints.

‘That could not be,’ she said. ‘I would have no divided attentions; I would have a man’s whole heart, or nothing. I have too long been alone in the world not to realise what a full meed of affection means.’

‘You should have all mine!’ Le Gautier cried, carried away by the torrent of his passions. ‘No longer should the League bind me. I would be free, if it cost ten

thousand lives! No chains should hold me then, for, by heaven, I would not hesitate to betray it!

'Hush, hush!' Isodore exclaimed in a startled whisper. 'You do not understand what you are saying. You do not comprehend the meaning of your words. Would you betray the Brotherhood?'

'Ay, if you but say the word—ten thousand Brotherhoods.'

'I am not bound by solemn oath like you,' Isodore replied sadly; 'and at times I think it could never do good. It is too dark and mysterious and too violent to my taste; but you are bound in honour.'

'But suppose I was to come to you and say I was free?' Le Gautier asked hoarsely. 'To tell you that my hands were no longer fettered—what words would you have to say to me then—Marie?' He hesitated before he uttered the last word, dwelling upon it in an accent of the deepest tenderness. Apparently, Isodore did not notice, for her eyes were sad, her thoughts evidently far away.

'I do not know what I should say to you—in time.'

'Your words are like new life to me,' Le Gautier exclaimed; 'they give me hope and strength, and in my undertaking I shall succeed.'

'You will do nothing rash, nothing headstrong, without telling me. Let me know when you are coming to see me again, and we will talk the matter over; but I fear, without treachery, you never can be free.'

'Anything to be my own master!' he retorted fervently.—'Good-night, and remember that any step I may take will be for you.' With a long lingering pressure of the hand and many burning glances, he was gone.

Isodore heard his retreating footsteps echoing down the stairs, and thence along the silent street. The mask fell from her face; she clenched her hands, and her countenance was crossed with a hundred angry passions. Valerie entering at that moment, looked at her with something like fear.

'Sit down, Valerie,' Isodore whispered hoarsely, in a voice like the tones of one in great pain, as she walked impatiently about the room, her hands twisted together convulsively. 'Do not be afraid; I shall be better presently. I feel as if I want to scream, or do some desperate thing to-night. He has been here, Valerie; how I sustained myself, I cannot tell.'

'Did he recognise you?' Valerie asked timidly.

'Recognise me? No, indeed! He spoke about the old days by the Mattio woods, the old times when we were together, and laughed at me for a romantic schoolgirl. I nearly stabbed him then. There is treachery afloat; his plan is prospering. As I told you it would be, Maxwell is chosen for the Roman mission; but he will never do the deed, for I shall warn Visci myself. And he was my bro—Visci's friend!'

'But what are you going to do now?' Valerie asked.

'He is a traitor. He is going to betray the League, and I am going to be his confidant. I saw it in his face. I wonder how I bear it—I wonder I do not die! What would they say if they saw Isodore now?—Come, Valerie, come and hold me tightly in your arms—tighter still. If I do not have a little pity, my poor heart will break.'

Long and earnestly did Salvarini and Maxwell sit in the latter's studio discussing the events of the evening, till the fire had burnt down to ashes and the clock in the neighbouring steeple struck three. It was settled that Maxwell should go to Rome, though with what ulterior object they did not decide. Time was in his

favour, the lapse of a month or so in the commission being a matter of little object to the League. They preferred that vengeance should be deferred for a time, and that the blow might be struck when it was least expected, when the victim was just beginning to imagine himself safe and the matter forgotten.

‘I suppose I had better lose no time in going?’ Maxwell observed, when they had discussed the matter thoroughly. ‘Time and distance are no objects to me, or money either.’

‘As to your time of departure, I should say as soon as possible,’ Salvarini replied; ‘and as to money, the League finds that—’

‘I would not touch a penny of it, Luigi—no, not if I was starving. I could not soil my fingers with their blood-money.—What do you say to my starting on Monday night? I could get to Rome by Thursday morning at the latest—And yet, to what good? I almost feel inclined to refuse, and bid them do their worst’

‘For heaven’s sake, do not!’ Salvarini implored. ‘Such a thing is worse than folly. If you assume a readiness to fulfil your undertaking, something may turn up in your favour.’

Maxwell gazed moodily in the dead ashes, and cursed the hot-headed haste which had placed him in that awful position. Like every right-minded man, he shrank with horror from such a cowardly crime.

‘You will never attain your ends,’ he said. ‘Your cause is a noble one; but true liberty, perfect freedom, turns against cold-blooded murder; for call it what you will, it is nothing else.’

‘You are right, my friend,’ Salvarini mournfully replied. ‘No good can come of it; and when reprisals come, as they must, they shall be swift and terrible.—But Frederick,’ he continued, laying his hand on the other’s shoulder, ‘do not blame me too deeply, for I will lay down my own life cheerfully before harm shall come to you.’

Maxwell was not aware that Sir Geoffrey Charteris was a member of the League, as Le Gautier had taken care to keep them apart, so far as business matters were concerned, only allowing the baronet to attend such meetings as were perfectly harmless in their general character, and calculated to inspire him with admiration of the philanthropic schemes and self-denying usefulness of the Brotherhood; nor was it the Frenchman’s intention to admit him any deeper into its secrets; indeed, his admission only formed part of the scheme by which the baronet, and through him his daughter, should be entirely in the Frenchman’s power. The cards were sorted, and, once Maxwell was out of the way, the game was ready to be played. All this the artist did not know.

With a heavy heart and a foreboding of coming evil, he made the simple preparations for his journey. He had delayed to the last the task of informing Enid of his departure, partly from a distaste of alarming her, and partly out of fear. It would look more natural, he thought, to break it suddenly, merely saying he had been called to Rome on pressing business, and that his absence would not be a prolonged one. Till Saturday, he put this off, and then, bracing up his nerves, he got into his cab, and was driven off rapidly in the direction of Grosvenor Square. He was roused from his meditations by a shock and a crash, the sound of broken glass, the sight of two plunging horses on the ground—roused by being shot forward violently, by the shouts of the crowd, and above all, by the piercing

scream of a woman's voice. Scrambling out as best he could, he rose to his feet and looked around. His cab had come violently in collision with another in the centre of Piccadilly. A woman had attempted to cross hurriedly; and the two cabs had swerved suddenly, coming together sharply, but not too late to save the woman, who was lying there, in the centre of an eager, excited crowd, perfectly unconscious, the blood streaming down her white face, and staining her light summer dress. A doctor had raised her a little, and was trying to force some brandy between the clenched teeth, as Maxwell pushed his way through the crowd.

'Nothing very serious,' he said, in answer to Maxwell's question. 'She is simply stunned by the blow, and has sustained, I should say, a simple fracture of the a right arm. She must be moved from here at once.—If you will call a cab, I will take her to a hospital.'

'No, no!' Maxwell cried, moved to pity by the pale fair face and slight girlish figure. 'I am mainly responsible for the accident, and you must allow me to be the best judge. My cab, you see, is almost uninjured; put her in there, and I will tell you where to drive.'

They lifted the unconscious girl and placed her tenderly on the seat. There were warm hearts and sympathetic hands there, as you may notice on such occasions as these, and there was a look of feeling in every face as the cab drove slowly away.

'Go on to Grosvenor Square,' Maxwell instructed his man. 'Drive slowly up New Bond Street. We shall be there as soon as you.'

They arrived at Sir Geoffrey's house together, considerably astonishing the footman, as, without ceremony, they carried the sufferer in. Alarmed by strange voices and the shrieks of the servants, who had come up at the first alarm, Enid made her appearance to demand the meaning of this unseemly noise; but directly she heard the cause, as coherently as Maxwell could tell her, her face changed, and she became at once all tenderness and womanly sympathy.

'I knew you would not mind, darling,' he whispered gratefully. 'I hardly knew what to do, and it was partly my fault.'

'You did quite right. Of course I do not mind. Fred, what do you take me for?' She knelt down beside the injured woman there in the hall, in the presence of all the servants, and helped to carry her up the stairs.

Lucrece looked on for a moment, and then a startled look came in her face.

'Ah!' she exclaimed, 'I know that face—it is Linda Despard.'

Enid heard these words, but did not heed them at the time. They carried the girl into one of the rooms and laid her on the bed. At a sign from the doctor, the room was cleared, with the exception of Enid and Lucrece, and the medical man proceeded to look to the broken limb. It was only a very simple fracture, he said. The gravest danger was from the shock to the system and the wound upon the forehead. Presently, they got her comfortably in bed, breathing regularly, and apparently asleep. The good-natured doctor, waving aside all thanks, left the room, promising to call again later in the day.

Chapter XIII

FOR a time, Enid stood looking at the sufferer sadly, and wondering where the friends of the poor girl might be. Gradually, as the scene came back to her, she remembered the words of Lucrece, and turned to her. 'Lucrece, did I hear you say you knew this poor woman?'

'Indeed, yes, miss. Three years ago, in Paris, Linda and I were great friends—what you English call "chums." She was an actress at the "Varieties"—a clever player; but she could not rise. Jealousy and a bad husband prevented that Poor Linda, she has all the talent!'

'Strange that you should know her; but still fortunate. Perhaps, through you, we may be able to discover where her friends are.'

'Poor child! she has no friends.—But hush! See! she has opened her eyes.'

The sufferer was looking wildly around. She tried to rise, but the pain and weakness were too great, and she sank back with a deep fluttering sigh. As she collected her senses—'Where am I?' she asked faintly. 'How did I come here?'

'Do not distress yourself,' Enid said softly. 'You are quite safe. You had an accident, and they brought you here.'

For a moment the girl closed her eyes. 'I remember now. I was knocked down by a cab. But I am better now. Let me get up. Where is my boy?' she continued—'what has become of my boy?'

'Do not trouble yourself about your child,' Enid said soothingly, marvelling that one apparently so young should be a mother. 'He shall be well cared for. Tell us where he is, and he shall be brought to you.'

'You are so good—so good and beautiful! You will find a card in my jacket-pocket where to send for him. Tell me, bright angel of goodness, what is the name they know you by?'

'My name is Enid Charteris,' she replied, smiling a little at the theatrical touch, earnest though it was.—'I must not let you talk any longer. The doctor was very strict about that.'

At the mention of the name, the sick woman became strangely agitated, so much so that Enid was alarmed. 'Am I in Grosvenor Square? Are you the daughter of Sir Geoffrey Charteris?'

'Yes, yes. But you really must be quiet now.'

But instead of complying with this request, the stranger burst into a fit of hysterical crying, weeping and sobbing as if her heart would break.

'Miserable woman that I am!' she cried, 'what have I done? Oh, what have I done? O that I could have known before!'

Enid looked at Lucrece in alarm. The outbreak was so sudden, so unexpected, that for a moment they were too startled to speak.

'She is unhinged by the shock,' Enid whispered. 'Perhaps if you were to speak to her, it would have a good effect'

'Yes, madam. But if I may be allowed to make a suggestion—I should say it was better if you left the room for a time. She sees some likeness to you, or fancies she

does, to some one. She knows me; and if you will leave for a short time, I will try and soothe her.'

'I think you are right, Lucrece. I will come in again presently, when she has become quieter.'

Directly Enid quitted the apartment, Lucrece's whole manner changed from the subdued domestic to the eager sympathetic friend. She bent over the bed and looked down in the suffering woman's eyes. 'Linda! do you not know me? It is I, Lucrece!'

'You—and here? What is the meaning of this, and in the dress of a servant? Tell me,' she continued eagerly. 'You are not one of his friends in his pay, to help his vile schemes?'

'I do not know who he is. I am here for a good purpose—to protect my mistress from a great harm.'

'Ah, then, you are no friend of Le Gautier's.—Do you ever see him? Does he come here often? Do you know what he is after?'

Lucrece started. 'What do you know of Le Gautier?'

'What do I know of him? Everything that is bad, and bitter, and fiendish! But he will not succeed, if I have to sacrifice my life to aid the beautiful lady who has been so kind to me.'

'You are not the only one who would,' Lucrece quietly answered. 'Tell me what you know.'

'I did not know then how good and noble she is.—My head is queer and strange, Lucrece; I cannot tell you now. To-morrow, perhaps, if I am better, I will tell you everything. I am glad now that they brought me here.'

Meanwhile, Maxwell was pacing about the drawing-room, having entirely forgotten the unfortunate woman in his own perplexity. He had been there perhaps half an hour, when Enid entered. She was not too occupied to notice the moody, thoughtful frown upon his face.

'What a sad thing for her, poor woman!' she said.—'How did it happen, Fred?'

'Poor woman?' Maxwell asked vaguely. 'How did what happen?'

'Why, Fred, what is the matter with you?' Enid exclaimed with vague alarm. 'How strange you look! Surely you have not forgotten the poor creature you brought here not more than half an hour ago?'

Maxwell collected himself by a violent effort. 'I had actually forgotten. I was thinking of something else.—Enid, dear, I am going away!'

'Going away! Any one would think, from the expression of your face and the tone of your voice, you were never going to return. Where are you going?'

There was a very considerable chance of his not returning, he felt, and he smiled at the grim idea.

'I am not going far—at least not very far, in this age of express trains and telegraphs. I wish I could take you with me, darling; for I am going to a place you have often longed to see—I am going to Rome.'

'To Rome? Is it not very sudden? You never told me before.'

'Well, it is rather sudden. I have not known it long. You see, I could not tell you a thing I was ignorant of myself.'

'I wish you were not going,' Enid said reflectively. 'I have a feeling that some evil will come of this. And yet I suppose you must go. Is it business of your own, Fred?'

Maxwell hesitated. He could not prevaricate with those clear truthful eyes looking up so earnestly to his own. The soul of honour himself, he could not forgive the want of it in others; but he temporised now.

‘Well, not exactly my own,’ he stammered, trying to make the best of a bad case, ‘or I would not go. It is a secret, which I cannot tell even you; but I shall not be long away.’

‘A secret which you cannot tell even me,’ Enid repeated mechanically. ‘Then it must be something you are very much ashamed of.’

‘Indeed, it is not,’ Maxwell began eagerly, hesitated, and stopped. After all, she was right. It was a secret, a terrible, shameful secret, against which all the manliness in him revolted. For a time he was silent, hanging down his head for very shame, as the whole force of his position came upon him. For the first time, he realised where his rashness had led him, and what he was about to lose.

Enid looked at him in amazement, strangely mixed with a terrible and nameless fear. ‘Fred!’ she cried at length, white and trembling, ‘you are going away upon the mission of that awful League! You cannot deny it—O Fred! Fred!’

He tried to soothe her as she lay sobbing in his arms, but to no avail. The most fervent promises and the most endearing words she heeded not, crying that he was going from her never to return; and her fears were strengthened when he mournfully but firmly declined to speak of his mission. Presently, when she grew a little calmer, she raised her wet cheeks to him and kissed him. She was pale now, but confident, and striving with all the artifices in her power to persuade him from his undertaking; but tears and prayers, threats even, could not avail

He shook his head sadly. ‘I would that I could stay with you, Enid,’ he said at length, holding her close in his arms; ‘but this much I can tell you—that I dare not disobey. It is as much as my life is worth.’

‘And as much as your life is worth to go,’ echoed the sobbing girl. ‘What is life to me without you? And now this thing has come between us, parting us perhaps for ever!’

‘I hope not,’ Maxwell smiled cheerfully. ‘I trust not, darling. My time away is very short; and doubtless I shall not be called upon again for a time—perhaps never.’

Enid dried her eyes bravely and tried to smile. ‘Good-bye, Fred,’ she said brokenly; ‘and heaven grant that my fears are groundless! If anything happened to you, I believe I should die.’

‘I shall come back, darling.—And now, goodbye, and God bless you.’

After he was gone, Enid threw herself down upon the lounge and wept

Le Gautier’s star was in the ascendant. His only dangerous rival would soon be hundreds of miles away on a hazardous mission, out of which, in all human probability, he could not come unscathed, even if he escaped with life; a prospective father-in-law wholly in his power; and a bride in posse, upon whose fears he could work by describing graphically her father’s danger, with the moral, that it would be her duty to her parent to wed his preserver, Le Gautier. This, in fine, was the pretty scheme the wily adventurer had sketched out in his busy brain, a scheme which at present looked like being brought to a successful issue.

Another source of congratulation to this inestimable young man was the progress he was making with the fair stranger, known to him as Marie St Jean. By the time a fortnight had passed, he had been in Ventnor Street more than once,

and quite long enough to feel a passion stronger than he had ever experienced before. It was absolutely dangerous to him, he knew, to be with her so often; but like the moth and the candle, the attraction was so great that he found it impossible to keep away—not that he lost his head for a moment, though he well knew that Marie St Jean could turn him round her finger; but he had formed his plans even here. The first step was to betray the League—the scheme was not quite ripe yet, and the news of Maxwell uncertain—and then take Marie St Jean for a tour upon the continent. There would be plenty of time to return and marry Enid afterwards without any unnecessary bother—for he had already made up his mind that Miss St Jean was too proud to show her wrongs to the world.

On the Monday afternoon following Maxwell's departure, Le Gautier turned his steps in the direction of Grosvenor Square, feeling on good terms with himself and all mankind. His schemes were prospering hugely. It was clearly useless, he determined, now to hesitate any longer; the blow must be struck, and the sooner the better for all parties concerned. With this intention upmost in his mind, he trippingly ascended the steps of Sir Geoffrey's house and knocked.

He found the baronet in the library, engaged as usual over some volume of deep spiritualistic research; the thing had become a passion with him now, and every spare moment was spent in this morbid amusement. He was getting thin and haggard over it, and Le Gautier thought he looked very old and careworn as he watched him now.

'You have come just in time,' he cried, placing a paper-knife in the book and turning eagerly to Le Gautier. 'I have a passage here that I am unable to understand. Listen to this.'

'I have something more important to speak of,' Le Gautier interrupted. 'I have something more pressing on hand than that attractive subject. Sir Geoffrey, next week I am summoned to Warsaw.'

The baronet began to feel anxious; he knew perfectly well what was coming, and, like all weak men, he dreaded anything like evil. The part that he had to play was a despicable one, and he feared his daughter's angry scorn. Like a recalcitrant debtor, he began to cry for time, the time that never comes.

'So you informed me last week,' he replied, twisting a paper-knife in his hands uneasily. 'I hope you will have a pleasant journey. How long do you expect to be detained there?'

'I cannot tell; it depends upon the amount of business to be done. I may be away six weeks; but, at the very least, I do not see how I can get back to England under the month.'

Sir Geoffrey's face lighted, in spite of his air of regret Le Gautier noticed this; nothing escaped the ken of those keen black eyes.

'And when you return, we will complete our little arrangements,' Sir Geoffrey exclaimed cheerfully. 'No hurry, you know, no haste in such matters as these; and, referring to our previous conversation, we cannot be too careful in treading such uncertain ground. Enid—'

'Precisely,' Le Gautier interrupted. 'With all due deference to your opinion, there is need of action, which is a very different matter from that raw haste which your poet tells us is half-sister to delay. I must have something definite settled before I leave England.'

"Pon my honour, you know, you young men are very hasty,' the baronet fidgeted; 'there is no controlling you. In my time, things were quite different; men professed a certain deference to women, and did not take so much for granted as you do now—'

'Sir Geoffrey,' Le Gautier interrupted again, 'things change; men alter; but perfect love is the same for all time. I love your daughter, and would make her my wife.'

In spite of the baronet's feeble-mindedness, there was always something in the Frenchman's higher flights which jarred upon his nerves, a sense of insincerity, a certain hollow, grotesque mockery, which pained him. The last word struck upon him like some chords played out of tune. Still the spell was upon him; he had nought to do but obey.

'We perfectly understand that,' he replied, 'and therefore need say no more about it. You have my promise; indeed, how can it be otherwise with the memory of that awful manifestation before me? And the word of a Charteris is always sufficient. But I do think, Le Gautier, that you are pushing this thing too far.'

'Let the depth of my love excuse my impetuosity;' and again the words struck harshly on the listener's ears. 'Surely the excuse is a good one. I am leaving England shortly; and before I go, I must—nay, I will have an answer to the question which affects my happiness so deeply. It is only fair, only just that I should know my fate.'

Sir Geoffrey speculated feebly what he was to do with a man like this.

'But have a little patience; let me prepare her for your proposal'

'Which you will promise to do, and put off day after day, as a man does who has an unpleasant task to perform. No, Sir Geoffrey; I do not wish to conduct my wooing second-hand. There is no time like the present; my motto is "Now." I do not ask you to help me; but before I leave this house, it is my intention to speak to your daughter.'

In sheer desperation, not unmixed with a little irritation, Sir Geoffrey rang the bell, and desired the servant to conduct Le Gautier upstairs. The thing must come sooner or later, he knew; and so long as he was not asked personally to interfere, he did not so much mind, though he was not unconscious of sundry twinges of conscience as his arbitrary visitor disappeared.

Chapter XIV

LE GAUTIER followed the footman into the drawing-room, where Enid was engaged with some visitors—three tall showy-looking girls, with an extremely vivacious mother. Le Gautier stood looking out of one of the windows, and noticed with satisfaction their intention of a speedy exit. For some moments the visitors remained chattering, and then, after a profusion of compliments, accompanied by much laughter, their voluminous skirts were heard switching down the broad staircase. It has often been a matter of speculation as to whether a man can be in love with two women at the same time; but without going into this delicate

question, it is possible to imagine a man with a penchant for two women, though the experiment probably would be attended with great hazard and danger. Le Gautier forgot the dark-eyed Marie, as he gazed upon Enid's fairer charms.

'You have heard nothing of Maxwell?' he asked after a pause in the desultory conversation. 'A strange thing he does not write. Many men would imagine that such a thing is not altogether an accident; there are occasions when a little absence from the gaze of man is desirable, Miss Charteris.'

'Many men, as usual, would be wrong,' Enid answered coldly. 'You should not shield your want of charity by these generalities, Monsieur le Gautier, though perhaps you have derived benefit from these absences yourself, you seem to understand the subject so thoroughly.'

Enid was angry at his cool insolence, and replied to his want of taste by a little plain language herself; and her random shaft went home.

'You are severe; but really, while sorry for Maxwell, there is something in it which is comforting to me. Can you not guess what I mean?'

Enid Charteris, though guileless and pure as woman can be, had not mixed with the great world for nothing. She had had suitors enough to know what a proposal was, and above all things she dreaded one from this man. Some instinct told her he would be a dangerous enemy.

'You speak in riddles,' she said calmly. 'I have not been educated to the language of diplomacy. Pray, explain yourself.'

'Then I must be more explicit. Maxwell's absence rids me of a dangerous rival. Now he is away, the path is all the smoother for me. Need I tell you, Miss Charteris—Enid—that I love you? Surely you must have known that for a long time past while another was in the way, I sealed my lips; but I can restrain myself no longer now.'

'It would be affectation not to understand you,' Enid replied with a calmness that boded ill for Le Gautier's success. 'I am sorry to hear it. If you are wise, you will not put me to the pain of a refusal.'

'I will take no refusal,' Le Gautier burst out passionately; 'for I swear that if you are not mine, you shall wed no other man. Enid, you must, you shall be mine! You may look upon me coldly now, but the time will come when you shall love me well enough.'

'The time will come when I shall—love—you?' The bitter scorn in these words stung Le Gautier to madness, stirring up a desperate passion in his veins, now that the prize seemed to be slipping from his grasp. He fell at her feet on his knees. 'Hear me!' he exclaimed passionately—'only listen to me, Enid. I have vowed that you are the only woman I have chosen—the only girl I could really love. Such love as mine must win a return some day; only, only give me a little chance of hope.'

'If you are a man, you will rise from that absurd position. Who am I, that you should kneel to me? You must take my word for it; and if you have any consideration for my feelings, you will change the subject'

'And this is your absolute and final decision?'

'Yes, it is my absolute and final decision.'

Le Gautier rose to his feet, pale but smiling, and there was a darkly evil look upon his white set face. When he spoke again his words were cold and incisive. 'Consider, before you wilfully make an enemy of me.' He uttered the words with a

low sibilation. 'I have made you I offer—the highest compliment I could pay, and you have scornfully rejected it. The next favour you ask from me you may seek for on your knees.'

'And to what purpose, sir, shall I ask a favour from you?'

'For your father,' Le Gautier answered quietly, though his tones were deep and earnest. 'You have guessed that Maxwell has gone away on a dangerous mission. Why should not Sir Geoffrey's chosen in his turn? And if so, who can save him? I, Hector le Gautier, and no other man.'

'And by whose evil counsel has my poor father been dragged into your infamous Brotherhood?—By yours alone! He would be a happy man now, if he had never known you—'

'On the contrary,' Le Gautier interrupted, 'I tried to save him. He has joined on his own wish. You do not credit my words. Go and ask him now if my words are not true, and that, if it is not his dearest wish that you should become my wife.'

'He might think so,' Enid answered haughtily; 'but he does not wish it in his heart Monsieur le Gautier, if you are a gentleman, you will cease this discussion. The subject is painful to me.' She stood there, looking at him coldly and scornfully.

But her very iciness only served to increase the warmth of his passion. 'I cannot!' he exclaimed. 'I will not cease! For five years, ever since I first met you at Rome, I have never ceased to love you. Bid me do anything in reason; ask me any favour; but to forget you is impossible!'

'I am sorry for you,' Enid said gently, touched a little by the ring of genuine passion in his voice—'I am sorry; but it cannot be. I do not break my pledges so lightly, even if I wished to do so.'

'Which you do not,' Le Gautier bitterly remarked. 'I do not care. I am desperate now. You despise and scorn me; but I will not be rejected thus. If you will not be my wife for my sake, you must for your father's and the honour of your house.' He stopped abruptly, for, standing in the room was Sir Geoffrey, his face pale, and his whole aspect downcast and degraded to a pitiable degree.

Enid turned to her father eagerly. 'Did you hear these words?' she asked. 'Can it be possible that you—that I—that the honour of our house is in any man's hands? Can it be your wish, father, that I—I—should form an alliance with Monsieur le Gautier? Speak, and show him how mistaken he can be!'

But Sir Geoffrey never spoke. His head sank lower upon his breast. For the first time, he realised the sacrifice he had imposed upon his daughter, and so he stood there, an English gentleman no longer, but a poor enfeebled, shamefaced old man.

A wild feeling of alarm took possession of Enid as she saw this thing.

'Why do you not speak?' she demanded. 'What cause have you to hesitate in endorsing my words?'

Still the baronet never spoke, never raised his head.

Enid ran swiftly to his side and threw one arm round his shoulder. She could feel the spasm that struck him as he encountered her touch.

'Father,' she asked in a dull even voice, 'does your silence mean that he is right?'

'Yes, my dear child; he is right There is no alternative.'

There is a providence which helps us in such times as these, a numbness of the senses that for a time deadens pain. Enid's voice was very calm as she turned to Le Gautier, standing there trying to disguise his triumph.

'I do not know what all this means,' she said. 'I do not understand whence you derive your power. I cannot think now. For his sake,' she continued, pointing to her father, 'I consent.'

Le Gautier sprang forward; but she repelled him with a glance.

'Listen to my conditions,' she continued. 'I have said I consent; but I warn you that if there is any loophole for escape from you, I shall take it. You are going away, you say. Nothing must be done till your return, and then the contract shall be fulfilled. Now, go.'

When Lucrece entered the room a few moments later, she found her mistress lying unconscious upon the floor. Looking out of the window, she saw the slim figure of Le Gautier disappearing in the distance, and smiled. He was smiling, too, as he walked away. Nothing remained now but only the final interview with Marie, and to regain possession of the lost moidore. A few weeks at Warsaw, and then—

Chapter XV

MAXWELL had been gone a week now, and no tidings of him had reached England, save one letter to say he was in Rome. As Le Gautier turned away from Grosvenor Square, his heart one glow of triumph, he determined that, come what may, the artist should never see England again. When he returned from Warsaw, he calculated that, through Marie St Jean's assistance, all information concerning the League would be in the hands of the police, freeing him from any further bondage, and throwing all the odium and danger on her. Full of these schemes, he arrived at his lodgings. A telegram was lying on the table. He took it up mechanically, and tore it open. The contents were terse:

'Visci died this morning from heart disease.'

Le Gautier was wild with rage. Here was a pretty combination, he thought. Nothing now to detain Maxwell in Rome. The victim had fallen by a higher Hand than that of man, and Maxwell was free.

As a Head Centre of the Order, Le Gautier wielded much power, and even now he did not despair, with the command of nearly all the desperadoes in Rome at his command. He had only to get Maxwell arrested in Rome on some false charge and carried to the mountains; and there—after a little delay and a packed meeting of the League—shot. Desperate men such as Le Gautier, especially with such a prize in their grasp, do not long hesitate over such a trifling matter as a human life, and he trusted to his own good luck and native audacity to pull him through.

It was getting dark the same night as he dispatched a telegram to Rome, and then turned in the direction of Fitzroy Square. He was as eager now to see Isodore

as he had been to encounter Enid in the afternoon, and looked forward not only to a pleasant evening but a remunerative one.

She did not keep him long waiting in the drawing-room ere she sailed in all smiles and welcome. She was looking radiantly beautiful to-night; there was a deeper flush on her face, and a glitter in her glorious eyes not usually seen there—signs of a loving welcome, Le Gautier imagined in his egotistical way. There was, besides, a warmth in her manner and a gladness in the pressure of her hand which inspired him, and sent an electric thrill coursing through his veins.

‘You are looking more transcendently lovely than usual, Marie!’ he exclaimed with a fervour unusual even to him. ‘Every time I see you, there is some additional charm in you to note.’

‘It depends upon whether the observing eye is a prejudiced one,’ she replied with a caressing smile, which brought him at once to her side. ‘You say that now, Hector. How long will you continue to think so?’

‘As long as I have power to think at all—as long as memory serves me. I shall remember you to the last day of my life.’

‘I believe you will,’ Isodore smiled bewilderingly. ‘And yet, strange as it may seem, the time will perhaps come when you will wish you had never seen my face.’

‘You are more than usually enigmatical tonight, Marie. You are a puzzle to me. I do not even know who you are. Tell me something about yourself, and why you are living in this solitude here.’

‘No; not to-night; but, as I have often promised you, I will tell you some time. I will tell you who I am before you go away; and then, when your curiosity is satisfied, you will leave me.’

‘Never!’ Le Gautier exclaimed passionately. ‘Leave you!—the only woman I ever saw that I could really love. Leave you, Marie! How can you entertain the bare idea!’

He would have approached her nearer, but she waved him gently but firmly aside. The distance she kept him fanned his passion all the more.

‘Tell me something about yourself,’ she said. ‘That is a topic which never fails to interest me. How about the League, this Maxwell’s journey? Has he accomplished his mission yet?’

‘He is not likely to, now. Visci is dead!—Gracious powers, Marie! what ails you? Are you ill?’

Isodore uttered a sharp exclamation, and then reeled forward in her chair. Her face was white and drawn, her lips trembled. Gradually her bosom ceased to heave so painfully, and she turned to Le Gautier with a white wan smile, though he could see the fan still trembling in her hands.

‘It is nothing,’ she said with an effort ‘I am subject to these attacks of the heart, and any news of sudden death always affects me so.—Do not look distressed; it is past now.’

‘There is nothing in the name to cause you any distress?’ Le Gautier asked suspiciously.

‘I have heard the name before, if that is what you mean. Tell me all you know of this Carlo Visci.’

‘I did not say his name was Carlo,’ Le Gautier observed, somewhat sharply. ‘I can tell you nothing more. When I reached home this afternoon, I had a telegram to say he was dead.’

‘And this Maxwell, what of him? I suppose he will return home now?’

‘He has been somewhat dilatory in obeying orders. No; he will not return. He will be detained at Rome for the present.’

‘Tell me why you hate this Englishman so.’

Le Gautier started. ‘How do you know I hate him?’ he asked. ‘I have never said so.’

‘Not in so many words; but in gesture and look, when you speak of him, your actions are eloquent, my friend. He has crossed your path. Ah, well, I like a good hater. Maxwell will suffer yet’

‘Yes,’ Le Gautier exclaimed involuntarily, ‘he will.’

Isodore rose and walked to the piano, where she sat for a moment striking the chords idly. ‘When do you go to Warsaw?’ she asked.

‘I have six days remaining to me.—Marie, the time has come when we must no longer delay. The pear is ripe now; all my plans are matured. I have only to hold up my hand and the League will vanish.’

All this time, Isodore played on softly, musingly, the music serving like the accompaniment of a song to force the speaker’s voice. As he stood there, and she answered him, she never ceased to play the soft chords.

‘Then you have everything prepared?’

‘Yes, everything is ready,’ He drew a low seat to her side, and seated himself there. ‘All the names are made out, the whole plot prepared.’

‘And you propose to hand them over to me. It is a great compliment; and I suppose I must take them. I would run greater risks than this for your sake and—my own.’

She took one hand from the ivory keys and held it out to him. Drawing a packet from his pocket, he gave it to her. She thrust it in her bosom, and ran her fingers over the keys again.

‘All is there, I suppose,’ she asked, ‘down to the minutest detail, everything necessary to betray the League and pull it up root and branch? You have taken good care to shield yourself, I presume?’

‘Of course.—And now, to talk of more pleasant things. You know I am going away in a few days; and when I return, I shall expect to find myself perfectly free.’

‘You may depend upon me. I will do all I can for you.’

Le Gautier looked up sharply—the words were coldly, sternly uttered, out the quiet placid smile never left her face.

‘How strangely you speak! But oh, Marie—my Marie, the only woman I ever loved, you will stand by me now, and help me, for both our sakes! Look at me, and say you will do what I ask!’

Isodore looked down, smiling brightly. ‘Yes, I will do what you ask,’ she said. ‘And so you really love me?’

‘Passionately and sincerely, such as I never expected to love woman yet.’

‘I am glad to hear you say that,’ Isodore replied with a thrill of exultation in her voice. ‘I have waited and hoped for the time to come; but never in my wildest dreams did I look for this.’

‘With your nobleness and beauty, how could it be otherwise? I should be more than a man—or less—if I looked upon you unmoved.’

‘Then, for the first time for years, I am happy.’

Le Gautier started to his feet rapturously. He did not understand her yet; he thought the soft earnest words all for him. He would have caught her there and then in his eager arms, but again she repulsed him.

‘No, no!’ she cried; ‘I have not proved you yet. Let things remain as they are till you return again to England.’

How strange, Le Gautier thought vaguely, that she should use words so similar to those of Enid to a precisely similar plea. Despite his passion, he had not thrown all prudence to the winds.

‘You had better leave me now,’ Isodore continued—‘leave me to think and dwell over this thing.’

‘But what about my badge of membership? I dare not leave England without that’.

‘I had almost forgotten it in this interesting conversation. It is not in my possession; it is in Paris. You have a meeting of the League before you go for final instructions. Come to me after that, and you shall have it. I am going to Paris to-morrow, and will bring it with me.’

‘You are a witch!’ Le Gautier exclaimed with admiration. ‘You seem to know as much as the mysterious Isodore, that princess who never shows herself unless danger besets the League. If she is the wonder men who have seen her say she is, they stand in dire need of her now.’

‘Beware how you talk so lightly of her—she has the gift of fernseed. At this very moment she may know of your perfidy.’

‘Perfidy is a hard word, my queen, and sounds not prettily.—And now, good-night. And you will not fail me?’

‘I will not fail you,’ Isodore replied with the stern inflection Le Gautier had noticed before, and marvelled over. ‘I never fail.’

‘A woman, and never fail!’

‘Not in my promises. If I make a vow or pledge my word, I can wait five years or ten to fulfil it—Good-night. And when we meet again, you will not say I have belied my contract’

When Valerie entered some minutes later, she found Isodore with firm-set face and gleaming eyes. ‘My brother is dead,’ she said quietly. ‘Poor Carlo! And he loved me so at one time. Now, he can never know.’

‘Dead!’ Valerie exclaimed. ‘You do not mean to say—’

‘That Maxwell killed him?—No. His heart has been failing for years, long before I left Rome; his life was not worth an hour’s purchase. But I have no time to mourn over him now.—Let me see if I can do a little good with my useless occupation. I start for Rome to-morrow.’

Valerie looked at her friend in stupid astonishment

‘I cannot explain to you now. Maxwell is free to return home. As you know, it means destruction to Le Gautier’s plans, if he does. I dared not press him too closely to-night; but Maxwell will be detained in Rome, in all probability by Paulo Lucci, till some charge can be trumped up for his destruction. But Lucci and his

band dare not cross me; my power is too great for that. To-morrow, I leave for Rome, and pray heaven that I may not be too late!’

Chapter XVI

CONSUMED by conflicting emotions, and torn by a thousand hopes and fears, Maxwell set out on his journey to Rome. At any hazards, he was determined to commit no crime, and trusted to time and his own native wit to show him a way out of the awful difficulty which lay before him. All the old familiar country he passed through failed to interest him now; he saw nothing but his own fate before his eyes; and the Eternal City, which had once been a place of mystery and delight to him, now looked to his distorted fancy like a tomb, every broken statue an avenging finger, and every fractured column a solemn warning.

It was night when he arrived and secured apartments—the old ones he had occupied in his student days, the happiest time in his life, he thought now, as every ornament recalled this silent voice or that forgotten memory slumbering in some corner of his brain. He could eat nothing; the very air of the place was oppressive to him; so he put on his hat and walked out into the streets, all alive with the citizens taking their evening walk, and gay with light laughter over flirtations and cigarette smoke. He wandered long and far, so far, that it was late when he returned; and there, lying on the table, was a sealed packet, bearing the device of the Order, and in the corner two crossed daggers. He groaned as he opened it, knowing full well the packet contained the hated ‘instructions,’ as they were called. He tore them open, read them hastily, and then looked out of the window up to the silent stars. And it was Visci, his old friend Carlo Visci, he was sent here—to murder! The whole thing seemed like a ghastly dream. Visci, the truest-hearted friend man ever had; Visci, the handsome genius, whose purse was ever ready for a fellow-creature in need; the man who had sat at his table times out of number; the student who was in his secrets; the man who had saved his life, snatched him from the very jaws of death—from the yellow waters of the Tiber. And this was the friend he was going to stab in the back some dark night! A party of noisy, light-hearted students passed down the street, some English voices amongst them, coming vaguely to Maxwell’s ears, as he sat there looking on the fatal documents, staring him in the face from the table.

‘Et tu, Brutel!’

Maxwell looked up swiftly. And there, with one trembling forefinger pointing to the open documents, stood the figure of a man with a look of infinite sorrow on his face, as he gazed mournfully down upon the table. He was young—not more than thirty, perhaps, and his aquiline features bore the marks of much physical suffering. There were something like tears in his eyes now.

‘Carlo! is it possible it is you?’ Maxwell cried, springing to his feet

‘Yes, Fred, it is I, Carlo Visci, who stand before you. We are well met, old friend; you have not far to seek to do your bidding now. Strike! while I look the other way, for it is your task, I know.’

‘As there is a heaven above us, no!’ Maxwell faltered. ‘Never, my friend! Do you think I would have come for this? Listen to me, Visci. You evidently know why I am here; but sure as I am a man, never shall my hand be the one to do you hurt I have sworn it!’

‘I had expected something like this,’ Visci replied mournfully. ‘Yes, I know why you came. You had best comply with my request. It would be a kindness to me to kill me, as I stand here now.’

‘Visci, I swear to you that when I joined the Brotherhood, I was in the blackest ignorance of its secret workings. When I was chosen for this mission, I did not even comprehend what I had to do. Then they told me Visci was a traitor. Even then, I did not know it was you. Standing there in the room, I swore never to harm a hair of your head; and, heaven help me, I never will!’

‘Yes, I am a traitor, like you,’ Visci smiled mournfully. ‘Like you, I was deceived by claptrap talk of liberty and freedom; like you, I was allotted to take vengeance on a traitor; and like you, I refused. Better the secret dagger than the crime of fratricide upon one’s soul!’

‘Fratricide! I do not understand.’

‘I do not understand either. Frederick, the man I was detailed to murder—for it is nothing else—is my only brother.—You start! But the League does not countenance relationships. Flesh and blood and such paltry ties are nothing to the friends of liberty, who are at heart the sternest tyrants that ever the mouth of man execrated.—But what brings you here? You can have only one object in coming here. I have told you before it would be a kindness to end my existence.’

‘But why? And yet, when I come to look at you again, you have changed.’

‘I have changed,’ Visci echoed mournfully—‘changed in mind and body. My heart is affected, diseased beyond all hope of remedy. I may die now, at any moment; I cannot live four months.’

They sat down together, and fell to discussing old times when they were happy careless students together, and Maxwell did not fail to notice the painful breathing and quick gasping spasms of his friend, altered almost beyond recognition from the gallant Visci of other days,

‘Salvarini advised me to come here. You remember him; he claims to be a true friend of yours,’ Maxwell observed at length. ‘He said it would gain time, and enable me to form my plans.—But tell me how you knew I was in Rome. I have only just arrived.’

‘I had a sure warning. It came from the hand of Isodore herself.’

‘I have heard much of her; she seems all-powerful. But I thought she was too stern a Leaguer to give you such friendly counsel. Have you ever seen her? I hear she is very beautiful.’

‘Beautiful as the stars, I am told, and a noble-hearted woman too. She is a sort of Queen of the League; but she uses her power well, ever erring on the side of mercy. She has a history, report says—the old story of a woman’s trustfulness and a man’s deceit. Poor Isodore! hers is no bed of roses!’

‘And she put you on your guard?’ Maxwell asked. ‘Come, there must be some good in a woman like that, though I cannot say I altogether like your picture. I should like to see her.’

'I should not be surprised if you did before many days. She is the one to protect you from violence. With her sanction, you could laugh the mandates of the League to scorn. Had I long to live, I should sue for her protection, and wherever she may be, she would come to me. Even now, if she comes to Rome, see her if you can and lay your case before her.'

'And shield myself behind a woman! That does not sound like the chivalrous Visci of old. She is only a woman, after all.'

'One in a million,' Visci answered calmly. 'If she holds out her right hand to you, cling to it as a drowning desperate man does to a rock; it is your only chance of salvation.—And now it is late. I must go.'

Despite his own better sense, Maxwell began to dwell upon the fact of gaining assistance from the mysterious Isodore. At meetings of the League in London, he had heard her name mentioned, and always with the utmost reverence and affection. If she could not absolutely relieve him from his undertaking, she could at any rate shield him from non-compliance with the mandate. Full of these cheerful thoughts, he fell asleep.

He found his friend the following morning quite cheerful, but in the daylight the ravages of disease were painfully apparent. The dark rings under the eyes and the thin features bespoke nights of racking pain and broken rest.

Visci noticed this and smiled gently. 'Yes, I am changed,' he said. 'Sometimes, after a bad night, I hardly know myself. It is cruel, weary work lying awake hour after hour fighting with the grim King. But I have been singularly free from pain lately, and I am looking much better than I have been.'

'There might be a chance yet,' Maxwell replied with a cheerfulness wholly assumed, and thinking that this 'looking better' was the nearest approach to death he had ever seen. 'An absence from Rome, a change of climate, has done wonders for people before now.'

Visci shook his head. 'Not when the mainspring of life is broken,' he said: 'no human ingenuity, no miracle of surgery can mend that. Maxwell, if they had deferred their vengeance long, they would have been too late. Some inward monitor tells me I shall fail them yet'

'You will for me, Visci, you may depend upon that. Time is no object to me.'

'And if I should die and disappoint you of your revenge, how mad you would be!' Visci laughed. 'It is a dreadful tragedy to me; it is a very serious thing for you; and yet there is a comic side to it, as there is in all things. Ah me! I cannot see the droll side of life as I used; but when the bloodthirsty murderer sits down with his victim tête-à-tête, discussing the crime, there is something laughable in it after all.'

'I daresay there is,' Maxwell answered grimly, 'though I am dense enough not to notice it. To me, there is something horribly, repulsively tragic about it, even to hear you discussing death in that light way.'

'Familiarity breeds contempt Is not that one of your English proverbs?' Visci said airily.—'But, my good Frederick,' he continued, lowering his voice to a solemn key, the white horseman will not find me unprepared, when he steals upon me, as he might at any moment. I am ready. I do not make a parade of my religion, but I have tried to do what is right and honest and honourable. I have faced death so often, that I treat him lightly at times. But never fear that when he comes to me for the last time—'

Maxwell pressed his friend's hand in silent sympathy. 'You always were a good fellow, Visci,' he said; 'and if this hour must come so speedily, tell me is there anything I can do for you when—when—'

'I am dead? No reason to hesitate over the word. No, Maxwell; my house is in order. I have no friends besides my brother; and he, I hope, is far beyond the vengeance of the League now.'

'Then there is nothing I can do for you in any way?'

'No, I think not. But you are my principal care now; your life is far more important than mine. I have written to Isodore, laying a statement of all the facts before her; and if she is the woman I take her for, she is sure to lose no time in getting here. Once under her protection, you are safe; there will be no further cause for alarm.'

'But it seems rather unmanly,' Maxwell urged.

'Unmanly!' echoed Visci scornfully. 'What has manliness to do with fighting cowardly *vendette* in the dark? You must, you shall do it I' he continued vehemently; but the exertion was too much for him, and he swayed forward over the table as if he would fall. Presently, a little colour crept into the pallid face, and he continued: 'You see, even that is too much for me. Maxwell, if you contradict me and get me angry, my blood will be upon your head after all. Now, do listen to reason.'

'If my want of common-sense hurts you as much as that, certainly. But I do not see how this mysterious princess can help me.'

'Listen to me,' Visci said solemnly. Then he laid all his schemes before the other—his elaborate plans for his friend's safety, designs whose pure sacrifice of self were absolutely touching.

Maxwell began to take heart again. 'You are very good,' he said gratefully, 'to take all this infinite pains for me.'

'In a like strait you would do the same for me, Fred.'

'Yes,' Maxwell answered simply. 'How Salvarini's words come back to me now! Do you remember, when I wanted to throw my insignia out of the window that evening, the last we all spent together?'

'I recollect It was two days before little Genevieve disappeared,' Visci answered sadly.—'Do you know, I have never discovered any trace of her or Lucrece. Poor child, poor little girl! I wonder where she is now.'

'Perhaps you may see her again some day.'

'It has long been my dearest wish; but it will never be fulfilled now. If ever you do see her once more, say that I—'

'Visci!'

As the last words fell from the Italian's lips, his head hung forward, and he fell from his chair. For a moment he lay motionless, then raised his face slightly and smiled. A thin stream of blood trickled down his fair beard, staining it scarlet. He lay quietly on Maxwell's shoulder.

'Do not be alarmed,' he said faintly. 'It has come at last—There are tears in your eyes, Fred. Do not weep for me. Do not forget Carlo Visci, when you see old friends; and when you meet little Genevieve, tell her I forgave her, and to the last loved and grieved for her.—Good-bye, old friend. Take hold of my hand. Let me

look in your honest face once more. It is not hard to die, Fred. Tell them that my last words—Jesu, mercy!’

‘Speak to me, Carlo—speak to me I’

Never again on this side of the grave. And so the noble-hearted Italian died; and on the third day they buried him in a simple grave under the murmuring pines.

No call to remain longer now. One last solitary evening ramble, Maxwell took outside the city wall ere his departure. As he walked along wrapped in his own sad thoughts, he did not heed that his footsteps were being dogged. Then with a sudden instinct of danger, he turned round. The feet that followed stopped. ‘Who is there?’ he cried.

A muffled figure came towards him, and another stealthily from behind. A crash, a blow, a fierce struggle for a moment, a man’s cry for help borne idly on the breeze, a mist rising before the eyes, a thousand stars dancing and tumbling, then deep, sleepy unconsciousness.

Chapter XVII

WHEN Maxwell came to himself, it was broad daylight. He was lying upon a straw mattress in a small room, containing no furniture besides the rude bed; and as he looked up, he could see the rafters, black with dirt and the smoke of ages. The place was partly a house, partly a hut. Gradually, as recollection came back to him, he remembered the events of the previous night, wondering vaguely why he had been selected as a victim for attack, and what brought him here. By the clear sound of voices and the rush of water, he judged himself to be in the country. He had no consciousness of fear, so he rose, and throwing open the heavy door, looked out. Towering away above his head were the snow-capped peaks of mountains, and below him the spreading valley of the Campagna. Wood upon wood was piled up before him, all aglow with bright sunlight, the green leaves whispering and trembling in the breeze. The hut was built on a long rocky plateau, approached by a narrow winding path, and ending in a steep precipice of two hundred feet, and backed up behind by almost perpendicular rocks, fringed and crowned by trees. In spite of his position, Maxwell drew a long breath of delight; the perfect beauty of the scene thrilled him, and appealed to his artistic soul and love of the beautiful. For some time he gazed upon the panorama, perfectly oblivious to his position, till gradually the sound of voices borne upon the wind came to his ears. He walked to the side of the hut and looked around.

Seated upon the short springy turf, in every picturesque and comfortable position the ingenuity of each could contrive, were four men, evidently, to Maxwell’s experienced eye, banditti. They seemed peacefully inclined now, as they lounged there in the bright sunshine smoking, and renewing the everlasting papilito, without which no such gentry are complete, either in the pages of fiction or as portrayed upon the modern stage. With the exception of one, evidently the leader, there was nothing gorgeous in their costume, it being the usual attire of the mountaineers; but the long carbines lying by their sides and the short daggers

in their waistbands spoke of their occupation. Maxwell began to scent an adventure and enjoy the feeling; it would only mean the outlay of a few pounds, a little captivity; but when he approached nearer, and saw each bearing on some part of his person the gold moidore, his heart beat a trifle faster as he stepped forward and confronted the group.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he asked, in the best Italian at his command. ‘I suppose it is merely a question of ransom. But it is useless to put the figure too high. Come, what is the amount?’

The brigands looked to each other in admiration of this coolness. Presently, the leader removed his cigarette from his mouth and spoke:

‘You have your watch, signor, and papers; you have your rings and purse. It is not our rule to forget these with an ordinary prisoner.’

Maxwell felt in his pocket, and, surely enough, his valuables were perfectly safe—nothing missing, even to his sketch-book. For the first time, he began to experience a sensation of fear. ‘Then, if plunder is not your object, why am I detained?’

‘Plunder is not a nice word to ears polite, signor,’ the leader replied with a dark scowl. ‘You are detained by orders. To hear, with us, is to obey. You will remain here during our pleasure.’

‘But suppose I refuse to remain?’

Without rising, the brigand turned on his side and pointed towards the sheer precipice, and then to the wall behind; with a gesture he indicated the narrow winding path, the only means of exit, and smiled ironically. ‘You may go; there is nothing to prevent you,’ he said; ‘but before you were half-way down the path yonder, you would be the target for a score of bullets, and we do not often fail’

Maxwell was considerably impressed by this cool display; and indeed, when he considered the matter calmly, there appeared no prospect of immediate escape. Remonstrances or threats would be equally unavailing, and he determined to make the best of his position.

‘Perhaps you would not mind telling me why I am here, and by whose orders you have arrested me. It would be some slight consolation to know how long I am to stay. I am anxious to know this,’ he continued, ‘because I am afraid your mountain air, exhilarating as it is, will not suit me.’

The group burst into loud laughter at this little humour: it was a kind of wit they were in a position to appreciate.

‘It is impossible to say, signor. We only obey orders; we can only wait for further instructions as regards your welfare—or otherwise. We were told to bring one Maxwell here, and lo! we have done it.’

‘I see you are brothers of the League,’ Maxwell replied; ‘and for some act of omission or commission I am detained here. You can at least tell me by whose orders you do this.’

‘Signor, they say you are a traitor to our Order.’

‘That I am not!’ Maxwell cried indignantly. ‘Tell me why I am here, and at whose orders. There is some mistake here.’

‘Not on our part, signor. The instructions came from London. I only received them last night. You will be well treated here, provided you do not make any attempts to escape. For the time, you are our guest, and as such, the best I have

is at your disposal. If orders come to release you, we shall conduct you to Rome. We shall do everything in our power to serve you. If, on the other hand, you are tried in the balance and found wanting, we shall not fail to do our duty.' He said these last words sternly, in contrast to the polite, grave manner with which he uttered the first part of his speech.

Maxwell had perception enough to comprehend his meaning. 'You mean that I should have to die,' he observed. 'I suppose it would be a matter of the utmost indifference to you, either way?'

'As a matter of duty, signor, yes,' he answered gravely; 'though I do not wish to see a brave man die; but if the mandate came to that effect, I must obey. There is no refusing the word of the League.'

'Then I really am a prisoner of the League,' Maxwell returned bitterly. 'Well, the cause of liberty must be in a bad way, when the very members of the League treat brothers as I have been treated.'

'Ah, it is a fine word liberty,' the brigand chief replied sardonically. 'It is a good phrase to put into men's mouths; but there can be no freedom where the shadow of the sword dwells upon the land. Even Italy herself has suffered, as she will again. Perfect liberty and perfect freedom can only be founded upon the doctrine of universal love.'

By this time, Maxwell and the chief had drawn a little aside from the others. The artist looked in his companion's face, and noted the air of sorrow there. It was a fine manly countenance, haughty and handsome, though the dark eyes were somewhat sombre now. Maxwell, with his cosmopolitan instinct, was drawn towards this man, who had a history written on his brow. 'You, too, have suffered,' he said gently.

'Suffered!' the brigand echoed. 'Yes, Englishman, I have suffered, and not more from the Austrian yoke than the cruelties of my own countrymen. There will be no true liberty here while a stiletto remains in an Italian's belt.'

'I suppose not,' Maxwell mused. 'These Societies seem to me a gigantic farce. Would that I had remained quietly at home, and let empires manage their own affairs. And Salvarini warned me too.'

'Salvarini! What do you know of him?' the chief exclaimed.

'Nothing but what is good and noble, everything to make one proud to call him friend.—Do you know him too?'

'He is my brother,' the chief replied quietly.—'You look surprised to find that a relative of Luigi should pursue such a profession as mine. Yes, he is my brother—the brother of an outlaw, upon whose head a price has been put by the state. I am known to men as Paulo Lucci'

Maxwell started. The man sitting calmly by his side was the most famous and daring bandit chief of his time. Provinces rang with his fame, and the stories of his dashing exploits resounded far and near. Even away in the distant Apennines, the villagers sat round the winter firesides and discoursed of this man with bated breath, and children trembled in their beds at the mere thought of his name. He laughed scornfully now as he noted Maxwell's startled look.

'I am so very terrible,' he continued, 'that my very name strikes terror to you! Bah! you have been listening to the old women's tales of my atrocities, about the tortures my victims undergo, and the thousand-and-one lies people are fond of

telling about me. I can understand Luigi did not tell you I was his brother! I am not a relative to be proud of—'

'He is in total ignorance of your identity. That I do know.—I wonder at you choosing such a life,' Maxwell put in boldly. 'With your daring, you would have made fame as a soldier; any path of life you had chosen would have brought you honour; but now—'

'But now I am an outlaw,' Paulo Salvarini interrupted. 'And why? If you will listen, I will tell you my story in a few words.'

Maxwell threw himself upon the grass by the other's side and composed himself to listen.

'If you will look below you,' the chief commenced, and pointing with his finger across the distant landscape, 'you will see the sun shining upon a house-top. I can see the light reflected from it now. That house was once my home. I like sometimes to sit here and think of those days when Gillana and I were happy there—that is ten years ago now. I had done my best for my country; I had fought for her, and I retired to this peaceful spot with the woman of my heart, to live in peace, as I hoped, for the rest of my life. But the fiend of Liberty was abroad. My wife's father, an aged man, was accused of complicity in political crimes, and one day, when I was absent, they came to arrest him. My wife clung to him, and one of the brutal soldiery struck her down with the butt of his rifle; I came in time to see that, for my blood was on fire, and I did not hesitate. You can understand the rest. My wife was killed, actually murdered by that foul blow. But I had my revenge. When I crossed the threshold of my house, on my flight to the mountains, I left three dead behind me, and another, the officer, wounded sore. He recovered, I afterwards heard; but some day we shall meet.'

He stopped abruptly, shaking in every limb from the violence of his emotion, his sombre eyes turned towards the spot where the sun shone upon the roof-tops of what was once a peaceful homestead.

'Luigi can only guess at this,' the speaker continued. 'To him I have been dead for years; indeed, I do not know what makes me tell you now, only that you surprised me, and I like to hear a little news of him.'

'I have heard this history before,' Maxwell observed. 'It is five years ago now; but I am not likely to forget it. Still, you cannot enjoy this life. It is wild and exciting, no doubt; but your companions—'

'I live for revenge,' Salvarini exclaimed sternly. 'I am waiting to meet the brutal officer who ordered his follower to strike down my wife. I have waited long; but the time will come at length, and then, heaven help the man called Hector le Gautier!'

'Le Gautier!' Maxwell exclaimed. 'He, an Italian officer! Why, he is at present Head Centre of the Brotherhood in London. He and your brethren are bosom friends. He was even present at the time when Luigi told us your sad history. Surely he cannot know; and yet I trusted him too. Signor Salvarini, you bewilder me.'

The outlaw laughed loud and long; but the mirth was strained, and jarred harshly upon the listener. 'And that fiend is a friend of Luigi's! Strange things happen in these times. Beware, Signor Maxwell—beware of that man, for he will work you mischief yet. It was by his orders you were arrested. He knows me by name, and as one of the Brotherhood only, so I did his bidding.'

‘Strange! And yet I have done him no harm.’

‘Not that you are aware of, perhaps. Still, no doubt you have crossed his path in some way. If I have a command in the morning to lead you out yonder to face a dozen rifles, I shall not be surprised.’

‘And you would countenance such murder?’

‘This morning, yes. Now, I am doubtful. You are my brothers friend; I am le Gautier’s enemy; I do not wish to help him.’

Three days passed uneventfully by, at the end of which time Maxwell had become a great favourite with the outlaw band. Following the lead of their chief, they treated him with every kindness; nor was he in his turn inclined to resent his captivity or chafe at this delay. His chief fear was for Enid; for Paulo Salvarini, though he was inclined to allow his prisoner every latitude, was firm upon the point of communication with the outer world; for, as he pointed out, he might after all be guilty of some great treachery to the League, and in that case must be answerable for anything that happened.

So the days passed on in that quiet spot, no further news coming to him till the morning of the fourth day. Then he was sitting at the door of his hut, watching the sunrise glowing on the distant hills, when Salvarini approached him, his face perturbed, and his whole manner, agitated. ‘You are in danger,’ he whispered. ‘The orders have come, and you are proclaimed traitor. The men are mad against you, and declare you shall be brought out for instant execution. Ah! you have only seen the best side of their character; you have not seen them hungry for blood.’

‘Do they want to murder me?’ Maxwell exclaimed. ‘Cannot you—’

‘I am powerless now,’ Salvarini interrupted. ‘I will do what I can; but I fear nothing can save you now.’

‘Do not be afraid,’ said a calm voice behind. ‘I shall save him!’

‘Isodore!’

‘Yes, Paulo Lucci; it is I.’

Maxwell looked up, and saw the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. For a moment he could only gaze in rapt astonishment. This, then, was the Empress of the League—the woman Visci had mentioned, whose lightest word could free his feet and clear his path for ever.

‘You have come in time,’ Salvarini said with a low obeisance. ‘An hour hence and our prisoner would have been no more.’

‘I am always in time,’ Isodore replied quietly.—‘I have come to deliver you from a great danger,’ she continued, turning to Maxwell. ‘Come; we must be in Rome at once, and away, or we may yet be too late. Hark! Are the wolves clamouring for their prey already? We shall see.’

It was light now, and from the plateau beyond came the hoarse yells and cries for revenge from the brigands. On they came towards the hut, clamouring for blood, and mad with the heat of passion. They rushed in, seized Maxwell, and led him out on to the level grass, while six of the party stepped back a few paces and cocked their rifles. The whole thing was so sudden that Lucci and Isodore were totally unprepared to resist. But the girl roused herself now, and quitting the hut, swept across the open space and placed herself in front of Maxwell.

‘Drop your arms!’ she cried. ‘Are you mad, that you do this thing? Ground your rifles, or you shall pay dearly for this indignity.’

Appalled by her gestures and the dignity of her voice, the desperadoes hesitated for a moment, and then one, more daring than the rest, raised his carbine to the shoulder, standing in the act of firing.

'You may fire,' Isodore cried. 'Fire! and every hair of my head shall be avenged for by a life! Fire! and then pray for the mercy of heaven, for you shall not meet with any from the hand of man!'

The desperate men were amazed by this beauty and daring, the audacity of which appealed to their rude instinct. One by one they dropped their firearms, and stood looking sullenly in the direction of the scornful woman, standing there without a particle of fear in her eyes.

'Who are you,' cried one bolder than the rest—'who are you, that come between us and justice?'

They all took up the cry, and bade her stand aside.

'If she falls, I fall!' Lucci exclaimed in a firm steady voice. 'Go on your knees, and ask for pardon.—Madam,' he continued, falling upon one knee, 'I did not think my followers would have shown such scant courtesy to Isodore.'

At the very mention of her name, a change came over the mutineers. One by one they dropped their firearms, and came forward humbly to implore her forgiveness for their rashness, but she waved them aside.

Long and earnestly the three talked together, listening to the revelation of Le Gautier's treachery, and how the final act was about to be played over there in England: how Le Gautier had confessed his treachery, and how, out of his own mouth, he was going to be convicted. Silently and slowly they wound their way down the mountain path, under Lucci's guidance, out on to the plains, beyond which the sun lighted upon the house-tops of distant Rome. When they had got so far, Isodore held out her hand to the guide.

'Good-bye. It will not be safe for you to come any farther,' she said. 'Rest assured, in the general reckoning your account shall not be forgotten.'

'It will not,' Lucci answered sternly. 'I shall see to that myself. By the time you reach England, I shall be there too.—Nay, do not strive to dissuade me. I do not take my revenge from another hand. I shall run a great risk; but, mark me, when the time comes, I shall be there!'

Without another word he disappeared; and Isodore and Maxwell walked on towards the Eternal City both wrapped in their own thoughts. Mile after mile passed on thus, ere Maxwell broke the silence.

'Do you think he will keep his word?' he said half timidly.

'Who, Lucci? Yes; he will keep his word; nothing but death will prevent that.—And now, you and I must get back to England without a moment's loss of time.'

'I cannot say how grateful I am,' Maxwell said earnestly. 'If it had not been for your bravery and courage—' He stopped and shuddered; the contemplation of what might have been was horrible.

Isodore smiled a little unsteadily in answer to these words. 'I owe you a debt of gratitude,' she replied. 'My memory serves me well. I was not going to allow you to die, when you would have perished rather than raise a hand against Carlo Visci.'

'Indeed, you only do me justice. I would have died first.'

'I know it; and I thank you for your kindness to him at the last. You were with him when he died. Things could not have been better. He was always fond of you. For that, I am grateful.'

'But I do not understand,' Maxwell faltered. 'He did not know you except by reputation.'

'I think you are mistaken. Am I so changed that you do not recognise your friend Genevieve?'

'Genevieve! You? Am I dreaming?'

'Yes; I am Genevieve; though much changed and altered from those happy old days when you used to come to the Villa Mattio. You wonder why I am here now—why I left my home. Cannot you guess that Le Gautier was at the bottom of it?'

'But he professed not to know you; he—'

'Yes, he professed to be a friend of yours. But until I give you permission to speak, not a word that Isodore and Genevieve are one and the same.'

'My lips are sealed. I leave everything in your hands.'

'And cannot you guess why you have incurred Le Gautier's enmity!—No? Simply, because he aspires to the hand of Enid Charteris.—You need not start,' Isodore continued, laying her hand upon the listener's arm. 'You have no cause for anxiety. It will never be!'

'Never, while I can prevent it!' Maxwell cried warmly.

'It is impossible. He has a wife already.'

Only tarrying for one mournful hour to visit the cemetery where lay Carlo Visci's quiet grave, Isodore and Maxwell made their way, but not together, to England, as fast as steam could carry them.

Chapter XVIII

'YOU wished to see me?'

'Yes; if you will be so good as to sit down and listen to me.'

Enid stood looking at her mysterious visitor in some perplexity. There was something almost weird about the strange woman's beauty; but in obedience, she seated herself to listen.

'I have a strange story to tell,' Isodore commenced. 'For a long while now I have been watching over your welfare. Do not think me personal or rude in any questions I may ask. Believe me, I do not for one moment wish to pain you; indeed, on the other hand, I wish to do you a great service.'

Enid inclined her head gently. 'Perhaps it will be as well to have as perfect confidence between us as possible. You already know my name. Will you be so good as to tell me to whom I owe this visit?'

'My name is Isodore.'

Enid looked at her visitor in interest and admiration. This, then, was the beautiful mystery about whom Maxwell had often spoken, the princess to whom the fatal Brotherhood owed allegiance. Then she grew frigid. Had it not been for her and such as her, Frederick would have been with her now.

'You misjudge me,' Isodore continued sadly, for she had read the other's thoughts as easily as an open book. 'Believe me, had I known, Mr Maxwell would never have been sent to Rome. But if I am to continue, I must have your confidence. What if I tell you your lover is in England now?'

'In England, and never came to see me!' Enid exclaimed with a little gasp. 'Impossible! He would surely have written.'

'Nevertheless, it is perfectly true, though he only arrived yesterday. He would have come to you, or written, had I not forbidden him.'

'Forbidden him,' Enid echoed haughtily. 'And why?'

'Because things were not ready,' Isodore replied calmly. 'I did not take a journey to Rome at the hazard of my life, to rescue him from a great danger, to have my plans upset at the last moment. If it had not been for me, Mr Maxwell would not be alive now.' Isodore could not restrain herself sufficiently to conceal this touch of womanly feeling.

Enid's face softened strangely. 'I have heard of you. Forgive me, if I seem cold, but I have been severely tried lately,' she said. 'You do not know what a load you have taken off my mind; and yet, perhaps—' She stopped abruptly; her thoughts turned in the direction of Le Gautier, and wondering how she could face her lover now.

'And yet,' Isodore replied—'and yet you would see a way out of the difficulty into which the miserable schemes of Le Gautier have placed you? Do I speak plainly, or shall I be more explicit?'

The random shot went home; Enid's face flashed crimson to the fair curls lying on her forehead. 'You speak plainly enough,' she faltered. 'You need say no more. I am dazed and bewildered by your wonderful knowledge.'

'It will be clear enough presently. The clouds are dark now; but I see rays of light here and there. Do you study spiritualism?'

'No,' Enid answered, puzzled by the abruptness and inconsequence of the question. 'I cannot say that I have. But why?'

'If your father is in the house, I shall be glad to see him. Will you be good enough to ascertain if he can be seen?'

'If I tell him he is wanted on supernatural affairs, he will come.' Enid smiled as she rang the bell 'It is his craze.'

After a little pause, the baronet entered the room, and, like his daughter, stood enthralled by the visitor's perfect beauty. He bowed low; in spite of his age, he was a lover of the beautiful still. He looked up admiringly in the perfect eyes, and waited for her to speak.

'Sir Geoffrey, you are a swindled, deluded man!'

'Bless me!' the startled baronet exclaimed at this unceremonious opening. 'Swindled, deluded, I? Who by? Impossible!'

'By the conjurer, Le Gautier.'

Sir Geoffrey stared in open-mouthed amazement; even the breeding of the Charterises did not rise to this occasion. Enid's heart gave one leap, and then began to beat violently. She was conscious of some coming revelations of the deepest interest to her, and waited with impatience for Isodore to speak.

'Some time ago, you went to a house near Paddington. You will please correct me if I am in error, Sir Geoffrey. During your presence there you saw several

startling manifestations: you were commanded to do certain things, one of which affected deeply your daughter's happiness, and which, by some happy accident, were equally acceptable to Le Gautier. Am I right?'

'Perfectly,' the baronet gasped. 'And I need not say they will be carried out to the letter. I believe—'

'They were a common, vulgar, barefaced swindle!'

'I beg your pardon,' Sir Geoffrey interposed politely, ready to do battle in defence of his pet scheme. 'I cannot agree with you. Le Gautier—'

'Is a low adventurer. I am not talking idly; I can prove every word I say. This very morning, I was at Paddington, and saw the manifestation room, or whatever you may choose to call it. At the back of the room is a large mirror; over the window is another. Preparations for the manufacture of visions to suit any taste were manifest. And one thing in conclusion: the girl who personated your better self and your dead brother, who never was married, is at present under your roof. She is Linda Despard, the girl who met with the accident in Piccadilly.'

Sir Geoffrey began to feel uncomfortable, and moreover experienced a twinge of common-sense.

There was something so horribly realistic about the beautiful stranger's story, that it shook his faith to its foundation. 'But really, such an extraordinary tale,' he stammered, 'and everything appeared so real. I cannot doubt, the likeness to my brother was so perfect Am I mad that I should believe this?'

'If you will excuse me for a moment and permit me to see this Linda Despard, I will introduce you to your brother in a few moments.—Miss Charteris, have I your permission?'

'You have my permission to do anything which will clear up the wretched mystery,' Enid cried passionately. 'Even now, I am totally at a loss to know what you are speaking of. Go! Do anything you may desire, so that we can have a little quietness hereafter.'

Without another word, Isodore vanished, leaving Sir Geoffrey pacing the drawing-room in great perturbation and casting uneasy glances in Enid's direction. He was not convinced yet, but his doubts were troublesome. 'It is all nonsense,' he exclaimed. 'I saw with my own eyes'

'Your brother, Sir Geoffrey.' The baronet looked up, and there, standing in the doorway, saw Isodore, holding by the hand a figure dressed in a slouch-hat and enveloped in a cloak. For a moment, he staggered back in amazement: it was the lost Ughtred to the life!

'This is the long-lost brother,' Isodore continued.—'Linda, throw your hat away, and tell Sir Geoffrey the tale you told Lucrece.—Listen, Sir Geoffrey, and you will hear something entertaining, and Miss Charteris something that will restore the bloom to her cheeks.'

Linda Despard pushed her hat aside, and stood, half-boldly, half-timidly, before the startled baronet. There were tears in her eyes as she looked at Enid.

'But what can this possibly have to do with Le Gautier?' Sir Geoffrey demanded.

Isodore waved him aside haughtily. 'Much, if you will have patience,' she said.—'Linda, you had best commence. We are trifling.'

There was an air of command in these words there was no disputing. Enid sank into a chair, pale but collected, the baronet standing behind her, looking anything

but comfortable. Lucrece took up her place beside her mistress. Isodore stood through the interview.

‘Well, I will do anything to help that angel of mercy who has been so good and kind to me!’ the actress commenced, with a grateful glance at Enid. ‘I tried to do her a great injury; but, thank heaven, I am not too late to save her yet. I am much to blame; but this is a hard world, and there are times when a few shillings are a godsend to me. It is not a long story. Lucrece here, and Isodore, knew my husband, and how he used to treat me, beating, half-starving me, and taking all my earnings to spend at the cafés. Well, I put up with that life as long as I could; and then, after one awful night, I left him. I came to England, and brought my boy with me. After some hardships, I contrived to get a situation in a London theatre under a new name. It was only a small part, for my imperfect English was against me. One night, some months ago, as I was coming out of the theatre, I met Le Gautier. I had known him in better days, and though I was not ignorant of his character, it was pleasant to hear the old familiar tongue again. It appeared he had been in the theatre, and recognised me, and waited to say a few words as I came out. Time went on, and he was really kind to me. Through his influence I obtained a rise of salary, and I was grateful. What he really wanted with me you shall hear presently.’

The narrator paused a moment here, and looked round in the eager faces. Every sound could be heard distinctly—the ticking of the clocks, and Sir Geoffrey’s heavy breathing.

‘One night he came to my lodgings,’ the speaker resumed, ‘and then he asked me if I had forgotten the old spiritualism tricks. I must tell you that once on a time I travelled the continent with a company that played ghostly pieces, such, for instance, as translations of Dickens’ Christmas Carol, a simple thing, a mere optical illusion, what you call Pepper’s Ghost. I told him I thought I could remember, and then he made a proposal to me. I never hesitated; the pay was too good for that. I was to meet Le Gautier at a house near Paddington one night, and go through the old tricks for a gentleman deeply interested in spiritualism. I learnt my lesson well I was first to personate the better self of the spectator, and afterwards the spirit of his brother.’

‘Ah!’ Sir Geoffrey exclaimed. ‘Go on!’

‘I interest you now. I thought I should. I knew at the time, to my shame let me confess it, from the things I had to say, that the spectator was to be got into Le Gautier’s power. Well, the night came; the simple apparatus was fixed; everything promised well. I was a bit nervous, for I was out of practice, and I wanted to see what sort of a man the victim was. While they were at dinner, I looked into the room, and there I saw the gentleman whom I now know to be Sir Geoffrey Charteris. When I saw your credulous face,’ the narrator continued, addressing the baronet, ‘I was no longer afraid. Presently, when it became dark and they sat over their wine, I listened till a word agreed upon was uttered by Le Gautier, and I commenced. First, there was some music, sounding strangely enough in the room, but not to me, for I played it. That was simple to an unbeliever with ordinary nerves; then came flashes of light, also easy enough; and when I deemed I had created a sufficient sense of fear, I entered the room. It was quite dark by that time, and I was dressed from head to foot in close garments. I touched Sir Geoffrey

on the face and whispered in his ear; and once when he showed signs of unbelief, I clutched him by the throat and nearly strangled him.—Sir Geoffrey, if I make a mistake in a single particular, correct me.’

‘You are perfectly correct,’ the baronet answered, flushing scarlet. ‘Pray, continue. You do not know what the suspense is to me.’

‘Had you been quick and strong of nerve, you would have found it out then, for, as it was, you grasped my arm, covered in wet eel-skins, a creepy thing to touch in the dark, even if you know what it is. That was the first part of the performance, and then the real business commenced in earnest. Le Gautier led you to a room at the back of the house, a room draped in black cloth, and seated you in a certain spot, daring you to move at your peril. I wonder I did not laugh at this; I did once or twice, I know, so that I had to finish with an hysterical scream, which had the advantage of relieving me and heightening the effect. Well, the jugglery commenced—the meanest trickery, hardly sufficient to deceive a child. It was easy enough, to work it under cover of the incense and smoke; for behind your chair, Sir Geoffrey, the curtains were pulled back and a mirror exposed. I stood upon a pedestal in the window, behind another mirror. The illusion is perfect, and all I had to do was to ask and answer questions. I got through the first part of the performance well enough; but when I had to personate Sir Geoffrey’s brother, the case was different. Had you, sir, been calm and collected, you must have discovered. I personated the spirit of your brother, desiring penance for some fancied wrong done to my children; and to heighten the effect, two ragged little boys were introduced to personate the dead man’s starving and abandoned family. Frightened almost to death by the fear of being haunted. Sir Geoffrey, you promised me anything. You promised to join some League, the meaning of which I do not know, to carry out your dead brother’s work; and last, but not least, that my good angel and preserver there should become Le Gautier’s wife. The illusion was perfect, and a little of Le Gautier’s matchless ventriloquism completed it—And now,’ the speaker continued, running forward and falling at Enid’s feet, ‘let me implore your forgiveness! My benefactress, how grateful I am that I have been able to serve you!’

‘I have nothing to forgive,’ Enid replied. ‘You have taken far too great a load on my mind for me to reproach you now.’

‘But the whole thing is inexplicable to me,’ Sir Geoffrey exclaimed. ‘How did you manage to impersonate my late brother so accurately?’

Linda Despard smiled and pointed to a photograph album. ‘Easy enough with plenty of these about. What simpler than to abstract a likeness from one of these books and give it me! With my theatrical training and knowledge of makeup, the task was nothing.’

‘I am all the more astonished,’ Isodore remarked, ‘that the audacity of the command relating to Miss Enid did not open your eyes.’

‘But you understand Le Gautier professed to know nothing of what had taken place,’ Sir Geoffrey explained. ‘I even had to broach the subject to him. He never by any chance alluded to it’

‘Such cunning as his always proves too deep for simple honesty. I need not ask if you believe what you have heard, Sir Geoffrey?’

‘Indeed, I do.—Enid, my child, come and kiss me, and say you forgive your foolish old father. Take me away into the country, where people cannot find me. I am not fit to mix with men of sense; and, O Enid, as soon as it is convenient, tell Varley to go into the library and pick out all the works he can find on spiritualism and burn them.’

‘You are sure you have forgiven me?’ Linda Despard asked Enid timidly.

‘From the bottom of my heart You have done me a service to-day which I cannot forget, or indeed ever repay.—And to you, Isodore, if I may call you so, I am grateful. You will pardon me if I seemed harsh or hard when you came here, but I have distrusted every one of late.’

‘You have no cause to thank me,’ Isodore replied simply. ‘I am afraid I must confess that it is not entirely upon your behalf I have done this thing.’

‘I care not for that I shall always remember you with gratitude.’

Isodore turned quickly from the window. ‘Le Gautier is coming up the steps,’ she exclaimed. ‘He must not see me here now, or everything will be ruined. I must see you again before I leave the house. Where can I hide? I would not have him discover me now for ten thousand pounds!’

Chapter XIX

NEAR one window stood a high Japanese screen, with plate-glass panels. Isodore had barely time to conceal herself behind this, when Le Gautier entered. He seemed somewhat hurried, but otherwise calm enough, as he walked into the room and towards Enid. ‘Before I leave—’

Then he stopped suddenly.

Sir Geoffrey was standing a little way back from the group, one hand behind his back, the other pointing with unsteady forefinger to Linda Despard, while he never moved his eyes from Le Gautier’s face. A little flick of the nostrils, a quiver of the lip, and the Frenchman was himself again. But Sir Geoffrey never moved; he merely opened his lips, and snapped out one word, ‘Well?’

‘Is this a theatrical rehearsal?’ Le Gautier asked at length.

‘I am waiting,’ the baronet returned, ‘for some explanation. To a man of your astuteness, I need not be explicit This lady, monsieur, and you, I hear, are old acquaintances.’

‘You talk in riddles, Sir Geoffrey.’

‘You are anxious to gain time. I, on the other hand, do not wish to be too hard upon you. Let me explain. Miss Linda Despard—who has been in my house for some time, the result of an accident—the details of which you have probably heard—turns out to be an old friend of yours. She is dressed this moment, you perceive, in a character which had been rehearsed under your personal superintendence—the character of my late brother.’

‘But what can this possibly have to do with me?’

‘A truce to this folly!’ Sir Geoffrey cried warmly. ‘I have heard everything about the jugglery at Paddington—the mirrors, and Pepper’s Ghosts, and the whole miserable machinery by which I was deluded.’

‘Then you no longer believe?’ Le Gautier asked, fixing his glittering eyes upon the baronet’s face.

But the magnetic power was gone now; the glance was returned as sternly. Sir Geoffrey seemed a new man. ‘I do not believe,’ he replied.

‘Then take the consequences—be a haunted, miserable man for the rest of your days! You will not be warned. I have done all I can for you. If you like to believe the tale you have heard, I will not prevent you. I say again, take the consequences.’

‘On the contrary, my good sir, it is you who will be the principal sufferer. I wish to make this interview as pleasant as possible, and cannot do better than by making it brief. There was a little contract between us, which you will consider at an end from this moment—’

‘And why?’ Le Gautier asked hotly. ‘You have proved nothing against me at present This Linda Despard, whose tale you have been listening to, is no friend of mine.’

‘Can you look her in the face and say that she is wrong?’ Sir Geoffrey interrupted. ‘Of course, you cannot deny the truth of her words. Then why am I bound to fulfil my contract with you?’

‘Because I have your word it shall be so. On your word, and by the power I hold over you, claim my wife still.’

‘And in good time, you shall have her, Hector le Gautier.’

The group assembled there looked suddenly at Lucrece, as she spoke. She came forward now, facing the Frenchman, who eyed her with an undisguised sneer.

‘And what has the maid of Miss Charteris to do with me?’

‘Much,’ she answered quietly.—‘Do you know who I am?’

‘A servant who has got into the drawing-room by mistake. If I am wrong, please enlighten me.’

Lucrece stepped forward, throwing her head back, and placing one hand upon a table at her side. ‘I will enlighten you. Five years is a long time in a lifetime like mine, but your memory will carry you back to the Villa Mattio. Hector le Gautier, I am Lucrece Visci, sister of your friend Carlo Visci.’

‘And I am no wiser now.’

‘But I am,’ Enid exclaimed.—‘Father, you remember Signor Visci, the artist who used to meet us at Rome?’

‘Yes, my dear —with a glance at Le Gautier—a fine specimen of an Italian gentleman. The only unpleasant recollection I have of him is, that he first introduced me to Monsieur le Gautier.’

The Frenchman’s eyes flashed, and he moved as if to speak; but Lucrece continued rapidly: ‘You may not remember me; but you have not forgotten my sister, Genevieve.—Ah! I have moved you now!—Miss Charteris, you were in Rome when she disappeared. Her false lover stands before you now!’

‘It is false!’ Le Gautier exclaimed. ‘Prove that I—’

‘It is true.—Prove it? Look at your own face there!’ Lucrece cried, pointing to a mirror opposite him. ‘Look there, and deny it if you can!’

‘True or false, I cannot waste words with you.—Sir Geoffrey, I hold you to your promise.—Enid, you shall keep your word.’

‘We are not in the habit of bestowing the daughters of our house upon adventurers,’ Sir Geoffrey replied. ‘I am sure your natural good sense and a little calm reflection will show you the folly of your demand.’

‘My father has spoken for me,’ Enid said. ‘I have nothing to add.’

Le Gautier stepped across the room to her. She rose to her feet in alarm. Lucrece stood between the two, and grasping Enid by the wrist, and laying her hand upon the Frenchman’s shoulder, held him back. ‘Are you mad that you ask this thing?’ she asked.

‘And wherefore? How does it concern you?’

She looked him steadily in the face as she replied: ‘Then I must refresh your memory;’ and raising her voice, till it rang through the lofty room, ‘because you have a wife already!’

Le Gautier staggered back; but he was not beaten yet. ‘Another of your little fabrications,’ he said mockingly,

‘Look at him!’ Lucrece exclaimed, turning to the others, and pointing at the detected man with infinite scorn. ‘Look into his face—mark his dejected air, though he braves it out well, and tell me if I am wrong.’

‘Your word is doubtless a good one; but there is something better than words, and that is proof. Do you not think I can see through this paltry conspiracy which has been got up against me? But you have the wrong man to deal with in me for that I will have the compact fulfilled; my power is not over yet; and, Sir Geoffrey, I give you one more chance. Refuse at your peril.’

‘I do refuse,’ Sir Geoffrey answered icily. ‘Do your worst’

‘That is your decision?—And now, as to these groundless accusations you have brought against me. You have made them; prove them.’ He turned to Lucrece with a gesture which was almost noble, all the actor’s instinct aroused in him now. There was one desperate chance for him yet

‘You had best take care, if I accept you at your word.’

‘I wish to be taken at my word. I demand your proofs!’

‘And you shall have them!’ Saying these words, Lucrece glided swiftly from the room.

An awkward silence fell upon the group. Le Gautier was the first to speak. There was a kind of moisture in his eye, and an air of resigned melancholy on his face. ‘You have misjudged me,’ he said sorrowfully. ‘Some day, you will be ashamed of this.—Sir Geoffrey, you are the victim of a designing woman, who seeks, for some reason, to traduce my fair fame. If I have a wife, let them bring me face to face with her here.’

‘You have your wish, Hector, for I am here!’

Le Gautier bounded forward like a man who has received a mortal hurt, and gazed at the speaker with glaring eyes. Valerie was standing before him, not without agitation herself. A low cry burst from his lips, and he drew his shaking hand down his white damp face.

‘What brings you here?’ he asked, his voice sounding strangely to his own ears, as if it came from far away. ‘Woman! why do you come here now, to destroy me utterly?’

She shrank back—an eloquent gesture to the onlookers—a gesture seven years' freedom from thralldom had not obliterated. 'You wished to see me. Lo! I am here! Turn round to your friends now, and deny that I am your lawful wife—deny again that you have ever seen me before, and put me to the proof.—Why do you not speak? Why do you not show a little of that manhood you used to have? Strike me, as you have done often in the times gone by—anything better than standing there, a poor, pitiful, detected swindler—a miserable hound indeed!'

There was a dead silence now, only broken by Le Gautier's heavy breathing, and the rustle of his sleeve as he wiped the perspiration from his face.

'There is the proof you demanded,' Lucrece said at length. 'We are waiting for you to deny the witness of your eyes.'

But still Le Gautier did not speak, standing there like some stone figure, his limbs almost powerless. He raised his head a moment, then lowered it again swiftly. He tried to articulate a few words, but his tongue refused its office.

Sir Geoffrey laid his hand upon the bell. 'Have you nothing to say?' he asked.

'I—I—Let me go out—the place is choking me!'

Sir Geoffrey rang the bell sharply. 'Then this interview had better close. It has already been too long, and degrading.—James, show Monsieur le Gautier out, if you please.—I have the honour to wish you good-morning; and if we do meet again,' he added in a stern undertone, 'remember, it is as strangers.'

Le Gautier, without another word or look, left the room, Lucrece following a moment later, and leading Valerie away. Isodore stepped out from her hiding-place, her face alternately scornful and tender.

'We owe you a heavy debt of gratitude indeed!' Sir Geoffrey exclaimed warmly. 'It is extremely good of you to take all this trouble for mere strangers. Accept my most sincere thanks!'

'We are not quite strangers,' Isodore replied, turning to Enid. 'Lucrece told you who she was; let me tell you who I am. I have never met you, though once I hoped to do so. I am Genevieve Visci!'

'What! Signor Visci's sister—the girl who—who—'

'Do not hesitate to say it. Yes, Isodore and Genevieve are one. Out of recollection of old times, when you were so kind to my dear brother, I have not forgotten you, knowing Le Gautier so well.'

'But Lucrece, your sister, to come here as my maid. And Le Gautier—how did you know? I am all at sea yet.'

'It is a long sad story, and some day, when I know you better, I will tell you all, but not now. But one thing, please, remember, that come what will, Le Gautier cannot harm you now. He may threaten, but he is powerless. I have only to hold up my hand—'

'And Frederick—Mr Maxwell?'

'Do not be impatient. You will see him tomorrow; for this evening I have need of him. You have not the slightest grounds for anxiety. Le Gautier will never harm any one more.'

'How strangely, sternly, you speak,' Enid replied.

Isodore smiled. 'Do I? Well, you heard what Lucrece said, and I may have planned a little retaliation of my own. The eastern eagle flies slowly, but his flight is sure. Trust me, and fear not'

Enid was bewildered. But the time was near when she was to understand.

With baffled fury and revenge raging in his heart, Le Gautier turned away in the direction of his lodgings, anywhere to get away from himself for a time, nothing left to him now but to wreak his vengeance upon Sir Geoffrey in the most diabolical way his fiendish ingenuity could contrive—and Isodore. By this time, Maxwell was no more; there was some grain of satisfaction in that; and he had Marie St Jean to fall back upon.

He sat brooding in his rooms till nearly nine—time to attend the meeting of the League, the last one he determined that should ever see his face. Had he known how fatally true this was, he would have faced a thousand dangers rather than gone to Gray's Inn Road that night. It was nearly ten when he lowered his gas, and struck off across the side streets in the direction of Holborn. When he reached his destination, he walked up-stairs, the only arrival as yet. Had he been less preoccupied, he would not have failed to notice the glance bestowed upon him by the custodian. He lingered about the room till one by one the company came in.

They were not long in commencing business. Le Gautier did not occupy the chair on this occasion; the proceedings of the evening were important, and a Supreme Councillor was present. He greeted each man coldly. To Le Gautier his manner was stern to the last degree. The routine commenced, and was conducted quietly for some time in the briefest, dryest fashion. Then the president for the evening rose, and taking from his pocket the gold moidore, commanded every one there to throw his upon the table. Presently, nine golden coins glittered on the green baize. 'One short,' the president said sternly. 'Whose?'

They looked round, each waiting for the other to speak.

'It is mine,' Le Gautier exclaimed. 'I did not think it necessary.'

'You have no right to think; it is not in your province. If you have in any way parted with it—' He stopped significantly, and Le Gautier hastily intervened.

'I humbly beg your pardon. I will fetch it immediately. I have not far to go; I can return at once. In justice to myself, I am sure you will permit me to fetch it'

'No!' thundered the Chief Councillor with a glance in Le Gautier's face that made his heart neat thick and fast. 'And as to justice, you shall have it presently, to the uttermost scruple.—Gentlemen, there is a traitor present!'

With one accord they sprang to their feet, suspicion and alarm in every eye.

'Who is it?' they cried. 'Death to the traitor!'

'Look round among yourselves, and see if you can discover him.—No? Then he wears a good mask who has a hard conscience.—Stand up, traitor!—ay, the most despicable; stand up, and look us in the face! Who is the man who has enjoyed our deepest confidences—the man we have to thank Isodore for discovering?—Stand up, I say! Rise, Hector le Gautier!'

The Frenchman knew his last hour had come; he knew that such a bold accusation as this could not be made without the most convincing proof. But despite his failings, he was not the man to cower before such a great danger. He braced his nerves till they were like steel; there was no particle of fear in his face as he turned at bay.

'I had expected something like this,' he said. 'It is not likely that my promotion should pass by without incurring some jealousy. I will say nothing about my long

services, the years I have spent in the service of the League. My accuser, and your proof!

A murmur of applause ran round the table at this sentiment. There was no appearance of guilt here.

'Isodore is your accuser—the proofs she holds. You are charged with conspiracy to overthrow the League, in conjunction with another person. Your companion is one Marie St Jean.'

Even with his iron nerves under control as they were, Le Gautier could not repress a start, which was not lost upon the Councillor.

'Marie St Jean,' he continued, 'received from you certain papers for the purpose of handing them over to the police. The information contained therein is complete. Do you deny your handwriting?'

He threw a bundle of papers across the table to Le Gautier. As he read them, his white face became corpse-like in its livid hue. But he was fighting for his life now, and summoned all his self-command to his aid, knowing full well that if he was condemned, he would never leave that room alive. His calm air came back to him.

'I admit the handwriting—private memoranda stolen from my apartments. I am still waiting for your proof. Besides, Marie St Jean is a member of the League; she restored to me—'

'Your insignia, which you had the temerity to stake upon the colour at Homburg.—Salvarini, I call upon you to say if this is not so?'

'I would rather say nothing about this,' Salvarini said. Le Gautier noticed how distressed and agitated he was. 'I fear—I much fear you have too much proof, without calling upon me.'

'You stand by a friend, Luigi!' Le Gautier said bitterly. 'Do not think of me now. Every man must look to himself!'

'Sufficient of this,' the president interrupted. 'My proofs are overpowering. You are charged with packing the cards, to force the Brother Maxwell upon a dangerous mission.'

'Enough!' the prisoner exclaimed; 'confront me with my accuser!'

'You shall see her.—Isodore!'

As he raised his voice, a breathless hush fell upon the assembly. Presently, a woman entered; for a moment she looked at the group, and then raising her veil, showed her beautiful lace.

'Marie!' A deep, bitter cry, following this word, burst from Le Gautier's lips, and he fell forward upon the table, his head upon his hands. There was no escape now, he knew full well. And the woman he thought had loved him—the woman who knew all his plans to the letter, was the Princess of the League, the most dangerous member, Isodore herself! Salvarini looked into her face for a moment, and then whispered one word—Genevieve; but she heard it, and smiled at him, pleased that one man should remember—heard the little word which struck a womanly chord in her heart, and was thankful. Then she made him a sign to be silent.

Stunned by the crushing force and suddenness of the blow, Le Gautier half lay there, with his head resting upon the table, no sound breaking the solemn silence. The president addressed the wretched man, asking him if he had anything to say.

He raised his head and looked dazedly around, then down again. 'No! I have nothing to say. My doom is sealed!'

'Bind him!'

Rough hands were laid upon the doomed wretch, and fastened him in his chair securely, taking care to make his bonds too tight for escape. Le Gautier did not resist; he knew now that there was no escape in all the wide world for him. They left him thus, trooping in to an adjoining room to go through the mockery of the trial which the orders of the League demanded.

When Le Gautier looked up, he was alone, save for Isodore. 'You are satisfied with your work now?'

'Yes, I am satisfied now,' Isodore echoed. 'So you thought to play me off against Enid Charteris, poor fool! Hector le Gautier, I am going to tax your memory. Do you remember one evening in the Mattio woods when you abandoned a lonely trusting girl, the sister of your friend? Do you remember laughing at a vow of vengeance five years ago? Justice is slow, but it is sure. Do you remember?'

'Yes. Is it possible that you can be—?'

'Yes, it is possible, for I am Genevieve Visci! It is my turn now.' And without another word she left him.

Presently, a desire to live took the place of his dull despair. In an agony he tugged and turned, cutting his wrists with the keen rope till the blood ran down his hands. He could hear the low monotonous voices from the adjoining room, the hurrying footstep in the road bellow; and only that thin wall between himself and safety. Even the window leading from the iron staircase was open, and the evening breeze fanned his white despairing face. He struggled again till his heart nearly burst, and then, worn out, broke into tears.

'Hector!'

He turned round, hardly certain whether it was a voice or a fancy. Gradually out of the mists a figure emerged, and creeping stealthily across the bare floor, came to his side. It was Valerie.

'So you have come to gloat over my misery too,' he whispered hoarsely. 'Go, or, manacled as I am, I shall do you a mischief.'

For answer, she drew a knife from her pocket, and commenced, with trembling fingers, to sever his bonds. One by one the sharp knife cut through them, till at length he stood a free man. One grudging, grateful glance at the woman, and he disappeared.

Chapter XX

TURNING into Holborn, he ran on blindly, never noticing another figure following in his footsteps. It was getting very late now, and as he hurried into the Strand, St Clement's Danes struck midnight. Through the crowd there blindly, on to the water-side, the snaky figure close behind never off his track; on to the Embankment, and towards Waterloo Bridge. Then he stopped for one brief moment to regain his spent breath and think.

The following footsteps halted too; and then some instinct told him he was followed. Turning round again, full under the lamplight, he encountered Paulo Salvarini, determination in his face, murder in his eyes. In an agony of sudden fear, Le Gautier ran down the steps on to the Temple Pier, standing there close by the rushing water. A second later, with a clutch like iron, Salvarini was upon him.

'Ah!' he hissed, as they struggled to and fro, 'you thought to escape me, you murderer of innocent women, the slayer of my wife! Now I have you. Back you go into the river, with a knife in your black heart!'

The doomed man never answered; breath was too precious for that. And so they struggled for a minute on the slimy pier, Salvarini's grip never relaxing, till, suddenly reaching down, he drew a knife. One dazzling flash, a muttered scream, and Le Gautier's lifeblood gushed out. Footsteps came down the stairs, a shrill shout from a woman's voice. Salvarini started. In one moment, Le Gautier had him in a dying clasp, and with a dull splash, they fell backwards into the rushing flood. Down, down, they went, the tenacious grip never relaxing, the water singing and hissing in their ears, filling their throats as they sucked it down, turning them dizzy, till they floated down the stream—dead!

Some boatmen out late, attracted by the scream, rowed to the spot; and far down below Blackfriars, they picked up the dead bodies, both locked together in the last clasp of death. They rowed back to the pier, and carried the two corpses to a place for the night, never heeding the woman who was following them.

Next morning, they saw a strange sight lying across the murdered man, her head upon his breast, a woman rested. They lifted her; but she was quite dead and cold, a smile upon her face now, wiping out all trace of care and suffering—a smile of happiness and deep content Valerie had crept there unnoticed to her husband's side, and died of a broken heart.

For a few days people wondered and speculated over the strange tragedy, and then it was forgotten. A new singer, a noted poisoning case, something turned up, and distracted the frivolous public mind from the 'mysterious occurrence,' to use the jargon of the press.

Maxwell lost no time in getting to Grosvenor Square the following morning, where his greeting may be better imagined than described. He told Enid the whole story of his mission, omitting nothing that he thought might be of interest to her; and in his turn heard the story of Le Gautier's perfidy, and the narrow escape both had had from his schemes.

'I do not propose to stay any longer in London,' Sir Geoffrey said. 'After what we have all gone through, a little rest and quietness is absolutely necessary.—Enid, would you care to go down to Haversham.'

'Indeed, I should. Let us go at once. I am absolutely pining for a little fresh air again. The place must be looking lovely now.'

'All right, my dear,' the baronet replied gaily; sooth to say, not sorry to get back to a part of the world where Sir Geoffrey Charteris was someone.

'Then we will go to-morrow, and Maxwell shall join us.'

'But Isodore? I have not seen her yet'

'Oh, she can come down there some time, directly we are settled.'

Later on in the same day, Maxwell heard the strange tale of Le Gautier's death. He did not tell the news to Enid then, preferring to wait till a time when her nerves

were more steady, and she had recovered from the shock of the past few days. So they went down to Haversham, and for three happy months remained there, 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot;' and at the end of that time, when the first warm flush of autumn touched the sloping woods, there was a quiet wedding at the little church under the hill.

Gradually, as time passed on, Sir Geoffrey recovered his usual flow of spirits, and was never known to have another 'manifestation.' He burned all his books touching on the supernatural, and gradually came to view his conduct in a humorous light. In the course of time, he settled down as a model country gentleman, learned on the subject of short-horns and top-dressing, and displaying a rooted aversion to spiritualism. It is whispered in the household—only it must not be mentioned—that he is getting stout, a state of things which, all things considered, is not to be regarded with incredulity.

Nearly two years later, and sitting about the lawn before the grand old house, were all our friends—Salvarini, mournful as usual, little altered since we saw him last; Maxwell, jolly and hearty, looking with an air of ill-disguised pride at Enid, who was sitting in a basket-chair, with a little wisp of humanity in her arms, a new Personage—to use the royal phrase—but by no means an unimportant one. Lucrece was there, happy and gay; and Isodore, glorious Isodore, unutterably lovely as she walked to and fro, followed by Salvarini's dog-like eyes. The baronet made up the party, and alas! truth must out, looking—but we will be charitable, and say portly.

'How long are you going to stay with us, Isodore?' Enid asked. She would always be Isodore to them.

'Really, I cannot say, Enid. How long will you have me?'

'As long as you like to stay,' Maxwell put in heartily.—'By the way, I suppose I am still a member of the League?'

'No, not now. Conditionally upon your promising never to reveal what you have seen and heard, you are free; Sir Geoffrey likewise.—Luigi here has resigned his membership.'

'I am so glad!' Enid cried. 'I must come and kiss you.—Fred, come and hold baby for a moment.'

'No, indeed'—with affected horror. 'I should drop him down, and break him, or carry him upside down, or some awful tragedy.'

'You are not fit to be the father of a beautiful boy; and everybody says he is the very image of you.'

'I was considered a good-looking man once,' said Maxwell with resignation. 'No matter. But if that small animal there is a bit like me, may I—'

They all laughed at this, being light-hearted and in the mood to laugh at anything. Presently, they divided into little groups, Isodore and Luigi together. All her cold self-possession was gone now; she looked a very woman, as she stood there nervously plucking the leaves from the rose in her hand.

'Isodore—Genevieve—'

At this word she trembled, knowing scarcely what 'Yes, Luigi.'

'Five years ago, I stood by your side in the hour of your trouble, and you said some words to me. Do you remember what they were?'

'Yes, Luigi.' The words came like a fluttering sigh.

'I claim that promise now. We are both free, heaven be praised! free as air, and no ties to bind us. Come!' He held out his arms, and she came shyly, shrinkingly, towards them.

'If you want me,' she said.

With one bound he was by her side, and drew her head down upon his breast. 'And you are happy now, Genevieve?'

'Yes, I am happy. How can I be otherwise, with a good man's honest love?—Carlo, my brother, would you could see me now!'

'It is what he always wished.—Let us go and tell the others.'

So, taking her simply by the hand, they wandered out from the deepness of the wood, side by side, from darkness and despair, from the years of treachery and deceit, out into the light of a world filled with bright sunshine and peaceful, everlasting love.
