Monsieur Vénus

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BY RACHILDE

TRANSLATED BY MADELEINE BOYD

INTRODUCTION BY ERNEST BOYD

PREFACE BY MAURICE BARRÈS

illustrations by

MAJESKA

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introduction

BY ERNEST BOYD

WHILE all of Paris was still shocked and fascinated by the apparition of the young lady whom Maurice Barrès promptly nicknamed "Mademoiselle Baudelaire," after reading *Monsieur Vénus,* the author, who had not yet met and married Alfred Vallette, the editor of the *Mercure de France,* felt compelled to confide to the public certain details of her autobiography. "Mlle. Rachilde—whose real name is Marguerite Eymery—was born near Périgueux. Périgord is a lovely country, of charming landscapes, well watered, with hills and meadows, blue skies and. . . . The inhabitants of this country are very dirty, very gossipy, very boastful: Southerners, only more so, but lacking the poetic flights and the love of art which distinguishes Provence.—Who would not prefer the vermillion horizon of Dordogne to the fuliginous roof of Paris? The air of that peaceful countryside is so pure!—Unfortunately, the soil of that blessed land contains within it a

small black spot which is the emblem of refined decay, the truffle, and in order to find this ignoble aphrodisiac an abundance of pigs is needed. For that matter, the pigs are of good quality. But their keepers, the peasants of Périgord—what a vile race, greedy, lazy poltroons, who never wash! That black spot is spreading. . . . Bonapartism is largely represented as well as Royalism, not to mention the sincerest clericalism and one or two specimens of Socialism in the worst taste. The result is that most people do not salute each other in the street of the country town; the prefects are the objects of wild hatreds, mud is often thrown at the carriages of the gentry from the neighbouring estates, and the pious render the lives of the unhappy prostitutes of the lower quarters absolutely miserable. And it is always damp! And there are always truffles, the unhealthy product of the shadows, slyly undermining solid stomachs and healthy minds! I detest truffles, I don't like pork, I don't like peasants, I don't like Bonapartists, Royalists, Socialists, pious people or prefects. Apart from these, the pure air agrees with me and I do not object to prostitutes.

"Mademoiselle Rachilde was born in 1860 at Le Cros, (which is the patois for 'hole') between Château-l'Evêque and Périgueux. Le Cros was a damp estate around which grew too many periwinkles, too much ivy, too much Virginia creeper, too many weeping willows and too many truffles. In front of the house was a pond full

of frogs; at the back there were farms filled with not very legitimate but very dirty babies. In the garden the damp prevented the strawberries from ripening, the radishes were eaten by some beast we could never see, and if the cows ever wandered into this garden, their milk dried up. The cherry jam was blue—moldy a fortnight after it was made; on the other hand, wild oats were everywhere, tossing their heads with the insolence of a queen's aigrette.

"So Rachilde came into the world in a room at Le Cros opposite the frog-pond, on the wild oats side. Her father was a rather taciturn officer, her mother . . . well, a mother is so compromised by the birth of a Rachilde that I shall refrain from speaking of the lady, a gentle, honest creature. I may add that the family, though highly respectable, was absolutely at loggerheads without ever knowing why, and lost in futile discussions a large sum of tranquillity (not being a parent, I can speak my mind).

"It appears that Rachilde was mortally pale when she was born, because of some corpse which the young mother had suddenly seen, and the poor thing still preserves this mortal pallor, to her disadvantage in the eyes of certain people.

"At the age of six weeks Rachilde used to travel on the knees of her nurse, an extremely ugly red-haired woman, but greatly loved by the baby. Her name was Lala, but

musical people always added: Rouk. Lala and Rachilde went from one garrison town to another. The former could not read and the latter refused to learn, which was a charming combination of obstinacies. Consequently, when she was eight, Mademoiselle Rachilde, somewhat stupid, always pale and very silent, was the despair of her parents, but the joy of her nurse who still carried her in the basket when she went to market.

"Religious instruction? . . . Nil (as they say in the school reports). French history: a few battles . . . Geography: she does not know where Germany is situated on the map. Morals: For each blow you receive, give two, and never play with little boys because they will take away all your sweets, nor with little girls because they will want to share with you. Accomplishments: drawing, music, La Fontaine's fables and the incoherent stories of Lala."

Against this background Rachilde has described her lonely, morbid childhood, a setting worthy of *The Fall of the House of Ussher*. On her mother's side she was descended from a Grand Inquisitor of Spain, and her great-grandfather had been a canon of the cathedral of Saint Front at Périgueux, who was unfrocked, married, and became a celebrated lawyer. The peasants believed that he had been turned into a werewolf and that he haunted the countryside. In this dreary, lonely, ghostly atmosphere Rachilde grew up, dreaming her strange,

childish fantasies. At the age of five she noted in her copybook that "the engine stops for five minutes at Negronde because it is dreadfully thirsty." Spiritualism attracted her and by means of table-rapping she related the story of a medieval Swedish nobleman called Rachilde, from whom she adopted the pseudonym which she was soon to make famous. She actually first began to write for the public at the age of twelve, when she sent a story, which was accepted, to a local newspaper. This alarmed her parents who tried to marry her, when she was fourteen, but she escaped by attempting suicide in the pond beneath the weeping willows. The papers of the district continued to publish her stories, which her father read aloud to the family circle in perfect innocence of their authorship, and so careful was he of their author's innocence that certain passages were omitted.

Rachilde was eighteen when her first novel appeared as a serial in a Paris newspaper. This was *Monsieur de la Nouveauté,* which was published in book form in 1880, with a preface by Arsène Houssaye, whom Sarah Bernhardt had approached on behalf of the young author, who had by this time settled definitely in Paris. The book, according to Rachilde, brought in the sum of two hundred and fifty-six francs in two years. Then, to quote her own words, she "indulged herself in the luxury of a brain fever, on the specious pretext that Catulle Mendès was a seductive man. . . . She saw Catulle Mendès, lis-

tened to him, did not like him, but almost fell in love with him. For a madwoman to love the handsome Mendès was the height of madness . . . so she did not become Catulle's mistress." Instead, when she recovered from her fever, she immediately proceeded to the office of Catulle Mendès and returned him five francs which she owed him for a cab fare. With her convalescence came a determination to be independent at all costs. A small income for writing fashion articles was all that she had when she began her rounds of the newspaper offices and the literary cafés. In order to save money she decided to wear men's clothes and cut her hair, which she sold to Prince Romuald Gédroye, Grand Chamberlain of the Emperor Alexander III of Russia. Her visiting card bore the inscription: "Rachilde, Man of Letters."

At the Café de l'Avenir she made the acquaintance of the Decadent group, Verlaine, Victor and Paul Margueritte, Jean Moréas, Stanislas de Guaita, Edmond d'Haraucourt, Jules Renard and others. She hated the smell of the place, she tells us, but liked the people. They would be, she felt, her salvation, but "as she had come alone, they took her for a lady of the evening and decided that she was too thin." Faced with absolute poverty, "Rachilde said to herself that she must either throw herself cheerfully into the river or . . . write in two weeks that disgusting work, *Monsieur Vénus*. It was the most scandalous success, not from the point of view of

money but of vice. . . . People wondered if the virile Raoule was not Rachilde herself. . . . The *Gil Blas* declared that it was an obscene work. Sully Prudhomme said, in the presence of witnesses, 'that is a curious book!' Wives forbade their husbands to read it. M. Henri Fouquier, under the pseudonym of Columbine, shouted that the author, who had yellow hair and green eyes, was a dangerous monster."

The book was suppressed in Belgium, where it was first published, and Rachilde was condemned to a fine of two thousand francs and two years in prison. She was accused of having invented a new vice. Whereupon Verlaine said: "Ah, my dear child. If you had invented a new vice you would be a benefactor of humanity." At all events, the scandal made her famous, and she prudently refrained from crossing the frontier into Belgium. She was received by the Decadents, not as an erring female, but as one of themselves: a man of letters. One evening she slapped Moréas in the face, during a literary argument, because he insulted Victor Hugo. She was one of the group associated with *Lutèce* and *La Plume* at the beginning of the Symbolist Movement. The year after her marriage to Alfred Vallette, she had a child and the *Mercure de France* was founded. For nearly forty years her literary and personal life has been intimately bound up with that remarkable venture.

At one of the *soirées* of *La Plume* F. A. Cazals com-

posed a song which is worth quoting in part, as indicating the attitude of the time towards Rachilde:

J'suis névropathe et mon papa
Qu'était de bonn' famille,
Dès mon jeune âge s'occupa
De fair' de moi sa fille.
Au jour d'aujourd'hui
J'ai déjà produit
Beaucoup plus qu'René Ghil . . . de;
Je fais des bouquins
Qui font du boucan
C'est moi que j'suis Rachilde!

Quand je fus grande ma maman,
Une dam' fort polie,
Me dit: faut t'marier, c'est l'moment,
Puisqu'on te trouv' jolie.
Quand on a vingt ans
On dit qu'on a l'temps:
L'on s'amuse et l'on fume.
As-tu des lecteurs
Et des éditeurs
Pour vivre de ta plume?

Je suis un monstre d'impudeur
(La Critiqu' le proclame);
Je n'écris pas avec mon coeur,
Ma plume est une lame;

Des certificats
Prouv'nt que j'suis un cas
Psycho-pathologique.
J'écris comm' je sens,
Je sens jusqu'au sang,
Donc ma plume est logique.

J'ai dépeint dans Monsieur Vénus
Un amour sanguinaire.
Barrès m'a surnommé' sans plus
Mademoisell' Baud'laire.
J'aim' les animaux
Et les anormaux
Mais je crains l'accolade
Des bas bleus jaloux
Et des auteurs fous
De la Marquis' de Sade!

For many years Rachilde reviewed fiction for the *Mercure de France* and to-day she is the author of some forty volumes of prose; plays, stories and novels. Their titles at once evoke the strange quality of her imagination: *La Marquise de Sade, La Sanglante Ironie, Le Démon de l'Absurde, L'Heure Sexuelle, La Princesse des Ténèbres, Les Hors-Nature, L'Animale, La Haine Amoureuse.* When someone suggested to Barbey d'Aurevilly that her work was pornographic, he replied: "Pornographic, yes. But how distinguished!" And Huysmans

described her books as "a celestial hell." All of them are curious and perverse in their brilliant treatment of strange and exotic themes, which have suggested inevitable comparisons with Hoffmann and Poe. Maurice Barrès, however, was right when he insisted upon her affiliations with Baudelaire, whose fame has long since transcended the mere notoriety which threatened *Les Fleurs du Mal.*

At the outset of her career there were not more than half a dozen women writers of note in Paris and their position was very different from that to which their successors have become accustomed. Time and change have in no wise lessened the distinction with which Rachilde stands out amongst her contemporaries today. She is unique and is assuredly one of the foremost figures in modern French fiction. Remy de Gourmont once wrote to her: "Feminine literature is the polite way women have of making love in public, but in you there is not too much of that . . . because in a literary sense you are not a woman." Bizarre and morbid, the hallucinations by which her imagination is haunted have the strength of a creative intensity which absolves her from the charge of mere sensationalism.

Barbey d'Aurevilly, Verlaine, Huysmans, Remy de Gourmont, Maurice Barrès, Jules Renard, Maurice Maeterlinck—the names of those who have recorded their

admiration for Rachilde are as distinguished as they are numerous, for the list might be extended to include such conservative critics as André Beaunier and Camille Mauclair; poets and novelists as diverse as Léon Bloy, Laurent Tailhade and Albert Samain; Victor Margueritte, Louis Dumur and Francis de Miomandre. To-day Madame Vallette is no longer the "androgyne of letters" who challenged the literary world of her generation in novels and autobiographical prefaces of the most candid insolence. In one of the latter, anticipating Whistler, she spoke of *l'art de se faire injurier,* which might be interpreted: the gentle art of making enemies. That is an art for which she has substituted the art of making friends, as the younger generation of Francis Carco and Alfred Machard have testified.

That is not to say that Rachilde has ceased to be a provocative and challenging personality, whose greenish, catlike eyes and disconcerting wit can still disturb the orthodox. Despite a superficial air of realism in her work, she is essentially a combination of Romanticism and Symbolism, at once sensual and cerebral, and it is this apparently contradictory element in her which gives its peculiar savour to her work and personality. A French critic, Marcel Coulon, has pointed out that *Monsieur Vénus* is the first authentic novel which the Symbolist Movement produced, the predecessor of Remy de Gour-

mont's *Sixtine* which, it will be remembered, was described as "a cerebral novel." Her genius resides in this symbolism, the link between her realism and her imagination: the mark of her high aesthetic seriousness.

prefatory letter

MY DEAR RACHILDE:

Since you told me that *Monsieur Vénus* was to be reprinted, I have very much wanted to give you twenty beautiful pages, explaining how and why it is a masterpiece. You have a large public, but one not sufficiently convinced that it is right in admiring you. *Monsieur Vénus* is still considered a book for circulating libraries, for the majority. I am sure that it would be rendering the public and the critics a real service to point out without pleasantries or flattery (as if it were a book published in Holland a century ago) that it is the only book written by a woman about how humiliating it is for a woman to be loved.

It won't be a preface (which would please neither you nor me) that I shall add to the book, but a study of a certain kind of love. Your book will then be a reprint for bibliophiles, and the ideas elaborated in my preface will be work already done for the writers of short reviews and other superficial critics.

If you are willing, be assured that you will be doing a favor to your friend and admirer.

Cordially yours,

MAURICE

Saturday
19 rue Chaptal.

preface

THE COMPLICATIONS OF LOVE

THOUGH this book is rather daring, I can't say that it really shocks me. Very serious people I know have not been scandalized, but amused, astonished, and interested; they place *Monsieur Vénus* on the forbidden shelves of their libraries, along with certain eighteenth century books which disturb our sensibilities but make us think.

Monsieur Vénus explains the soul of a very unusual young woman. I believe this book should be regarded as an anatomy. Those who are interested only in the nuances of good writing will lose their time turning these pages; but when most of the books they appreciate have been forgotten for a long time, people will still be seeking in this book the violent emotion which the spectacle of unusual perversity always gives to inquiring and thoughtful minds.

The nicety of the perverseness of this book lies in the fact that it was written by a young girl of twenty. A

marvellous masterpiece from Belgium, a masterpiece which revolted critical opinion at first, and was read only by the foul-minded and by a few of the very thoughtful, this volume, with all its tender and wicked passions and with all its forms of decadent love, is the work of a child, of the sweetest and most retiring child! Of course, for the civilized mind, this adds to it a supreme charm. The refinements of vice, bursting from the dreams of a virgin, are inexplicably mysterious, as mysterious as crime, genius or a child's folly, and in some ways similar to all three.

Rachilde was born with an infamous mind, infamous and playful. All those who love the unusual, study it uneasily. Jean Lorrain, who must have been pleased with her, gives a delightful sketch of his visit to Rachilde. "I found," he said, "a school girl, with sober and reserved mien, very pale, it is true, but with a studious schoolgirl's pallor, rather thin, frail, with extremely small hands, with the grave profile of a young Greek or a young Frenchman in love . . . and eyes—such eyes! Wide, wide, made heavy by unbelievable eyelashes, and clear as water, eyes which ignore everything, so much so that one can easily believe that Rachilde does not see with those eyes, but with others at the back of her head, with the aid of which she seeks and discovers the strong red pepper with which she spices her works." These

lines, which recall Whistler, express perfectly the pallor and gravity of this firebrand.

But we, who ordinarily dislike obscenity, would not write about this book merely to praise a queer child. We love *Monsieur Vénus,* because it is an analysis of one of the most curious cases of self-love produced by our pride-sick century. Those feverishly written pages, despite all their artistic weaknesses, are as interesting to the psychologist as *Adolphe,* as *Mlle. De Maupin,* as *Crime D'Amour,* which contain studies of some of the rare phenomena of love.

Of course the little girl who wrote this marvellous *Monsieur Vénus* did not have such æsthetics worked out in her head. She did not plan to give us an extraordinary monograph upon the sickness of the century. No, she simply had bad instincts, which she acknowledged with incredible malice. She had always been improper. When still very young—erratic, generous, full of strange enthusiasms—she frightened her parents, the gentlest parents in the world; she astonished Périgord. Instinctively she began to describe the emotions of an unusual virgin —herself. Gathering her petticoats gently between her legs, this child slid down the enervating incline which goes from Joseph Delorme to *Les Fleurs Du Mal,* and lower still—she slid gaily, carelessly, as, with a meaner brain and a different education, she would have shot down a roller coaster.

Young girls seem very complicated to us, because we don't perceive clearly enough that they are governed only by their instincts, being small animals, tricky, selfish, and passionate. At twenty Rachilde wrote a book which amazed everybody, and wrote it with scarcely any reflection; she wrote easily, following her instincts. The wonder is that she should have had such instincts.

In all her works, which are numerous today, Rachilde has done nothing but tell her own story.

I do not need to point out where *Monsieur Vénus* is true or false; any reader who knows the romantic exaggerations of a twenty-year-old brain will easily distinguish the embellishments of the author from the authentic passages. I imagine that if one suppresses the childishness of the setting and the tragedy of the story, keeping only the essential features of Raoule de Vénérande and of the deplorable Jacques Silvert, one would be very close to one of the most extraordinary deformities of love, which the *maladie du siècle* has produced in the soul of a young woman.

Here is the summary of the little masterpiece:

Mlle. Raoule de Vénérande is a delicate, sensitive girl, with thin lips of a not especially pleasing contour. In a flower-maker's shop she discovers a young workman. Crowned with roses, which he skilfully weaves into garlands, this young man, with very dark red hair, delights her because of his dimpled chin, his childishly clear and

smooth flesh, and the little line about his neck, a line like that which encircles the neck of a plump, new-born babe; and then his eyes, like a suffering dog's, with a thin film of tears over them. All the description is in this vein, common-place and natural. Raoule settles this fat, pretty boy in a romantic apartment; she catches him licking even the rollers of the furniture underneath their multicoloured fringes, drunk with the folly of a fiancée with her trousseau. With a very witty cynicism she upsets him when he wishes to be amiable, she pushes him into a dressing-room and causes him to blush from her audacity in examining and complimenting him, this lout she has picked up in the name of charity. And the poor humiliated male kneels upon the train of Raoule's dress and sobs. Because, as Rachilde excellently says, he was the son of a drunkard and a prostitute, and his only honor lay in tears. This *Monsieur Vénus,* completely desexed by a series of ingenious devices, becomes Raoule's mistress—that is to say, she loves him, humours him, caresses him, is irritated by him, and is tender to him, without ever yielding to his desires, which would immediately make her the lout's inferior. She trembles when she is near him, but she despises him. She defines her taste admirably: "I shall love Jacques as a man hopelessly loves his dead fiancée."

That is the theme of the novel, as I like to see it, stripped of the equivocations which only weaken the

book and which smack too much of a virgin's ignorance, the ignorance of a virgin who, I believe, was tampering with things about which she did not know. It insures Rachilde a very definite standing in the hierarchy of intellect.

She is not a moralist, and at twenty she would have been really unbearable if she had pretended to be. Indeed, it is obvious throughout the book that Rachilde admires Raoule de Vénérande.

And she is not a psychologist with a purely detached interest in the complexities of human behaviour. She describes all the very personal acts of a proud young woman; but does not explain the development of such a nature. After reading her we still do not know by what combination of the emotions and the intellect, in a society as strait-laced as ours, in a family as respectable as hers, such a freak could appear.

Rachilde is very witty and has a coquettish lightness, but she is not very much interested in improving the form of her work by hard labor. Neither a moralist, although she puts forward a theory of love, nor a psychologist, although she sometimes analyzes, nor an artist, in spite of her brilliant mind, Rachilde belongs to the most interesting category of writers, in the opinion of fastidious and disdainful minds. She writes sincere pages only to excite and intensify her own sensations. Her book is the prolongation of her life. To such writers, the novel

is only a means of expressing that emotion which the humdrum of life obliges one to repress, or at least to conceal.

Perhaps *Monsieur Vénus* is at bottom a true story; but were it only a dream, it would, none the less, show a very peculiar state of mind. I will add that such dreams are extremely powerful. The woman who dreams, who weeps, who tells of a love she longs for, as a rule soon secures it. Such perversions of the instincts, adoration for a wretched creature who is pretty as a child, plump and weak as a woman, but of the male sex, frequently occurs through the ages. According to laws which are beyond our comprehension, strange ancestral desires arise, sometimes, from our subconsciousness, where they have long lain dormant. Raoule de Vénérande, that pale, thin-lipped, mad woman, who bathes the ambiguous body of Jacques Silvert, recalls, despite all the differences of climate, civilization, and epoch, the Phrygian vertigo, when the women lamented Attis, the small, pink, too-fat male. These obscure complications of love are not made up of enervation alone, for with them is mixed a kind of mysticism. The Raoule de Vénérande of the novel has for an adviser a pious relative, who never ceases to stigmatize troubled humanity. Rachilde writes: "God should have created love and the senses separately. Real love should be made up of nothing but warm friendship. Let us sacrifice the bestial senses."

Such tender but, in spite of all, impure dreams have always tempted the proudest minds. A Catholic novelist, Joseph Peladan, thought he could yield to those unhealthy sensations without offending his religion. However, the man who thinks to satisfy with such sensualism his entire nature, his noble desires for justice, tenderness, and beauty, is descending a miserable path. Human love is sure to be mixed with many obscure complications, if parenthood does not suffice. The superior man learns very quickly that he cannot expect anything from a woman. Whatever kindness he sees in these creatures' glances he shies away from; it is only youth which lends beauty to their clear eyes; with their first words he encounters the humiliation of being fascinated by a lower being. Woman, on her side, reasons the same way; she won't yield to man, who is often very brutal, but whose embraces can cause a slight tremor in her, curious and insatiable as she is.

To what mysterious cults are the men and women, whom self-love keeps apart, to devote themselves? In what peculiar practices shall they seek caresses, they who often complicate their moral susceptibilities with an extreme nervous tension?

The *maladie du siècle,* which must always enter into the discussion, one of the most interesting feminine forms of which is clearly exhibited in *Monsieur Vénus,* is made up of an excessive nervous fatigue, and a pride

hitherto unknown. Before this book was written, all the peculiarities it brought into the consciousness, so far as love is concerned, had not been pointed out. Passing over that divine and troubling elegy of René, it is in M. de Custine, a great unknown novelist, and in Baudelaire that we must seek the formulæ (very much concealed, of course) of complicated love,—complicated for the reason that it endeavours to avoid besmirchment. One might behold, to one's horror, certain persons arriving at a disgust for femininity, while *Monsieur Vénus* proclaims a hatred of masculine force.

A complication with great consequences! The disgust for woman! The hatred of man! Some minds have dreamed of an unsexed race, but such dreams smack of death. And as for the last pages of the volume, when *Monsieur Vénus* is dead, we see Raoule de Vénérande watching and lamenting before a wax image! The image of her vulgar Adonis!

Tearful fantasy of a solitary being; a cerebral eccentricity, but one which has its interest—for the psychologist, the moralist, and the artist! *Monsieur Vénus* is a very significant phenomenon, the more so since one is able, I repeat, easily to distinguish between a novelist's exaggerations and the conditions arising from a nervous tension that is becoming more and more common in both sexes.

No, this autobiography of the most peculiar of young

women is not a naughty trick. In spite of the pages which try to be sadistic, and which only succeed in being very naïve and obscure, this book, to my mind, is to be looked upon as a curiosity which will last, for the same reason that certain books of a century ago are still read, though many more perfect works are forgotten. Modern criticism willingly substitutes pathological curiosity for literary curiosity; it is the author which the most distinguished minds seek in a work. You know here that the author is a young woman full of gentleness and understanding, and that a sensual and mystical passion is to be found in her book. Does it not seem to you that *Monsieur Vénus,* in addition to the light it throws on certain depravities of love in our time, is a very interesting case for those who study the connection, always so difficult to seize upon, between a work of art and the brain which has conceived it?

By what mysterious process has Rachilde built up Raoule de Vénérande and Jacques Silvert? How did that child, with her healthy education, become the creator of those strange, queer people? The problem is extremely interesting.

An eminent psychologist, M. Jules Soury, who is methodically interested in the many curious forms of human behavior, once said of Restif de la Bretonne: "Those who write such books are no more responsible than a hydra-headed monster; they are beautiful cases

of teratology. The tomb and oblivion are only for the crowd. He can claim the honours of the dissecting room and the Dupuytren Museum." Those are the words I would apply to the comrade I have the honour of studying, if I were not afraid of seeming to her a little heavy.

MAURICE BARRÈS

Monsieur Vénus

chapter 1

IN THE dark narrow passage which the concierge had pointed out, Mademoiselle de Vénérande was groping for a door.

The seventh floor was not lighted at all, and fear had suddenly gripped her in the midst of this unsavory hovel, when she remembered that there were matches in her cigarette case. By the light of the match she discovered number 10 and read this card:

MARIE SILVERT, FLOWER-MAKER, DESIGNER.

Then, as the key was in the door, she entered, but the smell of apples cooking filled her throat and stopped her short upon the threshold. No smell disgusted her so much as the smell of apples, and so it was with a shiver of disgust that she looked around the garret before revealing her presence.

Seated at a table on which a lamp was smoking, was a man, absorbed in very minute work, his back turned to the door. Around his body, over his loose blouse, was

thrown a garland of roses, very big roses of flesh satin with deep red, velvety tracings. They ran up between his legs to his shoulders and around his neck. On his right was a sheaf of gilly-flowers, and upon his left a bunch of violets.

On a disorderly pallet in a corner of the room were piled paper lilies. Some branches of defective flowers and some dirty plates, topped off by an empty milk bottle, were strewn between two chairs whose straw was broken. A small broken stove sent its pipe into the pane of a skylight, and watched over the apples spread before it, with one red eye.

The man felt the cold which the open door had let in; he pulled up the shade of the lamp and turned around.

"Am I mistaken, Monsieur?" asked the visitor, disagreeably surprised. "I want Marie Silvert, please."

"This is her place, Madame, and for the time being, I am Marie Silvert."

Raoule could not help smiling; the answer, made by a male voice, had something grotesque about it, enhanced if possible by the embarrassed pose of the man holding his roses.

"You make flowers? You do them like a real flowermaker."

"Of course, I have to. My sister is ill. She is sleeping over there in that bed . . . poor girl! Yes, very ill. A fever which shakes her. She can't do anything well. . . .

I know how to paint, but I said to myself that if I worked in her stead I would earn my living better than if I drew animals or copied photographs. Orders are not very plentiful," he concluded, "but I manage to earn a month's pay."

He stretched his neck to watch the sleep of the sick woman. Nothing moved under the lilies. He offered the young woman one of the chairs. Raoule drew her sealskin coat around her and sat down with the greatest reluctance. She had stopped smiling.

"Madame wishes . . .?" the young man asked, letting go his garland so that he might close his blouse, which was wide open, exposing his chest.

"Your sister's address," answered Raoule, "was given to me by someone who said she was a real artist. I must consult with her about an evening gown. Can't you waken her?"

"An evening gown? Oh! Madame, do not fear, no use waking her. I'll see to that for you. . . . Let us see, what do you want? Bunches, garlands, or detached flowers? . . ."

The young woman, ill at ease, wanted to go away. Haphazardly she picked up a rose and looked at its heart, which the flower-maker had enhanced with a crystal tear.

"You have talent, a lot of talent," she repeated, pulling at the satin petals. . . .

The smell of baking apples was becoming insupportable.

The artist sat opposite his new client and pulled the lamp between them to the edge of the table. Thus they could see each other from head to foot. Their eyes met. Raoule, as though blinded, blinked her eyes behind her veil.

Marie Silvert's brother had red hair, hair of a deep red, almost russet coloured; he was a little thick-set, with straight legs, slim at the ankles. His hair, growing low and straight, was stiff, thick and rebellious to the comb. Under his black, well-defined eyebrows his eyes were strange, although stupid. He looked at people as suffering dogs do, through a dim veil of tears. Such animals' tears are always heartrending. His mouth had the firm contour of all healthy mouths, which smoking, saturating them with its virile fumes, has not yet faded. At times his teeth showed so very white behind his crimson lips that one wondered why those milk drops did not dry up between those firebrands. The dimpled chin, modeled in smooth childish flesh, was adorable. Around the neck was a little line, the line that encircles the neck of a plump new-born babe. The wide hands, the grumbling voice, and the straight, low-growing hair, were the only indications of his sex.

Raoule was forgetting her order; an extraordinary torpor was seizing her, slowing even her words, but she

felt better; the hot steam from the apples no longer annoyed her; and the flowers—strewn among the dirty plates even seemed poetic.

Rather moved, she went on: "You see, Monsieur, it is for a fancy dress ball, and I am in the habit of wearing a costume especially designed for me. I will go as a water nymph in a Grevin costume, wearing a tunic of white cashmere with green beads and rushes; so you see there must be a background of river plants, nympheas, sagittaria, lentils, water-lilies. . . . Do you think you can do that in a week?"

"I think so, Madame, a work of art!" the young man answered, smiling in his turn. Then, taking a pencil, he made some designs upon a sheet of paper.

"That's right, that's right," Raoule approved, following him with her eyes. "Very soft colors. Don't leave out any details. . . . Any price you say! . . . Sagittaria with long arrow-like pistils and very pink nympheas, touched with brown."

She had taken the pencil to correct some lines; when she bent towards the lamp the diamond clasp which held her coat sparkled. Silvert saw it and became respectful.

"The work," he said, "will cost me one hundred francs, I can give you the design for fifty; I am not making much on it, Madame."

Raoule took three bank notes from her pocketbook.

"Here," she said simply, "I have full confidence in you."

The young man made such a quick movement, such a burst of joy, that his blouse came open again. Upon his chest, Raoule saw the same red shadow which marked his lips, like tangled gold threads.

Mademoiselle de Vénérande thought that she might eat one of those russet apples without too great disgust.

"How old are you?" she asked, still looking at his clear skin, more velvety than the roses in the garland.

"I am twenty-four, Madame," and he added very awkwardly: "At your service."

The woman moved her head, closing her eyelids and not daring to look again.

"You look as if you were eighteen. . . . A man who makes flowers—how funny! You are very badly housed in this garret, with a sick sister. . . . Heavens! . . . The skylight gives you so little light. . . . No, No! do not give me back any change—three hundred francs is very inexpensive. By the way, my address; write it down: Mademoiselle de Vénérande, 74 Avenue des Champs-Elysées, Hôtel de Vénérande. You'll bring them yourself. I can count upon them, can't I?"

Her voice was choking; her head felt very heavy. Mechanically, Silvert picked up a daisy stem, rolling it between his fingers, and unconsciously using the skilled

touch of a trained woman in manipulating the piece of stuff, to give it the appearance of a blade of grass.

"All right, next Tuesday, Madame. I shall be there, count upon me. I promise you a masterpiece . . . you are too generous!"

Raoule arose, a nervous tremor shook her all over. Had she caught a fever among these poor wretches?

The young man remained seated, open mouthed, sunk in joy, touching the three blue pieces of paper—three hundred francs! . . . He did not think to hide his chest, where the lamp lit up its golden gleams.

"I could have sent my dressmaker with my orders," murmured Mlle. de Vénérande, as if to answer a secret reproach and to excuse herself; "but when I saw your samples I chose to come myself. . . . But, by the way, didn't you tell me you are a painter? Is that yours?"

With her head she indicated a panel hanging on the wall, between a grey rag and a soft hat.

"Yes, Madame," said the artist, raising the lamp.

With a quick look, Raoule saw a heavy landscape, where five or six stiff sheep were grazing on a field of pale green, with so little regard for the laws of perspective that, between them, two appeared to have five legs.

Silvert was naïvely awaiting some compliment, some encouragement.

"A strange profession," Mademoiselle de Vénérande went on, paying no more attention to the canvas, "be-

cause, you really ought to break stones, it would be more fitting."

He laughed stupidly, a little disconcerted at hearing this stranger reproach him for using all possible means to earn his living. Then, just for the sake of saying something:

"Bah!" he said, "it does not keep me from being a man!"

And his open blouse showed his golden curls.

A sharp pain shot through Mademoiselle de Vénérande's neck. Her nerves were over-excited by the suffocating atmosphere of the garret. A kind of dizziness drew her to his naked flesh. She wanted to step backwards, to escape the obsession, to flee. . . . A mad sensuality seized her pulses! . . . Her arm grew limp, and she put her hand over the workman's chest, as she would have put it over a blond beast, a monster whose reality she was trying to prove.

"I can see that," she said, with ironical daring.

Jacques shook himself, taken aback. What he had at first taken for a caress now seemed to him merely an insult.

The lady-like glove recalled his poverty to him.

He bit his lips and, trying to belittle himself, answered:

"Well, you know, I have them all over!"

At that coarse remark, Raoule de Vénérande felt a

deathly shame. She turned her head away, and then, among the lilies, a hideous face, from which two sinister greenish lights shone, appeared: it was Marie Silvert, the sister.

For one moment, without faltering, Raoule kept her eyes fixed upon the woman's and then, haughtily, bowing imperceptibly, she lowered her veil and went out slowly. Jacques stood still, his lamp in his hand, never thinking of accompanying her.

"What do you think of that?" he said, rousing himself, when Raoule's carriage, reaching the boulevards, was already on its way to the Avenue des Champs-Elysées.

"Well," Marie answered, with a leer, falling back upon her couch, where the brightness of the lilies showed off the dirt, "I say that if you are not an idiot, it's a good thing. My dear, you've got her!"

chapter 2


It was very cold. Raoule, hidden in the depths of her carriage, had lowered the blinds and was pressing her muff to her mouth.

Of course it was not the first time that this well-bred lady had seen a handsome young man, but the memory of that male, fresh and rosy as a girl, was pursuing her cruelly. With Raoule de Vénérande, mental activity almost always replaced positive action; when she could not live a moment of passion, she thought of it, and the result was the same. Not wishing to remember the sinister stair in the Rue de la Lune, the dirty and sick flower-maker, the garret filled with the awful smell of apples, she evoked Jacques Silvert.

Indifferent to the workman's low birth, while abandoning herself to an imaginary affair, Raoule was dreaming of the flesh her finger tips had touched, and with half-closed eyes, this descendant of the Vénérandes was thrilled by a delightful languor. Her memory had soon

forgotten all means of arousing her conscience. The shame she had felt before the man she had had the audacity to provoke to coarseness, was succeeded by a mad admiration for the instrument of pleasure she longed for. She was already enjoying this man; she had already made him her prey; already, perhaps, she was taking him out of his surroundings, in order to idealize him in absolute possession. And Raoule, rocked by the quick movement of her carriage, was biting her furs, her head thrown back, her breasts heaving, her arms clasped. From time to time she gave a sigh of fatigue.

Neither beautiful, nor pretty, as those words are generally applied, Raoule was tall, well-built, with a supple neck. She had, like all truly well-bred people, a delicate figure, slender wrists and ankles, a rather haughty carriage, and that swaying motion, which, under a woman's clothes, shows the feminine structure. At first sight, her face, with its rather hard expression, was not attractive. Though beautifully formed, her eyebrows had a tendency to meet in the imperious line of a very uncompromising will. Her thin lips, shaded at the corners, attenuated in a disagreeable way the shape of her mouth. Her hair was brown, coiled at her neck, and added to the perfect oval of a face tinted with that Italian powder which pales in the light. Very black and metallic under long curled eyelashes, her eyes became two burning coals when lighted by passion.

Raoule jumped, suddenly torn away from the depravity of her passionate thoughts; the carriage had stopped in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Vénérande.

"How late you are, my child," said an old lady, entirely clothed in black, who came down the steps to meet her.

"Do you think so, aunt! What time is it?"

"It will soon be eight o'clock. You are not dressed, you probably have not dined. And Monsieur de Raittolbe is coming to take you to the opera tonight."

"I won't go, I've changed my mind."

"Are you sick?"

"Heavens, no. Upset, that's all. I saw a child fall under an omnibus in the Rue de Rivoli. I could not eat. I am certain omnibus accidents ought not to happen in the street."

Madame Elizabeth made the sign of the cross.

"Oh! I was forgetting . . . aunt. Come with me. You must be out to everybody. I want to speak to you about a subject you'll like much better, charity. I have chanced upon a good deed."

They crossed the immense rooms of the mansion. There were drawing-rooms with such a tomb-like atmosphere that no one ever entered them without a tightening of the heart. The old building had two wings, flanked by rounded staircases like those at Versailles. The windows, with narrow panes, extended to the floor,

showing behind them the lightness of dimity and laces and huge iron balconies, ornamented with bizarre arabesques. In front of those balconies, cut by the entrance gate, was a very Parisian mosaic of plants, those plants of neutral green tints that resist the winter, forming such perfect borders that the keenest eyes could not see one blade of grass higher than the other. The grey walls seemed bored, in each other's presence, and yet if a wizard, to annoy a devotee of the past, had turned around those walls with their coat of arms, he would have astounded the few retainers lost in the spacious avenue. And the niece's bedroom in the right wing, and the aunt's in the left, opened suddenly to the gaze of the onlooker would have given exquisite joy to anyone who appreciated pictorial contrasts.

Weapons of all kinds and of all countries, exquisitely proportioned to the feminine wrist, occupied the central panel. The ceiling, rounded in the corners, was painted in rococo style against a blue-green background. From the center hung a chandelier of Bohemian crystal, a garland of bluebells with lance-like leaves radiating and gleaming with their natural colors.

Raoule's room was hung with red damask and panelled around the openings with rare woods. A soft couch was placed across the mink carpet spread under the chandelier; and the bed, of carved ebony, had cushions

whose feathers had been impregnated by an Oriental perfume which filled the whole room.

Some pictures rather free in their subjects were hanging on the walls. Opposite the work table, which was strewn with papers and opened letters, was a drawing of a male nude, with no shading. An easel in a corner and a piano near the table, completed the worldly interior.

Madame Elizabeth, a canoness of several orders, had a room of steel grey, very sad to the eyes.

Carpetless, the well-waxed floor froze one's heels, and the thin Christ, hanging near a bed without pillows, was looking up at a ceiling painted with foggy clouds, like a Northern sky.

Madame Elizabeth had been living for about twenty years in the Hôtel de Vénérande with her niece, who had become an orphan at the age of five. Jean de Vénérande, the last of the name, had, when dying, expressed the wish that the child, born of death, whom he left after him, should be brought up by his sister, whose fine qualities he had always greatly esteemed.

Elizabeth was then a forty-year-old spinster, full of virtues, withered in devotions, spending her life as if under the arches of a cloister, lost in perpetual meditation, wearing thin the tip of her index finger repeating the sign of the cross, which permits one to dip largely into the treasure of plenary indulgences; but she was very little preoccupied—a rare quality in the devout—

with the salvation of her neighbours. Her story was a simple one. She told it on fast days, in the unctuous style which deep-rooted mysticism gives to passive natures. She had had a chaste passion, a passion in God; she had loved ingenuously an unfortunate consumptive, the Comte de Moras, a man who was dying every day of the year. Perhaps she had expected nuptial felicity and maternal joys, but an unforgettable catastrophe had spoiled everything at the last moment. The Comte de Moras had joined his ancestors, fortified by the last sacraments of the church. In the extremity of her grief, the fiancée did not scatter her wedding roses, nor rend her white veil; at the foot of the saving cross she sought an immortal spouse. Her beautiful piety asked for nothing more! . . . Madame Elizabeth had been about to enter a convent when Jean de Vénérande died, but she silenced her heart and devoted herself to the upbringing of Raoule.

At that troubled moment of the girl's life, when she was adolescent, a mother would have been gravely concerned for her future. The strong-willed little girl demolished all the arguments by which she was opposed with answers of an epicurean lightness. She brought to the realization of her caprices a terrible tenacity, and charmed her governesses by the clear explanation she gave of her follies. Her father had been one of those worn-out debauchés who blush at the work of the Marquis de Sade,

but not from prudery. Her mother, a provincial full of energy and with a very strong constitution, had had the most natural and violent of appetites. She had died of a hemorrhage, shortly after her lying-in. Perhaps her husband had followed her to the tomb, another victim of an accident he had caused; because one of his old servants used to say that when dying he had accused himself of causing the premature death of his wife.

Madame Elizabeth, a canoness, ignorant of the life of materialistic beings, spent her time trying to develop mystical aspirations in Raoule; she left her to her own devices, spoke to her often of her disdain for muddy humanity, in very well-chosen terms, and let her reach her fifteenth year in the most absolute solitude.

At the moment of sensual awakening, her aunt Elizabeth, the canoness, would never have suspected that her prudish kiss did not satisfy the secret longings of the virgin entrusted to her pious care.

One day, Raoule, rummaging in the garrets of the mansion, discovered a book which she read by chance. She saw an engraving, and turned away, but she took the book with her. . . . About that time there was a change in Raoule. Her expression altered, her words became brief, her eyes became feverish, she laughed and cried at the same time. Madame Elizabeth grew uneasy and, fearing a serious illness, called the doctors. Her niece refused to see them. However, one of them, very elegant,

witty and young, was clever enough to be able to reach the patient, and she begged him to come back, although there was no improvement in her condition.

Elizabeth had recourse to the help of her confessors. The real remedy was advised.

"Marry her," they said.

Raoule burst into a rage when her aunt broached the subject of matrimony.

That evening, during tea, the young doctor, speaking in a recessed window to an old friend of the family, said, pointing to Raoule:

"A very special case. A few years more, and that pretty creature whom you love too much, I think, will, without ever loving them, have known as many men as there are beads on her aunt's rosary. No happy medium! Either a nun or a monster! God's bosom or passions! It would, perhaps, be better to put her in a convent, since we put hysterical women in the Salpetrière! She does not know vice; she invents it!"

That was ten years before the day when our story begins and. . . . Raoule was not a nun. . . .

During the week following her visit to Silvert, Mademoiselle de Vénérande went out frequently, having no other aim than the realization of a plan she had formed on her way from the Rue de la Lune to her home. She had confided it to her aunt, and the latter, after a few timid objections, had, as usual, recourse to heaven. Raoule

had described to her in detail the poverty of the young artist. Who could fail to be moved at seeing Jacques' garret? How could he work there, with a crippled sister? Then Elizabeth had promised to recommend them to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and to send some charitable ladies, as titled as they were helpful.

"Let us open our purse, aunt," Raoule had cried, carried away by her audacity. "Let us give alms royally, but let us do it with dignity. Let us put this talented painter (here Raoule had smiled) in very artistic surroundings. Let him earn his living without his having the shame of receiving it from us. Let us make his future certain, right away. Who knows that later he may not pay us back a hundredfold!"

Raoule was speaking with conviction.

"My niece must have seen very great promise in those poor people to make her so enthusiastic . . . she, who is usually so cold. Now here is a chance to make her more tender-hearted! . . ."

Aunt Elizabeth did not know that her nephew, as she often called Raoule, when she saw her taking her fencing or painting lessons, had none of the faith which leads to a saintly life. But the canoness, for her part was too well-bred, of too fine a family, to doubt for a moment the physical and moral purity of her niece. A Vénérande could only be a virgin. There were Vénérandes known to have kept their virginal quality through many honey-

moons. This kind of nobility, although not hereditary in the family, set a standard which she felt her niece was obliged to maintain.

"Tomorrow," Raoule had finally concluded, "I'll look around Paris to find a studio. The furniture will be put in at night; we don't want to make people talk about us, and the least ostentation would be wrong. But Tuesday, when he brings my costume, everything will be ready. . . . Ah! It is on such occasions, my dear Aunt, that our money becomes interesting! . . ."

"I leave you, my darling, to the celestial benefits of your charities!" Aunt Elizabeth declared. "Spare nothing; as you sow on earth, you will reap in heaven!"

"Amen!" Raoule answered—and smiled like an evil angel at the delighted canoness.

A week later Mademoiselle de Vénérande, extremely beautiful in her costume of a water-nymph, made a sensational entrance at the ball of the Duchesse d'Armourville. Flavien X . . . , the smart journalist, said a few discreet words about the strange costume, and although Raoule had no intimate friends, she discovered some that evening, who begged her to give them the address of the clever flower-maker.

Raoule refused.

chapter 3

In the studio, Jacques Silvert, bewildered, sank down upon the divan. He looked like a small child caught in a storm. Yes, he was set up in a home of his own, with brushes, paints, carpets, curtains, furniture, velvet hangings, a lot of gilt, laces. . . . His arms hanging idle at his side, he looked around, almost expecting everything to disappear, and leave him in the darkness of night. His sister, incredulous, sat upon the suitcase containing their poor clothes. Her thin back bent, her hands clasped, she repeated, in a tone of respect and veneration:

"The noble creature! The noble creature!"

She had not forgotten her eternal cough, like the creaking of a wheel needing grease, a theatrical cough with deep chest notes at the end of each attack.

"We ought to tidy up," she added, rising with great decision. She opened the trunk, took out the picture of the sheep against a clear sky and hung it in a corner.

Then Jacques, moved by an inexplicable tenderness, came up to the picture and kissed it, crying:

"You see, sister, I always thought that my talent would bring us luck. And yet you told me that it would be better to run after girls than to do charcoal drawings upon the walls."

Marie laughed and hunched her back.

"Well, as if your face wasn't as good as your beastly sheep!"

He could not help laughing; his tears dried up and he murmured:

"You're crazy! Mademoiselle de Vénérande is an artist, that's all. She pities the artists, she is good, she is fine! . . . Workmen would not often make revolutions if they knew the women of the aristocracy better."

Marie grinned wickedly, and reserved her opinion. When she thought of that woman of the aristocracy, all the scenes of vice she had lived through rose in unhealthy fumes to her head, and then she saw the whole world as flat as her prostitute's bed had been a little while ago, after the departure of her last lover.

Philosophising in a slow voice, anxious to be listened to, Jacques walked back and forth, scattering the armor, which had not yet been put up. He pushed all the armchairs against the wall not having enough room to walk about and display his pride of ownership.

The easels of precious wood were heaped in the corner

where a very shiny Venus de Milo stood upon a bronze stand. He tried to count the busts and brought them to the feet of the goddess, as one piles up the pots of mignonette upon the grisette's window-sill. At times, he uttered little cries of pleasure, caressing the majolica urns and the shining foliage of a palm tree which emerged from a pouffe in the center of the studio. He even tried the stools scattered over the carpet; he tested them with his fists or threw them to the ceiling.

The window looked out upon the most open space of the Boulevard Montparnasse, opposite Notre-Dame-des-Champs. Its draperies were of grey satin, bordered with velvet, embroidered in black and gold. All the draperies were of the same hue and the Egyptian portières, with their strange bright designs, shone marvelously against the greys, the colour of a spring cloud.

After an hour, the studio almost looked like the garret in the Rue de la Lune, without the grease spots and the broken chairs; but one felt that they would soon be there. Marie decided that two iron beds should be put in the models' dressing-room, for the studio had a semi-circle with wide curtains, separated from the rest of the room by a Japanese lacquered screen, pink and blue. They would dress as well as they could, and then the two beds could be hidden behind the screen. She even thought of using a vessel of beaten copper as a garbage can. They did not even think of raising the portières, supposing

that they were as much a part of the decorations as the old armour.

"We shall wash those saucepans," said Marie, full of her subject, "and have economical boilers. I adore steam cooking"—she was pointing to the Roman helmets that her brother was trying on from time to time.

"Yes, yes," Jacques answered, standing opposite the mirror which reflected all the splendours of his paradise for him—"do what you like, without tiring yourself. It would be stupid for you to have a fever again. We have other things to think of; make yourself at home, make soup on the sofas, if you want to. I am master, am I not? You know, I'll have to work. Flowers have spoiled my fingers. I'll have to get them nice quickly. And then . . . the portraits of her aunt, portraits of her servants if she wants them. I am not ungrateful. I think I would willingly bleed to death for that woman. There is no God, or else she is one. By the way our clock is going to strike! Listen!"

The clock, a lighthouse surmounted by a luminous ball, struck six and suddenly the ball took fire, an opaline fire which made everything visible in a delightful shadow.

"It's not possible," Jacques exclaimed, astonished by this new phenomenon. "Now is the time for light and the light comes of itself. I begin to think that we are at a play given at the Châtelet Theatre."

"Nothing but vice!" Marie Silvert muttered, answering her own thoughts.

"The clock?" asked Jacques, as naïvely as a child.

The fact is that the light did not go out and that the clock was spreading vice. The draperies were bathed in a faintly iridescent colour, full of charming mystery. The Chinese buddhas lifted their drapery-covered legs, the terra-cotta nymphs dissolved into a kind of vapor, and unapproachable, they opened living arms, they had human smiles and the grotesque mannequins looked lustfully towards the chaste tunic of the Imperial Venus.

"Listen, I still have forty sous. I am going to get a quart of wine and some Italian cheese, will that do?"

"Of course. I am dying of hunger!"

Jacques, in his enthusiasm, pushed her toward the door and soon her footsteps were heard faintly upon the staircase. He threw himself upon the huge divan behind the clock. His body was hungry for the soft silk, as thick as wool, which covered most of the furniture in the studio. He lolled about, kissing the *capitons,* hugging their backs, his forehead against the cushions, following with his forefinger their Arabic designs, crazy with the madness of a fiancée faced with her trousseau, even licking the rollers, through their multicoloured fringes.

He would have forgotten to eat, in his paroxysm of happiness, if a hand had not taken his masterfully, and shaken him thoroughly. He jumped up, trembling, ready

to hear the bitter sarcasms of Marie, the eternal grumbler. Then he recognised Mademoiselle de Vénérande. She had entered noiselessly, expecting to catch the artist, full of admiration before a statue. She had even supposed that the brushes might be at work, the canvas wet and a painting begun. She found a child clowning upon new springs. At first it saddened her . . . then she laughed, and afterwards she admitted that it was as it should be.

"Well," she said in the sharp tone of a mistress giving orders, "well, try to be reasonable, my poor Silvert! I have come to help you. I hope you have no objection."

She looked at him. "What about your working clothes? I thought that you would know how to look presentable!"

"Mademoiselle, my dear benefactress," he began, according to Marie's instructions, standing up and passing his hand through his hair. "This solemn day is the turning point of my life! I owe you fame, fortune. . . ."

He stopped short, intimidated by Raoule's beautiful, bright black eyes.

"Monsieur Silvert," she went on, imitating his theatrical tone, "in my opinion you are a clown. . . . You owe me nothing . . . , but you have no common sense, and you'll be condemned, I am afraid, to stiff little sheep upon too green prairies. I am a year older than you, and I can paint a presentable nude in the time it takes you to

make a peony. Therefore I can permit myself some very harsh criticism of your work."

She caught him by his shoulders and made him walk around the studio.

"See how disorderly everything is. Where is your feeling for the beautiful? Answer . . . I have a good mind to strangle you."

She threw her coat over an armchair and drew herself erect, slim, her hair piled very high, in a black dress with a long tortuous train. No jewels brightened her almost masculine costume, only on the ring finger of her left hand a big cameo ring mounted upon two lions' paws. When she caught Jacques' hand again she scratched him. In spite of himself a sensation of terror overcame him. The creature was a devil.

She changed everything in a most cynical way. Jacques was scandalized and pouted. . . . The nymphs leaned on the backs of the Chinese satyrs, the helmets covered the busts, the mirrors were placed upside down reflecting the ceiling; the pouffes rolled against the slim supports of the easels and the trophies took matamoresque poses.

"We are lost," thought the flower-maker of the Rue de la Lune.

"Now come, you'll have to dress yourself, and I doubt whether you'll be successful."

She was mocking him, thinking that nothing could

be done with this heavy young man. Then a portière was pulled open and Jacques uttered a cry of surprise.

"I understand, you never thought of a bedroom, that's beyond your comprehension."

She lighted one of the wax candles ornamenting the torches and preceded him to a room decorated with pale blue silk. There was a bed with Venetian draperies, against a silver background, and ornamented with Belgian lace. Raoule had given the decorators what remained from her summer bedroom. A dressing-room with a bath of red marble was next to it.

"Go in . . . we'll talk through the door."

And they talked through the dressing-room curtain, he floundering in the water which he found cold, for the bath had been prepared for their arrival, and she laughing at his stupidity.

"But remember that I am a boy," she said. "An artist whom my aunt calls her nephew . . . and that I am acting toward Jacques Silvert as toward a childhood comrade. . . . There, are you through? . . . You'll find toilet water above the bath, a comb near it. Isn't he amusing? Isn't he funny?"

Jacques was amazed. After all the best people must be much freer than the people he knew, and growing bolder he made some rather improper remarks, and asked her not to look at him, for naturally it would embarrass him. He confided in her, telling how his poor

father had died, when caught in some machinery, in Lille, his native town, one day when he had drunk a little too much, how his mother had chased them out and taken another man. They had been very young, his sister and himself when they had come to Paris. . . . His abandoned sister knew such a lot already. They had earned their miserable bread with great hardship. . . . He did not speak of Marie's debauches but began mocking to drive away a sadness which had seized him. Charity was being given them . . . how could they repay? It was very humiliating, and he was forgetting Marie's malicious advice, while looking at the scratches which the big ring had made.

At last there was a great noise in the bath.

"I have had enough," he declared, suddenly disturbed by his shame at owing her even his bodily cleanliness. He looked for a towel and stood glistening, his arms lifted. It seemed to him that someone was hugging the curtain.

"You know, *Monsieur* de Vénérande," he said in a grumbling voice. "Even between men that is not proper. You are looking! I wonder whether you'd be pleased to be in my shoes."

And he thought that she wanted to be raped.

"She'll be sorry," he added in a very bad humor. His senses appeased by the bath, he put on a bathrobe.

Close to the floor, behind the curtain, Mademoiselle

de Vénérande could see him without having to move. The soft light of the candles fell upon his fair skin, as velvety as a peach. He had his back turned and he was acting the principal part in a scene of Voltaire, told in detail by a courtesan called Red Lips. Worthy of the Venus Callipyge, the curve of his back, where his spine ended in a voluptuous curve, and rose firm and fat in two adorable contours, looked like a Paros marble with the transparency of amber. The thighs, less thick than a woman's, were still round enough to make his sex uncertain. The very high calves gave prominence to the bust, and the impertinence of an innocent body was more intriguing still. The heel, very arched, had only one imperceptible contact, so rounded was it.

The elbows of the outstretched arms had two pink dimples. Beneath the armpits, and even lower, was curly golden hair. Jacques Silvert had told the truth, for he had curls everywhere, but he would have been mistaken, it is true, if he had sworn that they were the only proof of his virility.

Mademoiselle de Vénérande went back to the bed; her nervous hands clutched the sheets; she was roaring, as panthers roar, when the supple whip of the tamer has just struck them.

"The terrible poetry of human nudity, I understand it at last. I who tremble for the first time in trying to read it with blasé eyes. Man! At last, here is man! Not

Socrates and the greatness of his wisdom, not Christ with the majesty of devotion, but a poor man without his rags, and the skin of a menial. He is beautiful, I am afraid. He is indifferent and I am aroused. He is despicable and I admire him! And he, like a child in borrowed garments, surrounded by playthings which my caprice will soon take away from him, I'll make him my master and he will crush my soul with his body. I bought him, I belong to him. It is I who am sold. Passion, give me back my heart! Demon of love, you have made me a prisoner, stealing my chains and leaving me freer than my jailer. I thought I would capture him, and he has fascinated me. I laughed at love at first, and now I am its victim. . . . And since when does Raoule de Vénérande, whom an orgy leaves cold, feel her brain reeling before a young man as weak as a girl?"

She repeated the word: "A girl!"

Maddened, she jumped back to the portières of the dressing-room.

"A girl! . . . no . . . no . . . immediate possession, brutality, stupid drunkenness and forgetfulness. No, no, don't let my vulnerable heart share in this sacrifice to lust! Let him disgust me before pleasing me! Let him be what others have been, an instrument which I can break before becoming the echo of its vibrations!"

She pulled the drapery aside with an imperious ges-

ture. Jacques Silvert had hardly finished sponging himself.

"Child, do you know that you are marvelous?" she said to him, cynically frank.

The young man cried out and picked up his dressing gown. Then, miserable, pale with shame, he let it fall passively, because, poor boy, he understood. Was not his sister cackling from a corner: "Go on, idiot, you who thought you were an artist. Go on, contraband plaything, go on, playboy, practise your trade."

That woman had drawn him from his garlands of artificial flowers, as one pulls out from real flowers the rare insect which one wants to place, like a jewel, upon a setting.

"Go on, animal of the tide! You can't be the comrade of a girl nobly born. The vicious know how to choose! . . ."

It seemed to him he was hearing all those insults humming through his head, and his virginal blondness took the same hue, while the points of his breasts, revived by the water, shone like two tiny rosebuds.

"Antinoüs must have been one of your ancestors, I think," Raoule muttered, pulling her arms around his neck and obliged by her height to lean upon his shoulders!

"I never met him," the humiliated conqueror answered, bending his head.

Ah! All the wood he had cut for the wealthy, all the breadcrusts he had picked up in the gutter, bravely facing his poverty, in spite of the perfidious advice of his sister, the prostitute! . . . Her part as a worker played artfully, the little ridiculous tools tiring fate with their perseverance, where was all that? And how much more worth while! Honesty was not his strong point, but one could have been good till the end, leaving him his illusions, and time to make a fortune to reimburse her some day. . . .

"Will you love me, Jacques?" asked Raoule shivering at the contact of his naked body, which the horror of his fall froze to the marrow of his bones.

Jacques knelt on the train of her gown. His teeth were chattering, and then he burst into tears. He was the son of a drunkard and of a whore. All he could do was to cry.

Mademoiselle de Vénérande raised his head; she had seen those burning tears, and had felt them falling one by one upon her heart, the heart she had tried to deny. The room suddenly appeared to be suffused with dawn, and it seemed to her she was breathing an exquisite perfume, thrown suddenly into the delightful atmosphere. Her whole being spread immense, embracing at the same time all earthly sensations, and all heavenly aspirations, and Raoule, beaten but proud, cried:

"Stand up, Jacques, stand up! I love you!"

She pulled him away from her dress and walked to the door of the studio repeating:

"I love him! I love him!"

She turned around.

"Jacques, you are master here . . . I am going away. Good-bye forever. You shall never see me again! Your tears have purified me and my love is worth your forgiveness."

She ran away, full of an atrocious joy, more voluptuous than the voluptuousness of the flesh, keener than unappeased desire, but more complete than pleasure, mad with the madness of a first love.

"Well," said Marie Silvert quietly after she had left. "It seems the fish is hooked. Everything will go like a house afire!"

chapter 4

MARIE, with the letter safe in her pocket, was firmly convinced now that the crazy woman could resist them no longer, that she would come back, that she would be calmer and more generous, and that new wonders were sure to happen. Millions would settle upon the boy like jelly upon a cold beef stew; he would wear his Sunday clothes every day; she would trail moiré dresses around smelly kitchens. He would be called Monsieur, she Madame!

The letter had only a few misspelled sentences in blue ink, but it was very clear: "Come," Marie had written. "Come! dear mistress of your little Jacques . . . I long for you . . . we have spent the three hundred francs and I have had to send Marie to sell a vase with a serpent upon it. It is sad to be abandoned so quickly after tasting of heaven. . . . You understand me, don't you? I think I shall be ill, and as for my sister, she is still coughing.

"Your unquenched lover,

"JACQUES."

And when she had finished this masterpiece, Marie, in spite of her brother's annoyance, started for the Avenue des Champs-Elysées. That idiot would never know how to act his part properly. Luckily for him she was placing at his disposal her experience of the human body, and she knew, on important occasions, how to arouse a lover.

It had been raining all day, a March rain, slow and penetrating; the mud was deep in all the gutters of the avenue. Marie, trying to economize, did not take a carriage and was soon splashed from head to foot.

When she reached the sombre mansion, she grew afraid, and thought that she would probably be thrown out, as soon as she entered the hall. At the top of the stairs she found a big porter and a small dog. The first took the letter, the second growled.

"Do you want to see Mademoiselle or Madame?"

"Mademoiselle."

"Hey! Pierrot, there's a woman here who wants to clean the stairs," the porter shouted to a tiny page passing through the hall. The tiny page made a face like a man who believes anything possible, especially on a rainy day.

"All right, I'll see. Wait here."

He pointed to a seat. Marie did not sit down, but said coarsely: "I don't wait in antechambers. Do you take me for a retired charwoman, monkey-face?"

Taken aback, the valet turned on his heel, and like a well-trained servant, muttered:

"Someone with influence!" Under a republic clothes mean less and less all the time.

Mademoiselle was in a boudoir opening from her sitting-room. When Madame Elizabeth was out, Raoule received in her own apartment her friends of both sexes. Her boudoir opened upon a conservatory, which she used as her study. When the page entered, a man was pacing rapidly back and forth, while Mademoiselle de Vénérande was stretched out in a rocking chair and laughing loudly.

"You are condemning me to hell, Raoule," said the man who was still young and as dark haired as a Slav, though as light and graceful as a true Parisian. "Yes, you are driving me to hell, though I have deserved heaven. . . . Laughter is no answer. . . . My contention is that no woman can live without love, and you know that I mean by love the union of souls through the union of bodies. I am frank. I never wrap up a plain statement in pretty trimmings, as one disguises a bitter medicine with jam. . . . I am speaking to you bluntly, as a soldier should, and when I see the ditch, I don't lose my time picking daisies. No, I use the spurs and charge, Raoule de Vénérande, my dear pal! All right! Don't get married! But at least take a lover; it will be good for your health."

"Bravo! Monsieur de Raittolbe! But I'll bet that my health won't improve if my lover is a cavalry officer, dark-haired, with frank speech, impertinent eyes and a commanding voice."

"I admit it, I even go further. . . . I propose the same officer as a husband. Take your choice! For exceptional services or forever. There are five of us who for the last three years have been madly courting you. Prince Otto, the musician, has gone mad and placed your full-length portrait in a mortuary chapel, where yellow wax candles burn around a magnificent bed . . . and he sighs there from dawn to twilight. Flavien, the journalist, passes a trembling hand through his hair whenever your name is mentioned. Hector de Servange, after the plain dismissal given him by your aunt, has gone to Norway to cool off. Your fencing master almost put one of his best swords through his body. And now that only your humble servant remains . . . having the honour to hold your stirrup for your promenades in the Bois, I imagine you must look at him more favourably when he urges his candidacy. Shall we hide our friendship in a conjugal alcove? It will be warmer. . . . "

Raoule had risen and was going towards M. de Raittolbe when the valet entered.

"Mademoiselle, here is an urgent letter."

She turned.

"Give it to me."

"You'll excuse me?" she added, turning to the officer who was breaking a Japanese plant in tiny pieces to appease his rage. He turned his back upon her, too furious to answer. It was for the thousandth time that this conversation had been interrupted at the most interesting moment. M. de Raittolbe, impatient, lighted a cigar and smoked black a whole border of azaleas, swearing to himself that he would never come back to that hysterical woman. In his opinion anyone who did not follow ordinary rules must be hysterical.

As she read the letter, Raoule grew pale.

"Heavens!" she muttered, "he wants money; I have certainly fallen into the mud."

"Have this poor creature sent up," she went on lightly, "I shall give her what she wants at once."

"And refuse me the explanation I want," the officer grumbled to himself.

Raoule quietly closed the door upon him, came back to her boudoir and sat down as pale as death. She bent her head and dug her long nails into the crumpled letter.

"Money! No, I shan't give in! I shall send him what he wants, instead of going to kill him! . . . Is it his fault? Just because he has physical beauty, is that any reason why this man of the people shouldn't be low? I am glad that this cup of bitterness has been offered to me. I won't refuse it . . . on the contrary I shall gather new life from it."

Marie Silvert's racking cough made her turn her head. Raoule stood, threatening, and more queenly than a goddess speaking from Olympus.

"How much?" she said, smoothing out the immense train of her velvet dress.

Marie finished her fit of coughing . . . she had not expected that question so soon. . . . Damn! things were not going so well . . . they ought to begin gently, with talk of love, tender questions. . . . A caprice is handled like a stew, and the pepper is added at the last minute.

"Poor Jacques is lonely, you know," she declared with a leering smile.

"How much?" Raoule repeated, seized by a blind anger, and looking around for a knife.

"Don't get angry, Mademoiselle. The child only mentions money as an excuse, for he really wants to see you. . . . He is an unreasonable baby, a very sensitive crybaby! He thinks that your crush is over, and he is miserable. No matter what I say it's no use. If you don't come to see him, he'll kill himself, I'm afraid. This morning, as he looked in his glass, he told me he would soon take poison. Poor darling! It's enough to break his heart! At his age, so fair, so white! You know how he is! So I put on my Sunday best. . . . Don't let your brother die, I told myself, and here I am! As for money, we are poor but proud, and we can talk of that later! . . ."

She rubbed her foot upon the carpet, feeling secretly

pleased at this chance to soil something belonging to the aristocracy, and shook the old umbrella to which she clung. Raoule went straight to the cabinet just opposite her; with the back of her hand she thrust the woman aside, as one pushes an old rag.

"Here are a thousand francs. . . . I shall send you another thousand tonight . . . but go at once. . . . I do not know your brother. . . . I do not know where he lives. . . . I don't know your name. Take this and go!"

She laid the notes upon an armchair, motioned to Marie to pick them up, and rang the bell.

"Jeanne," she said to her maid, "show Madame out."

"Well!" the flower-maker said, very much surprised.

She was taken away, almost carried away, by Jeanne. The porter pushed her into the avenue, while the small dog followed her down the steps and barked shrilly at her.

"Are you bored, Raittolbe?" Raoule asked smilingly, as she entered the conservatory.

"Mademoiselle," Raittolbe answered impatiently, "you are an agreeable monster, but studying wild animals is interesting only in Africa. . . . So I shall say good-bye to you tonight and tomorrow I shall start for Constantine. I don't care who holds your stirrup for you."

"But I seem to remember that only a short while ago you offered to do so!"

Raittolbe clenched his fists.

"But why should I leave to hunt tigers!" he went on, not even listening to her.

". . . That you asked me to marry you! . . ."

"When I can hunt a tiger in the park of the Vénérandes, a tiger dressed in riding breeches. . . ."

". . . Without asking my aunt or observing the rules of etiquette, sir!"

". . . I am making myself ridiculous, Mademoiselle!"

"Yes, I think you are," Raoule added philosophically.

The Baron de Raittolbe was taken aback. They looked at one another a moment then burst out laughing. Encouraged by this he seized her hands, and they sat upon a divan in the greenhouse, a magnolia behind their backs.

"Listen to me—sincere love can never be ridiculous, Raoule. I love you sincerely."

He bent down, his mocking eyes filled with tears which were only due to nervousness, and not to the tenderness of which he wished to speak to her. Then he kissed her fingers one by one, looking up at her between each kiss.

"Raoule . . . I gave you my heart . . . I shall leave without taking it back, and since I have put it next to yours, I hope that you'll make a mistake . . . two boys' hearts, two hussard's hearts of much the same red. . . . Give me yours . . . keep mine. . . . In a month we shall be hunting real lions in real Africa."

"I accept!" Raoule answered.

But her dark eyes, which did not know how to cry, looked mournful.

"What do you accept? . . ." Raittolbe said, his heart tightening.

The young woman, with magnificent dignity, thrust away his outstretched hands.

"I accept you as a lover, my dear, and you won't be the first! You see, I am an honest man!"

"I knew it," Raittolbe replied gently; "and now I think I adore you!"

That evening the young officer dined with the Vénérandes. Towards Aunt Elizabeth he was the most courteous of knights. He made a speech about the devotion which blinds woman to human failings and raises her above this impure earth. Aunt Elizabeth admitted that the hussards were charming. As he took his leave, Raittolbe whispered in Raoule's ear:

"I am waiting. . . ."

She whispered, "Tomorrow, at the Hôtel Continental. My brown carriage will enter the door on the left about ten in the morning."

"That's enough."

And the man about town went away at peace.

The next day the brown carriage was ordered about ten and Raoule entered it with feverish gaiety. It was to be thus, she had sworn it and since he was, after all, better than the others, perhaps he would enjoy it more.

An error of the passions is not the flowering of a great love, and merely the beauty of the human form is not capable of inspiring an eternity of mad attachment.

She sang as she buttoned her gloves. The mirror in the carriage reflected her image, and it pleased her, womanlike, to see that her lace-covered bodice fitted well.

"Does Mademoiselle want to drive?" said the coachman, turning around at the end of the short drive.

"No, just stop, and when I have left, drive in at the left and wait for me till this evening! . . ."

Raoule's voice had grown shrill. She left her carriage and took a cab.

"Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Boulevard Montparnasse!" she ordered, as her carriage entered the driveway at the left.

During the drive she had not thought of the approaching sacrifice of her free body, but once face to face with it she had revolted. She had given in without demur.

The studio in the Boulevard Montparnasse seemed horrible when she arrived, but at the back she saw the bedroom, as blue as a corner of the sky. Marie Silvert left as soon as Raoule entered.

"Well," she said to herself, "we'll settle our little business after lunch, and I warn you, it will be pretty exciting, hussy!"

To isolate herself, Mademoiselle de Vénérande undid the heavy portières.

"Jacques!" she called sharply.

He hid his face in his pillow, unwilling to face this final humiliation.

"I did not write the letter!" he shouted. "I assure you, I would not have dared. Besides, I want to go away, I am sick. I have been made ill so that I have to stay in bed . . . Marie is capable of anything, I know her! You! . . . I can't bear you! . . ."

Worn out, he covered himself with his bedclothes and curled up his body like a beaten animal.

"Really?" said Raoule, quivering with delight.

"Really!"

He showed his tousled head, while his lovely fair complexion took a pinkish tint.

"Then why did you let her bring the letter?"

"I did not know! Marie told me I had fever, *her fever.* She gave me some drug and I was delirious every night. She said it was quinine; I would have stopped her, but I was not strong enough. Take away your damned studio! Oh, God!"

Out of breath, he tried to sit up, and Raoule saw that he was wearing a woman's embroidered nightgown.

"Is it she who decks you out in this fashion?" Raoule said, touching the embroidery.

"Do you think I have any linen? It's all been thrown away a long time ago. I was cold, and she put this on

me. . . . How do I know whether it's a woman's night-gown . . . or what it is! . . ."

"Well, it is, Jacques!"

They looked at each other for a moment, wondering whether or not to laugh.

Marie shouted from the studio:

"Shall I lay the table for two? . . ."

Then, willing to agree to anything if only she might be left in peace in her shame, which was beginning to intoxicate her, Raoule de Vénérande locked the door, while Jacques started to laugh heartily. Then she came back, hesitatingly, towards the bed. He had a stupid but very charming laugh, an exciting, provoking and thrilling laugh. She did not try to analyse the attraction behind that stupidity, but let herself sink into it, as the drowned man, his struggles over, yields to the current, and lets himself be carried away. She pulled aside the blue curtains that she might see his face in full light.

"You are sick?" she asked mechanically.

"Not since you came," he answered in a bragging voice.

"Do you want to give me great pleasure, Jacques?"

"I want to give you all the pleasures, Mademoiselle!"

"Then keep quiet. I don't come here to listen to you."

He was silent, rather hurt, saying to himself that doubtless his compliment had not sounded very new to this sophisticate. Ladies are rather annoying in intimate

relationships, and he realized that he had made a bad début.

"I am going to sleep!" he declared suddenly, pulling the sheet up to his nose.

"Yes, go to sleep," Mademoiselle de Vénérande muttered. On tiptoe she pulled the blinds, then lighted a night light whose globe let a soft light penetrate the room.

From time to time, Jacques raised his eyelashes, and as he watched the discreet movements of this woman dressed all in black he was greatly embarrassed.

Finally, she came up to him with a small tortoise-shell box in her hand.

"I have brought you," she said with a motherly smile, "a remedy which is not at all like your sister's quinine. It will put you to sleep more quickly! . . ."

She put her arm around his head and a silver spoon within reach of his mouth.

"Be good! . . ." she said, looking sombrely into his eyes.

"I don't want it!" he cried angrily.

He remembered a cheap book which he had bought upon the quays in a moment of recklessness, entitled: *The Exploits of the Brinvilliers,* and the loves of great ladies always made him think of poisoning. Suddenly he thought of a picture in which a monk in velvet was trying to poison a naked man. He saw the man pushing

the cup away with a grotesque gesture. Raoule certainly wanted to get rid of him, for there are creatures who stop at nothing when they think they have compromised themselves. So Jacques clenched his fist, ready to strike her if she tried force. For an answer, Raoule bit the contents of the spoon with her teeth.

"I'm not a baby!" he said, surprised. "There's no need to chew things for me."

And without batting an eyelash he swallowed the greenish remedy, which tasted like honey. Raoule sat on the edge of the bed, holding both his hands and smiling, happy and unhappy at the same time.

"My love," she whispered, so low that she sounded to Jacques as if she were speaking from the bottom of an abyss, "now we shall belong to each other in a strange country which you do not know. It is the country of madmen, but not the country of brutes. . . . I am taking away your vulgar senses and giving you others more refined. You shall see with my eyes, taste with my lips. In that country dreams are the only life. You will dream, and you will understand, when I appear in your dream, all you don't understand when I am speaking to you now! Go! I shall keep you no longer and my heart shall join in your pleasures! . . ."

Jacques, his head thrown back, tried to clasp his hands. He thought himself slipping little by little into a bath of feathers. The curtains grew liquid, and the multi-

plying mirrors in the room reflected a thousand times the silhouette of a woman in black, immense, pervading everything. He stretched his muscles, tightened all his limbs, trying to return to the earthly envelope which was being taken away from him, but he was falling in deeper and deeper. The bed had disappeared, and so had his body, and he went around and around in the blue, with the soaring woman in black. Though he thought he had been falling, he found himself very much above the world. He had, without any possible explanation, the proud sensation of Satan who, though he fell from Paradise, still dominates the earth and has, at the same time, his forehead under God's heel and his heel upon the forehead of man!

It appeared to him that, glorying in a luminous nudity, he had been living thus for centuries with the woman in black.

In his ear mingled all the songs of a strange sexless love, giving the ultimate pleasure. He loved with an awful power and with the warmth of a burning sun. He was being loved with a frightening passion and with such exquisite science that joy was always borne again just when it seemed ready to disappear.

Infinite space opened before them, always blue, always dazzling . . . and down below, in the distance, an outstretched animal seemed to be looking at them gravely. . . .

Jacques Silvert never knew how, during those moments of almost divine happiness, he had been able to rise. As he came to himself, he found that he was standing up, his heel digging nervously at the head of the big bear used as a rug. His eyes looked wildly into a Venetian mirror and the room was full of silence. Behind the heavy portières a voice asked:

"Will you dine, Mademoiselle?"

Jacques could have sworn that it was only a minute ago that "Will you lunch?" had been asked. . . .

He dressed hastily, moistened his temples with a sponge wet with vinegar and stammered:

"Where is she? I don't want her to go away!"

"Here I am, Jacques!" a voice answered. "I have not left you yet, as you were delirious."

Raoule appeared, raising the curtain which hid the bathroom. She was very slim, very black, and her fingers were fastening the clasp of a necklace.

"It is not true!" cried Jacques passionately. "I was not delirious. I did not dream! Why do you lie to me?"

Raoule took him by the shoulders and made him shrink from her imperious pressure.

"Why does Jacques Silvert speak so familiarly? Have I given him permission?"

"Oh! I am tired out!" Jacques repeated, trying to stand erect. "You ought not to mock a man so when he is

sick. Raoule! . . . Raoule! I love you! . . . I think I am going to die! . . ."

Rambling, frightened, he hid himself in Raoule's arms.

"Is it over?" he cried, "Is it really over? . . . "

"I repeat to you that you . . . dreamt. That's all."

And pushing him away, she re-entered the studio, paying no more attention to him.

"Mademoiselle's dinner is served!" said Marie Silvert, bowing as if nothing could astonish her. Raoule went up to the table, upon which a smoking dish stood beside a rolled napkin and some silver pieces.

"This is his place, I believe?" she said very calmly, looking at Marie, who did not flinch.

"Yes, I put you opposite each other."

"Very well," replied Raoule, in the same expressionless voice, "I wish you both the best of appetites!"

And she walked out.

chapter 5

RAITTOLBE understood at last that Mademoiselle de Vénérande simply sent an empty carriage to the rendezvous at the Continental, and was about to go away after an angry wait of nine hours when a cab appeared at the door on the right side; Raoule stepped out of it, her veil hiding her face, a little uneasy, trying to see without being seen.

The baron hurried up, stupefied at her audacity.

He exclaimed: "Well, this is a little too much, a yellow carriage instead of a brown one and the right door instead of the left. What does this new mystification mean?"

"As I am a woman nothing ought to astonish you," Raoule answered, laughing nervously. "I do the opposite of what I promised. What can be more natural than that?"

"Yes, indeed, what can be more natural! A poor suitor is tortured, he is left to think of horrible things, acci-

dents, betrayal, last minute repentance, a family scene or sudden death, and then he is quietly told: 'What's more natural?' Raoule, you deserve to go to the police station, and yet I thought that Mademoiselle de Vénérande was loyalty carried to an extreme! I am furious!"

"You were going to see me home," the young woman said, still smiling. "We'll dine without my aunt, who is plunged into a lot of nightly devotions, and while dining I shall explain to you. . . ."

"Of course! You mock me, I am sure."

"Get in first, and I'll swear I'll clear up everything afterwards, for I deserve my reputation for loyalty. I could hide things from you, my dear friend, but I won't. Who knows! (and her face had such a bitter expression that it calmed Raittolbe). Who knows if my story is not worth what you did not get today?"

He entered the brown carriage, very sulky, his moustache bristling, his eyes as round as those of a lion-tamer faced with his pupil.

During the drive he did not begin any discussion; even the *story* seemed unnecessary since he was going to dine at Raoule's. He knew, and he was not the only one who knew, that in her home, Madame Elizabeth's niece remained an irreproachable virgin, a kind of goddess who allowed herself everything from a pedestal which no one dared upset. Accordingly he was going to his martyrdom without enthusiasm. Raoule was dream-

ing with her eyes half-closed, gazing through the night she had made around her, at a very white object with all the contours of a human body.

When they reached the mansion she had a table laid and taken into her library. An Etruscan lamp was put into the hands of a bronze slave, and she sat upon the divan, asking the baron to take a comfortable armchair. All was done so gracefully that Raittolbe felt capable of strangling his hostess before touching the soup.

When the dishes had been put on two heated serving tables, Raoule told the footman that they would not need him any more.

"Shall we be quite regency?" she said.

"Just as you like!" grumbled the baron in a low voice. A bright fire was burning in the emblazoned fireplace, decorated with tapestry figures, which took them back a few centuries, back to the time when the king's supper rose from the floor when he struck it with the handle of his sword.

A panel represented Henri III distributing flowers to his minions. Near Raoule the enameled eyes of an Antinoüs crowned with vine-leaves shone with desire.

Profane names could be seen along the dark bindings of the books, piled up in their hundreds: Parny, Piron, Voltaire, Boccaccio, Brantôme; and in the midst of the books stood a chest which hid between its velvet-lined

shelves the unacknowledgeable ones and closed its doors, inlaid with ivory, upon them.

Raoule took an ewer and poured herself a glass of cold water.

"My friend," she said in a tone full of forced gaiety and restrained passion, "I warn you I shall get drunk, because I can't tell my story in a rational fashion, for you would not understand it!"

"Very well!" murmured Raittolbe, "I shall try to keep my senses!"

And he emptied a whole bottle of sauterne into a chiselled goblet. They watched each other for a moment. Though very angry Raittolbe was forced to admit to himself that Mademoiselle de Vénérande had a face like the most beautiful of Dianas.

As for Raoule, she could not see Raittolbe who was sitting opposite. The intoxication of which she was thinking had already dimmed her eyes.

"My friend," she said brusquely, "I am in love like a man!"

Raittolbe jumped up, laid down his goblet, and answered in a strange voice.

"Sappho! . . . Of course," he added, with an ironical gesture, "I suspected it. Go on, Monsieur de Vénérande, go on, my dear boy friend!"

Raoule sneered disdainfully.

"You are mistaken, Monsieur de Raittolbe; if I were

a Sappho, I would only be like everybody else! My education bars me from the crime of boarding-school teachers and the fault of the prostitute. I thought you knew that I am above the level of ordinary loves. How can you think me capable of such a weakness? Do not be afraid of the conventions . . . . I am not easily shocked."

Raittolbe was trying to bend his fork. He could see that he had fallen head first into the lion's den. He bowed deeply.

"What on earth could I have been thinking of? Ah! Mademoiselle, I was forgetting the *Homo sum* of Terence!"

"It is true, Monsieur," Raoule went on, shrugging her shoulders, "that I have had lovers in my life as I have books in my library, to know, to study. . . . But I have had no passion, I have not written my book yet! I always found myself alone when we were two. One is not weak, when one remains master of one's self in the midst of the most stupefying pleasures. To present my psychological theme under a more . . . Louis XV light, I shall say that although I have read a lot, and studied a great deal, I have always been able to see the shallowness of my authors, classical or otherwise! At the present time, my heart, that fiery scholar, wishes to show off and be like Faust . . . it is trying to rejuvenate, not its blood, but that old-fashioned thing called love!"

"Bravo!" said Raittolbe, convinced that he was about

to witness magic, and that soon he would see a witch come out of the mysterious chest. "Bravo! I shall help you if I can! Ready at any hour, you know! I also am tired of the eternal chorus which accompanies very much overrated actions. My little Faust, I drink to a new invention and I am ready to pay for the patent. By Jove! A new love! That suits me! And yet, Faust, it occurs to me that every woman when she begins, must think that she has created love, because love is only old for us philosophers! It is not old for virgins, hey? Let us be logical!"

She moved impatiently.

"I represent," she said, taking a dish of shrimps from the heater, "I represent the pick of the women of our time. A combination of the artist and of the great lady, one of those women who revolt at the idea of carrying on a weak race, or of giving a pleasure they don't share. Well! I come to your tribunal, sent by my sisters, to declare that we all want the impossible, because you love us so badly."

"You have the floor, my dear lawyer," Raittolbe asserted enthusiastically and in perfect seriousness. "Only I declare that I won't be both judge and defendant. Please put your discourse in the third person: Because they love us so badly. . . ."

"Yes," Raoule went on, "either brutality or impotence, that is the dilemma. The brutes exasperate, the impotent

degrade, and both are in such a hurry for their pleasure, that *they* forget to give us, the victims, the only aphrodisiac which could make them happy by making us happy: *Love!* . . ."

"That's right!" Raittolbe interrupted, nodding his head. "Love for love, the eternal aphrodisiac! Very pretty! I approve. The court is on your side!"

"In olden times," the pitiless advocate went on, "vice was sacred because born of strength; in our time it is shameful because born of our weakness. If one were strong, and if one also had grievances against virtue, viciousness would be permissible if, for example, one created a new vice. Sappho could not be a prostitute, for she was the vestal of a new fire. If I created a new depravity, I would be a priestess, while my imitators would flounder, after my reign, in abominable mud. . . . Don't you think that proud men, copying Satan, are more guilty than the Satan of the Bible who invented pride? Is Satan not respectable because of his unprecedented and divinely inspired sin? . . ."

Raoule rose greatly moved, her silver cup filled with pure water in her hand. She seemed to be drinking a toast to the Antinoüs who bent over her.

Raittolbe rose too, filling his goblet with iced champagne. More moved than a hussard generally is after his tenth glass, but more courteous than a rake would have been in the same circumstances, he cried:

"To Raoule de Vénérande, the Christopher Columbus of modern love . . . "

Then, sitting down:

"Lawyer, let us get down to facts, because I know that you are in love, but I don't know why you have betrayed me! . . ."

Raoule went on sorrowfully:

"I am madly in love! Yes! I want to raise an altar to my idol, though I know I'll never be understood! . . . Alas! Can an unnatural passion which is at the same time a real love ever be anything but dreadful madness? . . ."

"Raoule," said the Baron de Raittolbe, effusively, "I am certain that you are mad, but I hope to cure you. Tell me the whole story. How, without imitating Sappho, can you be in love with a pretty girl?"

Raoule's pale face turned a flaming red.

"I am in love with a man, not with a woman!" she replied, while her darkened eyes turned away from the gleaming eyes of the Antinoüs. "I have never been loved enough to gain the desire of reproducing a being in the image of my beloved . . . and I have never been given enough pleasure so that my brain has not had the leisure to seek for a better. . . . I have wanted the *impossible.* . . . I have it. . . . That is to say—no, I'll never have it! . . ."

A tear whose wet clearness seemed to have been stolen

from Eden rolled down Raoule's cheek. As for Raittolbe, he shrugged his shoulders in utter despair.

"She is in love like a man with a man! Immortal Gods!" he exclaimed, "have pity upon me! I think my brain is going!"

A moment's silence; then, very slowly, very naturally, Raoule told him how she had first met Jacques Silvert, how her caprice had grown to the proportion of a wild passion, and how she had bought a human being whom she despised as a man but adored as a beauty. (She said "beauty" for she could not say *"woman."*)

"Can such a man exist?" the bewildered baron muttered, carried away into an unknown world where inversion seemed natural and proper.

"He exists, my friend, and he is not a hermaphrodite, nor a eunuch; he is a beautiful twenty-four year old male, whose feminine soul has mistaken its envelope."

"I believe you, Raoule, I believe you! And you won't be his mistress?" the rake asked, sure that the adventure could not end otherwise.

"I shall be his lover," Mademoiselle de Vénérande answered, sipping her water and crumbling macaroons.

Raittolbe laughed heartily at that.

". . . Is this the invention I am ready to patent?" he asked.

A severe look stopped him.

"Have you ever denied the existence of Christian martyrs, Raittolbe?"

"Of course not! I have had other things to do, my dear Raoule!"

"Do you deny that virgins take the veil?"

"I yield to evidence. I have a charming cousin at the Carmelites of Moulins."

"Would you deny the possibility of being faithful to an unfaithful spouse?"

"As for me, yes, for one of my best comrades, no! Is the water you are drinking enchanted? You frighten me with your questions."

"Well, my dear baron, I shall love Jacques as a man loves his dead fiancée, hopelessly!"

They had finished dinner. A servant removed the table, and then, side by side, they lay upon the divan, each smoking a Turkish cigarette.

Raittolbe did not think of Raoule's dress, and Raoule was not in the least interested in the young officer's moustache.

"So you'll keep him?" asked the baron in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"Even if I ruin myself by it! I want her to be as happy as a king's *godson!*"

"Let us come to an understanding! If I am the chief confidant, my dear friend, let's stick to either *he* or *she*

so that I won't lose the few shreds of common sense I have left."

"All right; *She.*"

"And the sister?"

"A servant, that's all!"

"If the ex-flower-maker has had lovers, *she* can have new ones?"

". . . Hashish . . . "

"By Jove it's getting complicated! Suppose, by any chance, hashish was not sufficient?"

"I would kill *her!*"

Raittolbe picked up a book haphazardly, for he felt the desire to read aloud to himself. Suddenly amid the rising fumes of champagne, he seemed to see Raoule dressed in the doublet of Henri III, offering a rose to Antinoüs. A rumbling in his ears, a beating in his temples; and then, as he choked while reading the lines which danced before his eyes, he said things dreadful enough to make all the hussards of France blush.

"That's enough!" Mademoiselle de Vénérande murmured dreamily. "Let me have clean thoughts when I am thinking of *her!*"

Raittolbe rose and stretched, then came over to shake hands with Raoule.

"Good-bye," he said gently, "if I do not shoot myself first, tomorrow morning we'll visit *her* together."

"Your friendship will triumph! Besides, one cannot be really in love with Raoule de Vénérande! . . ."

"Quite right!" Raittolbe replied.

And he left very quickly, because his head was growing giddy. Before going back to her room, Raoule went to see her aunt. She was kneeling upon a monumental prayer-stool, and was reciting a prayer to the Virgin Mary.

"Remember, sweet Virgin Mary, that no one who prays to you has ever been rejected! . . ."

"Has anyone ever asked her to change one's sex?" the young woman thought, while she kissed the pious old woman, *sighing*.

chapter 6


THE introduction took place in front of an easel, upon which stood a sketch of a large bouquet of forget-me-nots. Jacques was wearing his studio costume: very wide trousers and a swanskin vest.

He had made a silk tie by pulling out one of the curtain loops, and, with lovely cheeks and clear eyes, he stood there, very much embarrassed by the visitor. The fabulous dreams of hashish, permeating his primitive make-up, had given him an awkward modesty, a shame which was revealed in all his movements. It was easy to tell from his languid air that these dreams were haunting his brain, and that they left him uncertain of the reality of the fairy-like existence he was being made to lead.

Raoule tapped him cavalierly upon the shoulder.

"Jacques," she said, "let me introduce one of my friends. He loves good drawings, and you can show him yours."

Raittolbe, dressed in a tight-fitting riding costume, and wearing a soldier's high collar, was sniffing ungraciously. As he came in, he had said: "By Jove! what a sumptuous apartment!"

"Yes," he mumbled, scandalised now by the too real beauty of the flower-maker, "I draw too, but staff maps! Is Monsieur a painter of flowers? . . ."

More and more confused, Jacques looked reproachfully at Mademoiselle de Vénérande.

"I have done some sheep, shall I bring them out?" he asked, without directly answering the baron, whose riding-whip embarrassed him.

This unexpected submissiveness sent a shiver down Raoule's spine, and she was only able to nod acquiescence. While he was looking for his cartoons, Marie Silvert, draped in a flounced skirt, haughty, with cynical eyes, entered from the bedroom. She wore pinchback rings with imitation stones. She stopped short when she saw Raittolbe and, forgetting the sacred presence of the mistress of the house, cried:

"Heavens! What a smart man!"

Jacques burst out laughing, the baron gaped and Raoule looked murderous.

"My dear, you ought to keep your admiration to yourself," said the ex-officer, pointing at Jacques, "there is someone here to whom you might give false ideas! . . ."

That joke, in rather doubtful taste, was meant for Jacques, but Marie thought it was for Raoule.

Marie said humbly that she had not been brought up in a fashionable convent.

"Now that you are better," Raoule said, haughtily, "you must get yourself a room near the studio. It will be more convenient for . . . Jacques! . . ."

"Mademoiselle will be satisfied at once. Yesterday I took a small room on the landing and put an iron cot there."

Jacques was not listening. He was taking down the picture of the sheep, and the woman went out backwards, repeating to herself: "What a good-looking man! God! what a good-looking man! . . ."

The incident over, they busied themselves with the drawings of the young artist. In a detached manner, Raoule told how she had discovered that he had a lot of talent; with a few hours study in the Louvre, her lessons, the quietness of the isolated neighbourhood where he lived, he would do wonders and later would be able to compete for the Salon prize. Jacques smiled with his flashing teeth. Ah, yes! The medal was a noble ambition. Thanks to his benefactress, he would become celebrated, he, the poor workman always out of a job!

He spoke slowly, for he wished to show Raoule that he knew how to act in good company. From time to time, he turned to Raittolbe, saying: *"n'est-ce-pas, Mon-*

sieur?" so shyly that, however disgusted he had been when he arrived, Raittolbe soon felt an immense compassion for that disguised prostitute. . . .

Raoule stretched out in an armchair, followed Jacques' every movement; when she saw him accept a cigarette, she almost jumped up with rage. He was smoking slowly, like a child afraid of being burned, and he was trying to hold his cigarette as if he was accustomed to smoking.

"Jacques," Raoule asked, "is your fever gone?"

He put his cigarette down immediately. Then Raoule explained to Raittolbe she spoke familiarly to Silvert because she was older than he was and because also, studying art made this familiarity possible between fellow-students. The baron nodded his assent. After all, since they were travelling in the moon. . . . The setting of this monstrous affair was so truly oriental, the wretchedness of this low passion was so cleverly gilded, such a thick carpet had been laid over the mud, that he, the rake, was not anxious to lay it bare with the tip of his riding whip. . . .

And, quite aside from the prostitute and the paramour, Raittolbe was compromising himself in the best of society. Although he had always been a gentleman till then, he was of his epoch; he would prefer a different hold on Raoule than the knowledge of the secrets of her private life; but after all, it is not unusual to have a

beautiful mistress, but it is not always easy to be able to study, in the raw, a new depravity.

Slowly the conversation became animated. Jacques was won by the baron's frankness; he said a few amusing things and became confidential.

"I'll bet that this boy, who has not the physique to be a soldier, has had many affairs with women instead?" . . . Raittolbe ventured, winking.

"With his face! Of course! . . ." Raoule said, playing nervously with one of her gloves.

"I swear I haven't," said Jacques, a little astonished that such a question should be asked in such a place. "If I have slept out ten times," and he winked back at Raittolbe, "that's all! . . ."

Raoule rose to modify something in the drawing of the blue bouquet.

"No flirtations? No intrigues?" insisted the baron.

"Only the rich can be in love!" muttered the flower-maker, suddenly losing his gaiety.

As he finished his cigarette Raittolbe complimented Jacques upon his talent, bowed to him, as one would bow to a woman in her home, with exaggerated respect, and then took his leave of Raoule, saying briefly:

"At the Italiens, this evening? . . ."

She shook her head, without turning around and called to Jacques.

"Here, stupid," she said, striking him with her torn

gloves, "try to give some life to your unlucky forget-me-nots! You paint wooden flowers!"

"I shall begin all over again, for I am going to give them to your aunt."

"Well, if they are for my aunt, you can make them like marbles!"

Raittolbe had gone.

"I forbid you to smoke!" she cried, shaking Jacques by the arm.

"All right! I shan't do it again! . . ."

"And I forbid you to speak to a man here without my permission."

Jacques, taken aback, stood still, keeping his stupid smile.

Suddenly she dashed at him, and threw him down before he had time to struggle; then grasping his neck which his vest left bare, she dug her nails into his flesh.

"I am *jealous!*" she roared. "Do you understand me now?"

Jacques had buried his clenched fists in his tear-filled eyes and did not move. Raoule felt better because she knew that she was hurting him.

"You must feel," she said ironically, "that my hands are not those of a flower-maker, and that I am the better man of the two!"

Jacques did not answer, but looked at her from the corner of his eye, smiling bitterly.

His feminine beauty was more apparent in his submissive attitude, and his weakness, perhaps voluntary, seemed to Raoule mysteriously attractive.

"How cruel you are! . . ." he said in a low tone.

Raoule took a cushion and placed it under his red head.

"You madden me!" she stammered. "I want you for myself alone, and yet you speak, you laugh, you listen, you answer with the poise of an ordinary human being! Don't you see that your almost supernatural beauty debauches the mind of all who approach you? Yesterday I wanted to love you in my own way without explaining my sufferings, but today I am out of my mind because one of my friends sat beside you."

She was stopped by raucous sobs and tried to hide her face with her handkerchief. On her knees beside his outstretched body, she burned with the ardour of a love which was communicated to Jacques in spite of himself; he sat up and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Then you love me very much?" he asked, cynically but charmingly.

"I love you unto death! . . ."

"Will you promise me to make me delirious all day long again? . . ."

"Yes, you prefer delirium to my kisses!"

"No! . . . and your remedy won't intoxicate me again, because I shall spit it out, if you force it into my

mouth! . . . This will be another delirium, a more satisfactory one . . . "

He stopped, a little out of breath, surprised at having said as much, and then went on speaking in a tone of voluptuous ardour:

"Why did you come with the gentleman? . . . Can't I be jealous too? I don't understand. I ought to leave, but . . . your green jam has made me more cowardly than my sister! . . . I am afraid of everything . . . and yet I am happy, very happy . . . . I'd like to sleep on my nurse's breast . . . "

Raoule was kissing his hair, as fine and golden as tulle, trying to fill him with her tremendous passion. Her compelling lips made him bend his head forward, and she bit the nape of his neck.

Jacques started and shrieked at the pleasure of that pain.

"How wonderful that is!" he sighed, stiffening in the arms of his wild possessor; "I don't want anything else! Raoule, love me as you please, if you will only caress me thus!"

The draperies were lowered, and the muffled noise of the buses and carriages passing in the street came through the double windows, like the distant thundering of an express train. The big divan against which Raoule had thrown Jacques and the cushions piled up behind them seemed like the padded compartment of

a train de luxe. . . . They were alone, carried away by a swift and upsetting frenzy . . . . they plunged to abysses and thought they were safe in each other's arms.

"Jacques," Raoule said, "I have made a *god* of our love. Our love shall be eternal. . . . My caresses will never stop! . . ."

"Then you really find me beautiful? You really find me worthy of you, most beautiful of women? . . ."

"You are so beautiful, dear creature, that you are more of a woman! Look in the mirror, at your pink and white neck, like a child's neck! . . . Look at your marvellous mouth like a wound in a fruit ripened in the sun! Look at the midnight in your deep, pure eyes. . . . Look. . . ."

She pulled him up, pushing aside with her feverish fingers his clothes upon his chest.

"Don't you know, Jacques, that fresh and healthy flesh is the only power in this world! . . ."

He was aroused. His masculinity awoke with these soft words.

She was not striking him now, she was not buying him, she was flattering him, and man, however low he may be, always possesses, at some time or another, that ephemeral virility called *vanity*.

"You have proved to me," he said, encircling her waist with a bold smile, "you have indeed proved to me that I did not have to blush before you, Raoule. The blue bed is waiting for us, come! . . ."

A cloud covered her scowling forehead.

"All right . . . . but only on condition, Jacques, that you won't be my lover."

He laughed frankly, as he would have laughed if he had met an unwilling woman in a disorderly house.

"I won't dream this time. You don't want me to, wicked one! . . ." he said, escaping with the ease of a young deer.

"You will be my slave, Jacques, if one can call the delightful abandonment of the body slavery."

Jacques tried to drag her after him, but she resisted.

"Do you swear it? . . ." she asked, in a compelling tone.

"What? . . . Are you mad! . . ."

"Am I master, yes or no?" cried Raoule, standing erect with hard eyes and distended nostrils.

Jacques moved back to the easel.

"I am going away . . . I am going away!" he repeated in despair, not understanding his master's desires, and not desiring anything else himself.

"You won't go away, Jacques. You have given yourself away, and you can't take yourself back! Are you forgetting that we love each other? . . ."

Now her love was almost a threat; so he turned his back upon her, sulking, but she came up behind him, and folded him in her lascivious arms.

"Pardon!" she muttered, "I was forgetting that you

are a capricious woman, with the right, in *her* home, to torture me. Well! . . . I'll do whatever you like . . . "

They went to the blue room, he, astounded by her demand for the impossible; she with cold eyes and biting her lower lip. She undressed herself, refusing all his advances. Without coquetry she took off her dress and her corset, behind a screen, thus preventing him from admiring her splendid, Diana-like figure. When he kissed her, it seemed to him that a marble statue had crawled between the sheets; he had the disagreeable sensation that a corpse was touching his own warm body.

"Raoule," he begged, "don't call me a *woman* again, it humiliates me . . . and you can see that I can only be your lover. . . ."

The sophisticate, upon the pillows, shrugged her shoulders in a way which proved her complete indifference.

"Raoule," Jacques repeated, trying to warm with kisses the mouth which a while ago had been so passionate, the mouth of the one he believed would be his mistress. "Raoule! do not despise me, I beg you. . . . We love each other, you said so yourself. . . . I am growing mad. . . . I feel I am dying. . . . There are things I will never do . . . never. . . . before making you mine with all my heart!"

Raoule's eyes were closed. She knew that game! She

knew word for word what Nature would say with Jacques' voice. . . .

How many times had she heard such cries, howls from some, sighs from others, polite advances from the seasoned ones, hesitating attempts from the shy ones. . . ? And though they had all shouted loudly, when they had obtained the realization of their dearest desire in time-worn phrase, they all were happily sated, equally vulgar after the appeasement of their senses.

"Raoule," Jacques stammered, exhausted from his distressing pleasure. "Do what you will with me now, I can see that depraved people do not know how to love! . . ."

The young woman's body vibrated from head to foot when she heard the despairing cry of that man who was only a child compared to her. With one leap, she jumped upon him and covered him with her wildly passionate body.

"I don't know how to love . . . I . . . Raoule de Vénérande! . . . I know how to love, but I also know how to wait!"

chapter 7

A STRANGE life began for Raoule de Vénérande, from the fatal moment when Jacques Silvert gave up his power as a lover and became hers to do with as she would, a lifeless object who let himself be loved, because his own love was powerless. Jacques loved Raoule with a real woman's love. He loved her with gratitude, with submissiveness, with a latent desire for unknown pleasures, with such a passion as one has for hashish, although he much preferred her to the green jam. The degrading habit she had taught him had become a necessity.

They saw each other almost every day, as often as Raoule's social obligations allowed.

When she had neither visits, nor soirées, nor studies, she would jump into a cab and go to the Boulevard Montparnasse, the key to the studio in her hand. She would give some brief orders to Marie, and often a royally filled purse, and then she would shut herself in

their temple, isolated from the rest of the earth. Jacques very rarely asked to go out. When she was not there he worked or read all kinds of books, scientific or literary, whatever Raoule gave him to charm his primitive mind.

He led the lazy existence of the Eastern women, confined to the harem, who know nothing except love and for whom love is everything.

Sometimes his sister made scenes about his quietness. She would have liked him to have a household, other mistresses and the desire to waste the wealth of the sinner. But he, always calm, declared that she could not know and could never know.

And the heavy draperies kept Marie from looking through the keyhole. She was obliged to remain a stranger to the mysteries of the blue room. Raoule came and went, commanded, acted like a man accustomed to affairs, though never before in love. She forced Jacques to bask in his passive happiness like a pearl in its setting. The more she forgot her sex, the more she multiplied the occasions for him to be feminine, and, so as not to frighten too much the male she wanted to smother, she tried various degradations upon him jokingly at first, and later made him accept them seriously. Thus, one morning she sent him by her footman an enormous bunch of white flowers, with this note: "I picked this perfumed armful of flowers for you in my greenhouse. Don't scold

me, for I send flowers instead of kisses. A fiancée could not do better! . . . "

Jacques grew very red when the flowers arrived, but he placed them in the vases about the studio, playing a comedy to himself, being a woman for the sake of art.

At the beginning of their relationship, he would have felt grotesque. With the excuse that he wanted to breathe some fresh air he would have gone out, would have taken a glass of beer at a neighbouring bar, with salesmen and casual labourers.

Raoule knew at once the difference she had wrought in that weak character, when she saw the way her bouquet had been arranged, and every morning thereafter her footman left with Jacques's concierge, immaculately white flowers.

Why immaculately white?

Jacques did not ask. One day, toward the end of May, Raoule ordered a closed carriage and took Jacques for a drive in the Bois.

He was as happy as a schoolboy on a holiday, but he enjoyed this unusual favour very discreetly. He stayed close to her in the carriage, his head upon her shoulder, repeating adorable nothings which rendered his beauty still more provocative.

With her forefinger, through the closed window, Raoule pointed out to him the principal people passing. She explained to him the terms of society life she was

using and told him of the life she led, a life which appeared forbidden to him, a poor monster without a conscience.

"Ah!" he used to say, cuddling up to her, frightened, "some day you'll marry and you'll leave me!"

These words gave to him, so fresh, so blonde, the touching charm of a seduced young woman, who foresees the possibility of being forgotten.

"No, I shall never marry!" Raoule asserted. "No, I won't leave you, Jaja, and if you are good, you'll always be mine! . . ."

They both laughed, but they were more and more united in a common thought: the destruction of their sex.

Jaja, however, had caprices, attainable ones. He disappointed his sister, whose hopes were much above the clothes-filled studio. He had asked for a pretty dressing gown of blue velvet, lined with blue. . . . and it was with heels tripping in the train of this garment that he greeted Raoule. She came once, about midnight, dressed like a man, a gardenia in her buttonhole, her hair hidden in curls, a top hat, her riding hat, low upon her forehead. Jacques had fallen asleep reading while waiting for her, and the book had slipped from his fingers. The night light shed a mystic glow over the bed of silky brocade, ornamented with Venetian lace. His tousled hair lay upon the fine line of the sheet with a charming abandon. His soft shirt revealed nothing masculine, and

his rounded hairless arm shone like beautiful marble upon the satin counterpane.

Raoule looked at him for a minute, wondering with a kind of superstitious terror if she, godlike, had not created a human being in her own image. She touched him with the tip of her glove, and he awoke, stammering a name; but, seeing this young man standing beside his bed, he jumped up, shouting in fear:

"Who are you? What do you want? . . ."

Raoule took off her hat with a very respectful movement.

"Madame sees before her the most devoted of her adorers," she said, curtsying.

For a moment he hesitated, with astonished eyes, looking at her patent leather boots and her short brown curls.

"Raoule! . . . Raoule! . . . Is it possible? You'll be arrested! . . ."

"Nonsense, foolish little one! Because I come in without ringing the bell? . . ."

He held out his arms, and she smothered him with passionate kisses, stopping only when she saw him ready to swoon, beside himself, begging for the last realization of an artificial happiness, which he endured as much from a need for peace as for the love of the sinister courtezan.

He quickly grew accustomed to the nightly disguise,

thinking that Mademoiselle de Vénérande had the right to dispense with wearing a dress if she chose.

Since he had a very vague idea of the life of the *Aristocracy,* as his sister often called them, he never imagined what efforts Raoule had to make to leave her home without being noticed.

Aunt Elizabeth went to bed at eight o'clock when there were no receptions, but after the tea on Saturday all the servants went back and forth from the hall to the drawing-room. So that Raoule, in order to leave her room by the servants' stairs had to take the most minute precautions. However, one evening when the big chandelier in the drawing-room had just been put out, as Raoule started down, she met a man who was lighting his cigar. To go back was to lose her opportunity, to go out was to run the risk of betraying herself. . . . She went on, passing by the man, who touched his hat, looking at her very attentively.

"One word, sir," the late one murmured, touching her shoulder. "Will you give me a light?"

Raoule had recognized Raittolbe.

"Well," she said, looking haughtier than ever, "so you haunt the chambermaids' quarters?"

"What about you?" the ex-officer answered, very much piqued.

"That's none of your business."

"Yes, it is," he replied, "because one can also reach

this way, I believe, the apartments of a lady for whom I have the deepest respect. Mademoiselle de Vénérande's room is above us. I shall give you my explanation in return for yours. Mademoiselle Jeanne's face lured me here. It is stupid, but it is true. . . . Your turn now."

"Such impertinence," said Raoule, trying to hide her laughter.

Raittolbe quickly threw his card and his cigar in Raoule's face, and she burst out laughing in spite of the danger. Then she took off her hat and turned her beautiful face to her questioner.

"Well, for heaven's sake!" Raittolbe grumbled, "that's a disguise I wasn't expecting!"

"I'll take you with me!" Raoule replied.

And they went to the tilbury which was waiting in the avenue. Raittolbe lamented the depraved who spoil the best. He declared that Jacques looked to him like a parcel of rotten flesh. And as for his sister she was right in loving handsome young men, for she was only living up to the rules of her union. And as he grumbled and swore, he drove toward the Boulevard Montparnasse, while Raoule, seated behind him, laughed heartily. They arrived very late.

A woman appeared to be silently waiting for them, opposite Notre-Dame-des-Champs.

There were very few people in the street at such an hour, and she was obviously a street-walker.

"Will you come up to my place? The gentleman with the decoration, I mean. I am as nice as any other, you know," the prostitute said, addressing herself to Raittolbe.

She was wearing a silk dress, covered with a Spanish mantilla held by a coral comb. Her eyes were shiny with promises, although a hollow cough had interrupted her sentence.

"So it's you," exclaimed Mademoiselle de Vénérande, raising her riding whip with one hand, and seizing Marie's arm with the other.

Marie Silvert, seeing that she was recognized by the master of the house, tried to take back what she had said.

"Excuse me," she stammered, "I thought you were some acquaintances of mine; please don't think badly of me, for I also know some people of the aristocracy."

Raoule struck Marie impetuously upon the temple, and since the riding whip had a round, agate handle, Marie Silvert fell unconscious upon the pavement.

"Oh, hell!" said Raittolbe, exasperated. "You might have restrained yourself, my young comrade; we'll be taken to the police station, right enough! Besides, you are illogical. If you are coming down in the world, this girl is going up. . . . Punishment was useless."

Raoule shivered.

"Hush, Raittolbe! My passion has nothing to do with this low female. I should have thrown her out long ago."

"I don't advise you to try!" . . . Raittolbe replied dryly.

He picked Marie up, slung her across his shoulder, and before the police arrived they had her in the house.

Raoule, not worrying about how the adventure might turn out for Raittolbe, let him enter the sister's room whilst she went to the brother's. Jacques was not in bed, for he had heard shouts in the street.

He ran up to Raoule and put his arms around her neck, as an anxious wife would have done.

"Jaja's sad," he declared, in a tone whose naïveté was belied by his cheeky smile.

"Why, my treasure?"

And Raoule almost carried him to the nearest armchair.

"I thought you were being arrested; there was a dispute, I think, underneath my window."

"No, nothing! By the way, you had not told me that your esteemed sister is not satisfied with the comfort I give her. She accosts passers-by on the boulevard at one o'clock in the morning."

"Oh!" said Jacques, scandalized.

"Taking me for someone else a short while ago, she allowed herself . . . "

Such an idea would have amused the flower-maker three months before, but now it infuriated him. . . .

"The wretch!" he said.

"You will allow me to suppress Mademoiselle Silvert, won't you?"

"You are justified! So she made advances . . . . " he said in a jealous tone.

"It is quite obvious that I must look like a serious . . . client, as such ladies say!"

And Raoule put down her coat with masculine ease.

"And yet," Jacques sighed, "one thing will always be missing."

She sat at his feet upon a low stool, plunged in mute adoration. He wore his velvet dressing gown tied around his waist with a silk cord, and his shirt, with embroidered front, had just enough collar to avoid being completely feminine. His hands, of which he took great care, were as beautifully white as a leisured woman's; upon his red hair he had sprinkled brilliantine.

"You are divine!". . . said Raoule. "I have never seen you so beautiful!"

"I have a surprise for you. . . . We shall have supper! . . . I have ordered champagne, and I have decided to tease you!"

"Really?"

He pushed away the Chinese screen and uncovered a table laid with two bottles of champagne on ice.

"There!" he said, "I even want to make you drunk!"

"So, Mademoiselle is at home!"

Just then someone knocked at the door.

"Who is there? . . ." asked Jacques, very much annoyed.

"I!" Marie answered. And, when they had unbolted the door, she entered, very pale, her mantilla torn, some blood upon her cheek.

"My god! What is the matter? . . ." Jacques cried out.

"Oh, nothing," the woman said in a raucous voice . . . Madame almost killed me, that's all!"

"Killed you!"

"Be calm!" said Raoule contemptuously; "there must be a doctor in the neighbourhood; have him fetched by the concierge or by M. de Raittolbe, if he is not already gone."

"I am here," the latter said, appearing and signalling to Raoule, who remained quiet.

"Explain yourself," muttered Jacques, pouring out a glass of champagne for his sister and making her sit in an armchair.

"Well, here you are, my dear. That whore you love the wrong way, beat me up, pretending that I was soliciting at the door. Apparently we are not in our own home! . . . She wants to be the only one to make a night of it, think of that! She has to meddle with poor women who

have different tastes than hers. She supervises prostitutes, makes up their yellow tickets and beats them. But in spite of this gentleman's honesty,"—and she pointed to the baron who was making desperate signs to Raoule—"I shall settle with her at once. I don't care a rap about your dirty love affair, but as long as we are rabble together, we can just get a little rough with each other before we part company, hey!"

Spluttering out those words, which made as much noise as pistol shots in the magnificence of that room, the woman pulled up her sleeves and, rising, stood in front of Raoule.

She was completely drunk. When her breath blew into Mademoiselle de Vénérande's face, it seemed to Raoule that a bottle of alcohol was being spilled over her.

"Miserable wretch," Raoule roared, searching her pockets for the dagger which she always carried.

Raittolbe thrust himself between them, while Jacques held his sister.

"That's enough!" said Raittolbe, who wished he were a hundred miles away from the Boulevard Montparnasse. "You are very ungrateful, Mademoiselle Silvert, and moreover, you are not in your right senses. Please leave!"

"No," roared Marie, absolutely beside herself, "I want to crown the hussy before I go away. She disgusts me, I tell you."

Dismayed, Jacques kept trying to push her outside.

"You also," she yelled, "deny your sister, you dirty trollop!"

Jacques became as pale as death; and slowly, without answering, he walked to his room, and let the portière fall behind him. At last, Raittolbe, his patience exhausted, seized Marie bodily, and in spite of her struggles and furious cries, carried her to her room, and locked her in; then he came back to Raoule.

"My dear friend," he said, trying not to look at her, "I think this scene ought to give you food for thought; this creature, however low she may be, looks very dangerous to me . . . take care! If you dismiss her, in two days the whole of Paris will know the story of Jacques Silvert."

"Will you, instead of that, help me to crush her?" Raoule asked, pale with rage.

"My dear child! You don't know what a real woman is like. You couldn't possibly change her. I promise to calm her, that's all!"

"How?" asked Raoule, frowning.

"That's my secret; but be sure your friend will know how to sacrifice herself."

Raoule drew back, revolted; she understood.

"Everyone according to his lights," said Raittolbe.

And he left, in a very dignified manner.

chapter 8

"Since we are rabble together," Marie Silvert had said. All night long these words kept Raoule from loving. All the souvenirs of Greek stateliness with which she surrounded her modern idol were suddenly pushed aside like a veil exposed to the wind, and revealed to the daughter of the Vénérandes the existence of ignoble things which she had never suspected. In love all women are alike. . . .

. . . The honest wife, at the moment she gives herself to her legal husband, is in the same position as the prostitute when she abandons herself to her lover.

Nature has made the victims naked and civilization gives them only clothes. Without clothes there are no differences, except in physical beauty; there, sometimes, the prostitute wins.

Christian philosophers have spoken of purity of intention, but they have never mentioned that last moment

during the amorous struggle. . . . At least we don't think so! They would have found it too distracting.

Raoule saw herself on a level with the ex-prostitute . . . and, if she had the superiority of beauty, she did not have that of pleasure. She gave pleasure, but she did not have any.

All monsters have their fits of depression, and she was tired . . . Jacques cried.

At dawn, she left the studio, took a cab and went back to her mansion.

While waiting for breakfast, she fenced with one of her cousins, a stupid snob, who looked well while fencing, and then she discussed with her aunt the prospects of their going away. Raoule thought they should leave at once, before the season ended. The canoness answered that she had charity visits to pay, farming accounts to settle, and a cook to replace. Wealth is sometimes very trying, society very boring, and the world is full of tribulations.

However, the modern Sappho could not yet condemn herself to death. A piercing pain from the depths of her being warned her that her idol had feet of clay. Like an inventor who is stopped by some small obstacle upon the threshold of perfecting his discovery, she hoped, in spite of the mud, to see in Jacques' bright eyes another corner of her sky, which she could fill with dreams.

Three days went by. Jacques did not write, Marie did

not come, and as for Raittolbe, he kept absolutely neutral. One evening Raoule, exasperated by the uncertainty, put on her masculine garments and rushed to the Boulevard Montparnasse. As she entered, she met Marie Silvert, who greeted her with a servile smile, without showing in her attitude anything that might recall what had happened between them. Jacques was making elaborate initials on notepaper. Raoule had ordered him to do so, and had paid him in advance with passionate kisses.

A delightful calm reigned in the studio, and the light of the lamp with its lowered shade fell only upon Jacques' adorable face. It was not the face of a low person; everything in his features indicated rather the candour of a young virgin thinking of the priesthood. Uneasy when he saw Raoule, he laid down his pencil and rose.

"Jacques," said Raoule quietly, "my friend, you are a coward."

Jacques fell back into his armchair, deathly pale.

"Your sister's epithets the other night were foul but justified."

He grew still paler.

"You are kept by a woman, you work only to have something to do, and you accept an infamous position without any struggle whatsoever."

Frightened, he looked up at her.

"I think," Raoule went on, "that it is not Marie whom I should dismiss as a vile creature."

Jacques clasped his hands to his breast, for he was suffering.

"You shall leave here," Raoule added coldly, "you shall go and seek for work from an engraver. I shall help you to find it, and then you'll go back to your garret and try to become a man."

Jacques rose again.

"Yes," he said, brokenly, "I shall obey you, Mademoiselle. You are right."

"On that condition," Raoule went on, more gently, "I promise you a reward you have never dreamt of."

"What, Mademoiselle?" he asked while putting his tools in order upon the cover of his rosewood desk.

"I'll make you my husband."

Jacques drew back, raising his arms.

"Your husband?"

"Of course! I ruined you, and I shall rehabilitate you. Nothing simpler! Our love is only a degrading torture to which you submit because I pay. Well, I give you back your freedom. I hope that you'll know how to use it to win me all over again . . . if you love me."

Jacques leaned upon the easel which was at his back.

"Well, I refuse," he said bitterly.

"What! You refuse to marry me?"

"I refuse to rehabilitate myself, even at that price."

"Why?"

"Because I love you, as you have taught me to love you

. . . because I want to be a coward, because I want to be vile, and the torture of which you speak is my life now. I shall go back to a garret; if you want it, I shall become poor again, I shall work, but when you want me, I shall still be your slave, the one you call: my wife!"

A thunderbolt would not have upset Raoule more.

"Jacques! Jacques! Don't you remember our first embraces, then? Think of it! To be my husband; you, the workman who was plunged in poverty, will be a king!"

"Well!" Jacques muttered, two big tears in his eyes, "it's not my fault if I don't feel equal to it any more!"

Raoule ran to him with open arms:

"Oh! I love you," she cried voluptuously. "Yes, I am mad; I even imagine that I just asked you something unnatural. . . . Dearest darling. . . . Forget it, you are better than I thought."

She led him to the divan, and as she often did, took him upon her knee. They looked like two brothers who had made up their quarrels.

"I would, indeed, look pretty dressed in white, the veil of a chaste spouse upon my forehead . . . . I who hate to be ridiculous. . . . But, look here, you seriously mean, darling idiot, that you don't care for the idea at all? . . ."

Jacques was sobbing, his head upon Raoule's breast.

"No, I assure you, it is the end. I'll take what you want to give me, and if we had to change at certain moments,

I would refuse. However, if you knew how much I love you, you would not insult me, you would pity me greatly. I am very unhappy."

She hugged him tightly, calming him as one calms a babe in arms. Her triumph, against her own conscience, intoxicated her. The coarse insults of the vile woman no longer rang in her ears. Again Greek memories veiled her idol in a cloud of incense. Now she was loved through love of vice; Jacques was becoming a god.

She dried his tears and asked him about his sister.

"I don't know anything about the life she leads," he replied, in a sulky voice; "she is always out, and in the evening she is always expecting someone. I think it is the baron you introduced to me one day."

"Impossible," Raoule exclaimed, bursting into laughter . . . "Raittolbe lowering himself to that extent! . . . After all, she is free, and so is he, but I forbid you to worry about it."

"You forgive her for her actions the other day? You know she was drunk . . . "

"I forgive her everything, since, indirectly, she is the cause of the talk we have just had. I'd go to hell, if I thought I could find there the proof of your sincere love, darling Jacques!"

He lay at her feet and kissed them with passionate humility . . . then he sighed:

"I am sleepy," and put upon his forehead the high heel of Raoule's shoe.

She made him get up, for she understood.

That night Raoule, who had to go to a hunt the next day, at the Duchesse of Armonville's, near Fontainebleau, left about one, leaving Jacques sound asleep.

She was on her way downstairs, when Jacques' door was opened cautiously: a man in his shirt sleeves invaded the blue room, which he explored in a glance.

"Monsieur Silvert," he said then, sure that he and Jacques were alone, "Monsieur Silvert, I wish to speak to you; get up and let us go into the studio."

It was the Baron de Raittolbe; his dishevelled appearance showed that he had not left the other half of his clothes very far away. He seemed very much annoyed to find himself there, but an indomitable will shone under his thick black eyebrows. He was thoroughly revolted by all he had seen and heard. In this sad situation, he thought that his influence as a really virile man should make itself felt. Since he had become involved in the affair, he would, at least, be able to control its speed.

"Jacques!" he repeated aloud, approaching the bed.

The night light fell upon the rounded shoulders of the sleeper and followed caressingly the line of his body.

He had fallen exhausted upon the crushed bedspread whose blue satin showed his complexion to advantage. His head was hidden in his arm, which was so white that

it had mother-of-pearl tints. In the hollow of his loins a golden shadow emphasized the suppleness of his back, and one of his legs, drawn apart from the other, was contracted as a nervous woman's is contracted, after a too prolongated excitation of her senses. He had two gold bangles around his wrist, set with diamonds, which sparkled upon the azured sheets all around him, and a bottle of attar of roses, open upon the pillow, emitted a perfume as voluptuous as all the loves of the Orient.

The Baron de Raittolbe, standing before this disorderly couch, had a strange hallucination. This ex-officer of the hussards, this brave duellist, this jolly rake, who held in equal esteem a pretty girl and a bullet from the enemy, lost his bearings for a half-second: the blue which was all around him became red, his moustache stood on end, his teeth clenched, a shudder convulsed his body and he broke out with cold perspiration. He was almost frightened.

"I'll be damned if it isn't Eros himself," he muttered.

And, like an amateur who had been interested in the procedure of military examination, he followed with his eyes, the sculptured outlines of the voluptuous flesh.

"Now's the time to get my riding-whip," he added, trying to shake off his admiration.

"Jacques!" he roared, loudly enough to shake the room to the ceiling.

Jacques rose; but, however roughly he had been

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"Jacques!" he roared, loudly enough to shake the room to the ceiling.

Jacques rose; but, however roughly he had been

awakened, he was beautiful in his astonishment; his arms fell gracefully, and he remained superb in his impudicity, like an antique marble.

"Who dares," he said, "to come in without knocking?"

"I do," the baron answered, enraged, "I do, my dear young scoundrel, because I want to talk to you about a few interesting things. I knew you were alone, so I passed the threshold of the sanctuary. I give you a minute to make yourself look decent."

And he went out while Jacques, jumping out of bed, looked with trembling hands for his dressing gown.

The weather was sticky, it was August and a storm was in the offing. Raittolbe opened the windows of the studio and plunged his forehead into the air, hotter than Jacques' bed. He seemed to be breathing fire.

"At least it is a natural fire," he thought.

When he turned around, the young painter was waiting for him, wrapped in the folds of an almost feminine garment; his pale face in the darkness looked like a statue's.

"Jacques," the baron said in a dull voice, "is it true that Raoule wants to marry you?"

"Yes, sir, but how do you know?"

"What does that matter to you! I know it, that's enough; I even know why you refused. It is very noble of you to have refused, Monsieur Silvert," and Raittolbe

laughed contemptuously; "only after that worthy and dignified effort you should have retired completely from Mademoiselle de Vénérande's sun."

Jacques, completely fatigued, was wondering what the sun had to do with his marvellous night and what this disagreeable man could want from him.

"But, Monsieur," he muttered, "what right have you?"

"Damnation!" exclaimed the baron, "the right which any man of honour, knowing what I know, would take when he has to deal with a scoundrel of your sort. Raoule is mad, and her madness will disappear, but if during the crisis she married you, you would not disappear! . . . It would be disgusting. I have done all that is possible so that our world should not know anything of this scandal, but you'll have to do the impossible so that it will cease altogether; this secrecy cannot last forever. Your sister may get drunk again, and if she does, I give up. Tonight, you were almost right. Well, what prevents you from leaving this apartment tomorrow, going to a garret, seeking some work, and forgetting her . . . error. If you had a good impulse, then everything is not dead within you! Damnation, try to come back whole, Jacques!"

"You were listening to us," said Jacques, mechanically.

"What! What! No! Someone was listening for me, in

spite of me, but I think you have a great deal of cheek to ask me so many questions."

"You are Marie's lover?" Jacques went on, with an ironical smile of understanding.

The ex-officer clenched his fists.

"If you had a drop of blood in your veins!" . . . he growled, his eyes shining.

"Well, Monsieur le baron, since I do not meddle with your affairs, do not meddle with mine," Jacques went on. "No! I shall not marry Mademoiselle de Vénérande, but I shall love her where I please: here, or elsewhere, in a drawing-room, in a garret, and as I please. I only take orders from her; if I am vile, that's my own business; if she loves me as I am, that's her own business too!"

"A thousand damnations! But that hysterical woman is capable of marrying you whether you want it or not, I know her."

"Just as Marie Silvert has become your mistress whether you wanted her or not, Monsieur le Baron, one never knows what one might do under different circumstances."

Jacques' calm and sweet tone changed Raittolbe. Was this man of pleasure perhaps telling the truth? Was beauty no longer necessary for physical enjoyment? He, the elegant rake, had sunk into the mud through devotion, and then, suddenly, the expert cynicism of the guttersnipe had seized his most secret self, and the sub-

stratum of corruption which the moralist always carries in his innermost being had risen to the surface. Of his own free will he had come back to Marie Silvert, trying to inspire an unholy passion, he also, and this intelligent couple, Raittolbe and Raoule, had become, almost at the same time, the prey of a double beastliness.

"If the sky would only burst," shrieked the baron, shaking his fist at the storm.

Jacques went up to him.

"Does not my sister want me to marry Raoule?" he asked, still smiling delightfully.

"Damn it! Quite the contrary. She wants to encourage you to this damnable union. Jacques, you must resist them."

"Of course, Monsieur, I don't wish it in the slightest."

"Swear to me that . . ."

The end of the sentence was lost in the throat of the ex-officer of hussards. He could not very well extract an oath from that monster. He seized Jacques' arm. The latter shrank back and as his floating sleeve left his arm bare, Raittolbe felt the mother-of-pearl skin beneath his fingers.

"You must promise me . . ."

But Silvert retreated still further:

"I forbid you, Monsieur, to touch me," he said coldly, "Raoule would not want you to."

Indignantly, Raittolbe upset a chair, jumped upon

the damnable creature whose velvet gown appeared to him now like the darkness of an abyss, and pulling off the handrail of an easel, struck till the stick was broken into pieces.

"Now you know what a real man is like, scoundrel!" Raittolbe howled, seized by a blind anger whose violence he could not understand, and he added, as Jacques, bruised, fell to the ground:

"And she'll learn, the depraved one, that there is only one way, according to me, of treating the rascals of your type! . . ."

After the baron's departure, Jacques, as he opened his sad eyes, in the night, saw on one of the studio walls what looked like a big firefly upon the draperies.

chapter 9

So that she might see and hear what was happening in her brother's room, Marie Silvert had made a hole in the wall of her own room, which was next to his. The firefly which Jacques saw shining in the dark was the lamplight shining through this hole.

Raittolbe found her in bed, drinking a cup of rum, which she had heated upon a little spirit lamp placed beside her.

Her room did not resemble in the least the apartment furnished by Raoule de Vénérande. A very heavy mahogany wardrobe with a mirror; a curtainless bed of the same mahogany, but less darkly stained; four chintz-covered chairs, placed haphazardly around an unpainted wooden table which was marked here and there where a frying pan had been placed upon it; at the left, upon the stove, where the dishes were piled up pell-mell a

streamer of a very much feathered hat dangled into a soup tureen full of melted butter.

Marie, her cheeks very red, smacked her lips as she sipped her rum; and looked tenderly at a coat decorated with the Legion of Honour which had been thrown over the nearest of the four chairs.

"What a fool I am," Raittolbe mumbled, his arms crossed, standing beside her bed, which he could not help comparing with Jacques'.

"You, my love, a fool!" said Marie, scandalized.

"By Heaven!" the ex-officer went on, "I have just acted like a brute, and not like a dispenser of justice."

"What did you do?" asked the woman, putting down her cup.

"What did I do, damn it, what did I do! I thrashed *Mademoiselle* your brother, something I had wanted to do badly the last few weeks without realizing it."

"You beat him up?"

"I thrashed him thoroughly!"

"Why?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I think he insulted me, but I'm not sure."

Marie, hidden in her sheets, looked like a happy cat.

"You were excited . . ." she sighed, "love often makes one cruel. I should have known that you would give it to him! . . ."

"Don't let's talk about it any more! If Raoule com-

plains, just send her to me. . . . Good evening! Really, I was wrong to get mixed up in your affairs. They are much too complicated for a simple and honest man."

"Are you angry with me too?" she asked anxiously, raising herself up.

"Pah!"

And Raittolbe put on his coat and left without saying another word.

The keen, fresh air of the boulevard put him in a good humour, but an almost painful idea remained fixed in his brain, like the point of a knife in the middle of the forehead; he had struck Silvert, who could not defend himself, Silvert, naked beneath his velvet robe, Silvert, whose limbs were already weak from an enervating fatigue.

Why should he, the strong-minded, moralize over a poor absurd human being? Nice work, indeed! If he had done it at once, but no, first he had become the lover of the most disgusting of prostitutes . . .

He walked to the Rue d'Antin, where he occupied an apartment on the mezzanine floor, entered his smoking-room, locked himself in and sat down to write to Mademoiselle de Vénérande.

As he began the letter, his pen slipped from his fingers. He could not loyally leave her in ignorance of the cause of his brutality; on the other hand, he thought, what right have I to interfere with the mutual shame of two

lovers? If Raoule wants to marry Silvert, the scandal concerns her only; it's not my duty to watch her honour.

Already he had torn up three sheets, hardly begun, when he recalled the hole pierced by Marie through the wall separating her from the lovers, one of whom he had just thrashed, and he felt so guilty that he gave up all idea of accusing anybody.

He contented himself by revealing to Raoule the exact location of that opening into her private life; he acknowledged that, in order to mollify Mademoiselle Silvert's dangerous temper, he had thought it necessary to yield to her *fancy* for him, that her admiration for his person was reaching disquieting proportions, that he intended to send her a banknote as farewell, and that he would never again set foot in the studio on the Boulevard Montparnasse.

He ended by regretting the anger of which Jacques had been the victim.

Raoule was to remain only a short time at the Duchesse d'Armonville's. Now she never left Paris except for very short visits, sacrificing for her love the summer holidays customary in the fashionable world; however, the baron did not forget to put upon the letter: "Please forward." Then, his conscience at rest, he returned to his ordinary life.

Jacques knew Raoule's address, but he never thought of complaining, simply taking a bath and avoiding any

explanations to his sister. Jacques, whose body was a poem, knew that his poem would always be read more attentively than any letter from such a vulgar writer as he. This extraordinary creature, through contact with a beloved woman, had acquired all the feminine wiles.

In spite of his silence, Marie was astonished to see a cut upon his cheek.

"You seem to swagger," she said to him tauntingly; "did Monsieur de Raittolbe insult you?"

She underlined her words with cruel irony, for she thought that her brother carried his complaisance a little too far.

"No! He only tried to forbid me to marry," Jacques replied bitterly.

"Well!" she grumbled, "that's not what he promised to tell you. So he wants to forbid you to marry. . . . Well, just let him go to hell! Your Raoule is much too involved not to legalize your amusements one of these days. I even advise you to hurry matters along for I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"If you marry Mlle. de Vénérande, a girl of high society and worth millions, I, your sister, might reform and become Madame la Baronne de Raittolbe."

Jacques was deep in the contemplation of a small tortoise-shell box full of green paste.

"You think so? . . ."

"I am sure of it; and then we would forget together the bad days, for we would all belong to good society."

Jacques's eyes suddenly shone, and he flushed delicately.

"I could punish her ex-lover if I wanted to be honest."

"Of course! But Raittolbe never was her lover, idiot! I happen to know he finds real women much more to his taste."

"Well, then, why did he strike so hard?" the young man objected, as the tears came to his eyes.

Marie merely shrugged her shoulders, pretending to think that Jacques was born to be beaten.

The next day, Raoule telegraphed that she would come the following night.

And indeed, about eight the next morning, the Vénérande mansion was all agog at Mademoiselle's unexpected return. Aunt Elizabeth thought that some catastrophe must have occurred, and ran to meet her.

"What, darling," she cried, "you have come back already! It is so stifling in town, and so nice and fresh in the country!"

"Yes, my dear aunt, I am back. Our friend the Duchesse's nerves are in a frightful state because the Baron de Raittolbe won't visit her. The poor baron has mysterious passions which keep him away from us."

"Now, Raoule, don't be catty," the canoness sighed, rather upset.

Raoule went to bed early, on the pretext that she was extremely tired. At midnight, she was in a cab on her way to the left bank.

Jacques was expecting her, fully believing that she would avenge him, for the telegram had said: "I know everything."

Without wondering how she had found out, Jacques was counting upon a terrific outburst against the one he accused of having been her happy lover.

Raoule burst impetuously into the studio, which was brilliantly lighted as a sign of rejoicing.

"Jaja? Where is Jaja?" she cried, feverishly impatient.

Jaja came forth, with expectant lips.

She seized his hands and stopped him.

"Speak quickly. . . . What happened? Monsieur de Raittolbe writes me that he is sorry he discussed a very scabrous subject with you . . . those are his very words. You must give me the details!"

She devoured him with her burning eyes.

"What's that on your cheek . . . that big blue bruise? . . ."

"I have many others, come to our room and you'll see."

He pulled her away, carefully closing the portières after him. Marie was sneering ironically, but she was uneasy, and she went to her room to put her ear to the hole in the wall.

Jacques took his clothes off one by one, and then Raoule uttered the cry of a she-wolf who finds her young massacred.

Her idol's fine skin was covered from top to bottom with long, bluish scars.

"Ah!" the young woman cried, grinding her teeth, "they spoil you for me!"

"A little, it is true," said Jacques, sitting on the edge of his bed to look leisurely at the new tints which his bruises were taking. "Your friend Raittolbe has a heavy fist."

"Raittolbe put you in that state?"

"He does not want me to marry you . . . he loves you!"

The accent with which Jacques uttered those words is indescribable.

Raoule, on her knees, was counting the brutal marks of the stick.

"I'll tear his heart out. He came in here . . . answer me! Don't hide anything from me!"

"I was asleep. He came from my sister's room. We had words about marriage. . . . Then he seized my arm. . . . I stepped back because you forbade me to let myself be touched, do you remember? I even told him why it was displeasing to me to feel his hand upon my arm . . ."

"That's enough," roared Raoule, absolutely beside her-

self with rage, "that man saw you! That's enough for me! I can guess the rest, he wanted you and you resisted him."

Jacques burst out laughing:

"Are you mad, Raoule? If I obeyed you, in forbidding him to touch me, that's no reason to think that he . . . Oh, Raoule! What you dare suppose is disgusting! He struck me because he was jealous, that's all."

"Oh yes, of course! My own senses tell me far too plainly what a man, even an honest man, can feel, when he is placed face to face with Jacques Silvert. . . ."

"But, Raoule. . . ."

"But. . . . I repeat that what I hear is enough for me. . . ."

She obliged him to go to bed at once, went for a bottle of arnica, and bandaged him as if he had been a child in the cradle.

"You did not look after yourself well, my dear love; you ought to have called a doctor!" she said when she had finished.

"I did not want anyone to look at me. . . . For a cure, I took some hashish!"

Raoule remained a moment in a state of mute adoration, and then she jumped quickly upon him, forgetting the blue bruises, seized by a delirious vertigo, and by a supreme desire to possess him by caresses, as his tor-

mentor had possessed him by blows. She hugged him so that he cried with pain.

"You are hurting me!"

"All the better," she moaned. "I must rub out every scar with my lips, or I shall always see you naked before him . . . "

"You are unreasonable," he moaned gently, "and you are going to make me cry!"

"Cry! What does it matter! He has seen you smile!"

"Your words are more cruel than his cruelest insult. He'll tell you himself that I was asleep. . . . I could not have smiled at him . . . and then I put on my dressing-gown!"

Jacques's simple explanations only added fuel to the fire.

"Who knows, Heavens, who knows," thought Raoule, "if this creature, whom I thought in my power, has not deceived me, and has been depraved for a long time."

Once the doubt had entered her mind, Raoule could restrain herself no longer. Violently she tore off the linen bandages she had placed around the sacred body of her idol, she bit his bruised flesh, grasping him tightly, and scratched him with her pointed nails. It was a complete defloration of those marvellous beauties which had made her swoon with mystical happiness.

Jacques was writhing in agony, bleeding from the real cuts which Raoule was reopening with a sadistic pleas-

ure. All human cruelty which she had tried to suppress in her metamorphosed being, reawoke, and now the thirst for that blood which flowed from the convulsed limbs replaced all the pleasure of her ferocious love. . . .

. . . Her ear still at the hole of her room, Marie Silvert was trying to hear what was happening; suddenly she heard a heart-rending cry:

"Help! She's hurting me, Marie! Help!"

She was frozen to the marrow of her bones and since she was a real woman, as Raittolbe had said, she did not hesitate to run towards the scene of the butchery. . . .

chapter 10

EVERY year, at the time of the Grand Prix, a reception was given at the Vénérande mansion, and in addition to the intimate circle, a few new acquaintances were always invited.

This reception was less formal than the evenings when guests chatted quietly over cups of tea, and commoners and artists were present.

Since Raoule had come back from the Duchesse d'-Armonville's she was the prey to a permanent sadness, as if, during the storms which had swept Paris recently, her brain had received a terrible shock; and yet, as the ball drew nearer she revived slowly from her depression. Her aunt had seen that she was troubled, but had not tried to find an explanation; first because her daily devotions did not require it, and also because she hoped that the reception, always gay, would distract *her nephew's* restless mind.

Indeed, Mademoiselle de Vénérande deigned to watch

and direct the preparations. She decided that the large central drawing-room should be opened, and also the room next to the conservatory where the bright magnesium light would show the exotic flowers in all their brilliance. Raoule could not conceive of giving a ball for the mere pleasure of inviting many people; she had to have the attraction of something original to offer her guests.

In the picture gallery, opposite the conservatory, a buffet, mounted upon columns of crystal, would offer to the sportsmen made thirsty by the dust of Longchamp, an inexhaustible fountain of Roederer. When she submitted the invitations to her aunt, Raoule said in a matter of fact tone:

"I'll introduce my pupil to you, the painter of the bouquet of forget-me-nots. That young flower-maker is such a courageous boy that he must be rewarded. Besides we are receiving an architect whom Raittolbe is going to bring; it is an accepted thing now, artists are received in the best of society, and if we did not have them we would be swamped with bourgeois who are worse!"

"Oh! Raoule," Dame Elizabeth whispered in frightened tones, "he is only an unknown pupil."

"But, my dear aunt, that's just why we must invite him. The greatest geniuses would never arrive if they were not helped."

"True; and yet . . . he seems to come from the lowest classes, and he can't have any education . . . "

"Do you think my cousin René well brought up, dear aunt?"

"No, he is unbearable, with his backstage anecdotes and his theatrical manners, but . . . he is your cousin!"

"Well, the other, at least, does not belong to my family, and we won't have to share in his bad manners, even supposing, dear aunt, that this young man should not know how to behave in our society."

"Raoule, I am uneasy," the canoness repeated, "the son of a workman."

"Who draws as if he were Raphael's son!"

"And will he be properly dressed?"

"I'll answer for that," Mademoiselle de Vénérande asserted with a bitter smile; and then, amending her sentence so that it would not sound so enigmatic:

"Is he not making a good living?"

"Well, I leave it to you, my dear Raoule," Aunt Elizabeth concluded, with a heavy heart.

That same day, the Baron de Raittolbe, who had not set foot in the house since Raoule's return, came to call. Very grave, very reserved, he gave Madame Elizabeth the cards for the enclosure at the races, without looking at her niece. Raoule left the new novel she was reading and held out her beautiful hand:

"Baron," she said, "our dear canoness has granted

a formal invitation for your architect, M. Martin Durand."

"My architect? . . . Oh, yes, of course, a young man with a future, whom I met in some artistic circles . . . he competed successfully at the last Exposition Universelle. . . . But Mademoiselle, I never asked. . . ."

"I know you did not insist," Raoule interrupted drily, "but I did it . . . your friend," she stressed the word, "will be among our guests, along with M. Jacques Silvert, the painter whom we went to see in the Boulevard Montparnasse."

If the goddesses who ornamented the ceiling had crashed to the floor, Raittolbe could not have shown more surprise. He looked straight at Raoule, and Raoule was obliged to look back at him—two sparks flew. Though he did not understand why the young woman had not answered his letter, nor why Jacques was going to be "formally" one of them, the baron foresaw a catastrophe.

"I thank you on behalf of these gentlemen," he said, pulling at his moustache; "Jacques Silvert is a delightful comrade, and Martin Durand an accomplished man of the world; to open your drawing-room to them, Mesdames, is to anticipate their future fame!"

"Well," sighed Madame Elizabeth, "you reassure me, but they have awful names, and it will be hard for me to grow accustomed to them."

They talked for some time about the races, and Raoule discussed the chances of the different stables with Raittolbe. Then, as the latter was about to leave:

"By the way, baron," Raoule cried happily, "do you know the new Devisme revolver?"

"No."

"A masterpiece!"

"Have you got one?" answered the baron, without flinching.

"Let us go to the fencing-room," she answered rising, "I want you to try it."

An old lady dressed in purple, wearing a mother-of-pearl crucifix, was just entering. Madame Elizabeth, delighted at not having to talk any more about the two commoners whose names irritated her, went up to meet her.

"Madame de Chailly, I am so happy, my dear President. We have so many things to talk about; just think, Father Stephane of Léoni is on his way; he is going to preach the autumn retreat!"

She spoke with the busy volubility of the unoccupied devotee.

"All the better!" Raoule concluded, ironically, letting the portière fall, and she disappeared, followed by the baron.

More excited than he wished to appear, he kept silent while they followed the dark passages of the mansion.

The fencing-room was a kind of vaulted terrace which Mademoiselle de Vénérande, a perfect hostess, had fitted for that purpose.

When they reached it the baron appeared to be examining the sets of arms, and then:

"Where is the famous revolver?" he ventured, breaking a portentous silence.

Raoule answered by pointing to a chair; and then, very pale, her voice not betraying any anger:

"We have to talk . . . "

"We have to talk . . . about the artists?"

"Yes, Martin Durand must be Jacques Silvert's sponsor. They must meet this week. Please arrange it for I have no time."

"Well! . . . That's a very delicate mission, Raoule; if I do it, won't I have to submit to your aunt's reproaches?"

"There was a time when my aunt didn't matter to you, Raittolbe."

"Yes, but damn it, at the time you speak of, Raoule, I was hoping to become the niece's husband!"

"Today you are her most intimate comrade. Everyone expects you to treat my aunt with the freedom of an intimate friend. Besides that, you are my cousin René's mentor. Those young men are of the same age, introduce them. . . . Do your best."

"All right," Raittolbe answered, bowing.

For a moment the two comrades looked at each other like two enemies before a duel.

It was obvious to Raittolbe that Raoule was hiding something; it was obvious to Raoule that Raittolbe felt guilty.

"Have you seen Jacques again?" asked the baron at last, assuming complete indifference.

Mademoiselle de Vénérande was toying with a loaded revolver, and it was with no less complete indifference that she aimed at the ex-officer's heart and fired. A cloud of smoke separated them.

"All right," he said without blinking; "if you had been a better shot I would be a dead man."

"Yes, as I was firing pointblank. It may be a foretaste of reality; don't you think you are destined, my dear man, to die by firing?"

"As an officer who has left the army, it is not very probable!"

In spite of Raittolbe's self-possession, he repressed with difficulty a nervous trembling. Those words: "by firing!" upset him.

"I have seen Jacques again," Mademoiselle de Vénérande went on, "he is not . . . well. Marie is looking after him, and I think that when he is better he will get married."

"What!" said the baron, "without your permission?"

"Mademoiselle Silvert will marry Monsieur Raoule de

Vénérande! Does it astonish you? Why the horrified air?"

"Raoule! Raoule! . . . It is impossible! It is monstrous! It is, it is revolting even! You marry that low scoundrel! No, it is impossible!"

Raoule looked straight at the terrified baron:

"But I shall, if only to defend him from you, Monsieur!" she cried, incapable of containing her lioness-like rage.

"From me!"

Then, beside himself with rage, Raittolbe went up to her:

"Mademoiselle, when you insult me you forget that I can't treat you as I treated Silvert! Blood would be necessary to wipe out your words. . . . What amends are you going to make?"

She smiled disdainfully:

"None, Monsieur, none! . . . Only I want you to note that you accuse yourself before I thought of doing so."

"A million damns!" burst out the baron, so furious that he forgot he was face to face with a woman. "You'll take that back."

"I said, Monsieur," Raoule went on, "that I would defend him from you. I hope you won't deny having struck him?"

"No, I do not deny it . . . did he tell you why?"

"You touched him. . . ."

"Is the young scoundrel by any chance made of glass? Can't an honest man's hand rest upon his arm to emphasize affectionately some word of advice, without producing such an effect that he is ready to faint! Or am I mad, and is he the sane one?"

"I am marrying him," repeated Mademoiselle de Vénérande.

"All right! Why should I object, after all? Marry him, Raoule, marry him."

And Raittolbe, broken by the shame of having been mixed in such intrigues, fell upon a seat.

"What a pity you haven't a father or a brother," he stammered, bending the blade of a fencing sword between his fingers.

The steel broke and one of the pieces struck Raoule's wrist. Under the lace a drop of blood showed.

"Honour is satisfied," she declared with a hollow laugh.

"On the contrary, I am beginning to think that honour has nothing to do with our actions. I give up the struggle, Mademoiselle," he added, "and I leave to whoever chooses the dangerous mission of introducing here the Antinoüs of the Boulevard Montparnasse."

Raoule shook her head:

"You fear him?"

"Be quiet . . . instead of thinking of lowering others, take pity on him and on yourself! . . ."

"Well, Monsieur de Raittolbe, I demand that you obey me!"

"Your reason?"

"I want to see you face to face in my drawing-room; you have to do it, otherwise I shall eternally suspect you."

"You are worse than crazy! . . . I won't obey. . . ."

Raoule clasped her hands, whose transparent skin was stained by some drops of blood.

"Raittolbe, the human being whom you struck like the vilest of animals, when you knew him to be a coward and a weakling, I tore him to pieces with my nails; I tortured him so, wherever your blows made a bruise, that he cried out . . . she came, and I, Raoule, was obliged to yield to his sister's indignation. Jacques is only a wound, and it is our work; won't you help me to make amends for that crime!"

The baron was deeply moved. He felt that Raoule was capable of anything and did not doubt for a minute that she had been able to reach such an excited state.

"It is horrible! Horrible," he muttered, "we are unworthy of humanity. . . . Whether it is cowardice or love which paralyzed Jacques, we had no right, we who are supposed to think before giving way to our tempers. We ought to see in him only an irresponsible human being."

Raoule could not repress a movement of anger.

"You'll come," she said, "I wish it! but remember that I hate you and that in future I forbid you to look upon him as a friend."

The baron paid no attention to this remark, which demanded another drop of blood.

"Does your aunt know of your prospective marriage?" he asked in a calmer tone.

"No," replied Raoule, "I count on your help in reconciling her to it; anyway, it will take place . . . Marie Silvert demands it."

And with great bitterness:

"I acknowledge the depth of my fall, but don't take advantage of my confession, Monsieur de Raittolbe."

"Can't I do anything about the sister, Raoule? Do you want me to complain to the police?" Raittolbe added, a gentleman till the end.

"No, nothing, nothing . . . scandal is unavoidable, she is the little stone which breaks the powerful steel engine. I humiliated her, and she is avenging herself. . . . Alas! I thought that for a prostitute money was everything, but now I see that she has, just as the children of the Vénérandes have, the right to love."

"To love! Good God! You make me shudder, Raoule."

"I don't need to tell you whom she loves, do I?"

In the depths of their humiliation they were silent.

They saw themselves prostrate upon the ground, beneath the heel of an invisible enemy.

"Raoule," Raittolbe whispered gently, "if you really wanted to, we could escape from the abyss, you by never seeing Jacques again, and I by never speaking to Marie again. An hour of folly is not one's whole life; united by our follies, we could also be united by our rehabilitation; Raoule, believe me, come back to your senses . . . you are beautiful, you are a woman, you are young. Raoule, if you wish to be happy according to the laws of nature, you have only to forget ever having known this Jacques Silvert; let us forget him."

Raittolbe, not thinking of Marie any longer, had said: "let us forget him." Raoule was somber, and in despair.

"I always love irresistibly," she said slowly; "let my passion lead me to heaven or hell! As for you, Raittolbe, you have seen my idol far too near for me to be able to forgive you: I hate you!"

"Good-bye, Raoule," said the baron, holding out his hand to her. "Good-bye, I pity you."

She stood motionless, so he clasped her wrist and shook it with sincere affection; but as he left the fencing room, and was putting on his gloves, he saw upon his fingers a slight bloody stain. He recalled at once the incident of the broken sword; but nevertheless a superstitious terror seized him; the ex-officer of hussards could not repress a shiver of fear.

chapter 11

MARTIN DURAND was the perfect type of the easy-going young man, whose only desire is to get on in the world and in all possible kinds of society. After an hour's talk with Jacques Silvert, he took him under his protection and became very friendly with him. According to him, only the compass could carry one far, and flowers, however marvellously done, have only the value of useless baubles, for which the artist may be paid a very high price once, and then ruined by their accumulation. All year long palaces are being built, but flowers are only occasionally in demand.

"As for example, the heaps of roses, the carts of violets, the bunches of tulips that ornament your walls. My dear fellow, too many flowers! I feel asphyxiated when I even look at them!"

Thereupon he lit a cigar, to offset the imaginary smell of the painted bouquets.

Jacques, who was as silent as all who carry in their

hearts a shameful weight, answered Martin Durand's tirades in monosyllables, and when the latter, amazed by the luxury of the studio, asked if his uncle were a millionaire, he trembled before this new friend, as he would have trembled before a new tormentor.

"At last," bawled Martin Durand, a real gamin, full of exuberant spirits and proud of having made his position by pushing himself forward, "we are going to make our start in the same jump, my dear fellow! Raittolbe swears it. A noble drawing-room, millionaire amateurs and pretty women. . . . My head is swelling! By Jove! Madame de Vénérande has the most beautiful mansion in the whole of Paris. Of the Renaissance style, with arched windows and Louis XV iron balconies. I do not know whether she pays a lot for your studies of forget-me-nots; but the devil take me if she does not give me an order to pull down a pavilion and to build a new tower. . . . We'll help each other. . . . You'll tell her that I am the fashionable architect. And I'll let her know that the President of the Republic has ordered a bunch of peonies from you."

Jacques smiled sorrowfully. This generous-hearted young man was happy. He earned his living by fighting with stones, he was strong and honest, and after all his sallies, he would sigh about his beautiful cousin, the daughter of the director of one of the biggest shops in

the capital. Nobility, love, money, everything was going to be his, upon a sign from him, because he was a man.

When their acquaintance had ripened, Martin Durand declared that he would call for Jacques on the day of the ball, and since he knew his friend Raittolbe at least as well as his friend Silvert, he said to him in delighted tones:

"That young man is the most superb type of professional model I have ever met; of course he has not got the slightest trace of talent. . . . But I'll make something of him."

Artists are generally afflicted with the monomania of wishing that good society should admire, not their merit, but their bad manners; they especially want to teach what they know nothing about.

Martin Durand caressed his brown beard and added: "Yes, I shall make something of him; he is twenty-three, he can be improved, I think I'll astonish him greatly, even if the patents of nobility of all these people were in Egyptian granite."

Could one still astonish Jacques Silvert? Raittolbe did not answer.

The evening of the Grand Prix, at about ten, the centre drawing-room and the conservatory with the exotic plants were suffused by blinding jets of white magnesium light, more fluid, lighter and yet less blinding than electricity. Under its glare all the lines of the statues,

all the folds of draperies stood out, as if the day itself wished to have a hand in the reception of the Vénérandes.

The ancestors in doublets, the ancestresses in Medici collars, from their frames, with the sword or the fan, seemed to point out to each other the samples of low Parisian society walking past them.

Decidedly the sporting events had mixed up everybody, those who descended from Adam and those who descended from the crusaders. The architect, Martin Durand, and the Duchesse d'Armonville, Madame Elizabeth the canoness and Jacques Silvert, a man of pleasure. With a marvellous understanding of people who want to amuse themselves, each according to his own ideas, at the expense of others, they all exchanged the most gracious welcoming smiles. Standing close to her aunt's monumental armchair, Mademoiselle de Vénérande was receiving with a rather haughty mien, more akin to a gentleman of other times, than to a coquettish woman.

When the strange creature was not at love, and a forerunner in matters of passion, she went back as far as the epoch when the ladies in the castle refused to let down the portcullis for badly dressed troubadours.

Raoule wore a very filmy white gauze dress, with a court train, without a jewel, without a flower. A bizarre idea had made her place upon her exposed shoulders a coat of gold mail, so finely meshed that her bust appeared

to be moulded in liquid gold. To mark off the line of the flesh from the cloth, a cord of diamonds encircled her neck, and in her black hair, piled up in Greek fashion, she had placed a diamond crescent, with phosphorescent points like moonbeams. The canoness was prudishly swathed in laces which covered a fancy-coloured dress. Her small, gentle face, parchment-like, with eyes like a pale blue sky, was shaded by the coat of arms emblazoned upon her armchair, which seemed to be ready to break under the powerful pressure of Raoule's arm.

On their right stood cousin René, a rare sample of the chic sportsmen of the day, explaining to whomsoever wanted to listen to him, how Simpson won by a length and why the gold silk tights were worn beautifully that year. Grave and severe, Raittolbe, his face inscrutable, thought of the old Gorgon when he looked at Mademoiselle de Vénérande. The Marquis de Sauvarès jumped about like a night bird blinded by the crude light, while he watched with his dead eyes, lighted up sometimes by lubricity, the rounded shoulders of his goddaughter Raoule.

Around them a swarm of exquisitely gowned women were talking with a consistency which annoyed the men, of the exploits of John Marc, the winning jockey.

In the crowd the amateur artists could be recognized by their constant moving about, forming a tide near the

tulle or lace trains, the aim of their movements being to approach such and such a well-known person.

As for the real artists, they operated, but in another way, the same course, so that the drawing-room was transformed into another race track, a very discreet one. During one of these fluctuations, Raoule, who saw everything, made a sign to Raittolbe. He started, then looked in the direction indicated by the young woman's hardly-raised finger. *He* was there, and Martin Durand was pushing him about violently.

"Go on! stupid! . . ." he was grumbling," you'll have to talk to her willy-nilly, while I study this bust. Damn nobility! . . . Only nobility can produce such caryatids. What a curve; my children! What a bust, what shoulders, what arms! I can see her holding up the balcony of the restored Louvre. She freezes one's blood just by bending slightly. Go on, I am following you. . . ."

Jacques refused to go forward; bewildered by the magic light in this magnificent drawing-room, walking upon the trains of dresses, intoxicated by the heady scents emanating from the jewel-covered coiffures, the ex-flower-maker felt himself still the prey of the paradisaical frenzy which the fumes of the hashish had given him.

"Aren't you stupid, my poor little painter!" Martin Durand was saying, very annoyed at seeing this want of audacity in a comrade. "By Jove, show a little more self-confidence! Look hard at the women, elbow the men

out of your way, here, do as I do. . . . Need two men like us fear the footlights? Ah, here is M. de Raittolbe; we are all right now."

As a matter of fact, the architect was not any more sure of himself than Jacques was, but he had the inimitable self-assurance of all wreckers who know a little how to rebuild.

The Baron de Raittolbe shook hands with him, but avoided touching that of his friend.

"Messieurs, I am delighted to see you, I'll introduce you now. . . ."

And he took them up to Raoule.

"Mademoiselle," he said, loudly enough to be heard by the principal group of guests, "let me introduce to you M. Martin Durand, to whom the capital owes some beautiful monuments, and M. Jacques Silvert."

The result of this brief introduction was that no one bothered about the personage of the monuments, since it was known at once of what he was capable. The monocle was put up more willingly for the one whose name was not known. Jacques remained rooted, looking into Raoule's eyes, for he had not seen her since the sinister night.

He shivered like a man who has been suddenly awakened. His body quivered, and again he was the tamed slave of that hellish mind who appeared there, clothed in gold armour like a symbolic shield.

He remembered suddenly that in her presence he was complete, that he was her joy, as she was his suffering. His first intoxication disappeared, to be replaced by the servile love of the grateful animal. His wounds were cauterized when he remembered her caresses. An expression at once resigned and happy hovered upon his beautiful mouth. Without thinking that people were looking at him, Jacques muttered:

"Heavens, why did you make me come here, I who am nothing and whom you no longer think worthy even of martyrdom?"

A flush rose to Raoule's temples, and she stammered: "But, Monsieur, I must believe that through her admiration for your work, my aunt concluded that you were . . . "

"I thank you, Madame," added Jacques, turning to the canoness, who was taken aback at seeing him so elegant in his ballroom clothes; "I thank you, but I am sorry that you are more indulgent than Mademoiselle Raoule!"

"It is quite natural!" stuttered the saint, unaware of what she was saying, and accustomed in her world to answer without hearing what was said to her.

Only Raittolbe, the Marquis de Sauvarès, cousin René and Martin Durand listened uneasily.

"More indulgent than Mademoiselle Raoule! . . . Well!" said René with a satisfied laugh, "he is rather

vulgar, Jacques Silvert. More indulgent . . . I do not understand! . . ."

"Neither do I," grumbled the old Marquis. "A nigger in the wood-pile . . . maybe! Ha! ha! . . . An Adonis, upon my word, an Adonis!"

Martin Durand was pulling at his pretty beard.

"I am outdone!" he thought. "The young man is quite gone on her and they all look as if they were playing to see who is the cleverest; what a contour, what caryatids, my children!"

Raittolbe, astonished by the sudden self-assurance of this low creature, admitted to himself that it almost reconciled her to him. The women came nearer Jacques, the Duchesse d'Armonville contemplated the marvellous features of this red-haired boy whom the starry whiteness of the lighting rendered as fair as a Titian Venus, and decided the hesitating ones by a boyish exclamation which suited her delightfully, for her hair was short and curly:

"By Jove, mesdames, I am amazed!"

Just then the orchestra, hidden in a balcony above the room, began the prelude of a waltz, from behind the frieze; couples started to dance, and Raoule, seizing the opportunity, walked away from her aunt, followed by a small court. Jacques bent over her.

"You are very beautiful . . ." he whispered ironically,

"but I am sure that your dress will get in your way when you dance!"

"Hush, Jacques!" Mademoiselle de Vénérande begged, dismayed. "Hush! I thought I had taught you to play your rôle as a man of the world differently!"

"I am not a man! I am not a man of the world!" replied Jacques, quivering with powerless rage; "I am the beaten animal who licks your hands! I am the slave who loves while he amuses! You taught me to speak, so that I might say *here* that I belong to you! . . . No use marrying me, Raoule; one does not marry one's mistress; that's not done in your world."

"You frighten me! . . . Now, Jacques! Must you avenge yourself in this manner? Let Marie die! Let our love no longer be accursed! Have I not seen your blood? And cannot we live again the madness of our happiness? No! Do not speak to me any more! Your breath, perfumed with young love, gives me fever! . . ."

Raittolbe, nearest to them, whispered:

"Be careful, you are being watched! . . ."

"Let us waltz!" said Raoule, carried suddenly away by the wildness of her sensual desire which grew greater still in the presence of the tempter.

Jacques, without using any of the ordinary formulæ, clasped Raoule in his arms. She bent like a reed and the circle opened to let them pass.

"It is a kidnapping!" said the Marquis de Sauvarès.

"This Jacques Silvert rushes up to our goddess as if she were an ordinary mortal! . . ."

"The caryatid has feet!" sighed Martin Durand, distressed at having witnessed such a degrading metamorphosis.

René was trying to laugh:

"Amusing! Very amusing! Exceedingly funny. My cousin tames him, so that she can devour him all the easier later! One more. . . . When the hundred are rich, we'll make a cross! Very amusing! . . ."

Raittolbe watched them waltzing with a dreamy air. Jacques waltzed well, and his supple body with its feminine movements seemed made for that graceful exercise. He did not try to hold his partner, but made himself seem inseparable. As they turned around and melted in an embrace their bodies, despite their clothes, adhered to each other, they seemed united in that divine love where each is both, they seemed to be that complete individual spoken of in the fabulous tales of Brahmins, two distinct sexes combined in one unique monster.

"Yes, the flesh!" he thought, "Healthy flesh, the sovereign power of the world! She is right, that perverted creature! If Jacques had all nobility, all science, all talent, all courage, but if his complexion were not as lovely as a rose, we would not look at him with such wonder in our eyes!"

"Jacques!" Raoule was saying, yielding to her intoxi-

cation . . . "Jacques, I shall marry you, not because I fear your sister's threats, but because I want you openly, after having had you during our mysterious nights. You'll be my beloved wife, as you have been my beloved mistress!"

"And then you'll reproach me with having sold myself?"

"Never!"

"You know that I am not quite healed yet! . . . that I am *ugly!* How can I be of any use to you! . . . Jaja is spoiled! . . . Jaja looks awful!" he went on in tender tones, clasping her more tightly.

"I swear I'll make you forget everything! It would be so lovely to be your husband! To call you privately Madame de Vénérande! . . . because I shall give you my name! . . ."

"That's true! I have no name!"

"Your sister is our Providence! She forced me to a promise I won't disown . . . my angel! My god! my beloved illusion!"

When they stopped, they thought they were in the studio in the Boulevard Montparnasse, and they smiled, exchanging a last promise.

"Do you know that the lion of the evening is Jacques Silvert?" said Sauvarès to a group of scandalized sportsmen.

"Where does that Antinoüs come from?" asked the

rakes, anxious to hear some unwholesome story about the new favourite.

"From Mademoiselle de Vénérande's good pleasure," replied the marquis, and his pun had a great success.

But Jacques' sudden arrival disturbed them in their disdainful reflections and reduced them to silence. They were about to rise in a body to show their contempt for that obscure dauber in forget-me-nots when they all felt at the same time a bizarre commotion which riveted them to their seat. Jacques, with his head thrown back, still had his smile of a young girl in love; his open lips let his mother-of-pearl teeth show, his eyes enhanced by bluish circles, kept a shining moisture, and under his thick hair, his delicate ears, as red as roses, made all of them shiver. Jacques passed them without seeing them; his hips, well defined under his evening clothes, touched them lightly . . . and with one movement they tightened their hands, suddenly grown moist.

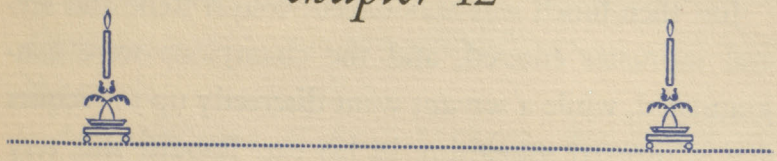
When he had passed by, the marquis uttered this banal phrase:

"It is very warm, Messieurs; 'pon my honour, it is unbearable! . . ."

They all repeated in chorus:

"It is unbearable! . . . 'Pon our honour, it is too warm!"

chapter 12



"Look here, my boy! Look here, by Heavens! A little vigour. . . . You are a man, not a statue! If I were you I would be furious to feel the blade so near my skin. Imagine that I am your mortal enemy, a man deserving the most violent chastisement. I have taken from you a woman you adore, I have thrown ten cards into your face, I have called you a coward or a thief, you can choose. Damn! Do parry!"

And Raittolbe, the master, impatient with Jacques Silvert, the pupil, rushed on to terrible assaults.

"You are not patient enough, Baron!" murmured Raoule, who was present at the lesson, clothed in a fencing costume. "I give him permission to rest; enough for today!"

Raoule took a sword, fell on guard before Raittolbe, and, as if to avenge Silvert, she charged him with mad impetuosity.

"Damn," he cried, after she had touched him three

times in succession. "You rush too quickly, my dear! I was talking to Jacques, not to you!"

Just then lunch was announced: cousin René and several intimates entered, and the champions were congratulated, while a servant went discreetly up to Jacques and whispered something in his ear. Raoule, still very excited, did not notice the young man change colour and go quickly into the adjacent smoking-room.

Jacques had at last obtained from the canoness Elizabeth the right of entry into the house; he had been officially engaged to Raoule for a month. After the ball at which all the amateurs of scandal had been scandalized by the introduction of young Silvert, Raoule, as mad as those people of the middle ages who were possessed of devils and were no longer responsible for their actions, had brutally declared herself at the bed of the unhappy canoness. It had been a very cold, very dark, very dull morning. The canoness, under her armor of blankets, was dreaming of mortification and frozen pavements; she was awakened by the sonorous voice of *her nephew,* ordering her maid to make a roaring fire.

"Why have a fire? Today is my day of mortification, my dear child," said the aunt, opening her eyelids, as transparent and as pale as consecrated wafers.

"Because, my dear aunt, I have come to talk over with you some very important and grave matters, which

will be such a natural mortification that they will be ample!"

With a nasty laugh, the young woman sat down in an armchair, covering her feet with her ermine-lined dressing-gown.

"At this time of day? Heavens, you awoke very bright and early, my darling. I am listening."

And the canoness propped herself up on her pillows, her eyes big with fright.

"Aunt Elizabeth, I want to get married!"

"Get married! Oh, Saint Philippe de Gonzague must have inspired you, for I pray to him about that every vigil. Get married, Raoule! But then I will be able to fulfil my dearest wish, to leave this world of vanities and retire to the Visitandines, where my veil is waiting for me. Blessed be the Lord! Of course," she added, with a malicious smile, "the Baron de Raittolbe is the bridegroom elect?"

"No, it is not Raittolbe, my aunt! I warn you I don't want to ennoble myself any more. The awful names please me much more than all the titles on our useless family parchments. I want to marry the painter Jacques Silvert!"

The canoness jumped up in her bed, raised her virginal arms above her chaste head and cried:

"The painter Jacques Silvert? Have I heard properly?

That beautiful youth, homeless and moneyless, to whom you give charity? . . ."

For a moment astonishment had paralyzed her tongue; then she went on, falling back upon her pillows:

"You'll make me die of shame, Raoule!"

"My aunt," the indomitable daughter of the Vénérandes said, "perhaps it might be less shameful to marry him!"

"Do explain what you mean!" moaned Madame Elizabeth in despair.

"Out of respect for you, my aunt, do not ask it! You have loved in too saintly a way to . . . "

"I represent your mother, Raoule . . ." interrupted the canoness with great dignity. "I have the right to hear everything."

"Well, I am his mistress!" answered Raoule, with terrifying calm.

Her aunt became as pale as the immaculate sheets around her; in the depths of her uncertain eyes gleamed the only fit of anger of her pious existence, and she said in a hollow voice:

"May the will of God be done. . . . Let there be a misalliance, my niece. I have enough tears left to wipe out your crime. . . . I shall enter the convent the day after your marriage."

And ever since that cold morning, during which a hellish fire had burned in the fireplace of the deeply

mortified canoness, Raoule had done as she liked. Her fiancé had been presented to her family and her intimates; and then, without an objection being raised against her fantastic caprice, each had ceremoniously bowed to Jacques. The Marquis de Sauvarès had declared he was "not bad." René, the cousin, had thought him "amusing, exceedingly amusing!" The Duchesse d'-Armonville had laughed enigmatically, and, on the whole, since a far-distant uncle had died at the right moment and left the magnificent dauber three hundred francs, he became a little less ridiculous.

Raoule, of course, had acted the part of the uncle.

The servants in the mansion said, in their own quarters: he is a foundling. A foundling to blacken the bright escutcheon of the Vénérandes!

During the sad autumnal nights, the sound of sobs could be heard from the closed room of Madame Elizabeth; it sounded like the wind whistling through the principal entrance. . . .

Raoule was still fencing, and Raittolbe was obliged to defend himself. Then they heard a sudden, short interjection, and they both stopped short, for they had recognized Marie Silvert's voice.

Mademoiselle de Vénérande, under the pretext of being a little tired and without thinking of the baron or her admirers, walked toward the smoking-room door. Raittolbe did likewise.

"Why don't the rest of you go on to lunch?" said Raoule. "We'll brush up and follow you in a few minutes."

The gentlemen went out, discussing the sparring blows.

"Why do you come here?" Jacques was saying behind the boudoir door. "To make a scene?"

"I'm not so stupid as that, for they'd put me out!"

"Well, then!" said Jacques impatiently, "please keep quiet."

"Keep quiet? That's right . . . you can square yourself by joining the aristocracy, but I, your sister, must remain a prostitute as before?"

"What are you driving at?"

"What am I driving at? I want you to tell your Raoule that her conditions are not mine. I don't care any more for the scrap of paper she sent me than for my old shoes. So, my dears, I am in the way, am I? You are ashamed of Marie Silvert; she shall be sent away to the country, and confined somewhere; well, I won't go! We have eaten the bread of poverty together, and now that you are going to feed on roast chicken, I want a goodish share of it, or else I'll put a spike in your wheels. Yes! Monsieur shows off from morning till night, he is dressed like a kept woman, nothing is too good for him! And his sister is to be dressed in rags, to wear second-hand hats, and to feed on a crust. That's as it should be!

You thought your six hundred franc pension would shut me up, but I shan't let myself be fooled; Marie Silvert does not need your money, and it would soil her!"

"Don't let that worry you," said Mademoiselle de Vénérande, as she entered just then, followed by Raittolbe, "don't worry, you'll get nothing!"

Raoule spoke coldly and distinctly, and for a moment her words appeared to have the effect of a cold shower upon the woman.

"All right," she said, biting her lips and sorry at not being able to come back to the subject of the six hundred francs by persuasion, "all right"; and then, digging her fingers into the back of the chair: "in fact, I like that better, for you disgust me—not you, sir," she said, trying to smile at Raittolbe, who was hiding behind Raoule, whom he regretted having followed; "and yet you are the cause of everything."

"What!" said Raittolbe, coming forward, "what are you saying?"

"It is clear; you know that Mademoiselle and Monsieur have never forgiven me for having been your mistress. It annoyed them!"

"That's enough," the baron interrupted roughly; "do not use our liaison as a pretext to go on with your insults. You practised your trade, I paid you, and we are quits."

"That's true," answered Marie, suddenly calm. "I even have here the hundred francs you sent me; I have

not used any. It hurt me to get them, it may be idiotic, but it is true."

She spoke with great submission, looking at Raittolbe with beseeching eyes.

"You see, sir," she went on, without paying any more attention to her brother and Raoule, "being poor does not keep me from having a heart. You say that I did my work well, but you know that is not so! I loved you, I still love you, and you have only to say the word and I'll do my utmost for . . ."

"That's enough!" Raittolbe interrupted, enraged at being made ridiculous in Raoule's presence. "I'll be satisfied with your departure!"

Really moved a few minutes before, the woman felt her anger rising again. Then it burst out:

"All right! I shall go, but I'll make a scandal! You can laugh, you can laugh, but I'm not through! This is the final blow! It amuses you, hey? It is funny," she jeered hideously. "You are pleased, aren't you? You were annoyed because I had caught his eye, and now he is sending me about my business. Damn it, are they the only ones who can have a good time? Not on your life! Since I can't find one man to have me, I'm going to have them all, my children; it will do you honour when your future sister-in-law announces to you her entry into a brothel. . . ."

"Your life won't change much," Mademoiselle de

Vénérande jeered, going toward the door and signalling to Jacques to follow her.

Jacques stood facing his sister, his fists clenched, his face pale, biting his lips; perhaps there was only one dishonour for which he had not been prepared in the suddenness of his fall. . . .

"Bon voyage!" Raoule said ironically, on the threshold of the fencing-room.

"Oh! we shall see each other again, sister-in-law," replied Marie, sneeringly. "On my days out I shall come to pay my respects. You can't afford to be disgusted, you know; Marie Silvert, even with a yellow ticket, is as good as Madame Silvert; at least she makes love normally!"

She hardly had time to finish her sentence, for Jacques, before Raittolbe could stop him, seized his sister by the wrist and shook her desperately.

"Will you shut up, you miserable cur?" he growled in a hollow voice. Then his muscles relaxed and Marie, pirouetting, fell almost to her knees.

Marie straightened herself up, went to the door, opened it, and then, turning to her brother, on each side of whom stood Raittolbe and Raoule, like two body-guards, said:

"You must not get nervous like that, my dear. You need your muscles, you need muscles enough for two. . . . You look as you did the day you were beaten. You

know the beating the baron gave you. Take care, you are going to faint! Surely something is wrong with you: your chaste spouse won't get what she wants. . . . Doesn't he look nice like that, between his two lovers!"

Marie spoke those last words with a ferocious laugh, the outburst of which must have shaken the Vénérandes' old mansion to its foundations.

Madame Elizabeth, the good angel who had tolerated it, and Marie Silvert, the base demon who had excited it, were flying at the same time, one to Paradise, the other to hell, from that monstrous love, which, in its pride reached higher than heaven, and in its depravity fell lower than hell.

chapter 13

ABOUT midnight, the guests at Jacques Silvert's wedding noticed something very strange; the bride was still with them, but the bridegroom had disappeared. A sudden illness, a lovers' quarrel, and all the other possible surmises were broached by the clan of the intimates, already greatly interested in that union. The Marquis de Sauvarès suggested that Jacques had found a challenge from an unhappy rival under his napkin, at the beginning of the marvellous meal which had been served to them. René thought that Aunt Elizabeth, who was to say good-bye to the world that same night, was placing her guardianship in the hands of Raoule's husband. Martin Durand, the bridegroom's witness, was grumbling openly, because artists have a right to be disagreeable at critical moments. He could not bear Jacques now. In one of the corners of the monumental fireplaces, where the burning logs of the new conjugal hearth let fall a shower of sparks, the

Duchesse d'Armonville, thoughtful, her glasses between her tapering fingers, was watching Raoule who stood opposite, tearing her orange-blossom bouquet mechanically. Raittolbe was assuring the Duchesse in an undertone that love was the only power capable of really smoothing out the political difficulties of the government of the moment.

"But," the Duchesse murmured, not paying the slightest attention to the stupidities of the baron, "can you tell me why our dear bride had her hair done in such an . . . unconventional fashion? It has been worrying me ever since the religious ceremony."

"Probably marriage, for Madame Silvert, is only another way of taking the veil," said Raittolbe, hiding an ironical smile.

Madame Silvert was wearing a long dress of silver brocade and a swansdown jacket. She had removed her veil at the beginning of the ball, and the wreath of orange-blossoms was resting like a tiara upon her curls, as close to her head as a boy's; her fearless face harmonized admirably with those short curls, but she resembled in no way a chaste bride, ready to lower her eyes beneath her perfumed tresses, which the impatience of the bridegroom would soon uncoil.

"I assure you," the Duchesse said, "I assure you that Raoule has had her hair cut short."

"A recent fashion which I have definitely adopted, my dear Duchesse," answered Raoule who had heard.

Raittolbe applauded silently, striking the palm of his hand with the tip of his fingers. Madame d'Armonville bit her lips to keep from laughing. Poor Raoule! If she went on growing more masculine, she'd end by compromising her husband!

The bridesmaids came forward noisily to offer some of the cake which had been imported from Russia, in accordance with a custom which was all the rage in high society that year. Still the bridegroom did not appear, and Raoule had to keep her part of the cake whole. Midnight struck; and then, the young woman crossed the immense drawing-room proudly and haughtily; as she reached the triumphal arch which had been made from all the plants in the conservatory, she turned around and gazed at the assemblage with the air of a queen dismissing her subjects. With a graceful but brief phrase, she thanked her guests, then she went out backwards, saluting them with a quick elegance, and with a swordsman's salute. The doors closed.

In the left wing, at the other end of the mansion, was the nuptial chamber, and there the deepest darkness and the most discreet silence reigned.

The passages were lighted with lanterns of blue Bohemian glass, as the gas had been lowered, and in the library, close to the bedroom, a single candelabrum, held

by a bronze slave, was used as a beacon. Just as Raoule entered its circle of light she noticed a woman, dressed as simply as a servant, silhouetted against the heavy draperies.

"What do you want of me?" murmured the bride, standing very erect and letting the immense train of her silver dress trail around her feet.

"Say good-bye, my niece," replied Madame Elizabeth, whose pale face seemed ghostlike.

"So you are going away, my aunt!"

Very much moved, Raoule held out her arms.

"Won't you kiss your nephew a last time?" she said, in a respectful and sweet voice.

"No!" said the canoness, shaking her head. "In heaven, perhaps, but not here! I cannot condone with my forgiveness the defilements of an abandoned woman. Good-bye, Mademoiselle de Vénérande. But before my departure I want you to know: however saintly God wishes me to be, he has permitted me to learn of your horrible dissolute actions. I know everything. Raoule de Vénérande, I curse you."

The canoness spoke in a very low tone, and yet Raoule seemed to hear that curse re-echo through the quiet of the nuptial chamber.

She shivered superstitiously.

"You know everything? Explain your words, my

aunt! Has the sorrow of seeing me take a commoner's name made you lose your reason?"

"You are the sister-in-law of a prostitute. She was here a short while ago, although you had forgotten to invite her; she forced me to look into the abyss. You were not Jacques Silvert's mistress, Raoule de Vénérande, and I regret it with all my soul! But remember, Daughter of Satan, that abnormal desires are never satisfied! You'll meet despair just when you believe in happiness! God shall plunge you into doubt when you think you have reached security. Good-bye. . . . I am going to pray under another roof."

Raoule, paralyzed by the powerlessness of her rage, let her go without uttering a word.

When Madame Elizabeth had disappeared, the bride called her maids who were waiting to help her undress.

"Did someone come to see my aunt?" she asked, in a husky voice.

"Yes, Madame," answered Jeanne, one of her maids, "a very much veiled person who talked to her for a long time."

"And that person?"

"Went away carrying a small box. I think that Madame the canoness made her a last charity before leaving for her convent."

"Ah! All right; a last charity."

Just then the noise of a carriage rattled the panes of the library.

"Your aunt has ordered the carriage," said Jeanne, bending her head, so as not to show her emotion.

Raoule went to the dressing-room and pushed her away:

"I don't want anyone; go and find someone to tell the Marquis de Sauvarès, my godfather, that henceforth he'll be alone as host."

"Yes, Madame."

Jeanne went out at once, completely bewildered. The air in the Vénérande mansion seemed to have become unbearable.

One by one, the guests passed before the Marquis, more astonished than they were at the duty which had been thrust upon him; and then, when only Raittolbe was left, M. de Sauvarès took him by the arm.

"Let us go, my dear fellow," he said, with a mocking laugh; "this house has decidedly become a tomb."

The footman who had been in attendance in the hall, put the lights out, and soon silence and the profoundest darkness covered all the deserted reception rooms and the whole mansion.

After she had bolted the door of her dressing-room Raoule had undressed, still the prey of a proud anger.

"At last!" she said, when the chaste brocade dress fell at her impatient feet.

She took a small copper key, opened a closet hidden among the draperies and took out a black evening suit, complete to patent leather pumps and pleated shirt. Before the mirror, which revealed to her the image of a man as beautiful as any novelist's heroes dreamt of by young girls, she passed her hand, on which shone the wedding ring, through her short curly hair. A bitter smile played upon her lips, the upper one slightly darkened by a brownish down.

"Dear aunt," she said coldly, "happiness is the more real if it is given in the maddest way possible; if Jacques does not waken from the sensual sleep which I have instilled in his obedient limbs, I shall be happy despite your curses."

She went to a velvet portière, raised it with a feverish gesture, and stopped, her bosom heaving.

The scene was fairy-like. From that pagan sanctuary erected in the midst of modern splendour, emanated a subtle intoxication, incomprehensible, but an intoxication from which no one could have been immune. Raoule was right . . . love can be born in any of all the cradles prepared for it.

Mademoiselle de Vénérande's former bedroom, circular, with a ceiling shaped like a cupola, was covered with blue velvet, and paneled with white satin threaded with gold.

A carpet designed by Raoule covered the floor with all

the beauties of Oriental flowers. Woven from thick wools, it had such bright colours and such striking relief that one seemed to be walking on enchanted ground.

In the center, under the light supported by four silver chains, the nuptial couch had the shape of the primitive vessel which bore Venus to Cytherea. A swarm of cupids, crouched at its feet, supported with all their strength the Tritons' shell, padded with blue. Poised upon a column of Carrara marble, stood Eros, with his bow upon his back, holding with rounded arms heavy brocade curtains, which fell into voluptuous folds all about the couch, and at the side, a tripod bore an incense burner studded with precious stones, which burned with a pink flame. The bust of the Antinoüs with the enamelled eyes faced the tripod. The windows had been barred as in a harem, behind softly tinted stained glass windows.

The only furniture in the room was the bed. Raoule's portrait, signed by Bonnat, hung upon the blue silk, surrounded with emblazoned draperies. In this canvas she wore a Louis XV costume and a reddish greyhound was licking the handle of the whip she held in her hand.

Jacques was stretched upon the bed; with the coquetry of a courtezan expecting her lover at any minute, he had pushed away the padded blankets and the soft eiderdown, for a vivifying warmth made the room snug and cozy.

With gleaming eyes and passionate mouth, Raoule went up to the altar of her god, and in her ecstasy:

"You alone exist, Beauty," she sighed, "I believe in you only."

Jacques was not asleep: he rose softly without changing his languishnig pose: against the azure background of the curtains, his supple and marvellously well shaped bust shone as pink as the flame of the incense burner.

"Then why did you wish to destroy that beauty which you love?" he asked in a passionate whisper.

Raoule sat upon the edge of the couch and caressed his slender bust.

"I was punishing an involuntary betrayal on your part; think of what I would do if you ever really betrayed me."

"Listen, dear master of my body, I forbid you to arouse your suspicions again, it frightens me too much. . . . Not on my account!" he added, laughing with his adorable childish laugh, "but on yours."

He laid his submissive head upon Raoule's knees.

"It is very beautiful here," he said with a grateful look. "We shall be very happy."

With the tip of her index finger Raoule was tracing and caressing the harmonious curve of his eyebrows.

"Yes, we shall be happy here, and we must not leave this temple for a long time, so that our love shall permeate every object, every drapery, every ornament, with

its mad caresses, like that incense which penetrates with its perfume all the draperies which surround us. We had decided on a journey, but we won't go; I don't want to run away from a pitiless society whose hatred for us I feel growing more and more. We must show them that we are the stronger, since we love each other. . . ."

She was thinking of her aunt . . . Jacques of his sister.

"Well," he said, resolutely, "we shall stay. Besides, I shall perfect my education and make myself a worthwhile husband. As soon as I know how to fight I'll try to kill the wickedest of your enemies."

"Think of that! Madame de Vénérande, killing someone!"

He fell back gracefully and whispered in her ear:

"She must kill someone, since the means of bringing someone into the world have been absolutely denied her."

They could not help laughing; and in that gaiety, both cynical and philosophical, they forgot the pitiless society which had said, that when it left the mansion of the Vénérandes, it was leaving a tomb.

Little by little, their insolent light-heartedness grew calmer. It no longer distorted their mouths as they kissed. Raoule drew the curtain to her, plunging the bed into a delightful semi-obscurity, in the depths of which Jacques' body gleamed starlike.

"I have a caprice," he said, speaking in low tones.

"It is the moment for caprices," answered Raoule, one knee upon the carpet.

"I want you to court me as a bridegroom does at such a time, when he is a man of your rank."

And he twisted around, coaxingly, in Raoule's arms. "So! So!" she said, holding off, "then I must be proper?"

"Yes . . . I am shy, I am a virgin. . . ."

And with the quickness of a school-girl who has uttered a malicious remark, Jacques gathered the sheets around him: their laces fell against his forehead and only the roundness of his shoulder could be seen, and, covered thus, it looked like the wide shoulder of a woman of the people admitted by chance into the bed of a wealthy rake.

"You are being cruel," said Raoule, pushing the curtain aside.

"No," said Jacques, not thinking that she had begun the game already. "No, no, I am not cruel, I am telling you, I want to play . . . I am full of gaiety, I feel quite drunk, all loving, full of mad desires. I want to make use of my kingship, I want to make you cry out with rage, I want you to bite my wounds as you did when you tore at me from jealousy. I want to be cruel in my way too."

"Haven't I waited many nights and haven't I asked in my dreams for the pleasures that you denied me?"

Raoule went on, standing up and looking at him sombrely with an expression whose power had given humanity another monster.

"I don't care," answered Jacques, putting out the tip of his tongue upon his red lips. "Really I don't care much for your dreams, for reality will be so much better. I beg you to begin at once, or I'll be angry."

"But it is the most atrocious martyrdom which you can impose upon me," Raoule's voice went on, with its deep masculine intonation: "to wait when supreme felicity is within my reach; to wait when you don't know how proud I am to have you in my power; to wait when I have sacrificed everything to have you night and day with me; to wait when the most wonderful happiness would be to hear you say: 'I am so happy with my head resting upon your shoulder that I want to sleep that way!' No, no, I haven't the courage!"

"I shall have it," Jacques declared, sincerely disappointed that she did not lend herself to the comedy and benefit voluptuously thereby. "I repeat that it is a caprice."

Raoule fell upon her knees, her hands folded, delighted at seeing him her dupe, and, because he was accustomed to the deceit which he begged for, not knowing that she had been using it in her passionate language for twenty minutes.

"Oh! you are wicked! I find you unbearable," said Jacques, unnerved.

Raoule had stepped back.

"Because I can't see you without growing mad," she said, herself being a victim of her delusion; "because your divine beauty makes me forget who I am and gives me a lover's thrills; because I lose my head when I see your ideal form . . . what does it matter to our delirious passion what the sex of our caresses is? What do the proofs of the love our bodies can exchange matter? What does the remembrance of love through all the centuries and the reprobation of all mortals matter? . . . You are beautiful . . . I am a man, I adore you and you love me!"

Jacques understood that, at last, she was obeying him. He raised himself upon one elbow, his eyes full of a mysterious joy.

"Come! . . ." he said, deeply thrilled, "but do not take off your clothes, for your beautiful hands suffice to chain your slave. . . . Come!"

Raoule fell upon the silk bed, uncovering anew the white and supple limbs of this amorous Proteus, who now had nothing left of his virginal purity.

For an hour this temple of modern paganism heard only long sighs and the rhythmic noise of kisses; then suddenly a heartrending cry was heard, like the howling of a demon who has just been mastered.

"Raoule," cried Jacques, his face distorted, his teeth biting his lips, his arms extended as if he had been crucified in a spasm of pleasure. "Raoule, aren't you a man? Can't you be a man?"

And the sob of lost illusions, forever dead, came from the innermost part of his being.

Raoule had undone her white silk waistcoat to feel the beating of Jacques' heart better, and she had exposed one of her naked breasts, a round breast, as rounded as a champagne cup, with its closed flower bud which was never to blossom into the sublime pleasure of giving suck. Jacques had been awakened by the brutal revolt of all his passion, and pushed Raoule away from him, with his clenched fist:

"No! No! Don't take your clothes off," he shouted, at the height of his madness.

Only once had they played this comedy sincerely, and they had sinned against their love, which if it were to live must face the truth while fighting it at the same time with all its strength.

chapter 14


THEY had remained in Paris to brazen it out, to fight, but public opinion, that great prude, refused to fight. The Vénérande mansion was ignored. Slowly Madame Silvert was shut out of the circle of very much sought after women; doors were not closed against her, but there were courageous ones who never entered hers. The winter functions did not claim her presence, and she was no longer consulted about the new play, the new novel, the novelties of fashion. Jacques and Raoule went constantly to the theatre, but no friends entered their box; they had no more friends, they were the accursed of the Garden of Eden, having behind them, instead of an angel with a flaming sword, an army of society. Raoule's pride held fast.

Her aunt's departure for a convent the very night of her wedding, was the subject of many conversations, and, although no one had pitied the canoness when she did not lead the life of her dreams, she was enormously

pitied now, when she at last fulfilled her dearest wish.

As for Marie Silvert, she did not reappear. In a class which had nothing to do with the society to which Raoule belonged, it was known that a very luxurious house of prostitution was soon to be opened, and some habitués of these houses knew that a Marie Silvert would direct it.

So true is the saying that the charities of saints do not always sanctify the recipients!

Nothing, however, had been heard of it in Raoule's circle; she did not know this shameful fact. She was respected, that's all, and people avoided her when she passed as they would a woman threatened by an impending catastrophe.

One evening, with a mute understanding, Jacques and Raoule put back the hour of pleasure. They had been married three months, and for three months every night had found them dizzy with their caresses under the blue cupola of their temple. But that evening, near a dying fire, they talked: there is an inexplicable attraction in the agony of dying coals. Jacques and Raoule felt the need of talking to each other, without feminine ecstasies, without voluptuous cries, like good comrades who see each other after a long absence.

"What has become of Raittolbe?" said Raoule, wafting to the ceiling the smoke of a Turkish cigarette.

"It is true," Jacques muttered, "he is not polite."

"You know I am not afraid of him any more," said Raoule, laughing.

"It would amuse me to play the part of *your husband* before his snarling mustachios."

"So! you fatuous young man! . . ."

She added gaily:

"Let us invite him to tea tomorrow . . . we won't go to the Opera, and we won't read any old books."

"If you see nothing against it."

"A honeymoon does not allow any surprises, Madame," said Raoule, carrying Jacques' white hand to her lips.

The latter blushed and shrugged his shoulders with an imperceptible movement of impatience.

The next evening the samovar was steaming before Raittolbe who had offered no objection to Raoule's invitation. The first words exchanged were full of irony on both sides. Jacques was almost impertinent, Raoule more so, Raittolbe exceedingly so.

"Why are you sulky?" said Jacques, offering him his finger as if he were condescending.

"Is the dear baron jealous of our happiness?" asked Raoule, looking for all the world like an offended gentleman.

"Heavens, my dear friend," said Raittolbe, as if

ashamed and talking only to Madame Silvert, "I always fear the pranks of nervous women: if by any chance my pupil," and he pointed out Jacques, "should take the fancy to uncap his foil, you see . . ."

While taking tea a few dangerous allusions were made again.

"You know that the Sauvarès, the Renés, the d'Armonvilles and the Martin Durands avoid us," said Raoule, laughing bitterly, like a condemned devil.

"They are wrong. . . . I take it upon myself to replace them advantageously. One has intimate friends or none," replied Raittolbe.

From that moment on, he came every Tuesday to the Vénérande mansion. The fencing lessons began again; and once Jacques went with the baron to try a recently acquired horse. The marriage seemed to have smoothed out all the difficulties which stood in the way of the ex-officer of the hussards.

He treated Jacques as an equal, and, when he saw that he rode well, a cigar in the corner of his mouth, he thought:

"Perhaps one could make a man out of that clay . . . if Raoule was willing."

And he thought of a possible rehabilitation, provoked, in a moment of forgetfulness, by a real mistress, whom Raoule would have to fight with ordinary feminine tactics.

Coming back from the Bois, Jacques wished to visit Raittolbe's apartment. They went as far as the Rue d'Antin.

Jacques sniffed as he entered.

"Oh!" he said, "it smells strongly of tobacco!"

"Well, my dear fellow," Raittolbe objected maliciously, "I am not a renegade. I have my beliefs and I keep them."

Suddenly Jacques cried out in surprise; he had just recognized all the furniture of his old apartment in the Boulevard Montparnasse.

"Oh," he said, "I gave them to my sister."

"Yes, she sold them to me; I had plenty of other furniture, but. . . ."

"What?" asked the young man, very much intrigued.

"I wanted to have them because they are like chapters of a true story one does not wish to see published."

"You are very kind!" muttered Jacques, sitting down upon his old Oriental divan.

He could find only that ordinary phrase to thank the baron for his thoughtfulness. The latter sat beside him.

"That time is far distant now, isn't it, Jacques?"

And he struck him familiarly upon his thigh.

"How do you know?" muttered Jacques, leaning backwards.

"What? I hope that Madame Silvert will soon give us the opportunity of eating the customary sugared almonds

offered at christenings. As for me, I want some with kirsch in them, they are the only ones I like."

"Now, you bad boy, will you shut up?"

"What?" grumbled Raittolbe.

"Yes, of course, don't you want me to be confined too?"

The baron haphazardly seized a beautiful china ornament and sent it crashing against the wall.

"Hell and damnation!" he roared. "Are you stuffed by any chance? So I did not have visions upon a certain night."

"Oh, well!" said Jacques unreservedly. "A habit is quickly learned!"

Raittolbe paced the floor.

"Jacques," he said, "do you want to try something without your female jailer knowing anything about it?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

And Jacques smiled strangely.

"Go to your sister's at twilight, and see what happens!"

"You rake!" said Raoule's husband, shaking his pretty red head.

"You refuse?"

"No, I want some further information."

"Well!" declared Raittolbe, seized suddenly by an absurd shyness. "I am not beating the drum for those

places; they are all charming and well-versed in their arts, that's all."

"That's not enough!"

"By Jove! You're a headless duck, then?" muttered Raittolbe furiously.

Jacques looked with wondering eyes, as pure as those of a virgin, at the hardened rake who was speaking to him.

"What are you saying, baron? . . . "

"Well, that's funny, by Jove! Heavens!"

And Raittolbe held his head; then he looked at this tired face, so delicately and voluptuously blond.

"I can't very well tell you a story you'll go and repeat to our wild Raoule . . . a would-be boy."

"No, I won't tell anything . . . tell me everything . . . if it is amusing."

And, filled with an unhealthy curiosity, Jacques forgot to whom he was talking; and confusing Raoule with men, and men with Raoule, he rose and leaned upon Raittolbe's shoulder. For an instant his perfumed breath warmed the baron's neck. The latter, stirred to the innermost depths of his being, turned around and looked at the window he would have liked to open.

"Jacques, my dear, no seduction, or I shall call the police."

Jacques burst out laughing.

"A seduction in riding habit? Oh! how depraved you are! Baron, you are impossible! . . ."

But Jacques' laughter was rather nervous.

"Well, you would appeal to me less if you wore a velvet coat! . . ." Raittolbe replied foolishly.

Jacques pouted, and when he saw the monster pouting, Raittolbe rushed to the window:

"I am choking," he gasped.

When he came back to Jacques, he was shaking with irrepressible laughter.

"Go! Jacques," he said, raising his riding whip.

Then, lowering his arm:

"Go, Jacques!" he said, his voice almost failing him. "Go, for this time you might really be killed."

Jacques seized his arm:

"We don't know how to fight well enough yet," he said, dragging him by force to their horses, prancing outside.

They dined at the Vénérande mansion side by side, without making any allusion to the scene of the afternoon, which might shake Raoule's confidence.

One night, Madame Silvert went alone to the azure temple. Venus' bed was left empty, the incense burner was not lighted, and Raoule did not put on her evening suit. . . .

Jacques, who had gone after lunch to a fencing match of renowned experts, had not come back.

About midnight Raoule was still doubting the possibility of a betrayal. Her eyes fell mechanically upon the cupid holding up the curtain; she thought she could detect a mocking expression upon his face. She felt her blood freezing in her veins. . . . With a terrifying fright she ran to the back of the room, to get a dagger hidden behind her portrait and placed it in her bodice.

She heard footsteps in the dressing-room.

Jeanne was shouting: "Monsieur!"

She was taking it upon herself to announce him, so that she might reassure Madame, whose face had frightened her.

Monsieur entered a few minutes later.

Raoule went up to him with a cry of love, but he pushed her away brutally.

"What is the matter?" muttered Raoule, extremely perturbed. . . . "Are you drunk?"

"I have just come from my sister," he said, in a broken voice . . . "from my sister, the prostitute . . . and not one of those women, do you hear, not one of those women has been able to revive what you have killed, you devil! . . ."

He fell heavily upon the nuptial couch, repeating with a leer of disgust:

"I hate women, I hate women!"

Overwhelmed, Raoule retreated to the wall, and fell in a faint.

chapter 15

"My very dear sister-in-law:

"If you go tonight, about eleven, to the flat of your friend, M. de Raittolbe, you'll see things which will please you."

"Marie Silvert."

That note was as brief as a slap in the face. Raoule, reading it, felt a sensation of horror; however, her courageous masculine nature prevailed.

"No!" she cried, "he may have been betraying his wife . . . he is incapable of betraying his lover!"

During the last month Jacques had hardly left the sanctuary of love, and a month ago, one morning, he had asked pardon as a repenting adulteress, kissing her feet and covering her hands with tears. She had forgiven him, because, at heart, she was glad that he had proved to himself that he was at the mercy of her hellish power. Was it necessary that from the lower depths a new insult should arise?

But she knew also . . . she knew only too well, that healthy and fresh flesh is sovereign of the world. She had said it so often in their maddest, most voluptuous and most subtle nights since Jacques' orgiastic night. Raoule burnt the note. Then its words shone in letters of fire upon the walls of her drawing-room. She did not want to read it again, but she saw it everywhere, from the floor to the ceiling. Raoule sent for her household retinue one after the other, and asked them:

"Do you know which way Monsieur went tonight after his promenade in the Bois?"

"Madame," answered the small groom who had held the bridle of Jacques' horse, "I think Monsieur took a cab! . . ."

This information did not indicate what her husband's intentions were; yet why had he not come back to tell her about his outing?

She was growing absolutely idiotic! . . . Could she hesitate? Is not human nature always ready to yield to the most extravagant of temptations? Just a year ago, had not she herself gone to Jacques instead of going to Raittolbe?

"Then," thought the grim philosopher, "he went where fate was calling him; he went where I foresaw he would go, in spite of my demoniacal caresses! Raoule, the hour of reckoning has come for you; look danger in the face, and if it is too late, punish the guilty one!"

She gave a start, because, while putting on her masculine attire so as not to be recognized in the Rue d'Antin, she was talking aloud to herself.

"Is he guilty? Who knows? Ought I not to share in a crime too often foreseen by my suspicions and to whose idea his cowardly nature has accustomed him?"

She added, going to the service stairs which communicated with their room:

"I won't chastise him! I shall be content to destroy the idol, because one can't adore a fallen god!" And she left, looking straight ahead, with a quiet face, but with a torn heart. . . .

In the Rue d'Antin, the concierge told her:

"Monsieur de Raittolbe is not seeing anyone."

Then, winking because he saw that this elegant young man must be an intimate friend:

"There is a lady with him."

"A lady!" stammered Madame Silvert.

An atrocious supposition came to her mind at once. He might have gone to his sister first . . . at his sister's there were sizes to suit everybody!

"Well, my friend, that's why I'd like to see him! . . ."

"But it is impossible, M. le Baron is very strict about such matters."

"Did he give you any orders? . . ."

"No. . . . No need . . . one can guess! . . ."

Raoule went up, without condescending to turn back

and rang the bell at the door of the mezzanine. M. de Raittolbe's man answered, his finger to his mouth.

"Monsieur is not seeing anyone!"

"Here is my card. He'll have to see me!"

She had one of her husband's cards in the pocket of her coat.

"Monsieur Silvert," stammered the bewildered servant, "but . . ."

"But," said Raoule, trying to laugh, "my wife is here, and I know it! Are you afraid that I shall make a scene? Don't worry! A police inspector is not following me. . . ."

She handed him a bank note and closed the door upon them.

"It is true, Monsieur," murmured the poor man, terrified, "I announced Madame Silvert hardly a quarter of an hour ago, I swear. . . ."

Raoule went quickly through the dining-room and entered the smoking-room, carefully closing after her each door she opened.

The smoking-room was lighted by only one candle, laid upon a pier-table. M. de Raittolbe was standing near that table, holding a revolver in his hand.

Raoule made a single bound. He also wanted to kill himself? Who had betrayed him? A loved human being, or his moral courage? . . .

She seized the revolver, and her attack was so sudden,

so unexpected, that Raittolbe let go of it; it dropped to the floor.

"You?" stammered the ex-officer, as pale as death.

"Yes, you must speak before you blow out your brains, I demand it. After that. . . . Well! you may do as you like! . . ."

She appeared so calm that Raittolbe thought she knew nothing.

"Jacques is here!" he said, in a throaty voice.

"I thought as much, since your servant announced him a short while ago."

"Dressed as a woman!" exclaimed Raittolbe, his words full of insensate rage.

"Why not!"

And they looked at each other with a frightening stare.

"Where is he?"

"In my room!"

"What is he doing?"

"He is crying! . . ."

"You refused!"

"I wanted to strangle him," roared Raittolbe.

"Yes! but later you wanted to blow out your brains?"

"I confess, yes! . . ."

"Why?"

Raittolbe had no answer ready. Crushed, the rake sank down upon the sofa.

"My honour is more sensitive than yours!" he said at last.

Then Raoule went to the bedroom. A few minutes, which seemed like centuries to the baron, went by.

Then a woman reappeared, clothed in a long plain black velvet dress, her head covered with a mantilla. That woman was Madame Silvert, née Raoule de Vénérande. Pale and unsteady, her husband was following her; he had put up the collar of his coat to hide the red finger-marks upon his neck.

"Baron," said Madame Silvert, in a very assured voice, "I have been caught *flagrante delicto,* but my husband does not wish for a public scandal. He will await you, tomorrow, with his witnesses, at the outskirts of the Vésinet."

"That's enough, Madame!" he murmured: "Only the *flagrante delicto* can't be proven by your husband, because Madame Silvert, I swear, is not guilty!"

And he laid his hand upon his rosette of the Legion of Honour.

"I believe you, Monsieur!"

She bowed as an adversary and went away, her arm around Jacques' waist. Going out of the smoking-room, she turned upon the threshold:

"To the death!" she whispered simply to Raittolbe, who was seeing her out.

The valet said later, about that strange adventure:

"Madame Silvert, whom I would have sworn as blond as corn when she came in, was as black as soot when she went out. . . . In any case she is a very stunning woman!"

It was Raoule herself who awoke Jacques next day at dawn; she gave him the addresses of her two witnesses.

"Go," she said very sweetly, "and don't be frightened. It is a fencing match in the open air, instead of in a fencing-room!"

Jacques rubbed his eyes, like someone not aware of what he is doing; he had slept in his clothes upon his silken bed:

"Raoule," he muttered bad-humouredly, "it is your fault! I only wanted to joke, that's all! . . ."

"Of course," she said, smiling with an adorable smile, "I love you still! . . ."

They kissed each other.

"You'll do your duty as an outraged husband, you'll get a slight scratch, and that will be my only vengeance. Your opponent is warned: he must be lenient! . . ."

"But, Raoule, suppose he does not obey you?" murmured Jacques, rather uneasy.

"He will obey me!"

Raoule's tone allowed no reply.

Jacques, however, though his imagination was rendered foggy and stupid by vice, still saw before him Rait-

tolbe's threatening face, and he could not understand why she, the beloved, forgave him so easily.

He found the carriage waiting near the steps, entered it mechanically and went to the given addresses.

Martin Durand accepted without demur the responsibility of being a witness in an unknown affair. But Cousin René, guessing that it had to do with some escapade of Raoule's, did not find it amusing to be asked to defend Jacques Silvert's honour. He yielded only when told it was merely a quarrel about fencing.

Then, as Jacques had married a de Vénérande, and therefore belonged to their clan, the cousin joined Martin Durand.

The two witnesses, not knowing what the trouble was, exchanged only a few words. Jacques Silvert reclined in the best padded corner of the carriage and went to sleep.

"Alexander!" said René, pointing to Raoule's husband and grinning.

"Of course," answered Martin Durand, "he is fighting for the sake of the world. Raittolbe probably has to show him a new thrust. Isn't he complacent, the husband!"

René looked haughty and stopped short the architect's unfortunate remark.

After a quarter of an hour Jacques, awakened by his witnesses, jumped down at the outskirts of the forest. It took them some time to find their adversary. Every-

thing in that duel was extraordinary, and the place of rendezvous was no more definite than its real motive.

Raittolbe appeared at last, bringing with him two ex-officers. Jacques knew how to salute an opponent, and he saluted.

"Very gallant, more and more gallant!" René asserted.

Then the witnesses went up, and Jacques, to look like a real man, lit a cigarette offered by Martin Durand.

It was in March, and the weather was grey but rather warm. It had been raining the night before and the buds on the trees shone with a thousand shining drops. Looking up, Jacques could not help smiling with his vague smile which was all the spirituality of his soft nature. What was he smiling at? Well, he did not know; only those drops of water had seemed to him like eyes tenderly gazing at fate, and he felt joy in his heart.

When he saw the country, with Raoule on his arm, the body of the terrible creature shut out everything for him.

And he loved her very deeply, that woman . . . . it was true that he had offended her very deeply for the sake of that man who had hurt his neck so much. . . .

He looked down again. Violets were showing through the grass. Then, just as the raindrops had put spangles in his stupid brain, the small dark eyes of the flowers,

half hidden by the blades of grass like eyelashes, made his brain still more stupid. He saw the earth sad, muddy, and he shivered at the thought of being laid there some morning, never to rise again. Yes, indeed, he had offended the woman; but why had that man hurt his neck so much? . . . And it was not his fault! . . . Prostitution is a disease! They all had had it in his family: his mother, his sister; could he struggle against his own blood? . . . He was so much like a whore in the depths of his being, that the madness of vice took the proportions of tetanus! And besides, what he had dared to wish for was really much more natural than what she had taught him! And he shook his red hair in the wind as he thought of these things! They were going to show off, as they parried each other's blows.

"On guard, gentlemen!"

They would fight till he had the promised scratch, and then he would return quickly, to make her drink in a kiss the red pearl, no larger than the pearls of rain. . . .

. . . And yet this man hurt his neck very much. . . .

The choice of arms belonged to Raittolbe. He chose. When Jacques took his sword in his hand, he was surprised to find it heavy. Those he used generally were very light. The customary "Go, gentlemen!" was said.

As usual Jacques handled his weapon very awkwardly.

The baron did not wish to look Jacques straight in the

face, but the young man was so calm and silent that Raittolbe felt his blood run cold.

"Let us hurry," he thought, "let us rid society of a foul creature!"

Just then the dawn broke through the grey sky. A ray of sunshine fell upon the fighters, and especially upon Jacques, whose open shirt showed the hollow of his chest, and a skin as delicate as a child's, with fine golden hair which only accentuated the whiteness of his body.

Raittolbe feinted and Jacques parried, but rather timidly. He also was in a hurry to end it. . . . Suppose the baron made a mistake? His fist was terrible, he had reason to know. It was the religious silence which oppressed him! At least Raoule amused him with her biting comments when she gave him lessons and he felt he wanted to look beautiful. . . .

Raittolbe hesitated a few minutes. An awful anguish tightened his heart and a cold perspiration covered his body.

Jacques, all pink, looked happy! Then that damned creature was not a coward; did he not understand, was he not defending himself?. . . The thrusts of the sword seemed to make no more impression upon his god-like limbs than did the riding whip?

Then, not wishing to see what was going to happen, he lunged quickly and turned his head away a little, touching Jacques just where his red curly hair shone like

gold. It seemed to him as if his sword penetrated by itself into the flesh of a new-born babe. Jacques did not utter a sound, but fell upon the grass where the dark little eyes of the violets were watching him. But Raittolbe uttered a harrowing cry which went to the heart of the witnesses.

"I am a scoundrel!" he said, in the tone of a father who accidentally has killed his son. "I have killed him! I have killed him!"

He ran to the outstretched corpse.

"Jacques!" he begged, "look at me! Speak to me! Jacques, why did you come? Did you not know that you were condemned beforehand? Oh! it is an atrocity, I can't have killed him, I who love him! Say I can't, say it is not true. Am I dreaming? . . . "

The witnesses, distressed by this unexpected outburst of sorrow, were trying to calm him, and to raise Jacques.

"For a duel that ought to have stopped at the first sign of blood, this is a very much-to-be-regretted ending," mumbled one of the officers.

"Yes! it is a very dreadful business," muttered Martin Durand.

"And not a doctor," added René, horribly disturbed.

"I am accustomed to such things, I'll bandage him; go and get some water quickly . . . ," said the baron's second witness.

While they were getting some water, Raittolbe had

put his lips to the wound and was trying to draw the blood, which was very slow in coming.

They cooled his forehead with a wet handkerchief. He opened his eyes.

"Are you alive?" asked the baron. "Oh, my child, do you forgive me?" he went on, stammering, "you did not know how to fight, you offered yourself to death."

"We assert," interrupted one of the officers, who thought that his friend was going too far, "that M. de Raittolbe behaved perfectly."

"You must be suffering a lot, aren't you?" the baron went on, not listening to them, "you, for whom the least hurt was always too much. Alas! you are so little like a man! I must have been mad to accept this duel. My poor Jacques, answer me, I beg of you!"

Silvert's eyes opened wide; a bitter smile played around his beautiful mouth, whose warm colour was fast disappearing.

"No, sir," he stammered in a voice which was less than a breath, "I have nothing against you, . . . it is my sister . . . who is the cause of everything . . . my sister! . . . I loved Raoule. . . . Oh! I am cold!"

Raittolbe tried again to suck the wound because the blood was still not coming.

Then Jacques pushed him away and said, in lower tones still:

"No, leave me, your moustaches prick me. . . ."

His body shivered as he fell backwards. Jacques was dead. . . .

. . . . . .

"Did you notice," said one of the baron's witnesses, when the carriage had gone with the corpse, "did you notice that Raittolbe, in spite of his despair, forgot to shake hands with him?"

"Yes, this duel was as incorrect as possible in every way. . . . I am sorry for our friend."

On the evening of that mournful day, Madame Silvert bent over the bed in the temple of love and, armed with silver pincers, a velvet-covered hammer and a silver scalpel, engaged in a very delicate task. . . . Occasionally she dried her tapering fingers with a lace handkerchief.

chapter 16

The Baron de Raittolbe has gone back to the army and is in Africa. He takes part in all the dangerous expeditions. Had he not been warned that he would die by a pistol shot?

In the Vénérande mansion, in the left wing, whose shutters are always closed, there is a heavily guarded room.

That room is as blue as a cloudless sky, and upon the couch shaped like a shell, an Eros of marble watches over a wax figure covered with transparent rubber. The red hair, the fair eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth which are in the mouth, and the nails on the hands and feet have been torn from a corpse. The enameled eyes have an adorable look.

The walled chamber has a door hidden in the draperies of the dressing-room. At night, sometimes a woman dressed in mourning, and sometimes a young man in evening clothes, opens this door.

One or the other kneels at the foot of the bed, and, after contemplating at length the marvellous lines of the wax statue, embraces it, and kisses it upon the mouth. A hidden spring connects with the mouth and gives it life.

This wax figure, an anatomical masterpiece, is the work of a German.

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