

The Beckoning Hand

By Grant Allen

I

I first met Césarine Vivian in the stalls at the Ambiguities Theatre.

I had promised to take Mrs Latham and Irene to see a French play. I wasn't at the time exactly engaged to poor Irene, though I knew Irene herself considered it practically equivalent to an understood engagement. We had known one another intimately from childhood for the Lathams were sort of second cousins of ours, three times removed: and we had always called one another by our Christian names, and been very fond of one another in a simple girlish and boyish fashion as long as we could either of us remember. Still, I maintain, there was no definite understanding between us; and if Mrs Latham thought I had been paying Irene attentions, she must have known that a young man of 22 with a decent fortune and a nice estate in Devonshire, was likely to look about him for a while before he thought of settling down and marrying quietly.

I had brought the yacht up to London Bridge, and was living on board and running about town casually, when I took Irene and her mother to see *Faustine*, at the Ambiguities. As soon as we had got in and taken our places, Irene whispered to me, 'Just look at the very dark girl on the other side of you, Harry! Did you ever in your life see anybody so perfectly beautiful?'

It has always been a great comfort to me that Irene herself was the first person to call my attention to Césarine Vivian's extraordinary beauty.

I turned round, as if by accident, and gave a passing glance, where Irene waved her fan, at the girl beside me. She was beautiful, certainly, in a terrible, grand, statuesque style of beauty; and I saw at a glimpse that she had Southern blood in her veins, perhaps Negro, perhaps Moorish, perhaps only Spanish, or Italian, or Provençal. Her features were proud and somewhat Jewish-looking; her eyes large, dark, and haughty; her black hair waved slightly in sinuous undulations as it passed across her high, broad forehead; her complexion, though a dusky olive in tone, was clear and rich, and daintily transparent; and her lips were thin and very slightly curled at the delicate corners, with a peculiarly imperious and almost scornful expression of fixed disdain. I had never before beheld anywhere such a magnificently repellent specimen of womanhood. For a second or so, as I looked, her eyes met mine with a defiant inquiry, and I was conscious that moment of some strange and weird fascination in her glance that seemed to draw me irresistibly towards her, at the same time that I hardly dared to fix my gaze steadily upon the piercing eyes that looked through and through me with their keen penetration.

'She's very beautiful, no doubt,' I whispered back to Irene, 'though I must confess I don't exactly like the look of her. She's a trifle too much of a tragedy queen for my taste: a Lady Macbeth, or a Beatrice Cenci. I prefer our simple little English prettiness to this southern splendour. Besides, I fancy the girl looks as if she had a drop or two of black blood somewhere about her.'

'Oh, no,' Irene cried warmly. 'Impossible, Harry. She's exquisite: exquisite. Italian, you know, or something of that sort. Italian girls have always got that peculiar gipsy-like type of beauty.'

Low as we spoke, the girl seemed to know by instinct we were talking about her; for she drew away the ends of her light wrap coldly, in a significant fashion, and turned with her opera-glass in the opposite direction, as if on purpose to avoid looking towards us.

A minute later the curtain rose, and the first act of *Faustine* distracted my attention for the moment from the beautiful stranger.

Marie Leroux took the part of the great empress. She was grand, stately, imposing, no doubt, but somehow it seemed to me she didn't come up quite so well as usual that evening to one's ideal picture of the terrible, audacious, superb Roman woman. I leant over and murmured so to Irene. 'Don't you know why?' Irene whispered back to me with a faint movement of the play-bill towards the beautiful stranger.

'No,' I answered; 'I haven't really the slightest conception.'

'Why,' she whispered, smiling; 'just look beside you. Could anybody bear comparison for a moment as a Faustine with that splendid creature in the stall next to you?'

I stole a glance sideways as she spoke. It was quite true. The girl by my side was the real Faustine, the exact embodiment of the dramatist's creation; and Marie Leroux, with her stagey effects and her actress's pretences, could not in any way stand the contrast with the genuine empress who sat there eagerly watching her.

The girl saw me glance quickly from her towards the actress and from the actress back to her, and shrank aside, not with coquettish timidity, but half angrily and half as if flattered and pleased at the implied compliment. 'Papa,' she said to the very English-looking gentleman who sat beyond her, 'ce monsieur-ci . . .' I couldn't catch the end of the sentence.

She was French, then, not Italian or Spanish; yet a more perfect Englishman than the man she called 'papa' it would be difficult to discover.

'My dear,' her father whispered back in English, 'if I were you. . .' and the rest of that sentence also was quite inaudible to me.

My interest was now fully roused in the beautiful stranger, who sat evidently with her father and sister, and drank in every word of the play as it proceeded with the greatest interest. As for me, I hardly cared to look at the actors, so absorbed was I in my queenly neighbour. I made a bare pretence of watching the stage every five minutes, and saying a few words now and again to Irene or her mother; but my real attention was all the time furtively directed to the girl beside me. Not that I was taken with her; quite the contrary; she distinctly repelled me; but she seemed to exercise over me for all that the same strange and indescribable fascination which is often possessed by some horrible sight that you would give worlds to avoid, and yet cannot for your life help intently gazing upon.

Between the third and fourth acts Irene whispered to me again, 'I can't keep my eyes off her, Harry. She's wonderfully beautiful. Confess now: aren't you over head and ears in love with her?'

I looked at Irene's sweet little peaceful English face, and I answered truthfully, 'No, Irene. If I wanted to fall in love, I should find somebody—'

'Nonsense, Harry,' Irene cried, blushing a little, and holding up her fan before her nervously. 'She's a thousand times prettier and handsomer in every way—'

'Prettier?'

'Than I am.'

At that moment the curtain rose, and Marie Leroux came forward once more with her imperial diadem, in the very act of defying and bearding the enraged emperor.

It was a great scene. The whole theatre hung upon her words for twenty minutes. The effect was sublime. Even I myself felt my interest aroused at last in the consummate spectacle. I glanced round to observe my neighbour. She sat there, straining her gaze upon the stage, and heaving her bosom with suppressed emotion. In a second, the spell was broken again. Beside that

tall, dark southern girl, in her queenly beauty, with her flashing eyes and quivering nostrils, intensely moved by the passion of the play, the mere actress who mouthed and gesticulated before us by the footlights was as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. My companion in the stalls was the genuine Faustine: the player on the stage was but a false pretender.

As I looked a cry arose from the wings: a hushed cry at first, rising louder and ever louder still, as a red glare burst upon the scene from the background. Then a voice from the side boxes rang out suddenly above the confused murmur and the ranting of the actors—‘Fire! Fire!’

Almost before I knew what had happened, the mob in the stalls was surging and swaying wildly towards the exits, in a general struggle for life. Dense clouds of smoke rolled from the stage and filled the length and breadth of the auditorium; tongues of flame licked up the pasteboard scenes and hangings, like so much paper; women screamed, and fought, and fainted; men pushed one another aside and hustled and elbowed, in one wild effort to make for the doors at all hazards to the lives of their neighbours. Never before had I so vividly realized how near the savage lies to the surface in our best and highest civilized society. I was to realize it still more vividly and more terribly afterwards.

One person alone I observed calm and erect, resisting quietly all pushes and thrusts, and moving with slow deliberateness to the door, as if wholly unconcerned at the universal tumult around her. It was the dark girl from the stalls beside me.

For myself, my one thought was for poor Irene and Mrs Latham. Keeping the two women in front of me, and thrusting hard with my elbows on either side to keep off the crush, I managed to make a tolerably clear road for them down the central row of stalls and out on to the big external staircase. The dark girl, now separated from her father and sister by the rush, was close in front of me. By a careful side movement, I managed to include her also in our party. She looked up to me gratefully with her big eyes, and her mouth broke into a charming smile as she turned and said in perfect English, ‘I am much obliged to you for your kind assistance.’ Irene’s cheek was pale as death; but through the strange young lady’s olive skin the bright blood still burned and glowed amid that frantic panic as calmly as ever.

We had reached the bottom of the steps, and were out into the front, when suddenly the strange lady turned around and gave a little cry of disappointment. ‘Mes lorgnettes! Mes lorgnettes!’ she said. Then glancing round carelessly to me she went on in English: ‘I have left my opera-glasses inside on the vacant seat. I think, if you will excuse me, I’ll go back and fetch them.’

‘It’s impossible,’ I cried, ‘my dear madam. Utterly impossible. They’ll crush you underfoot. They’ll tear you to pieces.’

She smiled a strange haughty smile, as if amused at the idea, but merely answered, ‘I think not,’ and tried to pass lightly by me.

I held her arm. I didn’t know then she was as strong as I was. ‘Don’t go,’ I said imploringly. ‘They will certainly kill you. It would be impossible to stem a mob like this one.’

She smiled again, and darted back in silence before I could stop her.

Irene and Mrs Latham were now fairly out of all danger. ‘Go on, Irene,’ I said loosing her arm. ‘Policeman, get these ladies safely out. I must go back and take care of that mad woman.’

‘Go, go quick,’ Irene cried. ‘If you don’t go, she’ll be killed, Harry.’

I rushed back wildly after her, battling as well as I was able against the frantic rush of panic-stricken fugitives, and found my companion struggling still upon the main staircase. I helped her to make her way back into the burning theatre, and she ran lightly through the dense smoke to the stall she had occupied, and took the opera-glasses from the vacant place. Then she turned to me once more with a smile of triumph. ‘People lose their heads so,’ she said, ‘in all these

crushes. I came back on purpose to show papa I wasn't going to be frightened into leaving my opera-glasses. I should have been eternally ashamed of myself if I had come away and left them in the theatre.'

'Quick,' I answered, gasping for breath. 'If you don't make haste, we shall be choked to death, or the roof itself will fall in upon us and crush us!'

She looked up where I pointed with a hasty glance, and then made her way back again quickly to the staircase. As we hurried out, the timbers of the stage were beginning to fall in. I took her hand and almost dragged her out into the open. When we reached the Strand, we were both blackened with smoke and ashes. Pushing our way through the dense crowd, I called a hansom. She jumped in lightly. 'Thank you so much,' she said, quite carelessly. 'Will you kindly tell him where to drive? Twenty-seven, Seymour Crescent.'

'I'll see you home, if you'll allow me,' I answered. 'Under these circumstances, I trust I may be permitted.'

'As you like,' she said, smiling enchantingly. 'You are very good. My name is Césarine Vivian. Papa will be very much obliged to you for your kind assistance.'

I drove round to the Lathams' after dropping Miss Vivian at her father's door, to assure myself of Irene's safety, and to let them know of my own return unhurt from my perilous adventure. Irene met me on the doorstep, pale as death still. 'Thank heaven,' she cried, 'Harry, you're safe back again! And that poor girl? What has become of her?'

'I left her,' I said, 'at home.'

Irene burst into a flood of tears. 'Oh, Harry,' she cried, 'I thought she would have been killed there. It was brave of you, indeed, to help her through with it.'

II

Next day, Mr Vivian called on me at my club the address on the card I had given his daughter. I was in when he called, and I found him a pleasant, good-natured Cornishman, with very little that was strange or romantic in any way about him. He thanked me heartily, but not too effusively, for the care I had taken of Miss Vivian over-night. We got on very well together, and I soon gathered from what my new acquaintance said that, though he belonged to one of the best families in Cornwall, he had been an English merchant in Haiti, and had made his money chiefly in the coffee trade. He was a widower, I learned incidentally, and his daughters had been brought up for some years in England, though at their mother's request they had also passed part of their lives in convent schools in Paris and Rouen. 'Mrs Vivian was a Haitian, you know,' he said casually: 'Catholic of course. The girls are Catholics. They're good girls, though they're my own daughters; and Césarine, your friend of last night, is supposed to be clever. I'm no judge myself. Oh, by the way, Césarine said she hadn't thanked you half enough herself yesterday, and I was to be sure and bring you round this afternoon to a cup of tea with us at Seymour Crescent.'

In spite of the impression Mlle Césarine had made upon me the night before, I somehow didn't feel at all desirous of meeting her again. I was impressed, it is true, but not favourably. There seemed to me something uncanny and weird about her which made me shrink from seeing anything more of her if I could possibly avoid it. And as it happened, I was luckily engaged that very afternoon to tea at Irene's. I made the excuse, and added somewhat pointedly—on purpose that it might be repeated to Mlle Césarine—'Miss Latham is a very old and particular friend of mine—a friend whom I couldn't for worlds think of disappointing.'

Mr Vivian laughed the matter off. 'I shall catch it from Césarine,' he said good-humouredly, 'for not bringing her cavalier to receive her formal thanks in person. Our West-Indian born girls, you know, are very imperious. But if you can't, you can't.'

I can't say why, but at that moment, in spite of my intense desire not to meet Césarine again, I felt I would have given whole worlds if he would have pressed me to come in spite of myself. But, as it happened, he didn't.

At five o'clock, I drove round to Irene's, having almost made up my mind, if I found her alone, to come to a definite understanding with her and call it an engagement. She wasn't alone, however. As I entered the drawing-room, I saw a tall and graceful lady sitting opposite her, with her back towards me. The lady rose, moved round, and bowed. To my immense surprise, I found it was Césarine.

I noted to myself at the moment, too, that in my heart, though I had seen her but once before, I thought of her already simply as Césarine. And I was pleased to see her: fascinated: spell-bound.

Césarine smiled at my evident surprise. 'Papa and I met Miss Latham this afternoon in Bond Street,' she said gaily, in answer to my mute inquiry, 'and we stopped and spoke to one another, of course, about last night; and papa said you couldn't come round to tea with us in the Crescent, because you were engaged already to Miss Latham. And Miss Latham very kindly asked me to drive over and take tea with her, as I was so anxious to thank you once more for your great kindness to me yesterday.'

'And Miss Vivian was good enough to waive all ceremony, Irene put in, 'and come round to us as you see, without further introduction.'

I stopped and talked all the time I was there to Irene; but, somehow, whatever I said, Césarine managed to intercept it, and I caught myself quite guiltily looking at her from time to time, with an inexpressible attraction that I could not account for.

By-and-by, Mr Vivian's carriage called for Césarine, and I was left a few minutes alone with Irene.

'Well, what do you think of her?' Irene asked me simply.

I turned my eyes away: I dare not meet hers. 'I think she's very handsome,' I replied evasively.

'Handsome! I should think so. She's wonderful. She's splendid. And doesn't she talk magnificently, too, Harry?'

'She's clever, certainly,' I answered shuffling. 'But I don't know why, I mistrust her, Irene.'

I rose and stood by the door with my hat in my hand, hesitating and trembling. I felt as if I had something to say to Irene, and yet I was half afraid to venture upon saying it. My fingers quivered, a thing very unusual with me. At last I came closer to her, after a long pause, and said, 'Irene.'

Irene started, and the colour flushed suddenly into her cheeks.

'Yes, Harry,' she answered tremulously.

I don't know why, but I couldn't utter it. It was but to say 'I love you,' yet I hadn't the courage. I stood there like a fool, looking at her irresolutely, and then—

The door opened suddenly, and Mrs Latham entered and interrupted us.

III

I didn't speak again to Irene. The reason was that three days later I received a little note of invitation to lunch at Seymour Crescent from Césarine Vivian.

I didn't want to accept it, and yet I didn't know how to help myself. I went, determined beforehand as soon as lunch was over to take away the yacht to the Scottish islands, and leave Césarine and all her enchantments for ever behind me. I was afraid of her, positively afraid of her. I couldn't look her in the face without feeling at once that she exerted a terrible influence over me.

The lunch went off quietly enough, however. We talked about Haiti and the West Indies; about the beautiful foliage and the lovely flowers; about the moonlight nights and the tropical sunsets; and Césarine grew quite enthusiastic over them all. 'You should take your yacht out there some day, Mr Tristram,' she said softly. 'There is no place on earth so wild and glorious as our own beautiful neglected Haiti.'

She lifted her eyes full upon me as she spoke. I stammered out, like one spellbound, 'I must certainly go, on your recommendation, Mlle Césarine.'

'Why Mademoiselle?' she asked quickly. Then, perceiving I misunderstood her by the start I gave, she added with a blush, 'I mean, why not "Miss Vivian" in plain English?'

'Because you aren't English,' I said confusedly. 'You're Haitian, in reality. Nobody could ever for a moment take you for a mere Englishwoman.'

I meant it for a compliment, but Césarine frowned. I saw I had hurt her, and why; but I did not apologize. Yet I was conscious of having done something very wrong, and I knew I must try my best at once to regain my lost favour with her.

'You will take some coffee after lunch?' Césarine said, as the dishes were removed.

'Oh, certainly, my dear,' her father put in. 'You must show Mr Tristram how we make coffee in the West Indian fashion.'

Césarine smiled, and poured it out—black coffee, very strong, and into each cup she poured a little glass of excellent pale neat cognac. It seemed to me that she poured the cognac like a conjuror's trick; but everything about her was so strange and lurid that I took very little notice of the matter at that particular moment. It certainly was delicious coffee: I never tasted anything like it.

After lunch, we went into the drawing-room, and thence Césarine took me alone into the pretty conservatory. She wanted to show me some of her beautiful orchids, she said; she had brought the orchids herself years ago from Haiti. How long we stood there I could never tell. I seemed as if intoxicated with her presence. I had forgotten now all about my distrust of her: I had forgotten all about Irene and what I wished to say to her: I was conscious only of Césarine's great dark eyes, looking through and through me with their piercing glance, and Césarine's figure, tall and stately, but very voluptuous, standing close beside me. She talked to me in a low and dreamy voice; and whether the wine at lunch had got into my head, or whatever it might be, I felt only dimly and faintly aware of what was passing around me. I was unmanned with love, I suppose: but, however it may have been, I certainly moved and spoke that afternoon like a man in a trance from which he cannot by any effort of his own possibly awake himself.

'Yes, yes,' I overheard Césarine saying at last, as through a mist of emotion, 'you must go some day and see our beautiful mountainous Haiti. I must go myself. I long to go again. I don't care for this gloomy, dull, sunless England. A hand seems always to be beckoning me there. I shall obey it some day, for Haiti—our lovely Haiti, is too beautiful.'

Her voice was low and marvellously musical. 'Mademoiselle Césarine,' I began timidly.

She pouted and looked at me. 'Mademoiselle again,' she said in a pettish way. 'I told you not to call me so, didn't I?'

‘Well, then, Césarine,’ I went on boldly. She laughed low, a little laugh of triumph, but did not correct or check me in any way.

‘Césarine,’ I continued, lingering I know not why over the syllables of the name, ‘I will go, as you say. I shall see Haiti. Why should we not both go together?’

She looked up at me eagerly with a sudden look of hushed inquiry. ‘You mean it?’ she asked, trembling visibly. ‘You mean it, Mr Tristram? You know what you are saying?’

‘Césarine,’ I answered, ‘I mean it. I know it. I cannot go away from you and leave you. Something seems to tie me. I am not my own master. . . . Césarine, I love you.’

My head whirled as I said the words, but I meant them at the time, and heaven knows I tried ever after to live up to them.

She clutched my arm convulsively for a moment. Her face was aglow with a wonderful light, and her eyes burned like a pair of diamonds. ‘But the other girl!’ she cried. ‘Her! Miss Latham! The one you call Irene! You are . . . in love with her! Are you not? Tell me!’

‘I have never proposed to Irene,’ I replied slowly. ‘I have never asked any other woman but you to marry me, Césarine.’

She answered me nothing, but my face was very near hers, and I bent forward and kissed her suddenly. To my immense surprise, instead of struggling or drawing away, she kissed me back a fervent kiss, with lips hard pressed to mine, and the tears trickled slowly down her cheeks in a strange fashion. ‘You are mine,’ she cried. ‘Mine for ever. I have won you. She shall not have you. I knew you were mine the moment I looked upon you. The hand beckoned me. I knew I should get you.’

‘Come up into my den, Mr Tristram, and have a smoke,’ my host interrupted in his bluff voice, putting his head in unexpectedly at the conservatory door. ‘I think I can offer you a capital Manilla.’

The sound woke me as if from some terrible dream, and I followed him still in a sort of stupor up to the smoking room.

IV

That very evening I went to see Irene. My brain was whirling even yet, and I hardly knew what I was doing; but the cool air revived me a little, and by the time I reached the Lathams’ I almost felt myself again.

Irene came down to the drawing-room to see me alone. I saw what she expected, and the shame of my duplicity overcame me utterly.

I took both her hands in mine and stood opposite her, ashamed to look her in the face, and with the terrible confession weighing me down like a burden of guilt. ‘Irene,’ I blurted out, without preface or comment, ‘I have just proposed to Césarine Vivian.’

Irene drew back a moment and took a long breath. Then she said, with a tremor in her voice, but without a tear or a cry, ‘I expected it, Harry. I thought you meant it. I saw you were terribly, horribly in love with her.’

‘Irene,’ I cried, flinging myself upon the sofa in an agony of repentance, ‘I do not love her. I’m afraid of her, fascinated by her! I love you, Irene. The moment I’m away from her, I hate her. For heaven’s sake, tell me what am I to do! I do not love her. I hate her, Irene.’

Irene came up to me and soothed my hair tenderly with her hand. ‘Don’t, Harry,’ she said, with sisterly kindness. ‘Don’t speak so. I know what you feel. But I am not angry with you. You mustn’t talk like that. If she has accepted you, you must go and marry her. I have nothing to

reproach you with. Never say such words to me again. Let us be as we have always been, friends only.'

'Irene,' I cried, lifting up my head and looking at her wildly, 'it is the truth: I do not love her, except when I am with her: and then, some strange enchantment seems to come over me. I don't know what it is, but I can't escape it. In my heart, Irene, I love you, and you only. I can never love her. My darling, tell me how to get myself away from her.'

'Hush,' Irene said, laying her hand on mine persuasively.

'You're excited tonight, Harry. You are flushed and feverish. You don't know what you're saying. You mustn't talk so. If you do, you'll make me hate you and despise you. You must keep your word now, and marry Miss Vivian.'

V

The next six weeks seem to me still like a vague dream: everything happened so hastily and strangely. I got a note next day from Irene. It was very short. 'Dearest Harry,—Mamma and I think, under the circumstances, it would be best for us to leave London for a few weeks. I am not angry with you. With best love, ever yours affectionately, Irene.'

I was wild when I received it. I couldn't bear to part so with Irene. I would find out where they were going and follow them immediately. I would write a note and break off my mad engagement with Césarine. I must have been drunk or insane when I made it. I couldn't imagine what I could have been doing.

On my way round to inquire at the Lathams's, a carriage came suddenly upon me at a sharp corner. A lady bowed to me from it. It was Césarine with her father. They pulled up and spoke to me. From that moment my doom was sealed. The old fascination came back at once, and I followed Césarine blindly to her house to luncheon, her accepted lover.

In six weeks more we were really married.

The first seven or eight months of our married life passed away happily enough. As soon as I was actually married to Césarine, that strange feeling I had at first experienced about her slowly wore off in the closer, commonplace, daily intercourse of married life. I almost smiled at myself for ever having felt it. Césarine was so beautiful and so queenly that when I took her home to Devonshire, and introduced her to the old manor, I really found myself immensely proud of her. Everybody at Teignbury was delighted and struck with her; and, what was a great deal more to the point, I began to discover that I was positively in love with her myself. She softened and melted immensely on nearer acquaintance; the Faustina air faded slowly away, when one saw her in her own home among her own occupations; and I came to look on her as a beautiful, simple, innocent girl, delighted with country pleasures, fond of a breezy canter on the slopes of Dartmoor, and taking an affectionate interest in the ducks and chickens, which I could hardly ever have conceived possible when I first saw her. The imperious, mysterious, terrible Césarine disappeared entirely, and I found in her place, to my immense relief, that I had married a graceful, gentle, tender-hearted English girl, with just a pleasant occasional touch of southern fire and impetuosity.

As winter came round again, however, Césarine's cheeks began to look a little thinner than usual, and she had such a constant, troublesome cough, that I began to be a trifle alarmed at her strange symptoms. Césarine herself laughed off my fears. 'It's nothing, Harry,' she would say; 'nothing at all, I assure you, dear. A few good rides on the moor will set me right again. It's all

the result of that horrid London. I'm a country-born girl, and I hate big towns. I never want to live in town again. Harry.'

I called in our best Exeter doctor, and he largely confirmed Césarine's own simple view of the situation. 'There's nothing organically wrong with Mrs Tristram's constitution,' he said confidently. 'No weakness of the lungs or heart in any way. She has merely run down—outlived her strength a little. A winter in some warm genial climate would set her up again.'

'Let us go to Algeria with the yacht, Reeney,' I suggested, much reassured.

'Why Algeria?' Césarine replied, with brightening eyes. 'Oh, Harry, why not dear old Haiti? You said once you would go there with me—you remember when, darling; why not keep your promise now, and go there? I want to go there, Harry: I'm longing to go there.' And she held out her delicately moulded hand in front of her, as if beckoning me, and drawing me on to Haiti after her.

'Ah, yes; why not the West Indies?' the Exeter doctor answered meditatively. 'I think I understood you that Mrs Tristram is West Indian born. Quite so. Her native air. Depend upon it, that's the best place for her. By all means, I should say, try Haiti.'

I don't know why, but the notion for some reason displeased me immensely. There was something about Césarine's eyes when she beckoned with her hand in that strange fashion, which reminded me exactly of the weird, uncanny, indescribable impression she had made upon me when I first knew her. Still I was very fond of Césarine, and if she and the doctor were both agreed that Haiti would be the best place for her, it would be foolish and wrong for me to interfere with their joint wisdom.

The end of it all was, that in less than a month from that day, we were out in the yacht on the broad Atlantic, with the cliffs of Falmouth fading slowly behind us in the distance, and the white spray dashing in front of us, like fingers beckoning us on to Haiti.

VI

The bay of Port-au-Prince is hot and simmering, a deep basin enclosed in a ringing semicircle of mountains, with scarce a breath blowing on the harbour, and with tall cocoa-nut palms rising unmoved into the still air above on the low sand-spits that close it in to seaward. The town itself is wretched, squalid, and hopelessly ramshackle, a despondent collection of tumble-down wooden houses, interspersed with indescribable negro huts, mere human rabbit-hutches, where parents and children herd together, in one higgledy-piggledy, tropical confusion. I had never in my days seen anything more painfully desolate and dreary, and I feared that Césarine, who had not been here since she was a girl of fourteen, would be somewhat depressed at the horrid actuality, after her exalted fanciful ideals of the remembered Haiti. But, to my immense surprise, Césarine did not appear at all shocked or taken aback at the squalor and wretchedness all around her. On the contrary, the very air of the place seemed to inspire her from the first with fresh vigour; her cough disappeared at once as if by magic; and the colour returned forthwith to her cheeks, almost as soon as we had cast anchor in Haitian waters.

The very first day we arrived at Port-au-Prince, Césarine said to me, with more shyness than I had ever yet seen her exhibit, 'If you wouldn't mind it, Harry, I should like to go at once, this morning—and see my grandmother.'

I started with astonishment. 'Your grandmother, Césarine!' I cried incredulously. 'My darling! I didn't know you had a grandmother living.'

‘Yes, I have,’ she answered, with some slight hesitation, ‘and I think if you wouldn’t object to it, Harry, I’d rather go and see her alone, the first time at least, please dearest.’

In a moment, the obvious truth, which I had always known in a vague sort of fashion, but never thoroughly realized, flashed across my mind in its full vividness, and I merely bowed my head in silence. It was natural she should not wish me to see her meeting with her Haitian grandmother.

She went alone through the streets of Port-au-Prince, without inquiry, like one who knew them of old, and I dogged her footsteps at a distance unperceived. After a few hundred yards, she turned out of the main road and down a tumbledown alley of scattered negro cottages, till she came at last to a rather better house that stood by itself in a little dusty garden of guava-trees and cocoa-nuts. I slipped into the next compound before Césarine observed me, beckoned the lazy negro from the door of the hut, with one finger placed as a token of silence upon my lips, dropped a dollar into his open palm, and stood behind the paling, looking out into the garden beside me through a hole.

Césarine knocked at the door, and in a moment was answered by an old negress, tall and bony, dressed in a loose sack-like gown of coarse cotton print, with a big red bandanna tied around her short grey hair, and a huge silver cross dangling carelessly upon her bare and wrinkled black neck. She wore no sleeves, and bracelets of strange beads hung loosely around her shrunken and skinny wrists. A more hideous old hag I had never in my life beheld; and yet I saw that she had Césarine’s great dark eyes and even white teeth, and something of Césarine’s figure lingered still in her lithe and sinuous yet erect carriage.

‘Grand’mère!’ Césarine said convulsively, flinging her arms with wild delight around that grim and withered black woman. It seemed to me she had never since our marriage embraced me with half the fervour she bestowed upon this hideous old African witch.

‘Hé, Césarine, it is thee, then, my little one,’ the old negress cried out suddenly, ‘I did not expect thee so soon, my cabbage. Thou hast come early. Be the welcome one, my granddaughter.’

I reeled with horror as I saw the wrinkled and haggard African kissing once more my beautiful Césarine. It seemed to me a horrible desecration. I had always known, of course, since Césarine was a quadroon, that her grandmother on one side must necessarily have been a full-blooded negress, but I had never yet suspected the reality could be so hideous, so terrible as this.

I crouched down speechless against the paling in my disgust and astonishment, and motioned with my hand to the negro in the hut to remain perfectly quiet. The door of the house closed, and Césarine disappeared: but I waited there, as if chained to the spot, under a hot and burning tropical sun, for fully an hour, unconscious of anything in heaven or earth, save the shock and surprise of that unexpected disclosure.

At last the door opened again, and Césarine apparently came out once more into the neighbouring garden. The gaunt negress followed her close, with one arm thrown caressingly about her beautiful neck and shoulders.

They came close up to the spot where I was crouching in the dust behind the fence, and then I heard rather than saw that Césarine had flung herself passionately down upon her knees on the ground, and was pouring forth a muttered prayer, in a tongue unknown to me, full of harsh and uncouth gutturals. It was not Latin; it was not even the coarse Creole French, the negro *patois* in which I heard the people jabbering in the streets around me: it was some still more hideous and barbaric language, a mass of clicks and inarticulate noises, such as I could never have believed might possibly proceed from Césarine’s lips.

At last she finished, and I heard her speaking again to her grandmother in the Creole dialect. 'Grandmother, you will pray and get me one. You will not forget me. A boy. A pretty one; an heir to my husband!' It was said wistfully, with infinite longing. I knew then why she had grown so pale and thin and haggard before we sailed away from England.

The old hag answered in the same tongue, but in her shrill withered note, 'You will bring him up to the religion, my little one, will you?'

Césarine seemed to bow her head. 'I will,' she said. 'He shall follow the religion. Mr Tristram shall never know anything about it.'

They went back once more into the house, and I crept away, afraid of being discovered, and returned to the yacht, sick at heart, not knowing how I should ever venture again to meet Césarine.

But when I got back, and had helped myself to a glass of sherry to steady my nerves, from the little flask on Césarine's dressing-table, I thought to myself, hideous as it all seemed, it was natural Césarine should wish to see her grandmother. After all, was it not better, that proud and haughty as she was, she should not disown her own flesh and blood? And yet, the memory of my beautiful Césarine wrapped in that hideous old black woman's arms made the blood curdle in my very veins.

As soon as Césarine returned, however, gayer and brighter than I had ever seen her, the old fascination overcame me once more, and I determined in my heart to stifle the horror I could not possibly help feeling. And that evening, as I sat alone in the cabin with my wife, I said to her, 'Césarine, we have never spoken about the religious question before: but if it should be ordained we are to have any little ones of our own, I should wish them to be brought up in their mother's creed. You could make them better Catholics, I take it, than I could ever make them Christians of any sort.'

Césarine answered never a word, but to my intense surprise she burst suddenly into a flood of tears, and flung herself sobbing on the cabin floor at my feet in an agony of tempestuous cries and writhings.

VII

A few days later, when we had settled down for a three months' stay at a little bungalow on the green hills behind Port-au-Prince, Césarine said to me early in the day, 'I want to go away today, Harry, up into the mountains, to the chapel of Notre Dame de Bon Secours.'

I bowed my head in acquiescence. 'I can guess why you want to go, Reeney,' I answered gently. 'You want to pray there about something that's troubling you. And if I'm not mistaken, it's the same thing that made you cry the other evening when I spoke to you in the cabin.'

The tears rose hastily once more into Césarine's eyes, and she cried in a low distressed voice, 'Harry, Harry, don't talk to me so. You are too good to me. You will kill me. You will kill me.'

I lifted her head from the table, where she had buried it in her arms, and kissed her tenderly. 'Reeney,' I said, 'I know how you feel, and I hope Notre Dame will listen to your prayers, and send you what you ask of her. But if not, you need never be afraid that I shall love you any the less than I do at present.'

Césarine burst into a fresh flood of tears. 'No, Harry,' she said, 'you don't know about it. You can't imagine it. To us, you know, who have the blood of Africa running in our veins, it is not a mere matter of fancy. It is an eternal disgrace for any woman of our race and descent not to be a

mother. I cannot help it. It is the instinct of my people. We are all born so: we cannot feel otherwise.'

It was the only time either of us ever alluded in speaking with one another to the sinister half of Césarine's pedigree.

'You will let me go with you to the mountains, Reeney?' I asked, ignoring her remark. 'You mustn't go so far by yourself, darling.'

'No, Harry, you can't come with me. It would make my prayers ineffectual, dearest. You are a heretic, you know, Harry. You are not Catholic. Notre Dame won't listen to my prayer if I take you with me.'

I saw her mind was set upon it, and I didn't interfere. She would be away all night, she said. There was a rest-house for pilgrims attached to the chapel, and she would be back again at our bungalow the morning after.

That afternoon she started on her way on a mountain pony accompanied only by a negro maid. I couldn't let her go quite unattended through those lawless paths, beset by cottages of half savage Africans; so I followed at a distance, aided by a black groom, and tracked her road along the endless hill-sides up to a fork in the way where the narrow bridle-path divided into two, one of which bore away to leftward, leading, my guide told me, to the chapel of Notre Dame de Bon Secours.

At that point the guide halted. He peered with hand across his eyebrows among the tangled brake of tree-ferns with a terrified look; then he shook his woolly-black head ominously. 'I can't go on, Monsieur,' he said, turning to me with an unfeigned shudder. 'Madame has not taken the path of Our Lady. She has gone to the left along the other road, which leads at last to the Vaudoux temple.'

I looked at him incredulously. I had heard before of Vaudoux. It is the hideous African cannibalistic witchcraft of the relapsing half-heathen Haitian negroes. But Césarine a Vaudoux worshipper! It was too ridiculous. The man must be mistaken: or else Césarine had taken the wrong road by accident.

Next moment, a horrible unspeakable doubt seized upon me irresistibly. What was the unknown shrine in her grandmother's garden at which Césarine had prayed in those awful gutturals? Whatever it was, I would probe this mystery to the very bottom. I would know the truth, come what might of it.

'Go, you coward!' I said to the negro. 'I have no further need of you. I will make my way alone to the Vaudoux temple.'

'Monsieur,' the man cried, trembling visibly in every limb, 'they will tear you to pieces. If they ever discover you near the temple, they will offer you up as a victim to the Vaudoux.'

'Pooh,' I answered, contemptuous of the fellow's slavish terror. 'Where Madame, a woman, dares to go, I, her husband, am certainly not afraid to follow her.'

'Monsieur,' he replied, throwing himself on the path before me, 'Madame is Creole; she has the blood of the Vaudoux worshippers flowing in her veins. Nobody will hurt her. She is free of the craft. But Monsieur is a pure white and uninitiated . . . If the Vaudoux people catch him at their rites, they will rend him in pieces, and offer his blood as an expiation to the Unspeakable One.'

'Go,' I said, with a smile, turning my horse's head up the right-hand path towards the Vaudoux temple. 'I am not afraid. I will come back again tomorrow.'

I followed the path through a tortuous maze, till I came at last to a spur of the hill, where a white wooden building gleamed in front of me, in the full slanting rays of tropical sunset. A skull was fastened to the lintel of the door. I knew at once it was the Vaudoux temple.

I dismounted at once, and led my horse aside into the brake, and tying him by the bridle to a mountain cabbage palm, in a spot where the thick underbrush completely hid us from view, I lay down and waited patiently for the shades of evening.

It was a moonless night, according to the Vaudoux fashion; and I knew from what I had already read in West Indian books that the orgies would not commence till midnight.

From time to time, I rubbed a match against my hand without lighting it, and by the faint glimmer of the phosphorus on my palm, I was able to read the figures of my watch without exciting the attention of the neighbouring Vaudoux worshippers.

Hour after hour went slowly by, and I crouched there still unseen among the agave thicket. At last, as the hands of the watch reached together the point of twelve, I heard a deep rumbling noise coming ominously from the Vaudoux temple. I recognized at once the familiar sound. It was the note of the bull-roarer, that mystic instrument of pointed wood, whirled by a string round the head of the hierophant, by whose aid savages in their secret rites summon to their shrines their gods and spirits.

I crept out through the tangled brake, and cautiously approached the back of the building. A sentinel was standing by the door in front, a powerful negro, armed with revolver and cutlass. I skulked round noiselessly to the rear, and lifting myself by my hands to the level of the one tiny window, I peered in through a slight scratch on the white paint, with which the glass was covered internally.

I only saw the sight within for a second. Then my brain reeled, and my fingers refused any longer to hold me. But in that second, I had read the whole terrible, incredible truth: I knew what sort of a woman she really was whom I had blindly taken as the wife of my bosom.

Before a rude stone altar covered with stuffed alligator skins, human bones, live snakes, and hideous relics of African superstition, a tall and withered black woman stood erect, naked as she came from her mother's womb, one skinny arm raised aloft, and the other holding below some dark object, that writhed and struggled awfully in her hand on the slab of the altar. I saw in a flash of the torches behind it was the black hag I had seen at the Port-au-Prince cottage.

Beside her, whiter of skin, and faultless of figure, stood a younger woman, beautiful to behold, imperious and haughty still, like a Greek statue, unmoved before that surging horrid background of naked black and cringing savages. Her head was bent, and her hand pressed convulsively against the swollen veins in her throbbing brow; and I saw at once it was my own wife—a Vaudoux worshipper—Césarine Tristram.

In another flash, I knew the black woman had a sharp flint knife in her uplifted hand; and the dark object in the other hand I recognized with a thrill of unspeakable horror as a negro girl of four years old or thereabouts, gagged and bound, and lying on the altar.

Before I could see the sharp flint descend upon the naked breast of the writhing victim, my fingers refused to bear me, and I fell half fainting on the ground, too shocked even to crawl away out of reach of the awful unrealizable horror.

But by the sounds within, I knew they had completed their hideous sacrifice, and that they were smearing Césarine—my own wife—the woman of my choice—with the warm blood of the human victim.

Sick and faint, I crept away slowly through the tangled underbrush, tearing my skin as I went with the piercing cactus spines; untied my horse and rode him down without drawing rein,

cantering round sharp angles and down horrible ledges, till he stood at last, white with foam, by the grey dawn, in front of the little piazza of our bungalow.

VIII

That night, the thunder roared and the lightning played round the tall hilltops in the direction of the Vaudoux temple. The rain came down in fearful sheets, and the torrents roared and foamed in cataracts, and tore away great gaps in the rough paths on the steep hill-sides. But at eight o'clock in the morning Césarine returned, soaked to the skin and with a strange frown upon her haughty forehead.

I did not know how to look at her or how to meet her.

'My prayers are useless,' she muttered angrily as she entered. 'Some heretic must have followed me unseen to the chapel of Notre Dame de Bon Secours. The pilgrimage is a failure.'

'You are wet,' I said, trembling. 'Change your things, Césarine.' I could not pretend to speak gently to her.

She turned upon me with a fierce look in her big black eyes. Her instinct showed her at once I had discovered her secret. 'Tell them, and hang me,' she cried fiercely.

It was what the law required me to do. I was otherwise the accomplice of murder and cannibalism. But I could not do it. Profoundly as I loathed her and hated her presence, now, I couldn't find it in my heart to give her up to justice, as I knew I ought to do.

I turned away and answered nothing.

Presently, she came out again from her bedroom, with her wet things still dripping around her. 'Smoke that,' she said, handing me a tiny cigarette rolled round in a leaf of fresh tobacco.

'I will not,' I answered with a vague surmise, taking it from her fingers. 'I know the smell. It is manchineal. You cannot any longer deceive me.'

She went back to her bedroom once more. I sat, dazed and stupefied, on the front piazza. What to do, I knew not, and cared not. I was tied to her for life, and there was no help for it, save by denouncing her to the rude Haitian justice.

In an hour or more, our English maid came out to speak to me. 'I'm afraid, sir,' she said. 'Mrs Tristram is getting delirious. She seems to be in a high fever. Shall I ask one of these poor black bodies to go out and get the English doctor?'

I went into my wife's bedroom. Césarine lay moaning piteously on the bed, in her wet clothes still; her cheeks were hot, and her pulse was high and thin and feverish. I knew without asking what was the matter with her. It was yellow fever.

The night's exposure in that terrible climate, and the ghastly scene she had gone through had broken down even Césarine's iron constitution.

I sent for the doctor and had her put to bed immediately. The black nurse and I undressed her between us. We found next to her bosom, tied by a small red silken thread, a tiny bone, fresh and ruddy-looking. I knew what it was, and so did the negress. It was a human finger-bone—the last joint of a small child's fourth finger. The negress shuddered and hid her head. 'It is Vaudoux, Monsieur!' she said. 'I have seen it on others. Madame has been paying a visit, I suppose, to her grandmother.'

For six long days and nights I watched and nursed that doomed criminal, doing everything for her that skill could direct or care could suggest to me: yet all the time fearing and dreading that she might yet recover, and not knowing in my heart what either of our lives could ever be like if she did live through it.

A merciful Providence willed it otherwise.

On the sixth day, the fatal *vomito negro* set in—the symptom of the last incurable stage of yellow fever—and I knew for certain that Césarine would die. She had brought her own punishment upon her. At midnight that evening she died delirious.

Thank God, she had left no child of mine behind her to inherit the curse of her mother's blood!