

**ALEX.
MCVEIGH
MILLER**

LITTLE NOBODY

Alex. McVeigh Miller

Little Nobody

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Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

Little Nobody

CHAPTER I

He was a Northern journalist, and it was in the interest of his paper that he found himself, one bright March morning, in New Orleans, almost dazed by the rapidity with which he had been whirled from the ice and snow of the frozen North to the sunshine and flowers of the sunny South.

He was charmed with the quaint and unique Crescent City. It was a totally different world from that in which he had been reared—a summer land, warm, indolent, luxurious, where one plucked the golden oranges from the dark-green boughs, laden at once with flowers and fruit, and where the senses were taken captive by the sensuous perfume of rare flowers that, in his Northern land, grew only within the confines of the close conservatory. Then, too, the dark, handsome faces of the people, and their mixture of foreign tongues, had their own peculiar charm. Nothing amused him so much as a stroll through the antique French Market, with its lavish abundance of tropic vegetables, fruits, and flowers, vended by hucksters of different nationalities in the Babel of languages that charmed his ear with the languorous softness of the Southern accent.

He had a letter of introduction to a member of the Jockey Club, and this famous organization at once adopted him, and, as he phrased it, "put him through." The theaters, the carnival, the races, all whirled past in a blaze of splendor never to be forgotten; for it was at the famous Metairie Race-course that he first met Mme. Lorraine.

But you must not think, reader, because I forgot to tell you his name at first, that he is the Little Nobody of my story. He was not little at all, but tall and exceedingly well-favored, and signed his name Eliot Van Zandt.

Mme. Lorraine was a retired actress—ballet-dancer, some said. She was a French woman, airy and charming, like the majority of her race. The Jockey Club petted her, although they freely owned that she was a trifle fast, and did not have the *entrée* of some of the best houses in the city. However, there were some nice, fashionable people not so strait-laced who sent her cards to their fêtes, and now and then accepted return invitations, so that it could not be said that she was outside the pale of society.

Mme. Lorraine took a fancy to the good-looking Yankee, as she dubbed him, and gave him *carte blanche* to call at her *bijou* house in Esplanade Street. He accepted with outward eagerness and inward indifference. He was too familiar with women of her type at the North—fast, frivolous, and avaricious—to be flattered by her notice or her invitation.

"She may do for the rich Jockey Club, but her acquaintance is too expensive a luxury for a poor devil of a newspaper correspondent," he told the Club. "She has card-parties, of course, and I am too poor to gamble."

Pierre Carmontelle laughed, and told him to call in the afternoon, when there was no gambling in the *recherché* saloon.

"To see madame at home, informally, with her little savage, would be rich, *mon ami*. You would get a spicy paragraph for your newspaper," he said.

"Her little savage?"

"Do not ask me any questions, for I shall not answer," said Carmontelle, still laughing. "Perhaps Remond there will gratify your curiosity. The little vixen flung her tiny slipper into his face once when he tried to kiss her, under the influence of a *soupçon* too much of madame's foamy champagne."

"Madame's daughter, perhaps?" said Van Zandt, looking at Remond; but the latter only scowled and muttered, under his breath:

"The little demon!"

He thought they were guying him, and decided not to call in Esplanade Street.

But it was only one week later that he saw Mme. Lorraine again at Metairie. Her carriage was surrounded by admirers, and she was betting furiously on the racing, but she found time to see the Yankee and beckon him importunately with her dainty, tan-kidded hand.

They made way for him to come to her where she sat among her silken cushions, resplendent in old-gold satin, black lace, and Maréchal Niel roses, her beautiful, brilliant face wreathed in smiles, her toilet so perfectly appointed that she looked barely twenty-five, although the Club admitted that she must be past forty.

"It is fifteen years since Lorraine married her off the stage, and she had been starring it ten years before he ever saw her," said Carmontelle, confidentially.

The big, almond-shaped dark eyes flashed reproachfully, as she said, with her prettiest *moue*:

"You naughty Yankee, you have not called!"

"I have been too busy," he fibbed; "but I am coming this evening."

"*Quel plaisir!*" she exclaimed, and then the racing distracted their attention again.

The blaze of sunshine fell on one of the gayest scenes ever witnessed. The old race-course was surrounded by thousands upon thousands of people in carriages, on horseback, and afoot. The grand stand was packed with a living mass.

The tropical beauty and rich costumes of the Louisiana ladies lent glow and brilliancy to the exciting scene. The racing was superb, and men and women were betting freely on their favorites. Gloves and jewels and thousands of dollars were won and lost that day.

The most interesting event of the day was on. A purse of gold had been offered for the most skillful and daring equestrienne, and the fair contestants were ranged before the judge's stand, magnificently mounted on blooded steeds curveting with impatient ardor, their silver-mounted trappings glistening in the sunlight, and their handsome riders clothed faultlessly in habits of dark rich cloth fitting like a glove. It was truly a splendid sight, and the Jockey Club immediately went wild, and cheered as if they would split their throats. Even Mme. Lorraine brought her gloved hands impetuously together as the five beauties rode dauntlessly forward.

"Jove! how magnificent!" Carmontelle burst forth. "But, madame, look!" excitedly. "Who is that little tot on the Arab so like your own? Heavens! it is—it is—" Without completing the sentence, he fell back convulsed with laughter.

Every one was looking eagerly at the slip of a girl on the back of the beautiful, shiny-coated Arab. She rode skillfully, with daring grace, yet reckless *abandon*—a girl, a child almost, the lissom, budding figure sitting erect and motionless in the saddle, a stream of ruddy golden hair flying behind her on the breeze, the small, white face staring straight before her as she swept on impetuously to the victory that every one was proclaiming would perch upon her banner.

Mme. Lorraine's face paled with blended dismay and anger. She muttered, loud enough for the Yankee to overhear:

"*Mon Dieu!* the daring little hussy! She shall pay for this escapade!"

But to her admirers she exclaimed, a moment later, with a careless, significant shrug of the shoulders:

"She has stolen a march upon me. But, pshaw! it is nothing for her, the little savage! You should have seen her mother, the bare-back rider, galloping at her highest speed and jumping through the hoops in the ring!"

"*Vive* the little savage!" cried Remond, his dark face relaxing into enthusiasm. "She has stolen a march upon you, indeed, madame, has she not?"

Madame frowned and retorted, sharply:

"Yes, monsieur; but I will make her pay for this! The idea of her racing my Arab, my splendid Arab, that I care for so guardedly! Why, one of his slender hoofs is worth more to me than the girl's whole body! Oh, yes, I will make her pay!"

The journalist's dancing gray eyes turned on her face curiously.

"She belongs to you?"

"In a way, yes," madame answered, with a sharp, unpleasant laugh. "Her mother, my maid, had the bad taste to die in my employ and leave the baggage on my hands. She has grown up in my house like an unchecked weed, and has furnished some amusement for the Jockey Club."

"As a sort of Daughter of the Regiment," said one, laughing; but madame frowned the more darkly.

"Nonsense, Markham," she said, shortly. "Do not put such notions into Monsieur Van Zandt's head. Let him understand, once for all, she is a cipher, a little nobody."

She did not quite understand the gleam in the dark-gray eyes, but he smiled carelessly enough, and replied:

"At least she is very brave."

"A madcap," madame answered, shortly; and just then a shriek of triumph from a thousand throats rent the air. The meteor-like figure of the golden-haired girl on the flying Arab had distanced every competitor, and the applause was tremendous. In the midst of it all she reined in her gallant steed a moment before the judges' stand, then, before the dust cleared away, she was galloping rapidly off the grounds, followed by every eye among them all; while Mme. Lorraine, beneath an indifferent air, concealed a hidden volcano of wrath and passion.

She stayed for the rest of the races, but her mind was only half upon them now, and she made some wild bets, and lost every stake. She could think of nothing but the daring girl who had taken her own Selim, her costly, petted Arab, and ridden him before her eyes in that wild race in which she had won such a signal victory.

CHAPTER II

Van Zandt determined to keep his promise to call in Esplanade Street that evening. He felt a languid curiosity over Mme. Lorraine's charge, the daring girl whose whole young body was worth less to madame than one of the slender hoofs of her favorite Selim.

He arrived early, and was ushered into an exquisite little salon all in olive and gold—fit setting for madame's ripe, dusky beauty. She was alone, looking magnificent in ruby velvet with cream lace garnishing and ruby jewelry, and the smile with which she received him was welcome itself.

"Ah, *mon ami*! I was wondering if you would really come," she said, archly. "Sit here beside me, and tell me how you enjoyed the day?"

She swept aside her glowing draperies, and gave him a seat by her side on the olive satin sofa. He accepted it with an odd sensation of disappointment, despite her luring beauty and the sensuous comfort and luxury of the room, whose air was heavy with the perfume of flowers in vases and pots all about them.

He thought, disappointedly:

"Am I not to see her Little Nobody?"

Apparently not, for no one entered, and madame sat contentedly by his side, talking arch nothings to him, fluttering her fan coquettishly, and laughing at his careless repartee. Not a word all the while of her whom madame had sworn should pay for her madcap freak of to-day.

By and by came Carmontelle, Remond, and Markham. They laughed at finding Van Zandt before them.

"But, madame, where is your Little Nobody?" queried the gay Carmontelle. "We are come to lay our hearts at her feet. Know that she has supplanted you in the adoration of the Jockey Club. Her victory to-day makes us all her slaves."

Madame gave utterance to a light, mocking laugh as she touched the gilded bell-cord close to her hand, and all eyes turned to the door. Five, almost ten, minutes passed, then it was softly opened, and a girl came in with a silver salver heaped high with luscious tropical fruit.

Van Zandt recognized her as the winner of the race by the wealth of tawny golden hair that flowed down her back below her slim, girlish waist. He waited, with his eyes on the strange young face, for madame to speak some words of introduction, but none came. Just as any other servant might have entered, so was this girl permitted to enter. The fellows from the Jockey Club nodded familiarly at her, and received a sulky stare in return as she dispensed her fruit among them with impatient courtesy.

When she paused, last of all, before Mme. Lorraine, with her salver of fruit, she seemed first to observe the tall, fair man by her side. She started and fixed her big, solemn, dark eyes half wonderingly upon him, and for a second they gazed silently and curiously at each other.

He saw a girl of fifteen or so, very *petite* for her age, and made to look more so by the fashion of her dress, which consisted mainly of a loosely fashioned white embroidered slip, low in the neck, short in the sleeves, and so short in the skirt that it reached the verge of immodesty by betraying much more than the conventional limit of the tapering ankles and rounded limbs. Madame had evidently aimed more at picturesqueness than propriety in choosing her dress, and she had certainly attained her point. Anything more full of unstudied grace and unconscious beauty than the little serving-maid it would be hard to imagine. The contrast of tawny golden hair with dark eyes and slender, jetty brows, with features molded in the most bewitching lines, and form as perfect as a sculptor's model, made up a *tout ensemble* very pleasing to the journalist's observant eyes. There was but one defect, and that was a certain sullenness of eyes and expression that bespoke a fiery spirit at bay, a nature full of repressed fire and passion ready to burst into lava-flame at a touch, a word.

For her she saw a man of twenty-five or six, tall, manly, and handsome in a splendid intellectual fashion, with fair hair clustered above a grand white brow, blue-gray eyes bright and laughing, a fair mustache ornamenting lips at once firm and sweet, a chin that was grave and full of power in spite of the womanish dimple that cleft it—altogether a most attractive face, and one that influenced her subtly, for some of the sullenness faded from her face, and with brightening eyes she exclaimed, with all the freedom of a child:

"Oh, I know you at sight! You are madame's handsome Yankee, *n'est ce pas?*"

He rose, laughing, and with his most elaborate bow.

"Eliot Van Zandt, at your service," he said. "Yes, I am the Yankee. And you?"

He saw the sullen gleam come back into her eyes, as she answered curtly, and, as it seemed, with repressed wrath:

"Oh. I am Little Nobody, madame says. I have always been too poor to have even a name. Have some fruit, please."

Madame tittered behind her elaborate fan, and the members of the Jockey Club exchanged glances. Eliot took an orange mechanically, and then the girl put the salver down and turned to go.

But Mme. Lorraine's dark eyes looked over the top of her fan with sarcastic amusement.

"Remain," she said, with cold brevity; and the girl flung herself angrily down into a chair, with her hands crossed and her tiny slippers dangling. With uplifted eyes she studied intently the face of the stranger.

"Handsome, is he, madcap?" at length queried Carmontelle, full of amusement.

The large eyes turned on his face scornfully.

"Handsomer than any of the ugly old Jockey Club!" she replied, with decision.

"We shall all be very jealous of this Yankee," said Markham. "Here we have been adoring you ever since you were a baby, ma'amselle, and you throw us over in a bunch for the sake of this charming stranger. You are cruel, unjust." He began to hum, softly, meaningly:

"Do not trust him, gentle lady,
Though his words be low and sweet;
Heed not him that kneels before thee,
Gently pleading at thy feet."

The song went no further, for the girl looked at him with large eyes of sarcastic amusement and said, curtly:

"If I had such an atrocious voice as yours, I should not try to sing."

A sally of laughter greeted the words, and the sulky countenance relaxed into a smile.

Van Zandt studied the young face closely, his artistic taste charmed by its bright, warm beauty, full of Southern fire and passion.

"How came she, the nameless child of a circus-rider, by her dower of high-bred, faultless beauty?" he thought, in wonder, noticing the dainty white hands, the

"Delicate Arab arch of her feet,
And the grace that, light and bright as the crest
Of a peacock, sits on her shining head;
And she knows it not. Oh, if she knew it!
To know her beauty might half undo it."

Mme. Lorraine, at his side, watched him with lowered lids and compressed lips. At last, tapping his arm with her fan, and smiling archly, she said, in an under-tone:

"Beautiful, is she not, *mon ami*? But—that is all. Her mind is a void, a blank—capable of nothing but the emotions of anger or hatred, the same as the brute creation. I have tried to educate her into a companion, but in vain; so she can never be more than a pretty toy to me—no more nor less than my Maltese kitten or my Spitz puppy, although I like to see her about me, the same as I love all beautiful things."

He heard her in amazement. Soulless—that beautiful, spirited-looking creature! Could it be? He saw the dark eyes lighten as the men began to praise her dauntless riding that day. They were very expressive, those large, almond-shaped eyes. Surely a soul dwelt behind those dark-fringed lids.

Some one proposed cards, and madame assented with alacrity, without seeing Eliot Van Zandt's gesture of disgust. He refused point-blank to take a hand in the game, and said, with reckless audacity:

"Do not mind me; I am always unlucky at play; so I will amuse myself instead with Little Nobody."

Her eyes flashed, but when Mme. Lorraine vacated the seat upon the sofa, she came over and took it, not with any appearance of forwardness, but as a simple matter of course. Then, looking up at him, she said, with child-like directness:

"And so you are a Yankee? I am surprised. I have always hated the Yankees, you know. My father was a Confederate soldier, madame says. He was killed the last year of the war, just a month before I was born."

Mme. Lorraine looked around with a dark frown, but Van Zandt pretended not to see it as he answered:

"Do you mean that you will not have me for your friend, ma'amselle, because I was born in Boston, and because my father fell fighting for the Stars and Stripes?"

"A friend? What is that, monsieur?" she queried, naïvely; and Markham, to whom the conversation was perfectly audible from his corner of the card-table, looked around, and said, teasingly:

"It is something that you will never be able to keep, ma'amselle, by reason of your pretty face. All your friends will become your lovers."

"Hold your tongue, Colonel Markham; I was not talking to you, and it's ill manners to break into a conversation," said the girl, shortly.

She broke off a white camellia from a vase near her, and held it lightly between her taper fingers as she again addressed herself to the journalist:

"I like your word 'friend.' It has a nice sound. But I don't quite understand."

"I must try to explain it to you," he replied, smiling. "I may tell you, since Markham has broached the subject, that the poets have said that friendship is love in disguise, but the dictionary gives it a more prosaic meaning. Let us find it as it is in Webster."

"Webster?" stammeringly, and Mme. Lorraine looked around with her disagreeably sarcastic laugh.

"Monsieur Van Zandt, you bewilder my little savage. She can not read."

But a light of comprehension flashed instantly into the puzzled eyes. She pulled Eliot's sleeve.

"You mean books. Come, you will find plenty in the library."

He followed her into the pretty room beyond the olive satin *portière*, where they found plenty of books indeed. She pointed to them, and looked at him helplessly.

He found Webster on the top shelf of a rich inlaid book-case, and was half-stifled with dust as he drew it down from the spot where it had rested undisturbed for years. He sneezed vigorously, and his companion hastened to dust it off with her tiny handkerchief.

"Now!" she said, anxiously, spreading the big book open on a table before him.

CHAPTER III

The leaves fluttered with her hasty movement, and a folded sheet of parchment fell out upon the floor. As he turned the pages to the F's she picked up the paper and held it in her hands, looking curiously at the bold, clear superscription on the back, and the big red seal; but it told nothing to her uneducated eyes, and with an unconscious sigh, she pushed it back into the dictionary, her hand touching his in the movement and sending an odd thrill of pleasure along his nerves.

He read aloud, in his clear, full tones:

"'Friend.—One who, entertaining for another sentiments of esteem, respect, and affection, from personal predilection, seeks his society and welfare; a well-wisher, an intimate associate.'"

She stood by him, her hands resting on the table, trembling with pleasure, her face glowing.

"It is beautiful," she exclaimed. "I thought the word sounded very sweet. And—you—you want to be my friend?"

The most finished coquette might have envied the artless naïveté of her look and tone, yet she was

"Too innocent for coquetry,
Too fond for idle scorning."

Touched by this new side of her character, he put his hand impulsively on the little one resting close by his on the table with a gentle pressure.

"Child, I will be your friend if you will let me," he said, in a gentle tone, and not dreaming of all to which that promise was swiftly leading.

"I shall be so glad," she said, in a voice so humble, and with so tender a face, that the people in the other room would scarce have recognized her as the little savage and vixen they called her.

But Pierre Carmontelle, always full of mischief and banter, had deliberately sauntered in, and heard the compact of friendship between the two who, until to-night, had been utter strangers. He gave his friend a quizzical smile.

"Ever heard of Moore's 'Temple to Friendship,' Van Zandt?" he inquired, dryly. "Let me recall it to your mind."

He brought a book from a stand near by, opened it, and read aloud, with dry significance, in his clear voice:

"'A Temple to Friendship,' said Laura, enchanted,
'I'll build in this garden—the thought is divine!'
Her temple was built, and she now only wanted
An image of Friendship to place on the shrine.
She flew to a sculptor who sat down before her
A Friendship the fairest his art could invent;
But so cold and so dull that the youthful adorer
Saw plainly this was not the idol she meant.

"'Oh, never!' she cried, 'could I think of enshrining
An image whose looks are so joyless and dim;
But you, little god, upon roses reclining,
We'll make, if you please sir, a Friendship of him.'"

So the bargain was struck; with the little god laden,
She joyfully flew to her shrine in the grove;
'Farewell,' said the sculptor, 'you're not the first maiden
Who came but for Friendship and took away Love!'"

He shut the book and laughed, for he had the satisfaction of seeing a warm flush mount to the temples of the young journalist, but the girl, so young, so ignorant, so strangely beautiful, looked at him unabashed. Evidently she knew no more of love than she did of friendship. They were alike meaningless terms to her uncultured mind. Frowning impatiently, she said:

"Carmontelle, why did you intrude upon us here? I wanted to talk to Monsieur Van Zandt."

"And I, ma'amselle, wanted to talk to you. Madame Lorraine was very angry with you for racing Selim to-day. What did she do to you?"

The large eyes brightened angrily, and a hot rose-flush broke through the creamy pallor of her oval cheek.

"Beat me!" she said, bitterly.

"No!" from both men in a shocked tone.

"But yes," she replied, with a sudden return of sullenness. With a swift movement she drew the mass of hair from her white shoulders, which she pushed up out of her low dress with a childish movement.

"Look at the marks on my back," she said.

They did look, and shuddered at the sight. The thick tresses of hair had hidden the long, livid marks of a cruel lash on the white flesh. There were a dozen or so of stripes, and the flesh was cut in some places till the blood had oozed through.

The girl's eyes flashed, and she clinched her little hands tightly.

"I hate that woman!" she muttered, fiercely. "Oh, it is cruel, cruel, to be nobody, to have no one but her, to be nothing but a pretty plaything, as she calls me, like her Spitz and her cat, her parrot and monkey! I mean to run away. It was for that I rode to-day—to win the gold—but—"

"But—what?" said Van Zandt, huskily.

She answered with passionate pride:

"When she beat me—when she flung my poverty in my face—when she said I should be starving but for her bread—I flung the purse of gold down at her feet—to—to—pay!"

The hard glitter of the dark eyes dissolved in quick tears. She dropped the golden tresses back on her lacerated shoulders, flung her arms before her face, and hard, choking sobs shook the slight, young form. The two men gazed on her, pale, moved, speechless.

Eliot Van Zandt thought of his fair, young sisters, scarcely older than this girl, on whose lovely frames the winds of heaven were scarce permitted to blow roughly. Why, if any one had struck Maud or Edith such a blow, he should have sent a bullet through his heart, so fierce would be his anger.

He looked at Carmontelle.

"Monsieur Lorraine—does he permit this?" he asked, indignantly.

"Lorraine had been in a mad-house fourteen years—sent there by the madness of jealousy," was the unexpected reply.

Madame's gay, shrill laugh rang out from the salon where she was winning golden eagles from her friends. The journalist shuddered and wondered if the brilliant woman ever remembered the man gone insane for her sake.

Ma'amselle's hard, bitter sobs ceased suddenly as they had begun. She dashed the tears from her eyes, and said, with bitter resignation:

"*N'importe!* It is not the first time—perhaps it may not be the last. But, *mon Dieu*, it is better to be only her plaything, petted one moment, whipped the next, as she does her mischievous monkey and snarling puppy. She says she should make me live in the kitchen if I were ugly instead of being

so pretty. She wants everything about her to be pretty. But, say nothing of all this, you two," lifting a warning taper finger. "It could do no good—she would only beat me more."

"Too true!" assented Pierre Carmontelle, sadly.

CHAPTER IV

They returned to the salon, and Mme. Lorraine flung down her cards and arose.

"Messieurs, I will give you your revenge another time. Now I must give some attention to my Northern friend. Come, Monsieur Van Zandt, let me show you my garden by moonlight."

She slipped her hand through his arm and led him through a side-door and out into a tropical garden bathed in a full flood of summer moonlight. Carmontelle drew Little Nobody out by the hand. Markham and Remond followed.

To Van Zandt's unaccustomed eyes the scene was full of weird, delicious splendor. Fountains sparkled in the moonlight, watering the stems of tall, graceful palm-trees and massive live-oaks, whose gigantic branches were draped in wide, trailing banners of funereal-gray moss. Immense green ferns bordered the basins of the fountains, white lilies nodded on tall, leafy stems, roses vied with orange-blossoms in filling the air with fragrance, and passion-flowers climbed tall trellies and flung their large flowers lavishly to the breeze. Madame, with her jeweled hand clinging to Van Zandt's arm, her jewels gleaming, walked along the graveled paths in advance of the rest, talking to him in her gay fashion that was odd and enchanting from its pretty mixture of broken French and English, interlarded here and there with a Spanish phrase. She was bent on subduing the heart of the young journalist, his coldness and indifference having roused her to a fatal pique and interest—fatal because her love was like the poisonous upas-tree, blighting all that it touched.

She had brought him out here for a purpose. In the soft, delusive moonlight she looked fair and young as a woman of twenty, and here she could weave her Circean spells the best. She became soft and sentimental with her light badinage. Bits of poetry flowed over the crimson lips, the dark eyes were raised to his often, coyly and sweetly, the jeweled hand slipped until her throbbing wrist rested lightly on his. Every gracious, cunning art of coquetry was employed, and the victim seemed very willing indeed to be won.

But when they bantered him next day he laughed with the rest.

"*Ad nauseam!*" he replied, boldly.

But he went again that night to Esplanade Street, drawn by an indefinable power to the presence of the cruel, beautiful woman and her fawn-like, lovely dependent.

"Madame Lorraine was engaged, but she would come to him soon," said the sleek page who admitted him to the salon, which a quick glance showed him was quite deserted.

He waited awhile, then grew weary of the stillness and silence, and went out through the open side-door into the charming garden.

The quiet walks gave back no echo of his firm tread as he paused and threw himself upon a rustic bench beside a tinkling fountain, but presently from beyond the great live-oak with its gray moss drapery there came to him the sound of a clear, sweet voice.

"The little ma'amselle," he thought, at first, and deemed it no harm to listen.

"It is a bargain, then, monsieur. You take the girl, and I am a thousand dollars richer. *Ciel!* but what a rare revenge I shall have for yesterday;" and Mme. Lorraine's low laugh, not sweet and coquettish now, but full of cruel venom, rang out on the evening air.

The night was warm, but Eliot Van Zandt shuddered through all his strong, proud frame, as the voice of Remond answered:

"Revenge—ha! ha! Mine shall be gained, too. How I hate and love the little savage in one breath, and I have sworn she shall pay for that slipper flung in my face. It is a costly price, but to gratify love and hate alike I will not stop at the cost."

"You are right. Once I refused when you asked for her because I prized my pretty, innocent, ignorant toy. But yesterday the fires of hell were kindled in my breast. She is no longer a child. When she rode Selim there amid the plaudits of thousands, she became my rival, hated and dreaded, and I

swore she should pay for her triumph at bitter cost. Last night did you see her with Van Zandt, her sly coquetry, her open preference? In her sleep, as she lay coiled on her cot, she murmured his name and smiled. It was enough. I swore I would hesitate no longer. I would give you your will."

Rooted to his seat with horror, Van Zandt sat speechless, his blood curdling at Remond's demoniac laugh.

"You have a *penchant* for the quill-driver?" scoffingly said the Frenchman.

"He is a new sensation. His indifference piques me to conquer him"—carelessly; "but to the point. I will drug her to sleep to-night, and you shall carry her off. Bring a carriage at midnight—all shall be ready."

"Done! But when they ask for her—for the Jockey Club has gone wild with admiration over the little vixen—what can you say?"

"I overheard her last night threatening to run away. She was in the library with Carmontelle and the Yankee. What more easy than to say she has carried out her threat?"

Their low, jubilant laughter echoed in the young journalist's ear like the mirth of fiends. There was a promise of money that night, injunctions of caution and secrecy; then the conspirators swept away toward the house, and Van Zandt remained there, in the shadowy night, unseen, unsuspected, brooding over what he had heard uttered behind the drooping veil of long, gray moss.

Carmontelle had said, laughingly, that a visit to madame and her little savage would furnish a spicy paragraph for his paper. He thought, grimly, that here was the item with a vengeance.

Oh! to think of that heartless woman and man, and of the simple, ignorant, lovely child bartered to shame for the sake of a fiendish revenge! The blood in his veins ran hotly, as if turned to fire.

"My God! I must do something," he muttered, and then started with a stifled cry of alarm.

From among the shrubberies close by something had started up with a sobbing cry. It ran toward him, and fell down at his feet; it was poor Little Nobody.

"You have heard? I saw you when you came!" she gasped, wildly.

"Yes, poor child!" he answered.

"Sold! sold, like a slave, to the man I hate!" she cried, fearfully, her dark eyes distended in terror. "Oh, monsieur, he kissed me once, and I hated his kiss worse than madame's blow. I flung my slipper in his face, and he swore revenge. Once in his power, he would murder me. Oh, you promised to be my friend"—wildly—"save me! save me now!"

CHAPTER V

It was a strange, picturesque scene there in the starlit garden, with its stately palms, its immense rough cactuses, its fountains, and flowers. The man sat there with doubt, trouble, and sympathy looking out of his frank eyes at the girl who knelt before him, her delicate, tapering hands pressed together, her white face looking up piteously, the tears raining from her splendid eyes, and the long veil of golden hair sweeping loosely about her slender form, that passionate appeal thrilling over her crimson lips:

"Save me! save me!"

"Poor child, what can I do?" he uttered, almost unconsciously, and she answered, wildly:

"Only tell me where to fly for refuge! I am dazed and frightened. I know not where to go unless to the deep, dark river, and fling myself in. But I do not want to die. I only want to get away from this terrible place to some happier spot! Ah! *certainement, le bon Dieu* sent you here, monsieur, to help me, to save me!"

All her trust was in him, all her confidence. He had promised to be her friend, and in a simplicity and innocence as complete as a child's, she claimed his promise. Nay, more, she claimed that God had sent him to her aid in this dark hour of distress.

His mind was a chaos of contending emotions. That he must help her he had decided already in his mind. But how?

No answer presented itself to the vexing question. His thoughts were in such a tumult that clear, coherent thinking was an impossibility.

A moment, and he said, gently:

"Yes, I will help you, my child. I were less than man could I let this thing go on and make no attempt to rescue you from so dark a fate. But—"

He paused, and she waited anxiously with her straining gaze fixed on his troubled face.

"But," he went on slowly, "I can not see my way clear yet; I must think, must decide. And it is not safe to remain out here longer. They may come out here and find me at any moment. Little one, can you trust me to go away and think it all over, and then come back to you?"

A moment of silence, then she rose and stood before him.

"Yes, yes, I will trust you," she said, gently; then, with sudden desperation, "Should—should you not come back I will never be taken by him. There—is—still—the—river!"

"Do not think of that," he said, quickly; "I will soon return. Trust me wholly. Have I not promised to be your friend?"

"Yes, yes," eagerly.

She put out her hands as if to clasp his arm, then suddenly withdrew them. Frank and child-like as she was, she was coy and shy as a fawn. She clasped her delicate hands before her, and stood waiting.

"Now, tell me, is there not some way by which I can gain the street without returning to the house?" said Van Zandt.

"Yes, monsieur. Follow me," said the girl, turning swiftly and going across the garden to a small gate in the wall that opened on the street.

She turned a key in the lock and opened it wide as he came up, thrusting shyly into his hand some dewy rosebuds she had plucked from a vine that clambered to the top of the wall.

"Do not fail me, *mon ami*," she breathed, softly.

"You can trust me," he said, again. "Now go back to the garden or the house. Be as natural as you can. Do not let them suspect your dangerous knowledge."

She nodded her bright head wisely, and the next moment he was out in the street, the gate shut against him, alone with the thronging thoughts awakened by the occurrences of the last hour. He

pulled a cigar from his breast-pocket, lighted it, and walked slowly along the wide and almost deserted street, under the shade of the tall trees that bordered the walk, his calmness gradually returning under the influence of the narcotic weed.

Within the flowery garden the little ma'amselle, so strangely lovely, so ignorant and innocent, with that deadly peril menacing her young life, flung herself down upon a garden-seat and gave herself up to impatient waiting for the return of her knight, her brave Sir Galahad.

"How sweet are looks that ladies bend
On whom their favors fall;
For them I battle to the end
To save from shame and thrall."

CHAPTER VI

Van Zandt had gone but a few squares, with his eyes cast down and his mind very busy, before he stumbled up against a man coming from an opposite direction. Both being tall and strong, they recoiled with some force from the shock, each muttering confused apologies.

But the next moment there was an exclamation:

"Van Zandt, upon my word!" cried the musical voice of Pierre Carmontelle. "Why, man, what the deuce ails you, to go butting up against a fellow in that striking fashion?"

"Carmontelle!"

"Yes—or, at least, what is left of him after your villainous assault. Where were your eyes, *mon ami*, that you run up against a fellow so recklessly? And where have you been, anyway—to madame's?"

Eliot Van Zandt laughed at his friend's droll raillery.

"Yes, I have just come from Madame Lorraine's," he said. "And I came away in a brown study, which accounts for my not seeing you. And you—you were on your way there?"

"Yes."

The word was spoken in a strange voice, and an odd little laugh followed it. Then the big, handsome Louisianian suddenly took hold of Van Zandt's arm, and said:

"Come, I have a great mind to make a confidant of you. Let us go and sit down yonder in the square, and smoke."

When they were seated, and puffing away at their cigars, he began:

"The fact is, I was in a brown study, too, Van Zandt, or I should not have run against you. I was going to Madame Lorraine's, and I found myself thinking soberly, seriously about the beautiful madame's wretched little slave and foot-ball, the Little Nobody you saw there last night."

"Yes," Van Zandt answered, with a quick start.

"By Heaven! it is a shame that the poor, pretty little vixen has no friends to rescue her from her tormentor!" exclaimed Carmontelle, vehemently. "For years this cruelty has been going on, and the girl, with her immortal soul, has been made a puppet by that charming, heartless woman. Would you believe it, the girl has never been given even the rudiments of an education? She is ignorant as a little savage, with not even a name. Yet I have seen this go on for years, in my careless fashion, without an effort to help the child. I can not understand what has roused me from my apathy, what has made me think of her at last—ah, *mon Dieu*!"

This exclamation was called forth by some sudden inward light. He went on, with a half-shamed laugh:

"What a speech I have made you, although I do not usually preach. Van Zandt, am I getting good, do you think, or—have I fallen in love with that Little Nobody?"

There was a minute's pause, and Eliot Van Zandt took the cigar from between his lips, and answered, quietly:

"In love, decidedly."

"*Parbleu*!"

After that hurried exclamation there was a moment's silence. Carmontelle broke it with an uneasy laugh.

"I am forty years old, but I suppose a man is never too old to make a fool of himself," he said. "I believe you are right, *mon ami*. I could not get the child out of my head last night. I never noticed how pretty she was before; and those lashes on her sweet, white shoulders. I longed to kiss them, as children say, to make them well."

"Poor child!" said Van Zandt; and then, without preamble, he blurted out the story of what had just happened.

Carmontelle listened with clinched hands and flashing eyes, the veins standing out on his forehead like whip-cords.

"The fiend!" he muttered. "*Peste!* he was always a sneak, always a villain at heart. More than once we have wished him well out of the club. Now he shall be lashed from the door, the double-dyed scoundrel! And she, the deceitful madame, she could plan this horrid deed! She is less than woman. She shall suffer, mark you, for her sin."

"But the little ma'amselle, Carmontelle? What shall we do to deliver her from her peril? Every passing moment brings her doom nearer, yet I can think of nothing. My brain seems dull and dazed."

"Do? Why, we shall take a carriage and bring her away 'over the garden wall,'" replied Carmontelle, lightly but emphatically.

"Very well; but—next?"

Carmontelle stared and repeated, in some bewilderment:

"Next?"

Eliot Van Zandt explained:

"I mean, what shall we do when we have brought her away? Where shall we find her a refuge and hiding-place from her treacherous enemies?" anxiously.

"You cold-blooded, long-headed Yankee! I never thought of that. I should have brought her away without thinking of the future. But you are right. It is a question that should be decided first. What, indeed, shall we do with the girl?"

And for a moment they looked at each other, in the starlight, almost helplessly.

Then Van Zandt said, questioningly:

"Perhaps you have relatives or friends with whom you could place her? I am not rich, but I could spare enough to educate this wronged child."

"I have not a relative in the world—not a friend I could trust; nothing but oceans of money, so you may keep yours. I'll spend some of mine in turning this little savage into a Christian."

"You will take her to school, then, right away?" Van Zandt went on, in his quiet, pertinacious way.

"Yes; and, by Jove, when she comes out, finished, I'll marry her, Van Zandt! I will, upon my word!"

"If she will have you," laconically.

"*Peste!* what a fellow you are, to throw cold water upon one. Perhaps you have designs upon her yourself?"

"Not in the face of your munificent intentions," carelessly.

"Very well; I shall consider her won, then, since you are too generous to enter the lists against me. What a magnificent beauty she will make when she has learned her three R's!" laughingly. "But, come; shall we not go at once to deliver our little friend from Castle Dangerous?"

They rose.

"I am glad I ran against you, Carmontelle. You have straightened out the snarl that tangled my mind. Now for our little stratagem. You will bring the carriage to the end of the square, while I go back to the garden and steal the bird away."

"Excellent!" said Carmontelle. "Oh, how they will rage when they find the bird has flown! Tomorrow the club shall settle with Remond; for madame, she shall be ostracised. We shall desert her in a body. Who would have believed she would be so base?"

Van Zandt made no comment. He only said, as if struck by a sudden thought:

"The poor child will have no clothes fit to wear away. Can you find time, while getting a carriage, to buy a gray dress, a long ulster, and a hat and veil?"

"Of course. What a fellow you are to think of things! I should not have thought of such a thing; yet what school would have received her in that white slip—picturesque, but not much better than a

ballet-dancer's skirts!" exclaimed the lively Southerner. "You are a trump, Van Zandt. Can you think of anything else as sensible?"

"Some fruit and bonbons to soothe her at school—that is all," lightly, as they parted, one to return to Mme. Lorraine's, the other to perfect the arrangements for checkmating Remond's nefarious design.

Carмонтelle was full of enthusiasm over the romantic idea that had occurred so suddenly to his mind. A smile curled his lips, as he walked away, thinking of dark-eyed Little Nobody, and running over in his mind a score of feminine cognomens, with one of which he meant to endow the nameless girl.

"Constance, Marie, Helene, Angela, Therese, Maude, Norine, Eugenie, etc.," ran his thoughts; but Eliot Van Zandt's took a graver turn as he went back to the starlit garden and the girl who believed him her Heaven-sent deliverer from peril and danger.

"There is but little I can do; Carмонтelle takes it all out of my hands," he mused. "Perhaps it is better so; he is rich, free."

A sigh that surprised himself, and he walked on a little faster until he reached the gate by which he had left the garden. Here he stopped, tapped softly, and waited.

But there was no reply to his knock, although he rapped again. Evidently she had gone into the house.

"I shall have to go in," he thought, shrinking from the encounter with the wicked madame and her partner in villainy, M. Remond.

Madame was at the piano, Remond turning the leaves of her music while she rendered a brilliant *morceau*. His hasty glance around the room did not find the little *ma'amselle*.

"She will be here presently," he decided, as he returned with what grace he could Mme. Lorraine's effusive greeting.

She was looking even lovelier than last night, in a costume of silvery silk that looked like the shimmer of moonlight on a lake. Her white throat rose from a mist of lace clasped by a diamond star. In her rich puffs of dark hair nestled white Niphetos roses shedding their delicate perfume about her as she moved with languid grace. The costume had been chosen for him. She had a fancy that it would appeal to his sense of beauty and purity more than her glowing robes of last night.

She was right. He started with surprise and pleasure at the dazzling sight, but the admiration was quickly succeeded by disgust.

"So beautiful, yet so wicked!" he said, to himself.

"You were singing. Pray go on," he said, forcing her back to the piano.

It would be easier to sit and listen than to take part in the conversation with his mind on the *qui vive* for the entrance of her he had come to save. He listened mechanically to the sentimental Italian *chanson* madame chose, but kept his eyes on the door, expecting every minute to see a *petite* white form enter the silken portals.

Remond saw the watchfulness, and scowled with quick malignity.

"Other eyes than mine watch for her coming," he thought.

The song went on. The minutes waned. Van Zandt furtively consulted his watch.

"Past ten. What if that wicked woman has already forced her to retire?" he thought, in alarm, and the minutes dragged like leaden weights.

"Oh, if I could but slip into the garden. Perhaps she is there still, fallen asleep like a child on the garden-seat."

Mme. Lorraine's high, sweet voice broke suddenly in upon his thoughts.

"Monsieur, you sing, I am sure. With those eyes it were useless to deny it. You will favor us?"

He was about to refuse brusquely, when a thought came to him. She would hear his voice, she would hasten to him, and the message of hope must be whispered quickly ere it was too late.

He saw Remond watching him with sarcastic eyes, and said, indifferently:

"I can sing a little from a habit of helping my sisters at home. And I belong to a glee club. If these scant recommendations please you, I will make an effort to alarm New Orleans with my voice."

"You need not decry your talents. I am sure you will charm us," she said; and Van Zandt dropped indolently upon the music-stool. His long, white fingers moved softly among the keys, evoking a tender accompaniment to one of Tennyson's sweetest love songs:

"Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,
Come hither, the dances are done.
In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,
Queen lily and rose in one;
Shine out, little head, sunning over with curls,
To the flowers, and be their sun.

"There has fallen a splendid tear
From the passion-flower at the gate.
She is coming, my dove, my dear;
She is coming, my life, my fate;
The red rose cries, "She is near, she is near,"
And the white rose weeps, "She is late;"
The larkspur listens, "I hear, I hear,"
And the lily whispers, "*I wait.*"

The man and the woman looked at each other behind his back. Remond wore a significant scowl; madame a jealous sneer. It faded into a smile as he whirled around on the music-stool and faced her with a look of feigned adoration.

"Last night was so heavenly in the garden—let us go out again," he said, almost consumed by impatience.

Time was going fast, and it lacked little more than an hour to midnight. He chafed at the thought that Carmontelle was waiting with the carriage, impatient, and wondering at the strange delay.

"We will go into the garden," assented Mme. Lorraine. "Ah, you cold-looking Yankee, you can be as sentimental as a Southerner. Monsieur Remond, will you accompany us?"

"Pardon; I will go home. I have no fancy for love among the roses," with a covert sneer. "Madame, monsieur, *bon soir.*"

He bowed and was gone. Van Zandt drew a long breath of dismay.

What if he should stumble upon Carmontelle and the carriage waiting at the end of the square under cover of the night?

It was impossible to follow. Mme. Lorraine's white hand clasping his arm, drew him out into the garden, with its sweet odors, its silence, and dew.

His heart leaped with expectancy.

"I shall find her here asleep among the flowers, forgetful of the dangers that encompass her young life."

He declared to Mme. Lorraine that he did not want to miss a single beauty of the romantic old garden, and dragged her remorselessly all over its length and breadth. Perhaps she guessed his intent, but she made no sign. She was bright, amiable, animated, all that a woman can be who hopes to charm a man.

He scarcely heeded her, so frantically was he looking everywhere for a crouching white form that he could not find. There came to him suddenly a horrified remembrance of her pathetic words:

"There is still the river!"

A bell somewhere in the distance chimed the half hour in silvery tones. Only thirty minutes more to midnight!

With some incoherent excuse he tore himself away from her, and dashing wildly out into the street, ran against Pierre Carmontelle for the second time that night.

"I have waited for hours, and was just coming to seek you. What does this mean?" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

A whispered explanation forced a smothered oath from his lips.

"Be calm. There is but one way left us. We will conceal ourselves near the door and wrest her from them when they bring her out," said Eliot Van Zandt.

CHAPTER VII

But no place of concealment presented itself. The broad pavement showed a long, unbroken space of moonlit stone, save where one tall tree reared its stately height outside the curb-stone, and flung long, weird shadows across the front of madame's house.

Carмонтelle looked up and down the street, and shook his head.

"I can see no hiding-place but the tree," he said.

"We need none better, unless you are too stout to scale it," Van Zandt answered, coolly, turning a questioning glance upon the rather corpulent form of his good-looking companion.

"You will see," laughed the Southerner, softly.

He glanced up and down the street, and seeing no one in sight, made a bound toward the tree, flung out his arms, and scaled it with admirable agility, finding a very comfortable seat among its low-growing branches. Van Zandt followed his example with boyish ease, and they were soon seated close to each other on the boughs of the big tree, almost as comfortable as if they had been lounging on the satin couches of madame's *recherché* salon. It was delightful up there among the cool green leaves, with the fresh wind blowing the perfume of madame's flowers into their faces.

"I feel like a boy again," said the journalist, gayly.

"Softly; we are opposite the windows of madame's chamber, I think," cautioned Carмонтelle.

"She will not come up yet; she will wait in the salon for Remond. It is but a few minutes to midnight."

A step approached, and they held their breath in excessive caution.

It passed on—only a guardian of the peace pacing his beat serenely, his brass buttons shining in the moonlight.

Van Zandt whispered:

"I am not sure but we should have invoked the aid of the law in our trouble."

But Pierre Carмонтelle shook his head.

"The law is too slow sometimes," he said. "We will place the little girl in some safe refuge first, then, if Madame Lorraine attempts to make trouble, we will resort to legal measures. I am not apprehensive of trouble on that score, however, for madame really has no legal right to the girl. Has she not declared scores of times that her maid died, and left the child upon her hands, and that, only for pity's sake, she would have sent her off to an orphan asylum?"

Steps and voices came along the pavement—two roystering lads, fresh from some festal scene, their steps unsteady with wine. They passed out of sight noisily recounting their triumph to each other. Then the echo of wheels in the distance, "low on the sand, loud on the stone."

"Are you armed?" whispered the Louisianian, nervously.

"No."

The cold steel of a pistol pressed his hand.

"Take that; I brought two," whispered Carмонтelle. "We may need them. One of us must stand at bay, while the other seizes and bears away the girl."

"It shall be I. I will cover your flight," Van Zandt said, quietly.

Under his calm exterior was seething a tempest of wrath and indignation that made him clutch the weapon in a resolute grasp. He had pure and fair young sisters at home. The thought of them made him feel more strongly for madame's forlorn victim.

Their hearts leaped into their throats as Remond's close carriage dashed into sight, whirled up to madame's door, and stopped.

The door swung open, and Remond, muffled up to the ears, sprung out and went up to the house.

Its portals opened as if by magic, with a swish of silken robes in the hall. Madame herself had silently admitted her co-conspirator.

Most fortunately the back of the carriage was toward the tree, and the driver's attention was concentrated upon his restive horses.

Silently as shadows the two men slid down from their novel hiding-place, tiptoed across the pavement, and took up their grim station on either side the closed door.

Not a moment too soon!

At that very instant the door unclosed, and Remond appeared upon the threshold bearing in his arms a slight, inert figure wrapped in a long, dark cloak. Madame, still in her diamonds, roses, and silvery drapery, appeared behind him just in time to see a powerful form swoop down upon Remond, wrest his prize from him, and make off with wonderful celerity, considering the weight of the girlish form in his arms.

She fell back with a cry of dismay.

"Diable! Spies!"

Remond had recoiled on the instant with a fierce oath hissed in his beard—only an instant; then he dashed forward in mad pursuit, only to be tripped by an outstretched foot that flung him face downward on the hard pavement.

Scrambling up in hot haste, with the blood gushing from his nostrils, he found his way barred by Eliot Van Zandt.

"Back, villain! Your prey has escaped you!" the young man cried, sternly.

A black and bitter oath escaped Remond, and his trembling hand sought his belt.

He hissed savagely:

"Accursed spy! Your life shall answer for this!"

Then the long keen blade of a deadly knife flashed in the moonlight. Simultaneously there was the flash and report of a pistol. Both men fell at once to the ground, and at the same moment there was a swish and rustle of silvery silk, as beautiful Mme. Lorraine retreated from her threshold, slamming and locking her door upon the sight of the bloodshed of which she had been the cause.

"Let them kill each other, the fools, if they have no more sense," she muttered, scornfully, heartlessly, as she retired to her salon.

Remond's horses had been so frightened by the pistol-shot that they had run off with their alarmed driver, who had dropped the reins in the first moment of terror. There now remained only two of the six souls present a moment ago, Van Zandt and Remond lying silent where they had fallen under the cold, white light of the moonlight.

But presently the Frenchman struggled slowly up to his feet, and put his hand to his shoulder with a stifled curse.

"The dog has put a bullet through my shoulder. Never mind, we are quits, for I ran my knife through his heart," he muttered, hastening away from the scene of bloodshed.

But Eliot Van Zandt lay still where he had fallen, with his ghastly white face upturned to the sky, and the red blood pouring in a torrent from the gaping wound in his breast.

CHAPTER VIII

Carmontelle made his way with what speed he could, hampered as he was by the heavy, unconscious form of the girl, to the carriage which he had in waiting at the end of the square. His speed was not great enough, however, to hinder him from hearing the sharp report of the pistol as it went off in Van Zandt's hand, and a slight tremor ran along his firm nerves.

"Somebody killed or wounded—and I pray it may be Remond, the dastardly villain," he thought. "I should not like for any harm to come to that noble young Van Zandt."

Then he paused while the driver sprung down from the box and opened the door for him. He laid his burden down upon a seat, sprung in, and then the door was closed.

"To the Convent of Le Bon Berger," he said.

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

The man whipped up his horses, and they were off at a spanking pace.

A happy thought had occurred to Carmontelle. He had a friend who was the Mother Superior of the Convent of the Good Shepherd. To her pious care he would confide the poor, helpless lamb just rescued from the jaws of the hungry wolf.

When the carriage had started off, he drew the thick wrappings from the head of the unconscious girl and looked at her face. It was deathly white, and the long, thick fringe of her dark lashes lay heavily against her cheeks. Her young bosom heaved with slow, faint respiration, but he tried in vain to arouse her from the heavy stupor that held her in its chains.

Mme. Lorraine had been more clever than any one suspected. She had given the drug to her victim in a cup of tea, before she went out to the garden. Consequently the narcotic was already working in her veins when she flung herself at Van Zandt's feet, imploring his aid, and in a very few minutes after he had left her she fell into a heavy sleep upon the garden-seat, her last coherent thought being of him who had promised to save her from the perils that threatened her young life.

Carmontelle gazed with deep pity and strong emotion on the piquant and exquisitely lovely face, realizing that that beauty had well-nigh proved a fatal dower to the forlorn girl.

Deep, strong emotion stirred the man's heart as he gazed, and he vowed to himself that however friendless, nameless, and lowly born was the girl, she should never want a friend and protector again.

"I am rich and well-born, and she shall share all I have. When she leaves the Convent of Le Bon Berger, it shall be as Madame Carmontelle, my loved and honored wife, not the Little Nobody of to-night," he mused. "I will teach her to love me in the years while she remains a pupil at the convent."

In such thoughts as these the time passed quickly, although the convent was several miles from Esplanade Street, and in the suburbs of the city. At length the carriage paused before the dark conventual walls and towers, the driver sprung down from his seat and came to the door with the announcement:

"Le Bon Berger."

"*Très bien.* Wait."

He drew a memorandum-book from an inner pocket, and hastily penciled some lines upon a sheet of paper.

"Madame la Superieure,—Pardon this late intrusion, and for God's dear sake admit me to a brief interview. I have brought a poor, little helpless lamb to the Good Shepherd.

Pierre Carmontelle."

"Take that," he said, hastily folding it across. "Ring the bell, and present it to the janitor. Tell him Madame la Superieure must have it at once. Say I am waiting in distress and impatience."

The man crossed the wide pave and rang the gate bell. There was some little delay, then a stone slide slipped from its place in the high gate, and the janitor's cross, sleepy face appeared in the aperture. He was decidedly averse to receiving Carmontelle's orders. It was against the rules admitting visitors at this hour. The superior had retired.

Carmontelle sprung hastily from the carriage and approached him with a potent argument—perhaps a golden one—for he took the note and disappeared, while the Louisianian went back to his carriage to wait what seemed an inconceivably long space of time, restless and uneasy in the doubts that began to assail his mind.

"If she refuses," he thought, in terror, and his senses quailed at the thought. In all the wide city he could think of no home that would receive his charge if the convent turned her from its doors.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he began to mutter to himself, in fierce disquietude, when suddenly he heard the grating of a heavy key in a huge lock, the falling of bolts and bars, and the immense gate opened gingerly, affording a glimpse of the janitor's face and form against the background of a garden in riotous bloom, while beyond towered the massive convent walls.

"*Entrez,*" the man said, civilly; and Carmontelle seized his still unconscious burden joyfully, and made haste to obey.

The janitor uttered an exclamation of surprise when he saw that strange burden, then he led the way, Carmontelle eagerly following, until they reached the convent door. It opened as if by an unseen power, and they went along a cold, dimly lighted hall to a little reception-room where two gentle, pale-faced nuns were waiting with the mother superior to receive the midnight visitor. She was a tall, graceful, sweet-faced woman as she stood between the two, her slender white hands moving restlessly along the beads of her rosary.

"My son," she uttered, in surprise, as he advanced and laid the still form of Little Nobody down upon a low sofa, drawing back the heavy cloak and showing what it hid—the fair young girl in the loose, white slip, and the wealth of ruddy, golden curls.

He looked up at her with a face strangely broken up from its usual calm.

"Madame, holy mother, I have brought you a pupil," he said, "and I have to confide a strange story to your keeping." He glanced at the sweet-faced, quiet nuns. "Perhaps it were better to speak to you alone?" he said, questioningly.

"No, you need not fear the presence of these gentle sisters of the Good Shepherd. No secrets ever pass beyond these walls," the mother superior answered, with grave, calm dignity.

CHAPTER IX

Carmontelle saw the three nuns looking apprehensively at the pale, still face of his charge, and said, reassuringly:

"Do not be alarmed. It is not death, although it looks so much like it. The girl is only in a drugged sleep."

"But, monsieur—" began the mother superior, indignantly, when she was interrupted by his equally indignant disclaimer:

"It is none of my work. Wait until I tell you my story."

And he immediately related it without reserve. All three listened with eager interest.

"Now you know all," he said, at last, "and I will be perfectly frank with you regarding my intentions. I am rich, and have none to oppose my will. I wish to educate this unfortunate girl and make her my wife."

The superioress was gracious enough to say that it was a most laudable intention.

"You will aid me, then? You will receive her as a pupil, train and educate her in a manner befitting the position she will fill as my wife?" eagerly.

"*Oui*, monsieur," she replied, instantly; and he nearly overwhelmed her with thanks.

"I leave her in your care, then," he said, finally, as he pressed a check for a large amount into her hand. "Now I will not intrude upon you longer at this unseemly hour, but to-morrow I will call to see how she fares, and to make arrangements."

He paused a minute to anxiously scan the pale, sweet, sleeping face, and then hurried away, eager to learn how Van Zandt had fared in his valiant effort at holding his pursuer at bay. Springing into the carriage again, he gave the order:

"Back to Esplanade Street."

The mettlesome horses trotted off at a lively pace through the quiet, almost deserted streets, and in a short space of time they drew up in front of Mme. Lorraine's residence.

All was still and silent there. The front windows were closed and dark, and the clear moonlight shone upon the bare pavement—bare, where but a little while ago had lain the forms of the two vanquished contestants.

Carmontelle looked at the dark, silent front of the house for a moment in doubt and indecision. He felt intuitively that behind its dark portals was the knowledge he desired, that Mme. Lorraine could tell him how the contest had fared after his departure.

Anxiety conquered his reluctance to arouse the household at that late hour. He again left the carriage, and in crossing the pavement to the door, slipped and fell in a pool of blood yet wet and warm.

Horried, he held up his hands with the dark fluid dripping from them.

"So, then, blood has been shed!" he exclaimed, and rang a furious peal on madame's door-bell.

"Whew! that was loud enough to wake the dead!" ejaculated the attentive driver from his box; but apparently Mme. Lorraine was a very sound sleeper indeed, for repeated ringings of the bell elicited no response.

In despair, Carmontelle was forced to go away, although quite satisfied in his own mind that Mme. Lorraine had heard, but refused to respond through malice prepense.

He drove next to Eliot Van Zandt's hotel, and met the startling information that the young man had not been in that night.

"*Mon Dieu!* what has become of the brave lad?" he ejaculated, in alarm; then, fiercely: "I will seek out Remond, and force the truth from him at the point of my sword!"

Fortunately for the now wearied horses, Remond's hotel was but a few squares further; but here he met the puzzling information that Remond had left an hour before, having given up his rooms, and declared his intention of not returning.

In the dim, strange light of the waning moon, Carmontelle grew strangely pale.

"There is some mystery at the bottom of all this!" he asserted.

But, baffled on every side in his efforts after information, he concluded to give up the quest until day; so was driven to his own lodgings in the pale glimmer of the dawn-light that now began to break over the quaint old city.

Weary and dispirited, with a vague presentiment of evil, he flung himself on his bed, and a heavy stupor stole over him, binding his faculties in a lethargic slumber from which he did not arouse until the new day began to wax toward its meridian.

CHAPTER X

He had given his valet no instructions to arouse him; therefore the man let him sleep on uninterruptedly, thinking that his master had been "making a night of it," in the slang phrase that prevails among gay fellows. So, when he awakened and rang his bell, the midday sunshine followed François into the quiet chamber and elicited an exclamation of dismay.

"*Diable!* François, why did you not call me?"

"Monsieur gave me no instructions," smoothly.

"True; but you should have aroused me anyhow, you rascal!" irascibly. "Now, hurry up, and get me out of this as quick as possible!"

His toilet completed, he swallowed a cup of coffee, munched a few morsels of a roll, and was off—appetite failing in his eagerness to get at Van Zandt. On his way to the hotel he dropped in at the club. No information was found there. Neither Van Zandt nor Remond had been in the rooms since yesterday.

He hastened on to the journalist's modest hotel, only to be confronted with the news that Eliot had not yet returned. Since he had dined, at eight o'clock last evening, he had not been seen by any one in the house. His room had remained unoccupied since yesterday.

Carmontelle sickened and shuddered at thought of the blood before madame's door last night.

"It is plain that Van Zandt was the one who was wounded, since Remond was seen at his hotel last night after the accident. Great heavens! what mystery is here? Is he dead, the brave lad? and have they hidden his body to conceal the crime? I must find out the truth and avenge his death, poor boy!"

He flung himself again into his carriage and was driven to that beautiful fiend's—to the home of the woman who had so heartlessly plotted the ruin of the helpless, innocent girl.

She was at home, looking cool, fair, and graceful in a *recherché* morning-robe garnished with yards on yards of creamy laces and lavender ribbons. She was twirling some cards in her jeweled fingers.

"Ah, monsieur, I have cards to the reception at Trevor's next week. Are you going? Perhaps you have come to say that you will attend me there?"

The coquettish smile faded at the scowl he turned upon her face.

"Madame, where is Van Zandt?" he blurted out, brusquely.

It was no wonder she had been such a star upon the dramatic stage. Her puzzled air, the wondering glance of her bright, dark eyes, were perfect.

"Monsieur—Van Zandt!" she repeated, in gentle wonder. "How should I know? I assure you he has not been here since last night."

"Yes, I know," impatiently. "But what happened to him last night? Did Remond kill him here, at your door, where I found the pool of blood when I came back to look for him?"

Her eyes flashed.

"Ah, then it was you, monsieur, that carried off poor Remond's bride?" with a low laugh of amusement.

"Answer my question, if you please, Madame Lorraine," sternly. "Tell me—did Remond kill our young Yankee friend last night?"

Madame threw back her handsome head, and laughed heartlessly.

"*Ma foi*, how can I tell? When I saw the two fools were fighting desperately, I ran in, locked my door, and went to bed. *Mon Dieu*, I did not want to be a witness in a murder trial!"

"And you did not peep out of the window?" cynically.

"*Ma foi*, no! I was too frightened. I did not want to see or hear! I put my head under the bed-clothes, and went to sleep."

"Heartless woman! After you had caused all the mischief!" indignantly.

"I deny it!" cried Mme. Lorraine, artlessly, fixing her big, reproachful eyes on his face. "I can not understand what all this fuss is about. I did but arrange a marriage for my pretty ward, French-fashion, with Remond, rich, in love with her, and a splendid *parti*. But the little rebel pouted, flirted, and held him at bay till he was wild with love and jealousy. She was romantic. I proposed that he run off with her and win her heart by a *coup d'état*. The priest was ready. All would have gone well but for the cursed intermeddling of that sneaking Yankee. I hate him! What did he have to do with her that he should break off the match? Do you say Remond has killed him?"

She had poured it all out in voluble French, protestingly, and with an air of the completest innocence, but she met only a furious frown.

"Madame, your airs of innocence are quite thrown away," he replied. "Your treachery is known. You would have sold that poor girl to a life that was worse than death. Your bargain in the garden was overheard," sternly. "Do you know what you have brought upon your head, traitress? Social ostracism and complete disgrace! The Jockey Club that has upheld you by its notice so many years, will desert you in a body. We can not horsewhip you as we shall Remond, but we shall hold you up to the scorn of the world."

"Mercy, monsieur!" she gasped, faintly, dropped her face in her hands, and dissolved in tears.

He had expected that she would scorn him, defy him, but this softer mood confounded him. He could not bear a woman's tears.

He sat and watched her in silence a few minutes, fidgeting restlessly, then said, curtly:

"Come, come, it is too late for tears unless they are tears of repentance for your sin."

Madame flung up her hands with a tragic gesture.

"*Mon Dieu*, how cruelly I have been misunderstood! I do not deny the plot in the garden, but the listener surely did not hear all. Remond was to marry the girl, I swear it! Poor little motherless lamb! do you think I would have allowed any one to harm a hair of her head? Oh, you wrong me bitterly! You have been deceived, misled."

She flung herself with sudden, inimitable grace on her knees at his feet.

"Carmontelle, you should know me better than this!" she cried. "I swear to you it was only a harmless plot to make her Remond's wife. It would have been better for her to have a home and protector, I—I am so poor," weeping, "I have lost so heavily at play that there is a mortgage on my home, and I could not keep the girl much longer; I must retrench my expenses. Yet only for this I am to be ostracised, disgraced, held up to the scorn of my friends. Ah, you are cruel, unjust to me. Oh, spare me, spare me! Say nothing until you can prove these charges true."

What a consummate actress! what a clever liar she was! Doubt began to invade his mind. Had Van Zandt misunderstood her words?

"Madame Lorraine," he said, sternly, "get up from the floor and listen to me. I will give you the benefit of a doubt. I will try to believe that your infamous plot went no further than the trying to force that helpless child into a hated union. Even that was infamy enough. Talk not to me of your French marriages. I despise them. But I will say nothing to the world—yet. I will not wrong you until I make sure."

"Bless you, noble Carmontelle!" she cried, seizing his hand and pressing passionate kisses upon it. He drew it coldly away, and said, dryly:

"If you really feel grateful for my clemency, tell me what you know about Van Zandt and Remond. I can not find either one, and I fear that something terrible has happened to the noble young Bostonian."

She swore by all the saints that she knew nothing, had heard nothing since the pistol-shot last night.

"I was so frightened I did not wait to see who was shot. I just ran in and went to bed. I did not want to be a witness of anything so terrible!" she shuddered.

"You swear you are not deceiving me, madame?" sternly.

"I swear by all the saints," fervently.

"Then I must search farther for my missing friend," he said, sadly, as he turned to go.

She caught his arm eagerly.

"Now tell me what you have done with the little baggage who has caused all this trouble? By Heaven, Carmontelle, if harm come to my little daughter through you, I will hold you to account!"

"Daughter!" he echoed, bewilderedly, and she answered, dauntlessly:

"Yes, my daughter. The secret is out at last, the secret of my shame! She was born before I met Lorraine. Her father was—well, no matter who, since he was a villain. Well, I put the child out to nurse, and made an honest marriage. Then the woman followed me with the child, and I had to invent a story to account for her to Lorraine. Now I am free to claim her, and you see that the law will support me in demanding her restoration to my care!"

They stood looking at each other silently a moment, then Carmontelle answered, angrily:

"Madame, I do not believe you. This is only one of a dozen different stories you have told to account for the possession of that child. Your last claim is made in order to support a claim for her return to you. The pretext will not avail you. The little ma'amselle is in safe hands, where she shall remain until she is trained and educated up to the standard necessary for my wife."

"Your wife?" she gasped, white with jealous fury.

"I have said it," he answered, coldly, and strode abruptly from the house.

Mme. Lorraine fell down for a moment on the sofa in furious hysterics. Carmontelle, her princely adorer, had scorned, defied her; Van Zandt knew her guilt and despised her; worst of all, the little scapegoat of her tempers, her beautiful slave, the hated Little Nobody, had escaped her clutches. Furies!

But suddenly she sprung up like a wild creature, tore open the door that Carmontelle had slammed together, and rushed after him. He was just entering his carriage when her frantic hand arrested him and drew him forcibly back.

"Come into the house; I must speak with you further. Do not shake your head," wildly. "It is a matter of life and death!"

He suffered her to drag him back into the salon. She turned her shining eyes upon his face with a half-maniacal gleam in them.

"The girl—had she awakened when you saw her last?" hoarsely.

"No," he replied.

She smote her forehead fiercely with one ringed white hand.

"My soul! I do not want to have murder on my hands. You must find Remond. I gave him the little vial with the antidote."

"The antidote?" he stammered, almost stupidly.

"Yes, the antidote. She is under the influence of a strange drug. I bought the two vials long ago from an old hag in the East as a curiosity, you see. One drug was to bring sleep, the other to wake at will. Without—" she paused, and her voice broke.

"Without—" he echoed, hoarsely; and in a frightened, guilty voice, she muttered:

"The one, without the other means—death!"

"Fiend!" he hissed, fiercely.

"No, no; do not blame me. I meant no ill. I gave Remond the antidote, to be used when they reached the end of their journey. How could I know you would take the girl from him and hide her? How could I know he would disappear? Find Remond quickly, or her death will lie at your door."

"You speak the truth?" he cried, wildly.

"Before God and the angels, monsieur!"

With a smothered oath he thrust her from him and rushed out again, leaped into the carriage, and gave his orders:

"Like the wind, to the detective agency."

It was two miles distant, and the panting horses were covered with foam when they set him down at his destination. Fortunately the familiar face of the most skillful detective in New Orleans looked at him in surprise from the pavement. He beckoned him into the vehicle.

In words as brief and comprehensive as possible he explained what he wanted done. He must find Remond at once—find him and bring him to the Convent of Le Bon Berger.

"A life hangs on his hands," he said, feverishly. "Tell him not to fail to bring with him the antidote he received last night."

"I will find him if he is in the city," the detective promised, ardently; and full of zeal, inspired not only by love for his profession, but genuine anxiety and grief over the startling case just confided to him, he sprung from the carriage to set about his task.

And Carmontelle, with his mind full of Little Nobody, gave the order again:

"To the convent!"

He was possessed by the most torturing anxiety over his little charge, and doubt over madame's startling assertion.

"Horrible! horrible! What possessed her to use a drug so deadly?" he thought, wildly. "Oh, it can not be true! I shall find her awake and waiting for me, the poor lamb! Madame Lorraine only invented that story to torture me."

He spoke feverishly to the driver:

"Faster, faster!"

The man replied, in a conciliatory tone:

"Monsieur, I dare not. I should be arrested for fast driving, and your speed would be hindered, not helped, by such a course."

He knew that it was true, and with a groan sunk back in his seat and resigned himself with what patience he could to the moderate pace of the horses. It seemed hours, although it was but thirty minutes, before they drew up again before the dark, grim building where he had left his charge the night before.

The janitor admitted him without any parley this time; but Carmontelle was so eager that he did not notice the solemn, sympathetic look with which the man regarded him. He rushed without delay to the presence of the mother superior.

When she saw him, her countenance expressed the greatest dismay. She crossed herself piously and ejaculated, sorrowfully:

"Oh, monsieur, monsieur, you have come at last!"

"Madame, holy mother!" he cried, agitatedly, and paused, unable to proceed further. Something in her face and voice filled him with dread.

"Oh, my son!" she uttered, sorrowfully, and speech, too, seemed to fail her. She regarded him in a pathetic silence mixed with deep pity.

He made a great effort to speak, to overcome the horror that bound him hand and foot. A terrible fear was upon him. What if she had not wakened yet?

With that awful thought, he gasped and spoke:

"Where is she?"

"Oh, *mon Dieu!* oh, holy Mother of Jesus, comfort him!" cried the good nun, piously. She advanced and touched him compassionately. "God help you, my poor son. She—she—has not awakened—yet."

He turned his pale, frightened face toward her.

"She sleeps?" he questioned, eagerly; and with a holy compassion in her trembling voice, she replied:

"Yes, my son, she sleeps—in Jesus."

"Dead?" he almost shrieked, and she answered, solemnly:

"Yes."

She thought he was about to faint, his face grew so pale and his form reeled so unsteadily; but he threw out one hand and caught the back of a chair to sustain himself, while a hollow groan came from his lips:

"Too late!"

With tears in her eyes, the good nun continued:

"The little girl never awakened from the deep sleep in which you brought her here. We made every effort to arouse her, but all in vain. She sunk deeper and deeper into lethargy, her breathing growing fainter and fainter, and at last it ceased altogether."

"When?" he questioned, huskily.

"Three hours ago," she replied.

If it had not been for her sacred presence, Carmontelle would have broken into passionate execrations of the wicked woman who had caused the death of that sweet young girl. As it was, he stood before her dazed and silent, almost stunned by the calamities that had befallen him since last night.

Van Zandt had mysteriously disappeared, and Little Nobody was dead. The one, he feared and dreaded, had been murdered by Remond in his fury; the other lay dead, the victim of Mme. Lorraine's cruel vengeance.

"Come," said the nun, breaking in on his bitter thoughts; "she lies in the chapel. You will like to look at her, monsieur."

He followed her silently, and the low, monotonous sound of the chant for the dead came to his ears like a knell as they went on along the narrow hall to the darkened chapel, where the weeping nuns lay prostrate before the altar, mumbling over the prayers for the dead, and an old, white-haired priest in flowing robes bent over his book. Carmontelle saw none of these. He had eyes for nothing but that black-draped coffin before the altar, with wax-candles burning at head and foot, shedding a pale, sepulchral light on that fair young face and form that such a little while ago had been full of life, and health, and vigor.

He stood like one turned to stone—speechless, breathless—gazing at that exquisitely lovely face, so faultlessly molded, and so beautiful even in the strange pallor of death, with the dark lashes lying so heavily against the cheeks and the lips closed in such a strange, sweet calm.

His heart swelled with love, and grief, and pity. Poor child! she had had such a strange, desolate life, and she had died without a name and without a friend, save for him who stood beside her now, his face pale and moved, as he looked upon her lying like a broken lily in her coffin, with the strange, weird light sifting through the stained-glass windows on her calm face, and the monotonous chants and prayers making a solemn murmur through the vaulted chapel.

"Is it death or heavy sleep?" he asked himself, with a sudden throb of hope; and he touched reverently the little hands that were crossed over a white lily the nuns had lovingly placed there. Alas! they were icy cold! His hope fled. "Too late! too late! If they find Remond, it will be all in vain," he muttered, and the mother superior looked at him inquiringly.

Impulsively he told her all, and the nuns, at their prayers, murmured aves and paters more softly, that they might listen; the old priest, with his head bent over his book, lost not a word. It was a romance from that wicked outer world from which the convent walls shut them in, a breath of life and passion from the "bewildering masquerade" of existence, where

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