

# Black Venn

By Bernard Capes

## I

“George,” said Plancine.

“Please say it again,” said George.

She dimpled at him and obeyed, with the soft suggestion of accent that was like a tender confidence. Her feet were sunk in Devonshire grass; her name was on the birth register of a little Devonshire sea-town; yet the sun of France was in her veins as surely as his caress was on her lips.

Therefore she said “George” with a sweet dragging sound that greatly fluttered the sensibilities of the person addressed, and not infrequently led them to alight, like Prince Dummling’s queen bee, on the very mouth of that honeyed flower of speech.

Now Plancine put her cheek on her George’s rough sleeve, and said she,—

“I have a confession to make—about something a little silly. Consequently I have postponed it till now, when it is too dark for you to see my face.”

“Never!” he murmured fervently. “A double cataract could not deprive me of that vision. It is printed here, Plancine.”

He smacked his chest hard on the left side.

“Yet it sounds hollow, George?”

“Yes,” he said. “It is a sandwich-box, an empty one. I would not consign your image to such a deplorable casket. My heart was what I meant. How I hate sandwiches—misers shivering between sheets—a vile gastronomic economy!”

“Poor boy! I will make you little dough-cakes when you go apainting.”

“Plancine! Your image here, yes. But your dough-cakes—!”

“Then keep to your sandwiches, sir.”

“I must. But the person who invented them was no gentleman!”

“Papa would like to hear you say that.”

“Say what?”

“Admit the possibility of any social distinction.”

“It is only a question of sandwiches.”

“George, *must* you be a Chartist and believe in Feargus O’Connor?”

“My soul, I cannot go back on my principles, for all that the violets of your eyes have sprouted under the shadow of a venerable family-tree.”

“That is very prettily said. You may kiss my thumb-nail with the white spot in it for luck. No, sir. That is presuming. Now I am snug, and you may talk.”

“Plancine, I am a son of the people. I hold by my own. No doubt, if I had blue blood to boast of, I should keep a vial of it in a prominent place on the drawing-room mantelpiece. As it is, I confess my desire is to carve for myself a name in art that shall be independent of all adventitious support; to answer to my vocation straight, upright, and manly.”

“That is better than nobility—though I have pride in my own. I wish papa thought so. Yet he has both himself.”

“The fine soul! For fifty years he has stood square to adversity with a smile on his face. Could I ever achieve that? Already I cry out on poverty; because I want an unencumbered field for work, and—yes, one other trifle.”

“One other trifle, George?”

He took Plancine’s face between his hands and looked very lovingly into her eyes.

“I think I did the old man too much honour,” he said. “You nestling of eighteen—what credit to scout misfortune with such a bird at one’s side!”

“Ah! but papa is sixty-nine and the bird but eighteen.”

“And eighteen years of heaven are a good education in happiness.”

So they coo’d, these two. The June scents of the little garden were wafted all about them. The moon had come up out of the sea, and, finding a trellis of branches over their heads, hung their young brows with coronals of shadowy leaves, like the old dame she was, rummaging in her trinket box for something for her favourites.

In the dimly-luminous parlour (that smelt of folios and warm coffee) of the little dark house in the background, the figure of papa, poring at the table over geological maps, was visible.

Fifty years ago an *émigré*, denounced, proscribed, and escaped from the ruin of a shattered society: here, in ’49, a stately, large-boned man, placidly enjoying the consciousness of a serene dignity maintained at the expense of much and prolonged self-effacement—this was papa.

Grey hair, thinning but slightly near the temples; grey moustache and beard pointed *de bouc*; flowered dressing-gown girdled about a heart as simple as a child’s—this was papa, papa who grubbed over his ordnance surveys while the young folks outside whispered of the stars.

Right beneath them—the latter—a broad gully of the hills went plunging precipitously, all rolled with leaf and flower, to the undercliff of soft blue lias and the very roof ridges of King’s Cobb, whose walls and chimneys, now snowed with light, fretted a scallop of the striding bay that swept the land here like a scythe.

Plancine’s village, a lofty appanage or suburb of this little seaboard town at the hill-foot, seemed rather the parent stock from which the other had emancipated itself. For all down the steep slope that fled from Upper to King’s Cobb was flung a *débris* of houses that, like the ice-fall of a glacier, would appear to have broken from the main body and gone careering into the valley below.

It was in point of fact, however, but a subordinate hamlet—a hanging garden for the jaded tourist in the dog days, when his soul stifled in the oven of the sea-level cliffs—an eyrie for Plancine, and for George, the earnest painter, a Paradise before the fall.

And now says George, “We have talked all round your confession, and still I wait to give you absolution.”

“I will confess. I read it in one of papa’s books that is called the *Talmud*.”

“Gracious me! you should be careful. What did you read?”

“That whoever wants to see the souls of the dead—”

“Plancino!”

“—must take finely sifted ashes, and strew them round his bed; and in the morning he will see their foot-tracks, as a cock’s. I did it.”

“You did?”

“Last night, yes. And what a business I had afterwards sweeping them up!”

“And did you see anything?”

“Something—yes—I think so. But it might have been mice. There are plenty up there.”

“Now you are an odd Plancine! What did you want with the ghosts of the dead?”

“I will tell you, you tall man; and you will not abuse my confidence. George, for all your gay independence, you must allow me a little family pride and a little pathetic interest in the fortunes of the dead and gone De Jussacs.”

“It is Mademoiselle De Jussac that speaks.”

“It is Plancine, who knows so little:—that ‘The Terror’ would have guillotined her father, a boy of fourteen: that he escaped to Prussia, to Belgium, to England; for six years always a wanderer and a fugitive: that he was wrecked on this dear coast and, penniless, started life anew here on his little accomplishments: that he made out a meagre existence, and late in the order of years (he was fifty) married an expatriated countrywoman, who died—George, my mother died when I was seventeen months old—and that is where I stop. My good, big father—so lonely, so poor, and so silent! He tells me little. He speaks scantily of the past. But he was a Vicomte and is the last of his line; and I wanted the ghosts to explain to me so much that I have never learned.”

The moonlight fell upon her sweet, pale, uplifted face. There were tears in her eyes that glittered like frost.

But George, for all his love, showed a little masculine impatience.

“Reserve is very good,” he said; “but we can’t all be Lord Burleighs by holding our tongues. There is a sort of silence that is pregnant with nothing.”

“George, you cannot mean to insult my father?”

“No, dear. But why does he make such a mystery of his past? I would have mine as clear as a window, for all to look through. Why does he treat me with such suave and courteous opposition—permitting my suit, yet withholding his consent?”

“If you could be less democratic, dear—”

“It is a religion with me—not a brutal indulgence.”

“Perhaps he cannot dissociate the two. Then, he admires yow genius and commends your courage; but your poor purse hungers, my lover, and he desires riches for his Plancine.”

“And Plancine?”

“She will die a grey-haired maid for thee, ‘O Richard! O my king!’”

“My sweet—my bird—my wife! Oh, that you could be that now and kiss me on to fortune! I should be double-souled and inspired. A few months, and Madame la Vicomtesse should ‘walk in silk attire.’ I flame at the picture. Why will your father not yield you gracefully, instead of plying us with that eternal enigma of Black Venn?”

“Because enthusiasm alone may not command wealth,” said a deep voice near them.

Papa had come upon them unobserved. The young man wheeled and charged while his blood was hot.

“Mr. De Jussac, it is a shame to hold me in this unending suspense.”

“Is it not better than decided rejection?”

“I have served like Jacob. You cannot doubt my single-hearted devotion?”

“I doubt nothing, my George” (about *his* accent there was no tender compromise)—“I doubt nothing, but that the balance at your bankers’ is excessive.”

“You would not value Plancine at so much bullion?”

“But yes, my friend; for bullion is the algebraic formula that represents comfort. When Black Venn slips his apron—”

George made a gesture of impatience.

“When Black Venn slips his apron,” repeated the father quietly, “I shall be in a position to consider your suit.”

“That is tantamount to putting me off altogether. It is ungenerous. It is preposterous. You may or may not be right; but it is simply farcical (Plancine cried, “George!”—but he went on warmly, nevertheless) to make our happiness contingent on the possible tumbling down of a bit of old cliff— an accident that, after all, may never happen.”

“Ah!” the quiet, strong voice went on; and in the old eyes turned moonwards one might have fancied one could read a certain pathos of abnegation, or approaching self-sacrifice; “but it will, and shortly, for I prophesy. It was no idle cruelty of mine that first suggested this condition, but a natural reluctance to sign myself back to utter loneliness.”

Plancine cried, “Papa! papa!” and sprang into his arms.

“A little patience,” said De Jussac, pressing his moustache to the round head, “and you will honour this weary prophet, I think. I was up on the cliff to-day. The great crack is ever widening. A bowling wind, a loud thunderstorm, and that apron of the hill will tear from its bondage and sink sweltering down the slopes.”

In the moment of speaking a tremor seized all his limbs, his eyes glared maniacal, his outstretched arm pointed seawards.

“The guillotine!” he shrieked, “the guillotine!” In the offing of the bay was a vessel making for the unseen harbour below. It stood up black against the moonlight, its sails and yards presenting some fantastic resemblance to that engine of blood.

George stepped back and hung his head embarrassed. He had more than once been witness of a like seizure. It was the guillotine fright—the fright that had smitten the boy of fourteen, and had pursued the man ever since with periodic attacks of illusion. Anything—a branch, a doorpost, a window, would suggest the hateful form during those periods—happily brief—when the poor mind was temporarily unhinged. No doubt, in earlier years, the fits had occurred frequently. Now they were rare, and generally, it seemed, attributable to some strong excitement or emotion.

Plancine knew how to act. She put her hand over the frantic eyes, and led the old man stumbling up the garden path. She was going to sing to him from the little sweet folk-ballads of the old gay France before the trouble came—

*“The king would wed his daughter  
Over the English sea;  
But never across the water  
Shall a husband come to me.”*

Love floated on the freshet of her voice straight into the heart of the young man who stood without.

## II

Perhaps at first it had not been the least of the bitterness in M. De Jussac’s cup of calamity that his mere pride of name must adjust itself to its altered conditions. That the Vicomte De Jussac should have been expatriated because he declined when called upon to contribute his heart’s blood to the red conduit in the Faubourg St. Antoine was certainly an infamy, but one of which the very essence was that unquestioning acknowledgment of his rank. That the land of his adoption should have dubbed him Mr. Jussuks—in stolid unconsciousness, too, of the solecism— was an outrage of a totally different order—an outrage only to be condoned on the

score that an impenetrable insular *gaucherie*, and not a malicious impertinence, was responsible for it.

Mr. Jussuks had, however, outlived his sense of the injurious appellation; had outlived much prejudice, the wear of poverty, his memory of many things, and, very early, his scorn of the plebeian processes that to the impecunious are a condition of living at all. He was certainly a man of courageous independence, inasmuch as from the hour of his setting foot in England—and that was at the outset of the century—he had controlled his own little fortunes without a hand to help him over the deep places.

Of his first struggles little is known but this—that for years, turning to account some small knowledge of draughtsmanship he had acquired, he found employment in ladies' academies, of which there was a plenitude at that date in King's Cobb.

That, however, which brought him eventually into a modest prominence—not only in that same beautiful but indifferently known watering-place (upon which he had happened, it would appear, fortuitously), but elsewhere and amongst men of a certain mark—was a discovery—or the practical application of one—which in its result procured him a definite object in life, together with the means to pursue it.

Ammonites, and such small geological fry, were to be found by the thousand in the petrified mud beds of the Cobb region; but it was left to the ingenuity, aided by good fortune, of the foreigner to unearth from the flaking and perishing cliffs of has some of the earliest and finest specimens of the ichthyo- and plesio-saurus that a past world has yielded to the naturalists.

Out of these the *émigré* made money, and so was enabled to pursue and enlarge upon his researches. Presently he prospered into a competence, married (poor Mademoiselle Belleville, of the Silver Street Academy, who died of typhoid at the end of a couple of summers), and so grew into the kindly old age of the absorbed and gentle naturalist, with his Plancine budding at his side.

What in all these fifty years had he forgotten? His name, his rank, his very origin? Much, no doubt. But that there was one haunting memory that had dwelt with him throughout, his child and her lover were to learn—one memory, and that dreadful recurring illusion of the guillotine.

“When Black Venn slips his apron, I shall be in a position to consider your suit.”

Surely that was an odd and enigmatical condition, entirely remote from the subject at issue? Yet from the moment of the first impassioned pleadings of the stricken George, De Jussac had insisted upon it as one from which there should be no appeal.

Now the Black Venn referred to was a great mound of has that rolled up and inland, in the far sweep of the bay, from the giddy margin of the lower ruin of cliffs. These—mere compressed mountains of mud, blown by the winds and battered by the sea—were in a constant state of yawn and collapse. Yard by yard they yielded to the scourge of Time, and landslides were of common occurrence.

All along the middle slope of Black Venn itself, a wide, deep fissure, dark and impenetrable, had stretched from ages unrecorded. But the eventual opening-out of this crevasse, and the consequent subsidence of the incline, or apron, below it, had been foretold by Mr. De Jussac; and this, in fact, was the condition to which he had alluded.

### III

De Jussac! do you hear me?”

“I am coming, my friend.”

The light shining steadily through a front window of the cottage flickered and shifted. The young man in the rain and storm outside danced with impatience.

Suddenly the door opened, and Plancine's father stood there, candle in hand.

"What is it, my George?"

"The hill, sir—the hill! It's fallen! You were right. You must stand by your word. Black Venn has slipped his apron!"

"My God, no!"

There were despair and exultation in his voice. "My God, no!" he whispered again, and dived into a cupboard under the stair.

Thence he reappeared with a horn lantern and his old blue cloak.

"Come, then!" he cried. "My hour is upon me!"

"Mr. De Jussac, it will wait till the morning."

"No, no, no! Do you trifle with your destiny? It has happened opportunely, while all are within doors and we have a clear field. How do you know? have you seen? Is it possible to descend to it from above?"

"I passed there less than an hour ago. It is possible, I am sure."

They set off hurriedly through the rain-beaten night. Not a word passed between them as they left the village and struck into the high-valley road that ran past, at a moderate distance, the head of the bay. De Jussac strode rapidly in advance of his companion. His long cloak whirled in the blast; it flogged his gaunt limbs all set to intense action. He seemed uplifted, translated—like one in whom the very article of a life-long faith, or monomania, is about to be justified.

Toiling onward, like driven cattle, they swerved from the road presently and breasted a sharp incline. Their boots squelched on the sodden turf; the wind bore on them heavily.

George saw the dancing lanthorn go up the slope in front of him like a will-o'-the-wisp—stop, and swing steady, heard the loud cry of jubilation that issued from the withered throat.

"It is true! The moment is realized!"

They stood together on the verge of the upper lip of the fissure. It was a cliff now, twenty, thirty feet to its base. The lower ground had fallen like a dead jaw; had slipped—none so great a distance—down the slope leading to the under-cliff, and lay a billowing mass subsided upon itself.

De Jussac would stand not an instant.

"We must climb down—somehow, anyhow!" he cried feverishly. "We must search all along what was once the bottom of the cleft."

"It is a risk, sir. Why not wait till the morning?"

"No, no! now! My God! I demand it. Others may forestall us if we delay. See, my friend, I wish but my own; and what proof of right have I if another should snatch the treasure?"

"The treasure?"

"It is our fortune that lies there—yours, and mine, and the little Plancine's. Do I know what I say? Hurry, hurry, hurry! while my heart does not burst."

He forced the lanthorn into the young man's hands. He was panting and sobbing like a child. Before the other realized his intention, he had flung himself upon his hands and knees, had slipped over the edge, and was scrambling down the broken wall of has.

There was nothing for George but to take his own life in hand and humour his venerated elder. He followed with the lanthorn, thinking of Plancine a little, and hoping he should fall on a soft place.

But they got down in safety, breathing hard and extremely dirty. Caution, it is true, reacts very commonly upon itself.

The moment his companion's feet touched bottom, De Jussac snatched the light from his hand, roughly enough to send him off his balance, and went scurrying to and fro along the face of the cliff like a mad thing.

"I cannot find it!" he cried, rushing back after an interval—nervous, in an agony of restlessness—a very pitiable old man.

George spoke up from the ground.

"Find what?" said he, feeling all sopped and dazed.

"The box—the casket! It could never perish. It was of sheet-iron. Look, look, my friend! Your eyes are younger than mine—a box, a foot long, of hard iron!"

"I am sitting upon something hard," said George.

He sprang to his feet and took the lanthorn.

"Bones," said he, peering down. "Some old mastodon, I expect. Is this your treasure?"

De Jussac was glaring. His head drooped lower and lower. His lips were parted, and the line of strong white teeth showed between them. His voice, when he spoke, was quite fearful in its low intensity.

"Bones—yes, and human. Where they lie, the other must be near. Ah, Lacombe, Lacombe; you will yield me my own at last!"

He was shaking a slow finger at the poor remnants—a rib or two, the half of a yellow skull.

Suddenly he was down on his knees, tearing at the black, thick soil, diving into it, tossing it hither and thither.

A pause, a rending exclamation, and he was on his feet again with a scream of ecstasy. An oblong casket, rusty, corroded, but unbroken, was in his hand.

"Now," he whispered, sibilant through the wind, controlling himself, though he was shaking from head to foot, "now to return as we have come. Not a word, not a word till we have this safe in the cottage!"

They found, after some search, a difficult way up. By-and-by they stood once more on the lip of the fall, and paused for breath.

It was at this very instant that De Jussac dropped the box beside him and threw up his hands.

"The guillotine!" he shrieked, and fell headlong into the pit he had just issued from.

#### IV

The poor bandaged figure; the approaching death; the dog whining softly in the yard "I am dying, my little Plancine?"

The girl's forehead was bowed on the homely quilt.

"Nay, cry not, little one! I go very happy. That (he indicated by a motion of his eyelids the fatal box, which, yet unopened, lay on a table by the sunny window) shall repay thee for thy long devotion, for thy poverty, and for thy brave sweetness with the old papa."

"No, no, no!"

"But they are diamonds, Plancine—such diamonds, my bird. They have flashed at Versailles, at the little Trianon. They were honoured to lie on the breast of a beautiful and courageous woman—thine aunt, Plancine; the most noble the Comtesse de la Morne. She gave her wealth, almost her life, for her king—all but her diamonds. It was at Brussels, whither I had escaped from The Terror— I, a weak and desolate boy of but fourteen. I lived with her, in her common,

cheap lodging. For five years we made out our friendless and deserted existence in company. In truth, we were an embarrassment, and they looked at us askance. Long after her mind failed her, the memory of her own former beauty dwelt with her; yet she could not comprehend but that it was still a talisman to conjure with. Even to the end she would deck herself and coquet to her glass. But she was good and faithful, Plancine; and, at the last, when she was dying, she gave me this box. 'It contains all that is left to me of my former condition,' she said. 'It shall make thy fortune for thee in England, my nephew, whither thou must journey when poor Dorine is underground.' By that I knew it was her cherished diamonds she bequeathed me. 'They do not want thee here,' she said. 'Thou must take boat for England when I am gone.'

"But George, my friend!"

The young man was standing sorrowful by the open window. He could have seen the sailing-boats in the bay, the sailing clouds in the sky placidly floating over a world of serene and verdurous loveliness. But his vision was all inward, of the piteous calm, following storm and disaster, in which the dying voice from the bed was like the lapping of little waves.

He came at once and stood over Plancine, not daring to touch her.

"It was not wilfulness, but my great love," said the broken, gentle voice, "that made the condition. All of you I cannot extol, knowing what I have known. But you are an honest gentleman and a true, my brave; and you shall make this dearest a noble husband."

Waveringly George stole his hand towards the bowed head and let it rest there.

From the battered face a smile broke like flowers from a blasted soil.

"Withholding my countenance only as I foresaw the means to enrich you both were approaching my grasp, I waited for the hill to break away that I might recover my casket. It was there—it is here; and now my Plancine shall never know poverty more, or her husband restrict the scope of his so admirable art on the score of necessity."

He saw the eyes questioning what the lips would not ask.

"But how I lost it?" he said. "I took the box; I obeyed her behests. The moment was acute; the times peremptory. I sailed for England, hurriedly and secretly, never to this day having feasted my eyes on what lies within there. With me went Lacombe, Madame's 'runner' in the old days—a stolid Berrichon, who had lived upon her bounty to the end. The rogue! the ingrate! We were wrecked upon this coast; we plunged and came ashore. I know not who were lost or saved; but Lacombe and I clung together and were thrown upon the land, the box still in my grasp. We climbed the cliffs where a stair had been cut; we broke eastwards from the upper slopes and staggered on through the blown darkness. Suddenly Lacombe stopped. The day was faint then on the watery horizon; and in the ghostly light I saw his face and read the murder in it. We were standing on the verge of the cleft under Black Venn. 'No further!' he whispered. 'You must go down there!' He snatched the box from my hand. In the instant of his doing so, stricken by the death terror, the affection to which I was then much subject seized me. I screamed, 'My God! the guillotine!' Taken by surprise, he started back, staggered, and went down crashing to the fate he had designed for me. I seemed to lie prostrate for hours, while his moans came up fainter and fainter till they ceased. Then I rose and faced life, lonely, friendless, and a beggar."

The restless wandering of his eyes travelled over his daughter's head to the rusty casket by the window.

"It was very well," he whispered. "I thank my God that He has permitted me at the perfect moment to realize my investment in that dead rascal's dishonesty. Have I ever desired wealth save for my little *pouponne* here? And I have sorely tried thee, my George. But the old naturalist had such faith in his prediction. Now—"

His vision was glazing; the muscles of his face were quietly settling to the repose that death only can command.

“Now, I would see the fruit of my prophecy; would see it all hung on the neck, in the hair of my child, that I may die rejoicing. Canst thou force the casket, George?”

The young man turned with a stifled groan. Some tools lay on a shelf hard by. He grasped a chisel and went to his task with shaking hands.

The box was all eaten and corroded. It was a matter of but a few seconds to prise it open. The lid fell back on the table with a rusty clang.

“Ah!” cried the dying man. “What now? Dost thou see them? Quick! quick! to glorify this little head! Are they not exquisite?”

George was gazing down with a dull, vacant feeling at his heart.

“Are they not?” repeated the voice, in terrible excitement.

“They—Mr. De Jussac, they are loveliness itself. Plancine, I will not touch them. You must be the first.”

He strode to the kneeling girl; lifted, almost roughly dragged her to her feet.

“Come!” he said; and, supporting her across the room, whispered madly in her ear: “Pretend! For God’s sake, pretend!”

Plancine’s swimming eyes looked down, looked upon a litter of perished rags of paper, and, lying in the midst of the rubbish, an ancient stained and cockled miniature of a powdered Louis *Seize* coquette.

This was all. This was the treasure the old crazed vanity had thought sufficient to build her nephew his fortune.

The diamonds! Probably these had long before been sacrificed to the armies ineffectively manœuvring for the destruction of Monsieur “Veto’s” enemies.

Plancine lifted her head. Thereafter George never ceased to recall with a glad pride the nobility that had shone in her eyes.

“My papa!” she cried softly, going swiftly to the bed; “they are beautiful as the stars that glittered over the old untroubled France!”

De Jussac sprang up on his pillow.

“The guillotine!” he cried. “The beams break into flowers! The axe is a shaft of light!”

And so the glowing blade descended.