

within the Morgue, that although he had subsequently entered there a score of times, he felt convinced that he should never be able to overcome its recollection.

I urged him to tell me wherefore, when he replied, 'Not now, no; for, in order that you may be fully enabled to appreciate the spectacle to which I allude, I must relate to you a portion of the poor suicide's history with which I afterwards became acquainted.'

And in compliance with that promise, when we had driven in the evening with some friends into one of the lateral alleys of the Bois de Boulogne, we all alighted, and seating ourselves upon the grass, M—— related with much feeling the sketch that follows:

'It was early in the spring of 1826, that a young Englishman of fashion, on his arrival in Paris, established himself in a splendid set of apartments in the Place Vendome. For a time he continued entirely unknown, not only to a circle of French society which his expensive style of living would have pointed out as that to which he would necessarily have been welcome, had he been so introduced as to render his acquaintance safe; but even to such of his own countrymen as were then sojourning in the French capital. He frequented no club; dined at no restaurant of note; mingled in no amusement which involved no communion with his fellow man; but on the other hand, he affected no seclusion; and was evidently too indifferent to notice and comment, to shrink from either when they became consequent on any of his pursuits. His equipages, although plain, and totally without arms, were of the most elegant description; his horses unequalled by any in the city; his establishment perfect; and his boxes; both at the Italian Opera and the Francais, in the most eligible situation.

Although the stranger himself affected no mystery, the idle and the curious began, ere long, to weave many and subtle ones of which he was the hero; and he had not resided ten days in Paris before it was decided that he must have something to conceal, or with his figure and fortune he would have been already plunged into the vortex of all the fascinating frivolities of Parisian dissipation. Ere another week had elapsed the busy had fresh food for comment and conjecture; for, at the gayest period of the day, the *joli Anglais*, as he was already called, appeared in an open carriage in the Allee de Longchamps, and beside him sat one of the most beautiful women who ever adorned the glories of her eye and form to the warm skies of Italy.

'Who could she be? Certainly not his sister; for her dark and glowing loveliness claimed no kindred with the auburn curls and clear blue eyes of her companion. The young ladies suggested that she might be his wife, but the idea was promptly negated by their elders, who discovered too much devotion in his manner to admit its possibility. She was alone with him in Paris, and consequently the enigma required no sphinx to aid in its solution; the inference was palpable; but, beyond the crude fact, all was covered with as dense a cloud as ever.

'In vain was the British ambassador appealed to more than once by mothers with marriageable daughters and fashionable spendthrifts, who were anxious to ascertain whether they could force their acquaintance upon him, and make him their banker through the medium of hazard and *rouge et noir*, without losing caste. His Excellency knew nothing of him; and could not recognize an English subject who had not even left his name at the embassy. And thus months rolled by, and the curious were as mystified as ever, save that it transpired through the servants of the stranger that he had arrived in Paris direct from Venice; but this was all. Meanwhile nothing could be more regular or simple than the habits of the two hand-box at the theatres, riding or driving in the Bois de Boulogne, sauntering through the woods of Meudon, or wandering amid the stately magnificence of Versailles; nor was the gentleman ever seen without his beautiful companion—they were as inseparable as substance and shadow; and all the *allures* which were lavishly bestowed upon each of them by some of the brightest eyes in Paris, were fairly flung away upon both.

'Things were in this state when the old Marquis de St. C—— arrived in Paris from his chateau in the Lower Alps; and as the *vieux bon homme*, for thus some of his associates thought proper to call him, had been seen in the capital every spring for the last twenty years, his advent on the present occasion, would scarcely have elicited a remark, had he not been accompanied by his bride, a fair young creature of sixteen who had exchanged the gloom of a convent for the arms of a bridegroom of seventy-nine, at the command of her father. It was her first appearance in the metropolis; she had never been heard of before; she blazed in the eyes of the Parisians at the Opera, like some sky-descended goddess; and it was consequently not wonderful that on the morrow the Hotel de St. C—— was besieged to such an extent that the old Faubourg St. Germain appeared suddenly to have flung off a century of time, and once more to have become the *quartier par excellence*, of the beautiful and capricious capital.

'Nor was the admiration which had been excited by her beauty at all diminished in the eyes of the aristocratic associates of the old Marquis, when they learned that the fair young creature who now bore his name, far from being the clever little *adventuriere* whom each expected to find her, was in reality the only child of Count V——, who had been banished many years previous for some alleged respects to royalty; and who, when he was afterwards pardoned and recalled, refused to return to the scene of his blighted ambition; preferring the tranquil and certain enjoyments

of his own secluded estate, to the feverish and fitful existence whence he had been formerly cast out.

'Young, noble, beautiful and rich, such, they discovered, was the wife of the withered, decrepid, dotting old Marquis de St. C——. What a delightful page had been suddenly opened to the aristocratic *desœuvres* of Paris! More than one *bel esprit* voted an address of thanks to the polite husband for the noble self-sacrifice which he had shown in bringing his fair wife to Paris; while the more designing and the more speculative made heavy bets on the future destiny of a lovely and innocent being to whom the very thought of vice was unknown.

'Pure and light-hearted as in her first childhood, the beautiful Marchioness received all the homage by which she was immediately surrounded, without a fear or a suspicion of evil; and many a courtly whisper, which would have breathed pollution into a more worldly and accustomed ear, fell harmless upon her's, and was rewarded with a smile.

'Laura had never loved, nor guessed she it is every woman's destiny to do so during her life. She had known the Marquis from her infancy, she had smiled upon him from her cradle, sported on his knee in her girlhood, made him the confidant of all her joys and sorrows; for he was her father's only intimate associate, and his nature was less stern than that of her own parent; and thus her *bon petit papa*, as she was accustomed to call him, was always the medium through which she obtained indulgence or evaded punishment; and when she was summoned to the convent parlor by the widowed Count and desired to prepare herself to become the wife of his friend within a month, her only feeling was one of delight that she should so soon, and so unexpectedly be freed from conventual restraint, and left at liberty to coax and be spoiled by her *bon petit papa*, without even the dread of her father's frown to damp her enjoyment.

'Such was the mood in which, a month after her marriage, the fair young Marchioness found herself suddenly steeped to the very lips in the gaieties of the metropolis; and if Laura knew nothing of evil, the Marquis on his side, appeared totally to have forgotten its existence; and to look upon his wife only as the laughing, romping girl, whose will had always been his law; without remembering that the child had grown into a beautiful and radiant woman, and that in Paris the husband of such a bride could not easily dispense with a dragon in his garden of the Hesperides.

'It was a crowded night at the Theatre Francais. Mlle. Mars, then in the zenith of her fame made her first appearance as the heroine of a drama which had been written expressly to display her admirable talent, and of which report spoke highly on the authority of the gifted *artiste* herself. Every box was filled; and the pit resembled a sea of human billows, heaving, jostling, and pressing one over the other, until the whole place was full to suffocation; but even on that occasion there were two groups in the house, which almost divided the admiration of the audience with the heroine of the evening.

'Well had it been for both had they never met!—had sickness or sorrow bound them to a weary pillow or a dreary hearth! had even death visited their dwellings, so that he had come softly and slowly, like an expected guest who could not be evaded, and whose fitting hour had rung; for them he would have killed the body only, and the soul would have defied his power!

'*Tesoro mio!* murmured a low rich voice, like the breathing of a summer wind over roses; 'I shall be jealous of this wondrous actress if she absorb you thus, both eye and ear. Did I ever before, think you, speak for the third time ere I could win a reply?'

'The questioner was a magnificent woman, with eyes like midnight when the storm cloud sleeps; her hair, of the deepest black, was swept smoothly back from such a brow as might have become a Cleopatra, and braided behind into a knot which seemed too weighty for the small and delicate head on which it grew. Her complexion was of that clear rich brown through which the blood rushes in a tide of crimson, her lip was carved like the bow of the archer, and her teeth glittered from an excess of whiteness. Her lofty figure was full, and rounded into that perfect outline which betrays that girlhood has departed, and is replaced by the summer tide of beauty; while the arm, which, partially veiled by a drapery of rich black lace, rested upon the crimson cushion of the box, was of such exquisite shape and grace, that it almost beguiled the eye of the spectator from the flashing above it. Though habited entirely in black, the jewels that she wore rendered her costume somewhat too costly for the simplicity of a Parisian theatre; and yet they so well became the stateliness of her beauty that none could have wished them away.

'It is almost needless to say that the individual whom she addressed was the young Englishman of the Place Vendome. It was with a start, and an accent in which there was almost a tinge of impatience, that he replied, 'Forgive me, my dear Bianca, but my thoughts were elsewhere. I intended no discourtesy.'

'Discourtesy?' repeated his beautiful companion to herself, as if unconsciously: 'he meant no discourtesy!' And as she looked more fixedly upon him, she remarked that it was not the genius of Mars which had so riveted his attention, for his *lorgnette* was not pointed at the stage; but as she ran her rapid glance along it, she discovered that it was fixed upon a box on the opposite side of the house, which like their own was tenanted only by two individuals. Bianca needed no glass to enable her at once to distinguish him; and she had not looked more than a second in the same direction when her dark eye flashed like lightning,

and the not blood rushed in a burning tide over her brow.

On one side of the box sat an aged gentleman, whose elaborately laced cravat and powdered head were in constant motion from his solicitude to answer and amuse his companion, whose animated expression and beaming eyes seemed to light upon the space around. It was a fair young girl; so young and so fair that neither time nor sorrow had written one line upon her snowy forehead. Her long auburn ringlets fell like links of gold over her brow and face; her large blue eyes, which deepened into purple when she laughed, were widely opened, and fringed along both lids with long dark lashes—rare beauty, which gives to the eye, in moments of repose, a charm which must be seen to be understood. She was simply dressed in white, with a bunch of roses in her girdle, which were put to shame by the brilliant glew of her smooth and rounder cheek; and as she sat there in all the grace and the glory of her sixteen summers no wonder that many a *lorgnette*, which owed its homage to the gifted actress, should prove truant, and linger on the lovely face of the Marchioness de St. C——.

It was midnight, and a sumptuous saloon in the Place Vendome, gorgeous with its draperies of crimson satin, its flood of light, and its costly furniture, was tenanted only by one solitary female. On a console of green marble stood a salver with a vase of fruit, and a couple of crystal goblets filled with wine; and upon a table in the centre of the floor lay a sheet of paper closely written over, and crumpled as though it had been crushed by the hand, and beside it a lady's glove embroidered with silver.

'The occupant of the room was Bianca; but not the proud and placid Bianca of the Theatre Francais—not the loved and loving Bianca of the early spring, who fled to Paris with him of whom her passion had made an earthly idol; and abandoned all that had once been dear to her without a pang or a regret.

'It was now winter; the snow lay deep upon the ground, and the wind howled its hoarse dirge in the wide chimney, and at intervals sent the light ashes of the wood which was burning upon the hearth in eddies over the apartment; but scarcely was the change without so great as that which the transit of those few months had produced upon the lady.

'She sat in a low chair before the fire, listlessly forming the likenesses of grotesque or familiar things in the burning logs which were blazing furiously under the impulse of the blast; for her arms were folded tightly before her; her head rested upon her breast; and her long hair, totally unconfined, fell about her like a mantle, and swept the floor. Still it was easy to perceive, even through that graceful veil, that her tall figure had become thin and wasted; while her bare arms, from which the wide sleeves had fallen back, had lost their roundness also. She was still beautiful, for the exquisite outline of her features might well defy alike time and suffering to rob them of their peculiar and haughty loveliness; but it was a fearful beauty that had been scorched and withered under the lava flood of passion, and which no peaceful sunshine could again restore.

'Suddenly she started up, and pressing her hands upon her temples, as if to stay their throbbing, she began to traverse the wide saloon with hurried and unequal steps; and a rush of blood crimsoned her previously pale features, and lent a light to her dim eye, as she exclaimed passionately, 'And was it for this that I left my home?—for this? To be set aside and forsaken for an idle girl, whose most serious pastime is the pursuit of a flying feather. For this that I forsook husband and child? a husband who, although stern, was true; and a child who, wanting words, talked to me by her smiles? Was it for no higher guerdon than contempt that I abandoned all, and became a thing which the cold and happy blush to name, and even the vicious worldling holds himself privileged to pass by with scorn, or to address with insult? Can it be that, to live in a fool's paradise for a few poor months, I flung from me all that makes life dear?—Honor, and home, and friends, and the ties of kindred, and the voice of praise! Well art thou paid, Bianca! It is stern justice that he who was thy crime should become thy punishment! And yet—yet—should the first blow have been dealt by Him? Could I not have been aroused from my dream of sin by the touch of some other hand? But perhaps, it is better thus; the work will be more quickly and more surely done. Another, then he might have wounded the surface, and left the heart unprobed; but he well knew how to cut to the very core.'

'And then she laughed the bitter, blighting laugh which has poison in its mirth! As she paused an instant in the centre of the floor, the door of the apartment opened, and an aged woman stood upon the threshold, towards whom the passionate Italian sprang in eager haste. Clapping her hand, she hurried her into the saloon, whispering hoarsely, 'You are welcome, Alba; I had forgotten that you, at least, are true to me. Come hither—I have a tale to tell you—a long and wondrous tale of love, and trust, and crime. Sit here—here in this velvet covered chair. Misery should, at least, be lodged luxuriously, when it has made a mockery of life.'

And having, forced her terrified companion into the seat which she had so lately quitted, she flung herself upon the carpet beside her, and buried her face on the knees of the agitated woman. For a time her sobs were fearful. She who listened to them felt that they were unaccompanied by tears, for they were dark and dry, and seemed to rive the heart from which they sprang. Suddenly they ceased; and tossing back her streaming hair, the victim of her own weakness swept her open palm over her

forehead; and without seeming to remark the paralyzing grief of her companion, she spoke in a voice which agony had rendered as calm and equal as though sorrow had never shaken it: 'You must remember, Alba, the infant daughter of a noble house which had no other heir—a lordly house, famous throughout Venice for its long descent and its prodigious wealth—a haughty house, which had given a Doge to the republic, and more than one cardinal to the papal court of Rome. Nay, speak not; there is no need to name it, for there is now so foul a stain on its escutcheon, that not all the virtues on which it has for centuries it has built up its pride can ever efface the blot.

'You remember the daughter of that house, Alba—a gay and happy child, for whom every day of life was one continuous carnival. It was you who rocked her cradle; who encouraged her timid footsteps into strength; who watched her as she grew from infancy to womanhood. She lost her mother while she was yet a girl; and sometimes I have thought, Alba, since— You know what I would say—sometimes I have thought—for even satisfied and happy guilt has its moments of reflection—that surely my poor young mother's spirit should have saved me. Could she not have flung the mantle of her innocence between me and my betrayer, and hid my crime from that power by which it is even now avenged? But I wander from my purpose. The heiress to wealth, to honor, and to fame, was at length a child no longer. Flatterers told her that she was beautiful; and poets wrote sonnets to her eyes. Her mind had been laid open by careful and earnest fingers, and the pages promised to do no discredit to her lineage. This was she when they married her! It was a gorgeous festival; and none asked whether the noble bride who pledged her faith at the altar wore her heart upon her lip, or whether she stood there an unresisting victim. Had they been able to look into that heart, they would have found a blank—a fearful blank—soon to be filled with loathing, falsehood, and dishonor?

'You know the rest, Alba; the disappointed bride, the neglected wife, the trembling mother learned, when it was too late, that she could be loved even to idolatry—that she could love as wildly as she was loved. You know the arts that were used to win her; for she was, at least, no easy victim. You know how tenderness for her infant child tugged at her heart-strings, and made her almost forswear her selfish passion. You watched her as it failed a length before the devotion of the first man who had ever taught that heart to beat at his approach; and you—you, the nurse of her infancy, the guard of her youth, the steadfast and uncalculating friend of her womanhood—you alone clung to her in her disgrace. I have been happy, Alba—I have been very happy—a child sporting on the brink of a precipice among the flowers that veil it—a bird sipping the honey-dew while a serpent conches beneath the blossom-laden boughs ready to spring. All, all that can be imagined by which the mind may figure a false security on the very confines of destruction, such have I been! Poor, self-sacrificing friend! And as she spoke, she passed her small thin hand over the face of her weeping listener. 'I, at least, have gathered a few buds of blessedness—the nightshade is pleasant to the eye when we forget its poison; but you have suffered without reaping even the reward of the guilty; for he is false, Alba, false——'

'Nay, nay; your ear has been abused, my gentle child.'

'Would that it were so; but no, no. See you yonder letter? and she pointed to that which lay upon the table; 'It is from—Her from the fair fiend who has robbed me of the only heart I ever cared to win—the only friend save yourself, whom my shame and my crime had left me. It is a reply to one from Him, in which he had declared his passion. Do you hear me, Alba?—declared his passion for another! One victim does not suffice; he is weary of the fond wretch who has clung to him through so many tedious months, and he asks for a new sacrifice. She has rebuked his boldness with all the indignation of a proud woman who holds the confession as an insult. But this is not enough. She has robbed me of his heart; for she must have looked and listened, when he talked to her, as though she loved him, or he would not have dared so much! And what care I for the casket when the jewel has been abstracted? While I was dear to him, I could have braved every thing for his sake—I have done it; but now, now—' and she wrung her hands, as she again started up, 'now I care not how soon we part.'

'You may be in error my young mistress,' said her companion. 'I pray you to be more calm ere you decide.'

'I am calm, quite calm,' was the cold reply. 'I have long guessed his falsehood. Can you not read the suspicion upon my wasted brow, and in my withered form. Long, long! yet still I would not be convinced. I would not, Alba; for who does not cling to life while it can still be cheated into hope?'

'Was it not enough that he should profit by his father's former friendship with the Marquis de St. C—— to abandon at once and forever, all his habits of seclusion? that he should pass hours of gaiety and happiness in the crowded saloons of pleasure, while I kept lonely vigils by his neglected hearth? Was it not enough that he taught me I was no longer the first and only object of his solicitude; and that care and sorrow might do their work, without eliciting one sigh from him who once was jealous lest the summer air should chill me? Was not all this enough? but must he also love the pretty plaything with which he had learned to amuse his leisure hours?'

'As she ceased speaking, she rang a silver bell which stood near her, and an attendant entered the room.