

Lex Talionis

By Unknown

In 1845, said Dr. Taifer, I was attached as assistant surgeon to the military hospital at Cairo.

The hospital is built within the Kasba, upon the top of a rock three or four hundred feet high. It commands a view of the town, of the governor's house, and of the wide-stretching plain which extends as far as the eye can reach.

The view is wild and grand. From my window, open to admit the evening breeze, I saw the crows and vultures as they wheeled around the rock, or hid themselves, as the twilight darkened, in the fissures. I could from it easily throw my cigar into the Rummel, which glided like a snake at the foot of the gigantic wall.

Not a sound, not a murmur, disturbed the quiet of my studies till the time came when the bugle and drum awoke all the echoes in the fortress, calling the men to the barracks.

Garrison life never had charms for me. I had never been able to give myself up to absinthe, rum, and little glasses of cognac. At the time of which I speak, a man who would not do so was charged with being wanting in *esprit de corps*. My gastric faculties, however, would not permit me to be possessed of such a kind of spirit.

I gave myself up, therefore, to visiting the wards, to drawing up my prescriptions, to a rigorous attention to my duties. When I returned home, I amused myself by making notes, turning over the leaves of some of my books, registering my observations.

In the evening, at the hour when the sun slowly withdrew his rays from the plain, I would sit—my elbow upon the sill of my window—to watch that great natural spectacle, always the same yet ever varying. In the distance a caravan wound along the side of the hills. An Arab galloped away off into the extreme horizon, until he was lost to sight in the distance. Some cork-trees stood out against the background of purple sky; and far, far below me was a flock of birds of prey, sweeping on the darkening air with their flapping wings, or hovering immovable. All this interested me—had a charm for me. I would have sat there for hours together had not I been obliged to betake me to the dissecting-room!

No one troubled himself to criticise those tastes of mine, with the exception of a certain lieutenant of volunteers named Castagnac, whose portrait it is necessary I should draw for you.

When I arrived at Constantine, as I got out of the carriage, I heard a loud voice behind me.

'Hulloa! I wager that is our assistant-surgeon.'

I turned round, and found myself in the presence of a tall infantry officer, meagre, bony, red-nosed, gray-moustached, his kepi over his ear, its point cocked up towards the sky, his sabre between his legs. It was Lieutenant Castagnac.

As I was turning away from this strange figure the lieutenant seized me by the hand—'Welcome, doctor,' said he, 'I am delighted to make your acquaintance. Morbleu! you are tired, are you not? Let us go in and I will introduce you to the assembly.'

The assembly at Constantine means, in truth, the company in the ale-house, the place where the officers meet.

We went in, for how could one resist the effusive sympathy of such a man? And yet I had read *Gil Blas!*

'Waiter—two glasses. What do you take, doctor? Cognac or rum?'

'No—curaçoa.'

‘Curaçoa! Why not go the whole length! Ha! ha! ha! You have strange taste. Waiter, a glass of absinthe for me—and full up—lift your elbow in pouring it out! That’s right! Your health, doctor.’

‘Yours, lieutenant!’

I was already in the stranger’s good graces.

It is hardly necessary for me to tell you that my liking for him did not last long. I was not long in observing that my friend Castagnac had a habit of being deeply absorbed in his newspaper when Rabelais’ quarter-of-an-hour came—when it was time to pay. That shows you what kind of fellow he was.

As a compensation I made the acquaintance of several officers of the same regiment, who often laughed with me at this new species of Amphitryon. One of these was Raymond Dutertre, a fine fellow, certainly not wanting in ability, who told me that on his arrival he, too, had had just such a reception.

‘Only,’ said he, ‘as I detest such low-spirited fellows, I told Castagnac I did so, before my comrades. He took the remark in bad part, and, my faith! we went for a turn without the walls, where I gave him a pretty little prick with my sword which did much to damage his reputation, for, thanks to some successful duels, he had a great name, and was respected as an executioner of swaggerers.’

Things went on thus until, in the middle of June, the fever made its appearance at Constantine. The hospital had in it not only soldiers, but also a good many of the townsfolk, and I was compelled to lay aside my studies in order to attend to the patients.

Amongst those who were ill at the same time were Castagnac and Dutertre. Castagnac was not, however, ill of a fever. He had that peculiar affection known as *delirium tremens*, a species of delirium, accompanied by nervous tremblings, peculiar to persons who have given themselves up to drinking. The attack is preceded by uneasiness and sudden tremblings, and is characterised by the flushed appearance of the face and the alcoholic scent of the breath.

Poor Castagnac would throw himself out of his bed, and would run about on the floor on all fours, as if he were hunting rats. He would mew in a terrible fashion, and would at intervals pronounce a cabalistic word, like a fakir in an ecstatic state—

‘Fatima! O Fatima!’

From this I assumed that the poor fellow had once been unhappy in love, and had afterwards betaken himself to drink in order to find consolation.

This idea inspired me with a profound pity for him. It was such a sad thing to see that tall thin fellow spring to the right, to the left, then draw himself together stiff as a piece of wood, his face white, his nose blue, his teeth set. One could not listen to his cries without shuddering.

At the end of half-an-hour, when he came to himself again, he would always ask—

‘What did I say, doctor? Did I say anything?’

‘No nothing, lieutenant.’

‘But I must have said something! Tell me what it was, do not keep it from me.’

‘Bah! How can I remember what you said? A few empty words! Sick people will rave now and then.’

‘A few empty words! What were they?’

‘Ha! How can I tell you? If you wish it I will put them down on the next occasion!’

Then he would grow pale and would look at me with a fixed gaze which seemed to search the bottom of my soul. He would close his loose-hanging eyelids, press his lips together, and murmur to himself—

‘A glass of absinthe would do me good.’

Then he would stretch his arms down beside him and lie perfectly still.

The next day, as I was going to Castagnac’s room, I saw coming towards me, at the end of the passage, my friend Raymond Dutertre.

‘Doctor, he said, taking my hand in his, ‘I have come to ask you to do me a favour!’

‘Willingly, my dear fellow, provided I have the power.’

‘I want you to give me permission in writing to go out for the day.’

‘As to that do not think of it—anything you like, but not permission to go out.’

‘But, doctor, it seems to me that I am all right—quite right. I have had no fever for the last four days.’

‘That is true, but there is fever in the town and I do not want to expose you to a relapse.’

‘Well then, give me a pass for two hours only—just time to go there and come back.’

‘It is impossible, my dear fellow. Do not ask me for it. It would be useless. I know well enough how tired one gets of being in an hospital, and how impatient sick folk are to get out to breathe the fresh air, but you must have patience.’

‘Well, are you determined?’

‘Quite. In eight days, if the improvement continues, we will go—’

He went off in a very bad humour. I did not mind that, but on turning round, what was my surprise to see Castagnac, his great eyes wide open, staring after his comrade, with a strange look on his face.

‘Well,’ said I, ‘how are you this morning?’

‘All right, quite right,’ he answered sharply. ‘Is that Raymond who has just gone away?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he want?’

‘Oh, nothing! He wanted me to give him a written permission to go out, and I refused it.’

‘Ah! you refused it?’

‘Certainly—what else could I do?’

Castagnac drew a long breath, and, as it were, withdrawing within himself, appeared to fall into a state of somnolency

I know not how it was, but a vague dread came over me. The voice of the man had somehow disturbed my nerves, and I went on my way full of thought.

On that day one of my patients died. I had his body carried to the dissecting-hall, and towards nine o’clock in the evening, leaving my lodging, I went down the stairs which led to the amphitheatre.

Picture to yourself a little vaulted room, fifteen feet high and twenty feet wide. Its two windows opening upon the precipice which skirts the highway to Philippeville. At the farther end is a sloping table on which is the body which I propose to dissect.

Having put down my lamp upon a stone ledge in the wall, made for the purpose, and having opened my case of instruments, I commenced work and was absorbed in it for more than two hours without interruption.

The recall had been sounded long ago. The only sound I heard was the step of the sentinel. Sometimes he would remain still, or his musket would rattle on the ground. Then, hour after hour, the patrol came round, and I heard the challenge, the distant whispering of the password, and saw the movement of the lantern casting a ray of light over the slope—brief noises, clatters, the gradual cessation of which seemed to make the silence oppressive.

'It was past twelve, and I was beginning to feel tired, when, looking by chance to the side of the room where was the open window, I was startled by a strange sight. There was a row of little screech-owls, gray, their feathers puffed out, their eyes green and squinting, fixed upon my lamp. They pressed forward to the edge of the casement, struggling with one another, each seeking to obtain a place.

These hideous birds, attracted by the smell of flesh, were awaiting my departure so that they might pounce upon their feast.

It would be impossible for me to tell you how horrified I was by this sight. I sprang towards the window, and all the birds disappeared into the gloom without, like dead leaves carried away by the wind.

At the same moment a strange noise caught my ear, a noise almost imperceptible in the still night. I leaned forward, with my hand upon the edge of the window, looking out and holding my breath so as to be able to hear the better.

Above the amphitheatre was the room of Lieutenant Castagnac, and below, between the precipice and the wall of the hospital, ran a ledge about a foot wide, covered with pieces of broken bottles and earthenware, thrown there by the hospital attendants.

But, at that hour of the night, when the least sound, the lightest breath, could be heard, I could distinguish the steps and the groping of a man proceeding along the ledge.

'Heaven grant,' I said to myself, 'that the sentinel does not see him! Should he hesitate one second he is lost!'

I had hardly finished when a husky choking voice, the voice of Castagnac, cried suddenly in the silence—

'Raymond! Where are you going?'

That exclamation went through me. It was a declaration of doom. At the same moment some debris fell down the slope, and then I heard some one clinging, with great gasps, to the narrow ledge. The cold sweat rolled down my face. I tried to see—to leave my room—to call for aid—my tongue was paralysed.

All of a sudden I heard a groan. I listened. Would nothing follow? I deceived myself. There was a burst of mocking laughter, and a window was shut to with such violence that I could hear the noise of broken glass. Profound continued silence threw its winding-sheet over the fearful drama.

How shall I go on, my friends! Terror drove me hack to the farthest end of the room. There, trembling, my hair bristling, my eyes fixed on space before me, I remained for more than twenty minutes, listening to the beating of my heart and seeking to restrain its throbs with my hands. At the end of that time I mechanically closed the window, took the lamp, mounted the stairs, and went along the passage to my room. I lay down but I could not shut an eye. I heard those gasps—those long painful heavings of the victim—and then the laughter of his murderer.

'To kill a man upon the highway with a pistol in one's hand,' I said to myself 'is no doubt dreadful, but to murder with a word—without any peril to oneself!'

Outside the sirocco was blowing. It was sweeping over the plain with low moaning, and dashing the sand and gravel of the desert even against the top of the wall. At last the violence of the feelings which possessed me made me feel the need of sleep. Fright alone kept me awake. I pictured to myself the tall Castagnac in his shirt, leaning out of his window, his neck stretched out, looking down into the profound shadowy depths of the precipice after his victim, and the thought made my blood run cold.

'It was he,' I said to myself, 'it was he! If he knew that I was here!'

Then I thought I heard the boards of the corridor creak under a stealthy step, and I lifted myself up upon my elbow, my mouth half open, listening.

At length, however, the necessity for sleep prevailed, and towards three o'clock I slept as sound as a bell.

It was full day when I awoke. The night wind had subsided. The sky was clear, and the calm was so profound that I doubted my recollection. Surely I must have had a terrible dream?

What was strange was that I felt afraid to set about ascertaining the truth. I performed my various duties, and it was not until I had visited all the rooms, and made a prolonged inquiry into the condition of each of my patients, that I betook myself to the chamber of Dutertre.

I knocked at his door. There was no answer. I opened it. His bed had not been slept in. I called the hospital assistants and asked where the lieutenant was. No one had seen him since the preceding evening.

Then summoning all my courage, I went to Castagnac's room.

A rapid glance at the window showed me that two of its panes were broken. I felt myself grow pale, but recovering myself I said, 'What a storm we had during the night! What did you think of it, lieutenant?'

He was calmly sitting with his elbows on the table, his long bony face between his hands, pretending to reach a military work.

'Parbleu!' replied he, pointing to the window. 'Look at that!'

'It looks, lieutenant,' said I, 'as though this room must be more exposed than the others—or, perhaps, you left the window open!'

An almost imperceptible muscular contraction was visible around the jaws of the old soldier.

'Faith, no,' said he, looking at me strangely. 'It was closed.'

'Ah!'

I went to him to feel his pulse.

'And how are you going on?'

'Oh, so so.'

'Certainly! You are better—just a little disturbance! In five days, lieutenant, you will be all right. I promise you. Then, however, take care. No more of that green poison—or if you do, look to yourself.'

In spite of the cheerful tone I assumed, my voice was trembling. The arm of the old scoundrel, as I held it in my hand, seemed like a serpent. I should have liked to fly. Then his eye, fixed, yet restless, was never off me for an instant. It was terrible! Nevertheless I contained myself.

As I was leaving, turning suddenly as if I had forgotten something, I said—

'By the bye, lieutenant, has Dutertre been to see you?'

His gray hair seemed to bristle. 'Dutertre?'

'Yes. He is missing—missing since yesterday. No one knows what has become of him. I expect—'

'No one has called on me,' he replied, with a little dry cough, 'no one.'

He took up his book, and I left his room as assured of his guilt as I was it was day. Unfortunately, however, I had no proof of it.

'If I denounce him,' said I to myself; when I was in my room, 'he is sure to deny it, and if he does so what proof could I bring that my assertion is true? My own bare testimony would not be sufficient of itself. I should be made odious by the accusation, and should have made a terrible enemy.'

Again, such crimes as these are not recognised by the law. In the end I resolved to keep my eye upon Castagnac without his suspecting me, believing that he would ultimately betray himself. Then I went off to the commandant, and simply reported to him the fact of Lieutenant Dutertre's disappearance.

The next day some Arabs arrived, on their way to Constantine, their asses laden with gums, and they stated that on the way to Philippeville they had seen a uniform hanging high up in the rocks of the Kasba, and that the birds of prey flew around it in hundreds, filling the air with their clamour.

It was the body of Raymond.

The remains were recovered with infinite pains, men climbing along the rocks by means of cords and ladders.

For two or three days the officers in the garrison talked about this remarkable occurrence, and a thousand guesses were made as to what could have taken place. Then other affairs distracted their attention—bezique and piquet.

Men who are daily exposed to peril have not much sympathy to waste on others. Jacques dies, Pierre takes his place. The regiment itself is immortal. It is a personification of what is called the humanitarian principle. You are, then you shall be! By existence you participate in the eternal and infinite being! Yes, I shall exist, but as what? That is the question. To-day as a lieutenant of hussars—and to-morrow as a clod of earth! Such a condition of things is worthy of a second thought.

II

My position, in the midst of the general indifference, was pitiable. Silence weighed upon me as if it were a crime. The sight of Castagnac filled me with indignation, with a sort of insupportable disgust. The gloomy look of that man, his ironical smile, chilled my blood. He would now and again look at me as if he would search to the bottom of my soul, and these furtive glances, full of malignity, did not at all add to my ease.

'He suspects something,' I said to myself. 'If he was only certain, I should be lost. Such a man shrinks from nothing.'

These thoughts imposed an intolerable restraint upon me. My work suffered in consequence of it. It was necessary I should put an end to such a state of things—but how?

Heaven came to my assistance.

One day as I passed through the wicket, about three o'clock in the afternoon, in order to go to the town, the corporal of the infirmary, running to me, gave me a piece of paper, which he had found in Raymond's tunic.

'It is a note from a certain woman named Fatima,' said the good fellow. 'It seems the girl was attached to Lieutenant Dutertre. I thought, major, that perhaps the letter would interest you.'

As I read the letter I was much astonished. It was very short, and indeed merely named a time and a place of meeting. But what a revelation was the signature!

'Then,' said I, 'the exclamations of Castagnac when he had his severest fits, the exclamation "Fatima, Fatima," was the name of a woman, of a living woman, and she loved Dutertre! Who knows? Perhaps it was in order to keep this appointment that Raymond asked me to give him the written permission! Yes, yes! The note is dated the third of July. It must have been so. Poor fellow! As he could not slip out in the daytime, he ventured along that dreadful ledge at night; and then—Castagnac heard him!'

Turning these things over in my mind, I descended to the foot of the rock, and found myself in front of a low brick building, open to the wind, as is the custom in the East.

In the back of this place a certain Sidi Houmaïum, armed with a long wooden spoon and gravely sitting in his slippers, was stirring the perfumed powder of Moka in a vessel full of boiling water.

I must tell you that I had cured Sidi Houmaïum of a malignant skin affection, which had defied all the panaceas and all the charms of the native doctors and surgeons. The good fellow in consequence cherished quite an affection for me.

All around the room ran a bench covered with little rope mats, and upon this bench sat five or six Moors, each with his red fez with its blue tassel on his head, his legs crossed, his eyes half closed, his *chibouk* between his lips, silently inhaling the perfume of the Turkish tobacco and of the Arabian berry.

I do not know how it was, but the idea occurred to me to consult Sidi Houmaïum. It was one of those strange impulses which one is unable to account for, and of which one cannot explain the origin.

I went into the *botéga* with a solemn step, to the great surprise of the folk within, and took my place on the bench.

The *kaouadji*, without seeming to remember me, brought me a *chibouk* and a cup of hot coffee.

I sipped the beverage; I smoked my *chibouk*. Time went slowly on, and towards six o'clock the hypocritical tones of the muetzin were heard, calling the pious to prayer.

All rose, passed their hands over their beards, and set out for the mosque.

At last I was alone.

Sidi Houmaïum, casting around him an uneasy look, came to me and bent down to kiss my hand.

'Sir Taleb, what has brought you to my humble place?' he asked. What service can I do you I'

'You can introduce me to Fatima.'

'Fatima, the Moorish girl?'

'Yes, the Moorish girl.'

'Sir Taleb, in your mother's name, do not see that girl.'

'Why not?'

'She is the ruin of all who come near her. She has a deadly charm—do not see her.'

'Sidi Houmaïum, my resolution is unchangeable. Fatima possesses a charm! Very well. I possess a charm—a more powerful one. Her's deals death; mine gives life, youth, beauty. Tell her, Sidi Houmaïum, tell hem' that the wrinkles of old age efface themselves as I approach. Tell her that I have found the pippins of the apple of Eve—that apple which has, for countless ages, condemned all to die; tell her I have set them, and that from them has sprung up the tree of life, the sweet fruits of which give the beauty of eternal youth. If one tastes of it, however old she be, though she be ugly and wrinkled like a witch, she becomes young again—her wrinkles disappear, her skin becomes white and sweet as a lily, her lips red and perfumed like the queen of flowers, her teeth sparkling as those of a young jackal.'

'But, Sir Taleb,' cried the Mussulman, 'Fatima is not old. She is young and pretty—so pretty that she would be worthy of a sultan.'

'I know it. She is not old, but she will become so. I want to see her. Remember, Sidi Houmaïum, remember your promises.'

'Since such is your desire, Sir Taleb, come here again to-morrow at the same time. But remember what I tell you. Fatima makes a terrible use of her beauty.'

‘Rest assured, I will not forget.’

And extending my hand to the *coulouglis*, I went out as I had come in, my head held high, and my step majestic.

You may imagine with what impatience I awaited the hour of my appointment with Sidi Houmaïum. I could hardly restrain myself. A hundred times I went over the great court awaiting the cry of the muetzin, taking off my hat to every one I met, and even chatting with the sentinel in order to kill time.

At last the verse of the Koran was heard in the high air, hovering on from minaret to minaret over the still city. I hurried along the street, and found Sidi Houmaïum closing his *botéga*.

‘Well?’ said I, almost breathless.

‘Fatima is waiting for you, Sir Taleb.’

He put up the bar, and, without another word, led me on.

The sky was dazzling in its brilliancy. The tall white houses, a veritable procession of ghosts, clothed here and there with a ray from the sun, reflected their mournful pallor on the few passers-by.

Sidi Houmaïum walked on without looking aside, the long sleeves of his bernous almost sweeping the ground; and as we walked I could hear him reciting in Arabic, in a low tone, some prayers which sounded something like those of our pilgrims.

At length, leaving the great street, he plunged into the narrow Suma alley, so narrow that two people cannot walk abreast. There in the black mud of the gutter, under wretched sheds, grovels a crowd of cobblers, of embroiderers on morocco-leather, of sellers of Indian spices, aloes, dates, rare scents. Some come and go with an apathetic air, others are squatted down, their legs crossed, meditating on heaven only knows what, in an atmosphere of blue smoke exhaled from their mouth and nose.

The African sun penetrates the dark passage with its golden beams, lighting up here an old gray-beard with hooked nose, with his *chibouk* in his fat hand, the fingers of which are loaded with rings; farther on it rests on the graceful profile of a young Jewess, thoughtful and sad, within her shop; or perhaps, better still, it lights up an armourer’s stall, with his slender yataghans, his long Bedouin guns with their stocks inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The smell from the ground struggles with the keen odour of the laboratory. The sunlight chases the shadows, carves them into grotesque shapes, lightens them up into dim gloom—never able to entirely banish them.

All of a sudden, in one of the intricate turns of the alley, Sidi Houmaïum stopped before a low door and knocked.

‘You will follow me,’ I said in a low voice. ‘You can act as interpreter.’

‘Fatima speaks French,’ he answered, without turning his head.

At that moment the shining face of a negress appeared at the wicket. Sidi Houmaïum spoke some words in Arabic. The door opened and suddenly shut itself behind me. The negress went out by a side door I had not observed, and Sidi Houmaïum remained in the alley.

After having waited some minutes I began to grow impatient, when the side door opened, and the negress who had let me in signed to me to accompany her.

I went on some paces, and found myself in a small inner court, paved with mosaic work of little delf bricks. Several doors opened into the same court.

The negress led me on into a room, the open windows of which were hung with silk curtains of Moorish design. All around were cushions of violet chintz, a large amber-coloured reed mat covered the floor, interminable arabesques of flowers and of fantastic fruits were displayed on

the ceiling. What, however, attracted all my attention was Fatima herself, as she leaned on her elbow on the divan, her eyes veiled by her eyelids with long black lashes, her lips slightly parted, her nose straight and fine, her arms loaded with heavy bracelets. She had little feet, and calmly played with her slippers embroidered with greenish gold, when I stood upon the threshold.

For some seconds the Moorish girl looked at me out of the corner of her eyes, and then, a slight smile parting her lips, said in a self-possessed voice—

‘Come in, Sir Taleb. Sidi Houmaïum told me you were coming, and I know what brings you here. You are very good to interest yourself in poor Fatima, who is growing old, for she is now seventeen. Seventeen! It is an age of regrets and wrinkles! A time for late repentance! Ah, Sir Taleb, sit down and make yourself at home. You bring me the apple of Eve, do you not? The apple which keeps one youthful and beautiful Ah! poor Fatima has need of it!

I knew not what to answer. I was confused, but recalling to myself the errand on which I had come, my blood ceased to run so fast, and I became as cool as marble.

‘You rally with much grace, Fatima,’ said I, seating myself upon the divan. ‘I have heard your wit praised no less than your beauty, and I find that what was said of you is true.’

‘Ah!’ said she, ‘and by whom?’

‘By Dutertre.’

‘Dutertre?’

‘Yes—Raymond Dutertre, the young officer who fell down the precipice of the Rummei. He whom you loved, Fatima.’

She opened her big eyes in surprise.

‘Who says I loved him?’ she asked me with a strange look. ‘It is not true. Did he tell you that?’

‘No, but I know it. This note proves it to me; this letter which you wrote to him, and which has been the cause of his death; which led him to risk his life at night on the rocks of the Kasba.

Hardly had I finished those words, when the girl rose abruptly, her eyes sparkling with a sombre fire.

‘I was sure of it,’ she said. ‘Yes. When the negress came and told me that some one had been killed there, I said “Aïssa, it is he who has done it. It is he! Ah! the wretch!” ’

While I looked at her, astounded, not comprehending her words, she came to me and said in a low voice—

‘Will he die for it? Will he die for it soon? I should like to see him cut to pieces.’

She took me by the arm, and looked at me as if she would read my soul. I shall never forget the livid pallor of that face, those great dark gleaming eyes, those trembling lips.

‘Of whom do you speak, Fatima?’ I asked, quite bewildered. ‘Explain yourself. I do not know what you mean.’

‘Of whom? Why, of Castagnac! You are Taleb in the hospital. Well then, poison him, he is a villain. He got me to write to the officer to come here. I did not wish him to come. I well knew that the young fellow had sought an introduction to me for a long time, but I knew that Castagnac contemplated some evil against him. When I refused to write he threatened to come from the hospital to beat me if I did not do so at once. See. There is his letter. I tell you, he is a villain.’

It would pain me, my friends, to repeat to you all that the Moorish girl told me about Castagnac. She told me the story of their love—how he had illuded her, how he used to beat her.

When I left Fatima’s house my heart was heavy.

Sidi Houmaïum waited for me at the gate, and we retraced our steps through the Suma alley.

‘Take care,’ said the *coulouglis*, looking at me out of the corner of his eyes, ‘take care, Sir Taleb. You are very pale. The evil angel hovers over your head!’

I pressed the hand of the good fellow, and said—

‘I fear nothing.’

My resolution was taken. Without losing a moment I went to the Kasba, entered the hospital, and knocked at the door of Castagnac’s room.

‘Come in.’

It would seem the sight of me was not very welcome, for when he looked round he gave a slight start.

‘Huhloa! is it you?’ said he, with a forced smile. ‘I was not expecting you.’

For an answer I showed him the letter he had written to Fatima.

He became pale, and when he had looked at it for some seconds he was about to throw himself upon me, but I stopped him with a gesture.

‘If you move a step,’ I said, laying my hand upon my sword hilt, ‘I will kill you like a dog. You scoundrel! You have murdered Dutertre! I was in the amphitheatre and overheard all! Do not deny it. Your conduct towards that girl has been disgraceful. How could a French officer degrade himself to such a degree! Now, listen. I would give you up to justice, but your disgrace would also reflect upon us. If you have any courage kill yourself. I give you till to-morrow. If to-morrow, at seven o’clock, I find you alive, I will myself hand you over to the commandant.’

Having said these words, I left the room without waiting for his response, and hastened to order the sentinel not to allow Lieutenant Castagnac to leave the hospital on any pretence whatever. I also ordered the door-keeper to keep a sharp watch, and told him that I should hold him responsible for whatever might follow if he was negligent or cowardly. Then I calmly walked to my lodgings, as if nothing had happened. I was even more merry than usual, and prolonged my dinner till close upon eight o’clock.

Since Castagnac’s criminality had been proved to me so certainly, I was pitiless. Raymond cried to me to revenge him.

When I had dined I went to the shop of a seller of resin and bought a pitch-torch, such as our spahis carry at their night carousals. After that, entering the hospital, I went direct to the amphitheatre, taking care to double lock the door behind me.

The voice of the *muetzin* announced the tenth hour; the mosques were empty; the night was dark.

I sat down in front of my window, breathing the lukewarm puffs of the breeze, and gave myself up to thoughts which had beforetimes been so dear to me. How much had I suffered, how much trouble had I not gone through during the last five days. In all my past life I could not find the like. It seemed to me as though I was escaping from the grasp of some malignant spirit to enjoy new freedom.

So time roiled on. The guard had already twice relieved the sentinels, when, all of a sudden, I heard quick stealthy footsteps upon the stair. A light knock echoed on the door.

I made no reply.

A nervous hand sought the handle.

‘It is Castagnac,’ I said to myself, astonished.

Two seconds passed.

‘Open,’ cried some one from outside.

I was not deceived. It was he.

I listened, and heard him try to force open the stout oak door with his shoulders.

All was silent. He listened. I remained perfectly quiet, holding my breath. Something was thrown down upon the stairs. I could hear his steps die away.

I had escaped death.

But what if he should return?

Fearing another and more fierce attempt upon the door, I put up the two great bars which made a veritable prison of the room.

It was labour thrown away, for on reseating myself I saw the shadow of Castagnac thrown upon the wall between the two bastions. The moon, which rose on the side of the town, threw the shadow of the hospital upon the precipice. A few stars sparkled on the horizon, not a breath of air was stirring.

Before committing himself to the dangerous path the old soldier halted, looking towards my window. He hesitated for a considerable time.

At the end of about a quarter of an hour he made the first step, proceeding with his back against the wall. He was come to the middle of the ledge, and no doubt flattered himself he would now be able to arrive at the slope which descends to the Kasba, when I uttered the death-cry—

‘Raymond, where are you going?’

Although he was taken by surprise, he had, however, more coolness than his victim. The wretched fellow did not budge an inch, and answered me with an ironical laugh—

‘Ah! ah! Are you there, doctor? I thought you were. Listen, I shall come back, and we shall have a little account to settle together.’

Lighting my torch and holding it over the precipice, I cried—

‘It is too late. Look, you scoundrel, that is your tomb.’

The immense tiers of the abyss with their black rocks, glittering, bristling in grotesque shapes, were lighted up down to the very bottom of the valley.

The scene was titanic. The white light of the torch fell, step by step, between the rocks, making their enormous shadows dance in the profundity, and seemed to hew out endless shadowy forms.

I was overwhelmed by the scene myself, and recoiled a step, as if struck with giddiness.

But he—he who was not separated from that gulf by more than the space of a single foot, how great must his terror have been!

His knees shook, his hands clung to the wall. I advanced once more. An immense bat, attracted by the light, hovered in mystic circles around the huge walls, like a black rat, with sharp nails, swimming in a circle of light. Far off, very far off, glimmered the waters of the Rummel.

‘Mercy!’ cried the murderer, in broken tones. ‘Mercy!’

I had not the courage to prolong his torture, and I threw my torch into space.

It fell slowly, carrying the scattered flame down into the deep shadows, lighting by turns the layers of rock, and sprinkling its dazzling sparks over the thorns.

It became no more than a speck in the night, falling, falling. Then a shadow shot between it and my eye like a thunderbolt.

I knew that justice had been done.

As I ascended the steps from the amphitheatre I trod upon something. I bent down. It was my sword. Castagnac, with his wonted treachery, had resolved to kill me with my own weapon, so that it might be believed I had committed suicide.

As to the rest—as I had foreseen, the door of my room had been broken open, my bed turned upside down, my papers scattered about. He had done his work well in my room.

This at once dissipated every feeling of pity which had occurred to me when I thought of the scoundrel's miserable end.