

For Satan's Sake

By Elliott O'Donnell

PROLOGUE.—PART I

HOW AGONOSTES ENTERED MONELPISIA

As I, Paul Penruddock, replaced the fatal bottle after draining its contents, a mental reaction followed; and the longing for death, which prompted me to swallow the draught, was succeeded by a terror so great that my blood seemed to freeze, while my limbs trembled in violent agitation.

A sound as of a woman in distress—a wail that told of the destruction of hope, even of a broken heart, burst upon my terrified ears; and I thought I saw a white draped figure flit past me into the darkness beyond.

So utterly were my nerves shattered, that I could barely drag myself to my bed, where I lay panting, the victim of a thousand conflicting emotions. I realised that my unnatural act had outlawed me from God and man; that, alone, I should have to bear the responsibility of my deed. It was this sense of coming isolation which overawed me.

I believe, during that brief period, I would willingly have lived to struggle for a wretched existence in the slums of London, rather than die thus, and be exiled from my fellow-men. Yet in spite of this regret, no desire for Divine pardon entered my mind. The love of all things good and beautiful, once so strong within my breast, now lay cold and dead. I had ceased to be an idealist. The bitterness of a lifetime of disappointment, crowned by the miseries of the last few days, had annihilated all my love or reverence for my Creator.

It was death I dreaded. Friendless though I was, a waif of the world on the brink of starvation, without shelter, I would have clung to earth now with the grave so close at hand.

The nature of my offence stared me in the face with dawning clearness. The catastrophe, which in my recklessness I had invited, appalled me by its proximity; its magnitude made me shudder; I questioned in my alarm how death would come—and when? Would it bring pain? How long should I take to die? And whither should I go—afterwards?

A wave of choking despair swept over me. Phantoms of nightmare gibbered at me from the dark corners of my room; they stretched their crooked fingers as if to rend my still living flesh in pieces. Faces too hideous for human thought floated over me, and pressed their loathsome lips against my own. The room, empty a moment before, was crowded with grotesque forms, the very incarnation of mocking devilry; the madness of malice gleamed in their colourless eyes as they crouched or lay upon the floor, waiting for the coming of Death.

At length it came. One of their number, even more hideous than the rest, crawled from amongst them, its bony haunches white with leprosy; and my whole being was filled with violent nausea as I watched its loathsome body drawing nearer and nearer.

The climax of horror arrived. The foul monster clambered over the foot of the bed, and sat glaring into my eyes.

Could any countenance have been more wickedly bestial? Could any long-buried corpse have rivaled it in offensiveness? With the fascination one feels in the presence of something outrageously repulsive, I could not withdraw my gaze from its face.

It sat for a brief space, gloating over my tenor; then slowly commenced to drag itself over the bedclothes towards my head. As it brushed my feet I felt an icy chill shoot upwards. I saw its brown swollen hands creep over the counterpane, felt its hot, fetid breath burning in my nostrils.

All this torture did I undergo, and more besides. At last the claw-like fingers closed upon my throat, the sharp knees pressed upon my chest; and I realised that I was in the very throes of Death.

The agony of that last struggle for breath is indescribable. In that short time I suffered more acutely than in all the rest of my life put together. But, as Big Ben solemnly tolled out the hour of midnight, Death conquered, and squatted over the body of its victim.

The flickering lights no longer played upon the grimy ceilings; the figures by the bedside vanished, and the blackness of darkness supervened. I relapsed into a dreamless sleep—my soul left the useless carcass, and sped whither I know not. No longer did the cares of life oppress me; no longer did I clutch at its fleeting pleasures. I was insensible to all that belonged to the world.

Rest, great and all-compelling, seemed at last to have overtaken my weary soul.

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How long I remained in this state I know not. In the return from unconsciousness, there are two steps; the first mental, the second physical; first the organs of the dormant brain awake to motion; then the limbs become once more sentient, as the message from the reviving brain bids them reassert themselves.

Before that final coma, I had been Paul Penruddock; when next I possessed knowledge of anything, a vast change had taken place. Two riddles presented themselves to be solved.

Who am I? Where am I?

One fact was evident; I was no longer an inhabitant of York Road, London. Nor was I even an inhabitant of the earth.

I was lying passive in the arms of a huge grey man; and was being borne by him, at a terrific speed, through space. Our course was upwards, and, so far as I could ascertain, straight towards the sun, the size of which seemed every moment to increase. But, although the heat must have been intensified in proportion, I experienced no unpleasant sensation.

This fact first conveyed to me the knowledge of one of the changes through which I had passed. In full possession of the organs of sight, hearing, and smell, I was proof against pain. This was not unfavourable, and I felt something like self-congratulation at the thought.

Then I glanced at my captor's face. It was that of a man convulsed with evil passions and wholly abandoned to vice. Yet it did not displease me; in fact, I regarded him with admiration, and wondered if my countenance were now cast in a similar mould. His skin, eyes, and hair, were all of one hue—grey.

His eyes never met mine, but always looked upward at the blaze of the sun. At first I feared to follow his gaze, but, emboldened by his example, I raised my eyes at last, and met the fierce, blood-red rays direct. And I found I need not flinch, but could view steadily the glaring, molten mass, straight into which we were rapidly flying.

Nearer and nearer we drew, till we came to the open mouth of a vast crater. In my ears there rang the roar of a million furnaces, many tongues of fire licked my limbs; yet I was borne onward, unscathed. Now we plunged downwards into this fiery pit; flames twirled and leaped around us, playing sportively over our bodies, but their touch attracted no attention from my

captor, and in silence we still descended. As we sank deeper, the fire grew feebler and fainter, till at length we left it behind, and the remainder of our journey was shrouded in darkness.

How long we continued to fall I knew not then, and have never learnt, often as my thoughts have wandered to that mad descent. It may have been hours, or days, or years; the flight of time had ceased to convey any meaning to me.

When we did alight, I perceived that we were in a rough and rocky passage, excessively dark. Had it not been for a kind of phosphorescent glow which hung about my companion I could not have seen where to walk. As it was, I only contrived to grope along, following him very closely. The vast silence of the place filled me with a great sense of fear.

I expected every moment to be clutched by unseen hands, or to see hideous forms arise in the dimness. Nor were my fears wholly unrealised. Foul reptiles splashed into dark pools on our approach, while more than one pair of eyes peered out from huge crevices. Whether the owners of those eyes bore any resemblance to the human form I was unable to discern; but an occasional glimpse of formidable claws and insect-like antennæ led me to draw a negative inference.

Once a thing like an enormous centipede rattled over the stones at my feet, and snapped its pincers at my legs as it passed. Again, a kind of flying cockroach the size of a wren settled on my thigh; and I felt—although always without pain—how the fangs dug into my skin. Had I possessed all earthly sense of suffering I should scarcely have shrunk away in greater honor; the touch and aspect of the creature was vile in the extreme. After many efforts, however, it seemed to realise its inability to cause me pain; it uttered a croaking sound of dissatisfaction, and, spitting out a quantity of rank saliva, flapped away.

After this incident I staggered on in trepidation; and it was with feelings of the greatest relief that I saw the other entrance to this subterranean passage widen in front of us.

We emerged upon an immense sandy plain, which stretched as far as the eye could see. This desert was lighted by flaming rocks scattered here and there over its monotonous expanse. My guide struck a track at last, and on and on we went, still in silence.

After this plain was traversed, we plunged into a forest. There, obstacles of every kind lay across our path; but we both glided through them as easily as mortals pass through an open doorway. So on and on we tramped; and my guide never spoke.

On leaving this wood we found ourselves in a broad avenue, lined on either side by stately trees, belonging, as I knew, to no earthly species. Hanging on some of the branches were human skulls, from which emanated flickers of light.

Now for the first time my guide turned and addressed me, speaking thus—

“This place is the Avenue of Gloom, and will henceforth be thine abode; for thou art no longer mortal, but soul only, like unto them that flit about thee. On earth thou wert Paul Penruddock—now thou art Agonostes—and to me thou art indebted for thy transformation.”

He paused, as if expecting a reply, and, unwilling to offend him, I answered, “I am grateful, O noble stranger, for all thou hast performed on my behalf; for wholly wretched was my state on earth, and my altered condition at least cannot be for the worse.”

In a voice quivering with suppressed passion, he rejoined: “Nay, Agonostes; do not thank me, I am but the servant of our master Diaphernes. Thank *him* for the favour he has shown thee. And thou shalt not call me stranger; for I have attended thee since thy entrance into mortal life. I am Aginarius, thy counsellor, the trusted emissary of our mutual lord, Diaphernes.”

“And whither dost thou lead me now, Aginarius?” I ventured to ask, as he again proceeded along the strange avenue.

“To the presence of Diaphernes,” he replied, without looking round. “And now, no more questions. To tell the truth, thou art somewhat inquisitive for one so lately arrived. Let this suffice thee; thou art in form a man, but copper-hued, and taller than the men who walk on earth. Thy flesh too is not like theirs, it resembles rather the fibre of plants; thou hast neither bones, nerves, nor organs; and, as thou knowest, physical pain can no longer touch thee. Thy mental faculties are highly developed, and thy eager soul is alert for destruction, above all for the destroying of that thou hast called virtue. But thou canst still love; for Diaphernes will inspire thee with an affection far exceeding that of man for woman. Now, no more; follow closely.”

I obeyed in silence, marvelling; and studying in the light of this new information the spirits who jostled us as we passed on.

Some walked with jaunty air, others hung their heads and beat their breasts. There were even more women than men; and not a few were engaged in desperate struggles. Two women I noticed in particular, fighting beneath a rugged tree. The combat was severe; and the weaker did not yield till long after she was pinned to the ground, her adversary forcing her fingers into her eye-sockets. No traces of wounds were visible, yet I could see that she endured great agony. I wondered that these could suffer pain while I could not. But I observed that they were of a red colour; and the explanation which I give now I learnt later.

The spirits in Monelpisia are divided into groups distinguished by their colouring. Those for whom a chance of redemption seems still to exist are of copper, mauve, or green, according to the degree of evil in their earthly life; those for whom this chance is rapidly fading are yellow, blue, or pink in colour; those awaiting their summons to the nethermost hell are red—wholly abandoned to vice, fighting, suffering, and loving to torture their fellow-sufferers, even as the women whom I had observed.

The Avenue of Gloom, some say, stretches to the very borders of the Kingdom of Nature. Others deny this, but none are rash enough to attempt to define minutely its length or breadth. The trees which flank it on either side are totally different from anything found on earth. In fact, they seem half-human—they are immortal. Instead of being rough and fibrous, their bark and boughs are soft and smooth, of a texture resembling the flesh of men. These trees are instinct with active life, and seem to be swayed, like the red souls, by uncontrollable passions.

Incredible though it may seem, they wage deadly strife among themselves, using their branches as men use their arms. One I saw uprooted and hurled to the ground by the superior strength of an adversary. Many paths lead into the avenue; so many, in fact, that a plan of it would resemble a huge centipede, its legs representing the by-tracks. Down one of these Aginarius turned suddenly, signing to me to follow; which I did closely, for I never trod a darker or more troublesome road. It twisted so often and so abruptly that I sometimes clutched the girdle of Aginarius in sheer giddiness. The ground was covered with boulders, which my guide carefully avoided; and I soon saw that these rocks also were furnished with moving arms, to ward off intruders or challenge their right of passage.

At the end of this track we were confronted by a sentinel—a thing half-man and half-wolf in form—who with a glance of ferocity demanded the purport of our errand.

“Before advancing farther, give the password, O grey-skinned soul,” he said, or rather snarled, baring his yellow teeth.

“Pleasant in the sight of our master is the death of virtue,” was the prompt reply of my guide.

“Who is the copper spirit cringing behind thee—has he, too, the password?” asked the monster.

“He is a soul newly come from earth. I have the right to lead him to the master,” said Aginarius; and the creature drew aside to allow us to pass on.

Now that no obstacles hindered our journey we progressed rapidly, and soon reached the entrance to an enormous cave. On either side of this stronghold stood a gigantic spirit, whose colour was black—black of the deepest sable. They kept time to a doleful chant with firebrands which they waved backwards and forwards in their hands.

Upon perceiving us they lowered their torches, and, bending down, peered closely at our features. I observed with a start that their faces were skeletons, wholly fleshless, and covered with a substance resembling verdigris. When they spoke—as they did together—their voices rang hollow, and I heard the rattle of their bones, their breath was cold, and offensive as vapours from a putrid corpse.

“What seek ye, O comrades?” they cried, their torches flashing round our heads.

“Are ye come to visit the Great Hall, to hear the readings of Dragonomel—or would ye behold the passage of the red souls into the Pit?”

“I bring hither my spoils of war, brother sentinels,” my companion said, pointing to me. “This melancholy soul has but just quitted the visible earth, and Diaphernes desires his presence.”

“Then thou hast the password?” they asked; “for none may enter without our master’s express sanction. The ceremony of the Pit is about to take place, and all may not behold it.”

“Pleasant in the sight of our master is the death of virtue,” Aginarius responded as before.

The great sentinels allowed us to cross the threshold, whence a steep flight of many steps led downwards. At the foot of this staircase were heavy sombre curtains, which separated at our approach, and closed themselves behind us when we had passed.

We entered a vast hall, lighted by millions of flaring torches that hung, unsupported, in mid-air. Around this cavern, leaning against the walls, were yet more spirits, evidently awaiting some event with expectancy. In the centre was a large circular hole with precipitous sides, flanked at equal intervals with fountains of blood—not freshly spilt, but foul, granulous, and discoloured.

We took our places in the waiting circle; and a spirit of similar colour to myself whispered—

“That is the Bottomless Pit. Presently the red souls, accompanied by hellish elemental spirits, will enter through the doorway opposite.”

“And what spirits are those?” I asked. “Pardon my ignorance. I am but newly come from earth, and unacquainted with anything pertaining to your country.”

My interlocutor smiled. “I, too, am a recent immigrant,” he said. “Hellish elemental spirits are those created by Diaphernes himself, representing the original germs of every possible vice and disease. They perform his missions, physical and mental, on earth, meeting and combating the heavenly elemental spirits in the tissues of the mortal body or in the cells of the human brain. Here they have control over the spirits whom they urge onward, and with whom they even plunge into the Bottomless Pit. But hush! they are coming!”

Scarcely had he finished speaking when the door opened, and a man entered, accompanied by an elemental spirit in the form of a fair woman.

They approached the brink of the chasm; and the beauty of the girl-figure dumfounded me with its rich sensuality. As they moved she clasped the red man round the neck, and fondled him; the passion in his eyes grew and grew, till he was blinded by it, and stumbling, he plunged forward into the gaping abyss.

Again the door opened, to admit the figure of a man withered and bent; and there rolled edgewise after him a golden coin of several feet in diameter. It overtook him before he had gone many yards, gliding under his arm and rubbing its polished edge against his hand. He looked upon it with glistening eyes; presently he clasped it to his breast, lavishing upon it every token of affectionate admiration. Thus engrossed, he wandered to the very edge of the Pit, till his

outstretched foot found no ground to stand upon. Unable to regain his balance, he pitched over, still fondly clasping the cherished germ of wealth.

Now another figure entered, that of a woman beautifully apparelled, holding a living mirror in her hand. It reflected her face, beautiful undoubtedly, but cold and haughty; its sole expression that of vanity and love of earthly pleasure. Yet it seemed to please her, for she moved on, lost in self-contemplation, till she stepped right into the yawning gulf; nor did she remove her gaze from it at the very moment of the awful descent.

Once more the door opened. To my amazement a card—the ace of spades—ran into the hall. It possessed olive-skinned hands and the face of a girl from the south of Europe. In her right hand she rattled a dice-box; with her left (and I noted its exquisite form, the delicate outline of the flexible fingers) she beckoned to one that followed. He rode a black horse that pulled and strained at the bit; the restless eye, twitching hands, and unsteady mouth proclaimed an earthly life of dissipation. On he rode, mad to overtake the flitting, beckoning form, till he deliberately set his horse at the precipice; and it neighed in fiendish glee as it bore him over.

Other souls followed; and not one endeavoured to escape the open pit-mouth; some even plunged eagerly into it, in unbridled pursuit of their guiding passions.

When the door was closed for the last time, a mighty cheer went up from those assembled in the hall, till the walls of the cavern trembled and flung back a million echoes. Then a blood-red mist rose from the opening of the pit; and with it a stench that caused me to recoil. It was so pestilential that a cry of fear rose from the multitude; and some rolled on the ground in terror.

I had closed my eyes; and when I reopened them I sought in vain for the pit-mouth. It had vanished, and the space it had occupied was completely filled by a gigantic emerald throne.

Following the example of those around, I prostrated myself before it, and joined in their cry:

“Have mercy on thy slaves, O mighty Diaphernes! O great and glorious prince, incomparable in power and beauty, accept our humble adoration, we beseech thee!”

Then on my astonished ear broke a voice, sweeter and softer than the purest notes of a harp or the murmur of rippling waters. I was entranced with its soothing magic—it healed old sores, wiped away old sorrows, made the blighted soul love again as it had never loved before. It was gentle, strong, inspiring, creating the enthusiasm that can smile at Death. It made me its slave, ardent to obey it at whatever cost.

When it paused, a murmur of joy broke from the attendant spirits, a sound that grew and swelled till the ground heaved beneath us and the torch-lights quivered overhead.

“Arise, O my faithful servants!” spake the wonderful voice; “look upon the countenance of him who loves you. I have many things to say unto you—arise and hear!”

So we all arose, and stood with eyes upraised and meekly-folded hands. Never can the sight I then saw be effaced from my memory.

I became unconscious of the place, of the other souls, of myself—of every one and every thing save only the majestic being on whom I gazed. Every breath that stirred in the crypt whispered the name “DIAPHERNES.”

His face was like that of a mighty Grecian hero, with noble forehead and long eyelashes, firmly moulded chin and perfect teeth. But the eyes! Ah, who may describe them? I only looked into their clear blue depths, and placed my soul at their disposal. Gladly would I have suffered the most excruciating torments to serve his pleasure for a moment, to win one kindly glance from those most wondrous eyes. The love of man for woman, which inspires the most heroic, most self-sacrificing deeds, was as nothing to the vast love overwhelming those who stood in his presence and gazed upon his beauty.

Now, at the bidding of Diaphernes, his herald Dragonomel, a spirit of great stature and stately bearing, stood forth before the throne, and commenced to read from a number of scrolls the histories of the souls newly arrived.

He recounted their earthly careers, calling them by name and commanding them to approach. This they did, in company with the emissary who had brought them hither; the latter receiving a few words of praise for his faithful service from the Prince himself. With intense trepidation I awaited my summons.

“Approach, O Agonostes, soul of Paul Penruddock.”

Aginarius led me forward, and we halted close under the emerald throne.

“I have a few words to say unto thee, Agonostes,” Diaphernes said, fixing me with his eagle glance. I saw that neither eyelid nor eyeball moved, and I knew that he read me right through my inmost being. “Nay, be not afraid,” he continued gently, for in truth I shrank and swayed in my fear, “thou art no longer of mortal flesh, therefore no harm can befall thee; least of all in the presence of *me*, thy chosen master and protector.”

Reassured by his gracious words, I stood firm, and listened with rapt attention.

“Dost thou understand, Agonostes, the conditions of thy sojourn here?”

“Not wholly, O my master,” I found voice to reply.

“Give ear, then, to my words,” the Prince went on. “Thou knowest that thy hue is copper. This means that thou mayest yet be snatched from us; and, unless thou followest closely my instructions, in fighting against one Sagatheela, who is the agent of my Enemy in Heaven!”—(his voice thrilled with a strength of hate that attracted rather than repelled me, waking a responsive echo in myself)—“thou wilt be torn away from this place—and from *me!* I think,” he added, with a look that nearly made me weep from sheer love and ecstasy, “this would scarcely cause thee pleasure?”

Striving to restrain my emotion, I replied—“To leave thee now, O Prince, were crueller than a thousand human deaths.”

“Well spoken, Agonostes!” He smiled again so that my heart yearned towards him tenfold. “Thou art a brave spirit, and wilt be a good servant. Learn, then, thy duties. Henceforth thou art one of my emissaries among the men and women of the world thou hast just quitted. Thou shalt be ever contending for their souls against her of whom I have already spoken. For this Sagatheela, whom thou knewest once upon earth, has carried her maudlin love for thee beyond the limits of mortal life. She has left Paradise of her own will and desire, and can no more enter therein unless she wins thee from me. But thou wilt scorn her, and her subtle methods employed to rob me of my rights and to poison thy mind against me—me, Diaphernes, whom thou lovest. Yield to her inducements once—and thou hast lost me for ever! Be firm, Agonostes, ever bold and loyal. If thou art in danger or distress, if she seem too strong for thee, cry to me for help. Trust me, and me only—else is thy work undone and thy name blotted out of my favour for ever. Thou hast heard—hast thou aught to answer?”

“This, my master!” I said, with new boldness, “my very soul thirsts to do thy will. The harder the task, the more eagerly will I perform it for thee. My love for thee is such that I can fear nothing—my whole trust is in thy strength and favour.”

“Again, well spoken, Agonostes,” Diaphernes said. “Give him the winged sandals, Dragonomel.”

The herald came forward, and bound a pair of gleaming black sandals upon my feet.

“These,” said Diaphernes, “will bear thee speedily to the scene of thy labours, and will guide thee wheresoever I would have thee go. But more than this thou must not seek from them. And

now, all ye my faithful and tried servants, pay heed to the story of my new-made servant Agonostes.”

The eyes of the multitude were on me; and I realised that I had become an object of interest to all, as Dragonomel opened a new scroll and began to read.

PROLOGUE.—PART II

RELATING TO THE LIFE OF PAUL PENRUDDOCK

“Hearken, ye spirits!” thus Dragonomel read, “to the record of the mortal career of Paul Penruddock, henceforth to be known as our brother Agonostes. And note that it has pleased our noble lord and master to place a red mark against the name of Aginarius, for a sign of good service done on the difficult and important mission entrusted to him.

“The virtue of Paul’s mother, and his love for her, were the trusty weapons of our white-faced foe from Heaven, sent to contend against skilful Aginarius. The death of this woman with her beguiling affection removed the first and greatest barrier from our path. Yet the watchful angel, with her glib tongue, persuaded the dying mother to give a cross—accursed symbol!—to her son, charging him to keep it always.

“Give ear now, ye listening spirits, and profit well! “Our crafty emissary, Aginarius, by weaving a cunning plot, did make a mockery of his foe, breaking suddenly in upon her peaceful sway. A woman, full of subtle grace and sinister design, usurped the earthly place of Paul’s dead mother.

“This woman had been wedded before. She brought with her a son, one Crawley Langton, young in years, but a tool well tempered to our master’s use; and she schemed and toiled to make this son heir to the estates that should have fallen to the mortal Paul.

“Into the willing ears of Crawley Langton she poured her words of deep conspiracy. He hated and liked well enough the prospect of possessing his fair inheritance. The plot grew and matured; and, circumstances favouring, our subject was accused of theft. His protests brought no pity to his father’s heart, already turned in great degree from him by subtle insinuations well introduced. He had no means of proving his innocence; and his fervent prayers to Heaven—in which he then believed—found no answer. The plotters won by a masterpiece of subtlety; the envoy of Heaven stood at Paul’s side, thwarted and helpless. So the victim was thrust forth from his home, an outcast, at the mercy of the world of the God of Virtues!

“Aginarius was with him. Alone in a mighty city, the living visions of evil inspired by Diaphernes fixed the lustre of their dark eyes upon him. But when their wondrous beauty had made him look, and start, and look again, and the grey shadow by his side seemed surest of victory, then ever did the white watcher whisper her interference—and the end was not yet.

“With a stubbornness born of long and faithful service to our master, Aginarius persevered nobly, and whispered words of venture into his quarry’s ear. So the mortal Paul took ship and sailed for other climes. In a far land he found, however, another home.

“Won by those obstinate virtues he still held from Heaven, a woman loved him. It seemed that our brave emissary was after all doomed to defeat—for woman, if not our staunchest ally, is like to prove our most unconquerable antagonist. Yet with the love that one and all of us feel for our great master, Aginarius yielded not; and once again Chance fought for the soldier of Diaphernes.

“A fire with crackling flames, fierce as from yon pit, burst out in Paul’s new refuge and devoured all. And ere he had recovered from the shock of this new misfortune, one brought him

word that Death had claimed the woman who had shown him kindness. For in his weariness and struggling—all praise to Aginarius—the heart of Paul was blind and deaf to her love, and called it kindness and compassion only.

“Once more an outcast, homeless and friendless, he sought his fortunes anew.

“In a dream, worn out with toil, he fell asleep, and saw in a vision the alluring grace of the ace of spades. He woke, and fell a victim to this new passion for awhile. Yet, in a moment of misfortune, our opponent found her opportunity. When he was about to part with that accursed golden symbol, she awakened, with foolish tenderness, the memory of his dead mother. He flung down the cards, thrust away the embracing arm of Aginarius, and pressing to the side of our enemy, bade us defiance.

“The memory had awakened a yearning for his native land, and Paul returned to London. There, after many days, he met a woman with fair face and eyes, and a heart moulded after the fashion of those who serve our master. All praise to Aginarius again, he loved her! He had obtained good employment in a mighty merchant’s house; the woman plighted him her troth, the white-faced angel wept. Then, through the subtle scheming of Aginarius, Paul’s former foe crossed his path again. The woman saw him; in a fleeting glance evil met evil and invited friendship. The great house in which our subject toiled, changed hands; and in his second master Paul recognised Crawley Langton. A scornful dismissal followed; and in the same hour that he received it, tidings were brought him of the falseness of Alice, his beloved. Then followed the torture with which the tender God of Mercy rewards His creatures! Despised, robbed at once of his love and of his livelihood, a prey to all the feelings of the damned, our subject cried for death—and even that was denied him. All the while the pale, weary angel wept, powerless.

“A grievous illness next came upon Paul, racking his limbs and wearing away his flesh. The slender store of money he had saved was all but gone; and at last the faithful Aginarius convinced Paul of the perfidy of our Enemy. He yielded, and breaking the cord that held the hated cross about his neck, he hurled the symbol from him. It struck the wail, and, falling, slipped out of sight into a dark crevice of the well-worn mantelpiece. With the chink of its disappearance, sounded on the air the despairing sob of Heaven’s angel.

“Out into the night, amid the Babel of men’s voices, our subject took his way; and Aginarius was ever at his side. He returned, hugging to his bosom the poison bought with bribery, procured with his last coin; and in the darkest hour which ushers in the dawn, he rested on the kindly supporting arm of Aginarius and raised the phial to his lips. In a hush of profound silence his voice rang out strongly—the words were glorious, and damning—

“ ‘Take back that life which thou hast given me, O God! Rather let my soul go to everlasting perdition than linger in this living hell.’

“Thus did the soul of Paul Penruddock pass into our keeping.”

Dragonomel finished reading; and a vast silence fell upon the hall. Once again Diaphernes addressed me.

“Art thou not full glad that thou art here, O Agonostes?”

Every one waited in silence for my reply; but my throat had dried so that no words would come, and I stood speechless, a very fool in my helpless shame.

Then some began to jeer, crying, “Where is thy voice, O handsome stranger?”

Others said—“Are we not good enough for thee, that we may not hear thy speech?”

Some there were, the very incarnations of malice, that clawed at me with grisly fingers, and even laid their hands upon my shoulders to cast me down.

Then Diaphernes thought fit to interfere, and shouted, in such tones that the vast hall shook and trembled with a thousand echoes—

“How dare ye, dogs of slaves, touch my servant, my ambassador spirit, who shall be a winner of men’s souls, even as Aginarius, whose praise ye have heard from Dragonomel. Fie on you all—begone!”

So the crowd slunk shamefacedly away, and left me, rejoicing, in the presence of the Prince.

The First Mission

CHAPTER I

THE MASTERPIECE

To us poor shades who, never ceasing, toil along the gloomy groves of Monelpisia, turning past grievances over in our minds, all thoughts of time are meaningless, simply because we have no means of reckoning it.

There are no breaks in the monotonous promenading, no rifts in the impenetrable cloud which Diaphernes has been pleased to term his screen from light—in short, nothing which might tend in any way to serve as an indicator of the length of our incarceration.

At first I was well enough content to brood over the injuries received on earth, to invent a hundred ingenious ways of tormenting my foes should they ever fall into my power; and to such a pitch did my overwrought feelings attain that I would frequently attack some tree, and, imagining that it was Crawley Langton, endeavour to rend it into pieces. This madness naturally attracted the attention of those around; so that I had to encounter much ribald jesting as well as the resistance of my victim; for, as I have already stated, every tree was furnished with living arms.

Still, these outbursts of fury at least broke the intolerable monotony of the timeless existence. I do not know if they were restricted to me; probably not, though personally I never observed such actions on the part of my fellows. Their behaviour never altered.

I have seen shades, the very incarnation of devilry, with long, white, ghoulish faces positively glittering with animosity towards all they met—nay, I have not hesitated to shrink behind a tree as they approached. Oh, the horror of those moments! No mere mortal can realise what such fear is. The long dark avenues, the fantastic living trees, the sighing wind, the murmur of ghostly voices appalled all alike—each one feared to look around, to see the faces of the others. Fear itself hung brooding over us, more awful than the shadow of the grave. Can any one wonder that I exulted to receive a respite from all these hellish wanderings, and to see again the sunshine, the blue sky, the sparkling stars—and earth?

How tiny it appeared as I descended towards it, passing in my downward course thousands of other worlds, of many sizes, full of strange indentations, and grotesque mountains shaped like distorted human limbs; of dark pits of awful size, their sides crusted with a strange crimson vegetation. My descent was too rapid to give more than a passing glimpse; those red creepers may not have been the only form of life on those planets, but I saw no other.

I saw innumerable seas, not of water, but of some milky substance over which hung a thick vapour, just as clouds linger on the hill-tops of the earth. I discovered that certain of the planets were belted with this mist-film. All around me flew meteors, helter-skelter, tearing through space with a shrieking sound, hissing round like globules of fire, narrowly missing each other in the most marvellous manner, or, occasionally, plunging straight into the red-hot bosom of an antagonist with a crash that reverberated like thunder and scattered abroad myriads of sparks.

I had never witnessed such sights before, and would gladly have paused in mid-air to watch these monsters meet and batter one another until they could not part asunder; but I might not delay.

As I passed Mercury I was met by another wonder—I learned for the first time the fate of that which we call the brute creation. They have their paradises and purgatories, according to the

nature of their earthly lives. Here, amid expanses of undulating pasture, wander the shades of domestic animals, and others that are never known to injure man. Here, free from bondage, secure from the snares of the hunter, from all suffering or cruelty, they enjoy all the privileges of safety, liberty, and abundance. In the trees I observed birds building their nests, and fraternising, one species with another, in a commonwealth of music and brilliant colouring. Happy indeed was this animal paradise, and I was loath to pass it by, and I looked back at it above me, till it assumed the dimension of a child's marble, and was finally lost to sight.

The moon afforded a striking contrast. It was cold, and brutally inhospitable, and chilled me with horror as I passed. Earthly telescopes have made out and classified the ranges of mountains with their giant peaks, the empty seas and barren plains. One and all of these clever astronomers agree that the moon is a dead planet, its surface untrodden by man or beast.

If they only knew the truth!

Those stretches of bleak, cheerless ground, extending for hundreds of miles in awful solemnity, are awakened by the roar of the lion, the shrill trumpeting of the man-killing elephant; over rocky boulders the jaguars leap as if on their unsuspecting prey, to alight on some sharp and projecting stone which wounds and enrages them; the tiger prowls in phantom jungles, seeking to satisfy the gnawing pains of eternal hunger. The ocean beds are full of sharks, gasping for the water that will never return; crocodiles crunch their sharp teeth on unyielding stones, which in their blind fury they take for the rounded limbs of women. On the mountain-tops famished vampires and starving birds of prey vainly seek shelter and food among the leafless, death-like pines that swish and groan in a continual tempest.

I hurried past, and the sky lost its blackness, till at length I could discern a thin white line to the northward of the earth, and knew that I beheld the polar sea. Dropping on through masses of clouds, I could by degrees distinguish the outlines of land and water; could make out the white peaks of the Himalayas, then the dazzling silver-blue of the Indian ocean; finally, I could even see feeble wafts of smoke climbing towards me from the busy hives of humanity.

Where was I going? Whither would my sandals guide me?

My devilish sandals halted at last, and set me down in London. It seemed but a few days since I had toiled along its grimy streets, rested on the Thames Embankment, listened to the sonorous voice of Big Ben, and crept with sinking heart to my bare garret in York Road.

That name awakened anew my memories of Crawley Langton. "O Diaphernes!" I vowed, "grant me Revenge, and I am thine for all eternity!"

The room to which I was led was fitted up with all the accessories of an artist's studio. A large uptight easel stood in one corner, and there were many pictures on the walls. A long table was covered with paint tubes and their mahogany palettes, and a large brass-mounted "reflecting mirror" stood against the wall. Yet the prevailing note was hardly one of toil and endeavour. Here was a lounge rather than a workshop. Above the mantelpiece hung a life-size portrait of a fair-haired girl of great loveliness; on either side of her the heads of two equally captivating brunettes; but the rest of the pictures were portraits of considerable pretensions, but falling far short of the first three in drawing and colour alike. I judged the three to be the work of some master-hand, the rest the attempts of an amateur—possibly the owner of the studio, for his furniture inevitably suggested the wealthy dilettante. The floor was softly carpeted with a great rug of brick-red and peacock-blue the chairs and lounge richly covered and luxurious. Money and ease clearly ruled here, accompanied by their usual friend, negligence.

The studio was very untidy. Books lay about everywhere. On an ottoman of Persian saddlebags lay a Shakespeare, a large-paper edition, open at one of the most erotic of the master's poems;

here, on a writing-table of olive-wood encrusted with nacre, face downwards, and dangerously near a pool of ink, lay Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*. The books, the considered comfort, the whole air of the place told me two things—the occupier was idle, and he was sensual—a good omen if he were to be my client.

Upon examining these volumes I found certain passages underlined, and the names of women written in the margin—“ ‘Mrs So-and-So————’ ‘Miss—’ exactly.” And there were other comments which I will not mention here, but which served to confirm my deductions.

The door opened and my client entered. I was satisfied. He was a tall, thin young man, with slightly stooping shoulders, long, curly black hair, beautifully chiselled features, and dreamy brown eyes. I realised his type at once—a languid semi-mystic of the loose moral school, very dangerous among women.

The hollow cheeks and dark rings round his eyes told their tale of unhealthy carousals; of the usual supper with the usual kind of women, and the inevitable results. This air of dissipation in itself sufficed to prove the man's nature; there can be no confusion between the havoc wrought by overwork and that resulting from too much pleasure.

Entering the room with an expression of weariness, he flung himself on the couch, and passing his fingers—I saw at once they were white and nervous as a woman's—through his hair, gazed in a listless manner at the ceiling.

I could read his thoughts. They ran on women, always on women. Each morning when he got out of bed he formed the resolution of sticking to his work and leaving the other sex alone. Vain resolve! The passions of his heart combated the weakness of his will, and always won. Breakfast over, he must take a constitutional, or his digestion would suffer. His will tried to argue the point, even went so far as to convince him that he was a fool, but in the end he invariably gave way—and he went out! These rambles always tended in the same direction, along the High Road, and past a certain milliner's establishment, haunted by yellow-haired girls with large eyes, who ogled him from behind the counter, or waved to him under cover of some fashion bust. The walk ended, he would return, and dabble away at some imaginary heads, but with no higher ideal to guide his brush than the memory of the giggling shop-assistants. In earlier days women had held a different position in his regard; he had respected them, but later, as he moved with the “fast” sets, he lost this respect, and sought their company with anything but honourable intentions. So, little by little, he slipped downwards, till he reached the level of cravings which must soon terminate in either madness or death.

Why had I been sent on such a petty mission? My client would need no prompting, his natural tendencies could do their work without me!

I leant against the mantelpiece and thought over this, feeling, perhaps not unreasonably, hurt that Diaphernes should give me such child's work to do, when I felt equal to, and eager for, tasks far more stubborn and intricate.

How long I grumbled thus I cannot say; it may have been an hour, it may have been five minutes. At any rate it lasted as long as my client's reverie, and was finally interrupted by a curious feeling of opposition, as if some hostile agency were at work striving to deaden my faculties. I could see no one—yet I was aware of a hand placed gently but firmly on my brow, of a sweet breath on my face—and my first inclination was to yield to the pressure, and sleep. Those who have had the fingers of some laughing girl laid lightly on their foreheads as they were told to fall into a mesmeric trance, know what I mean.

My client suddenly spoke and invoked Hell for inspiration! With his words, the touch fell away, and ere it returned I had realised the danger. Immediately I met it with a counter stroke,

flinging out my arms and striking fiercely. They came in contact with something. Next moment, with an earnest appeal to Diaphernes, I was engaged in a terrible and persistent struggle with an evidently feminine antagonist.

Round and round that room we fought, over chairs and tables, couch and ottoman. Sometimes she gained an advantage; and long loose sprays of hair cut into my face as she tried to force me down and away; sometimes I held the upper hand, and strove in a madness of hatred to rend her in pieces. The mysterious battle raged the whole afternoon, neither gaining a victory, and when at last we ceased the unended contest we had a shrewd knowledge of each other's prowess, and I at least trembled to think of future meetings. I doubt whether I feared or hated my unseen antagonist most. I think the latter.

Judge then of my surprise to hear her voice as we separated, saying, "Poor, poor Agonostes!"

This incensed me the more, for I thought she was mocking at my inability to see her; nor did I credit her sighs with sincerity, seeing she had done her best to cast me down. All she received from me in reply to her pity was a mouthful of curses.

I turned to my client at last, and found him fast asleep, rolling uneasily from side to side. As I watched him meditatively, a brilliant idea, which I did not hesitate to put into execution, came to me.

Obeying instructions I had received before leaving Hell, I prayed to Diaphernes for a dream representing a girl of surpassing beauty—and it came.

Seldom have I seen a more seducing phantom. She came, all aglow with winsome smiles, like a flashing star, flying along the path of a moonbeam into the room where I kept watch. There was wild love in her gleaming eyes, and wicked glee in the trembling of her raven hair.

"Will I do?" she whispered, showing her gleaming teeth in a laugh of conscious pride.

I nodded, and would have kept her by my side. Her beauty distracted me, for we were both evil together. But, with a quick motion of her hand, she waved me aside, and stealing to the couch, peered into the sleeper's face; then with her taper fingers touched both his eyelids.

My client turned and opened his eyes wide, to meet the face closely bent above his own. Her beauty dazzled him. At first he gazed as one bereft of reason, or lost in a fog of thought; then a cry from his very heart broke through his lips. And as the magic she employed began to do its work, he lay enchanted on her bosom, drinking in the spectacle of her beauty with unlimited delight.

Such adoration from a human being filled me with wonder—especially from one so long lost to any sense of purity. My adversary—whose name, Sagatheela, had been suddenly communicated to my brain—was at work here; by some crafty trickery she had frustrated my design, and substituted admiration and genuine love for the passion of a lower order I had designed to provoke.

So my client lay peacefully in the caresses of the dream, and loved—and awoke from the vision with the phantom's picture firmly stamped upon his mind, but not as I saw her. To him she was clad in virgin innocence, and he loved her all the more for it.

Sagatheela had done this! How should I find my revenge? I reflected, chased some fantastic notion, snatched at it, and lost it—and this not once, but many times.

Methods of vengeance appearing feasible one moment would enrage me with their impracticable folly in the next. At last I cried to Diaphernes in my despair—and gained my object.

Next morning my client did not go for his customary walk. For once, he was too wholly preoccupied to give it a moment's thought. Hurrying into his studio, he collected his painting

materials, placed the easel under the great north light through which the clear light of morning was pouting, and after a slight hesitation, commenced to work on the canvas.

Under his touch grew a dimly-lighted chamber, with a flood of moonbeams pouring on the floor, and lending to the whole a weird, silvery glamour. There was a bed with the clothes half thrown aside, a man half-sitting, half-lying there, gazing, with head thrown back and features alight with love, into the face of a beautiful woman, who was supporting him in her snowy arms. The light in her eyes was such that a man would risk his life to kindle it—none could witness the smile on her lips and remain impassive. The idea was one which might produce a masterpiece, and the hand of the dilettante seemed inspired as he worked. He rarely left it; from morning till night, day after day, he knew no rest till it was complete, and the fair visitant of his dream smiled down at him from her easel-throne.

Through those days of toil—the first hard work he had ever done—it was I who stood by him, guiding his hand, keeping the image of the vision before his eyes. Success began to draw very near. Once again the artist saw her in his sleep, lovelier than ever, more affectionate, more real. He caught at her as she slipped away, crying that he could not live without her.

All that day he worked with the energy of despair, sick at heart for a love unrealised, a beloved one he could never hope to know except in the brief journeys through the borderland of existence which men call dreams. There was much to be admired in the dogged manner in which this young ne'er-do-weel applied himself to his work, leaving off only for hurried meals and for sleep. He seemed to have lost all his old craving for dissipation in a manner which was incomprehensible to his landlady, a worthy old person with a keen sense of getting full value out of her lodgers, and a knack of forcing obligations down their throats.

The picture had been commenced on a Monday; it was finished on a Monday. The intervening period of twenty days, including Sundays, was a time of solid slavery without interruption.

The yellow-haired shop-girls, with their ogling eyes and carefully curled hair, their trim waists and jingling bangles, no longer exercised any fascination over my client; they, and all other women he had ever known, had faded out of his life. No one remained to fill their place, for the woman for whom he lived was a Nothing, not even a child of the gutters! A princess, perhaps, of dreamland; beautiful as the stars in heaven—but always non-existent. Yet day by day he drifted into the mazes of this new love, and knew in himself that there was no retreat.

On the evening of the Monday which saw the completion of his picture, he invited two of the least reputable of his friends to supper. He had a sudden desire to learn their opinion of his work.

Both the young men were artists of some note. The elder, Jack Herbert, had his pictures hung, and well hung too, for several years. The younger one was a prominent member of the St Ives school, and it was thought that he would obtain his A.R.A. before long. His name was Charles St Aubyn. My client, whom I have hitherto mentioned only as "my client," I will now introduce as Ralph Webster, nephew of the famous actor of that name.

When the meal was over, and the last bottle of champagne emptied, Webster took his friends into the studio. Approaching the easel on tiptoe, he turned to them with an air of mock mystery.

"I'll bet you two chaps," he remarked, "you've never clapped eyes on anything so fetching as this."

Swish—the cloth was removed—and before the astonished gaze of the young men the dream-girl stood out in all her supernatural beauty. Neither of them could at first find words to utter, they were simply amazed, and, I think, frightened.

Critics as well as artists, they recognised the touch of a master-hand, not a mere dabbler as they thought their host. There was real genius here, originality of conception, perfection of execution.

It was uncanny. Other hands than Webster's must have been at work—or else the devil had borrowed the studio—for in the woman lurked all the craft of a hidden hell, the love in her eyes was a transparent window for the evil soul; the caressing hands seemed to conceal the stings of serpents; the floating hair hissed out tongues of poisonous flame, and clung to the man's flesh like the tentacles of an octopus.

It was splendid, but horrible—more than horrible—and, mocking sceptics as they were, they hesitated to confess that the spirit-world must have lent its aid to such a picture.

“Well,” my client exclaimed, impatient for their verdict, “what do you think of it? To see you both standing like stuffed dummies, one would imagine you didn't like it! Perhaps it infringes your ideas of decency.” He laughed—a hollow, unnatural laugh, which made his listeners look strangely at him.

Herbert was the first to speak; it was only with a severe effort that he controlled his voice.

“It is splendid, old chap; but just a trifle weird. Where on earth did you get the idea?”

“Yes, the idea?” the other chimed in, ready enough to speak once the silence was broken.

“Well,” my client began moodily, kicking the heel of his left foot with an air of distraction, “you will laugh “ He paused, as if it pained him to continue. I was inspired by a dream.”

“By a *dream*?” the voices came together.

“Yes, a dream. That woman is merely ethereal. I had no tangible model. Oh, you may smile—but upon my honour it is true!”

“But some one sat for you,” said St Aubyn.

“No one.”

“Nonsense, my dear fellow; the champagne has got into your top-knot. You never painted that thing without a model?” The questioner's laugh was infectious, and Herbert echoed it.

My client was not inclined to treat the matter as a joke; love was strong within his breast, and his picture was sacred—for her sake.

“Don't be a sceptical idiot!” he retorted irritably. “I'm not joking! I worked alone—no one was in the room but myself—and her.”

“Come, come, old chap!” cried Herbert. “You vowed a minute ago that she was only a dream!”

“So she is!” Webster averred. “She was here—here!” and he pressed his fingers to his forehead, “in here, where she has remained day and night since first I saw her. Are you convinced?”

“Half and half,” said St Aubyn. “The whole business is, in my humble opinion, d—queer. I can't make head or tail of it.”

“This doesn't tell me your candid opinion of its merits. Well, Jack?”

Herbert coughed.

“I think, Ralph,” he said at last with some reserve, “you have struck oil. A picture like that will make the committee sit up—in fact, your name is made.”

Ralph was startled. “Don't humbug!” he said.

“I'm in grim earnest. I repeat, you are a made man.”

“If you did it,” St Aubyn put in, “all I can say is, that genius comes to some of us late in life, and there may yet be hope even for me!”

Webster looked annoyed. There had been occasions on which his word had been challenged and proved a lie. Now, however, he spoke the truth, and was angry in consequence.

“I really can't make you believe it, St Aubyn,” he said with a sneer. “Perhaps you will ask my old woman. You will find her ironing in the kitchen. First let me apologise for her lack of beauty, but we don't run to pretty housemaids here.”

It was now St Aubyn's turn to lose his temper, and a quarrel seemed imminent, when good-natured Herbert came to the rescue.

"Don't be fools!" he laughed. "Of course Ralph did it. I take your word for it, Ralph; so does Charlie, only he likes to be clever and play the conscientious doubter. You see, the picture is rather above your old standard; in fact, it is rather above us all—perfect, but a bit too devilish to please me. The woman is simply beyond comprehension—she is a marvellous personification of wickedness."

"Wickedness, and devilish!" shouted Webster. "Why, what the deuce do you mean? She is purity and innocence itself!"

The men exchanged glances, and St Aubyn walked over to the fireplace. He could not trust himself to control his face.

"All I can say," remonstrated Herbert mildly, "is that you have a rum way of showing innocence. Why, man alive, look at her!"

"Yes," my client said, the old adoration tense and strong on his sensitive face, "I am looking, not for the first time, nor the hundredth—perhaps not the thousandth—I see only innocence."

"Where do you intend exhibiting it?"

"Exhibiting? No, I mean to keep it here."

Both men fairly leaped from the ground; the wonder of this thing was almost beyond belief.

"Keep it!" St Aubyn cried; "why, Ralph, are you stark staring mad? That picture would be the talk of London! It is worth thousands! I guarantee that no committee in the world would dare to refuse it the best hanging they could give. It is a work of genius, the real unadulterated thing."

"I can't help it," snapped Ralph, mentally desiring his friends to go to Jericho—or farther. "I shall keep it. Indeed, it would kill me to send it to the Academy to be insulted by the stare of greasy, sweltering crowds."

"You will think better of it to-morrow!" St Aubyn averred. "Too much champagne and that excellent duck have wrought havoc with your digestion to-day."

"I shan't," was the reply; "to-morrow, nor the day after. That picture shall never leave this room, so help me God!"

And at last St Aubyn believed him.

When the two men had bidden Webster good-bye and were parting in the street outside, St Aubyn said: "Well, I shall never forget this night. I have seen Satan disguised as the fairest of women; I have seen the blindest, wildest love ever generated in human nature; and have read the most astonishing story of sudden genius ever developed in this world, in the face of an old friend. How it is to end, God only knows."

He spoke almost reverently; and Herbert's face was very grave in the clear moonlight.

"Ah," he replied, "God only knows. Perhaps He can still save a soul which is lost to-night, for such genius as this must come direct from hell."

CHAPTER II

A GALATEA FROM HELL

The hour of my triumph was nigh. For the hundredth time I assured myself of this as I kept in close attendance on my client. When he slept I crouched, wakeful, by his bed, thinking over the incidents of the day, planning for the future—or sometimes holding converse with any stray dreams that floated past the window. I saw the hooded shade of Murder glide like an assassin

through the midnight air; the pale face of Envy nodded to me on its rounds; the yellow countenance of Jealousy gleamed in the moonlight; the scowling visage of Hate showed its teeth in a snarl by way of greeting. Death and his attendants were not behindhand, but fluttered in all directions across the horizon. Mortals often complain of a chill down the spine, but how many of them guess that it is merely the monarch of the grave or one of his attendants who has breathed upon them in passing by? But I paid little heed to all these—for I felt that victory was at hand, and I was nerving myself for a final blow.

My client, like most lovers, had dedicated many poems to his beloved. Some really held flashes of his newly-awakened genius, others were mere ramblings of a weakening intellect. Selecting one which pleased him, he sat one afternoon wrapped in a sentimental mood, repeating it over and over again, as if the object of his adoration would hear him from the canvas.

The room was warm and comfortable, with a bright fire burning in the grate and radiating its heat into all corners. The blinds were down, and the only light in the room came from the leaping flames. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked calmly away in its aggressive monotone—love, murder, and death could never concern it so long as its works were kept in order. Ralph glanced at it and saw that in another hour his landlady would bring in tea—an upsetting episode when one is living in romance at the feet of a dreamland princess.

When he had repeated the poem for the twentieth time, with his eyes fixed upon the picture, he saw, or fancied he saw the eyes glitter; and, half-frightened, he arose, with the intention of lighting the gas.

It wanted but a few minutes to tea time, and the hour had come for the fulfilment of my last great scheme. I stepped forward, when I was interrupted by an outstretched arm, and a gentle voice cautioned me, “Desist from thy evil designs ere it is too late.”

I strained my eyes, but could see no one. With the exception of my client there was no one visible in the room. Without doubt I was opposed by Sagatheela. Infuriated, I raised my hand, and dealt a strong blow into the void before me.

It reached its mark. I felt its contact with her soft warm bosom, and the next moment she spoke.—“Wouldst thou hurt me with idle blows? Knowest thou not, O Agonistes, that I, like thyself, am of no earthly mould? Desist; thou addest to thy folly.”

Irritated beyond measure at her continued interference, I hurled at her a torrent of abuse in reply. But with a sigh as one in sorrow she suddenly sprang upon me, and tried with all her power to force me from the side of my client. I knew well what she desired. It was a crisis in his affairs, and one uninterrupted word from her, cleverly timed, might at such a moment shatter my counsels for ever. During the struggle I never lost my footing, and finally pressed her so hard that she yielded—departing with a cry of woe that I could not forget.

And now I breathed freely once more! The hour was mine! I looked at the picture. It was indeed a work of art. Not a lineament, a line, a tiny dimple, remained unnoted—it wanted but one thing to complete its perfection.

I was now about to perform an act allowed to each of Diaphernes’ envoys but once in his career, and that at a great risk, for if unsuccessfully employed it condemned him who used it to the fiercest torments of the nethermost hell. The dream was to be materialised and allowed to walk on earth for not more than half a year, subject always to my instructions.

My client was still worshipping the picture as I prompted him with fitting words.

“Could you but live in flesh and blood!” he cried, with uplifted, passionate eyes, “I would gladly surrender my soul.”

The canvas shook from top to bottom, the easel rocked backwards and forwards, the fire burned brilliantly red, the curtains rustled, the wind passed under the rich carpet and made it surge like billows—and then—

Before Webster's awestruck gaze, the woman in the picture left her framework, and extending her arms, stepped down to meet him. The result was as I expected—the artist fainted.

Left to ourselves, my ally and I held a short conference—with, I fear, some light badinage, and possibly some evil wooing. Then, at my injunctions, she knelt beside the prostrate man, and rubbing his brows with her soft hand, and breathing on his face, brought him slowly back to consciousness. But on looking up he swooned again. When finally he was restored to the possession of his faculties, and began to appreciate the caresses of the woman by his side, he noticed with a start that his picture was no longer on the easel. Believing himself to be insane, or the victim of some strange delusion, he closed his eyes for a moment. But when he opened them again the picture was still absent, and in its stead was the beautiful woman who held him in her arms and gazed into his eyes with love glowing in her own. He felt her hands, soft as velvet, but unmistakably flesh and blood—he listened to her regular breathing and the beating of her heart. Could he believe it? Had some girl—one of his old flames—found out his foolish passion and by means of some clever trickery performed this impersonation, and, gaining admittance to the studio, caught him napping?

No—there was not a girl in Fulham—not in all London, with such a face. It was a living reproduction of his dream, which now returned to him in startling vividness. Then he remembered his last profane utterance before the picture, and shuddered at the thought. The terror which had inspired him at the first movement of the canvas came back; he tried to raise himself and summon his voice to call for help, but his companion checked him, and reassured him with a smile. Her fingers were playing with his hair, and he felt their cool tips on his burning forehead.

"I'm utterly at a loss," he began, "to know who you are—how you came here? Why am I lying like this?"

The girl's mouth twitched with merriment, and he caught a gleam of fun in her eyes. Then she replied, in pretty, unfamiliar accents that puzzled him still further:

"You couldn't guess!" she cried, "because you don't believe in witchcraft."

The man shifted uneasily in her embrace.

"Witchcraft—no," he rejoined. "Why, who does, nowadays? Witches belong to the past, and a good thing too—they were supposed to be old and ugly. But," recovering his courage, "if you had said fairies I might have answered very differently."

"And why?" laughed the girl.

"Because I am in the arms of one."

At this she blushed.

"You must not think me very forward," she said shyly; "but when I arrived you were asleep, and when I aroused you, you fainted—thinking, I suppose, that I was a witch."

"No—not a witch," he said; "and I apologise for fainting."

"Well, some horrible monster. And even now you pretend you don't recognise me. Oh, it is too bad of you." There was a suspicion of tears in the deep blue eyes.

"Recognise you?" he said, in growing wonder.

"Why, yes—of course, oh, Ralph, how stupid you are to-day."

Webster fairly gasped. The situation was beyond him. He could only stare. She, too, seemed surprised, but it was the surprise of hurt dismay.

“Ralph, don’t be trying! Speak as you always do!”

No answer.

“Ralph, why do you look at me like that? Are you ill? Shall I kiss you?”

A faint smile crossed his face at the suggestion; he tried to reach her lips.

“Not until you behave naturally,” she said, “and less like a goose.”

It was useless for him to endeavour to solve the mystery. Whenever he questioned her she became petulant, with eyes ready to overflow. So he had to be still and listen to her chatter, wondering whether she mistook him for her husband, brother, or lover, whether she was in earnest, in fun, or mad.

A hundred awkward questions crowded his mind. Where was his picture? What would his landlady say? How was all this to be explained? The girl showed no intention of leaving, but appeared perfectly content where she was, prattling to him in the half-childish fashion of lovers or honeymoon couples.

A rap at the door! Webster felt faint, but in a weak voice said, “Come in.” In she came, a short, stout woman, with a ruddy face and the air of a landlady who knows how to manage young men. When she caught sight of the girl she positively gasped for breath.

“The young lady of the picture,” she stammered. “Sakes alive—here have I lived for forty years and never knowed the likes of this.” Then with a sudden sense of her breach of etiquette—“I beg pardon, miss, but it seems strange to an ’umble body like me to come face to face with the real live lady, and not her painted drawing.”

The dream-girl accepted her apology with a gracious smile, and the woman thought her voice more beautiful than her face. She could not restrain her curiosity.

“Mr Webster!” she exclaimed, setting the tray on the table and toying with cup and saucer, “why didn’t you tell me? When I sees the picture, ‘Annah,’ I says to myself, ‘that ain’t no fancy head, it belongs to a lady of flesh and blood.’ And from that I gets to argify, putting two and two together, till at last I arrives at the ’appy ’ome of Cupid.”

Ralph, for the first time in his life, blushed; the girl, on the contrary, broke into a pretty trill of laughter.

“For shame, Ralph,” she cried, patting him on the bead with her left hand and showing a glittering engagement ring. “Why didn’t you tell Mrs Gardiner? You see I know *your* name,” she added; “Ralph so often mentions you in his letters.”

My client’s face was a study. So many strange things had happened that afternoon that he had almost ceased to be surprised. Still, he did marvel at this girl’s capacity for lying. What on earth would she say next?

Mrs Gardiner eyed him with an expression intended to convey how pained she was at this want of confidence in her who had been “like a mother to him” for over six years.

Perceiving that he must say something, he muttered, sulkily enough, that “It only came off last week, so I haven’t had much time to announce it yet, besides,”—this sincerely enough—“I never expected to see her this afternoon.”

“Ah, miss, just like all ladies in love, you like to take your sweetheart by surprise. Bless your dear ’eart, you needn’t fear for ’im; he’s been hammering at nothing but your own picture hour after hour till I wonder ’e ain’t made himself bad with work, I do. Ain’t it like you?” And Mrs Gardiner wheeled round as she spoke, pointing with her thumb to the easel. “‘Ullo—why, where’s it gone?”

“Oh yes,” laughed the dream, “Ralph has sold it; the man came half an hour ago. Didn’t he, dear?”

Ralph assented with a sickly smile.

“Sold it—a man came ’alf an ’our ago? Why, who let him in; ’ow was it I never ’eard ’im?” The worthy woman was sorely mystified.

“You were busy getting tea, I suppose,” the girl replied; “Ralph opened the door to him, just as he did to me.”

Mrs Gardiner nodded; there was something odd about it all, and she felt some strange influence from the visitor’s beauty. Being a devout Roman Catholic, she crossed the palm of her right hand with the fingers of the left before proceeding to lay the table. Then, seeing that neither of them wished to continue the conversation, she fetched an extra cup, brought in the tea and muffins, and withdrew to her own domain downstairs to think it over.

The meal progressed. The girl poured out his tea, drew him, in spite of himself, into conversation, made him laugh or be serious as she herself chose; in fact, bent him entirely to her own inclinations.

“Where are you stopping?” he asked at length.

“At the Metropole, of course. You must call there to-morrow morning; my room is 306. Now, as you seem so stupid to-day, must I remind you that my name is Maggie Westmacott? I wonder can you remember all this?”

With her eyes upon him Ralph was ready to acquiesce in anything she thought fit to say, her beauty had already made him her slave. In the dark pupils of her eyes he saw a thousand lights—it seemed to him a man could easily lose his soul there. The face was perfect. He looked at the delicate outline of the nose, the straight, pencilled eyebrows, the fine turn of the upper lip, but he always came back to the eyes. Even in his dream they had never seemed one-half so alluring. And there was a strangeness in them quite distinct from formation, or colouring, or expression, which he could not define, a hidden meaning which he tried to read, and failed; a suggestive mystery which might one day be fathomed. The girl’s voice thrilled every nerve in his body, awakening emotions hitherto unknown. She played upon him as upon a finely-strung instrument. Now he was a soldier stirred to martial ardour, now a poet, with wonderful lines surging in his brain to some far-off melody—now an actor—now an inventor. Whatever those eyes desired or that voice suggested found instant answer in his soul. And he loved her with a passion defiant of death.

The fire flickered its light upon her face—its flames paled before the flash of those eyes. I, watching, saw in them the gleam of a baleful triumph! For all their beauty, the eyes of a tiger were less cruel—those of a murderer less malicious.

As time crept on she arose, and yielding to his signal, offered him her lips—at first evading his embrace with a coy movement which made him all the more eager.

“Shall I see you to the hotel?” he asked, as he helped her on with her jacket, a pretty thing of blue velvet, fitting closely to her figure.

“No, no”; then, as if to compensate for her refusal, “but you may have one more. Ah!” with a sigh and cast-down eyes, “I must be going. How long it will seem till to-morrow!”

Ralph trembled as he looked at her. What if he should never see her again? if she vanished out of his life as mysteriously as she had entered into it? What if other men should see her and make love to her? A wave of jealousy rushed through him. He hardly dared to let her go; the risk of losing her seemed so great. They were standing out in the moonlight with the beams falling upon them at their feet. Away in the distance he heard the hum of traffic, the cries of newsboys, the whistling of trains. All the common sounds seemed weighted with some grim foreboding. Her

hand was still in his when a hansom pulled up at the gate, and the driver's voice awoke him to the necessity of leave-taking.

"Good-bye, my darling!" he whispered, gazing with a hungry look into her glorious eyes. "Now you have come to me, I cannot live without you. For pity's sake, tell me you are in earnest!"

"Why, of course I am," she replied, with her merry laugh. "Should I have travelled from my distant home to Fulham, if it hadn't been for love of you? Never fear, be true to me. Once again, *au revoir*."

"Ah, my lovely fairy sweetheart!" he sighed, "your love can be naught to mine. You came like a beautiful will-o'-the-wisp, but you must not go like one. Promise!"

The cabman coughed. He was thinking of his home and his supper and was tired of waiting. The girl looked at Ralph with her great tender eyes.

"I must go, my love," she whispered, gently freeing herself from his grasp. "We will meet again tomorrow!"

As the cab vanished down the glimmering road, Ralph returned to his room with a sense of desolation; all life seemed to have left him, and the emptiness was torture to his soul.

CHAPTER III

ASTONISHING INCIDENT AT A THEATRE

The evening of the 18th December 189- will not soon be forgotten by the people, especially the men, who flocked to the opening performance of "The British Ensign" at the Cosmopolitan Theatre, Strand, W.C. The play was an absurdly sensational one, full of those situations in which nothing short of a miracle saves the hero from a horrible death.

Ever since the assassination of the great tragedian, Ernest Harford, at the door of the theatre, the Cosmopolitan had been closed. No one had been bold enough to take over the management, until an American, with the self-assurance of his nation, came forward and announced his intention of reopening the establishment with a play by the leading sensational dramatist of the day, and a caste embracing the best talent London could afford. Seats were booked for months in advance—newspapers gave vent to all sorts of speculations, some extolled the pluck of the Yankee, others gloomily prognosticated failure. Nothing else was talked of among theatre-going people; the caste was criticised, and many and various opinions were prevalent. Some said So-and-So would be a miserable failure in a role entirely new to him; others said the part of the heroine would have been better suited to—any other but the lady selected. How could she shine in tragedy after her career in burlesque? So the clitter-clatter of gossip ran, and one grew sick of the Cosmopolitan long before the production of the play.

On the day of the production, for hours before the opening of the doors the neighbouring streets presented a unique appearance—they were black with hosts of people. A long string of hansoms filed slowly past and deposited a living freight. The orchestra was unusually large, its conductor a man of enormous reputation. His appearance was the signal for a tremendous outburst of applause that only ceased when the overture began. But all through the first act the audience sat like stone, and from gallery to circle, circle to pit, the silence, unbroken save by the voices of the performers, hung over the theatre like an ominous cloud over some doomed city. As minute followed minute the conviction of failure increased, and with its augmentation the nerves of those acting began to fail.

It was at the commencement of the second act, just as the hero was carried off by the press-gang, that a wonderful incident took place. The theatre was almost in darkness, the lights being at their lowest for this scene, when suddenly a pale blue flame illuminated box No. 7. All eyes were instantly turned from the stage to this, and men started to see, leaning her elbow on the velvet fronting, a woman of the most entrancing beauty. Every feature of her face was revealed as if seen through a telescope—and never in their wildest dreams of beauty had any of them looked upon such a face. Every man believed her eyes were turned meaningly on him, every woman felt her beauty shrivel before this dazzling creature. Yet there were many beautiful women in the audience; women, too, who knew how to dress well, and did so. There was no comparison between the loveliest of them and this stranger. None of them possessed her power of compelling attention, her strangely striking presence, nor the blending of something uncomprehended with her beauty.

The effect upon the stage was instantaneous and disastrous. Interest in the play had been steadily waning, and the actors, losing heart at the impassiveness of the audience, became embarrassed. One or two showed symptoms of breaking down, and behaving in anything but the manner expected of them, considering their long experience in the dramatic world. So when with one accord all the occupants of the pit, circles, and boxes, whose position enabled them to get a glimpse of the charming lady, burst into a suppressed murmur of wonder and admiration, the actors paused, and then, following the direction of the eyes of the crowd, were dumfounded—standing motionless and speechless on the boards. Such a phenomenon had never before been witnessed.

A perfect babel arose in the gallery and among those who were ignorant of the cause of the hitch in the performance. Cries of “What is it?” “Fire!” “Police!” were mingled with torrents of hissing and booing. The management were in despair. Everything pointed to a catastrophe of no ordinary nature. Already some of the rowdier element were standing up on their seats, not content with shouting, but jostling, and in one corner collecting in a knot, as if they meant to make an ugly rush to the front. Several women screamed. The proprietor had just made up his mind to face the footlights and implore them to desist, when the origin of the mischief disappeared. The blue light was extinguished, and with a sigh of relief he noticed that Box 7 was no longer occupied.

There was an immediate reaction. The magnetic influence gone, objects within its sphere seemed to return to their normal condition; only some of the men resolved to try and see more of the lovely woman, while their sisters and wives felt as if some baneful influence had been removed, and regarded the performance with kindlier eyes. Somehow the actors themselves seemed benefited by this extraordinary episode. They ceased to be listless and half-hearted, their blood coursed wildly in their veins, their nerves thrilled with enthusiasm; in fact, they simply outshone their own records and made the most dragging parts go with a rush. The hero lived his role, the villain forgot himself and acted with such passionate intensity that real terror was mingled with the shrieks of the heroine. There was no further doubt as to the fate of the piece. Scene after scene met with tumultuous applause; men yelled themselves hoarse demanding reappearances; women laughed and wept hysterically, and the house shook with the noise. Bedlam seemed to be let loose. No one could practise the least self-control. All acted on the impulse of the moment, that impulse being, to make themselves heard and to applaud the most realistic acting ever staged. The management rubbed their hands and thought of coffers weighted with gold, the critics hastily tore up their earlier reports and adapted their language to the tune of the public feeling. Undoubtedly the *Cosmopolitan* had scored the hit of the season.

Some time before the house emptied—in fact, at the very moment the blue light vanished—Lord Edward Brompton, a fashionably dressed young man, left Box 6, slipped on his overcoat, and followed the retreating form of the mysterious lady down the corridor. She was not alone. Her arm lay in that of a tall, dark young man, whom his lordship recognised as Ralph Webster, once a shining light of Bohemianism in the west of London.

Lord Edward was doubly puzzled. Like many other dissolute young men about town, he hung on the skirts of any pretty woman whom chance brought in his way, or to whom he could gain access by introductions. Beauty was to him a quarry—virtue an out-of-date punctilio. Yet none of the ladies he had hitherto sought had roused his interest like this stranger, and he was mad to make her acquaintance without further delay.

To hail a hansom and bid the driver follow her was but the work of a moment. The chase was short, easy, and satisfactory. The lady parted from her escort at the doors of the Metropole, and, kissing her hand, entered the hall with a light step and a gay toss of the head.

His lordship seized the chance—his eyes pleaded for closer acquaintance, and in the glance which met his he saw no reason to despair. There was a subtle meaning in the dark depths, such as he had seen many times in the eyes of other girls—only in a less degree.

He followed up his opportunity, and paying the driver, passed into the splendid hall lighted up by electricity, and filled with ladies and gentlemen in evening dress. In answer to his request, he was conducted to a room on the third floor, and without much difficulty he extracted from his guide all the information the latter could give him on the subject uppermost in his thoughts.

“She had been there three weeks. Oh yes, he well remembered her arrival. She came by herself late one evening, and the driver was much puzzled at finding two trunks on the hansom, which he swore had never been placed there by him. This was the more impressed upon him because he was certain the man was sober, and he had never seen any one more horribly frightened in his life. The lady’s room was No. 306. No, she never stayed to meals, except her breakfast, which was brought to her own room. Yes, she always went out with the same gentleman, an artist, Mr Ralph Webster. He thought they were engaged, as both wore rings. Oh yes, she was a perfect lady; rich too, and very liberal; wore magnificent jewelry—she might be a titled lady travelling under an assumed name. Miss Westmacott? Lady Westmacott, he would lay long odds, was probably more like it in reality.”

The man beamed all over as his lordship slipped some gold into his hand; and he promised to do all he could to put him in the way of getting what he wanted. Miss Westmacott was not above talking to a poor porter—and he could drop her a hint as to his lordship’s arrival.

The next day brought Lord Edward no luck. He saw quite a number of men walking up and down in front of the hotel, doubtless bent on the same mission as himself. The papers were full of the incident of the previous night, and clamoured for the name of the “most beautiful woman in London.”

All sorts of absurd theories were going about. Several journals professed to hold the secret in their hands, throwing out hints that she was a foreign princess, whose name “for political reasons” could not be divulged at present. Others pretended that they had information from those in the know, and pointed out the coincidence of the arrival of an American belle, a girl quite out of the common, who hailed from San Francisco. A few honest editors confessed their inability to answer the demand of the public, and evinced a great eagerness for the question to be settled.

All this feverish excitement manifesting itself throughout London society made my client extremely ill at ease. Since his first encounter with the dream he had been wholly captivated, and, indeed, found life insufferable when out of her company. His soul was wrapt in one

continual state of adoration, worshipping before the shrine of its beauty-goddess, in which it found its life, and away from which it could no longer exist.

A love such as his, belonging to a nature of the baser sort, must have as its consort a certain amount of latent jealousy, waiting to be fanned to flame, when it will not stop at crime itself. It was not long, in Ralph's case, before this jealousy was excited. One morning, on calling at the Metropole, he was informed that Miss Westmacott was out, but had left a note. With an odd sense of foreboding he opened the envelope, and read the contents written in her bold, clear handwriting:—

“DARLING RALPH,—So sorry to disappoint—but an old friend turned up last night—Lord Edward Brompton. He is such a dear boy! Now, don't be green with jealousy, I'm not going to elope with him, and am I not yours for ever? So cheer up, and look forward to to-morrow instead. With a thousand kisses,—Ever your loving MAGGIE.”

So, after all, his misgivings were correct. The girl was but a fairy princess—she had come with the moonbeams, only to vanish with the dawn.

There was a queer choking feeling in his throat. He never remembered feeling so helpless, as he called a hansom and drove moodily back to Fulham. All sorts of desperate thoughts leaped into his mind. His imagination, always morbidly keen and sensitive, brought vividly before him the picture of his Ideal close in the embrace of an old lover. How different everything had seemed an hour ago! Then the streets, with their crowds of bustling men and women, had made him laugh with pleasure, and his merriment had been a light-hearted outlet for the elasticity of youthful spirits. He had found enjoyment in the warm sunshine, the bright blue sky, and the fresh air against his face. Now all was changed. The streets were gloomy, the men silent and depressed, he even noted in their faces the tell-tale marks of the struggle for bread. He wondered why the shabby cab-man and thinly clad bootblack didn't commit suicide. The sun irritated him—it was a bitter mockery of the faded glitter of this seething Babylon, with its yellow rays. Yellow, the colour of gold—and money at the root of all evil.

“No, not money, but women,” I suggested.

“Women, yes; false, cruel, treacherous women!” Throwing back his head, he laughed a nasty, meaningless laugh.

The driver started. He had once heard a madman laugh, and the resemblance in the sound was too great to be pleasant. He shivered, and whipped his horse to its utmost speed.

When my client reached his rooms he spent the rest of the day indoors, tortured with a thousand fears, and subjected to all the racking of jealousy.

In the evening he was aroused from his lethargy by a visit from St Aubyn and Herbert. Neither had seen him since the evening already described, and they naturally looked at once for the picture. It had occupied their minds a good deal in the interim—it was bound to have a good future, and it was absurd to think that Webster would not part with it.

“Hub, old man!” St Aubyn greeted him, as he burst into the dark room, his young face aglow with healthy exercise; “what, all in the dumps? Come now, never say die, or you are no artist. Is it not the principle of our noble profession to live on hope when you have nothing left to pawn? Here, let me light your gas.”

Webster growled out a not too cordial welcome, but rose from his seat at the fire and turned up the gas notwithstanding.

“Take a seat, you chaps,” he said. “To tell you the truth, I am feeling uncommon bad.”

“Oh, influenza, is it?” For this epidemic had been raging in the metropolis, and claiming its list of victims every week.

“No, I’m only run down—that’s about it.”

“Overwork,” said Herbert sympathetically, his eyes seeking for the well-remembered canvas. “By the bye, old chap, where’s the picture?”

My client frowned. “What picture?” he said vaguely and lamely.

“Why, the young lady, of course,” Herbert rejoined, and shot an uneasy glance at St Aubyn. He had seen madmen before; and if glaring eyes and a nervous hunted demeanour had any value as symptoms, poor Webster seemed to be fairly on the way to join the number.

“It’s gone,” he said, breathing hard and turning his haggard face towards the easel with the set expression of a man who expects something.

“Gone!” burst from the others simultaneously. “What, sold already?”

“No, I didn’t say it was sold, merely *gone*. Please drop the subject, my dear fellows; it’s a painful one.”

The men took him at his word, and wondering more than ever, adroitly turned the conversation.

“Heard the latest, Ralph?” Herbert asked as he helped himself to his host’s fine Havannah cigars.

“No,” was the listless answer, “what is it?”

“Why, all the world is expatiating upon the personality of the loveliest woman in Christendom. It seems she appeared like some fairy princess at Box No. 7 of the Cosmopolitan on the reopening night. By Jove, old chap—you are ill. Here, cut out, St Aubyn, and get some brandy—hot stuff, mind! He’s going to faint or something.”

Herbert, downright frightened, lifted the inanimate form of his friend from the easy-chair where it was crouched, laid it upon the sofa, and unbuttoned his collar. It was not for some moments after the return of St Aubyn with the restorative that my client regained consciousness, and his face looked so worn and wild that Herbert thought of sending for a doctor.

“For God’s sake don’t!” Webster pleaded, walking with the help of the others to his chair by the fire. “I’ve a horror of doctors, and attacks like this are not uncommon. I inherit a weak heart from my mother—she died of it—perhaps I shall, some day. As I told you, I have been seedy for the past day or two, and excitement tends to make me feel faint.”

Nothing more could be done, so the visitors resumed their seats, and steering clear of all recent topics of conversation, spoke of their own affairs. When they left him at ten o’clock, Ralph was much better, his temperature was almost normal; and his hearty good-bye showed that he appreciated their kindly efforts.

“I will look you up in the morning, Ralph,” Herbert shouted, as the gate swung on its hinges.

My client replied that he would be glad to see him, and then, as the others walked away, he returned slowly to his room, staying a few more minutes by the fire, and then going to bed, though not to sleep. All night long he tossed to and fro, uselessly trying to obtain relief from the Inferno in his brain. The moon, round, bright, and mocking, poured in its ghostly rays upon his pillow. The furniture creaked, the sheets irritated his skin. He heard footsteps outside, and then could have sworn that somebody stealthily crossed the room. Then, to his horror, he felt rather than saw a hideous and bestial face peering at him through the window-pane. Again, a clammy perspiration broke out all over him, as something—it felt like a dead hand—crept up the bedclothes, chilling his limbs and drawing ever nearer to his throat. Just as he believed it was about to seize him, it vanished. Then there floated through his worried brain visions of his Ideal.

He saw her in a hundred dear familiar attitudes, and feasted on the love-light in her eyes. Just as his bliss seemed secure, a violent change would take place; her liking turned to scorn, and she would laugh at him from the arms of another lover. So with all this series of troubled wanderings, sleep never came, but jeered at him from a distance, and the welcome morning sun found him unrefreshed, and ripe for any deed of madness.

With assiduous attention I had waited by his couch all night long. I had striven to depict to him many of the scenes I had witnessed in Monelpisia; and, be it said to my credit, I succeeded in my object, so that he crept out of bed, at eight o'clock, a mere wreck of his own manhood.

Catching him by the arm as soon as he had eaten a hasty breakfast, I hurried him down the narrow path out into the Fulham Road. I had more power over him now than ever before. My hand was on his wrist as he hailed a Charing Cross 'bus, and covering the ground at a run, jumped in while it was in motion. I laughed. I remembered how he had promised to be at home to Herbert. It was a good omen. I hoped that my anticipations of the scene at the hotel would be reached to the full.

The porter eyed him anxiously. He was an old soldier himself, and like all smart men of his profession, he resented unshaven chins. This toilet function my client had forgotten to perform, and he entered the Metropole in anything but a presentable state.

"Miss Westmacott was engaged—Mr Webster wouldn't mind waiting?"

"Was any one with her?" My client's fierceness made the man stare; he, too, noted the restless symptoms.

"A gentleman." His reply sounded more evasive than he meant it to be.

"A *gentleman*?" The wildness in Webster's eyes appalled him, and he shrunk from the tightening grasp of his hand.

"I cannot show you up, sir," he said stolidly, pocketing nevertheless the half-sovereign Webster slipped into his hand. "I had strict orders from the lady to say she was engaged."

"Who is the gentleman?"

Webster's breath was full in his face; for once the soldier's instinct failed, and he replied, "Lord Brompton."

"Lord *Edward* Brompton? Impossible—the biggest blackguard in London! My good man, do you know what you've done?"

The porter shifted from one foot to the other somewhat sheepishly—he had the greatest dislike to a scene."

"Hush, sir," he pleaded, "some of the gents will hear you, and, begging your pardon, it isn't right for me to listen to you calling his lordship names."

Just at this moment a trim young lady entered the hall and whispered something to the porter.

"If you will wait here for a while, sir," he said, turning to my client, "I will deliver your message to Miss Westmacott." And before he heard Webster's reply he was whisked off by the girl.

With a madman's cunning, my client, left for the instant alone, and yielding to the pressure of my hand, leaped up the main staircase two steps at a time, and steered his course for room No. 306—his Ideal's room.

At the threshold he paused, and distinctly heard the conversation within. A man's voice spoke.

"Upon my word,"—he was using the loud drawling tone which certain "Society" men at that time thought fit to adopt—"you are awfully good fun! I wonder you don't kill the young man to whom you are engaged."

“He’s a prig and can’t stand a joke!” she replied in a saucy tone. “Oh, *he’s* not like my Lord Brompton!” There was a jingle of bangles after this as if the wearer was trying to repel some bold advance of her companion, and it conveyed a sinister meaning to my client. His temples throbbed fiercely as his fingers closed round the handle of the door. He only waited to hear the man’s bantering accents, “It’s really unkind of you, my pretty one!”—then, with a savage whirl, he sent the door flying back on its hinges, and staggered into the room.

The inmates arose from their seats. Lord Edward, disentangling his arm from the girl’s waist, faced his angry opponent with a white face in which the cowardice of his nature was clearly displayed. The girl maintained an attitude of irritating calmness, and her eyes met those of Ralph with an air of cool inquiry.

“Will you be so kind, Mr Webster,” she said in chilling tones, “as to explain this unwarrantable intrusion into my private room? I thought you were a gentleman, but I see I have made a mistake.”

My client shook with passion, his voice came in thick gasps—

“And I was mistaken too. I thought you loved me—and now I know you were only playing with me, playing—” He broke down in agitation—there was pathos enough in his voice to have melted the heart of most earthly women. But this Thing was not of earth, and she laughed.

“Yes,” she said calmly, allowing him the full benefit of her glorious eyes. “Oh yes, I quite admit it. I had nothing better to do, and a fool in love is always most amusing. But besides being a fool you have your knavish side—or is it your ‘Bohemian’ disregard of etiquette? The man who forces himself thus into a lady’s private room is not usually tolerated in good society, is he? At any rate, I have no desire to retain your friendship or your ring.” She took a glittering circle from her left hand and tossed it carelessly to the wretched man.

“Well,” she continued mercilessly, “at least have the goodness to leave my room. Or must I call upon Lord Edward to assist you? I have no doubt he will be pleased to do so.”

His lordship acknowledged this compliment with a rather sickly smile, for he was no athlete, while the artist’s spare lithe figure seemed to promise some power of resistance.

At the mention of Lord Edward’s name my client’s attitude changed. He had been a spurned, miserable lover; he was now an infuriated avenger. With a spring like a wild beast he hurled himself upon the terrified nobleman, who, in trying to keep him off with a chair, was hurled against the wall, and in a moment lay at the mercy of his antagonist.

The eyes that glowed over him showed no signs of quarter. In his deadly peril he looked despairingly towards the beautiful origin of the quarrel, as if appealing for her help, or at least her sympathy.

And now came his surprise. The face which had leaned against his cheek a few minutes before had undergone a curious change. It had been full of a piquant grace, shy mirth, bashfulness; it was now cold and hard, and the eyes filled him with dismay—they were cruel, steely points of malice.

He had, however, short time for observing her. The madman’s fingers closed on his throat with a grip of iron, choking his cries and sending the blood surging to his brain. He was aware of a bursting sensation in his head, he felt himself raised from the ground, he saw through a mist the triumphant face of his enemy, and then—crash! crash!—he saw and felt no more. His skull was smashed to splinters, and a sickly mass of blood and brain and hair clung to the sharp edge of the bright fender.

Webster leaped to his feet. He “saw red”—he was filled with the mania for killing, he wanted more of the sticky, precious red fluid which trickled over his hands. He groped for the poker, and

with it sprang at the woman. Snarling like an angry tiger, he brought the heavy implement down on her head with a terrific crash. But—marvel of marvels—she offered no resistance, did not wince at his attack, but received the blow with a tantalising smile of mockery, while in his horrid rage he battered again and again at the changeless smiling face. On—and on! No, he would never stop! Smash, smash; but still she smiled, and showed no sign of pain or fear. With the perspiration streaming down his face he worked convulsively, his chest heaving, his arms rising and falling without cessation, he kept doggedly on at his horrid task—and still she smiled!

* * *

It was a grisly sight that met the eyes of the two policemen summoned at last by the porter—a man's corpse with its head battered to a pulp lying beside the fender, and the maniac scattering bits of marble hither and thither with the meaningless blows he rained upon one corner of the mantelpiece. But of the lady of the room neither they, nor others after, saw anything.

She was gone; only a superb portrait of her remained, supported on an artist's easel, near the window.

There were many strange and gruesome stories current in connection with the Metropole murder, and much ingenious theorising. But to this day no one has ever learned what became of the beautiful lady in Room 306; only the wonderful picture by the mad artist, Webster, is still to be seen in the Guildhall.

My sandals bore me away, and I knew that my first campaign was ended. A right royal welcome had I indeed, when, fresh from my triumph, I bowed low at the emerald steps of the throne of Diaphernes.