Le Queux William

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
The Soul of Princess Tchikhatzoff

Wrapped in furs until only my nose and eyes were visible, I was walking along the Nevski Prospekt in St. Petersburg one winter's evening, and almost involuntarily turned into the Dominique, that fashionable restaurant which, garish in its blaze of electricity, is situated in the most frequented part of the long, broad thoroughfare. It was the dining-hour, and the place, heated by high, grotesquely-ornamented stoves, was filled with officers, ladies, and cigarette smoke, while the savoury smell of national dishes mingled judiciously with those of foreign lands.

At the table next the one at which I seated myself were two persons, a man and a woman.

The former, who was about fifty, had a military bearing, a pair of keen black eyes, closely-cropped iron-grey hair, and a well-trimmed bushy beard. The woman was young, fair haired, and pretty. Her eyes were clear and blue, her face oval and flawless in its beauty, and she was attired in a style that showed her to be a patrician, wearing over her low-cut evening dress a velvet

shuba, lined with Siberian fox; her soft velvet cap was edged with costly otter, and the *bashlyk* she had removed from her head was of Orenberg goat-wool. On her slim white fingers some fine diamonds flashed, and in the bodice of her dress was a splendid ornament of the same glittering gems, in the shape of a large double heart.

As our eyes met, there appeared something about her gaze that struck me as strange. Her delicately-moulded face was utterly devoid of animation; her eyes had a stony stare – that fixed, unwavering glance that one sees in the glazed eyes of the dead.

Having poured out a glass of the Brauneberger I had ordered, and taken a slight draught, I caught sight of a man I knew who was just leaving, and, jumping up, rushed after him. We remained chatting a few moments in the vestibule, and on returning, I sat down to my soup.

My neighbours were an incongruous pair. The man, who spoke the dialect of the South, was uttering words in a low, earnest tone with a curious, intense look in his eyes, and an expression on his dark, sinister features that filled me with surprise and repulsion. Notwithstanding his excited manner, his fair *vis-à-vis* remained perfectly calm, gazing at him wonderingly, and answering his questions wearily, in abrupt monosyllables.

Once she turned to me with what I thought was a glance of mute appeal. At last they finished their dessert, and when the man had paid the bill, he rose, exclaiming —

"Come, Agàfia, we must be moving!"

"You – you must go alone," she said quickly, passing her hand wearily across her brow. "I have that strange sensation again, as if my brain is benumbed. My forehead seems on fire, and I can think of nothing except – except the enormity of my terrible crime."

And she shuddered.

"Fool! some one will overhear you," he whispered, with an imprecation. "You are only faint. The drive will revive you."

As she rose mechanically, he fastened her *shuba*, then, taking her roughly by the arm, led her out.

Finishing my meal leisurely, I afterwards sat for a long time over my tea and cigar, until I gradually became aware that my mind was wandering strangely, and a curious, apprehensive feeling was oppressing me, causing me considerable uneasiness. Tossing the cigar away, I pulled myself together, rose, and went out.

The thermometer was below zero, and in the keen night air my head felt better, yet as I walked along my senses seemed dulled. The one vivid impression, however, that remained on my mind was the calm, beautiful face of the girl who, by a slip of the tongue, had confessed to some mysterious crime. Walking on under the dark walls of the palace of Sergiei Alexandrovitch, embellished with its highly-coloured saints and heads of seraphim, I was suddenly amazed at seeing her standing before me. But a moment later I laughed heartily, when I saw

that her form was a mere vagary of the imagination. The face, however, seemed so distorted by passion and indignation as to appear hideous, and in vain I endeavoured to account for its appearance.

On the Anitchkoff Bridge I paused, and as I leaned over to watch the skating carnival in progress, there was a movement behind me, and I heard words uttered in a low half-whisper —

"To-night. On the table!"

I turned quickly, but the unknown messenger was already some distance away, walking as quickly as his clumsy sheepskin would allow.

It was a summons from the Party of Political Right – the so-called Nihilists! On one occasion, during my residence in the Russian capital, as correspondent of a London daily newspaper, I had been able to render the Terrorists an important service, and being in sympathy with their attempt to free their country from the terrible yoke of Tzardom, I sometimes attended their secret meetings.

The message I had received prompted me to take a drosky to an unfashionable little tea-shop a few doors from the entrance to the Gostinny Dvor Bazaar. Having seated myself, and ordered a cup of tea and a cigarette, I leaned my arms on the little round marble table, and, without attracting notice, proceeded to examine it minutely.

Strange as it may seem, this table was the private notice-board of the Nihilists. The proprietor was a member of the Circle, and

this was considered one of the safest means of communication. In a few moments I discovered what I sought; a line in English, very faintly traced with a lead pencil, which read, "Come at eleven to-night, certain." For nearly an hour I remained smoking and chatting with the genial proprietor, then, after rubbing out the message, bade him adieu and left.

Shortly before eleven I strolled down one of the narrow, squalid streets that led to the Neva, halted before a little bakery, and having rapped three times at a side door, was admitted. Passing to the end of a long, dark passage, I bent, groped about until I found an iron ring in the floor, and pulled up a large flap, from beneath which came a flood of light. Then I descended the ladder, and, walking into an underground kitchen, found myself in the presence of the Revolutionary Executive Committee.

As I glanced round quickly, I saw a stranger – a woman, with her back turned towards me, and holding in her hand a bright, keen knife. She stood looking up at the *ikon* upon the wall. The president from his seat at the head of the table had apparently been addressing her.

"I agree to the conditions," she was replying, in Russian, in harsh, strained tones. "I bind myself irrevocably, by my solemn oath before this holy picture, to strike any such blow for liberty as the Circle may direct."

There was something in her form that struck me as curious, and as she slowly raised the knife to her lips, and kissed the thin, double-edged blade, I rushed across and looked into her face.

It was the woman I had noticed in the Dominique! She had taken an oath to commit murder at the bidding of the Revolutionists! There was the same fixed look in her eyes, the same blank, expressionless countenance, and as she turned and faced the council of desperate conspirators, her teeth were firmly set and her bejewelled hands tightly-clenched.

As her eyes met mine, I fancied she started, but the words of the president attracted her attention.

"It is enough," he said solemnly. "To-morrow you will receive instructions. You have joined us, therefore never forget that the punishment inflicted on those who divulge our secret is always swift and decisive – death!"

A shudder ran through her, the knife fell from her grasp, and she reeled and would have fallen, had not an elderly, grey-haired woman jumped up from her seat and caught her.

In a few moments, however, she recovered, and the pair walked slowly out.

When they had left, I inquired the name of the mysterious stranger, but all information was refused. Secrecy is one of the chief tenets of the Nihilistic creed, and frequently members of the same Circle do not know one another. The Terrorist organisations are most elaborate and far-reaching, and the more I have known of their operations, the more wonderful they have always seemed. The business of the Executive with me was unimportant – merely to give me some information which I might send to London, and which, when published in my journal,

would be calculated to take the police off the scent of a fugitive conspirator who was being diligently sought for by the ubiquitous members of the Third Section of the Ministry of the Interior.

When I left, half an hour later, I went straight to my bachelor lodgings in a tall and rather gloomy house on the other side of the Moika. Lighting a cigarette, and drawing my armchair close to the stove, I sat for a long time in my dimly-lighted sitting-room, pondering over the events of the evening. How long I sat there I have no idea, but I was aroused by distinctly hearing a woman's shrill scream. At the same time, I felt a tight pressure on my right wrist, as if it were being held by bony fingers, and on my throat I felt a strange, cold sensation, as if a knife had been drawn across it.

Again I was mystified on discovering that I was alone; that it was nothing but a weird sensation! Yet, on removing the green shade from my reading-lamp, and going over to the mirror, I saw upon my throat *a thin red line*, while upon my wrist were three red marks that had apparently been left by unseen fingers!

During the weeks that followed, I seemed filled with a terrible dread of some utterly vague danger, and before my eyes came frequent visions of the pale, handsome face of the beautiful woman who had allied herself with the most dangerous group of the Narodnaya Volya. Was there, I wondered, some mysterious affinity between us? So puzzled was I to account for the strange phenomena, and the fact that the curious marks upon my wrist still remained, that I began to fear that the periodical fits of

passion and despair were precursory of madness.

Lounging aimlessly along the streets in the hope of meeting her, I was walking one afternoon along the English Quay, when a drosky drove swiftly past, and pulled up before one of the great palaces that face the Neva. A woman, wrapped in costly furs, alighted, and in a moment I recognised her. As I approached, she halted, with her eyes fixed upon me, her mouth slightly open, and the same curiously blank expression on her countenance. At first I was prompted to stop and speak, but the tall man-servant in livery who had thrown open the great door looked down upon me with suspicion, therefore I hesitated, and walked on.

As I brushed past her, I thought I heard a long sigh, and, turning, I was just in time to see her enter the palace, saluted by the gigantic *dvornik*.

Stumbling blindly on for a few hundred paces, I met a man I knew, and, pointing out the house, asked him who lived there.

"The woman has enmeshed you, eh?" he suggested, laughing. "Well, you are not the first who has been smitten by her extraordinary charms."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Flirtation is a dangerous pastime here, in Petersburg," he replied, shrugging his shoulders ominously. "Especially so if one's idol is Agàfia Ivanovna, the Princess Tchikhatzoff."

"Princess?" I echoed, in surprise.

Then, linking my arm in his, I begged him to tell me what he knew of her. But he only replied —

"I really cannot tell you anything, *mon cher*, except her name. Ugly rumours were once afloat, but perhaps the least said of her the better."

And, waving his hand and wishing me a hurried adieu, he went on.

A month later, having received instructions from London to proceed to the cholera-infected districts of Vologda, in order to describe the hospitals, I had obtained the necessary permit from the Ministry of the Interior, and one evening had taken my seat in the mail train for Moscow. Scarcely had I arranged my traps and prepared for the long night journey, when a rather shabbily-attired female appeared at the carriage door.

"M'sieur," she exclaimed in a soft, musical voice. "It is M'sieur Wentworth that I address, is it not?"

Replying in the affirmative I alighted.

"You are going to Pavlova, in Vologda?" she said in broken English. "I – I am in a great difficulty – a great danger threatens me. If you would only render me a service, I should indeed owe my life to you."

"What can I do?" I asked.

"I have here a message to a – a friend who is lying ill of cholera in the hospital at Pavlova;" and she drew forth a letter from under her faded shawl.

"You wish me to deliver it?"

"Yes," she replied anxiously. "Were I able to travel, I would not ask this favour; but only the journalists are allowed to pass

the cordon, and the post is suspended for fear of infection."

I took the letter slowly from her hand, and as I did so, was amazed to discover that on her slim white wrist there were three red marks, exactly similar to those I bore!

"I shall be pleased to act as your messenger," I said, placing the letter in my pocket; "you may rest assured it will be delivered safely, Princess."

"You recognise me, then?" she cried, starting back. "I – "

But her sentence remained unfinished, for the train was moving off slowly, and I had barely time to scramble in without bidding her adieu.

The mid-winter journey by sleigh through the remote, plague-stricken district, where poverty, disease, and death were rife on every hand, was a terrible experience. The distress and suffering I witnessed is photographed indelibly on the tablets of my memory. Not without difficulty, I one night found Nikanôr Baranovitch, the addressee of the letter, who was lying on the point of death in the filthy log-built hospital. He was young, dark-haired, emaciated, but still conscious. When I handed him the missive, he tore it open eagerly and read it by the aid of the guttering candle I held.

Suddenly his face was convulsed by anger, and, crying, "Agàfia – Agàfia!" he uttered fearful imprecations in Russian. Then, crushing the letter in his hand, he thrust it into the flame of the candle, and in a moment the flimsy paper was consumed.

Gasping a word of thanks to me, and crying for the vengeance

of heaven to descend upon some person he did not name, he sank wearily back upon the dirty straw pallet, and a few moments later had passed to the land that lies beyond human ken.

Two years had gone by. I was back again in England, writing descriptions of events at home, and holding myself in readiness to journey to any quarter of the globe, should occasion arise.

Frequently in my day-dreams the countenance of the Princess Agàfia Ivanovna passed before me, always serious, always haggard, always intense.

When, after my journey through Vologda, I returned to the capital, the Tchikhatzoff Palace was closed, and the only information the burly *dvornik* would vouchsafe was that the Princess had gone abroad.

I longed to penetrate the mystery surrounding her, and obtain some explanation of the extraordinary coincidence of the marks upon her wrist and mine. I had never been entirely myself since first seeing her. Some strange, occult spell seemed to enthrall me, for the phenomena I had experienced were remarkable, while the varied mental sensations were utterly mystifying.

Horribly morbid thoughts constantly oppressed me. Sometimes they were of murder, which I felt impelled to commit, even though the very suggestion was repugnant. At others, in moments of blank despair, I contemplated the easiest modes of suicide; while through all, I cherished a deadly hatred towards some person of whose identity I had not the remotest notion.

In the months that had elapsed after returning to England, I

had gradually grown callous to mental anguish; yet the bodily pain I frequently experienced in the wrists and across the forehead was remarkably strange, inasmuch as livid marks would sometimes appear on my arms without any apparent cause, and disappear as suddenly as they came.

Through the hot August days I was idling in that part of Norfolk that is justly termed Poppyland, making my headquarters at a farmhouse near Cromer. I had been unusually perturbed regarding Agàfia Ivanovna, and such an intense longing to see her had seized me, that I even contemplated returning to Petersburg.

One very hot afternoon, while sitting on the bench outside the house calmly smoking, some unknown force prompted me to rise and set out for a long walk along the cliffs. I had no motive for doing this, yet a lichen-covered stile, nearly five miles in the direction of Yarmouth, was fixed in my mind as my destination, and I felt myself compelled to reach it.

The sun blazed down mercilessly, notwithstanding the cool breeze that had sprung up, and sparkling waves were breaking with sad music on the shingly beach. Engrossed in my own thoughts, I had sped on, and was just approaching the stile, when the rustle of a woman's dress startled me, and I saw a graceful form clad in cream-coloured serge, with a bright ribbon at the waist, standing before me.

I recognised her features. It was Agàfia!

"You, Princess?" I cried in astonishment, grasping her hand.

But she uttered a low scream, and, twisting her fingers from mine, dashed swiftly away. I was unable to overtake her, for, taking a desperate leap, she alighted on a projecting rock, and, scrambling down among the bushes, descended the precipitous face of the cliff and disappeared.

Not daring to follow, I remained breathless and bewildered for about half an hour, and at length turned my heavy steps again towards Cromer.

While walking in London's *al fresco* pleasure exchange, the Row, one bright spring afternoon, exchanging salutes with those I knew, a brilliantly-varnished carriage, drawn by a magnificent pair of bays, suddenly passed me. Notwithstanding the rapid pace at which it was driven, I caught a glimpse of the tip of a tiny bronze shoe stretched against the cushion of the front seat, the fold of a light fawn dress, and under a lace-fringed sunshade a fair face – the face of Agàfia Ivanovna, Princess Tchikhatzoff.

Until the equipage turned out of the Park, I kept it in sight; then I jumped into a hansom, and followed, until I watched her alight and enter one of the largest houses in Queen's Gate. On inquiry, I ascertained that the house had been taken furnished for the season by a young foreign lady, whose name nobody seemed to know.

That evening, after dining at the club, I sat in the smoking-room, shrinking with horror from some terrible deed that I seemed forced to commit. Then gradually there crept over me that strange attraction that drew me irresistibly towards her; until

at last, unable to remain, I put on my hat and drove to the house.

"I wish to see the Princess," I said, giving my card to the grave, elderly man-servant who opened the door.

Bowing, he ushered me into a small, well-furnished room and disappeared. The moment he had gone, I heard voices speaking rapidly in Russian in the next apartment. Agàfia was addressing some man, and I thought I heard her utter my name, and refuse to see me. The rooms communicated by means of folding-doors, and, determined to speak with her, I turned the handle and entered.

The scene that met my gaze was only momentary, but it was one of tragedy. In a low lounge chair a young man was sitting, calmly smoking a cigarette. He had blonde hair, but his face was turned from me. Stealthily Agàfia crept up behind him, her face distorted by the same terrible look of vengeance that I had sometimes seen in my weird day-dreams. In her uplifted hand something gleamed in the lace-shaded lamplight. It was the knife upon which she had taken the *ikon* oath in Petersburg.

"Princess! At last!" I cried, rushing forward in an endeavour to prevent her from striking the deadly blow at her unsuspecting visitor.

At that moment, however, I felt my hands gripped tightly, and a man flung himself before me. With an imprecation, I tried to push him aside, for I had instantly recognised him as the man who had dined with the Princess at the Dominique.

My senses seemed paralysed. With one hand he held me, and

with the thumb and finger of the other he pressed my temples so tightly that I became dazed. For a moment I was conscious of his sinister face peering into mine, and of a peal of harsh, demoniacal laughter that rang through the room. Then I knew no more.

When I recovered consciousness, I found myself lying in bed in a long hospital ward, with the kind face of my friend, Dr Ferguson, a specialist in mental diseases, looking down upon me.

I had, he told me, been found by the police early one morning lying in a back street in Kensington in a state of collapse, owing to injuries I had received on the head. For a week I had been delirious, and no hope had been entertained for my recovery; but at last I had rallied, and was now gaining strength.

He questioned me, apparently in order to ascertain if my brain had been affected; but it was remarkable that my mind was much clearer than hitherto.

It was many days before I was able to rise, but at last, when I was allowed to go out, I related to him all the circumstances surrounding the mysterious Princess.

Being much interested, he consented to accompany me to the house, and late that evening I placed my revolver in my pocket, and together we took a cab to the corner of Queen's Gate.

Dismissing the man, we walked together to the house, only to find the shutters up and the place deserted. Our knocks and rings having been unanswered, we descended to the area, and after considerable difficulty entered by the kitchen window. By the aid

of a candle we had brought with us, we searched the house, which we found still furnished, although unoccupied, and on the carpet of the room in which I had seen Agàfia was a great dark stain – the stain of blood. Was it mine, or that of the unknown victim?

Ascending to the floor above, we opened the door of the drawing-room, and on glancing round the great, handsome apartment, our eyes fell upon an object that caused us both to start back in amazement.

Attired in a long, loose gown, and chained by her wrists to one of the polished granite columns, was Agàfia!

With her hair unbound, she had sunk at the base of the pillar, and was apparently dead. Evidently she was a prisoner, for the empty jug and plate standing near told their own tale.

As in a moment of passion I bent to kiss her, Ferguson, who had placed his hand upon her breast, took out a lancet and made a slight incision in her arm.

"There is yet life," he said.

"Thank heaven!" I cried. "We must save her."

Opening her eyes, he took the candle and looked intently into them. They still had a fixed, stony stare, and there seemed a film upon them.

Then the doctor, with his forefinger and thumb, stroked her forehead in a downward direction, pressing her temples, saying —

"You shall now awake and feel exactly as you were before that villain placed you under his influence. Come, rouse yourself!

Rouse yourself!"

Several times he repeated this, until at length her eyes twitched, her face flushed, and she gradually became perfectly conscious, answering the doctor's questions quite rationally. But at me she glanced shyly, and blushed.

"She remembers nothing distinctly since she was hypnotised," Ferguson said, "therefore you are a stranger."

I endeavoured to explain that I had delivered the letter she entrusted to me; but she shook her head, saying —

"I only saw you once, in the Dominique Restaurant in Petersburg, when you drank the wine over which Petrovitch Délianoff had made passes during the few moments you were absent."

Ferguson, who was one of the greatest English authorities on hypnotism and a student of the occult, eagerly asked what the man had done.

"He touched my forehead quickly in a curious way," she answered, "and he afterwards dipped his finger in the wine, saying, 'Your sensibility and soul will now leave you and be transferred to this glass of wine. In future you will feel nothing.' Since that time I – I seem to have been in a long dream; I can remember nothing distinctly."

"Ah! I now understand," exclaimed my friend, raising the candle and looking into my eyes. "The man has experimented successfully upon you with the novel method of producing hypnosis recently discovered by Charcot at La Salpêtrière.

Remarkable as it may seem, it is, nevertheless, possible to transfer by suggestion the sensibility of hystero-epileptic subjects to any liquid. On drinking the wine, you absorbed her sensibility, and her very soul thus transferred to you, produced the mysterious affinity of thought and deed. The very singular coincidence of the marks upon your wrists, and the curious magnetic force that impelled you towards her, are nothing more than demonstrations of the powerful psychical influence of the mind on the body."

"What can have been the motive for all this?" I exclaimed, when, after considerable difficulty, we had broken the chains and led her to a chair.

"The motive was gold," she answered in a weak voice. "I – I am the victim of the man Délianoff. Mine has been a tragic career. Three years ago I loved Nikanôr Baranovitch; but, although only eighteen, my mother compelled me to marry the Prince, who was nearly forty years older than myself. It is true he idolised me, but I cannot say that I experienced the least regret when, five months later, he died, leaving me all his wealth. Then, alas! my unhappiness commenced. The management of the estate was left to Délianoff, and there was a clause in the will which provided that if I died, or married Nikanôr, the property should go to Vladimir Lemontzeff, a nephew of the Prince's who was an *attaché* at the Embassy in London.

"Almost as soon as the Prince was buried, Délianoff proceeded to place me under his influence, for, my mother and

most of my near relations being dead, I was utterly alone. The scoundrel was an accomplished hypnotist, and in order to further his villainous scheme, he put cruel rumours in circulation which caused Petersburg society to shun me. His irresistible power of fascination I was unable to withstand, and by hypnotic suggestion he has caused me to hand over to him the greater part of my fortune. He kept me constantly in his thrall by threatening to give information to the police that I had committed murder. This crime he had suggested to me, causing me to believe that I had actually stained my hands with blood. Just at that period I saw you in the Dominique, and, as I have already explained, he practised on you one of his devilish experiments. He was a Nihilist, and on that night he used his influence to induce me to attend a meeting alone, and swear to kill whoever the Executive decided should be removed. Soon afterwards I heard of Nikanôr's illness in Pavlova, and you were good enough to convey to him a letter in which I told him how Délianoff had attempted to cut my throat, and how utterly helpless I was in his hands."

"Nikanôr died, and could not save you," I observed sorrowfully.

"Yes," she sighed; "Délianoffs motive for getting me to take the oath was as ingenious as his other villainies, for, when his plans were complete, he brought me to London, invited Vladimir here, and then, by the exercise of his occult power, he made me believe that the Prince's nephew was the man the Executive had ordered me to kill. But you saved me, for just as I was about

to strike the fatal blow, you entered. Délianoff at that moment came behind you, and, with his curious touch, insinuated in your brain the image of sleep. Of what afterwards occurred I know nothing, for I fainted.

"This scoundrel, who had planned that I should kill Vladimir and afterwards commit suicide, in order that his villainy should not be exposed, was mad with rage at the failure of his plot. When I regained consciousness, he dragged me about the room, brandishing a knife and threatening to murder me; but at last his anger cooled, and his demoniacal ingenuity devised a terrible torture. My passive will was still under his influence, and I could not escape or utter cry when he locked the fetters upon my wrists and chained me to yonder column. For several days he came regularly with food and water, but four days ago, after telling me how he had obtained possession of all that belonged to me, he laughed derisively, and said he should leave me to die of starvation."

"Yes; we were only just in time," the doctor remarked, feeling her pulse, with his eyes upon his watch. "You would have been dead to-morrow."

The Princess had no friends in London, therefore I gave up my chambers to her, taking up quarters at a neighbouring hotel, while the hospital nurse I engaged attended her until she fully recovered.

She can never recover the bulk of her fortune; nevertheless she has the satisfaction of knowing that Délianoff speedily met

with his deserts.

Although ostensibly a Nihilist, it was ascertained that he acted as a spy in the pay of the Secret Police. His end was befitting a coward and a traitor, for while assisting in an attempt to wreck the Winter Palace, he handled a bomb carelessly, with the result that it exploded and killed him.

Some are of opinion that, being an informer, the vengeance of the Narodnaya Volya fell upon him, and I incline to that belief.

Chapter Two.
The Golden Hand

Ramblings, erratic and obsession-dogged, had taken me to Bagnères de Luchon, over the snow-capped Pyrenees by the Porte de Vénasque to Huesca, thence to quaint old Zaragoza and Valencia, and in returning from Madrid I found myself idling away a few days at San Sebastian, that gay and charming watering-place which somebody has termed "the Brighton of Spain." The month was July, the town was filled with Madrileftos attracted by the excellent bathing, and glad to escape the stifling heat and dust of the Castellana or the Calle de Alcala, while the shell-like Concha, or bay, was given up to the *campamento* of bathing-tents.

From my seat in the porch of the Fonda de Ezcurra I gazed upon the beautiful Bay of Zurriola, with its twinkling lights, crowded with a thousand fantastic shadows; I heard the creak of the row-locks and the plashing of oars, and the laughter of girls; and in the deep gloom not far away the faint music of violins and mandolines trembled in the air. So still was the night that the regular throbbing of paddle-wheels from a steamboat not yet visible formed a rumbling undertone to all the other sounds, and the summer moon bathed all things in its mystic light, throwing far out over the water into the Bay of Biscay a bright, shining

pathway.

Across this path boats glided from time to time; on the asphalte walk at the edge of the beach fair flirtatious little dames in graceful mantillas passed to and fro, and as I lit a cigarette, I dreamed and dwelt upon the future.

Presently a neat-ankled waiting-maid came out and handed me a telegram which she said had arrived during dinner, and I rose, sauntered over to where the great light was placed above the door, and opened the dispatch. It gave me satisfaction, for it was an order from the journal I represented to remain there, and transmit by telegraph daily what fresh intelligence I could gather with regard to the political crisis through which Spain was at that moment passing. By reason of the Queen-Regent, the young King, and the Court having left Madrid for San Sebastian a week earlier, the *locale* of the crisis had been removed from the capital, and among those staying at my hotel were Señor Canovas del Castillo, the Conservative leader, Señor Novarro Reverter, Minister of Finance, and Señor Villaverdi, ex-Minister of the Interior, besides several members of the Cortes. In these circumstances the prospect of a week or two at one of the most charming of European health-resorts was by no means distasteful, especially as I saw that I should experience but little difficulty in obtaining such information regarding the situation as I required. A rigorous censorship had been established by the Government over all telegraphic messages sent out of the country, therefore it would be necessary for me to cross the

frontier into France each day, and send off my dispatch from Bayonne.

Thrusting the telegram into my pocket, I lit a fresh cigarette, and lounged away down the Avenida de la Libertad to the Calle del Pozzo; the fine tree-lined promenade behind the Casino, where the life and gaiety of the town had assembled. Under the bright electric rays crowds of well-dressed promenaders were strolling slowly up and down, listening to the strains of a military band, and ever and anon, when the music paused, the chatter and laughter mingled in a din of merriment with the jingle of the many gaily-lit cafés in the vicinity. Carried to and fro the length of the asphalte by the ebb and flow of promenaders, I spent a pleasant hour watching the life around me, and enjoying the cool air after the heat and burden of the glaring day. San Sebastian is noted for the beauty of its female population, and, indeed, I am fain to admit that I saw more beautiful women during that brief hour than it had ever been my lot to meet at Vichy, Etretat, Royat, Arcachon, Biarritz, Nice, or any of the other favoured spots where Dame Society allows her world-weary children to disport themselves at certain seasons. Spanish women know how to dress, but the women of San Sebastian rely not upon the manipulation of the fan nor the arrangement of the mantilla to attract; they are naturally graceful in gait and fair of face.

Two figures in that crowd riveted my attention, but, alas! only for a moment. I gazed upon them, but next instant they were gone, swallowed in that ever-shifting vortex of laughter-loving

pleasure-seekers. Both were attired in black, one an elderly lady with white hair, upon whose refined face care had left deep furrows; the other a tall, graceful girl, scarcely more than nineteen, evidently from the South, whose calm, serious face was even more strikingly handsome than those of the many beauties about her. The *chevelure* had evidently been arranged by a maid of the first order; the mantilla she wore, graceful in every fold, gave to her clear olive complexion an essentially soft and feminine look; her dark eyes were large and languishing, and there was that peculiar grey tint upon the skin that when natural in women of the South is so unusual and so artistic.

For a second, unnoticed by her, I gazed in admiration, but she passed on and was lost. Turning a few moments afterwards, I sped back in the hope of overtaking her and again feasting my eyes upon her incomparable beauty, but though I searched the crowd for fully half an hour, I was compelled to relinquish my self-imposed task, turning at last into the Casino, where, over cigarettes and coffee, I sat chatting to a loquacious old captain of artillery upon the political crisis until the musical carillon of San Vicente chimed the midnight hour. Then, wishing my companion "*Buenas noches*," I rose and strolled back to my hotel, haunted by the sad, sweet face that had passed and vanished like a shadow.

But I had work before me. The relations between England and Spain were strained, and diplomatic negotiations regarding some incidents in Morocco and in Cuba had been rendered more difficult on account of the unexpected overthrow of the Ministry.

The British Government was more interested in the affairs of Spain than it had been for many years, so the British public were eager for the latest intelligence; therefore, when I retired to my room, I was compelled to sit far into the night, writing by the light of a guttering candle all I knew, and recording every rumour anent the complex questions.

Those who have wandered over the yellow sands of San Sebastian well know how picturesque is the view across the Bay of Zurriola. It was upon this scene I gazed on opening my windows on the following morning. Beyond the broad Plaza, lined on three sides by handsome houses, the sunlit waters of the Bay of Biscay rolled in upon the shore, wave after wave of transparent emerald breaking in long lines of snowy foam. White villas gleamed from among the foliage on the hillsides, and high brown cliffs rose from right and left, against which the rollers, roaring and surging, dashed and went up in columns of spray.

Swallowing my coffee, I went out – not, however, before I had made a gratifying discovery; namely, that the room next mine, communicating by a locked door, was the private sitting-room of Señor Canovas del Castillo, the statesman upon whose political actions the eyes of Europe were at that moment centred. Success in journalism depends a good deal upon luck, and to accidental incidents I attribute any good fortune I have enjoyed in obtaining exclusive and reliable information in various holes and corners of the Continent where I have had to compete with the resident correspondents of Reuter's, the Havas, and the Central

News agencies. I had walked across the Plaza de la Constitucion, wondering how I could best turn this fortuitous circumstance to account, when suddenly I found myself before the grey façade of Santa Maria, and almost involuntarily I entered. The air was heavy with incense, and the church was in semi-darkness – a chiaroscuro that was exceedingly striking and effective. There was, however, little of interest beyond the heavily-gilded and somewhat tawdry altars, which are the feature in most Spanish churches, and I was just about to leave when the silence was broken by loud sobbing close to me. I had believed myself alone in the place, but on gazing round in surprise, I saw within a few yards of me, half hidden by one of the great stone columns, a female figure kneeling before one of the altars, with her face buried in her hands, sobbing as though her heart would break. I was turning away, leaving the lonely worshipper to her grief, when the dress, the softness of outline, and the flawless complexion seemed strangely familiar. Next instant I recognised her as the girl I had passed in the crowd, and whose beauty had so impressed me.

Upon the stones she was kneeling in abject despair. In her dark hair she had placed a crimson rose, and her delicate white hands, upon which some bright gems glistened, were wet with bitter tears.

My feet fell noiselessly upon the matting, and she was unaware of my presence, until, placing my hand lightly upon her shoulder, I bent, exclaiming in French: —

"Mademoiselle is unhappy! Is there no assistance I can render?"

She started, raising her pale, pensive face to mine in surprise. Then in sorrow she shook her head.

"M'sieur is very kind," she answered, in a voice that betrayed a poignant grief. "Words of sympathy may lighten one's burden of sorrow, but nothing can heal a broken heart."

"It mainly depends on how the fracture was caused," I answered, smiling, and, grasping her tiny hand, assisted her to rise.

She brushed the dust from her dress, dashed away her tears, and, turning to me, said —

"I have heard that gaiety is efficacious – sometimes."

"Until I know the cause, I cannot prescribe for the effect," I replied, as I held open the door and she passed out into the sunlight.

"Ah, m'sieur," she sighed bitterly, her beautiful eyes still full of tears, "woe is my heritage! The brightness of each dawn jars upon me, showing me how gloomy life is, and how utterly hopeless and lonely is the sea of despair upon which I am drifting. I welcome each night with joy, because – because it brings me one day nearer – nearer to *death*."

"You are young and fair; you have joy and life around you. Surely you are joking?"

"No, m'sieur. Ah, you do not know!" she sighed. "If you were aware of my secret, you would, I assure you, not be surprised

that, even though surrounded by friends, I desire to die."

"But it is so extraordinary!" I said, walking beside her and chatting as if we were old acquaintances. "Have you never tried to unburden yourself by confiding your secret to some friend?"

"*Dieu*! No. I – I dare not."

"Dare not?" I echoed. "Of what are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" she repeated in a strained voice, speaking like one in a dream, with her eyes fixed straight before her. "Yes, I – I am a wretched, miserable coward, because I fear the punishment."

"Is your crime of such a flagitious character, then?"

"My crime?" she cried, turning suddenly upon me with flashing eyes. "What – what do you know of my crime? What do you insinuate?"

"Nothing, mademoiselle," I answered, as politely as I could, though amazed at her sudden change of manner. "Your own strange words must be my excuse for inquisitiveness."

"Then let us change the subject. To you my private affairs can be of no concern whatever."

I was not prepared for this stinging rebuff. We passed the front of the Casino, strolling through the shady gardens facing the Concha, and when we had rested upon a convenient seat, pleasantly sheltered from the sun, she grew communicative again. While I had been telling her of my journey over the Pyrenees to Madrid, her grief had been succeeded by gaiety, and when I related some amusing *contretemps* that had befallen me at a wayside *posada* in the Sierra de Guara, she laughed lightly.

At length at my request, she drew out a silver case, and, in exchange for my card, gave me one bearing the name "Doroteita d'Avendaño."

Then, with an ingenuousness that enhanced her personal charms, she told me of herself, that she was the only daughter of the Count Miguel d'Avendaño, who had represented Castillejo in the Senate, but who had died a year ago. The widowed Countess – who had been her companion on the previous night – had let their mansion in the Calle Ancha de San Bernardo at Madrid to a wealthy foreigner, and since that time her mother and herself had been travelling, spending the winter at Cannes, the spring at Seville, and coming to San Sebastian for a few weeks previous to going north to Paris. She pointed out their villa from where we sat, a great white house with a terrace in front, standing out against a background of foliage on the side of the hill overlooking the bay. The Count, her father, had, I knew, been one of the most celebrated of Spanish statesmen. Referring to many well-known personages at Court as her friends, her observations regarding their little idiosyncrasies were full of dry humour. With a versatility of narrative she told me many little anecdotes of the Queen-Regent and the infant monarch, the knowledge of which betrayed an intimacy with the domestic arrangements of the palace, and for fully an hour gossiped on pleasantly.

"And amid this life of gaiety and happiness I find you kneeling in yonder church, abandoned to melancholy!" I observed at length, half reproachfully.

The light died out of her face.

"True," she sighed. "Sometimes for an hour or so I manage to forget, but sooner or later the sorrow that overshadows my life recurs to me in all its hideous reality, and when I am alone it overwhelms me. To the world I am compelled to appear *chic*, happy, and thoughtless. Few, indeed, who know me are aware that my feigned laughter is but a bitter wail of lamentation, that beneath my smile lies a broken heart."

"And your lover? Was he faithless? What of him?"

"What of him!" she gasped hoarsely, rising from the seat with her hands clenched. "I – I know nothing of him," she added, with a strange look in her eyes.

She laughed a hollow laugh, and as she drew on her long *suède* gloves, the bells of San Vicente announced the noon.

"I have been out too long already," she added, hurriedly rising. "We must part."

"May I not accompany you towards your home?" I asked.

"No, m'sieur," she answered firmly, holding out her hand.

"And when shall we resume our chat?" I asked.

She hesitated, gazing away to the misty cliffs across the bay. I half feared she would refuse to meet me again.

"If you are not bored by my wretchedness and bad temper," she said at last, with a sad smile, "I will be here to-morrow morning, at eleven."

"I shall not fail to keep the appointment," I said, delighted. "Meanwhile try and forget your secret; try and be equally happy

with those around you, and remember that at least you have one sympathiser, even though he is almost a stranger."

Tears welled in her beautiful eyes as I clasped her hand.

"Thank you," she said in a low voice, trembling with emotion. "I – I appreciate your sympathy. *Au revoir, m'sieur, sans adieu*."

For an instant our eyes met, then, turning towards the Concha, she walked away, and was, a few seconds later, hidden by a bend in the path.

I strolled back to the Ezcurra, utterly mystified. Women's ways are as many and as devious as "luck's lines" on one's hand, but the Señorita Doroteita was an enigma. I was not one of those "minor lovers" whose petty passions could be caged in a triolet, for her marvellous beauty and exquisite grace now held me in fascination.

No solution of the political crisis presented itself. In those agitated and troublous times under which Spain was labouring, I was compelled to make a daily journey to Bayonne, a distance of thirty-four miles, in order to dispatch my telegram to London. The Carlists were active; the various political parties were holding conferences incessantly; in military circles dissatisfaction was being openly expressed, and there were sinister rumours of a projected *coup d'état*. With Señor Canovas del Castillo, Señor Romero y Robledo, and Señor Navarro Reverter I had had short interviews, the substance of which had been transmitted to London; and spending the brilliant sunny mornings in strolling with my enchanting señorita, the afternoons

in writing, and the evenings in travelling to and fro across the frontier, the days glided by, and I took no count of them. In the course of those charming morning rambles we had visited Los Pasajes and Monte Iguëldo, we had strolled along the Paseo de Ategorrita, and ascended Monte Orgullo to enjoy the view of the Pyrenees, and each hour I spent with her increased my admiration. She had discarded the mantilla, and was always dressed in gowns and hats that were unmistakably from the Rue de la Paix. Patrician refinement was stamped upon every line of her handsome countenance, and her conversation was always bright, witty, and delightful. One day, while we were walking along the Paseo de Ategorrita, beside the sea, outside the town, I explained to her how, as a newspaper correspondent, I was exceedingly anxious to obtain reliable information regarding the situation, and the earliest intimation as to the formation of the new Cabinet.

Then, as she expressed herself interested in journalism, I related in reply to her questions some of my adventures in pursuit of news. She was, I found, quite an enthusiast in politics, for she gave a critical opinion upon the probable policy of the various parties, declaring that the day of revolutions by *pronunciamiento* had not gone by, adding emphatic arguments that would have done credit to any member of the Chamber. I told her of the details I had already sent to London describing the efforts of Señor Canovas del Castillo to form a new Cabinet; but, after hearing all I had ascertained regarding a probable solution of the

crisis, she shook her head, and, laughing, said —

"I believe your information has somewhat misled you. Although the deadlock is even more serious than you anticipate, yet matters may be temporarily adjusted at any moment."

"And when they are, I shall, alas! be compelled to bid you adieu," I said sorrowfully. "The memory of these few bright, happy days will dwell always within me."

In silence she gazed for a few moments away upon the broad expanse of green sunlit sea. Then she exclaimed —

"And you will return to London – and – and – forget me!"

"No, never, Doroteita," I said passionately. "I shall always look upon these as the happiest hours of my life!"

Her breast rose and fell. As we walked together, I held her small, well-gloved hand in mine, breathing into her ear the tender passion that had overwhelmed me. I scarce know what words I uttered, but she heard me patiently in pensive silence until I had concluded. Then, withdrawing her hand slowly but firmly, she replied in a voice that betrayed emotion —

"No, no. Our relationship can never be closer than that of friends. Our lives lie so very, very far apart."

"Ah, I know!" I cried in disappointment, stopping and gazing straight into her great liquid eyes. "If I were wealthy, I might dare to ask for your hand. As it is, Doroteita – as it is, may I not entertain hope?"

Slowly and sadly she shook her head.

"But I love you."

"That I do not doubt," she said huskily, sighing heavily.

"You do not reciprocate my affection sufficiently," I hazarded.

"I did not say so," she replied quickly, raising her dark lashes for an instant. "Perhaps I may even love you with as fierce a passion as you yourself have betrayed. Yet, though that may be so, we can never marry – never!"

"May I not know the reason?" I asked.

"No," she answered, with her eyes fixed seaward. "Soon I shall die – then perhaps you will ascertain the truth. Until then, let us be friends, not lovers."

I was sorely puzzled, for the mystery was so tantalising. Times without number I sought by artfully concealed questions to penetrate it, but she frustrated every effort, and when we parted outside the Casino at noon, my bewitching señorita grasped my hand in farewell, saying —

"We are true friends. Let us trust each other."

"We do," I answered, bending with reverence over the hand I held. "Our friendship will, I hope, last always – always."

Her heart seemed too full for further words, for her luminous eyes were filled with tears as she disengaged her hand and turned slowly away with uneven steps.

Again and again we met, but on each occasion I spoke of love, she requested me kindly but firmly to refrain from discussing the subject.

"It is enough," she said, one morning, while we were strolling in the Calle Santa Catalina – "enough that, in idling away a few

hours each morning, we do not bore each other. Let us live for the present, enjoying to the full the few pleasant rambles that remain to us. Then, when we have parted, only pleasant memories will remain."

Sometimes I met her driving in the afternoon, or walking along the Concha in the evening with the Countess. Then she would smile a graceful recognition, but, being only a chance acquaintance, I was not introduced, neither was I invited to the Villa Guipuzcoa.

Late one afternoon, a fortnight after our first meeting, I returned to the Ezcurra from a long walk, having parted from her as usual, outside the Casino, when Señor Cos Gayon, a well-known member of the Senate, told me that Señor Canovas del Castillo had that morning had an audience of the Queen-Regent, and had at last undertaken to form a new Cabinet. This was an important piece of intelligence, inasmuch as it showed that the Conservatives would again hold office, and that, the loyalty of the military thus being assured, all fear of revolutionary troubles was at an end. Having spent an hour chatting with half a dozen politicians staying at the hotel, I ascended to my room to write a long dispatch descriptive of the situation.

The afternoon seemed too bright and balmy for work, therefore, before sitting down to my correspondence, I went out upon the balcony, and there smoked and dreamed until the shadows lengthened and over the broad waters of the Bay of Biscay there hung a glorious golden haze. A cool wind at

last sprang up, and, returning into my room, I sat down and commenced to pen the latest intelligence for publication in London on the following morning. After writing about a quarter of an hour, voices in the adjoining room attracted my attention. Then suddenly I remembered that it was the Conservative leader's sitting-room. With the names of well-known politicians falling upon my ear, I crept noiselessly across the polished floor to the locked door that divided the two apartments. Then, placing my ear close against the door, I stood on the alert.

My heart beat quickly, for in a few moments I ascertained that a meeting was in progress to decide upon the formation of the Cabinet. I recognised the voice of Señor Canovas, who acted as president, and there must have been fully eighteen or twenty of the most prominent members of his party present. With paper and pencil in hand, I listened to the discussion, as each name was submitted for the eight principal offices of State, Señor Canovas himself being, of course, President of the Council. The first business was the acceptance of the chief of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the Duke of Tetuan, and it was agreed without a single dissentient that Señor Romero y Robledo should become Minister of Justice. Señor Bosch and Señor Castellanos accepted office as Ministers of Public Works and the Colonies respectively; but a discussion lasting nearly an hour took place regarding the Ministry of Finance, until an agreement was at length arrived at that to Señor Navarro Reverter the portfolio should again be allotted. Protracted discussions also

ensued regarding the appointment of the Ministers of Marine, War, and the Interior, and it was not until nearly seven that these appointments were made. Then Señor Canovas read a complete list of the newly-formed Cabinet, – each member of which was present, and expressed his acceptance of office, – afterwards stating that the crisis was at an end, and that at noon on the following day he had arranged to place the list in the hands of the Queen-Regent.

Little did the President of the Council dream that the list he had read out had been carefully noted by an eavesdropping journalist, and that even while his colleagues were congratulating each other upon the amicable solution of the crisis, the correspondent was busy preparing a list of the new Cabinet, which would be published in London in the morning, and known throughout England many hours before it became public in Spain.

Congratulating myself upon my good fortune, I finished my dispatch, waited until all the politicians had left the President's room, and then descended to the *table d'hôte*. Opposite me sat Señor Romero y Robledo, the new Minister of Justice, but in reply to my carefully-veiled inquiries he gave no sign that a Cabinet had been formed. The decision was, I knew, a profound secret until the Queen had given her assent. While idling over dessert, with just an hour to catch my train to Bayonne, the waitress handed me a note, stating that a man-servant awaited a reply.

On the envelope was a great gilt crest, and the address was written in an unfamiliar angular hand. As I tore it open, a breath of sweet perfume greeted my nostrils, and the words I read in French were as follows: —

"Villa Guipuzcoa, *July 22*.

"*My brother Luis has returned unexpectedly front Cuba, and mamma and I are leaving with him for Madrid by the mail to-night. Will you not call here to wish me farewell; or shall we never meet again? Give bearer a verbal reply, and come at once if possible.*

"Doroteita."

With satisfaction I recognised that it gave an opportunity for an introduction to her family, yet I was nevertheless doubtful about being able to get to Bayonne. Having, however, glanced at the time-table, and ascertained that there was another train at a quarter-past nine, by which I could get over the frontier at midnight, and finding I should be able to spend about an hour at the villa, I decided to respond to the invitation, and gave the girl an answer to that effect. Several times I read the brief, sweetly-scented note, then, finishing my wine, I rose, and, after a "brush up," entered a cab and told the man my destination.

As I alighted before the great handsome house on the hillside overlooking the bay, the door was thrown open by a servant in livery, who conducted me across a wide square hall, in which a fountain was playing, and ushered me into a small but luxuriously-furnished room.

Taking my card upon a salver, the man returned almost immediately, saying —

"The Señorita Doroteita will be with you in a few moments, Señor."

Then he withdrew, and almost before I had had an opportunity of inspecting the pretty room, which was evidently a boudoir, the door again opened and Doroteita entered.

"I'm so glad you have come," she exclaimed, with a bright smile of welcome, as she grasped both my hands. "I thought perhaps you would be compelled to go to Bayonne to-night."

"So I am," I said. "Nevertheless, I could not part from you without just one brief word of farewell."

Sinking into a low wicker chair, she motioned me to a seat beside her, and told me how her brother, an army officer, who had been for four years in Cuba, had returned that afternoon, and the Countess, on account of some family matters, had resolved to accompany him to Madrid, where he was compelled to report himself on the morrow. She looked absolutely bewitching in a low-necked gown of some dove-grey clinging material, that disclosed her delicately-moulded chest and arms, while in her blue-black hair was a single crimson flower that gave the touch of colour necessary for artistic effect. It was a blossom I had never before seen, almost waxen, and similar to a camellia, but larger and of richer colour.

When we had been chatting some time, each expressing regret that the hour of parting had come, and hope that we should meet

again ere long, she suddenly asked —

"Is it absolutely imperative that you should cross the frontier to-night? We go by the Sud Express at eleven-fifteen, why not remain and see us off?"

"I cannot, Doroteita," I replied. "It is most important that I should go to Bayonne to-night – for the last time."

"Then the crisis is ended?" she exclaimed, suddenly interested. "Has a new Ministry been formed?"

"Yes," I replied. "My work is finished."

Her brows contracted for a second as if a sudden thought had occurred to her; then she shivered slightly, and, rising, crossed the room, and, drawing the heavy silken curtains across the window, shut out the extensive view of the moonlit bay.

"Our wanderings have been so pleasant and unconventional that I am loth to leave," she said, as she slowly sank again among her cushions. "Nevertheless, I hope some day before long to be in London. Then perhaps we shall be able to spend a few more pleasant hours together."

"I hope so," I said earnestly, rising and taking her hand. "I must, alas! go, or I shall not catch my train."

But she would not hear of my departure, declaring that by the road on the other side of the hill I could reach the station in ten minutes, and, assuring me that she would send one of the servants with me as guide, urged me to resume my seat. Just as I was about to do so, there entered a tall slim man about thirty-five, wearing the uniform of a cavalry officer, and my pretty hostess, rising,

introduced him as Luis, her brother.

He was a good-looking fellow, dark and sun-tanned, but when he smiled, cynicism lurked in the corners of his mouth, and instinctively I disliked him. Not that he was supercilious – on the contrary, his greeting was quite effusive. He declared himself much attached to his sister, and any friend of hers was likewise his friend. He regretted that he had to leave for Madrid, but military orders could not be disobeyed. Together we sat chatting, Doroteita ordering some wine, which was served almost immediately by the man who had admitted me. Luis d'Avendaño proved a brilliant conversationalist and entertaining companion, but somehow I could not help regarding him with a curious indescribable suspicion. Once I caught the pair exchanging significant glances, and this increased my vague mistrust. Yet his sister lolled in her chair, with a great cushion of yellow silk behind her head, fanning herself slowly, and chatting with that light coquetry that had so charmed me.

A little clock chiming on its silver bells caused me to spring to my feet.

"Nine o'clock!" I exclaimed. "You must excuse me, otherwise I really shall not catch my train."

"Must you go?" asked Doroteita, in a tone of regret, closing her fan with a snap and rising also.

"Yes," I said. "This is my last train. I must wish you *au revoir*, in the hope that we may meet again at a date not far distant."

"Aren't you going to exchange tokens of friendship?" Luis

suggested, laughing in his careless, good-humoured way. “Give my future brother-in-law your flower, Doroteita.”

She laughed and blushed, then taking the crimson blossom from her hair, handed it to me. I was about to inhale its fragrance when the strange, fixed look in her eyes fascinated me, and as I placed it in the lapel of my coat with a murmured word of thanks, I confess I was startled by the sudden transformation of her countenance.

“Good-bye,” I said, taking her hand.

It was cold, limp, and trembling.

“Adieu,” she answered huskily.

I turned to shake hands with her brother, but before I could do so, he had pounced upon me from behind, holding my arms powerless, crying —

“No, no, my friend, you will not escape so easily!”

“What – what do you mean?” I gasped in abject amazement.

“I mean that you do not leave this place alive,” he hissed in my ear. Though I could not see him, I could feel his hot breath upon my cheek, and struggled violently to free myself, but in his iron grip I seemed powerless as a child.

“Now, quick, Doroteita!” he commanded. “Remember, we have no time to lose. Don’t stand staring there!”

“Do you mean to kill me?” I cried, clenching my teeth and struggling with all my might to free my arms.

“Curse you, woman! Don’t you hear me?” he yelled at Doroteita, who stood transfixed, with face ashen pale and hands

clenched in desperation. “Remember what we have at stake! You have trapped him – finish your work, or – or I’ll kill *you*!”

In a second she sprang forward, and, snatching from my buttonhole the flower she had given me, held her handkerchief over my mouth with one hand, while with the other she pressed the flower against my nostrils. It seemed damp with some evil-smelling fluid, and though I struggled, she held my face with such determined force, that the leaves of the blossom were forced into my nose, and I was compelled to inhale the disagreeable perfume they emitted.

The odour was strange, and in a few seconds produced a curious giddiness such as I had never before experienced. My brain became paralysed and my limbs assumed an unaccountable rigidness. I tried to speak, but was unable. My jaws seemed to have become suddenly fixed, as if attacked by tetanus. A thrill of horror ran through me, for I could not breathe, and the pang of pain that shot through my eyes was excruciating.

Feeling myself utterly helpless in the hands of those who had so cunningly plotted my murder, I wondered in that brief instant whether Luis was Doroteita’s lover, and whether on discovering our friendship, he had planned this terrible and merciless revenge. My enchantress’s handsome face, now hideously distorted by mingled fear and passion, was close to me, her eyes riveted to mine, and as she pressed the strange flower against my face, her white lips moved as if speaking to me. But I was deaf. My senses had been destroyed.

Next second, though I fought against the sudden faintness that crept over me, my head swam, and my surroundings grew indistinct. I felt myself falling. Then, by a sudden darkness that fell upon me, the present became blotted out.

On opening my aching eyes, they became dazzled by a bar of golden sunlight that strayed in between the closed curtains.

Amazed, I gazed around from where I lay stretched upon the floor. Then, in a few moments, the recollection of the strange events of the previous night returned to me in all their grim reality. The woman I had adored had, from some motive utterly incomprehensible, enticed me there to murder me! Feeling terribly weak and ill, I managed to struggle to my feet. I looked for the fatal flower, but could not find it. Then my eyes fell upon the clock, and I was amazed to discover it was past three in the afternoon.

I had remained unconscious nearly eighteen hours!

Half fearful lest another attempt should be made upon me, I searched the rooms on the ground floor and shouted. No one stirred. The house was tenantless!

Walking with difficulty down the hill towards the Ezcurra, I suddenly remembered my dispatch, and placing my hand in the inner pocket of my coat, I found it gone! It had evidently been stolen; but for what object was an enigma.

As I passed onward under the trees of the Calle del Pozzo, boys were crying *La Voz*, and from their strident shouts, and the eagerness of purchasers, I knew that the new Ministry had

been officially announced. My intellect seemed too disordered to think, so I merely returned to the hotel, and, casting myself on the bed, slept till next morning.

I refrained from lodging a complaint with the police, believing that my extraordinary story would be discredited; nevertheless, I remained three days longer, endeavouring to discover some facts regarding the Countess d'Avendaño and her daughter. All I could glean was, that, a month before, they had taken the Villa Guipuzcoa for the season, and that a number of tradespeople, including two jewellers, were now exceedingly anxious to ascertain their whereabouts. Therefore, after much futile effort to ascertain the truth about Doroteita, I at length returned to London, being compelled to invent an absurdly lame excuse for not telegraphing the information of the new Cabinet.

Last July I again found myself in Spain. Another serious crisis had occurred. The Carlists were known to be carrying on an active propaganda, and I had been despatched to Madrid, so as to be on the spot if serious trouble arose. Only one London newspaper keeps a resident correspondent in the Spanish capital, the remainder of the news from that city being supplied through a well-known agency. A few days after my arrival at the Hôtel de Rome, in the Caballero de Gracia, I called upon Señor Navarro Reverter, Minister of Finance, and was granted an interview. I desired to ascertain his views on the situation, and as he had been very communicative during those stormy times at San Sebastian a year before, I had no doubt that he would give me a few opinions

worth telegraphing.

As I entered his cosy private room in the Calle de Alcala, and he rose to greet me, my gaze became fixed upon the mantelshelf behind him, for upon it stood two cabinet photographs of a man and a woman.

The one was a counterfeit presentment of Luis d'Avendaño; the other a portrait of Doroteita!

When I had formally "interviewed" him upon the financial reforms and other matters regarding which I desired his opinion, I asked to be allowed to see the photographs, and he handed them to me with a smile.

"Doroteita d'Avendaño!" I ejaculated. The features were unmistakable, though the dress was different.

"Are they – er – friends of yours?" the Minister asked, regarding me keenly from beneath his shaggy brows.

"They were – once," I answered. "Ever since we were at San Sebastian last year I have been endeavouring to trace them."

"What? Did she add you to her list of victims?" he asked, laughing.

"Well, the plot was scarcely successful, otherwise I should not be here now," I replied. Then I told him briefly how, after luring me to their villa, the interesting pair had attempted to murder me.

"Extraordinary!" he ejaculated, when I had finished. "Curiously enough, however, your story supplies just the link in the chain of evidence that was missing at their trial."

"Their trial?" I exclaimed. "Tell me about them."

"Well, in the first place, the enchantress you knew as Doroteita d'Avendaño was none other than the notorious Liseta Gonzalez, known to the police as 'The Golden Hand.'"

"'The Golden Hand'?" I echoed in amazement. I had heard much of the extraordinary career of an adventuress bearing that *sobriquet*; how she had moved in the best society in Paris and Vienna, and how in the latter city, in a single year, in her character as queen of the *demi-monde*, she had spent 50,000 pounds, the money of her dupes. Indeed, her adventures had been the talk of Europe.

"Yes," he continued, smiling at my astonishment. "No doubt you have read in your English newspapers all about the many ingenious frauds she has perpetrated. For the past five years she has been well-known in various characters in Pau, Rome, Paris, and Vienna; her schemes have invariably been successful, and her escape from the police has been accomplished just at the right moment, in a manner almost incredible. But the audacious boldness of a *coup* she effected a year ago caused her downfall."

"A year ago?" I said. "Was it during the time I knew her?"

"Yes. While spending the summer at San Sebastian with Mateo Sanchez, – a Bourse adventurer of Madrid, who, under the name of Luis d'Avendaño, passed as her brother, – she conceived, during the Cabinet crisis, a very ingenious scheme for gigantic operations on the Bourse with certain success. The circumstances were remarkable, and your story supplies the facts which have remained until now a mystery. Unaware of the true

character of Sanchez, I had employed him as agent in various transactions shortly before the crisis, and he had thus become aware of my intentions to institute certain financial reforms that would affect the Bourse to a considerable extent. 'The Golden Hand,' it appears, with her usual shrewdness, pointed out how the knowledge thus acquired would enable him to operate with success, if only he could be certain of my reappointment as Finance Minister, and the pair forthwith carried into effect an ingeniously arranged plan. Apparently you were watched, and, it having been ascertained that, as correspondent of an influential journal, you were a likely person to obtain the very earliest intimation of the formation of the Cabinet, they laid their plans to entrap you."

"I confess I little dreamed of foul play when I entered the Villa Guipuzcoa," I observed.

"At the trial it was a mystery how they obtained knowledge of the State secret," he continued. "But it is now quite plain that on the evening when the portfolios were arranged, they, being aware of the devices to which you would probably resort in order to obtain accurate information, enticed you to their house, and then, having ascertained from your own lips that the Ministry had been formed, resolved to carry out their cunningly-devised scheme. They saw that you were the only member of the public who knew the secret, and if they prevented you from despatching it to London, – whence it was certain to be re-telegraphed here, – it would give them time to get to Madrid on the following morning

and operate on the Bourse some hours before the announcement of the new Ministry."

"She seemed so ingenuous and charming, that I suspected nothing – until – "

"Until she attempted to murder you – eh?" he said, taking up her portrait, and gazing upon it with a smile. "To say the least, the plot was a most extraordinary one. By your admission that the crisis was at an end, they knew you held a list of the new Ministers, and as you persisted in your endeavour to catch the train to the frontier, it became necessary for them to possess themselves of the list, and silence you, in order to escape to Madrid, and on the opening of the Bourse next day purchase the stock which they knew would rise immediately the official announcement was published. 'The Golden Hand' gave you as a souvenir the flower she wore, in the expectation that you would inhale its fatal perfume, as other victims had done."

"It was very similar to a camellia," I said. "Has anything been ascertained regarding it?"

"Oh yes. The flower she sometimes wore in her hair, and which appeared rather like a camellia, was at the trial proved to be the Kali Mujah, or death-rose of Sumatra, which is so deadly that its perfume is sufficient to cause unconsciousness, and sometimes even death. It was found that she actually cultivated these flowers, and that on more than one occasion she had used them upon her victims with fatal result. She gave one to you, but you merely placed it in your buttonhole; therefore, just as

you were about to depart, her lover gripped you, while she pressed the fatal blossom into your nostrils. Then you lapsed into unconsciousness, and half an hour afterwards the enterprising pair were on their way to Madrid, where, on the following morning, they purchased a quantity of stock, with money secured by your idol Doroteita from one of her dupes, the Comte de Ségonnaux, whose death had been caused by the poisonous blossom in a similar manner to the attempt upon yourself."

"Were their operations on the Bourse successful?" I asked.

"Entirely so. Unaware of these events, I put forward my financial scheme in the Chamber a month afterwards, with the result that the stock they had secured rose to unparalleled prices, and then they effected a gigantic *coup*, gaining nearly a million pesetas. But the boldness of the scheme caused their downfall, for the colossal extent of their transactions attracted the attention of the police, the result being that eventually the murder of the Comte de Ségonnaux at Toledo was conclusively proved, and your divinity's identity with 'The Golden Hand' fully established."

"Were they both tried?" I asked, amazed at his extraordinary story.

"Yes. Mateo Sanchez was found guilty of being an accessory in the assassination of the Comte, and sentenced at the last sitting of the Assize Court to fifteen years' imprisonment; while the bewitching Liseta, condemned for the murder, is at present serving a life sentence at the convict prison at Barcelona."

A quarter of an hour later I had wished my genial friend the Minister adieu, and, full of grave reflections, crossed the sunlit Puerta del Sol, carrying in my pocket, as a souvenir of a foolish infatuation, the portrait of “The Golden Hand.”

Chapter Three.
The Masked Circe

The success of "The Masked Circe" in last year's Royal Academy was incontestable, not only for the intrinsic beauty of the picture, but from the fact that the personal charms of a handsome woman were perpetuated without compromising her features. Woman's vanity often outruns her natural diffidence, and the consciousness of her great beauty stifles the conscience of modesty.

Visitors to the Academy know the picture. Circe, seated on a throne, with her back to a great circular mirror, presents a half-draped figure of marvellous delicate colouring and beauty of outline. One hand holds aloft a golden wine-goblet, and the other a tapering wand, while upon the tesselated pavement before the daïs purple grapes and yellow roses have been strewn. The black hair of the daughter of Perseis falls in profusion about her bare shoulders, and strays over her breast, but her features are hidden by a half-mask of black silk. The lips, with their *arc de cupidon*, are slightly parted, disclosing an even row of pearly teeth, and giving an expression of reckless *diablerie*.

Of the thousands who have gazed upon it in admiration, none knows the somewhat remarkable story connected with it. As I have been closely associated with it, from the day it was outlined

in charcoal, until the evening it was packed in a crate and sent for the inspection of the hanging committee, it is perhaps *àpropos* that I should relate the narrative.

The studio of my old friend, Dick Carruthers, the man who painted it, is on Campden Hill, Kensington, within a few hundred yards of where I reside, and in the centre of an aesthetic artistic colony. We have been chums for years, for on many occasions he has displayed his talent as a black and white artist in illustrating my articles and stories in various magazines. He is a popular painter, and as handsome a man as ever had a picture "on the line."

Three years ago, when the prologue of this secret drama was enacted, he was in the habit of coming over when the light had faded, to smoke a cigarette and discuss art and literature with me. I was glad of a chat after a hard day's work at my writing-table, but his companionship had one drawback. He drivelled over a girl he loved, and was forever suggesting that I might take her as a character and drag her into the novel upon which I was engaged.

One day he drew a cabinet photograph carefully from his pocket, and placed it upon the blotting-pad before me.

The girl he loved! Bah! I knew her, though I did not tell him so. She was a dark-haired, pink-and-white beauty that flitted through artistic Bohemia like a butterfly in a hothouse. The sight of the pictured face brought back to me the memory of days long past – of a closed chapter in my life's history. I remembered the first time I saw Ethel Broughton, fully five years before. She wore

a soiled pink wrapper, her satin slippers were trodden down at heel, and she had a bottle of champagne at her elbow. At that time her lover, grandiloquent and impecunious Mr Harry Oranmore, a bad but handsome actor, had been untrue to her, and she, a third-rate actress, who had an *ingénue* part at a Strand theatre, was reviling him. I had been taken to her house and introduced by a mutual friend, but she scarcely heeded me. Probably she was thinking of Oranmore, for she clasped her slim fingers round her suffering throat, and offered up an occasional sob, following it with a silent but protracted draught from her glass.

The result of this interview was but natural. Dazzled by her beauty, I sympathised with her, endeavoured to cheer her, and concluded by falling violently in love with her. At that time I was writing numbers of dramatic criticisms, and I confess I used what weight my opinions possessed for the purpose of her advancement. It is needless to refer to the smooth and uninterrupted course of our love. Suffice it to say that we were both Bohemians, and that within a year I had the satisfaction of sitting before the footlights, watching her make her début as "leading lady" at a West End theatre, and a few days later of observing her photograph exhibited in shop windows among those of other stage beauties.

But, alas! those halcyon days were all too brief. Suddenly the scales fell from my eyes. A scene occurred between us – and we parted.

To think that sin should lie for years in the blood, just as

arsenic does in a corpse!

When I discovered that Dick Carruthers was wasting the very honest and ardent emotions of his heart at this feverish fairy's shrine, I resolved to take him aside, and, without admitting that I knew her, give him a verbal drubbing. I did so, but he bit his moustache fiercely, and turned upon me.

"She is charming," he said, "and I love her."

"Ah! I know the type – "

"You know nothing, old fellow!" he exclaimed, flushing angrily. "But" – he shrugged his shoulders – "the prejudices of the world count for – what? Nothing at all. The curse of the Philistine is his Philistinism."

"Very well, Dick, old chap, forget my words," I said. "I approach your idol in the properly reverential spirit."

"You shall see her before long." His gaze grew bright, soft, and vague, as one who catches glimpses of the floating garments of supernatural mysteries. "Ah, she is lovely! Only an artist can appreciate her beauty."

I saw that words were of no avail. Like Ulysses, he was living in the paradise of Aeaea, heedless of everything under the spell she had cast about him.

One night, not long after I had expressed my sentiments to him regarding his infatuation, I entered his studio, and found his goddess seated by the fire, with her shapely feet upon the fender, sipping kümmel from a tiny glass, and holding a lighted cigarette between her dainty fingers.

Dick flung down his palette, and came forward to introduce me. Her dark eyes met mine, and we tacitly agreed not to recognise each other, therefore we bowed as perfect strangers. As I seated myself, and she poured me out a liqueur, I caught her glancing furtively at me under her long lashes. She had grown even handsomer than when last I had seen her, and was the picture of the romantic *Bohemienne*. Her dress was of black gauze, through which the milky whiteness of her figure seemed to shine. Yet, as she turned her beautiful face towards me, I was struck by the complete effect of physical and moral frailty that she presented.

She expressed pleasure at meeting me, remarking that she had read my last novel, and had been keenly interested in it.

When I had briefly acknowledged the compliment she paid me, she said —

"One thing always strikes me in reading your stories. Your women are inevitably false and fickle. Perhaps, however, you write from personal experience of the failings of my sex," she laughed.

Glancing sharply at her, I saw that her eyes did not waver.

"It is true I once knew a woman who proved false and infamous," I replied, with some emphasis.

"And you avenge yourself by reviling all of us. It is really too bad!" she said, pouting like a spoiled child.

"By Jove, old fellow," Dick chimed in, "do tell us about your romance! It would be interesting to know the reason you set your

face against all the fair ones."

But I succeeded in turning the conversation into another channel. I saw I had intruded upon them, so, making an excuse, I bade them *au revoir*, and returned to my own book-lined den.

Unlocking a drawer in my writing-table, I took out a packet of letters that still emitted a stale odour of violets. Then I lit my pipe, and one by one read them through, pausing and pondering over the declarations of passionate love they contained. Far into the night I sat reviewing the romance of bygone days, until I came to the last letter. It was a cold, formal note, merely a few lines of hurried scrawl, and read: "You are right. I have been false to you. Think no more of me. By the time you receive this I shall be on my way to New York; nevertheless, you will be always remembered by yours unworthily – Ethel." Bitter memories of the past overwhelmed me; but at last, growing impatient, and tossing the letters back into the drawer, I strove to forget. The clock had struck two, and my reading-lamp was burning low and sputtering when I rose to retire for the night. I confess that my frame of mind surprised me, inasmuch as I actually found myself still loving her.

"Good afternoon. I hope I don't disturb you."

Looking up from my work, I saw Ethel.

"Not at all. Pray sit down," I said coldly, motioning her to an armchair. "To what do I owe the honour of this visit?"

She pulled off her long gloves, and let her sealskin cape fall at her feet, while I put down my pen, and, rising, stood with my

back to the fire.

With her she had brought the odour of violets, the same that I remembered years ago; the same perfume that always stirred sad memories within me.

"You don't welcome me very warmly," she said in a disappointed tone, as she grasped my hand, and looked steadily into my eyes.

"No," I said sternly. "Last night I told you that a woman had embittered my life. The woman I referred to was yourself."

"Ah," she said, striving to suppress a sob, "Forgive me! I – I was mad then. I loved you; but I did not apprehend the consequence."

"Love? What nonsense to speak of it, when through your baseness I have been almost ruined. Think of your actions on the day before you left me; how you took from that drawer a signed blank cheque, with which you drew six hundred pounds, – nearly all the money I possessed, – and then fled with your lover. Is that the way a woman shows her affection?"

Her head was bowed in humiliation.

"Forgive me, Harold," she said, with intense earnestness. "I admit that I wronged you cruelly, that I discarded the honest love you gave me; but you – you do not know how weak we women are when temptation is in our path. Cannot I now make amends?"

I shook my head sadly.

"Don't say that you will not forgive," she implored tearfully. "At least I am honest. My object in coming this afternoon was to

repay the money I – I borrowed." And she drew forth an envelope from her pocket and handed it to me.

"There are notes for six hundred pounds," she added, as I took it and felt the crisp paper inside.

"How did you obtain it?" I asked, hesitating to receive it.

"I have earned it honestly, every penny," she replied. "Since we parted, I have become popular in America, and played 'lead' in nearly all the great cities. During the years that have gone I have many, many times wondered what had become of you, for in your writings I read plainly how soured and embittered you had become."

"And where is Oranmore?"

"Dead. He contracted typhoid while we were playing in San Francisco, and it terminated fatally."

"Ethel," I said gravely, taking her hand in mine, "you have fascinated Dick Carruthers, my friend; and you will treat him as you treated me."

"No, no. I love him," she said in a fierce half-whisper, adding, "Keep secret the fact that we loved one another, and I swear before Heaven I will be true to him. If he marries me, he shall never have cause for regret – never!"

"Suppose I told him? What would he think of you?"

"You will not!" she cried, clinging to me. "You are too honourable for that. Promise to keep my secret!"

"For the present I will preserve silence," I answered, my heart softening towards her. "But I cannot promise that I will never

tell him."

"I am going to sit to him as model," she said, after a brief silence. "What character do you think would best suit me?"

"Well, I should suggest that of Circe – the woman who broke men's hearts," I replied, mischievously.

"Excellent! I shall be able to assume that character well," she said, with a grim smile. "I will tell him."

Spring came and went, but I saw very little of Dick. He had received a commission from one of the illustrated papers to make a series of sketches of scenery in Scotland, and consequently he was away a good deal. Whenever he paid flying visits to London, however, he always looked me up, but, strangely enough, never mentioned Ethel. Nevertheless, I ascertained that they frequently met.

At the close of a blue summer's day, when the dreamy, golden haze wrapped the city in a mystic charm, I called at the studio, having heard that he had returned, and was settling down to work.

When I entered, Dick was standing before his easel, pipe in mouth and crayon in hand, busily sketching; while on the raised "throne" before him sat Ethel, radiant and beautiful. A tender smile played about her lips. It seemed as though a happiness – full, complete, perfectly satisfying – had taken possession of her, and lifted her out of herself – out of the world even.

"Welcome, old fellow!" Dick cried, turning to shake hands with me. "Behold my Circe!" and he waved his hand in the direction of his model. "Ethel will not sit for any other subject.

It hardly does her justice – does it?"

"It is a strange fancy of mine," she explained, when I had greeted her. "I'm sure the dress is very becoming – isn't it?" And she waved the goblet she was holding above her head.

"Your pose is perfect, dear. Please don't alter it," urged the artist; who, advancing to his easel again, continued the free, rapid outline.

We chatted and laughed together for nearly an hour, until the tints of pearl and rose had melted imperceptibly into the deep night sky; then Dick lit the lamps, while Ethel retired into the model's sanctum to resume her nineteenth century attire.

Presently she reappeared, and we went to dine together at a restaurant in Piccadilly, afterwards visiting a theatre, and spending a very pleasant evening.

Poor Dick! I was sorry that he was so infatuated. He was such a large-hearted, honest fellow, that I felt quite pained when I anticipated the awakening that must inevitably come sooner or later. He knew absolutely nothing of her past, and was quite ignorant that she had been a popular actress.

In the months that followed, I visited the studio almost daily, and watched the growth of the picture. Dick was putting his whole soul into the composition, and my knowledge of art – acquired by years of idling in the ateliers of the Quartier Latin, and dabbling with the colours a little myself – told me that he was engaged upon what promised to be his finest work.

The face was a lifelike portrait. The delicate tints of the neck

and arms were reproduced with a skill that betrayed the master hand, and the reflection in the mirror behind had a wonderfully natural appearance, while the bright colours enhanced the general effect of gay, reckless abandon.

The fair model herself was charmed with it. Woman's vanity always betrays itself over her picture.

One evening, at the time the canvas was receiving its finishing touches, I returned home from a stroll across Kensington Gardens, and, on going in, heard some one playing upon my piano, and a sweet soprano voice singing Trotere's "In Old Madrid." I recognised the clear tones as those of Ethel.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.