

M. Anastasius

By Dinah M. Mulock

I will relate to you, my friend, the whole history, from the beginning to—nearly—the end.

The first time that—*that it happened*, was on this wise.

My husband and myself were sitting in a private box at the theatre—one of the two large London theatres. The performance was, I remember well, an Easter piece in which were introduced live dromedaries and an elephant, at whose clumsy feats we were considerably amused. I mention this to show how calm and even gay was the state of both our minds that evening, and how little there was in any of the circumstances of the place or time to cause, or render us liable to—what I am about to describe.

I liked this Easter piece better than any serious drama. My life had contained enough of the tragic element to make me turn with a sick distaste from all imitations thereof in books or plays. For months, ever since our marriage, Alexis and I had striven to lead a purely childish, commonplace existence, eschewing all stirring events and strong emotions, mixing little in society, and then, with one exception, making associations beyond the moment.

It was easy to do this in London; for we had no relations—we two were quite alone and free. Free—free! How wildly I sometimes grasped Alexis' hand as I repeated that word.

He was young—so was I. At times, as on this night, we would sit together and laugh like children. It was so glorious to know of a surety that now we could think, feel, speak, act—above all, love one another—haunted by no counteracting spell, responsible to no living creature for our life and our love.

But this had been our lot only for a year—I had recollected the date, shuddering, in the morning—for one year, from this same day.

We had been laughing very heartily, cherishing mirth, as it were, like those who would caress a lovely bird that had been frightened out of its natural home and grown wild and rare in its visits, only tapping at the lattice for a minute, and then gone. Suddenly, in the pause between the acts, when the house was half-darkened, our laughter died away.

“How cold it is,” said Alexis, shivering. I shivered too; but not with cold, it was more like the involuntary sensation at which people say, “Someone is walking over my grave.” I said so, jestingly.

“Hush, Isbel,” whispered my husband, and again the draught of cold air seemed to blow right between us.

I should describe the position in which we were sitting, both in front of the box, but he in full view of the audience, while I was half hidden by the curtain. Between us, where the cold draught blew, was a vacant chair. Alexis tried to move this chair, but it was fixed to the floor. He passed behind it, and wrapped a mantle over my shoulders.

“This London winter is cold for you, my love. I half wish we had taken courage, and sailed once more for Hispaniola.”

“Oh, no—oh, no! No more of the sea!” said I, with another and stronger shudder.

He took his former position, looking round indifferently at the audience. But neither of us spoke. The mere word “Hispaniola” was enough to throw a damp and a silence over us both.

"Isbel," he said at last, rousing himself, with a half-smile, "I think you must have grown remarkably attractive. Look! half the glasses opposite are lifted to our box. It cannot be to gaze at me, you know. Do you remember telling me I was the ugliest fellow you ever saw?"

"Oh, Alex!" Yet it was quite true—I had thought him so, in far back, strange, awful times, when I, a girl of sixteen, had my mind wholly filled with one idea!—one insane, exquisite dream; when I brought my innocent child's garlands, and sat me down under one spreading magnificent tree, which seemed to me the king of all the trees of the field, until I felt its dews dropping death upon my youth, and my whole soul withering under its venomous shade.

"Oh, Alex!" I cried once more, looking fondly on his beloved face, where no unearthly beauty dazzled, no unnatural calm repelled; where all was simple, noble, manly, true. "Husband, I thank heaven for that dear 'ugliness' of yours. Above all, though blood runs strong, they say, I thank heaven that I see in you no likeness to—"

Alexis knew what name I meant, though for a whole year past—since God's mercy made it to us only a name—we had ceased to utter it, and let it die wholly out of the visible world. We dared not breathe to ourselves, still less to one another, how much brighter, holier, happier, that world was, now that the Divine wisdom had taken—*him*—into another. For he had been my husband's uncle, likewise, once my guardian. He was now dead.

I sat looking at Alexis, thinking what a strange thing it was that his dear face should not have always been as beautiful to me as it was now. That loving my husband now so deeply, so wholly, clinging to him heart to heart in the deep peace of satisfied, all-trusting, and all-dependent human affection, I could ever have felt that emotion, first as an exquisite bliss, then as an ineffable terror, which now had vanished away, and become—nothing.

"They are gazing still, Isbel."

"Who, and where?" For I had quite forgotten what he said about the people staring at me.

"And there is Colonel Hart. He sees us. Shall I beckon him?"

"As you will."

Colonel Hart came up into our box. He shook hands with my husband, bowed to me, then looked round, half-curiously, half-uneasily.

"I thought there was a friend with you."

"None. We have been alone all evening."

"Indeed? How strange!"

"What! That my wife and I should enjoy a play alone together?" said Alexis, smiling.

"Excuse me, but really I was surprised to find you alone. I have certainly seen for the last half-hour a third person sitting on this chair, between you both."

We could not help starting, for, as I stated before, the chair had in truth been left between us, empty.

"Truly our unknown friend must have been invisible. Nonsense, Colonel; how can you turn Mrs Saltram pale, by thus peopling with your fancies the vacant air?"

"I tell you, Alexis," said the Colonel (he was my husband's old friend, and had been present at our hasty and private marriage), "nothing could be more unlike a fancy, even were I given to such. It was a very remarkable person who sat here. Even strangers noticed him."

"Him!" I whispered.

"It was a man, then," said my husband, rather angrily.

"A very peculiar-looking and extremely handsome man. I saw many glasses levelled at him."

"What was he like?" said Alexis, rather sarcastically. "Did he speak? or we to him?"

"No—neither. He sat quite still, in this chair."

My husband turned away. If the Colonel had not been his friend, and so very simple-minded, honest, and sober a gentleman, I think Alexis would have suspected some drunken hoax, and turned him out of the box immediately. As it was, he only said:

“My dear fellow, the third act is beginning. Come up again at its close, and tell me if you again see my invisible friend, who must find so great an attraction in viewing, gratis, a dramatic performance.”

“I perceive—you think it a mere hallucination of mine. We shall see. I suspect the trick is on your side, and that you are harbouring some proscribed Hungarian. But I’ll not betray bin. Adieu.”

“The ghostly Hungarian shall not sit next you, love, this time,” said Alexis, trying once more to remove the chair. But possibly, though he jested, he was slightly nervous, and his efforts were vain. “What nonsense this is! Isbel, let us forget it. I will stand behind you, and watch the play.” He stood—I clasping his hand secretly and hard; then I grew quieter; until, as the drop-scene fell, the same cold air swept past us. It was as if someone fresh from the sharp sea-wind had entered the box. And just at that moment we saw Colonel Hart’s and several other glasses levelled as before.

“It is strange,” said Alexis. “It is horrible,” I said. For I had been cradled in Scottish, and then filled with German superstition; besides the events of my own life had been so wild, so strange, that there was nothing too ghastly or terrible for my imagination to conjure up.

“I will summon the Colonel. We must find out this,” said my husband, speaking beneath his breath, and looking round, as if he thought he was overheard.

Colonel Hart came up. He looked very serious; so did a young man who was with him.

“Captain Elmore, let me introduce you to Mrs Saltram. Saltram, I have brought my friend here to attest that I have played off on you no unworthy jest. Not ten minutes since, he, and I, and some others saw the same gentleman whom I described to you half an hour ago, sitting as I described—in this chair.”

“Most certainly—in this chair,” added the young captain.

My husband bowed; he kept a courteous calmness, but I felt his hand grow clammy in mine.

“Of what appearance, sir, was this unknown acquaintance of my wife’s and mine, whom everybody appears to see, except ourselves?”

“He was of middle-age, dark-haired, pale. His features were very still, and rather hard in expression. He had on a cloth cloak with a fur collar, and wore a long, pointed Charles-the-First Beard.”

My husband and I dug hand to hand with an inexpressible horror. Could there be another man—a living man, who answered this description?

“Pardon me,” Alexis said faintly. “The portrait is rather vague; may I ask you to repaint it as circumstantially as you can.”

“He was, I repeat, a pale, or rather a sallow-featured man. His eyes were extremely piercing, cold, and clear. The mouth close-set—a very firm but passionless mouth. The hair dark, seamed with gray—bald on the brow—”

“O heaven!” I groaned in an anguish of terror. For I saw again—clear as if he had never died—the face over which, for twelve long months, had swept the merciful sea-waves, off the shores of Hispaniola.

“Can you, Captain Elmore,” said Alexis, “mention no other distinguishing mark? This countenance might resemble many men.”

“I think not. It was a most remarkable face. It struck me the more—because—” and the young man grew almost as pale as we—“I once saw another very like it.”

“You see—a chance resemblance only. Fear not, my darling,” Alexis breathed in my ear. “Sir, have you any reluctance to tell me who was the gentleman?”

“It was no living man, but a corpse that we last year picked up off a wreck, and again committed to the deep—in the Gulf of Mexico. It was exactly the same face, and had the same mark—a scar, cross-shape, over one temple.”

“‘Tis he! He can follow and torture us still; I knew he could!”

Alexis smothered my shriek on his breast.

“My wife is ill. This description resembles slightly a—a person we once knew. Hart, will you leave us? But no, we must probe this mystery. Gentlemen, will you once more descend to the lower part of the house, whilst we remain here, and tell me if you still see the—the figure, sitting in this chair.”

They went. We held our breaths. The lights in the theatre were being extinguished, the audience moving away. No one came near our box; it was perfectly empty. Except our two selves, we were conscious of no sight, no sound. A few minutes after Colonel Hart knocked.

“Come in,” said Alexis, cheerily.

But the Colonel—the bold soldier—shrunk back like a frightened child.

“I have seen him—I saw him but this minute, sitting there.”

I swooned away.

II

It is right I should briefly give you my history up to this night’s date.

I was a West Indian heiress—a posthumous, and, soon after birth, an orphan child. Brought up in my mother’s country, until I was sixteen years old, I never saw my guardian. Then he met me in Paris, with my governess, and for the space of two years we lived under the same roof, seeing one another daily.

I was very young; I had no father or brother; I wished for neither lover nor husband; my guardian became to me the one object of my existence.

It was no love-passion; he was far too old for that, and I comparatively too young, at least too childish. It was one of those insane, rapturous adorations which young maidens sometimes conceive, mingling a little of the tenderness of the woman with the ecstatic enthusiasm of the devotee. There is hardly a prophet or leader noted in the world’s history who has not been followed and worshipped by many such women.

So was my guardian, M. Anastasius—not his true name, but it sufficed then, and will now.

Many may recognize him as a known leader in the French political and moral world—as one who, by the mere force of intellect, wielded the most irresistible and silently complete power of any man I ever knew, in every circle into which he came; women he won by his polished gentleness—men by his equally polished strength. He would have turned a compliment and signed a death-warrant, with the same exquisitely calm grace. Nothing was to him too great or too small. I have known him, on his way to advise that the President’s soldiers should sweep a cannonade down the thronged street—stop to pick up a strayed canary-bird, stroke its broken wing, and confide it with beautiful tenderness to his bosom.

Oh how tender!—how mild!—How pitiful he could be!

When I say I loved him, I use, for want of a better, a word which ill expresses that feeling. It was—Heaven forgive me if I err in using the similitude—the sort of feeling the Shunamite woman might have had for Elisha. Religion added to its intensity; for I was brought up a devout Catholic; and he, whatever his private opinions might have been, adhered strictly to the forms of the same Church. He was unmarried, and most people supposed him to belong to that Order called—though often, alas! how unlike Him from whom they assume their name—the Society of Jesus.

We lived thus—I entirely worshipping, he guiding, fondling, watching, and ruling by turns, for two whole years. I was mistress of a large fortune, and, though not beautiful, had, I believe, a tolerable intellect and a keen wit. With both he used to play, according as it suited his whim—just as a boy plays with fireworks, amusing himself with their glitter—sometimes directing them against others, and smiling as they flashed or scorched—knowing that against himself they were utterly powerless and harmless. Knowing, too, perhaps, that were it otherwise, he had only to tread them out under foot, and step aside from the ashes, with the same unmoved, easy smile.

I never knew—nor know I to this day, whether I was in the smallest degree dear to him. Useful I was, I think, and pleasant, I believe. Possibly he liked me a little, as the potter likes his clay, and the skilful mechanic his tools—until the clay hardened, and the fine tools refused to obey the master's hand.

I was the brilliant West Indian heiress. I did not marry. Why should I? At my house—at least it was called mine—all sorts and societies met, carrying on their separate games; the quiet, soft hand of M. Anastasius playing his game—in, and under, and through them all. Mingled with this grand game of the world was a lesser one—to which he turned sometimes, just for amusement, or because he could not cease from his *métier*—a simple, easy, domestic game, of which the battledore was the same ingenious hand, and the shuttlecock my foolish child's heart.

Thus much have I dilated on him, and on my own life, during the years when all its strong wild current flowed towards him; that, in what followed when the tide turned, no one may accuse me of fickleness, or causeless aversion, or insane terror of one who after all was only man, “whose breath is in his nostrils.”

At seventeen I was wholly passive in his hands; he was my sole arbiter of right and wrong—my conscience—almost my God. As my character matured, and in a few things I began to judge for myself, we had occasional slight differences—begun, on my part, in shy humility, continued with vague doubt, but always ending in penitence and team. Since one or other erred, of course it must be I. These differences were wholly on abstract points of truth or justice.

It was his taking me by a persuasion that was like compulsion, to the ball at the Tuileries, which was given after Louis Napoleon Bonaparte had seized the Orleans property, and it was my watching my cousin's conduct there, his diplomatic caution of speech; his smooth smiling reverence to men whom I knew, and fancied he knew, to be either knaves or fools—that first startled me concerning him. Then it was I first began to question, in a trembling, terrified way—like one who catches a glimpse of the miracle-making priest's hands behind the robe of the worshipped idol—whether, great as M. Anastasius was, as a political ruler, as a man of the world, as a faithful member of the Society of Jesus, he was altogether so great when viewed beside any one of those whose doctrines he disseminated, whose faith he professed.

He had allowed me the New Testament, and I had been reading it a good deal lately. I placed him, my spiritual guide, at first in adoring veneration, afterwards with an uneasy comparison, beside the Twelve Fishermen of Galilee—beside the pattern of perfect manhood, as exemplified in their Divine Lord—and ours.

There was a difference.

The next time we came to any argument—always on abstract questions—for my mere individual will never have any scruple in resigning itself to his—instead of yielding I ceased open contest, and brought the matter afterwards privately to the One infallible Rule of right and wrong.

The difference grew.

Gradually, I began to take my cousin's wisdom—perhaps, even his virtues—with certain reservations, feeling that there was growing in me some antagonistic quality which prevented my full understanding or sympathising with the idiosyncrasies of his character.

“But,” I thought, “he is a Jesuit; he only follows the law of his Order, which allows temporising, and diplomatising, for noble ends. He merely dresses up the Truth, and puts it in the most charming and safest light, even as we do our images of the Holy Virgin, adorning them for the adoration of the crowd, but ourselves spiritually worshipping them still. I do believe, much as he will dandle and play with the truth, that, not for his hope of heaven, would Anastasius stoop to a lie.”

One day, he told me he should bring to my salons an Englishman, his relative, who had determined on leaving the world and entering the priesthood.

“Is he of our faith?” asked I indifferently.

“He is, from childhood. He has a strong, fine intellect; this, under fit guidance, may accomplish great things. Once of our Society, he might be my right hand in every Court in Europe. You will receive him?”

“Certainly.”

But I paid very little heed to the ‘stranger. There was nothing about him striking or peculiar. He was the very opposite of M. Anastasius. Besides, he was young, and I had learnt to despise youth—my guardian was fifty years old.

Mr Saltram (you will already have guessed it was he) showed equal indifference to me. He watched me, sometimes did little kindnesses for me, but always was quiet and silent—a mere cloud floating in the brilliant sky, which M. Anastasius lit up as its gorgeous sun. For me, I became moonlike, appearing chiefly at my cousin's set and rise.

I was not happy. I read more in my Bible and less in my breviary; I watched with keener, harder eyes my cousin Anastasius, weighed all his deeds, listened to and compared his words. My intellect worshipped him, my memoried tenderness clung round him still, but my conscience had fled out of his keeping, and made for itself a higher and purer ideal. Measured with common men, he was godlike yet—above all passions, weaknesses, crimes; but viewed by the one perfect standard of man—Christian man—in charity, humility, single-mindedness, guilelessness, truth—my idol was no more. I came to look for it, and found only the empty shrine.

He went on a brief mission to Rome. I marvelled that instead as of yore wandering sadly through the empty house from the moment he quitted it, I breathed freer, as if a weight were taken out of the air. His absence used to be like wearisome ages—now it seemed hardly a week before he came back.

I happened to be sitting with his nephew Alexis when I heard his step down the corridor—the step which had once seemed at every touch to draw music from the chords of my prostrate heart, but which now made it shrink into itself, as if an iron-shod footfall had passed along its strings.

Anastasius looked slightly surprised at seeing Alexis and myself together, but his welcome was very kind to us both.

I could not altogether return it. I had just found out two things which, to say the least, had startled me. I determined to prove them at once.

“My cousin, I thought you were aware that, though a Catholic myself, my house is open, and my friendship likewise, to honest men of every creed. Why did you give your nephew so hard an impression of me, as to suppose I would dislike him on account of his faith? And why did you not tell me that Mr Saltram has for some years been a Protestant?”

I know not what reply he made; I know only that it was ingenious, lengthy, gentle, courteous—that for the time being it seemed entirely satisfactory, that we spent all three together a most pleasant evening. It was only when I lay down on my bed, face to face with the solemn Dark, in which dwelt conscience, truth, and God, that I discovered how Anastasius had, for some secret—doubtless blameless, nay even justifiable purpose, told of me, and to me, two absolute Lies!

Disguise it as he might, excuse it as I might, and did, they were Lies. They haunted me—flapping their black wings like a couple of fiends, mopping and mowing behind him when became—sitting on his shoulders, and mocking his beautiful, calm, majestic face—for days. That was the beginning of my sorrows; gradually they grew until they blackened my whole world.

M. Anastasius was bent, as he had (for once truly) told me, on winning his young nephew back into the true fold, making him an instrument of that great purpose which was to bring all Europe, the Popedom itself, under the power of the Society of Jesus. Not this alone—a man may be forgiven, nay, respected, who sells his soul for an abstract cause in which he himself is to be absorbed and forgotten—but in this case it was not though I long, believed it—it was not so. Carefully as he disguised it, I slowly found out that the centre of all things—the one grand pivot upon which this vast machinery for the improvement, or rather government, of the world, was to be made to turn, was M. Anastasius.

Alexis Saltram might be of use to him. He was rich, and money is power; an Englishman, and Englishmen are usually honourable and honoured. Also there was in him a dogged directness of purpose that would make him a strong, if carefully guided, tool.

However, the young man resisted. He admired and revered his kinsman; but he himself was very single-hearted, staunch, and true. Something in that Truth, which was the basis of his character, struck sympathy with mine. He was far inferior in most things to Anastasius—he knew it, I knew it, but through all, this divine element of Truth was patent, beautifully clear. It was the one quality I had ever worshipped, ever sought for, and never found.

Alexis and I became friends—equal, earnest friends. Not in the way of wooing or marriage—at least, he never spoke of either; and both were far, oh how far! from my thought—but there was a great and tender bond between us, which strengthened day by day.

The link which riveted it was religion. He was as I said, a Protestant, not adhering to any creed, but simply living—not preaching, but living—the faith of our Saviour. He was not perfect—he had his sins and shortcomings even as I. We both struggled on towards the glimmering light. So, after a season, we clasped hands in friendship, and with eyes steadfastly upward, determined to press on together towards the one goal, and along the self-same road.

I put my breviary aside, and took wholly to the New Testament, assuming no name either of Catholic or Protestant, but simply that of Christian.

When I decided on this, of course I told Anastasius. He had ceased to be my spiritual confessor for some time; yet I could see he was surprised.

“Who has done this?” was all he said.

Was I a reed, then, to be blown about with every wind? Or a toy, to be shifted from hand to hand, and set in motion just as my chance-master chose? Had I no will, no conscience of my own?

He knew where he could sting me—and did it—but I let the words pass.

“Cousin, when you ask, ‘Who did it?’ I answer, Desdemona-like, ‘Nobody’: I myself. In my change of faith I have had no book but this—which you gave me; no priest, except the inward witness of my own soul.”

“And Alexis Saltram.”

Not said in any wrath, or suspicion, or inquiry—simply as the passive statement of a fact. When I denied it, he accepted my denial; when I protested, he suffered me to protest. My passionate arguments he took in his soft passionless hold—melted and moulded them—turned and twisted them—then reproduced them to rue so different that I failed to recognize either my own meaning or even my own words.

After that, on both sides the only resource was silence.

III

“I wish,” said I to my guardian one day, “as I shall be twenty-one next year, to have more freedom. I wish even”—for since the discovery of my change of faith he had watched me so closely, so quietly, so continually, that I had conceived a vague fear of him, and a longing to get away—to put half the earth between me and his presence—“I wish even if possible this summer, to visit my estates in Hispaniola?”

“Alone?”

“No; Madam Gradelle will accompany me. And Mr Saltram will charter one of his ships for my use.”

“I approve the plan. Alexis is going too, I believe?”

How could he have known that which Alexis had never told me? But he knew everything. “Madame Gradelle is not sufficient escort. I, as your guardian, will accompany and protect you.

A cold dread seized me. Was I never to be free? Already I began to feel my guardian’s influence surrounding me—an influence once of love, now of intolerable distaste, and even fear. Not that he was ever harsh or cruel—not that I could accuse him of any single wrong towards me or others: but I knew I had thwarted him, and, through him, his cause—that cause whose strongest dogma is, that any means are sacred; any evil consecrated to good, if furthering the one great end—Power.

I had opposed him, and I was in his hand—that hand which I had once believed to have almost superhuman strength. In my terror I half believed so still.

“He will go with us—we cannot escape from him,” I said to Alexis. “He will make you a priest and me a nun, as he once planned—I know he did. Our very souls are not our own.”

“What, when the world is so wide, and life so long, and God’s kindness over all—when, too, I am free, and you will be free in a year—when”—

“I shall never be free. He is my evil genius. He will haunt me till my death.”

It was a morbid feeling I had, consequent on the awful struggle which had so shaken body and mind. The very sound of his step made me turn sick and tremble; the very sight of his grand face—perhaps the most beautiful I ever saw, with its faultless features, and the half-melancholy cast given by the high bald forehead and the pointed beard—was to me more terrible than any monster of ugliness the world every produced.

He held my fortune—he governed my house. All visitors there came and went under his control, except Alexis. Why this young man still came—or how—I could not tell. Probably because in his pure singleness of heart and purpose, he was stronger even than M. Anastasius.

The time passed. We embarked on board the ship *Argo*, for Hispaniola.

My guardian told me, at the last minute, that business relating to his Order would probably detain him in Europe—that we were to lie at anchor for twelve hours, off Havre—and, if he then came not, sail.

He came not—we sailed.

It was a glorious evening. The sun, as he went down over the burning sea, beckoned us with a finger of golden fire, westward—to the free, safe, happy West.

I say us, because on that evening we first began unconsciously to say it too—as if vaguely binding our fates together—Alexis and I. We talked for a whole hour—till long after France, with all our old life therein, had become a mere line, a cloudy speck on the horizon—of the new life we should lead in Hispaniola. Yet all the while, if we had been truly as the priest and nun Anastasius wished to make us, our words, and I believe our thoughts, could not have been more angel-pure, more free from any bias of human passion.

Yet, as the sun went down, and the sea breeze made us draw nearer together, both began, I repeat, instinctively to say “we”, and talk of our future as if it had been the future of one.

“Good evening, friends!”

He was there—M. Anastasius!

I stood petrified. That golden finger of hope had vanished. I shuddered, a captive on his courteously compelling arm—seeing nothing but his terrible smiling face and the black wilderness of sea. For the moment I fit inclined to plunge therein—as I had often longed to plunge penniless into the equally fearsome wilderness of Paris—only I felt sure he would follow me still. He would track me, it seemed, through the whole world.

“You see I have been able to accomplish the voyage; men mostly can achieve any fixed purpose—at least some men. Isabel, this sea-air will bring back your bloom. And, Alexis, my friend, despite those close studies you told me of, I hope you will bestow a little of your society at times on my ward and me. We will bid you a good evening now.”

He transferred to his nephew my powerless hand; that of Alexis, too, felt cold and trembling. It seemed as if he likewise were succumbing to the fate which, born out of one man’s indomitable will, dragged us asunder. Ere my guardian consigned me to Madame Gradelle, he said, smiling, but looking me through and through.

“Remember, my fair cousin, that Alexis is to be—must be—a priest.”

“It is impossible!” said I, stung to resistance. “You know he has altogether seceded from the Catholic creed; he will never return to it. His conscience is his own.”

“But not his passions. He is young—I am old. He will be a priest yet.” With a soft hand-pressure, M. Anastasius left me.

Now began the most horrible phase of my existence. For four weeks we had to live in the same vessel; bounded and shut up together,—Anastasius, Alexis, and I; meeting continually, in the soft bland atmosphere of courteous calm; always in public—never alone.

From various accidental circumstances, I discovered how M. Anastasius was now bending all the powers of his enormous intellect, his wonderful moral influence, to compass his cherished ends with regard to Alexis Saltram.

An overwhelming dread took possession of me. I ceased to think of myself at all—my worldly hopes, prospects, or joys—over which this man’s influence had long hung like an accursed

shadow; a sun turned into darkness—the more terrible because it had once been a sun. I seemed to see M. Anastasius only with relation to this young man, over whom I knew he once had so great power. Would it return—and in what would it result? Not merely in the breaking off any feeble tie to me. I scarcely trembled for that, since, could it be so broken, it was not worth trembling for. No! I trembled for Alexis' soul.

It was a soul, I had gradually learnt—more than ever perhaps in this voyage, of which every day seemed a life, full of temptation, contest, trial—a soul pure as God's own heaven, that hung over us hour by hour in its steady tropic blue; and deep as the seas that rolled everlastingly around us. Like then, stirring with the lightest breath, often tempest-tossed, liable to adverse winds and currents; yet keeping far, far below the surface a divine tranquillity—diviner than any mere stagnant calm. And this soul, full of all rich impulses, emotions, passions,—a soul which, because it could strongly sympathise with, might be able to regenerate its kind, M. Anastasius wanted to make into a Catholic Jesuit priest—a mere machine, to work as he, the head machine, chose!

This was why (the thought suddenly struck me, like lightning) he had told each of us severally, concerning one another, those two lies. Because we were young, we might love—we might marry; there was nothing externally to prevent us. And then what would become of his scheme?

I think there was born in me—while the most passive slave to lawful, loving rule—a faculty of savage resistance to all unlawful and unjust power. Also, a something of the female wild-beast, which, if alone, will lie tame and coward in her solitary den, to be shot at by any daring hunter; whereas if she be not alone—if she have any love-instinct at work for cubs or mate—her whole nature changes from terror to daring, from cowardice to fury.

When, as we neared the tropics, I saw Alexis' cheek growing daily paler, and his eye more sunken and restless with some secret struggle, in the which M. Anastasius never left him for a day, an hour, a minute, I became not unlike that poor wild-beast mother. It had gone ill with the relentless hunter of souls if he had come near me then.

But he did not. For the last week of our voyage M. Anastasius kept altogether out of my way.

It was nearly over—we were in sight of the shores of Hispaniola. Then we should land. My estates lay in this island. Mr Saltram's business, I was aware, called him to Barbados; thence again beyond seas. Once parted, I well knew that if the power and will of my guardian could compass anything, and it seemed to me that they were able to compass everything in the whole wide earth—Alexis and I should never meet again.

In one last struggle after life—after the fresh, wholesome, natural life which contact with this young man's true spirit had given me—I determined to risk all.

It was a rich tropic twilight. We were all admiring it, just as three ordinary persons might do who were tending peacefully to their voyage-end.

Yet Alexis did not seem at peace. A settled, deadly pallor dwelt on his face—a restless anxiety troubled his whole men.

M. Anastasius said, noticing the glowing tropic scenery which already dimly appeared in our shoreward view,

“It is very grand: but Europe is more suited to us grave Northerners. You will think so, Alexis, when you are once again there.”

“Are you returning?” I asked of Mr Saltram.

My cousin answered for him, “Yes, immediately.”

Alexis started; then leaned over the poop in silence, and without denial.

I felt profoundly sad. My interest in Alexis Saltram was at this time—and but for the compulsion of opposing power, might have ever been—entirely apart from love. We might have gone on merely as tender friends for years and years—at least I might. Therefore no maidenly consciousness warned me from doing what my sense of right impelled, towards one who held the same faith as I did, and whose life seemed strangled in the same mesh of circumstances which had nearly paralysed my own.

“Alexis, this is our last evening, you will sail for Europe—and we shall be friends no more. Will you take one twilight stroll with me?”—and I extended my hand.

If he had hesitated, or shrunk back from me, I would have flung him to the winds, and fought my own battle alone; I was strong enough now. But he sprang to me, clung to my hand, looked wildly in my face, as if there were the sole light of truth and trust left in the world; and as if even there, he had begun—or been taught—to doubt. He did not, now.

“Isbel, tell me! You still hold our faith—you are not going to become a nun?”

“Never! I will offer myself to Heaven as Heaven gave me to myself—free, bound by no creed, subservient to no priest. What is he, but a man that shall die, whom the worms shall cover?”

I said the words out loud. I meant M. Anastasius to hear. But he looked as if he heard not; only when we turned up the deck, he slowly followed.

I stood at bay. “Cousin, leave me. I wish to speak to Mr Saltram. Cannot I have any friend but you?”

“None, whom I believe you would harm and receive harm from.”

“Dare you—”

“I myself dare nothing, but there is nothing which my church does not dare. Converse, my children. I hinder you not. The deck is free for all.”

He bowed, and let us pass, then followed. Every sound of that slow, smooth step seemed to strike on my heart like the tracking tread of doom.

Alexis and I said little or nothing. A leaden despair seemed to bind us closely round, allowing only one consciousness, that for a little, little time, it bound us together! He held my arm so fast that I felt every throbbing of his heart. My sole thought was how to say some words that should be fixed eternally there, so that nothing might make him swerve from his Christian faith. That faith, which was my chief warranty of meeting him—never, or never in this world! but in the world everlasting.

Once or twice in turning we came face to face with M. Anastasius. He was walking at his usual slow pace, his hands loosely clasped behind him—his head bent; a steely repose, even pensiveness, which was his natural look—settled in his grave eyes. He was a man of intellect too great to despise, of character too spotless to loathe. The one sole feeling he inspired was that of unconquerable fear. Because you saw at once that *he* feared nothing either in earth or heaven, that he owed but one influence, and was amenable but to one law, which he called “the Church”, but which was, himself.

Men like M. Anastasius, one-idea'd, all-engrossed men, are according to slight variations in their temperaments, the salvation, the laughingstock, or the terror of the world.

He appeared in the latter form to Alexis and me. Slowly, surely came the conviction, that there was no peace for us on this earth while he stood on it; so strong, so powerful, that at times I almost yielded to a vague belief in his immortality. On this night, especially, I was stricken with a horrible—curiosity, I think it was—to see whether he *could* die, whether the grave could open her mouth to swallow him, and death have power upon his flesh, like that of other men.

More than once, as he passed under a huge beam, I thought—should it fall? as he leaned against the ship's side—should it give way? But only, I declare solemnly, out of a frenzied speculative curiosity, which I would not for worlds have breathed to a human soul! I never once breathed it to Alexis Saltram, who was his sister's son, and whom he had been kind to as a child.

Night darkened, and our walk ceased. We had said nothing—nothing; except that on parting, with a kind of desperation Alexis buried my hand tightly in his bosom, and whispered, "Tomorrow?"

That midnight a sudden hurricane came on. In half an hour all that was left of the good ship *Argo* was a little boat, filled almost to sinking with half-drowned passengers, and a few sailors clinging to spars and fragments of the wreck.

Alexis was lashed to a mast, holding me partly fastened to it, and partly sustained in his arms. How he had found and rescued me I know not, but love is very strong. It has been sweet to me afterwards to think that I owed my life to him—and him alone. I was the only woman saved.

He was at the extreme end of the mast; we rested, face to face, my head against his shoulder. All along to its slender point, the sailors were clinging to the spar like flies; but we two did not see anything in the world, save one another.

Life was dim, death was near, yet I think we were not unhappy. Our heaven was clear, for between us and Him to whom we were going came no threatening image, holding in its remorseless hand life, faith, love. Death itself was less terrible than M. Anastasius.

We had seen him among the saved passengers swaying in the boat, then we thought of him no more. We coting together with closed eyes, satisfied to die.

"No room—off there! No room!" I heard shouted, loud and savage, by the sailor lashed behind me.

I opened my eyes. Alexis was gazing on me only. I gazed, transfixed, over his shoulder, into the breakers beyond.

There, in the trough of a wave, I saw, clear as I see my own right hand now, the up-turned face of Anastasius, and his two white stretched-out hands, on one finger of which was his well-known diamond ring—for it flashed that minute in the moon.

"Off!" yelled the sailor, striking at him with an oar. "One man's life's as good as another's. Off!"

The drowning face rose above the wave, the eyes fixed themselves full on me, without any entreaty in them, or wrath, or terror—the long-familiar, passionless, relentless eyes.

I see them now; I shall see them till I die. Oh, would I had died!

For one brief second I thought of tearing off the lashings and giving him my place; for I had loved him. But youth and life were strong within me, and my head was pressed to Alexis' breast.

A full minute, or it seemed so, was that face above the water, then I watched it sink slowly, down, down.

IV

We, and several others, were picked up from the wreck of the *Argo* by a homeward-bound ship. As soon as we reached London I became Alexis' wife.

That which happened at the theatre was exactly twelve months after—as we believed—Anastasius died.

I do not pretend to explain, I doubt if any reasoning can explain, a circumstance so singular—so impossible to be attributed to either imagination or illusion. For, as I must again distinctly

state, we ourselves saw nothing. The apparition, or whatever it was, was visible only to other persons, all total strangers.

I had a fever. When I arose from it, and things took their natural forms and relations, this strange occurrence became mingled with the rest of my delirium, of which my husband persuaded me it was a part. He took me abroad—to Italy—Germany. He loved me dearly! He was, and he made me, entirely happy.

In our happiness we strove to live, not merely for one another, but for all the world; all who suffered and had need. We did—nor shrunk from the doing—many charities which had first been planned by Anastasius, with what motives we never knew. While carrying them out, we learnt to utter his name without trembling, remembering only that which was beautiful in him and his character, and which we had both so worshipped once.

In the furtherance of these schemes of good, it became advisable that we should go to Paris, to my former hotel, which still remained empty there.

“But not, dear wife, if any uneasiness or lingering pain rests in your mind in seeing the old spot. For me, I love it! since there I loved Isbel, before Isbel knew it, long.”

So I smiled; and went to Paris.

My husband proposed, and I was not sorry, that Colonel Hart and his newly-married wife should join us there, and remain as our guests. I shrunk a little from re-inhabiting the familiar rooms, long shut up from the light of day, and it was with comfort I heard my husband arranging that a portion of the hotel should be made ready for us, namely, two salons *en suite*; leading out of the farther one of which, were a chamber and dressing-room for our own use—opposite two similar apartments for the Colonel and his lady.

I am thus minute for reasons that will appear.

Mrs Hart had been travelling with us some weeks. She was a mild sweet-faced English girl, who did not much like the Continent, and was half shocked at some of my reckless foreign ways, on board steamboats and on railways. She said I was a little—just a little—too free. It might have seemed so to her; for my southern blood rushed bright and warm, and my manner of life in France had completely obliterated early impressions. Faithful and fond woman, and true wife as I was, I believe I was in some things unlike an English woman or an English wife, and that Mrs Hart thought so.

Once—for being weak of nature and fast of tongue, she often said things she should not—there was even some hint of the kind dropped before my husband. He flashed up—but laughed the next minute; for I was his, and he loved me!

It seemed uncourteous to retire for the night; so I merely threw my dressing-gown over my evening toilette, and lay down outside the bed dreamily watching the shadows which the lamp threw. This lamp was in my chamber, but its light extended faintly into the boudoir, showing the tall mirror there, and a sofa which was placed opposite. Otherwise, the little room was half in gloom, save for a narrow glint streaming through the not quite closed door of the salon.

I lay broad awake, but very quiet, contented, and happy. I was thinking of Alexis. In the midst of my reverie, I heard, as I thought, my maid trying the handle of the door behind me.

“It is locked,” I said; “come another time.”

The sound ceased; yet I almost thought Fanchon had entered, for there came a rift of wind which made the lamp sway in its socket. But when I looked, the door was closely shut, and the bolt still fast. I lay, it might be, half an hour longer. Then, with a certain compunction at my own discourtesy in leaving her, I saw the salon door open, and Mrs Hart appear.

She looked into the boudoir, drew back hurriedly, and closed the door after her.

Of course I immediately rose to follow her. Ere doing so, I remember particularly standing with the lamp in my hand, arranging my dress before the mirror in the boudoir, and seeing reflected in the glass, with my cashmere lying over its cushions, the sofa, unoccupied.

Eliza was standing thoughtful.

“I ought to ask pardon for my long absence, my dear Mrs Hart.”

“Oh no—but I of you, for intruding in your apartment; I did not know Mr Saltram had returned. Where is my husband?”

“With mine, no doubt! We need not expect them for an hour yet, the renegades.”

“You are jesting,” said Mrs Hart, half offended. “I know they are come home. I saw Mr Saltram in your boudoir not two minutes since.”

“How?”

“In your boudoir, I repeat. He was lying on the sofa.”

“Impossible!” and I burst out laughing. “Unless he has suddenly turned into a cashmere shawl. Come and look.”

I flung the folding doors open, and poured a blaze of light into the little room.

“It is very odd,” fidgeted Mrs Hart; “very odd indeed. I am sure I saw a gentleman here. His face was turned aside—but of course I concluded it was Mr Saltram. Very odd, indeed.”

I still laughed at her, though an uneasy feeling was creeping over me. To dismiss it, I showed her how the door was fastened, and how it was impossible my husband could have entered.

“No; for I distinctly heard you say, ‘It is locked—come another time.’”

What did you mean by that?”

“I thought it was Fanchon.”

To change the subject I began showing her some parures my husband had just bought me. Eliza Hart was very fond of jewels. We remained looking at them some time longer in the inner-mom where I had been lying on my bed; and then she bade me good night.

“No light, thank you. I can find my way back through the boudoir.

Goodnight. Do not look so pale tomorrow, my dear.”

She kissed me in the friendly English fashion, and danced lightly away, out at my bedroom door and into the boudoir adjoining—but instantly I saw her reappear, startled and breathless, covered with angry blushes.

“Mrs Saltram, you have deceived me! You are a wicked French woman.”

“Eliza!”

“You know it—you knew it all along. I will go and seek my husband. He will not let me stay another night in your house!”

“As you will,”—for I was sick of her follies. “But, explain yourself.”

“Have you no shame? Have you foreign women never any shame? But I have found you out at last.”

“Indeed!”

“There is—I have seen him twice with my own eyes—there is a man lying this minute in your boudoir,—and he is—*not* Mr Saltram!”

Then indeed I sickened—a deadly horror came over me. No wonder the young thing, convinced of my guilt, fled from me, appalled.

For, I knew now *whom* she had seen.

Hour after hour I must have lain where I fell. There was some confusion in the house—no one came near me. It was early daylight when I woke and saw Fanchon leaning over me, and trying to lift me from the floor.

“Fanchon—is it morning?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“What day is it?”

“The twenty-sixth of May.”

It had been *he*, then. He followed us still.

Shudder after shudder convulsed me. I think Fanchon thought I was dying.

“Oh, Madame! oh, poor Madame! And Monsieur not yet come home.”

I uttered a terrible cry—for my heart foreboded what either had happened or assuredly would happen.

Alexis never came home again.

An hour after, I was sent for to the little woodcutter’s hut, outside Paris gates, where he lay dying.

Anastasius had judged clearly; my noble generous husband had in him but one thing lacking—his passions were “not in his hand”. When Colonel Hart, on the clear testimony of his wife, impugned *his* wife’s honour, Alexis challenged him—fought and fell.

It all happened in an hour or two, when their blood was fiery hot. By daylight the Colonel stood, cold as death, pale as a shadow, by Alexis’ bedside. He had killed him, his old friend whom he loved. No one thought of me. They let me weep near my husband—unconscious as he was—doubtless believing mine the last contrite tears of an adulteress. I did not heed nor deny that horrible name—Alexis was dying.

Towards evening he revived a little, and his senses returned. He opened his eyes and saw me—they closed with a shudder.

“Alexis—Alexis!”

“Isbel, I am dying. You know the cause. In the name of God—are you—”

“In the name of God, I am your pure wife, who never loved any man but you.”

“I am satisfied. I thought it was so.”

He looked at Colonel Hart, faintly smiling; then opened his arms and took me into them, as if to protect me with his last breath.

“Now,” he said, still holding me, “My friends, we must make all clear. Nothing must harm her when I am gone. Hart, fetch your wife here.”

Mrs Hart came, trembling violently. My husband addressed her. “I sent for you—to ask you a question. Answer, as to a dying person, who tomorrow will know all secrets. Who was the man you saw in my wife’s chamber?”

“He was a stranger to me. I never met him before, anywhere. He lay on the sofa, wrapped in a fur cloak.”

“Did you see his face?”

“Not the first time. The second time I did.”

“What was he like? Be accurate, for the sake of more than life—honour.”

My husband’s voice sank. There was terror in his eyes, but not *that* terror—he held me to his bosom still.

“What was he like, Eliza?” repeated Colonel Hart.

“He was middle-aged; of a pale, grave countenance, with keen, large eyes, high forehead, and a pointed beard.”

“Heaven save us! I have seen him too,” cried the Colonel, horror-struck. “It was no living man.”

“It was M. Anastasius!”

My husband died that night. He died, his lips on mine, murmuring how dearly he loved me, and how happy he had been.

For many months after then I was quite happy, too; for my wits wandered, and I thought I was again a little West Indian girl, picking gowans in the meadows about Dumfries.

The Colonel and Mrs Hart were, I believe, very kind to me. I always took her for a little playfellow I had, who was called Eliza. It is only lately, as the year has circled round again to the spring, that my head has become clear, and I have found out who she is, and—ah, me!—who I am.

This coming to my right senses does not give me so much pain as they thought it would; because great weakness of body has balanced and soothed my mind.

I have but one desire: to go to my own Alexis—and before the twenty-fifth of May.

Now I have been able nearly to complete our story; which is well. My friend, judge between us—and *him*. Farewell.

ISBEL SALTRAM

POSTSCRIPT

I think it necessary that I, Eliza Hart, should relate, as simply as veraciously, the circumstances of Mrs Saltram’s death, which happened on the night of the twenty-fifth of May.

She was living with us at our house, some miles out of London. She had been very ill and weak during May, but towards the end of the month she revived. We thought if she could live till June she might even recover. My husband desired that on no account might she be told the day of the month—she was indeed purposely deceived on the subject. When the twenty-fifth came she thought it was only the twenty-second. For some weeks she had kept her bed, and Fanchon never left her. Fanchon, who knew the whole history, and was strictly charged, whatever delusions might occur to take no notice whatever of the subject to her mistress. For my husband and myself were again persuaded that it must be some delusion. So was the physician, who nevertheless determined to visit us himself on the night of the twenty-fifth of May.

It happened that the Colonel was unwell, and I could not remain constantly in Mrs Saltram’s room. It was a large but very simple suburban bedchamber, with white curtains and modern furniture, all of which I myself arranged in such a manner that there should be no dark corners, no shadows thrown by hanging draperies, or anything of the kind.

About ten o’clock at night Fanchon accidentally quitted her mistress for a few minutes, sending in her place a nursemaid who had lately come into our family.

This girl tells me that she entered the room quickly, but stopped, seeing, as she believed, the physician sitting by the bed, on the further side, at Mrs Saltram’s right hand. She thought Mrs Saltram did not see him, for she turned and asked her, the nursemaid—“Susan, what o’clock is it?”

The gentleman did not speak. She says, he appeared sitting with his elbows on his knees, and his face partly concealed in his hands. He wore a long coat or cloak—she could not distinguish

which, for the room was rather dark, but she could plainly see on his little finger the sparkle of a diamond ring.

She is quite certain that Mrs Saltram did not see the gentleman at all, which rather surprised her, for the poor lady moved from time to time, and spoke complainingly of its being "very cold." At length she called Susan to sit by her side, and chafe her hands.

Susan acquiesced—"But did not Mrs Saltram see the gentleman?"

"What gentleman?"

"He was sitting beside you, not a minute since. I thought he was the doctor, or the clergyman. He is gone now."

And the girl, much terrified, saw that there was no one in the room.

She says, Mrs Saltram did not seem terrified at all. She only pressed her hands on her forehead; her lips slightly moving—then whispered: "Go, call Fanchon and them all, tell them what you saw."

"But I must leave you. Are you not afraid?"

"No. Not now—not now."

She covered her eyes, and again her lips began moving.

Fanchon entered, and I too, immediately.

I do not expect to be credited. I can only state on my honour, what we both then beheld.

Mrs Saltram lay, her eyes open, her face quite calm, as that of a dying person; her hands spread out on the counterpane. Beside her sat erect the same figure I had seen lying on the sofa in Paris, exactly a year ago. It appeared more life-like than she. Neither looked at each other. When we brought a bright lamp into the room, the appearance vanished.

Isbel said to me, "Eliza, he is come."

"Impossible! You have not seen him?"

"No, but you have?" She looked me steadily in the face. "I knew it. Take the light away, and you will see him again. He is here, I want to speak to him. Quick, take the light away."

Alarmed as I was, I could not refuse, for I saw by her features that her last hour was at hand.

As surely as I write this, I, Eliza Hart, saw, when the candles were removed, that figure grow again, as out of air, and become plainly distinguishable, sitting by her bedside.

She turned herself with difficulty, and faced it. "Eliza, is he there? I see nothing but the empty chair. Is he there?"

"Yes."

"Does he look angry or terrible?"

"No."

"Anastasius!" She extended her hand towards the vacant chair. "Cousin Anastasius!"

Her voice was sweet, though the cold drops stood on her brow.

"Cousin Anastasius, I do not see you, but you can see and hear me. I am not afraid of you now. You know, once, I loved you very much."

Here—overcome with terror, I stole back towards the lighted staircase. Thence I still heard Isbel speaking.

"We erred, both of us, Cousin. You were too hard upon me—I had too great love first, too great terror afterwards, of you. Why should I be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man, whose breath is in his nostrils? I should have worshipped, have feared, not you, but only God."

She paused—drawing twice or thrice, heavily, the breath that could not last.

"I forgive you—forgive me also! I loved you. Have you anything to say to me, Anastasius?"

Silence.

‘Shall we ever meet in the boundless spheres of heaven?’

Silence—a long silence. We brought in candles, for she was evidently dying.

“Eliza—thank you for all! Your hand. It is so dark—and”—shivering—“I am afraid of going into the dark. I might meet Anastasius there. I wish my husband would come.”

She was wandering in her mind, I saw. Her eyes turned to the vacant chair.

“Is there anyone sitting by me?”

“No. Dear Isbel; can you see anyone?”

“No one—yes”—and with preternatural strength she started right up in bed, extending her arms. “Yes! There—close behind you—I see—my husband. I am quite safe—now!”

So, with a smile upon her face, she died.