HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE MAGIC SKIN

Honoré Balzac
The Magic Skin

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25020323
The Magic Skin:

Содержание

Honoré de Balzac
The Magic Skin

I. THE TALISMAN

Towards the end of the month of October 1829 a young man entered the Palais-Royal just as the gaming-houses opened, agreeably to the law which protects a passion by its very nature easily excisable. He mounted the staircase of one of the gambling hells distinguished by the number 36, without too much deliberation.

"Your hat, sir, if you please?" a thin, querulous voice called out. A little old man, crouching in the darkness behind a railing, suddenly rose and exhibited his features, carved after a mean design.

As you enter a gaming-house the law despoils you of your hat at the outset. Is it by way of a parable, a divine revelation? Or by exacting some pledge or other, is not an infernal compact implied? Is it done to compel you to preserve a respectful demeanor towards those who are about to gain money of you? Or must the detective, who squats in our social sewers, know the name of your hatter, or your own, if you happen to have written it on the lining inside? Or, after all, is the measurement of your skull required for the compilation of statistics as to the cerebral

capacity of gamblers? The executive is absolutely silent on this point. But be sure of this, that though you have scarcely taken a step towards the tables, your hat no more belongs to you now than you belong to yourself. Play possesses you, your fortune, your cap, your cane, your cloak.

As you go out, it will be made clear to you, by a savage irony, that Play has yet spared you something, since your property is returned. For all that, if you bring a new hat with you, you will have to pay for the knowledge that a special costume is needed for a gambler.

The evident astonishment with which the young man took a numbered tally in exchange for his hat, which was fortunately somewhat rubbed at the brim, showed clearly enough that his mind was yet untainted; and the little old man, who had wallowed from his youth up in the furious pleasures of a gambler's life, cast a dull, indifferent glance over him, in which a philosopher might have seen wretchedness lying in the hospital, the vagrant lives of ruined folk, inquests on numberless suicides, life-long penal servitude and transportations to Guazacoalco.

His pallid, lengthy visage appeared like a haggard embodiment of the passion reduced to its simplest terms. There were traces of past anguish in its wrinkles. He supported life on the glutinous soups at Darcet's, and gambled away his meagre earnings day by day. Like some old hackney which takes no heed of the strokes of the whip, nothing could move him now. The stifled groans of ruined players, as they passed out, their mute

imprecations, their stupefied faces, found him impassive. He was the spirit of Play incarnate. If the young man had noticed this sorry Cerberus, perhaps he would have said, "There is only a pack of cards in that heart of his."

The stranger did not heed this warning writ in flesh and blood, put here, no doubt, by Providence, who has set loathing on the threshold of all evil haunts. He walked boldly into the saloon, where the rattle of coin brought his senses under the dazzling spell of an agony of greed. Most likely he had been drawn thither by that most convincing of Jean Jacques' eloquent periods, which expresses, I think, this melancholy thought, "Yes, I can imagine that a man may take to gambling when he sees only his last shilling between him and death."

There is an illusion about a gambling saloon at night as vulgar as that of a bloodthirsty drama, and just as effective. The rooms are filled with players and onlookers, with poverty-stricken age, which drags itself thither in search of stimulation, with excited faces, and revels that began in wine, to end shortly in the Seine. The passion is there in full measure, but the great number of the actors prevents you from seeing the gambling-demon face to face. The evening is a harmony or chorus in which all take part, to which each instrument in the orchestra contributes his share. You would see there plenty of respectable people who have come in search of diversion, for which they pay as they pay for the pleasures of the theatre, or of gluttony, or they come hither as to some garret where they cheapen poignant regrets for three

months to come.

Do you understand all the force and frenzy in a soul which impatiently waits for the opening of a gambling hell? Between the daylight gambler and the player at night there is the same difference that lies between a careless husband and the lover swooning under his lady's window. Only with morning comes the real throb of the passion and the craving in its stark horror. Then you can admire the real gambler, who has neither eaten, slept, thought, nor lived, he has so smarted under the scourge of his martingale, so suffered on the rack of his desire for a coup of *trente-et-quarante*. At that accursed hour you encounter eyes whose calmness terrifies you, faces that fascinate, glances that seem as if they had power to turn the cards over and consume them. The grandest hours of a gambling saloon are not the opening ones. If Spain has bull-fights, and Rome once had her gladiators, Paris waxes proud of her Palais-Royal, where the inevitable *roulettes* cause blood to flow in streams, and the public can have the pleasure of watching without fear of their feet slipping in it.

Take a quiet peep at the arena. How bare it looks! The paper on the walls is greasy to the height of your head, there is nothing to bring one reviving thought. There is not so much as a nail for the convenience of suicides. The floor is worn and dirty. An oblong table stands in the middle of the room, the tablecloth is worn by the friction of gold, but the straw-bottomed chairs about it indicate an odd indifference to luxury in the men who will lose

their lives here in the quest of the fortune that is to put luxury within their reach.

This contradiction in humanity is seen wherever the soul reacts powerfully upon itself. The gallant would clothe his mistress in silks, would deck her out in soft Eastern fabrics, though he and she must lie on a truckle-bed. The ambitious dreamer sees himself at the summit of power, while he slavishly prostrates himself in the mire. The tradesman stagnates in his damp, unhealthy shop, while he builds a great mansion for his son to inherit prematurely, only to be ejected from it by law proceedings at his own brother's instance.

After all, is there a less pleasing thing in the world than a house of pleasure? Singular question! Man is always at strife with himself. His present woes give the lie to his hopes; yet he looks to a future which is not his, to indemnify him for these present sufferings; setting upon all his actions the seal of inconsequence and of the weakness of his nature. We have nothing here below in full measure but misfortune.

There were several gamblers in the room already when the young man entered. Three bald-headed seniors were lounging round the green table. Imperturbable as diplomatists, those plaster-cast faces of theirs betokened blunted sensibilities, and hearts which had long forgotten how to throb, even when a woman's dowry was the stake. A young Italian, olive-hued and dark-haired, sat at one end, with his elbows on the table, seeming to listen to the presentiments of luck that dictate a gambler's

"Yes" or "No." The glow of fire and gold was on that southern face. Some seven or eight onlookers stood by way of an audience, awaiting a drama composed of the strokes of chance, the faces of the actors, the circulation of coin, and the motion of the croupier's rake, much as a silent, motionless crowd watches the headsman in the Place de Greve. A tall, thin man, in a threadbare coat, held a card in one hand, and a pin in the other, to mark the numbers of Red or Black. He seemed a modern Tantalus, with all the pleasures of his epoch at his lips, a hoardless miser drawing in imaginary gains, a sane species of lunatic who consoles himself in his misery by chimerical dreams, a man who touches peril and vice as a young priest handles the unconsecrated wafer in the white mass.

One or two experts at the game, shrewd speculators, had placed themselves opposite the bank, like old convicts who have lost all fear of the hulks; they meant to try two or three coups, and then to depart at once with the expected gains, on which they lived. Two elderly waiters dawdled about with their arms folded, looking from time to time into the garden from the windows, as if to show their insignificant faces as a sign to passers-by.

The croupier and banker threw a ghastly and withering glance at the punters, and cried, in a sharp voice, "Make your game!" as the young man came in. The silence seemed to grow deeper as all heads turned curiously towards the new arrival. Who would have thought it? The jaded elders, the fossilized waiters, the onlookers, the fanatical Italian himself, felt an indefinable dread at sight

of the stranger. Is he not wretched indeed who can excite pity here? Must he not be very helpless to receive sympathy, ghastly in appearance to raise a shudder in these places, where pain utters no cry, where wretchedness looks gay, and despair is decorous? Such thoughts as these produced a new emotion in these torpid hearts as the young man entered. Were not executioners known to shed tears over the fair-haired, girlish heads that had to fall at the bidding of the Revolution?

The gamblers saw at a glance a dreadful mystery in the novice's face. His young features were stamped with a melancholy grace, his looks told of unsuccess and many blighted hopes. The dull apathy of the suicide had made his forehead so deadly pale, a bitter smile carved faint lines about the corners of his mouth, and there was an abandonment about him that was painful to see. Some sort of demon sparkled in the depths of his eye, which drooped, wearied perhaps with pleasure. Could it have been dissipation that had set its foul mark on the proud face, once pure and bright, and now brought low? Any doctor seeing the yellow circles about his eyelids, and the color in his cheeks, would have set them down to some affection of the heart or lungs, while poets would have attributed them to the havoc brought by the search for knowledge and to night-vigils by the student's lamp.

But a complaint more fatal than any disease, a disease more merciless than genius or study, had drawn this young face, and had wrung a heart which dissipation, study, and sickness had

scarcely disturbed. When a notorious criminal is taken to the convict's prison, the prisoners welcome him respectfully, and these evil spirits in human shape, experienced in torments, bowed before an unheard-of anguish. By the depth of the wound which met their eyes, they recognized a prince among them, by the majesty of his unspoken irony, by the refined wretchedness of his garb. The frock-coat that he wore was well cut, but his cravat was on terms so intimate with his waistcoat that no one could suspect him of underlinen. His hands, shapely as a woman's were not perfectly clean; for two days past indeed he had ceased to wear gloves. If the very croupier and the waiters shuddered, it was because some traces of the spell of innocence yet hung about his meagre, delicately-shaped form, and his scanty fair hair in its natural curls.

He looked only about twenty-five years of age, and any trace of vice in his face seemed to be there by accident. A young constitution still resisted the inroads of lubricity. Darkness and light, annihilation and existence, seemed to struggle in him, with effects of mingled beauty and terror. There he stood like some erring angel that has lost his radiance; and these emeritus-professors of vice and shame were ready to bid the novice depart, even as some toothless crone might be seized with pity for a beautiful girl who offers herself up to infamy.

The young man went straight up to the table, and, as he stood there, flung down a piece of gold which he held in his hand, without deliberation. It rolled on to the Black; then, as strong

natures can, he looked calmly, if anxiously, at the croupier, as if he held useless subterfuges in scorn.

The interest this coup awakened was so great that the old gamesters laid nothing upon it; only the Italian, inspired by a gambler's enthusiasm, smiled suddenly at some thought, and punted his heap of coin against the stranger's stake.

The banker forgot to pronounce the phrases that use and wont have reduced to an inarticulate cry – "Make your game… The game is made… Bets are closed." The croupier spread out the cards, and seemed to wish luck to the newcomer, indifferent as he was to the losses or gains of those who took part in these sombre pleasures. Every bystander thought he saw a drama, the closing scene of a noble life, in the fortunes of that bit of gold; and eagerly fixed his eyes on the prophetic cards; but however closely they watched the young man, they could discover not the least sign of feeling on his cool but restless face.

"Even! red wins," said the croupier officially. A dumb sort of rattle came from the Italian's throat when he saw the folded notes that the banker showered upon him, one after another. The young man only understood his calamity when the croupiers's rake was extended to sweep away his last napoleon. The ivory touched the coin with a little click, as it swept it with the speed of an arrow into the heap of gold before the bank. The stranger turned pale at the lips, and softly shut his eyes, but he unclosed them again at once, and the red color returned as he affected the airs of an Englishman, to whom life can offer no new sensation, and

disappeared without the glance full of entreaty for compassion that a desperate gamester will often give the bystanders. How much can happen in a second's space; how many things depend on a throw of the die!

"That was his last cartridge, of course," said the croupier, smiling after a moment's silence, during which he picked up the coin between his finger and thumb and held it up.

"He is a cracked brain that will go and drown himself," said a frequenter of the place. He looked round about at the other players, who all knew each other.

"Bah!" said a waiter, as he took a pinch of snuff.

"If we had but followed *his* example," said an old gamester to the others, as he pointed out the Italian.

Everybody looked at the lucky player, whose hands shook as he counted his bank-notes.

"A voice seemed to whisper to me," he said. "The luck is sure to go against that young man's despair."

"He is a new hand," said the banker, "or he would have divided his money into three parts to give himself more chance."

The young man went out without asking for his hat; but the old watch-dog, who had noted its shabby condition, returned it to him without a word. The gambler mechanically gave up the tally, and went downstairs whistling *Di tanti Palpiti* so feebly, that he himself scarcely heard the delicious notes.

He found himself immediately under the arcades of the Palais-Royal, reached the Rue Saint Honore, took the direction of the

Tuileries, and crossed the gardens with an undecided step. He walked as if he were in some desert, elbowed by men whom he did not see, hearing through all the voices of the crowd one voice alone – the voice of Death. He was lost in the thoughts that benumbed him at last, like the criminals who used to be taken in carts from the Palais de Justice to the Place de Greve, where the scaffold awaited them reddened with all the blood spilt here since 1793.

There is something great and terrible about suicide. Most people's downfalls are not dangerous; they are like children who have not far to fall, and cannot injure themselves; but when a great nature is dashed down, he is bound to fall from a height. He must have been raised almost to the skies; he has caught glimpses of some heaven beyond his reach. Vehement must the storms be which compel a soul to seek for peace from the trigger of a pistol.

How much young power starves and pines away in a garret for want of a friend, for lack of a woman's consolation, in the midst of millions of fellow-creatures, in the presence of a listless crowd that is burdened by its wealth! When one remembers all this, suicide looms large. Between a self-sought death and the abundant hopes whose voices call a young man to Paris, God only knows what may intervene; what contending ideas have striven within the soul; what poems have been set aside; what moans and what despair have been repressed; what abortive masterpieces and vain endeavors! Every suicide is an awful poem of sorrow. Where will you find a work of genius floating above the seas of

literature that can compare with this paragraph:

> "Yesterday, at four o'clock, a young woman threw herself into the
> Seine from the Pont des Arts."

Dramas and romances pale before this concise Parisian phrase; so must even that old frontispiece, *The Lamentations of the glorious king of Kaernavan, put in prison by his children*, the sole remaining fragment of a lost work that drew tears from Sterne at the bare perusal – the same Sterne who deserted his own wife and family.

The stranger was beset with such thoughts as these, which passed in fragments through his mind, like tattered flags fluttering above the combat. If he set aside for a moment the burdens of consciousness and of memory, to watch the flower heads gently swayed by the breeze among the green thickets, a revulsion came over him, life struggled against the oppressive thought of suicide, and his eyes rose to the sky: gray clouds, melancholy gusts of the wind, the stormy atmosphere, all decreed that he should die.

He bent his way toward the Pont Royal, musing over the last fancies of others who had gone before him. He smiled to himself as he remembered that Lord Castlereagh had satisfied the humblest of our needs before he cut his throat, and that the academician Auger had sought for his snuff-box as he went to his death. He analyzed these extravagances, and even examined himself; for as he stood aside against the parapet to allow a porter

to pass, his coat had been whitened somewhat by the contact, and he carefully brushed the dust from his sleeve, to his own surprise. He reached the middle of the arch, and looked forebodingly at the water.

"Wretched weather for drowning yourself," said a ragged old woman, who grinned at him; "isn't the Seine cold and dirty?"

His answer was a ready smile, which showed the frenzied nature of his courage; then he shivered all at once as he saw at a distance, by the door of the Tuileries, a shed with an inscription above it in letters twelve inches high: THE ROYAL HUMANE SOCIETY'S APPARATUS.

A vision of M. Dacheux rose before him, equipped by his philanthropy, calling out and setting in motion the too efficacious oars which break the heads of drowning men, if unluckily they should rise to the surface; he saw a curious crowd collecting, running for a doctor, preparing fumigations, he read the maundering paragraph in the papers, put between notes on a festivity and on the smiles of a ballet-dancer; he heard the francs counted down by the prefect of police to the watermen. As a corpse, he was worth fifteen francs; but now while he lived he was only a man of talent without patrons, without friends, without a mattress to lie on, or any one to speak a word for him – a perfect social cipher, useless to a State which gave itself no trouble about him.

A death in broad daylight seemed degrading to him; he made up his mind to die at night so as to bequeath an unrecognizable

corpse to a world which had disregarded the greatness of life. He began his wanderings again, turning towards the Quai Voltaire, imitating the lagging gait of an idler seeking to kill time. As he came down the steps at the end of the bridge, his notice was attracted by the second-hand books displayed on the parapet, and he was on the point of bargaining for some. He smiled, thrust his hands philosophically into his pockets, and fell to strolling on again with a proud disdain in his manner, when he heard to his surprise some coin rattling fantastically in his pocket.

A smile of hope lit his face, and slid from his lips over his features, over his brow, and brought a joyful light to his eyes and his dark cheeks. It was a spark of happiness like one of the red dots that flit over the remains of a burnt scrap of paper; but as it is with the black ashes, so it was with his face, it became dull again when the stranger quickly drew out his hand and perceived three pennies. "Ah, kind gentleman! *carita*, *carita*; for the love of St. Catherine! only a halfpenny to buy some bread!"

A little chimney sweeper, with puffed cheeks, all black with soot, and clad in tatters, held out his hand to beg for the man's last pence.

Two paces from the little Savoyard stood an old *pauvre honteux*, sickly and feeble, in wretched garments of ragged druggeting, who asked in a thick, muffled voice:

"Anything you like to give, monsieur; I will pray to God for you…"

But the young man turned his eyes on him, and the old beggar

stopped without another word, discerning in that mournful face an abandonment of wretchedness more bitter than his own.

"*La carita*! *la carita*!"

The stranger threw the coins to the old man and the child, left the footway, and turned towards the houses; the harrowing sight of the Seine fretted him beyond endurance.

"May God lengthen your days!" cried the two beggars.

As he reached the shop window of a print-seller, this man on the brink of death met a young woman alighting from a showy carriage. He looked in delight at her prettiness, at the pale face appropriately framed by the satin of her fashionable bonnet. Her slender form and graceful movements entranced him. Her skirt had been slightly raised as she stepped to the pavement, disclosing a daintily fitting white stocking over the delicate outlines beneath. The young lady went into the shop, purchased albums and sets of lithographs; giving several gold coins for them, which glittered and rang upon the counter. The young man, seemingly occupied with the prints in the window, fixed upon the fair stranger a gaze as eager as man can give, to receive in exchange an indifferent glance, such as lights by accident on a passer-by. For him it was a leave-taking of love and of woman; but his final and strenuous questioning glance was neither understood nor felt by the slight-natured woman there; her color did not rise, her eyes did not droop. What was it to her? one more piece of adulation, yet another sigh only prompted the delightful thought at night, "I looked rather well to-day."

The young man quickly turned to another picture, and only left it when she returned to her carriage. The horses started off, the final vision of luxury and refinement went under an eclipse, just as that life of his would soon do also. Slowly and sadly he followed the line of the shops, listlessly examining the specimens on view. When the shops came to an end, he reviewed the Louvre, the Institute, the towers of Notre Dame, of the Palais, the Pont des Arts; all these public monuments seemed to have taken their tone from the heavy gray sky.

Fitful gleams of light gave a foreboding look to Paris; like a pretty woman, the city has mysterious fits of ugliness or beauty. So the outer world seemed to be in a plot to steep this man about to die in a painful trance. A prey to the maleficent power which acts relaxingly upon us by the fluid circulating through our nerves, his whole frame seemed gradually to experience a dissolving process. He felt the anguish of these throes passing through him in waves, and the houses and the crowd seemed to surge to and fro in a mist before his eyes. He tried to escape the agitation wrought in his mind by the revulsions of his physical nature, and went toward the shop of a dealer in antiquities, thinking to give a treat to his senses, and to spend the interval till nightfall in bargaining over curiosities.

He sought, one might say, to regain courage and to find a stimulant, like a criminal who doubts his power to reach the scaffold. The consciousness of approaching death gave him, for the time being, the intrepidity of a duchess with a couple of

lovers, so that he entered the place with an abstracted look, while his lips displayed a set smile like a drunkard's. Had not life, or rather had not death, intoxicated him? Dizziness soon overcame him again. Things appeared to him in strange colors, or as making slight movements; his irregular pulse was no doubt the cause; the blood that sometimes rushed like a burning torrent through his veins, and sometimes lay torpid and stagnant as tepid water. He merely asked leave to see if the shop contained any curiosities which he required.

A plump-faced young shopman with red hair, in an otter-skin cap, left an old peasant woman in charge of the shop – a sort of feminine Caliban, employed in cleaning a stove made marvelous by Bernard Palissy's work. This youth remarked carelessly:

"Look round, *monsieur*! We have nothing very remarkable here downstairs; but if I may trouble you to go up to the first floor, I will show you some very fine mummies from Cairo, some inlaid pottery, and some carved ebony —*genuine Renaissance* work, just come in, and of perfect beauty."

In the stranger's fearful position this cicerone's prattle and shopman's empty talk seemed like the petty vexations by which narrow minds destroy a man of genius. But as he must even go through with it, he appeared to listen to his guide, answering him by gestures or monosyllables; but imperceptibly he arrogated the privilege of saying nothing, and gave himself up without hindrance to his closing meditations, which were appalling. He had a poet's temperament, his mind had entered by chance on

a vast field; and he must see perforce the dry bones of twenty future worlds.

At a first glance the place presented a confused picture in which every achievement, human and divine, was mingled. Crocodiles, monkeys, and serpents stuffed with straw grinned at glass from church windows, seemed to wish to bite sculptured heads, to chase lacquered work, or to scramble up chandeliers. A Sevres vase, bearing Napoleon's portrait by Mme. Jacotot, stood beside a sphinx dedicated to Sesostris. The beginnings of the world and the events of yesterday were mingled with grotesque cheerfulness. A kitchen jack leaned against a pyx, a republican sabre on a mediaeval hackbut. Mme. du Barry, with a star above her head, naked, and surrounded by a cloud, seemed to look longingly out of Latour's pastel at an Indian chibook, while she tried to guess the purpose of the spiral curves that wound towards her. Instruments of death, poniards, curious pistols, and disguised weapons had been flung down pell-mell among the paraphernalia of daily life; porcelain tureens, Dresden plates, translucent cups from china, old salt-cellars, comfit-boxes belonging to feudal times. A carved ivory ship sped full sail on the back of a motionless tortoise.

The Emperor Augustus remained unmoved and imperial with an air-pump thrust into one eye. Portraits of French sheriffs and Dutch burgomasters, phlegmatic now as when in life, looked down pallid and unconcerned on the chaos of past ages below them.

Every land of earth seemed to have contributed some stray fragment of its learning, some example of its art. Nothing seemed lacking to this philosophical kitchen-midden, from a redskin's calumet, a green and golden slipper from the seraglio, a Moorish yataghan, a Tartar idol, to the soldier's tobacco pouch, to the priest's ciborium, and the plumes that once adorned a throne. This extraordinary combination was rendered yet more bizarre by the accidents of lighting, by a multitude of confused reflections of various hues, by the sharp contrast of blacks and whites. Broken cries seemed to reach the ear, unfinished dramas seized upon the imagination, smothered lights caught the eye. A thin coating of inevitable dust covered all the multitudinous corners and convolutions of these objects of various shapes which gave highly picturesque effects.

First of all, the stranger compared the three galleries which civilization, cults, divinities, masterpieces, dominions, carousals, sanity, and madness had filled to repletion, to a mirror with numerous facets, each depicting a world. After this first hazy idea he would fain have selected his pleasures; but by dint of using his eyes, thinking and musing, a fever began to possess him, caused perhaps by the gnawing pain of hunger. The spectacle of so much existence, individual or national, to which these pledges bore witness, ended by numbing his senses – the purpose with which he entered the shop was fulfilled. He had left the real behind, and had climbed gradually up to an ideal world; he had attained to the enchanted palace of ecstasy, whence the universe appeared

to him by fragments and in shapes of flame, as once the future blazed out before the eyes of St. John in Patmos.

A crowd of sorrowing faces, beneficent and appalling, dark and luminous, far and near, gathered in numbers, in myriads, in whole generations. Egypt, rigid and mysterious, arose from her sands in the form of a mummy swathed in black bandages; then the Pharaohs swallowed up nations, that they might build themselves a tomb; and he beheld Moses and the Hebrews and the desert, and a solemn antique world. Fresh and joyous, a marble statue spoke to him from a twisted column of the pleasure-loving myths of Greece and Ionia. Ah! who would not have smiled with him to see, against the earthen red background, the brown-faced maiden dancing with gleeful reverence before the god Priapus, wrought in the fine clay of an Etruscan vase? The Latin queen caressed her chimera.

The whims of Imperial Rome were there in life, the bath was disclosed, the toilette of a languid Julia, dreaming, waiting for her Tibullus. Strong with the might of Arabic spells, the head of Cicero evoked memories of a free Rome, and unrolled before him the scrolls of Titus Livius. The young man beheld *Senatus Populusque Romanus*; consuls, lictors, togas with purple fringes; the fighting in the Forum, the angry people, passed in review before him like the cloudy faces of a dream.

Then Christian Rome predominated in his vision. A painter had laid heaven open; he beheld the Virgin Mary wrapped in a golden cloud among the angels, shining more brightly than the

sun, receiving the prayers of sufferers, on whom this second Eve Regenerate smiles pityingly. At the touch of a mosaic, made of various lavas from Vesuvius and Etna, his fancy fled to the hot tawny south of Italy. He was present at Borgia's orgies, he roved among the Abruzzi, sought for Italian love intrigues, grew ardent over pale faces and dark, almond-shaped eyes. He shivered over midnight adventures, cut short by the cool thrust of a jealous blade, as he saw a mediaeval dagger with a hilt wrought like lace, and spots of rust like splashes of blood upon it.

India and its religions took the shape of the idol with his peaked cap of fantastic form, with little bells, clad in silk and gold. Close by, a mat, as pretty as the bayadere who once lay upon it, still gave out a faint scent of sandal wood. His fancy was stirred by a goggle-eyed Chinese monster, with mouth awry and twisted limbs, the invention of a people who, grown weary of the monotony of beauty, found an indescribable pleasure in an infinite variety of ugliness. A salt-cellar from Benvenuto Cellini's workshop carried him back to the Renaissance at its height, to the time when there was no restraint on art or morals, when torture was the sport of sovereigns; and from their councils, churchmen with courtesans' arms about them issued decrees of chastity for simple priests.

On a cameo he saw the conquests of Alexander, the massacres of Pizarro in a matchbox, and religious wars disorderly, fanatical, and cruel, in the shadows of a helmet. Joyous pictures of chivalry were called up by a suit of Milanese armor, brightly polished and

richly wrought; a paladin's eyes seemed to sparkle yet under the visor.

This sea of inventions, fashions, furniture, works of art and fiascos, made for him a poem without end. Shapes and colors and projects all lived again for him, but his mind received no clear and perfect conception. It was the poet's task to complete the sketches of the great master, who had scornfully mingled on his palette the hues of the numberless vicissitudes of human life. When the world at large at last released him, when he had pondered over many lands, many epochs, and various empires, the young man came back to the life of the individual. He impersonated fresh characters, and turned his mind to details, rejecting the life of nations as a burden too overwhelming for a single soul.

Yonder was a sleeping child modeled in wax, a relic of Ruysch's collection, an enchanting creation which brought back the happiness of his own childhood. The cotton garment of a Tahitian maid next fascinated him; he beheld the primitive life of nature, the real modesty of naked chastity, the joys of an idleness natural to mankind, a peaceful fate by a slow river of sweet water under a plantain tree that bears its pleasant manna without the toil of man. Then all at once he became a corsair, investing himself with the terrible poetry that Lara has given to the part: the thought came at the sight of the mother-of-pearl tints of a myriad sea-shells, and grew as he saw madrepores redolent of the sea-weeds and the storms of the Atlantic.

The sea was forgotten again at a distant view of exquisite

miniatures; he admired a precious missal in manuscript, adorned with arabesques in gold and blue. Thoughts of peaceful life swayed him; he devoted himself afresh to study and research, longing for the easy life of the monk, devoid alike of cares and pleasures; and from the depths of his cell he looked out upon the meadows, woods, and vineyards of his convent. Pausing before some work of Teniers, he took for his own the helmet of the soldier or the poverty of the artisan; he wished to wear a smoke-begrimed cap with these Flemings, to drink their beer and join their game at cards, and smiled upon the comely plumpness of a peasant woman. He shivered at a snowstorm by Mieris; he seemed to take part in Salvator Rosa's battle-piece; he ran his fingers over a tomahawk form Illinois, and felt his own hair rise as he touched a Cherokee scalping-knife. He marveled over the rebec that he set in the hands of some lady of the land, drank in the musical notes of her ballad, and in the twilight by the gothic arch above the hearth he told his love in a gloom so deep that he could not read his answer in her eyes.

He caught at all delights, at all sorrows; grasped at existence in every form; and endowed the phantoms conjured up from that inert and plastic material so liberally with his own life and feelings, that the sound of his own footsteps reached him as if from another world, or as the hum of Paris reaches the towers of Notre Dame.

He ascended the inner staircase which led to the first floor, with its votive shields, panoplies, carved shrines, and figures

on the wall at every step. Haunted by the strangest shapes, by marvelous creations belonging to the borderland betwixt life and death, he walked as if under the spell of a dream. His own existence became a matter of doubt to him; he was neither wholly alive nor dead, like the curious objects about him. The light began to fade as he reached the show-rooms, but the treasures of gold and silver heaped up there scarcely seemed to need illumination from without. The most extravagant whims of prodigals, who have run through millions to perish in garrets, had left their traces here in this vast bazar of human follies. Here, beside a writing desk, made at the cost of 100,000 francs, and sold for a hundred pence, lay a lock with a secret worth a king's ransom. The human race was revealed in all the grandeur of its wretchedness; in all the splendor of its infinite littleness. An ebony table that an artist might worship, carved after Jean Goujon's designs, in years of toil, had been purchased perhaps at the price of firewood. Precious caskets, and things that fairy hands might have fashioned, lay there in heaps like rubbish.

"You must have the worth of millions here!" cried the young man as he entered the last of an immense suite of rooms, all decorated and gilt by eighteenth century artists.

"Thousands of millions, you might say," said the florid shopman; "but you have seen nothing as yet. Go up to the third floor, and you shall see!"

The stranger followed his guide to a fourth gallery, where one by one there passed before his wearied eyes several pictures

by Poussin, a magnificent statue by Michael Angelo, enchanting landscapes by Claude Lorraine, a Gerard Dow (like a stray page from Sterne), Rembrandts, Murillos, and pictures by Velasquez, as dark and full of color as a poem of Byron's; then came classic bas-reliefs, finely-cut agates, wonderful cameos! Works of art upon works of art, till the craftsman's skill palled on the mind, masterpiece after masterpiece till art itself became hateful at last and enthusiasm died. He came upon a Madonna by Raphael, but he was tired of Raphael; a figure by Correggio never received the glance it demanded of him. A priceless vase of antique porphyry carved round about with pictures of the most grotesquely wanton of Roman divinities, the pride of some Corinna, scarcely drew a smile from him.

The ruins of fifteen hundred vanished years oppressed him; he sickened under all this human thought; felt bored by all this luxury and art. He struggled in vain against the constantly renewed fantastic shapes that sprang up from under his feet, like children of some sportive demon.

Are not fearful poisons set up in the soul by a swift concentration of all her energies, her enjoyments, or ideas; as modern chemistry, in its caprice, repeats the action of creation by some gas or other? Do not many men perish under the shock of the sudden expansion of some moral acid within them?

"What is there in that box?" he inquired, as he reached a large closet – final triumph of human skill, originality, wealth, and splendor, in which there hung a large, square mahogany coffer,

suspended from a nail by a silver chain.

"Ah, *monsieur* keeps the key of it," said the stout assistant mysteriously. "If you wish to see the portrait, I will gladly venture to tell him."

"Venture!" said the young man; "then is your master a prince?"

"I don't know what he is," the other answered. Equally astonished, each looked for a moment at the other. Then construing the stranger's silence as an order, the apprentice left him alone in the closet.

Have you never launched into the immensity of time and space as you read the geological writings of Cuvier? Carried by his fancy, have you hung as if suspended by a magician's wand over the illimitable abyss of the past? When the fossil bones of animals belonging to civilizations before the Flood are turned up in bed after bed and layer upon layer of the quarries of Montmartre or among the schists of the Ural range, the soul receives with dismay a glimpse of millions of peoples forgotten by feeble human memory and unrecognized by permanent divine tradition, peoples whose ashes cover our globe with two feet of earth that yields bread to us and flowers.

Is not Cuvier the great poet of our era? Byron has given admirable expression to certain moral conflicts, but our immortal naturalist has reconstructed past worlds from a few bleached bones; has rebuilt cities, like Cadmus, with monsters' teeth; has animated forests with all the secrets of zoology gleaned from

a piece of coal; has discovered a giant population from the footprints of a mammoth. These forms stand erect, grow large, and fill regions commensurate with their giant size. He treats figures like a poet; a naught set beside a seven by him produces awe.

He can call up nothingness before you without the phrases of a charlatan. He searches a lump of gypsum, finds an impression in it, says to you, "Behold!" All at once marble takes an animal shape, the dead come to life, the history of the world is laid open before you. After countless dynasties of giant creatures, races of fish and clans of mollusks, the race of man appears at last as the degenerate copy of a splendid model, which the Creator has perchance destroyed. Emboldened by his gaze into the past, this petty race, children of yesterday, can overstep chaos, can raise a psalm without end, and outline for themselves the story of the Universe in an Apocalypse that reveals the past. After the tremendous resurrection that took place at the voice of this man, the little drop in the nameless Infinite, common to all spheres, that is ours to use, and that we call Time, seems to us a pitiable moment of life. We ask ourselves the purpose of our triumphs, our hatreds, our loves, overwhelmed as we are by the destruction of so many past universes, and whether it is worth while to accept the pain of life in order that hereafter we may become an intangible speck. Then we remain as if dead, completely torn away from the present till the *valet de chambre* comes in and says, "*Madame la comtesse* answers that she is expecting *monsieur*."

All the wonders which had brought the known world before the young man's mind wrought in his soul much the same feeling of dejection that besets the philosopher investigating unknown creatures. He longed more than ever for death as he flung himself back in a curule chair and let his eyes wander across the illusions composing a panorama of the past. The pictures seemed to light up, the Virgin's heads smiled on him, the statues seemed alive. Everything danced and swayed around him, with a motion due to the gloom and the tormenting fever that racked his brain; each monstrosity grimaced at him, while the portraits on the canvas closed their eyes for a little relief. Every shape seemed to tremble and start, and to leave its place gravely or flippantly, gracefully or awkwardly, according to its fashion, character, and surroundings.

A mysterious Sabbath began, rivaling the fantastic scenes witnessed by Faust upon the Brocken. But these optical illusions, produced by weariness, overstrained eyesight, or the accidents of twilight, could not alarm the stranger. The terrors of life had no power over a soul grown familiar with the terrors of death. He even gave himself up, half amused by its bizarre eccentricities, to the influence of this moral galvanism; its phenomena, closely connected with his last thoughts, assured him that he was still alive. The silence about him was so deep that he embarked once more in dreams that grew gradually darker and darker as if by magic, as the light slowly faded. A last struggling ray from the sun lit up rosy answering lights. He raised his head and saw a skeleton dimly visible, with its skull bent doubtfully to one side,

as if to say, “The dead will none of thee as yet.”

He passed his hand over his forehead to shake off the drowsiness, and felt a cold breath of air as an unknown furry something swept past his cheeks. He shivered. A muffled clatter of the windows followed; it was a bat, he fancied, that had given him this chilly sepulchral caress. He could yet dimly see for a moment the shapes that surrounded him, by the vague light in the west; then all these inanimate objects were blotted out in uniform darkness. Night and the hour of death had suddenly come. Thenceforward, for a while, he lost consciousness of the things about him; he was either buried in deep meditation or sleep overcame him, brought on by weariness or by the stress of those many thoughts that lacerated his heart.

Suddenly he thought that an awful voice called him by name; it was like some feverish nightmare, when at a step the dreamer falls headlong over into an abyss, and he trembled. He closed his eyes, dazzled by bright rays from a red circle of light that shone out from the shadows. In the midst of the circle stood a little old man who turned the light of the lamp upon him, yet he had not heard him enter, nor move, nor speak. There was something magical about the apparition. The boldest man, awakened in such a sort, would have felt alarmed at the sight of this figure, which might have issued from some sarcophagus hard by.

A curiously youthful look in the unmoving eyes of the spectre forbade the idea of anything supernatural; but for all that, in the brief space between his dreaming and waking life,

the young man's judgment remained philosophically suspended, as Descartes advises. He was, in spite of himself, under the influence of an unaccountable hallucination, a mystery that our pride rejects, and that our imperfect science vainly tries to resolve.

Imagine a short old man, thin and spare, in a long black velvet gown girded round him by a thick silk cord. His long white hair escaped on either side of his face from under a black velvet cap which closely fitted his head and made a formal setting for his countenance. His gown enveloped his body like a winding sheet, so that all that was left visible was a narrow bleached human face. But for the wasted arm, thin as a draper's wand, which held aloft the lamp that cast all its light upon him, the face would have seemed to hang in mid air. A gray pointed beard concealed the chin of this fantastical appearance, and gave him the look of one of those Jewish types which serve artists as models for Moses. His lips were so thin and colorless that it needed a close inspection to find the lines of his mouth at all in the pallid face. His great wrinkled brow and hollow bloodless cheeks, the inexorably stern expression of his small green eyes that no longer possessed eyebrows or lashes, might have convinced the stranger that Gerard Dow's "Money Changer" had come down from his frame. The craftiness of an inquisitor, revealed in those curving wrinkles and creases that wound about his temples, indicated a profound knowledge of life. There was no deceiving this man, who seemed to possess a power of detecting the secrets of the

wariest heart.

The wisdom and the moral codes of every people seemed gathered up in his passive face, just as all the productions of the globe had been heaped up in his dusty showrooms. He seemed to possess the tranquil luminous vision of some god before whom all things are open, or the haughty power of a man who knows all things.

With two strokes of the brush a painter could have so altered the expression of this face, that what had been a serene representation of the Eternal Father should change to the sneering mask of a Mephistopheles; for though sovereign power was revealed by the forehead, mocking folds lurked about the mouth. He must have sacrificed all the joys of earth, as he had crushed all human sorrows beneath his potent will. The man at the brink of death shivered at the thought of the life led by this spirit, so solitary and remote from our world; joyless, since he had no one illusion left; painless, because pleasure had ceased to exist for him. There he stood, motionless and serene as a star in a bright mist. His lamp lit up the obscure closet, just as his green eyes, with their quiet malevolence, seemed to shed a light on the moral world.

This was the strange spectacle that startled the young man's returning sight, as he shook off the dreamy fancies and thoughts of death that had lulled him. An instant of dismay, a momentary return to belief in nursery tales, may be forgiven him, seeing that his senses were obscured. Much thought had wearied his mind,

and his nerves were exhausted with the strain of the tremendous drama within him, and by the scenes that had heaped on him all the horrid pleasures that a piece of opium can produce.

But this apparition had appeared in Paris, on the Quai Voltaire, and in the nineteenth century; the time and place made sorcery impossible. The idol of French scepticism had died in the house just opposite, the disciple of Gay-Lussac and Arago, who had held the charlatanism of intellect in contempt. And yet the stranger submitted himself to the influence of an imaginative spell, as all of us do at times, when we wish to escape from an inevitable certainty, or to tempt the power of Providence. So some mysterious apprehension of a strange force made him tremble before the old man with the lamp. All of us have been stirred in the same way by the sight of Napoleon, or of some other great man, made illustrious by his genius or by fame.

"You wish to see Raphael's portrait of Jesus Christ, monsieur?" the old man asked politely. There was something metallic in the clear, sharp ring of his voice.

He set the lamp upon a broken column, so that all its light might fall on the brown case.

At the sacred names of Christ and Raphael the young man showed some curiosity. The merchant, who no doubt looked for this, pressed a spring, and suddenly the mahogany panel slid noiselessly back in its groove, and discovered the canvas to the stranger's admiring gaze. At sight of this deathless creation, he forgot his fancies in the show-rooms and the freaks of his dreams,

and became himself again. The old man became a being of flesh and blood, very much alive, with nothing chimerical about him, and took up his existence at once upon solid earth.

The sympathy and love, and the gentle serenity in the divine face, exerted an instant sway over the younger spectator. Some influence falling from heaven bade cease the burning torment that consumed the marrow of his bones. The head of the Saviour of mankind seemed to issue from among the shadows represented by a dark background; an aureole of light shone out brightly from his hair; an impassioned belief seemed to glow through him, and to thrill every feature. The word of life had just been uttered by those red lips, the sacred sounds seemed to linger still in the air; the spectator besought the silence for those captivating parables, hearkened for them in the future, and had to turn to the teachings of the past. The untroubled peace of the divine eyes, the comfort of sorrowing souls, seemed an interpretation of the Evangel. The sweet triumphant smile revealed the secret of the Catholic religion, which sums up all things in the precept, "Love one another." This picture breathed the spirit of prayer, enjoined forgiveness, overcame self, caused sleeping powers of good to waken. For this work of Raphael's had the imperious charm of music; you were brought under the spell of memories of the past; his triumph was so absolute that the artist was forgotten. The witchery of the lamplight heightened the wonder; the head seemed at times to flicker in the distance, enveloped in cloud.

"I covered the surface of that picture with gold pieces," said the merchant carelessly.

"And now for death!" cried the young man, awakened from his musings. His last thought had recalled his fate to him, as it led him imperceptibly back from the forlorn hopes to which he had clung.

"Ah, ha! then my suspicions were well founded!" said the other, and his hands held the young man's wrists in a grip like that of a vice.

The younger man smiled wearily at his mistake, and said gently:

"You, sir, have nothing to fear; it is not your life, but my own that is in question… But why should I hide a harmless fraud?" he went on, after a look at the anxious old man. "I came to see your treasures to while away the time till night should come and I could drown myself decently. Who would grudge this last pleasure to a poet and a man of science?"

While he spoke, the jealous merchant watched the haggard face of his pretended customer with keen eyes. Perhaps the mournful tones of his voice reassured him, or he also read the dark signs of fate in the faded features that had made the gamblers shudder; he released his hands, but, with a touch of caution, due to the experience of some hundred years at least, he stretched his arm out to a sideboard as if to steady himself, took up a little dagger, and said:

"Have you been a supernumerary clerk of the Treasury for

three years without receiving any perquisites?"

The stranger could scarcely suppress a smile as he shook his head.

"Perhaps your father has expressed his regret for your birth a little too sharply? Or have you disgraced yourself?"

"If I meant to be disgraced, I should live."

"You have been hissed perhaps at the Funambules? Or you have had to compose couplets to pay for your mistress' funeral? Do you want to be cured of the gold fever? Or to be quit of the spleen? For what blunder is your life forfeit?"

"You must not look among the common motives that impel suicides for the reason of my death. To spare myself the task of disclosing my unheard-of sufferings, for which language has no name, I will tell you this – that I am in the deepest, most humiliating, and most cruel trouble, and," he went on in proud tones that harmonized ill with the words just uttered, "I have no wish to beg for either help or sympathy."

"Eh! eh!"

The two syllables which the old man pronounced resembled the sound of a rattle. Then he went on thus:

"Without compelling you to entreat me, without making you blush for it, and without giving you so much as a French centime, a para from the Levant, a German heller, a Russian kopeck, a Scottish farthing, a single obolus or sestertius from the ancient world, or one piastre from the new, without offering you anything whatever in gold, silver, or copper, notes or drafts, I will make

you richer, more powerful, and of more consequence than a constitutional king."

The young man thought that the older was in his dotage, and waited in bewilderment without venturing to reply.

"Turn round," said the merchant, suddenly catching up the lamp in order to light up the opposite wall; "look at that leathern skin," he went on.

The young man rose abruptly, and showed some surprise at the sight of a piece of shagreen which hung on the wall behind his chair. It was only about the size of a fox's skin, but it seemed to fill the deep shadows of the place with such brilliant rays that it looked like a small comet, an appearance at first sight inexplicable. The young sceptic went up to this so-called talisman, which was to rescue him from all points of view, and he soon found out the cause of its singular brilliancy. The dark grain of the leather had been so carefully burnished and polished, the striped markings of the graining were so sharp and clear, that every particle of the surface of the bit of Oriental leather was in itself a focus which concentrated the light, and reflected it vividly.

He accounted for this phenomenon categorically to the old man, who only smiled meaningly by way of answer. His superior smile led the young scientific man to fancy that he himself had been deceived by some imposture. He had no wish to carry one more puzzle to his grave, and hastily turned the skin over, like some child eager to find out the mysteries of a new toy.

"Ah," he cried, "here is the mark of the seal which they call in the East the Signet of Solomon."

"So you know that, then?" asked the merchant. His peculiar method of laughter, two or three quick breathings through the nostrils, said more than any words however eloquent.

"Is there anybody in the world simple enough to believe in that idle fancy?" said the young man, nettled by the spitefulness of the silent chuckle. "Don't you know," he continued, "that the superstitions of the East have perpetuated the mystical form and the counterfeit characters of the symbol, which represents a mythical dominion? I have no more laid myself open to a charge of credulity in this case, than if I had mentioned sphinxes or griffins, whose existence mythology in a manner admits."

"As you are an Orientalist," replied the other, "perhaps you can read that sentence."

He held the lamp close to the talisman, which the young man held towards him, and pointed out some characters inlaid in the surface of the wonderful skin, as if they had grown on the animal to which it once belonged.

"I must admit," said the stranger, "that I have no idea how the letters could be engraved so deeply on the skin of a wild ass." And he turned quickly to the tables strewn with curiosities and seemed to look for something.

"What is it that you want?" asked the old man.

"Something that will cut the leather, so that I can see whether the letters are printed or inlaid."

The old man held out his stiletto. The stranger took it and tried to cut the skin above the lettering; but when he had removed a thin shaving of leather from them, the characters still appeared below, so clear and so exactly like the surface impression, that for a moment he was not sure that he had cut anything away after all.

"The craftsmen of the Levant have secrets known only to themselves," he said, half in vexation, as he eyed the characters of this Oriental sentence.

"Yes," said the old man, "it is better to attribute it to man's agency than to God's."

The mysterious words were thus arranged:

[Drawing of apparently Sanskrit characters omitted]

Or, as it runs in English:

POSSESSING ME THOU SHALT POSSESS ALL THINGS.
BUT THY LIFE IS MINE, FOR GOD HAS SO WILLED IT.
WISH, AND THY WISHES SHALL BE FULFILLED;
BUT MEASURE THY DESIRES, ACCORDING
TO THE LIFE THAT IS IN THEE.
THIS IS THY LIFE,
WITH EACH WISH I MUST SHRINK
EVEN AS THY OWN DAYS.
WILT THOU HAVE ME? TAKE ME.
GOD WILL HEARKEN UNTO THEE.
SO BE IT!

"So you read Sanskrit fluently," said the old man. "You have been in Persia perhaps, or in Bengal?"

"No, sir," said the stranger, as he felt the emblematical skin curiously. It was almost as rigid as a sheet of metal.

The old merchant set the lamp back again upon the column, giving the other a look as he did so. "He has given up the notion of dying already," the glance said with phlegmatic irony.

"Is it a jest, or is it an enigma?" asked the younger man.

The other shook his head and said soberly:

"I don't know how to answer you. I have offered this talisman with its terrible powers to men with more energy in them than you seem to me to have; but though they laughed at the questionable power it might exert over their futures, not one of them was ready to venture to conclude the fateful contract proposed by an unknown force. I am of their opinion, I have doubted and refrained, and – "

"Have you never even tried its power?" interrupted the young stranger.

"Tried it!" exclaimed the old man. "Suppose that you were on the column in the Place Vendome, would you try flinging yourself into space? Is it possible to stay the course of life? Has a man ever been known to die by halves? Before you came here, you had made up your mind to kill yourself, but all at once a mystery fills your mind, and you think no more about death. You child! Does not any one day of your life afford mysteries more absorbing? Listen to me. I saw the licentious days of Regency.

I was like you, then, in poverty; I have begged my bread; but for all that, I am now a centenarian with a couple of years to spare, and a millionaire to boot. Misery was the making of me, ignorance has made me learned. I will tell you in a few words the great secret of human life. By two instinctive processes man exhausts the springs of life within him. Two verbs cover all the forms which these two causes of death may take – To Will and To have your Will. Between these two limits of human activity the wise have discovered an intermediate formula, to which I owe my good fortune and long life. To Will consumes us, and To have our Will destroys us, but To Know steeps our feeble organisms in perpetual calm. In me Thought has destroyed Will, so that Power is relegated to the ordinary functions of my economy. In a word, it is not in the heart which can be broken, or in the senses that become deadened, but it is in the brain that cannot waste away and survives everything else, that I have set my life. Moderation has kept mind and body unruffled. Yet, I have seen the whole world. I have learned all languages, lived after every manner. I have lent a Chinaman money, taking his father's corpse as a pledge, slept in an Arab's tent on the security of his bare word, signed contracts in every capital of Europe, and left my gold without hesitation in savage wigwams. I have attained everything, because I have known how to despise all things.

"My one ambition has been to see. Is not Sight in a manner Insight? And to have knowledge or insight, is not that to have instinctive possession? To be able to discover the very substance

of fact and to unite its essence to our essence? Of material possession what abides with you but an idea? Think, then, how glorious must be the life of a man who can stamp all realities upon his thought, place the springs of happiness within himself, and draw thence uncounted pleasures in idea, unspoiled by earthly stains. Thought is a key to all treasures; the miser's gains are ours without his cares. Thus I have soared above this world, where my enjoyments have been intellectual joys. I have reveled in the contemplation of seas, peoples, forests, and mountains! I have seen all things, calmly, and without weariness; I have set my desires on nothing; I have waited in expectation of everything. I have walked to and fro in the world as in a garden round about my own dwelling. Troubles, loves, ambitions, losses, and sorrows, as men call them, are for me ideas, which I transmute into waking dreams; I express and transpose instead of feeling them; instead of permitting them to prey upon my life, I dramatize and expand them; I divert myself with them as if they were romances which I could read by the power of vision within me. As I have never overtaxed my constitution, I still enjoy robust health; and as my mind is endowed with all the force that I have not wasted, this head of mine is even better furnished than my galleries. The true millions lie here," he said, striking his forehead. "I spend delicious days in communings with the past; I summon before me whole countries, places, extents of sea, the fair faces of history. In my imaginary seraglio I have all the women that I have never possessed. Your wars and revolutions come up before me for

judgment. What is a feverish fugitive admiration for some more or less brightly colored piece of flesh and blood; some more or less rounded human form; what are all the disasters that wait on your erratic whims, compared with the magnificent power of conjuring up the whole world within your soul, compared with the immeasurable joys of movement, unstrangled by the cords of time, unclogged by the fetters of space; the joys of beholding all things, of comprehending all things, of leaning over the parapet of the world to question the other spheres, to hearken to the voice of God? There," he burst out, vehemently, "there are To Will and To have your Will, both together," he pointed to the bit of shagreen; "there are your social ideas, your immoderate desires, your excesses, your pleasures that end in death, your sorrows that quicken the pace of life, for pain is perhaps but a violent pleasure. Who could determine the point where pleasure becomes pain, where pain is still a pleasure? Is not the utmost brightness of the ideal world soothing to us, while the lightest shadows of the physical world annoy? Is not knowledge the secret of wisdom? And what is folly but a riotous expenditure of Will or Power?"

"Very good then, a life of riotous excess for me!" said the stranger, pouncing upon the piece of shagreen.

"Young man, beware!" cried the other with incredible vehemence.

"I had resolved my existence into thought and study," the stranger replied; "and yet they have not even supported me. I am not to be gulled by a sermon worthy of Swedenborg, nor by your

Oriental amulet, nor yet by your charitable endeavors to keep me in a world wherein existence is no longer possible for me… Let me see now," he added, clutching the talisman convulsively, as he looked at the old man, "I wish for a royal banquet, a carouse worthy of this century, which, it is said, has brought everything to perfection! Let me have young boon companions, witty, unwarped by prejudice, merry to the verge of madness! Let one wine succeed another, each more biting and perfumed than the last, and strong enough to bring about three days of delirium! Passionate women's forms should grace that night! I would be borne away to unknown regions beyond the confines of this world, by the car and four-winged steed of a frantic and uproarious orgy. Let us ascend to the skies, or plunge ourselves in the mire. I do not know if one soars or sinks at such moments, and I do not care! Next, I bid this enigmatical power to concentrate all delights for me in one single joy. Yes, I must comprehend every pleasure of earth and heaven in the final embrace that is to kill me. Therefore, after the wine, I wish to hold high festival to Priapus, with songs that might rouse the dead, and kisses without end; the sound of them should pass like the crackling of flame through Paris, should revive the heat of youth and passion in husband and wife, even in hearts of seventy years."

A laugh burst from the little old man. It rang in the young man's ears like an echo from hell; and tyrannously cut him short. He said no more.

"Do you imagine that my floors are going to open suddenly,

so that luxuriously-appointed tables may rise through them, and guests from another world? No, no, young madcap. You have entered into the compact now, and there is an end of it. Henceforward, your wishes will be accurately fulfilled, but at the expense of your life. The compass of your days, visible in that skin, will contract according to the strength and number of your desires, from the least to the most extravagant. The Brahmin from whom I had this skin once explained to me that it would bring about a mysterious connection between the fortunes and wishes of its possessor. Your first wish is a vulgar one, which I could fulfil, but I leave that to the issues of your new existence. After all, you were wishing to die; very well, your suicide is only put off for a time."

The stranger was surprised and irritated that this peculiar old man persisted in not taking him seriously. A half philanthropic intention peeped so clearly forth from his last jesting observation, that he exclaimed:

"I shall soon see, sir, if any change comes over my fortunes in the time it will take to cross the width of the quay. But I should like us to be quits for such a momentous service; that is, if you are not laughing at an unlucky wretch, so I wish that you may fall in love with an opera-dancer. You would understand the pleasures of intemperance then, and might perhaps grow lavish of the wealth that you have husbanded so philosophically."

He went out without heeding the old man's heavy sigh, went back through the galleries and down the staircase, followed by

the stout assistant who vainly tried to light his passage; he fled with the haste of a robber caught in the act. Blinded by a kind of delirium, he did not even notice the unexpected flexibility of the piece of shagreen, which coiled itself up, pliant as a glove in his excited fingers, till it would go into the pocket of his coat, where he mechanically thrust it. As he rushed out of the door into the street, he ran up against three young men who were passing arm-in-arm.

"Brute!"

"Idiot!"

Such were the gratifying expressions exchanged between them.

"Why, it is Raphael!"

"Good! we were looking for you."

"What! it is you, then?"

These three friendly exclamations quickly followed the insults, as the light of a street lamp, flickering in the wind, fell upon the astonished faces of the group.

"My dear fellow, you must come with us!" said the young man that Raphael had all but knocked down.

"What is all this about?"

"Come along, and I will tell you the history of it as we go."

By fair means or foul, Raphael must go along with his friends towards the Pont des Arts; they surrounded him, and linked him by the arm among their merry band.

"We have been after you for about a week," the speaker

went on. "At your respectable hotel *de Saint Quentin*, where, by the way, the sign with the alternate black and red letters cannot be removed, and hangs out just as it did in the time of Jean Jacques, that Leonarda of yours told us that you were off into the country. For all that, we certainly did not look like duns, creditors, sheriff's officers, or the like. But no matter! Rastignac had seen you the evening before at the Bouffons; we took courage again, and made it a point of honor to find out whether you were roosting in a tree in the Champs-Elysees, or in one of those philanthropic abodes where the beggars sleep on a twopenny rope, or if, more luckily, you were bivouacking in some boudoir or other. We could not find you anywhere. Your name was not in the jailers' registers at the St. Pelagie nor at La Force! Government departments, cafes, libraries, lists of prefects' names, newspaper offices, restaurants, greenrooms – to cut it short, every lurking place in Paris, good or bad, has been explored in the most expert manner. We bewailed the loss of a man endowed with such genius, that one might look to find him at Court or in the common jails. We talked of canonizing you as a hero of July, and, upon my word, we regretted you!"

As he spoke, the friends were crossing the Pont des Arts. Without listening to them, Raphael looked at the Seine, at the clamoring waves that reflected the lights of Paris. Above that river, in which but now he had thought to fling himself, the old man's prediction had been fulfilled, the hour of his death had been already put back by fate.

"We really regretted you," said his friend, still pursuing his theme. "It was a question of a plan in which we included you as a superior person, that is to say, somebody who can put himself above other people. The constitutional thimble-rig is carried on to-day, dear boy, more seriously than ever. The infamous monarchy, displaced by the heroism of the people, was a sort of drab, you could laugh and revel with her; but La Patrie is a shrewish and virtuous wife, and willy-nilly you must take her prescribed endearments. Then besides, as you know, authority passed over from the Tuileries to the journalists, at the time when the Budget changed its quarters and went from the Faubourg Saint-Germain to the Chaussee de Antin. But this you may not know perhaps. The Government, that is, the aristocracy of lawyers and bankers who represent the country to-day, just as the priests used to do in the time of the monarchy, has felt the necessity of mystifying the worthy people of France with a few new words and old ideas, like philosophers of every school, and all strong intellects ever since time began. So now Royalist-national ideas must be inculcated, by proving to us that it is far better to pay twelve million francs, thirty-three centimes to La Patrie, represented by Messieurs Such-and-Such, than to pay eleven hundred million francs, nine centimes to a king who used to say *I* instead of *we*. In a word, a journal, with two or three hundred thousand francs, good, at the back of it, has just been started, with a view to making an opposition paper to content the discontented, without prejudice to the national government

of the citizen-king. We scoff at liberty as at despotism now, and at religion or incredulity quite impartially. And since, for us, 'our country' means a capital where ideas circulate and are sold at so much a line, a succulent dinner every day, and the play at frequent intervals, where profligate women swarm, where suppers last on into the next day, and light loves are hired by the hour like cabs; and since Paris will always be the most adorable of all countries, the country of joy, liberty, wit, pretty women, *mauvais sujets*, and good wine; where the truncheon of authority never makes itself disagreeably felt, because one is so close to those who wield it, – we, therefore, sectaries of the god Mephistopheles, have engaged to whitewash the public mind, to give fresh costumes to the actors, to put a new plank or two in the government booth, to doctor doctrinaires, and warm up old Republicans, to touch up the Bonapartists a bit, and revictual the Centre; provided that we are allowed to laugh *in petto* at both kings and peoples, to think one thing in the morning and another at night, and to lead a merry life *a la* Panurge, or to recline upon soft cushions, *more orientali*.

"The sceptre of this burlesque and macaronic kingdom," he went on, "we have reserved for you; so we are taking you straightway to a dinner given by the founder of the said newspaper, a retired banker, who, at a loss to know what to do with his money, is going to buy some brains with it. You will be welcomed as a brother, we shall hail you as king of these free lances who will undertake anything; whose perspicacity discovers the intentions of Austria, England, or Russia before

either Russia, Austria or England have formed any. Yes, we will invest you with the sovereignty of those puissant intellects which give to the world its Mirabeaus, Talleyrands, Pitts, and Metternichs – all the clever Crispins who treat the destinies of a kingdom as gamblers' stakes, just as ordinary men play dominoes for *kirschenwasser*. We have given you out to be the most undaunted champion who ever wrestled in a drinking-bout at close quarters with the monster called Carousal, whom all bold spirits wish to try a fall with; we have gone so far as to say that you have never yet been worsted. I hope you will not make liars of us. Taillefer, our amphitryon, has undertaken to surpass the circumscribed saturnalias of the petty modern Lucullus. He is rich enough to infuse pomp into trifles, and style and charm into dissipation… Are you listening, Raphael?" asked the orator, interrupting himself.

"Yes," answered the young man, less surprised by the accomplishment of his wishes than by the natural manner in which the events had come about.

He could not bring himself to believe in magic, but he marveled at the accidents of human fate.

"Yes, you say, just as if you were thinking of your grandfather's demise," remarked one of his neighbors.

"Ah!" cried Raphael, "I was thinking, my friends, that we are in a fair way to become very great scoundrels," and there was an ingenuousness in his tones that set these writers, the hope of young France, in a roar. "So far our blasphemies have been

uttered over our cups; we have passed our judgments on life while drunk, and taken men and affairs in an after-dinner frame of mind. We were innocent of action; we were bold in words. But now we are to be branded with the hot iron of politics; we are going to enter the convict's prison and to drop our illusions. Although one has no belief left, except in the devil, one may regret the paradise of one's youth and the age of innocence, when we devoutly offered the tip of our tongue to some good priest for the consecrated wafer of the sacrament. Ah, my good friends, our first peccadilloes gave us so much pleasure because the consequent remorse set them off and lent a keen relish to them; but nowadays – "

"Oh! now," said the first speaker, "there is still left – "

"What?" asked another.

"Crime – "

"There is a word as high as the gallows and deeper than the Seine," said Raphael.

"Oh, you don't understand me; I mean political crime. Since this morning, a conspirator's life is the only one I covet. I don't know that the fancy will last over to-morrow, but to-night at least my gorge rises at the anaemic life of our civilization and its railroad evenness. I am seized with a passion for the miseries of retreat from Moscow, for the excitements of the Red Corsair, or for a smuggler's life. I should like to go to Botany Bay, as we have no Chartreaux left us here in France; it is a sort of infirmary reserved for little Lord Byrons who, having crumpled up their

lives like a serviette after dinner, have nothing left to do but to set their country ablaze, blow their own brains out, plot for a republic or clamor for a war – "

"Emile," Raphael's neighbor called eagerly to the speaker, "on my honor, but for the revolution of July I would have taken orders, and gone off down into the country somewhere to lead the life of an animal, and – "

"And you would have read your breviary through every day."

"Yes."

"You are a coxcomb!"

"Why, we read the newspapers as it is!"

"Not bad that, for a journalist! But hold your tongue, we are going through a crowd of subscribers. Journalism, look you, is the religion of modern society, and has even gone a little further."

"What do you mean?"

"Its pontiffs are not obliged to believe in it any more than the people are."

Chatting thus, like good fellows who have known their *De Viris illustribus* for years past, they reached a mansion in the Rue Joubert.

Emile was a journalist who had acquired more reputation by dint of doing nothing than others had derived from their achievements. A bold, caustic, and powerful critic, he possessed all the qualities that his defects permitted. An outspoken giber, he made numberless epigrams on a friend to his face; but would defend him, if absent, with courage and loyalty. He laughed

at everything, even at his own career. Always impecunious, he yet lived, like all men of his calibre, plunged in unspeakable indolence. He would fling some word containing volumes in the teeth of folk who could not put a syllable of sense into their books. He lavished promises that he never fulfilled; he made a pillow of his luck and reputation, on which he slept, and ran the risk of waking up to old age in a workhouse. A steadfast friend to the gallows foot, a cynical swaggerer with a child's simplicity, a worker only from necessity or caprice.

"In the language of Maitre Alcofribas, we are about to make a famous *troncon de chiere lie*," he remarked to Raphael as he pointed out the flower-stands that made a perfumed forest of the staircase.

"I like a vestibule to be well warmed and richly carpeted," Raphael said. "Luxury in the peristyle is not common in France. I feel as if life had begun anew here."

"And up above we are going to drink and make merry once more, my dear Raphael. Ah! yes," he went on, "and I hope we are going to come off conquerors, too, and walk over everybody else's head."

As he spoke, he jestingly pointed to the guests. They were entering a large room which shone with gilding and lights, and there all the younger men of note in Paris welcomed them. Here was one who had just revealed fresh powers, his first picture vied with the glories of Imperial art. There, another, who but yesterday had launched forth a volume, an acrid book filled with

a sort of literary arrogance, which opened up new ways to the modern school. A sculptor, not far away, with vigorous power visible in his rough features, was chatting with one of those unenthusiastic scoffers who can either see excellence anywhere or nowhere, as it happens. Here, the cleverest of our caricaturists, with mischievous eyes and bitter tongue, lay in wait for epigrams to translate into pencil strokes; there, stood the young and audacious writer, who distilled the quintessence of political ideas better than any other man, or compressed the work of some prolific writer as he held him up to ridicule; he was talking with the poet whose works would have eclipsed all the writings of the time if his ability had been as strenuous as his hatreds. Both were trying not to say the truth while they kept clear of lies, as they exchanged flattering speeches. A famous musician administered soothing consolation in a rallying fashion, to a young politician who had just fallen quite unhurt, from his rostrum. Young writers who lacked style stood beside other young writers who lacked ideas, and authors of poetical prose by prosaic poets.

At the sight of all these incomplete beings, a simple Saint Simonian, ingenuous enough to believe in his own doctrine, charitably paired them off, designing, no doubt, to convert them into monks of his order. A few men of science mingled in the conversation, like nitrogen in the atmosphere, and several *vaudevillistes* shed rays like the sparking diamonds that give neither light nor heat. A few paradox-mongers, laughing up their sleeves at any folk who embraced their likes or dislikes in men or

affairs, had already begun a two-edged policy, conspiring against all systems, without committing themselves to any side. Then there was the self-appointed critic who admires nothing, and will blow his nose in the middle of a *cavatina* at the Bouffons, who applauds before any one else begins, and contradicts every one who says what he himself was about to say; he was there giving out the sayings of wittier men for his own. Of all the assembled guests, a future lay before some five; ten or so should acquire a fleeting renown; as for the rest, like all mediocrities, they might apply to themselves the famous falsehood of Louis XVIII., Union and oblivion.

The anxious jocularity of a man who is expending two thousand crowns sat on their host. His eyes turned impatiently towards the door from time to time, seeking one of his guests who kept him waiting. Very soon a stout little person appeared, who was greeted by a complimentary murmur; it was the notary who had invented the newspaper that very morning. A valet-de-chambre in black opened the doors of a vast dining-room, whither every one went without ceremony, and took his place at an enormous table.

Raphael took a last look round the room before he left it. His wish had been realized to the full. The rooms were adorned with silk and gold. Countless wax tapers set in handsome candelabra lit up the slightest details of gilded friezes, the delicate bronze sculpture, and the splendid colors of the furniture. The sweet scent of rare flowers, set in stands tastefully made of bamboo,

filled the air. Everything, even the curtains, was pervaded by elegance without pretension, and there was a certain imaginative charm about it all which acted like a spell on the mind of a needy man.

"An income of a hundred thousand livres a year is a very nice beginning of the catechism, and a wonderful assistance to putting morality into our actions," he said, sighing. "Truly my sort of virtue can scarcely go afoot, and vice means, to my thinking, a garret, a threadbare coat, a gray hat in winter time, and sums owing to the porter… I should like to live in the lap of luxury a year, or six months, no matter! And then afterwards, die. I should have known, exhausted, and consumed a thousand lives, at any rate."

"Why, you are taking the tone of a stockbroker in good luck," said Emile, who overheard him. "Pooh! your riches would be a burden to you as soon as you found that they would spoil your chances of coming out above the rest of us. Hasn't the artist always kept the balance true between the poverty of riches and the riches of poverty? And isn't struggle a necessity to some of us? Look out for your digestion, and only look," he added, with a mock-heroic gesture, "at the majestic, thrice holy, and edifying appearance of this amiable capitalist's dining-room. That man has in reality only made his money for our benefit. Isn't he a kind of sponge of the polyp order, overlooked by naturalists, which should be carefully squeezed before he is left for his heirs to feed upon? There is style, isn't there, about those bas-reliefs that

adorn the walls? And the lustres, and the pictures, what luxury well carried out! If one may believe those who envy him, or who know, or think they know, the origins of his life, then this man got rid of a German and some others – his best friend for one, and the mother of that friend, during the Revolution. Could you house crimes under the venerable Taillefer's silvering locks? He looks to me a very worthy man. Only see how the silver sparkles, and is every glittering ray like a stab of a dagger to him?.. Let us go in, one might as well believe in Mahomet. If common report speak truth, here are thirty men of talent, and good fellows too, prepared to dine off the flesh and blood of a whole family;… and here are we ourselves, a pair of youngsters full of open-hearted enthusiasm, and we shall be partakers in his guilt. I have a mind to ask our capitalist whether he is a respectable character…"

"No, not now," cried Raphael, "but when he is dead drunk, we shall have had our dinner then."

The two friends sat down laughing. First of all, by a glance more rapid than a word, each paid his tribute of admiration to the splendid general effect of the long table, white as a bank of freshly-fallen snow, with its symmetrical line of covers, crowned with their pale golden rolls of bread. Rainbow colors gleamed in the starry rays of light reflected by the glass; the lights of the tapers crossed and recrossed each other indefinitely; the dishes covered with their silver domes whetted both appetite and curiosity.

Few words were spoken. Neighbors exchanged glances as the

Maderia circulated. Then the first course appeared in all its glory; it would have done honor to the late Cambaceres, Brillat-Savarin would have celebrated it. The wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy, white and red, were royally lavished. This first part of the banquet might been compared in every way to a rendering of some classical tragedy. The second act grew a trifle noisier. Every guest had had a fair amount to drink, and had tried various crus at this pleasure, so that as the remains of the magnificent first course were removed, tumultuous discussions began; a pale brow here and there began to flush, sundry noses took a purpler hue, faces lit up, and eyes sparkled.

While intoxication was only dawning, the conversation did not overstep the bounds of civility; but banter and bon mots slipped by degrees from every tongue; and then slander began to rear its little snake's heard, and spoke in dulcet tones; a few shrewd ones here and there gave heed to it, hoping to keep their heads. So the second course found their minds somewhat heated. Every one ate as he spoke, spoke while he ate, and drank without heeding the quantity of the liquor, the wine was so biting, the bouquet so fragrant, the example around so infectious. Taillefer made a point of stimulating his guests, and plied them with the formidable wines of the Rhone, with fierce Tokay, and heady old Roussillon.

The champagne, impatiently expected and lavishly poured out, was a scourge of fiery sparks to these men; released like post-horses from some mail-coach by a relay; they let their spirits gallop away into the wilds of argument to which no one listened,

began to tell stories which had no auditors, and repeatedly asked questions to which no answer was made. Only the loud voice of wassail could be heard, a voice made up of a hundred confused clamors, which rose and grew like a crescendo of Rossini's. Insidious toasts, swagger, and challenges followed.

Each renounced any pride in his own intellectual capacity, in order to vindicate that of hogsheads, casks, and vats; and each made noise enough for two. A time came when the footmen smiled, while their masters all talked at once. A philosopher would have been interested, doubtless, by the singularity of the thoughts expressed, a politician would have been amazed by the incongruity of the methods discussed in the melee of words or doubtfully luminous paradoxes, where truths, grotesquely caparisoned, met in conflict across the uproar of brawling judgments, of arbitrary decisions and folly, much as bullets, shells, and grapeshot are hurled across a battlefield.

It was at once a volume and a picture. Every philosophy, religion, and moral code differing so greatly in every latitude, every government, every great achievement of the human intellect, fell before a scythe as long as Time's own; and you might have found it hard to decide whether it was wielded by Gravity intoxicated, or by Inebriation grown sober and clear-sighted. Borne away by a kind of tempest, their minds, like the sea raging against the cliffs, seemed ready to shake the laws which confine the ebb and flow of civilization; unconsciously fulfilling the will of God, who has suffered evil and good to

abide in nature, and reserved the secret of their continual strife to Himself. A frantic travesty of debate ensued, a Walpurgis-revel of intellects. Between the dreary jests of these children of the Revolution over the inauguration of a newspaper, and the talk of the joyous gossips at Gargantua's birth, stretched the gulf that divides the nineteenth century from the sixteenth. Laughingly they had begun the work of destruction, and our journalists laughed amid the ruins.

"What is the name of that young man over there?" said the notary, indicating Raphael. "I thought I heard some one call him Valentin."

"What stuff is this?" said Emile, laughing; "plain Valentin, say you? Raphael DE Valentin, if you please. We bear an eagle or, on a field sable, with a silver crown, beak and claws gules, and a fine motto: NON CECIDIT ANIMUS. We are no foundling child, but a descendant of the Emperor Valens, of the stock of the Valentinois, founders of the cities of Valence in France, and Valencia in Spain, rightful heirs to the Empire of the East. If we suffer Mahmoud on the throne of Byzantium, it is out of pure condescension, and for lack of funds and soldiers."

With a fork flourished above Raphael's head, Emile outlined a crown upon it. The notary bethought himself a moment, but soon fell to drinking again, with a gesture peculiar to himself; it was quite impossible, it seemed to say to secure in his clientele the cities of Valence and Byzantium, the Emperor Valens, Mahmoud, and the house of Valentinois.

"Should not the destruction of those ant-hills, Babylon, Tyre, Carthage, and Venice, each crushed beneath the foot of a passing giant, serve as a warning to man, vouchsafed by some mocking power?" said Claude Vignon, who must play the Bossuet, as a sort of purchased slave, at the rate of fivepence a line.

"Perhaps Moses, Sylla, Louis XI., Richelieu, Robespierre, and Napoleon were but the same man who crosses our civilizations now and again, like a comet across the sky," said a disciple of Ballanche.

"Why try to fathom the designs of Providence?" said Canalis, maker of ballads.

"Come, now," said the man who set up for a critic, "there is nothing more elastic in the world than your Providence."

"Well, sir, Louis XIV. sacrificed more lives over digging the foundations of the Maintenon's aqueducts, than the Convention expended in order to assess the taxes justly, to make one law for everybody, and one nation of France, and to establish the rule of equal inheritance," said Massol, whom the lack of a syllable before his name had made a Republican.

"Are you going to leave our heads on our shoulders?" asked Moreau (of the Oise), a substantial farmer. "You, sir, who took blood for wine just now?"

"Where is the use? Aren't the principles of social order worth some sacrifices, sir?"

"Hi! Bixiou! What's-his-name, the Republican, considers a landowner's head a sacrifice!" said a young man to his neighbor.

"Men and events count for nothing," said the Republican, following out his theory in spite of hiccoughs; "in politics, as in philosophy, there are only principles and ideas."

"What an abomination! Then you would ruthlessly put your friends to death for a shibboleth?"

"Eh, sir! the man who feels compunction is your thorough scoundrel, for he has some notion of virtue; while Peter the Great and the Duke of Alva were embodied systems, and the pirate Monbard an organization."

"But can't society rid itself of your systems and organizations?" said Canalis.

"Oh, granted!" cried the Republican.

"That stupid Republic of yours makes me feel queasy. We sha'n't be able to carve a capon in peace, because we shall find the agrarian law inside it."

"Ah, my little Brutus, stuffed with truffles, your principles are all right enough. But you are like my valet, the rogue is so frightfully possessed with a mania for property that if I left him to clean my clothes after his fashion, he would soon clean me out."

"Crass idiots!" replied the Republican, "you are for setting a nation straight with toothpicks. To your way of thinking, justice is more dangerous than thieves."

"Oh, dear!" cried the attorney Deroches.

"Aren't they a bore with their politics!" said the notary Cardot. "Shut up. That's enough of it. There is no knowledge nor virtue worth shedding a drop of blood for. If Truth were brought into

liquidation, we might find her insolvent."

"It would be much less trouble, no doubt, to amuse ourselves with evil, rather than dispute about good. Moreover, I would give all the speeches made for forty years past at the Tribune for a trout, for one of Perrault's tales or Charlet's sketches."

"Quite right!.. Hand me the asparagus. Because, after all, liberty begets anarchy, anarchy leads to despotism, and despotism back again to liberty. Millions have died without securing a triumph for any one system. Is not that the vicious circle in which the whole moral world revolves? Man believes that he has reached perfection, when in fact he has but rearranged matters."

"Oh! oh!" cried Cursy, the *vaudevilliste*; "in that case, gentlemen, here's to Charles X., the father of liberty."

"Why not?" asked Emile. "When law becomes despotic, morals are relaxed, and vice versa.

"Let us drink to the imbecility of authority, which gives us such an authority over imbeciles!" said the good banker.

"Napoleon left us glory, at any rate, my good friend!" exclaimed a naval officer who had never left Brest.

"Glory is a poor bargain; you buy it dear, and it will not keep. Does not the egotism of the great take the form of glory, just as for nobodies it is their own well-being?"

"You are very fortunate, sir – "

"The first inventor of ditches must have been a weakling, for society is only useful to the puny. The savage and the

philosopher, at either extreme of the moral scale, hold property in equal horror."

"All very fine!" said Cardot; "but if there were no property, there would be no documents to draw up."

"These green peas are excessively delicious!"

"And the *cure* was found dead in his bed in the morning…"

"Who is talking about death? Pray don't trifle, I have an uncle."

"Could you bear his loss with resignation?"

"No question."

"Gentlemen, listen to me! *How to kill an uncle*. Silence! (Cries of "Hush! hush!") In the first place, take an uncle, large and stout, seventy years old at least, they are the best uncles. (Sensation.) Get him to eat a pate de foie gras, any pretext will do."

"Ah, but my uncle is a thin, tall man, and very niggardly and abstemious."

"That sort of uncle is a monster; he misappropriates existence."

"Then," the speaker on uncles went on, "tell him, while he is digesting it, that his banker has failed."

"How if he bears up?"

"Let loose a pretty girl on him."

"And if – ?" asked the other, with a shake of the head.

"Then he wouldn't be an uncle – an uncle is a gay dog by nature."

"Malibran has lost two notes in her voice."

"No, sir, she has not."

"Yes, sir, she has."

"Oh, ho! No and yes, is not that the sum-up of all religious, political, or literary dissertations? Man is a clown dancing on the edge of an abyss."

"You would make out that I am a fool."

"On the contrary, you cannot make me out."

"Education, there's a pretty piece of tomfoolery. M. Heineffettermach estimates the number of printed volumes at more than a thousand millions; and a man cannot read more than a hundred and fifty thousand in his lifetime. So, just tell me what that word *education* means. For some it consists in knowing the name of Alexander's horse, of the dog Berecillo, of the Seigneur d'Accords, and in ignorance of the man to whom we owe the discovery of rafting and the manufacture of porcelain. For others it is the knowledge how to burn a will and live respected, be looked up to and popular, instead of stealing a watch with half-a-dozen aggravating circumstances, after a previous conviction, and so perishing, hated and dishonored, in the Place de Greve."

"Will Nathan's work live?"

"He has very clever collaborators, sir."

"Or Canalis?"

"He is a great man; let us say no more about him."

"You are all drunk!"

"The consequence of a Constitution is the immediate stultification of intellects. Art, science, public works, everything,

is consumed by a horribly egoistic feeling, the leprosy of the time. Three hundred of your bourgeoisie, set down on benches, will only think of planting poplars. Tyranny does great things lawlessly, while Liberty will scarcely trouble herself to do petty ones lawfully."

"Your reciprocal instruction will turn out counters in human flesh," broke in an Absolutist. "All individuality will disappear in a people brought to a dead level by education."

"For all that, is not the aim of society to secure happiness to each member of it?" asked the Saint-Simonian.

"If you had an income of fifty thousand livres, you would not think much about the people. If you are smitten with a tender passion for the race, go to Madagascar; there you will find a nice little nation all ready to Saint-Simonize, classify, and cork up in your phials, but here every one fits into his niche like a peg in a hole. A porter is a porter, and a blockhead is a fool, without a college of fathers to promote them to those positions."

"You are a Carlist."

"And why not? Despotism pleases me; it implies a certain contempt for the human race. I have no animosity against kings, they are so amusing. Is it nothing to sit enthroned in a room, at a distance of thirty million leagues from the sun?"

"Let us once more take a broad view of civilization," said the man of learning who, for the benefit of the inattentive sculptor, had opened a discussion on primitive society and autochthonous races. "The vigor of a nation in its origin was in a way physical,

unitary, and crude; then as aggregations increased, government advanced by a decomposition of the primitive rule, more or less skilfully managed. For example, in remote ages national strength lay in theocracy, the priest held both sword and censer; a little later there were two priests, the pontiff and the king. To-day our society, the latest word of civilization, has distributed power according to the number of combinations, and we come to the forces called business, thought, money, and eloquence. Authority thus divided is steadily approaching a social dissolution, with interest as its one opposing barrier. We depend no longer on either religion or physical force, but upon intellect. Can a book replace the sword? Can discussion be a substitute for action? That is the question."

"Intellect has made an end of everything," cried the Carlist. "Come now! Absolute freedom has brought about national suicides; their triumph left them as listless as an English millionaire."

"Won't you tell us something new? You have made fun of authority of all sorts to-day, which is every bit as vulgar as denying the existence of God. So you have no belief left, and the century is like an old Sultan worn out by debauchery! Your Byron, in short, sings of crime and its emotions in a final despair of poetry."

"Don't you know," replied Bianchon, quite drunk by this time, "that a dose of phosphorus more or less makes the man of genius or the scoundrel, a clever man or an idiot, a virtuous person or

a criminal?"

"Can any one treat of virtue thus?" cried Cursy. "Virtue, the subject of every drama at the theatre, the denoument of every play, the foundation of every court of law…"

"Be quiet, you ass. You are an Achilles for virtue, without his heel," said Bixiou.

"Some drink!"

"What will you bet that I will drink a bottle of champagne like a flash, at one pull?"

"What a flash of wit!"

"Drunk as lords," muttered a young man gravely, trying to give some wine to his waistcoat.

"Yes, sir; real government is the art of ruling by public opinion."

"Opinion? That is the most vicious jade of all. According to you moralists and politicians, the laws you set up are always to go before those of nature, and opinion before conscience. You are right and wrong both. Suppose society bestows down pillows on us, that benefit is made up for by the gout; and justice is likewise tempered by red-tape, and colds accompany cashmere shawls."

"Wretch!" Emile broke in upon the misanthrope, "how can you slander civilization here at table, up to the eyes in wines and exquisite dishes? Eat away at that roebuck with the gilded horns and feet, and do not carp at your mother…"

"Is it any fault of mine if Catholicism puts a million deities in a sack of flour, that Republics will end in a Napoleon, that

monarchy dwells between the assassination of Henry IV. and the trial of Louis XVI., and Liberalism produces Lafayettes?"

"Didn't you embrace him in July?"

"No."

"Then hold your tongue, you sceptic."

"Sceptics are the most conscientious of men."

"They have no conscience."

"What are you saying? They have two apiece at least!"

"So you want to discount heaven, a thoroughly commercial notion. Ancient religions were but the unchecked development of physical pleasure, but we have developed a soul and expectations; some advance has been made."

"What can you expect, my friends, of a century filled with politics to repletion?" asked Nathan. "What befell *The History of the King of Bohemia and his Seven Castles*, a most entrancing conception?.."

"I say," the would-be critic cried down the whole length of the table. "The phrases might have been drawn at hap-hazard from a hat, 'twas a work written 'down to Charenton.'"

"You are a fool!"

"And you are a rogue!"

"Oh! oh!"

"Ah! ah!"

"They are going to fight."

"No, they aren't."

"You will find me to-morrow, sir."

"This very moment," Nathan answered.

"Come, come, you pair of fire-eaters!"

"You are another!" said the prime mover in the quarrel.

"Ah, I can't stand upright, perhaps?" asked the pugnacious Nathan, straightening himself up like a stag-beetle about to fly.

He stared stupidly round the table, then, completely exhausted by the effort, sank back into his chair, and mutely hung his head.

"Would it not have been nice," the critic said to his neighbor, "to fight about a book I have neither read nor seen?"

"Emile, look out for your coat; your neighbor is growing pale," said Bixiou.

"Kant? Yet another ball flung out for fools to sport with, sir! Materialism and spiritualism are a fine pair of battledores with which charlatans in long gowns keep a shuttlecock a-going. Suppose that God is everywhere, as Spinoza says, or that all things proceed from God, as says St. Paul… the nincompoops, the door shuts or opens, but isn't the movement the same? Does the fowl come from the egg, or the egg from the fowl?.. Just hand me some duck… and there, you have all science."

"Simpleton!" cried the man of science, "your problem is settled by fact!"

"What fact?"

"Professors' chairs were not made for philosophy, but philosophy for the professors' chairs. Put on a pair of spectacles and read the budget."

"Thieves!"

"Nincompoops!"

"Knaves!"

"Gulls!"

"Where but in Paris will you find such a ready and rapid exchange of thought?" cried Bixiou in a deep, bass voice.

"Bixiou! Act a classical farce for us! Come now."

"Would you like me to depict the nineteenth century?"

"Silence."

"Pay attention."

"Clap a muffle on your trumpets."

"Shut up, you Turk!"

"Give him some wine, and let that fellow keep quiet."

"Now, then, Bixiou!"

The artist buttoned his black coat to the collar, put on yellow gloves, and began to burlesque the *Revue des Deux Mondes* by acting a squinting old lady; but the uproar drowned his voice, and no one heard a word of the satire. Still, if he did not catch the spirit of the century, he represented the *Revue* at any rate, for his own intentions were not very clear to him.

Dessert was served as if by magic. A huge epergne of gilded bronze from Thomire's studio overshadowed the table. Tall statuettes, which a celebrated artist had endued with ideal beauty according to conventional European notions, sustained and carried pyramids of strawberries, pines, fresh dates, golden grapes, clear-skinned peaches, oranges brought from Setubal by steamer, pomegranates, Chinese fruit; in short, all the

surprises of luxury, miracles of confectionery, the most tempting dainties, and choicest delicacies. The coloring of this epicurean work of art was enhanced by the splendors of porcelain, by sparkling outlines of gold, by the chasing of the vases. Poussin's landscapes, copied on Sevres ware, were crowned with graceful fringes of moss, green, translucent, and fragile as ocean weeds.

The revenue of a German prince would not have defrayed the cost of this arrogant display. Silver and mother-of-pearl, gold and crystal, were lavished afresh in new forms; but scarcely a vague idea of this almost Oriental fairyland penetrated eyes now heavy with wine, or crossed the delirium of intoxication. The fire and fragrance of the wines acted like potent philters and magical fumes, producing a kind of mirage in the brain, binding feet, and weighing down hands. The clamor increased. Words were no longer distinct, glasses flew in pieces, senseless peals of laughter broke out. Cursy snatched up a horn and struck up a flourish on it. It acted like a signal given by the devil. Yells, hisses, songs, cries, and groans went up from the maddened crew. You might have smiled to see men, light-hearted by nature, grow tragical as Crebillon's dramas, and pensive as a sailor in a coach. Hard-headed men blabbed secrets to the inquisitive, who were long past heeding them. Saturnine faces were wreathed in smiles worthy of a pirouetting dancer. Claude Vignon shuffled about like a bear in a cage. Intimate friends began to fight.

Animal likenesses, so curiously traced by physiologists in human faces, came out in gestures and behavior. A book lay

open for a Bichat if he had repaired thither fasting and collected. The master of the house, knowing his condition, did not dare stir, but encouraged his guests' extravangances with a fixed grimacing smile, meant to be hospitable and appropriate. His large face, turning from blue and red to a purple shade terrible to see, partook of the general commotion by movements like the heaving and pitching of a brig.

"Now, did you murder them?" Emile asked him.

"Capital punishment is going to be abolished, they say, in favor of the Revolution of July," answered Taillefer, raising his eyebrows with drunken sagacity.

"Don't they rise up before you in dreams at times?" Raphael persisted.

"There's a statute of limitations," said the murderer-Croesus.

"And on his tombstone," Emile began, with a sardonic laugh, "the stonemason will carve 'Passer-by, accord a tear, in memory of one that's here!' Oh," he continued, "I would cheerfully pay a hundred sous to any mathematician who would prove the existence of hell to me by an algebraical equation."

He flung up a coin and cried:

"Heads for the existence of God!"

"Don't look!" Raphael cried, pouncing upon it. "Who knows? Suspense is so pleasant."

"Unluckily," Emile said, with burlesque melancholy, "I can see no halting-place between the unbeliever's arithmetic and the papal *Pater noster*. Pshaw! let us drink. *Trinq* was, I believe, the

oracular answer of the *dive bouteille* and the final conclusion of Pantagruel."

"We owe our arts and monuments to the *Pater noster*, and our knowledge, too, perhaps; and a still greater benefit – modern government – whereby a vast and teeming society is wondrously represented by some five hundred intellects. It neutralizes opposing forces and gives free play to *Civilization*, that Titan queen who has succeeded the ancient terrible figure of the *King*, that sham Providence, reared by man between himself and heaven. In the face of such achievements, atheism seems like a barren skeleton. What do you say?"

"I am thinking of the seas of blood shed by Catholicism." Emile replied, quite unimpressed. "It has drained our hearts and veins dry to make a mimic deluge. No matter! Every man who thinks must range himself beneath the banner of Christ, for He alone has consummated the triumph of spirit over matter; He alone has revealed to us, like a poet, an intermediate world that separates us from the Deity."

"Believest thou?" asked Raphael with an unaccountable drunken smile. "Very good; we must not commit ourselves; so we will drink the celebrated toast, *Diis ignotis*!"

And they drained the chalice filled up with science, carbonic acid gas, perfumes, poetry, and incredulity.

"If the gentlemen will go to the drawing-room, coffee is ready for them," said the major-domo.

There was scarcely one of those present whose mind was not

floundering by this time in the delights of chaos, where every spark of intelligence is quenched, and the body, set free from its tyranny, gives itself up to the frenetic joys of liberty. Some who had arrived at the apogee of intoxication were dejected, as they painfully tried to arrest a single thought which might assure them of their own existence; others, deep in the heavy morasses of indigestion, denied the possibility of movement. The noisy and the silent were oddly assorted.

For all that, when new joys were announced to them by the stentorian tones of the servant, who spoke on his master's behalf, they all rose, leaning upon, dragging or carrying one another. But on the threshold of the room the entire crew paused for a moment, motionless, as if fascinated. The intemperate pleasures of the banquet seemed to fade away at this titillating spectacle, prepared by their amphitryon to appeal to the most sensual of their instincts.

Beneath the shining wax-lights in a golden chandelier, round about a table inlaid with gilded metal, a group of women, whose eyes shone like diamonds, suddenly met the stupefied stare of the revelers. Their toilettes were splendid, but less magnificent than their beauty, which eclipsed the other marvels of this palace. A light shone from their eyes, bewitching as those of sirens, more brilliant and ardent than the blaze that streamed down upon the snowy marble, the delicately carved surfaces of bronze, and lit up the satin sheen of the tapestry. The contrasts of their attitudes and the slight movements of their heads, each differing in character

and nature of attraction, set the heart afire. It was like a thicket, where blossoms mingled with rubies, sapphires, and coral; a combination of gossamer scarves that flickered like beacon-lights; of black ribbons about snowy throats; of gorgeous turbans and demurely enticing apparel. It was a seraglio that appealed to every eye, and fulfilled every fancy. Each form posed to admiration was scarcely concealed by the folds of cashmere, and half hidden, half revealed by transparent gauze and diaphanous silk. The little slender feet were eloquent, though the fresh red lips uttered no sound.

Demure and fragile-looking girls, pictures of maidenly innocence, with a semblance of conventional unction about their heads, were there like apparitions that a breath might dissipate. Aristocratic beauties with haughty glances, languid, flexible, slender, and complaisant, bent their heads as though there were royal protectors still in the market. An English-woman seemed like a spirit of melancholy – some coy, pale, shadowy form among Ossian's mists, or a type of remorse flying from crime. The Parisienne was not wanting in all her beauty that consists in an indescribable charm; armed with her irresistible weakness, vain of her costume and her wit, pliant and hard, a heartless, passionless siren that yet can create factitious treasures of passion and counterfeit emotion.

Italians shone in the throng, serene and self-possessed in their bliss; handsome Normans, with splendid figures; women of the south, with black hair and well-shaped eyes. Lebel might have

summoned together all the fair women of Versailles, who since morning had perfected all their wiles, and now came like a troupe of Oriental women, bidden by the slave merchant to be ready to set out at dawn. They stood disconcerted and confused about the table, huddled together in a murmuring group like bees in a hive. The combination of timid embarrassment with coquettishness and a sort of expostulation was the result either of calculated effect or a spontaneous modesty. Perhaps a sentiment of which women are never utterly divested prescribed to them the cloak of modesty to heighten and enhance the charms of wantonness. So the venerable Taillefer's designs seemed on the point of collapse, for these unbridled natures were subdued from the very first by the majesty with which woman is invested. There was a murmur of admiration, which vibrated like a soft musical note. Wine had not taken love for traveling companion; instead of a violent tumult of passions, the guests thus taken by surprise, in a moment of weakness, gave themselves up to luxurious raptures of delight.

Artists obeyed the voice of poetry which constrains them, and studied with pleasure the different delicate tints of these chosen examples of beauty. Sobered by a thought perhaps due to some emanation from a bubble of carbonic acid in the champagne, a philosopher shuddered at the misfortunes which had brought these women, once perhaps worthy of the truest devotion, to this. Each one doubtless could have unfolded a cruel tragedy. Infernal tortures followed in the train of most of them, and they drew after them faithless men, broken vows, and pleasures atoned

for in wretchedness. Polite advances were made by the guests, and conversations began, as varied in character as the speakers. They broke up into groups. It might have been a fashionable drawing-room where ladies and young girls offer after dinner the assistance that coffee, liqueurs, and sugar afford to diners who are struggling in the toils of a perverse digestion. But in a little while laughter broke out, the murmur grew, and voices were raised. The saturnalia, subdued for a moment, threatened at times to renew itself. The alternations of sound and silence bore a distant resemblance to a symphony of Beethoven's.

The two friends, seated on a silken divan, were first approached by a tall, well-proportioned girl of stately bearing; her features were irregular, but her face was striking and vehement in expression, and impressed the mind by the vigor of its contrasts. Her dark hair fell in luxuriant curls, with which some hand seemed to have played havoc already, for the locks fell lightly over the splendid shoulders that thus attracted attention. The long brown curls half hid her queenly throat, though where the light fell upon it, the delicacy of its fine outlines was revealed. Her warm and vivid coloring was set off by the dead white of her complexion. Bold and ardent glances came from under the long eyelashes; the damp, red, half-open lips challenged a kiss. Her frame was strong but compliant; with a bust and arms strongly developed, as in figures drawn by the Caracci, she yet seemed active and elastic, with a panther's strength and suppleness, and in the same way the energetic grace of her figure suggested fierce

pleasures.

But though she might romp perhaps and laugh, there was something terrible in her eyes and her smile. Like a pythoness possessed by the demon, she inspired awe rather than pleasure. All changes, one after another, flashed like lightning over every mobile feature of her face. She might captivate a jaded fancy, but a young man would have feared her. She was like some colossal statue fallen from the height of a Greek temple, so grand when seen afar, too roughly hewn to be seen anear. And yet, in spite of all, her terrible beauty could have stimulated exhaustion; her voice might charm the deaf; her glances might put life into the bones of the dead; and therefore Emile was vaguely reminded of one of Shakespeare's tragedies – a wonderful maze, in which joy groans, and there is something wild even about love, and the magic of forgiveness and the warmth of happiness succeed to cruel storms of rage. She was a siren that can both kiss and devour; laugh like a devil, or weep as angels can. She could concentrate in one instant all a woman's powers of attraction in a single effort (the sighs of melancholy and the charms of maiden's shyness alone excepted), then in a moment rise in fury like a nation in revolt, and tear herself, her passion, and her lover, in pieces.

Dressed in red velvet, she trampled under her reckless feet the stray flowers fallen from other heads, and held out a salver to the two friends, with careless hands. The white arms stood out in bold relief against the velvet. Proud of her beauty; proud (who

knows?) of her corruption, she stood like a queen of pleasure, like an incarnation of enjoyment; the enjoyment that comes of squandering the accumulations of three generations; that scoffs at its progenitors, and makes merry over a corpse; that will dissolve pearls and wreck thrones, turn old men into boys, and make young men prematurely old; enjoyment only possible to giants weary of their power, tormented by reflection, or for whom strife has become a plaything.

"What is your name?" asked Raphael.

"Aquilina."

"Out of *Venice Preserved*!" exclaimed Emile.

"Yes," she answered. "Just as a pope takes a new name when he is exalted above all other men, I, too, took another name when I raised myself above women's level."

"Then have you, like your patron saint, a terrible and noble lover, a conspirator, who would die for you?" cried Emile eagerly – this gleam of poetry had aroused his interest.

"Once I had," she answered. "But I had a rival too in La Guillotine. I have worn something red about me ever since, lest any happiness should carry me away."

"Oh, if you are going to get her on to the story of those four lads of La Rochelle, she will never get to the end of it. That's enough, Aquilina. As if every woman could not bewail some lover or other, though not every one has the luck to lose him on the scaffold, as you have done. I would a great deal sooner see a lover of mine in a trench at the back of Clamart than in a rival's

arms."

All this in the gentlest and most melodious accents, and pronounced by the prettiest, gentlest, and most innocent-looking little person that a fairy wand ever drew from an enchanted eggshell. She had come up noiselessly, and they became aware of a slender, dainty figure, charmingly timid blue eyes, and white transparent brows. No ingenue among the naiads, a truant from her river spring, could have been shyer, whiter, more ingenuous than this young girl, seemingly about sixteen years old, ignorant of evil and of the storms of life, and fresh from some church in which she must have prayed the angels to call her to heaven before the time. Only in Paris are such natures as this to be found, concealing depths of depravity behind a fair mask, and the most artificial vices beneath a brow as young and fair as an opening flower.

At first the angelic promise of those soft lineaments misled the friends. Raphael and Emile took the coffee which she poured into the cups brought by Aquilina, and began to talk with her. In the eyes of the two poets she soon became transformed into some sombre allegory, of I know not what aspect of human life. She opposed to the vigorous and ardent expression of her commanding acquaintance a revelation of heartless corruption and voluptuous cruelty. Heedless enough to perpetrate a crime, hardy enough to feel no misgivings; a pitiless demon that wrings larger and kinder natures with torments that it is incapable of knowing, that simpers over a traffic in love, sheds tears over a

victim's funeral, and beams with joy over the reading of the will. A poet might have admired the magnificent Aquilina; but the winning Euphrasia must be repulsive to every one – the first was the soul of sin; the second, sin without a soul in it.

"I should dearly like to know," Emile remarked to this pleasing being, "if you ever reflect upon your future?"

"My future!" she answered with a laugh. "What do you mean by my future? Why should I think about something that does not exist as yet? I never look before or behind. Isn't one day at a time more than I can concern myself with as it is? And besides, the future, as we know, means the hospital."

"How can you forsee a future in the hospital, and make no effort to avert it?"

"What is there so alarming about the hospital?" asked the terrific Aquilina. "When we are neither wives nor mothers, when old age draws black stockings over our limbs, sets wrinkles on our brows, withers up the woman in us, and darkens the light in our lover's eyes, what could we need when that comes to pass? You would look on us then as mere human clay; we with our habiliments shall be for you like so much mud – worthless, lifeless, crumbling to pieces, going about with the rustle of dead leaves. Rags or the daintiest finery will be as one to us then; the ambergris of the boudoir will breathe an odor of death and dry bones; and suppose there is a heart there in that mud, not one of you but would make mock of it, not so much as a memory will you spare to us. Is not our existence precisely the same whether

we live in a fine mansion with lap-dogs to tend, or sort rags in a workhouse? Does it make much difference whether we shall hide our gray heads beneath lace or a handkerchief striped with blue and red; whether we sweep a crossing with a birch broom, or the steps of the Tuileries with satins; whether we sit beside a gilded hearth, or cower over the ashes in a red earthen pot; whether we go to the Opera or look on in the Place de Greve?"

"*Aquilina mia*, you have never shown more sense than in this depressing fit of yours," Euphrasia remarked. "Yes, cashmere, *point d'Alencon*, perfumes, gold, silks, luxury, everything that sparkles, everything pleasant, belongs to youth alone. Time alone may show us our folly, but good fortune will acquit us. You are laughing at me," she went on, with a malicious glance at the friends; "but am I not right? I would sooner die of pleasure than of illness. I am not afflicted with a mania for perpetuity, nor have I a great veneration for human nature, such as God has made it. Give me millions, and I would squander them; I should not keep one centime for the year to come. Live to be charming and have power, that is the decree of my every heartbeat. Society sanctions my life; does it not pay for my extravagances? Why does Providence pay me every morning my income, which I spend every evening? Why are hospitals built for us? And Providence did not put good and evil on either hand for us to select what tires and pains us. I should be very foolish if I did not amuse myself."

"And how about others?" asked Emile.

"Others? Oh, well, they must manage for themselves. I prefer laughing at their woes to weeping over my own. I defy any man to give me the slightest uneasiness."

"What have you suffered to make you think like this?" asked Raphael.

"I myself have been forsaken for an inheritance," she said, striking an attitude that displayed all her charms; "and yet I had worked night and day to keep my lover! I am not to be gulled by any smile or vow, and I have set myself to make one long entertainment of my life."

"But does not happiness come from the soul within?" cried Raphael.

"It may be so," Aquilina answered; "but is it nothing to be conscious of admiration and flattery; to triumph over other women, even over the most virtuous, humiliating them before our beauty and our splendor? Not only so; one day of our life is worth ten years of a bourgeoise existence, and so it is all summed up."

"Is not a woman hateful without virtue?" Emile said to Raphael.

Euphrasia's glance was like a viper's, as she said, with an irony in her voice that cannot be rendered:

"Virtue! we leave that to deformity and to ugly women. What would the poor things be without it?"

"Hush, be quiet," Emile broke in. "Don't talk about something you have never known."

"That I have never known!" Euphrasia answered. "You give

yourself for life to some person you abominate; you must bring up children who will neglect you, who wound your very heart, and you must say, 'Thank you!' for it; and these are the virtues you prescribe to woman. And that is not enough. By way of requiting her self-denial, you must come and add to her sorrows by trying to lead her astray; and though you are rebuffed, she is compromised. A nice life! How far better to keep one's freedom, to follow one's inclinations in love, and die young!"

"Have you no fear of the price to be paid some day for all this?"

"Even then," she said, "instead of mingling pleasures and troubles, my life will consist of two separate parts – a youth of happiness is secure, and there may come a hazy, uncertain old age, during which I can suffer at my leisure."

"She has never loved," came in the deep tones of Aquilina's voice. "She never went a hundred leagues to drink in one look and a denial with untold raptures. She has not hung her own life on a thread, nor tried to stab more than one man to save her sovereign lord, her king, her divinity… Love, for her, meant a fascinating colonel."

"Here she is with her La Rochelle," Euphrasia made answer. "Love comes like the wind, no one knows whence. And, for that matter, if one of those brutes had once fallen in love with you, you would hold sensible men in horror."

"Brutes are put out of the question by the Code," said the tall, sarcastic Aquilina.

"I thought you had more kindness for the army," laughed Euphrasia.

"How happy they are in their power of dethroning their reason in this way," Raphael exclaimed.

"Happy?" asked Aquilina, with dreadful look, and a smile full of pity and terror. "Ah, you do not know what it is to be condemned to a life of pleasure, with your dead hidden in your heart…"

A moment's consideration of the rooms was like a foretaste of Milton's Pandemonium. The faces of those still capable of drinking wore a hideous blue tint, from burning draughts of punch. Mad dances were kept up with wild energy; excited laughter and outcries broke out like the explosion of fireworks. The boudoir and a small adjoining room were strewn like a battlefield with the insensible and incapable. Wine, pleasure, and dispute had heated the atmosphere. Wine and love, delirium and unconsciousness possessed them, and were written upon all faces, upon the furniture; were expressed by the surrounding disorder, and brought light films over the vision of those assembled, so that the air seemed full of intoxicating vapor. A glittering dust arose, as in the luminous paths made by a ray of sunlight, the most bizarre forms flitted through it, grotesque struggles were seen athwart it. Groups of interlaced figures blended with the white marbles, the noble masterpieces of sculpture that adorned the rooms.

Though the two friends yet preserved a sort of fallacious

clearness in their ideas and voices, a feeble appearance and faint thrill of animation, it was yet almost impossible to distinguish what was real among the fantastic absurdities before them, or what foundation there was for the impossible pictures that passed unceasingly before their weary eyes. The strangest phenomena of dreams beset them, the lowering heavens, the fervid sweetness caught by faces in our visions, and unheard-of agility under a load of chains, – all these so vividly, that they took the pranks of the orgy about them for the freaks of some nightmare in which all movement is silent, and cries never reach the ear. The valet de chambre succeeded just then, after some little difficulty, in drawing his master into the ante-chamber to whisper to him:

"The neighbors are all at their windows, complaining of the racket, sir."

"If noise alarms them, why don't they lay down straw before their doors?" was Taillefer's rejoinder.

Raphael's sudden burst of laughter was so unseasonable and abrupt, that his friend demanded the reason of his unseemly hilarity.

"You will hardly understand me," he replied. "In the first place, I must admit that you stopped me on the Quai Voltaire just as I was about to throw myself into the Seine, and you would like to know, no doubt, my motives for dying. And when I proceed to tell you that by an almost miraculous chance the most poetic memorials of the material world had but just then been summed up for me as a symbolical interpretation of human wisdom;

whilst at this minute the remains of all the intellectual treasures ravaged by us at table are comprised in these two women, the living and authentic types of folly, would you be any the wiser? Our profound apathy towards men and things supplied the half-tones in a crudely contrasted picture of two theories of life so diametrically opposed. If you were not drunk, you might perhaps catch a gleam of philosophy in this."

"And if you had not both feet on that fascinating Aquilina, whose heavy breathing suggests an analogy with the sounds of a storm about to burst," replied Emile, absently engaged in the harmless amusement of winding and unwinding Euphrasia's hair, "you would be ashamed of your inebriated garrulity. Both your systems can be packed in a phrase, and reduced to a single idea. The mere routine of living brings a stupid kind of wisdom with it, by blunting our intelligence with work; and on the other hand, a life passed in the limbo of the abstract or in the abysses of the moral world, produces a sort of wisdom run mad. The conditions may be summed up in brief; we may extinguish emotion, and so live to old age, or we may choose to die young as martyrs to contending passions. And yet this decree is at variance with the temperaments with which we were endowed by the bitter jester who modeled all creatures."

"Idiot!" Raphael burst in. "Go on epitomizing yourself after that fashion, and you will fill volumes. If I attempted to formulate those two ideas clearly, I might as well say that man is corrupted by the exercise of his wits, and purified by ignorance. You are

calling the whole fabric of society to account. But whether we live with the wise or perish with the fool, isn't the result the same sooner or later? And have not the prime constituents of the quintessence of both systems been before expressed in a couple of words —*Carymary*, *Carymara*."

"You make me doubt the existence of a God, for your stupidity is greater than His power," said Emile. "Our beloved Rabelais summed it all up in a shorter word than your '*Carymary*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.