The Seven Pillars

Wenceslao
Fernández Flórez

Translated by
Sir Peter Chalmers
Mitchell

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W. FERNÁNDEZ FLÓREZ

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translated
from the Spanish

by
Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Spain is occupied with a revaluation of its values. A novel that gained the National Prize for Literature and was a "best seller" last year, must tell something of what Spanish readers and writers are thinking. W. Fernández Flórez, a native of Galicia, has written a number of novels, a volume on the Theatre, and a volume of Parliamentary Sketches, but so far as I know *Las Siete Columnas* is his first conspicuous success, although *Las Gafas del Diablo*, published a few years ago, went into several editions. I have translated the title as *The Seven Pillars*, the supports, let us say, of modern Civilisation. They are our old friends, the Seven Deadly Sins. Part One is an ironic description of modern life, but the irony has neither the suavity of Anatole France nor the bitter pathology of Octave Mirbeau. It is life seen through the hard and positive eyes of a Spaniard, and even the humour is grim. In Part Two the Seven Deadly Sins have been removed; the Seven Pillars have fallen, and with their fall, civilisation collapses.

The Devil is the Destroyer. You may think his temptation of the Hermit, as described in the Prologue, an incompetent effort, but if you be pleased to read, in Chapter Seven, of the fashion in which he granted the Holy Man his terms, you may agree that the Devil was the Devil.

I am not learned in Castilian, and, indeed, set myself the task of translation as a relief from work, and to better my knowledge. There may be slips due to carelessness or to ignorance, but I give you my word that the English is a faithful rendering, and not a paraphrase of the original. I have tried to keep the exotic flavour, but to avoid the easy device of retaining un-English forms of construction.

P. CHALMERS MITCHELL

WHIPSNADE,
January 1, 1934

PROLOGUE

In which Satan acts with results apparent only in the second part of this Book

The hut lay hidden under a great rock, black and pinnacled; in front a few level yards, then the abyss. It was a high balcony overlooking the plain chequered with rich fields.

The mountain, vast and empty, brooded in the dusk; the strong scents offered by the lusty earth to the midday sun were quenched, and the thin air held only the sweet and delicate perfume of thyme. In the tense stillness, that gentle scent, replacing the heady aroma given by the pines to the heat of June, seemed like the voice of a choir-boy when the cathedral organ had hardly ceased to resound. As by a soft enchantment, the mountain was changing to blue and the solitude was being steeped in an eerie charm.

The hermit, Acracio, felt his spirit caught as in a net. The nightfall was so comforting that he recognised in it too carnal a flavour, something of sin. He sat motionless in front of his hut, arms crossed, his fiery eyes hidden under the bony forehead, his beard scanty and ragged; he was as still as the pines and the rocks. In that ineffable moment he could have wished that his soul would ascend, a humble vapour, above the mountain, to the longed-for Presence. So intense was the stillness that it seemed to precede and announce a miracle, not peace but a bewilderment. These arrests of time came often at summer sunsets when miracles seemed about to happen, and the heart of the hermit would throb in expectation. Always he hoped. He was filled with the deep and sweet longing to obtain from the Divine Bounty some consolation such as those which were granted to hermits of old; but in his ten years of penitence, stern and unrelenting, on that spur of the mountains, far from other human beings, always hungry, exposed to cold and tempests, never had the supernatural come near him. One day, indeed, as he was praying, a ring dove, circling near him, alighted on the edge of the precipice. The air seemed unnaturally clear. The blood beat in his attentive ears; he remembered the ravens which carried bread to the prophet Elijah, and the eagle which served St. Vito and St. Modesto in the desert of Lucania. Pierced with an emotion that was half pleasure and half anguish, he closed his eyes and bowed his head to the ground. Was there in truth a fragrance of incense and sandalwood? But the bird looked at the servant of God, turning its lovely head, pecked at the ground, and flew away. The

beating of its wings undeceived the hermit. He meditated on his illusion, and saw that it was vanity.

"Lord," he cried, "I know my unworthiness."

Another day, when the sun was setting in a sultry calm, there came out of the thicket and down towards his rock, a huge black dog with ears pricked and fiery eyes. There fell on Acracio a different thrill and another vanity. He thought that the Evil One had come to conquer him by terror, in the fashion He had tried the faith of many a holy solitary. He awaited the assault, his soul valiant, his arms crossed on his bony and panting breast. The last rays of the sun, already set, fanned out behind the clouds, and the scarlet splendour of the sky seemed to be pouring a glory on the defender of the faith, awaiting the battle without fear. But a shepherd whistled in the wood, and the dog, turning round, hurried off in obedience to the call.

The hermit was wont to punish rudely such lapses from humility, although in truth they came from a longing for perfection and a holy impatience for putting his faith to the proof. In the same fashion an untried warrior pants to face the enemy.

The fame of the good hermit grew day by day. Sorrowful mothers brought him their ailing children; a brave young fellow risked his life climbing through the winter snow to cheer the hermit with a load of firewood or relieve his hunger by a supply of food; in the city, in that home of vice, they knew of him and marvelled. And yet, notwithstanding his edifying steadfastness, never had there been launched against him, to conquer him, the hellish devices of temptation which had been lavished on other saints; neither slaves bearing shining jewels; nor pale horsemen, exhaling sulphur and offering dominion and power; nor those infernal women who dance in the moonlight at the doors of hermits, their shifts wantonly opened to display their softly lighted bodies, their arms inviting, their breasts aflower, the fire of hell in their eyes, their skins with the lovely golden tint that comes from eternal flames.

When he examined the depths of his conscience, Acracio believed that he found the sin for which he must continue to do heavy penance; but he was so entangled in the coils of the Serpent that no penitences could free him. This was the sin; ever since, in a moment of unpardonable vanity, he had thought of attaining sanctity, he was discontented with his name. He was a Pérez, son of Pérez, the weaver, and his forefathers, 'bus drivers, were also called Pérez. How was it possible, he thought, to enter on the roll of saints a surname so base; how could anyone be expected to pray to a Saint Pérez? It

helped him little to recall that Juan Gonzáles y Martínez had an altar in the chapels, because everyone had come to call him St. Juan de Sahugún, from his birthplace, whilst he, Acracio, had first seen the light in Gallinejas. San Acracio Pérez, or San Acracio de Gallinejas, these were not names to inspire devotion!

He could change his name, but anxious to punish the weakness of even thinking to do it, he bore it as a spiritual hair-shirt. Never was he heard calling himself anything but "Pérez," as it humbled him even more than "Acracio," a word which, apart from its meaning, had rather a pleasing sound.

Although the air was still transparent on the grey mountain, shadows crept over the plain. And to-night the shadows did not seem to the gentle saint like a soft vapour exuding from the pores of the earth. They seemed to be creeping out from the dark rim of the horizon like horrible snakes, or even bike unspeakable worms oozing towards him with slimy, shapeless bodies. The little lights kindling down below were the eyes of dreadful monsters. The shadows drew near and writhed together. They were the tentacles of a squid whose smooth, repulsive head was still below the horizon. Next they became like a black wave beating against the mountain. The last long cloud, straight and scarlet, faded; the first star shone over the highest peak of the mountain, shivering as if the snow had touched it, but splendid and friendly, full of the comforting suggestion of the stars. Eyes of fire were fixed on the holy man across a clump of brushwood; but he saw them not.

His peaceful soul was bathed in the infinite softness of earth and skies. Black shadows were climbing up the mountain. Suddenly a double glowing ray pierced the darkness, reached the motionless hermit, and disappeared. It came from the lamps of a car travelling down in the city. And then it seemed to the hermit that a hot gust broke on him, and he heard the rapid and frightened flight of a flock of birds, perhaps pursued by a hunting nightfowl. A stone crashed on a heap, scattering other stones. The thousand small noises which fill the mountain when darkness comes, awoke. But suddenly everything was hushed; a silence deep and wide, strange, chill, and terrifying, reached the marrow of his bones. The holy man slowly turned his head.

On a mossy rock, three feet high, his chin resting on his hands, and his elbows on his knees, there sat Satan.

The hermit's body stiffened at the shock. Then with his white hand, deliberately and firmly, he made the sign of the cross. Satan kept still, as if rooted to the rock. Ardent faith brought to the mind of the hermit St. Dunstan's encounter, when he seized the Devil by the nose, or St. Anthony's feat when he spat in the Devil's face. He was filled with furious zeal, a burning desire to give battle to the Enemy with his own hands, as so many servants of God had done before him, and he reached out for his knotty staff.

But Satan took his hands from his cheeks, revealing his sad, but beautiful face. His voice and his huge bat-like wings seemed to quiver.

"Acracio," he said, in a gentle pleading tone, "you have nothing to fear from me."

"I do not fear you," retorted the hermit.

"Then, put down your stick."

"Get thee gone, tempter," muttered the hermit.

Satan smiled bitterly.

"Acracio, I do not come to tempt thee. I give you my word. Put down your stick. Why do you wish to reproduce one of these stupid old quarrels of long ago? Do you think I have come in my old shape to fight a mortal with sticks and fists on this lonely hillside? Listen, and put down your stick, I beg you; I am so soured and bored that I don't mind telling you that I am only just beginning to feel the hardness of my punishment. You have before you the most unhappy of beings. When I was thrust from Heaven, I didn't suffer. Arrogance and rage blinded me to the misfortunes that might come. There was a proud satisfaction in having kept up a rebellion so mighty. But that is not all. You know very well, Acracio, that for centuries and centuries I was the master of the world. *HE* created man lovingly, but I made man prefer to worship Me. I threw against Heaven the most bitter injury—ingratitude. Humanity worshipped me in a thousand queer ways. I was the totem of savages, the stag, the bear, or the dog, worshipped by tribes. I was the sacred cow of the Brahmins, the Voodoo snake in Dahomey; the eagle-headed monster of Assyrian altars; the sun of the Aztecs; the fire fanned by the hands of the women of Iran at dawn; I was the multitude of spirits worshipped by the Chinese. I was then the master of the world. It was believed that *HE* was a drinker of human blood. To me Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia; it was in my service that the Jews, scattering death, entered the promised land. I was the tutor of the human race in its savage childhood. Later, much later, my shadow was still large on the earth. They

sought me and they fled from me; legions of men brought against me hyssop and exorcisms, and legions of men came to sign horrible pacts with me, using the feathers of cocks dipped in their own blood. *HE* and I divided the earth, and no living creature refrained from enlisting on one side or on the other. In the dim woods and on the silent hills, millions of wretches assembled in the revelries of Sabbath eves, and I saw them prostrate at my cloven footprints. Masses were offered to me; and I also had my martyrs, burning in the fires of the Inquisition, writhing and blaspheming in tortures as cruel as those of the other camp. These were my epic days. The greatest poets sang of me, and every heart was graven with my terrible name."

Satan breathed a heavy sigh.

"But how is it now?" he continued sadly. "What am I to-day? Whose conscience do I trouble? Those two great armies whose battles used to shake the unhappy earth have signed a peace with no consideration for their Captains. They have turned disdainful backs on Us, and seem to have forgotten that We ever existed. If anyone does concern himself with HIM, it is to try to analyse HIM scientifically in the cold language of reason and the petulance of logic. But not even by these efforts can the investigators of the Divine gain the attention of the masses. As for me, myself, never could I have expected to be in a position so sorry, to suffer such insulting neglect. I was the Adversary—and now, I am ashamed to own it, I am hardly even an oath; if men didn't require to interlard their words with interjections, would my name ever be mentioned? They call on me when they have dropped a stud, or had their corns stepped on, or as a mild retort to chaff. I am only a sound without meaning, like a grunt. People say 'the devil,' just as if they were saying 'dash it all,' or 'dear me.' Am I anything more? Alas, yes; I am also an ugly mask in carnival processions, and it pleases children to pull my forked tail, sticking out limply from my dirty finery. Unhappy fate; no one loves me, no one fears me, no one believes in me. If you were to tell them down in the city that you had seen me and spoken to me, they would shut you up in a lunatic asylum."

Satan's bitterness was deep and sincere. The holy man, in a voice made soft and pleading by his habit of prayer, forced himself to say:

"Your place is in Hell."

Slowly the Evil One stretched out his arms.

"Hell is here; Hell is the crust of this planet on which human beings swarm; my punishment is that I cannot quit them, but must continue to witness their stupidities and pettinesses. Just think what a penance this is to

one of my intelligence. Long ago when they did recognise me, my sorrow was less acute. The spirit is kept active by hate or by love addressed to it. When the world held many men like you, Acracio, I kept myself well amused, inventing temptations and trials. I contrived some sensational tricks. My word! Many a time when I had seen a disappointed witch rage at the prudery of a hermit who had spurned her offer of a lovely and lustful body, I laughed until the earth shook, and all the world heard the thunder of my guffaws. But now I suffer more than a dethroned king; I endure a unique martyrdom. I speak and am not heard; and I show myself and I am not seen. Homesickness and boredom darken my long idleness. But the round world holds no creature so worthy as you. I have searched all the deserts, the thickest forests, all the crannies of the earth, and you, alone in the world, keep up the fine old traditions, the customs of the good days, even faith itself. For ten years I have watched you, afraid that I was mistaken. At first I didn't trust you; don't get offended. . . . I'll tell you what I've lately had to put up with. I had discovered a hermit in a corner of the Apennines. His life was blameless; he was dressed only in a coarse robe; his head was bare to the rain and the sun; he subjected his body to the hardest toil, and his food was fruits and roots. One night I appeared before him. He looked at me carefully, muttered 'all right,' and set himself to sketching me in a notebook. He was an English naturalist, testing his theories in that retreat."

The Devil breathed heavily.

"What kind of world is this? I can make nothing of it. I have entered into the bodies of several persons by the classical methods; I hid in an orange which a youth ate, and in the wine for which a pregnant woman craved, and I have also slipped into the open mouth of a virgin who had fallen asleep without saying her prayers. Possessed by me, these persons writhed convulsively and spat out froth between their clenched teeth. No one in the olden times was more truly possessed by the Devil. But it was no good. The medical profession pronounced them cases of epilepsy."

Satan again buried his face in his hands, so that his olive cheeks were hidden, and his gaze, sullen and sad, was fixed on the darkening air. The plateau and the mountain were now merged in shadow, but the distant horizon glowed as if the last light of sunset had lingered, forgotten by the mists, or as if some invisible conflagration imitated with its flames the dying agony of the sun. It was as if the sky had poured its blood into the purple rim of sunset, and now showed the pallor of exhaustion. Every night the same glowing stain kindled in the clouds, and dissolved at dawn. It was the distant city revealing its lights, everywhere shining with a pallid glow; the lights of

the wide streets, of eyes starry with ambition, eyes glaring with lust, eyes glowing with anger, eyes shining with greed, and eyes to which pride lent a metallic glitter. Possibly also there was in the milky zenith, held back so that it should not ascend to God, the reflection of millions of human eyes, lighted with the sad fire of mortal sin.

The holy man, who pitied the pines when the hurricane twisted them, who helped a beetle to right itself if he found it waving its legs in the air and vainly struggling to turn over; the lonely soul, kindled with love for every living creature, felt growing in him a flicker of pity for the agony, naked and sorrowful, which the fallen majesty of the Enemy so strangely revealed. He bent his ragged grey beard towards his chest, shut his eyes, and stretched out his bony hand. His voice began to murmur firmly, but without anger:

"Get thee behind. . . ."

Satan leapt from the rock to the ground. His wings covered him like a cloak which was a shroud.

"Stop!" he cried, and his voice shook with sorrow. "Stop! Never shall I try you with my temptations. Never shall I disturb your prayers. You alone of mortals remind me of what I was, and what I could do. I'll do nothing to hinder the salvation of your soul; I am asking nothing from you."

He joined his hands in a gesture of supplication.

"Only let me come to see you now and again, and talk about HIM. . . . For many long years I've found no one to discuss that topic. . . my only subject."

PART I

1

In which Humanity begins to file before us

Archibald Granmont paced across his sumptuous office with a worried air, and then stopped, frowning, in front of his secretary.

"And so," he grumbled, crossing his muscular arms, "we've got only half a dozen children."

"That is so," murmured the other.

"Well then, what's your bright idea, Lucio? To put me to shame?"

"Excellency!"

"To cover me with ridicule? When Archibald Granmont presents an asylum to the Charity Organisation, he presents it all complete. I warned you of that. I give the site, the building, the staff, the beds, and the chairs. Am I to leave out the patients, which are the main thing? No, Archibald Granmont is not going to make any such mistake. Hunt up some other children, pay whatever they ask. And they must be the best specimens in all the town."

The secretary tried to excuse himself.

"I was negotiating for two splendid cases, your Excellency, a child with an enormous head, and another with a minute head. To look at them brought tears to the eyes. But at the last moment their relations refused to hand them over."

"The imbeciles," grunted Granmont. "Did they know that they were for my asylum? What were they up to?"

"I don't know, sir."

"It doesn't surprise me that they thought they had something pretty good in these two extraordinary heads. They must have said: 'Archibald Granmont has all that he wants except a child with a head much too large or much too small.' But they are mistaken, Lucio. Offer them double the price. If they don't accept, we'll bring from elsewhere a number of children with heads so misshapen that no one will look at theirs."

"It shall be done, Excellency."

The secretary gave a low bow, gathered his papers, and began to go away. Granmont, now quite calm, told him:

"You'll find Miss Sander in the anteroom. Have her shown in."

The great man left his splendid desk and moved slowly to one of the windows and then went to a mirror to look at his tall form and lofty brow with their vigorous and dominating appearance. He then turned to watch the door by which Miss Sander would come in. But there were other things to happen before anyone could reach the presence of the magnate. First the curtain over the entrance door shook, then there appeared a hand in a white cotton glove, followed by a stolid face, and finally a man-servant in livery. The servant announced a name, received a nod of approval, disappeared for a moment, reappeared, and ushered in an elegantly dressed girl. Archibald moved to meet her without any great haste.

"Sit down, dear friend," he said in a slightly honied voice. "I've been anxious to see you for nearly a month, but my orphan asylum has been occupying all my time. I have something to tell you. I've taken the National Theatre."

Adriana Sander's lovely face shone with pleasure.

"And I am thinking of giving you the lead."

"Mr. Granmont," she cried in a transport of pleasure. "No wonder they call you the most generous philanthropist in the world."

"But there is something else. I have taken a flat in Grand Avenue, and my secretary has just told me that the rooms have been decorated and furnished, and are quite ready for you to take possession."

Adriana Sander changed from joy to surprise.

"For me to take possession?"

"There are two cars in the garage, one of them a road racer. I am told that you like driving."

The girl got up hurriedly.

"Mr. Granmont, I don't know what you mean. Why are you offering me all these?"

"My dear, I don't like silly questions. You know the answer very well. I have a lot to do, and I wish this first interview to be brief. I have only to add that my jeweller is John Levy in Poplar Street; but I have no objection if you prefer another shop."

"Oh," she exclaimed, blushing with shame, "you are suggesting in this casual way that I am to become your mistress. You forget that I am an

honest woman."

"No, I haven't forgotten it. I know that you are the most coveted of all our actresses; the desire of men surrounds you, and some day you will fall. Don't protest! It always happens. And then your artistic talent will suffer, you will fall from public favour, and perhaps you will have the tragic fate of dragging the wings with which you used to soar. You said just now that I was a philanthropist. Now here is the noblest possible charity. The National Theatre is closed because it has ruined every impresario. I am going to open it to Art again. Up to now you haven't had a field worthy of your talent. I offer you the first stage in the country. As for the rest, if gossip associates your name with mine, that won't do a woman any very great harm."

"This is too much; please let me go."

"Go when you please, Adriana, I am not going to put any pressure on you."

The actress hurried across the room, but when she began to raise the curtain at the door, she paused.

"You must see, Mr. Granmont, that your behaviour is unpardonable."

"I don't agree," replied the great man politely. "Perhaps before deciding you might have a look at the furniture and the garage, and spend a few minutes at the jeweller's window."

Adriana dropped the curtain and threw herself, sobbing, into an armchair.

"Oh, how miserable I am, how miserable! Are you not ashamed to tempt a poor girl?"

Granmont looked at his watch without saying anything.

"You might at least tell me that you loved me," cried the girl, recovering her honourable indignation.

"But, dear girl," Archibald allowed himself to say, "that hardly comes in. Just think how many women would sell their souls to the Devil for the proposal I have just made to you. Again, I assure you that my idea is entirely philanthropic, and I have no time to waste; the asylum is taking up all my time. By the bye, I have put your name down among the invitations to the opening ceremony. All the best people will be there."

"I don't care about the best people."

"Are you going?"

“Mr. Granmont, you are a monster. Do you want to drive me crazy? A moment ago you were making horrible proposals to me, and now suddenly you are talking about something else. Do you mean what you say? How can I take you seriously?”

“Sorry, I was thinking of something else.”

“Oh,” burst out the actress, “you are hopeless, Archibald. Thinking of something else when you are trying to seduce a girl. I wouldn’t have believed it of you. It is no use talking any more.”

And she went again towards the door.

“At least give me an answer,” the magnate almost shouted.

But Adriana had gone. A few seconds passed. Then again the curtain opened to show the charming face of the actress, who asked:

“What is the number of the house?”

“Grand Avenue, number 116.”

“Thank you.”

And this time the honourable young lady made her final exit.

Three days later, at the opening ceremony of the asylum, everyone knew that the virtue of Adriana Sander, which had resisted many temptations, had finally yielded to the noble millionaire, and the truth is that among all the people crowding the courtyards and the halls of the building, only one person thought this capitulation of any importance. If anyone wishes to know who that person was, he has only to pick out the one guest who refused a sandwich, didn’t taste the cup, didn’t seek a bow or a smile from Granmont; the one person who went through the dormitories and dining-rooms, the gymnasium and the class-rooms, without uttering words of praise and admiration; the person who seemed to look at things without seeing them, who even when the cigars were handed round, took one without lighting it. And by these signs there would have been discovered Florio Olivan, the young manufacturer of *foie gras*, who was now hiding his sorrow in a corner of the huge hall between his great friend Alberto Truffe, fat and round as a football, and the gloomy Marco Massipo, silent and dignified, the most conscientious of all the researchers who have dedicated themselves to the high task of hypertrophying the liver of ducks.

But nobody took the pains to notice this sorrow among so great rejoicings. The luncheon had been copious, the guests had now the pleasure of feeling replete and of showing their good manners by exchanging

commonplaces. The crowd was densest under the elms of the courtyard, and the noise of people chattering, of women laughing, of merry shouting, reached over the high walls to the slopes outside where uninvited idlers were trying to guess what was going on inside. The smoke from the flashlights of photographers came slowly through the open windows. On the steps of the great staircase leading to the hall, some grave seniors in frock-coats were in solemn conclave.

Truffe himself didn't seem to think the grief of his friend very serious. His heart was too well protected by fat for ill-humour to reach it, but he was very nearly cross when he was dragged away from the sideboard by Florio, in torture at the revelation of female inconstancy. From the moment of leaving the buffet, Truffe only interrupted Olivan's wails by a few monosyllables. As for Marco Massipo, he hardly ever spoke. He was a man between forty and fifty, browned by the sun, powerful and dark-skinned, the owner of a huge moustache which hung down over his mouth and chin. Since he was no more than a boy he had been employed in the cemetery of St. Mamed until it was closed as the city had reached its walls. Then the out-of-work cemetery man had found a job in Olivan's factory, and in time had come to be a trusted official, overseer of the pens in which innumerable ducks, shut in wire cages, endured in the darkness and silence the hypertrophy of their most succulent organ. It must be said that prosperity and the change of occupation had not altered Marco's character. It seemed almost as if he suffered from homesickness. The few words he uttered were always lugubrious, and he lost his verbal continence only when he came to tell stories of the gloomy precincts in which he had spent more than half his life.

"What a calamity, Alberto, what a calamity!" continued Olivan.

"A real calamity," replied Truffe in the most indifferent way.

"Who could have foretold that the innocent girl whom we used to see running about in the fields would come to this? A lover, Alberto, she has taken a lover!"

"No doubt about it, my friend," replied the fat man, his face now brightened by hope as he saw some waiters coming round with trays.

But at that moment Florio saw Adriana, who was making her way through the throng, evidently coming to speak to him. The young man seized his friend's arm.

“Let us be off,” he cried anxiously. “For goodness’ sake, don’t turn your head.”

“What’s up?”

“Adriana is coming. Let us be off.”

Truffe set off in a hurry towards the waiter.

“Not that way!”

“What way then?” asked the glutton, pretending to be confused.

But by then Adriana was in front of them, and held out her hand to Olivan.

“It must be many days since we have seen each other, Florio; how are you?”

He replied reproachfully:

“I am just as I always was, and I wish you could say the same.”

The young girl looked at him with surprise, and then blushed, and held down her head.

“Then they have told you.”

“Yes.”

There was silence. Truffe and Massipo eagerly lightened the waiter’s tray, taking no notice of the unhappy couple.

Adriana said:

“You were my dearest and oldest friend. Don’t judge me too harshly. Life is a hard struggle and I am alone. Granmont can bring me success and happiness.”

“Do you love him?”

“No.”

“What do you expect from him?”

“Florio, it is only three days, only three days, since I accepted. . . the friendship of that man, and everything has changed for me; without asking, I get everything. I am the star of the National Theatre; my new life is so luxurious that it almost frightens me. All sorts of people seek me out and bow to me, who took no notice of me when I was ‘straight.’ All the

newspapers are now publishing my portrait, and they are preparing an enthusiastic biography for my first appearance."

"Granmont has paid for all that to flatter your vanity."

"But it is me that it is helping."

"At what a price!"

"The world is like that."

"Not all the world."

The girl looked at him with her eyes full of tears.

"Florio, you know that since I was a child my life has been a struggle, sometimes absolute want. . . . Do you think I haven't the right to be happy, even if the price is high?"

Florio's heart softened, as he listened to her, and it was now he who hung his head. And just then the clatter of talk changed into a clamour. Archibald Granmont appeared at the top of the great staircase surrounded by the beings who were to have the happiness of living in his asylum. There was loud applause. Granmont came forward leading with one hand a child with a gigantic head and with the other a child almost without a head. The applause turned into a shout of hurrahs.

But then the Mayor raised his hand for silence. In the name of the city he thanked the generous donor. He recounted the benefactions the city had received from Granmont, the Granmont People's Club, the Granmont Free Library, the Granmont Asylum. He announced that the name of the philanthropist was to be given to a street.

Next, a thin solemn man, dressed in black, came to the front of the balcony and made a speech to the children. It was Theophilus Alp, the founder and director of the Savings Bank. His dreary voice was heard at every public function, preaching the benefits of saving. What was he up to now? He congratulated the children rescued by Granmont from misery and poverty, and urged them to open a Savings Bank account with the twenty-five pesetas which the magnate had given to each of them.

"Save," he shouted, "and show that you are civilised beings. A civilised man is distinguished from everyone else by the fact that he saves. The savage never saves; he lives for the day and takes no thought for the future. If you will get in the habit of saving from your infancy, you will have gone a long way towards being useful to your country and to yourselves. A famous author has said, 'Saving is the elementary school of capitalism.' "

And he proceeded to take their money from them. He was thus able to satisfy himself with sorrow that the fifteen orphans were fifteen little savages who had intended at once to buy sweets and toys with the dole which they were made to hand over in tears.

As the waiters had disappeared before the speeches were over, the guests began to leave. Granmont and a few people of importance still remained at the top of the staircase. The philanthropist was telling the journalists that no other asylum in the world owned a pair of children like the one with the gigantic head and the other with the minute head, and he allowed himself to be photographed between them. He was then photographed in another pose, surrounded by the important persons who had kept close to him, hardly concealing their satisfaction, although they made a favour of being taken in the group. Some reporters who were already leaving the hall turned round quickly and pointed their cameras at the group, just as if a big spider had caught them by the leg. Florio, who was looking angrily at the group, said:

"Just look at them; each of them thinks himself the centre of the universe, the one who ought to be in the middle of the picture-page of the daily papers. They all think that the others should serve only as a background. Just look how pride is stiffening their necks. There are the savant Noke and the famous Sike pushing themselves forward, and Commander Coedere with his clipped moustache, and Hector Azil, the critic, with his eyebrows raised disdainfully. What fools! The chief idea in their heads is that the world was made for them to shine in. And that Granmont!. . . that Granmont!"

He stopped speaking and clenched his fists as the magnate was passing close to him, distributing distant bows. A splendid car was throbbing in the courtyard, at the entrance gate, where there was still a crowd of spectators, and the footman, bowing so deeply that he seemed to be looking for something on the ground, held open the door. The philanthropist entered the car, cheering broke out, the liveried footman got up beside the driver, and the order to start was given.

Olivan and his friends also left. The young man lived in a house close to his factory, in the country, a few miles from the city. The sun was setting when they arrived. They sat down in a wide veranda from which could be seen the rich valley and the distant mountains. Florio's bad temper had made their journey silent. Truffe, however, ventured to say that he felt the heat, and the intelligent Marco didn't require a clearer hint to set before him a gigantic glass of beer. The insatiable glutton drank it off in a prolonged gulp, so that when he had finished it he had to take a deep breath as if he had just

come up from a dive. Then he clasped his hands on his stomach and smiled ecstatically.

"What a lovely summer, Florio," he chanted in praise. "The plain looks like a table set for a banquet of the gods. The grapes are giving the best harvest of the century; I've never seen the wheat look better; it has been necessary to prop up the branches in the orchards, and in the river, trout as big as tunnies swim up and down as if they were annoyed by the laziness of the fishermen. Merely to look at all this plenty, brings happiness."

He looked at his friend out of the corner of his eye. But Olivan certainly didn't seem at all pleased by all that good news.

"As for you," grumbled Truffe, "nothing will drag you out of your melancholy. Just listen to me. I was once even more slender than you, and was in love with Lida as much as Romeo was in love with Juliet, When she deserted me, I became such a yellow skeleton that the manager of a circus wanted to hire me for his show. I couldn't forget Lida, and the bitterness of her deceit made me hate the whole human race. But now I know the difference between a bad woman and a good cook, and if I have to choose between a kiss and a fat quail, I take good care not to disappoint the innocent bird."

Florio didn't show the slightest interest in these preferences.

"After all," cried Truffe, a little annoyed, "don't you realise that you did nothing to prevent what happened. You have known Adriana since she was a child, and you've been in love with her for years. But when did you ever make a formal proposal to her? I've no patience with you, Florio. I am quite sure that every morning when you opened your letters you expected to find a declaration of love from her."

Olivan retorted:

"She knew as well as me that I was in love with her; but our lives parted. When I went abroad, Adriana was only a little girl; when I came back, she had taken to the stupid life of the stage. What do you think I should have done? You would have been the first to look grave if I had offered to marry her. I thought that I would forget her. I couldn't. And now, what am I to her? The good friend of her childhood, too serious to share her follies, and too poor to satisfy her ambition?"

"You aren't poor. You are the owner of the chief factory of *foie gras* in the kingdom."

“But Archibald Granmont is a multi-millionaire, and he bears a name famous for two hundred years. To the devil with him! Did you see the way he looks at people? It seems as he doesn’t see anyone, as if nobody reached the level of his eyes. I believe I could kill him, and never repent, Alberto. He is the most arrogant man in the world.”

Marco raised his voice.

“The most arrogant man that has ever lived was buried years ago in the cemetery of St. Mamed.”

And although the recollection plunged him into gloom, he stretched over to refill with care Truffe’s glass.

“Nobody can pour out beer as well as you, Marco,” said the glutton, deeply moved by the attention. “I am going to drink this glass to your health.”

“I don’t know that it will do me any good, sir,” replied the employee, “but thank you all the same.”

“Now,” said Truffe, when he had emptied the huge mug, “I am in the proper spiritual frame to hear the history of your reprobate.”

Massipo turned to his master:

“If Mr. Olivan doesn’t mind listening,” he said diffidently.

Florio made a gesture of indifference, as much as to indicate that no possible annoyance (whether it were a story by Massipo, or an earthquake) could add to his grief, and the former superintendent of St. Mamed sat down beside the two friends and began as follows:

“The proudest man on earth, gentlemen,” he said, “died twenty years ago. He was the Baron de la Cetea, and his Christian name was José: but he changed that name, as being rather vulgar, to Everard, after having ascertained that in the whole province there was no other distinguished Everard. About what my hero did during his life, I have nothing to say, because I haven’t taken the trouble to find out the facts. But I know that he had fifteen or twenty different uniforms, the wearing of each of which carried a distinct privilege, even if it had become no more than the right to meet other wearers of the same uniform. The servant who for some time had the duty of taking flowers to the tomb told me that the chief object of these reunions was to maunder over old times, a fatiguing task which made it necessary for them to dress themselves in strange costumes and brag of their own ancestors. Baron de la Cetea was very proud of his own chief ancestor,

and cited him on any pretext and at any time. I know also that among all his suits, the one that gave our nobleman most pleasure carried the right to stand for four hours a day outside one of the bedrooms of the royal palace. The same servant also told me that his dead master would never try to strike the same match twice. If the phosphorus didn't break into flame with one rub on the box, the haughty Everard threw it away and took another, as to persevere with the first was to grant it an unmerited favour.

"It won't surprise you that our gentleman devoted many pages of his will to directions for his own funeral. It is a practice few vain people can resist. Our hero arranged for himself a sensational funeral. He contrived to give trouble to more people at his death than most men give during their whole lives. He had himself placed in a coffin of costly wood, where, stiff and solemn, clad in his most splendid uniform, he was on view for a whole day, to everyone who cared to come, just as if his carrion were something out of the way. At ten o'clock at night the first gases of decomposition slightly moved his mouth, and gasped out '*puah*.' And exactly at that moment the prime minister and other very distinguished persons had come into the death chamber.

" 'How annoying,' thought the proud corpse, 'whatever will these gentlemen think of my manners?'

"He watched them from the corner of his eye, to see if their faces showed any signs of reproach or ridicule; but he saw nothing except gravity and sorrow. And he was comforted.

"Apart from that little detail, never did a corpse acquit itself in its coffin with more dignity. Four-and-twenty hours he was on view and not for a second did he forget himself. You couldn't come across a dead man making a more dignified corpse, and those who saw him in his white uniform, with his frilled collar, a fine ivory crucifix in his hands, his boots with the spurs of his Order shining like mirrors, one eyelid closed and the other just showing a bit of the cornea, can never have forgotten him.

"All the same, the supreme triumph of the dead man was when he felt himself being slipped gently over the velvet-palled floor of the hearse—the sumptuous open hearse he had specified in his will. Everything was magnificent: the horses, the chariot, the plumes, the liveries of the footmen —and although one of these wasn't plump enough to fit his dress coat, he was to be forgiven because of the discomfort a wig much too small must have caused him. The cortège started, and behind it there came the discordant voices of the clergy—to whom it seemed impossible to assume

the proper melancholy tone—next a crowd on foot, further back an endless stream of carriages with crests. Weepers, black gloves, silk hats, and then, as master of the funeral ceremony, the representative of the king, a thin and livid courtier, hunched of body and slow on his feet, to whom, because he looked like an unburied corpse himself, these duties were always assigned at the Palace, to his legitimate pride.

"To see that dignitary behind the coach was the chief pleasure the defunct owed to his new estate. But soon he found other reasons to be glad that he was dead, enjoying himself more than he had thought possible. To pass through the streets in a sumptuous coach, holding up the traffic, with hundreds of well-dressed people on foot following behind, is a deep joy; but to be saluted by all the world, to obtain from old and young, from rich and poor, a solemn courtesy in which for a space bared heads showed bald skulls, curly hair, white or ruddy locks, is a pleasure granted to very few whilst they are alive. The baron received these salutes with the reserved gravity that came from conscious merit.

" 'At last,' he thought, 'justice is being done me.'

"He would have liked the priests to sing all the way, but that little grievance didn't disturb his contentment too much. Things went well, and there were no ruts to endanger the stability of his sword, his staff, and his plumed hat lying on the coffin. On many of the balconies women appeared and crossed themselves, and some people coming out of their houses as the cortège passed, hurried back in visible terror.

"That reminded the dead man of the faculty which he had acquired as a corpse, of casting the evil eye, and from his coffin he directed an evil gaze from his horrible eye at everyone who came out from his house as he passed.

"Many decent merchants became bankrupt that day, by the action of the proud gentleman.

"Since the soil of St. Mamed was consecrated, there had not been, among all the millions who had been buried there, any conduct so strange as the Baron's. The customs of the dead are very simple, and contrary to the general belief, there is not the least solemnity when they meet. They like to tell stories, to dance, and to chase will-o'-the-wisps. The Baron de la Cetea soon began to go out at nights, to walk along the cemetery paths, clad in a rag of his white robe as knight of some Order or other. But he didn't exchange a word with anyone, or go near a group of his neighbours, although they were extremely picturesque in the moonlight. You can take it

from me that there were there some very respectable ghosts: for instance, there were Mr. Calamin who had a sonnet on his tombstone, and another skeleton with six gold teeth. And yet neither of these gentlemen gave themselves any airs. But one night, whilst the Baron was trying to decipher the laudatory poem on Mr. Calamin's tombstone, the gentleman came out of his retreat and made a courteous salute.

" 'I congratulate you,' said the Baron. 'This idea of a poetical epitaph is excellent. I am sorry I didn't think of it.'

" 'After a time,' objected the other modestly, 'I got rather tired of it. I am not going to deny that for the first few months I was very proud of the verses; but they seem now to turn me into—into something like toffee.'

" 'Like toffee, my dear sir?'

" 'Yes; when I was a child, I was very fond of sweetmeats with verses printed on the wrapping paper. But why talk about a trifle like that? Allow me to say that I regret not seeing you at our little meetings.'

" 'Oh,' replied the Baron, rather fretfully, 'I haven't found anyone to introduce me.'

" 'I assure you that it isn't necessary.'

" 'Well, to tell the truth, I am afraid of meeting undesirable persons; I am not very fond of the rabble.'

" 'But,' explained Mr. Calamin gloomily, 'there are no common people here; there is nothing but the community of the dead. Neither blue blood, nor horny hands, nor well-endowed brains: the worms have eaten or the soil has drank up all that. Death has levelled us, and in this domain there is nothing to divide us into ranks.'

"The Baron de la Cetea interrupted him:

" 'I am sorry to hear a gentleman of your obvious distinction defend notions of that kind. What distinguishes us in life is the way in which we came into it, and I don't see why the same should not apply to our death. I came into life in a cradle with a coat of arms. That was enough. And I came into the cemetery in a state coach. Very good, you are not going to tell me that it would have been all the same if I had come here third class.'

" 'I also came here first class,' said Mr. Calamin, with some pride, boasting in his turn.

“ ‘So I should have supposed,’ admitted the other; ‘let us introduce ourselves. What were you in life?’

“ ‘Chief of the Board of Trade. And you?’

“ ‘It would take a long time to recite all my titles; but it will probably please you specially to know that I was private chamberlain of the cape and sword of His Holiness.’

“The man with the poetic epitaph made a deep bow.

“ ‘It is an honour to know you. Was your duty very heavy?’

“ ‘By no means. I saw the Pope only once in my life.’

“ ‘Then?’

“ ‘You must understand that I only had it to put on my death certificate. It is well known that there are many offices and many distinctions that have no other object except to be put on the death certificate. But I think the hour has come for us to retire. Good-bye, sir.’

“ ‘Good-bye, sir, here is my niche, and I am at your service.’

“Breaking the simple manners of the dead, the Baron soon succeeded in dividing them into castes. He formed an upper-class club, and got them to meet on Fridays in his vault, with little other purpose than to talk to them about his distant ancestor, the first Baron de la Cetea. No one else had an ancestor so distinguished, and the skeleton with the six gold teeth tried in vain to attract attention when the private chamberlain was speaking. Before the club broke up, every Friday evening, Mr. Calamin got leave to recite his poetical epitaph, so giving a literary tone to the proceedings.

“One night, when the Baron was taking a solitary walk near the boundary wall, he saw a skeleton sitting in a meditative attitude on a mossy stone. The nobleman looked askance at him, with the lofty disdain which the rabble deserve. A mere glance had warned him that he had to do with a denizen of the common grave-pit. The skeleton was many years old, possibly many centuries, and was grimy and discoloured with gritty patches of soil. The nobleman passed on silent and dignified. But he heard a voice:

“ ‘Everard!’

“The voice was harsh and powerful, and just a little mocking. The private chamberlain of His Holiness stood still, and the two skeletons stared at each other for a few seconds.

“ ‘I am very pleased to see you, Everard,’ said the bunch of dirty bones smoothly. ‘Yes, very pleased indeed! In your present condition no one can say that you aren’t very like your father, and that should gratify family pride.’

“ ‘And who are you?’ muttered the proud gentleman.

“ ‘I am one of your ancestors; the first Baron de la Cetea, my dear. That I am, although the common grave has damaged me a bit. I heard yesterday that you had arrived, and I said to myself that a chat with you might be amusing. How is the world wagging? What sort of a life did you lead there?’

“ ‘The life proper to my rank, grandparent,’ replied the Baron, although he was a little confused.

“ ‘Very good; I am glad of that. Is there still good money in piracy?’

“ ‘Piracy?’

“ ‘My word—it would be almost worth while to live again, my boy, to taste its joys. I hear that the world is now rather a dull place, and that people have to learn reading and writing. It must be like a girls’ party. Oh, the good times! the good times! I can’t deny that I was sometimes starving and often had a struggle; but from the day we murdered the master of the *Cetea* and I made myself captain, and we turned to piracy, life was much pleasanter.’

“ ‘I always understood that you had been captain of a royal vessel.’

“ ‘When that happened I had already drunk many casks. And casks made my fortune. Do you know the story? The ship of Arnaldo, the Genoese, saw us because we had deliberately placed ourselves in his course. We pretended to be carriers of wine in the Adriatic, and we had a full cargo. The trick succeeded. Arnaldo’s crew coveted the wine, boarded our stern, and chained us to the benches in their ship. “Drink!” we thought, “for our turn will come soon.” You have guessed that the casks were poisoned. In a few hours the crew of the ship died, howling. Arnaldo and a few others had vomited up the poison, but we had no trouble in securing them. Then I had the notion of impaling Arnaldo on the foremast of the *Cetea*. But he didn’t stick well, and we had to tie ropes to his ankles and pull hard. Lord, how we laughed!’

“ ‘Horrible!’

“ ‘And so we entered the port. When Don Henry, the king, whom the Genoese had kept uneasy, heard of it, he not only pardoned us, but made me captain of the captured vessel. Three years later I married Mencia, your

virtuous ancestress, and it was to that rash impulse that I owe the pleasure of speaking to you now, Everard.'

"He sighed deeply and exclaimed:

" 'There was an excellent woman! When I had to use a knife on her father who had withheld his consent to our marriage, that saint kept on crying: "Don't make him suffer, don't make him suffer! It's not necessary; cut his throat without any more tortures." Tender heart! She couldn't bear to see unpleasantness!'

"Everard, completely overcome, had sat down near his ancestor, and was hiding his skull in his hands. Suddenly they heard close by a thump on the ground. A voice whispered:

" 'Jump down! there's nothing to fear.'

"And they saw a man holding out his arms to another, who was still astride the wall.

" 'We must hide,' ordered the founder of the House of de la Cetea, 'or we are done for.'

"And he dragged his descendant to the shelter of a tombstone.

"The two new arrivals stood quite near them, but talked so low that not a word could be heard. They put down on the ground beside the tomb a big sack and a rope ladder, and moved away in the darkness.

" 'They have come to steal skeletons,' said the old pirate; 'they make bone buttons and they come here to get their raw material.'

"He shook his head sadly.

" 'Now they are going to the common grave-pit. It's the worst of being an occupant of that ditch; you run the risk of finding yourself holding up people's drawers. I hear that you have a splendid vault. I must take up my quarters in it from to-night.'

"Everard didn't reply. He peered into the darkness, and listened to the sound of the footsteps to guess how far off they were. Then he hurled himself violently on the dirty skeleton of his ancestor, seized it, doubled it up, popped it into the robbers' sack, and tied the neck so that it couldn't escape.

" 'Everard, Everard,' cried the prisoner, in a lamentable voice.

“ ‘Ouf,’ cried the Baron, ‘what would come of the De la Ceteas if they had to introduce this bandit to their friends?’

“He shook his hands, tainted from having touched that dirt, and moved off.”

II

In which Big Business is presented and a young man of exemplary conduct appears

There was a crowd in the assembly hall of the Savings Bank when Olivan came in. He took a back seat and looked at those who were present with some surprise. When he decided to accept Theophilus Alp's invitation to be present, he had no idea that the meeting would have the importance evident from the number and the quality of those who had assembled. Among the forty odd persons who were impatiently stirring in their seats or were whispering to each other in an unceasing monotone, guessing about the purpose of the meeting, there were representatives of the leading firms of the country in commerce and industry. Florio also recognised several politicians, and Lawel the engineer, pale and smiling, as if he were highly excited, talking with his colleagues, the famous Sike and the renowned Noke, the three forming a group at which everyone kept looking. Florio had lived with Lawel when they were abroad, and although their duties now kept them apart, they were on very friendly terms. He would have liked to approach Lawel and ask him what was the object of the meeting, but he could not get near him. He came to the conclusion that most of those present were equally ignorant. When the wealthy David, plump and large-nosed, squeezed between the rows of seats, rubbing against them with his stout body, many hands were held out to him, to stop him; but the millionaire passed on, smiling, replying to the questions only with the promising words:

"Great news! great news! very soon you'll hear all about it."

The arrival of the director of the Savings Bank caused an impressive silence. The doors were closed and a few persons still standing hurried to find seats. Theophilus Alp, pale and solemn, sat stiffly behind the chairman's table, and with his eyebrows called to his side Lawel the engineer, who kept nervously twisting the bunch of papers he was carrying.

The nasal voice of the director of the Savings Bank was raised. The illustrious financier spoke with his hands on the table and his eyes turned down, but as he warmed to his speech, his twinkling little eyes fluttered like butterflies all over the room, and his hands twitched as if he were a miser counting his gold.

“Fortune,” he declared, “had capriciously selected him to make public the most remarkable event of his generation. When he had come to the end of what, he feared, must be a rather dull speech, it would be said that a new epoch had dawned for humanity, and that every one of them who shared in the gigantic enterprise would experience the high satisfaction of helping to turn to a new and propitious direction the chariot of fate of the human race, our noble human race.

“How far back into the dim centuries of history was it necessary to penetrate to find the beginning of the human longing to fly? He could not say. Perchance in the huge forests, rank and flowerless, of the end of the Tertiary Period, in which there was now evidence that Man was already leaving his footprints on the warm and moist earth, amongst monsters now extinct, the bold longing to fly was first formed in his brain. Primitive man wished to be like a bird so that he might detect and overtake the prey which his hunger demanded, or escape from the fierce pursuit of the carnivores of the forest, or when in the terrible geological convulsions of that childhood of the globe, subterranean forces raised mountain ranges and opened valleys into which tumultuous waters, the mother of life, were precipitated, and primitive man, mad with terror, fled not knowing whither, over the surface of the quaking earth, amid a throng of wild beasts sharing his terror.

“From these times, doubtless, man aspired to flight. This age-long wish inspired mythology and took haven in the souls of poets. Idolaters gave wings to their idols and Christians to their angels; literature had dedicated miles of verses to the longing to ascend into the tranquil or the stormy air, towards the pearly clouds, towards the adored woman, towards the ends of the earth.

“When the aeroplane was invented, the human race greeted with joy the attainment so long desired. But had the aeroplane truly given us dominion of the air? Unfortunately, no! The long and tragic tale of victims forbade us deceiving ourselves. Hardly a day passed without a disaster. From causes beyond the reach of perfect construction and the skill of pilots, these mechanical birds too frequently fell from the skies which we had thought conquered; man had reached the boldness of Icarus but not the tranquil security of the eagle. The frequency of accidents forbade our using the invention to the limits of its theoretical possibilities. For its effect on human life to attain the enormous influence, the incalculable power that it ought to have, every possibility of accident must be removed, and an aerial journey must become as safe—no—safer than a journey by steamer, by rail, or by motor!

“Very good; that had now been accomplished. Lawel the engineer, Lawel, whose name could now be enrolled among the great benefactors of humanity, had invented a stabiliser of perfect efficiency.

“We could now affirm,” insisted Alp, “that this invention had brought a miraculous metamorphosis to aviation. Until now it had been little more than a dangerous sport. From to-day it had become the most valuable instrument of human activity.”

Theophilus Alp made a deliberate pause which served as a safety-valve through which the murmuring astonishment of the audience escaped. A confused tumult of voices arose, threaded by audible comments. Some of those present could not reconcile their idea of Alp, a man of business, with a speech in which he had praised scientific progress, and some of the phrases in his peroration, laboriously poetical, had brought to the faces of more than one millionaire the mocking smile we give to a display of weakness. A purple-faced old man shouted out that he was about as much interested in aviation as in Chinese kites, and that for his part he would never quit the solid earth.

But Alp now resumed his speech, to an audience a little keener and more responsive. The orator announced the formation of a company to exploit Lawel’s patent in every country. The scale of the new company was immense, and when it was in full operation there would be no business to compare with it, in size and profits. Skilfully, with the mastery he always displayed in such affairs, the director of the Savings Bank drew a rapid sketch of the company’s future; its swift national and international passenger lines; its rapid transport of merchandise between the most distant parts of the globe, and arising from the new safety of the journeys, a multitude of minor services which would bring a total revenue of incalculable magnitude; hotels built by the company in the most beautiful parts of the world to which guests would be brought in thousands by the planes; gigantic planes the models of which were now in the designing rooms, to carry, at a cost almost ridiculously small, produce which up to now could not be distributed because of the slowness of transport. The company would have to found at once three of these subsidiaries, to deal respectively with fish, fruit, and dressed meat. Fruit gathered in the morning in the far South would be sold the same evening in the North with the dew still on it: fishes which were swimming one day in the Atlantic would be in the markets of Central Europe the next. Careful management would secure both very low prices and very large profits. Alp read some figures to prove his forecast. The estimates, although conservative, were most attractive, and their clearness as

well as the plain honesty of the scheme were more convincing than a long speech. Leaning forward in the effort to catch every point, their eyes glowing as if they were reflecting mountains of gold, the possible investors followed Alp's words as if they were hypnotised, the more so because now he had abandoned the glitter of rhetoric and was speaking with keen precision.

He finished reading and neither words nor applause were heard. Everyone in the audience was engaged in making his own reflections and in deciding what he was going to do. Several wrinkled their eyebrows under their sweating foreheads. Theophilus Alp added little. It was necessary to promote the company, to begin the construction of the aeroplanes, to buy land for stations and aerodromes. The complete development of the scheme would require millions. He had ventured to assemble the influential persons he saw before him, as he was confident that they were the obvious persons to carry forward the great enterprise. The Savings Bank had decided to invest a very large sum, but even that Bank did not have the honour of being the first subscriber. The first subscriber had been that honoured man, Archibald Granmont, and, moreover, he had generously provided the funds required by Lawel for the researches and experiments which had come to fruition in the invention.

All eyes were turned on Archibald Granmont, who, seated in the front row, received the homage impassively. Lawel then rose up quickly and, holding out his arm, cried:

"It is true. And I wish to make public acknowledgment of my indebtedness to Mr. Granmont."

He sat down as abruptly, nodding his head emphatically. There was a round of enthusiastic applause, and the audience rose from the seats and broke up into groups discussing excitedly, or pressing the director of the Savings Bank for further details. It became known that Sike and Noke, the two famous scientists, were to be associated with the company. Until then Sike's life had been passed in extreme austerity, devoted to researches on the making of hardened steels. He had abjured all forms of emotion and had never coveted wealth. Noke, whose brilliant reputation had grown parallel with Sike's, had employed his science in inventing projectiles capable of penetrating Sike's steels. As both were men of first-rate ability and neither had cared for anything except their science, their rivalry could have ended only with the death of one of them. When Sike put out a new steel, the trumpets of fame sounded, and telegraphists all over the world fingered their keyboards. When Noke produced his newest projectile, able to pass through

the Sike's armour-plates as if they were butter, the roar of triumph was renewed. Every newspaper in the kingdom, for such events, had published the portraits of one or the other, more than twenty times, and all the medals and orders with which a well-organised nation rewards human merit were already within the reach of the two glorious researchers.

Florio had little difficulty in getting Lawel into a corner of the hall, for attention was concentrated not on the inventor of the stabilisers but on Alp and Granmont, and after a few people had pressed his hands, the young engineer was left alone. And so he joined Olivan very gladly, and with an arm on his shoulder followed him smilingly.

"Your success delights me, Lawel," said Olivan, "and I should think that Company as described by Alp is really going to have a great future. I have some money free—quite a big sum. I was thinking of enlarging my factory, but this scheme tempts me more. All the same, before I hand over my reserves to Alp, I'd like your opinion."

"What do you want my opinion about?" replied the inventor, smiling.

"Oh, perhaps you don't realise the risks we may run. Sometimes without an absolute certainty, relying only on probabilities and hopes, one may be risking not only one's own fortune but the fortune of other people in——. But I know that you are a solid person."

Lawel interrupted him:

"I know nothing about the business side, but I do know that my stabilisers are sound."

Florio embraced him joyfully.

"I must get a great deal of money—a very great deal of money, the wealth of Midas. Very likely on that depends whether my life is to be happy or miserable."

"What do you want to buy?"

"A heart."

"You are ambitious, but an ambition like that has a big driving force. Listen to me, Florio; and it may encourage you to know that a motive very like yours has driven me to a success which I could never have dreamed of. If I had not been in love with Celia, I should have remained the rather sceptical idler you used to know, with no more money than the pittance I got from the State and with nothing to distinguish me from the common herd. I can almost say that Celia invented the stabilisers. At least the longing to win

her inspired my efforts. We were introduced two years ago at a party where a number of distinguished people were dancing to relieve the want of some unfortunates. . . I forget whom. Celia was the loveliest of the pretty girls there, and she was not only beautiful but an heiress. There was always a devoted swarm round her, and in the swarm were the richest and smartest young men, and the bearers of the proudest titles. Amongst all these I was less than nothing. Celia kept calling me Powel or Pullman, or Kleber. At last I said to her, 'You ought to try to remember a name which all the world will know in a few months.' It was a silly boast, and I was ashamed of it, but from that moment I began to work to make it good. You realise that all these people here are not really interested in the stabiliser, but in the dividends that the Company will pay. And all that I really care about is Celia. Do you know what I think, my friend? The secret motive of nearly all the efforts men make is a woman."

"That has often been said."

"But every truth we prove for ourselves seems new and our own discovery. And I tell you that but for Celia we wouldn't be discussing this improvement in aviation."

Someone called away the engineer, and the friends separated.

When only a few people were left in the hall, Florio went to say good-bye to Alp. The honourable banker kept him back affectionately, with a smile on his foxy face.

"Wait a minute; I want a word with you."

He shook hands with his friends and invited the young man to his office.

"What did you think of our scheme?" he asked.

"Excellent, Alp; I've made up my mind to come in."

"You won't regret it. Everything is going smoothly and already we have got enough money promised for a beginning. But I am particularly delighted to have your support. You heard me mention some business projects relating to the transport of fruit and meat. I have the idea that your experience would be very useful to us on that side of the scheme. Would you care to be one of our directors? You needn't answer at once. I'll give you a summary of what it would mean. You can examine it and, if you like the idea, please develop it and work out the details. There is no hurry. Until the lines are working regularly we can't do anything. But I wish to have everything ready down to the minutest detail."

He rang the bell. Then appeared timidly a young man badly dressed and worse shaved; to judge from the little of him that could be seen, it seemed as if he had opened the door only enough to let one eye and one ear pass through.

"Andres," said Alp, "fetch the portfolio marked with Mr. Olivan's name."

The eye and the ear disappeared silently.

"He is my secretary," explained the director of the Savings Bank, ". . . a young man who will go far. He is worth anything you might have to give him. Of course I have trained his mind since he was a mere boy, but I am not blinded by vanity in my judgment, I assure you. He has the virtue of saving in the most complete form. If his history ever comes to be written, it will be a lesson."

Mr. Alp was about to confirm his description by an example, but the door opened again and Andres came in. He was as lean as was possible for a living body; his upper lip was pressed tightly on the lower, and as he handed over the roll of documents you could see the broadened tips of his fingers, calloused from the typewriter.

"Wait," ordered the director.

Theophilus Alp winked at Olivan.

"Andres," he said, pretending to be serious, "I am rather dissatisfied with your behaviour. I saw you last night outside a café drinking beer."

"Vermouth," corrected the secretary curtly.

"Vermouth? But that is worse."

"A disgusting vermouth, tasting like varnish; it takes away the appetite completely."

A smile lightened Alp's face.

"I understand, and after it you had no appetite."

"None."

"This young man will go far, Olivan," commented the director, unable to hide his satisfaction. "Never has he bought a novel, or worn an overcoat, or taken a little milliner to the pictures, or wasted any money on unnecessaries. It won't surprise me if he owns a fortune by the time he is seventy. You will have a happy old age, Andres."

“So I expect, sir,” said the young scarecrow with pleasure. “I am always thinking of making my old age comfortable and fortunate. When my wife, who is rheumatic, complains of what she suffers by not taking the ’bus when she has a long way to go, I tell her, ‘And isn’t it worth a sacrifice to make sure that in your old age you’ll have a three-wheeled bath-chair that you can steer yourself, with a servant to push it in the streets?’ ‘Shall I have a rug over my legs?’ she asks me. ‘Yes, a fine rug.’ Then pleasure brings tears to her eyes, and we hug each other in happiness.”

“You are a happy pair. You seem to have been born for each other.”

“So I think, sir. And I keep being more pleased that I didn’t follow the advice of some of my friends when they told me that the small size of my sweetheart should put me off her. ‘It wouldn’t take more trouble to get hold of a fine plump girl,’ they used to tell me, ‘and you would have a better bargain.’ ‘All very well,’ I thought, ‘but to have a plump woman always with you would demoralise you and lead to waste. You begin by having a plump woman, and you end by having three meals a day. And soon we would have to buy fans and have big, substantial furniture. No, thank you. My Juana will do very well. She won’t wear out too many shoes; she won’t swallow too much food, and when my jackets are old they will cut down into coats for her. She has given me a son and has suckled him as well as any other woman could do. It is true that while she was nursing it she couldn’t cry, and one day when she sweated she had nothing left to make her milk. But these were trifles.’ ”

“I should like to know,” Olivan put in, “how you came to have this passion for saving.”

Andres, in order to reflect, shut the only eye that was open.

“Probably it was from observing nature, sir,” he replied. “Nature abhors the superfluous. Atrophy is her savings bank. I could easily convince you by some of the grander phenomena of nature; it will be enough to call your attention to quite a common little fact—baldness. Nature deprives men of their hair at the age when their daughters can knit silk caps for them. ‘As they can now protect themselves against catching colds by their own means,’ she seems to say, ‘let us take their hair away from them.’ But does it end there? By no means. The unctuous bald heads don’t remain barren and useless; Nature doesn’t tolerate mere luxury. Millions and millions of flies pasture exclusively on what they can pick up on these smooth and ruddy fields, and thus Nature saves having to nourish them on other provender. I

have reflected deeply on such lessons, sir, but what finally shaped my philosophy was the example of my uncle Miguel."

"Did he also save?"

"My uncle Miguel wasted a large fortune in drinking the oldest wines, loving the most beautiful women, and in gallivanting about the world. He used to say that a banknote was a draft on happiness, and that he could not understand how anyone could be such a fool as not to cash it into pleasure at once. That is the detestable heresy of prodigals. But he went further, and held that saving only made a single rich banker out of many poor people, and that he did more for the public welfare by throwing his fortune about like a madman than those who saved every dirty copper they could scrape up."

"What a fool!" cried Alp in real indignation.

"A fool! but it was useless trying to dissuade him. When he was fifty-five years old he turned up amongst us, broken down, as wretched as a beggar, without even enough to buy his food. He claimed that we ought to keep him out of charity. 'Saving is the only thing!' I shouted at him when he turned up at my house. 'Saving is the only thing; if I reach old age, I shan't be without a good joint on the table!' 'But you won't have the teeth to eat it,' he prophesied. 'Give *me* a lump of bread and I'll eat it thinking of a truffled pheasant I once ate in Paris; I can recall all the most savoury tastes because my palate has known them all.' He was incorrigible. I lost sight of him until one day I was told that he was in the hospital. A motor car had knocked him down and it was necessary to amputate both his legs. The accident seemed to have brought him to reason, because he said, patting my head: 'If everyone were like you, there wouldn't be so many motor cars, and perhaps I wouldn't be in this state.' I went to see him a week later. His face was pale but showed a happy serenity. He greeted me more affectionately than ever before, and asked me to give my opinion on a pair of waterproof boots with the soles still polished that he had beside his bed. 'They are first-rate,' I said, and it was true. 'So I think too,' he agreed, looking at them affectionately, and added, 'I have wanted them for a long time because my boots had holes in them and let in water; at last I've got them.' Then he told me that he had sold his amputated legs to two doctors from Madrid to make what they called a 'preparation.' Having told me that, he was silent a minute or two as if it were painful to confess his faults, but in the end he wrung my hands and exclaimed, 'You were right, Andres; blessed be saving. If I had not saved my legs until now, how could I have sold them to buy boots? God has granted me enlightenment by this sign, but I fear it is a little late.' It was

late, because he died three days afterwards. But never will I forget this valuable lesson. I shall try not to have to repent, like my poor uncle Miguel, when it is too late to repair the evil."

And the prudent young man took out of his pocket a handkerchief which was about a quarter of the usual size and mopped up half a tear.

III

Which relates to a conversation in Adriana's dressing-room

A few days before the date of the quarterly banquet of the Society of Epicures over which Alberto Truffe presided, that gentleman came to Florio's house bringing with him two tickets for the performance at the National Theatre.

"We have resolved to invite Adriana to our dinner, and you also are to be one of the guests. A manufacturer of *foie gras* is the right kind of guest. I am going to see our pretty friend to-night and I hope you will help me to persuade her."

Olivan agreed. They sat through two acts, and, when the curtain fell after the second, Truffe rose up, turned his back to the orchestra and looked at the seats.

"How marvellous!" he praised.

Florio also turned round to look. It was a gala performance and there wasn't an empty seat in the theatre. The light was so strong that everyone appeared to be in focus to the last detail of face and dress. Strings of electric lamps reached from the orchestra to the roof, where a gigantic lamp poured down a cascade of light, flooding the auditorium. Scintillations flashed and crossed at the movements of jewelled fingers or heads with earrings and crescents. Eyes shone like jewels, or like dark mirrors in which the electric lights were reflected as pinpoints. The reverberations of chatter were as compelling as the light. By the ears and the eyes alike a pleasant intoxication entered the brain, exciting, causing meaningless laughter and the irrational contentment at being there, the pleasure of seeing and being seen which civilisation has made exquisite for its own sake, although it also produces the mood necessary for some plays.

No woman looked plain and no man badly dressed. Flowing garments had the dignity of statuary, and bare arms the undulating grace of serpents. Every costume aimed at being a work of art; it tried not to serve the body but to harmonise with it; not to be useful but beautiful. Paradoxically, the naked body, by being draped, became more evident and more exciting.

"Women have never dressed so well as they do now," breathed Truffe.

“Men have thought that in every age,” objected Olivan.

“That is no reason why they were not right,” suggested his friend, “right at each turn of the spiral. We, who are now at the top, enjoy a higher grade of perfection, but that doesn’t mean that in past times each generation was not at the top in its own day. When do you think that the art of making women more beautiful was more highly developed? Was there any other age in which it was practised so widely? Can anyone calculate the part played by the adornment of women in the work and wealth of the people? Think of the millions and millions of workers who weave, dye, stitch, cut out, embroider, iron, string beads, make lace, plait the fine straw of hats, or contrive those spider-web miracles of the underwear of the girls of to-day? Think of the exhausting labours of pearl fishers, of the fights for diamond fields; of the labours of chemists eager to produce a new scent; of the indispensable little articles of the toilet, produced now in incredible numbers; of the efforts of the artists in the service of dressmakers to surpass their own models. Sometimes I am disturbed by all this, for it seems to me as if the world only works in order that women may make themselves more beautiful.”

Olivan remembered the confidences of Lawel the engineer.

“Perhaps it is true, Alberto,” he agreed.

“I wonder what miraculous tissues and unimaginable patterns will be used in the garments of women ten centuries hence. I should like to live to see, Florio; yes, I should like it.”

He crossed his hands on his rounded stomach and was absorbed in the discomfort of being sure that he could not satisfy that desire for knowledge.

“All the same,” he said in a few moments, “I believe it would be much more interesting to know how they will cook lobsters in the year three thousand. Probably they will do marvels.”

But Florio was looking at the auditorium and didn’t reply. He was upset, struggling with his longing to see Adriana. When he had seen her enter the stage, resplendent in her filmy dress, open at one side to reveal her leg, he had noticed how his heart beat more quickly and his lips became dry. The murmur of admiration with which the public greeted the actress made him suffer, and his love became more imperious. He noticed, also with a clearness that he had not felt before, how much desire there was in his love, and how the diffused desire of the public exasperated and enraged him. For the first time, too, he thought of that lovely body being submissive to Archibald Granmont, and his sad feeling of failure turned to rage and hate.

“In this theatre,” he thought, casting his eye over the seats, “there are many women as lovely as Adriana, perhaps more lovely and more worthy of my love. All the same I couldn’t talk with any of them for ten minutes without getting bored. Were I told that each of them had a lover, I would think nothing more natural, and yet I am tortured by the idea that that Granmont. . . . Oh, I wish I could stop loving Adriana. If only I could get back to the calm affection I used to have for her.”

Suddenly he asked Truffe:

“Shall we go to Adriana’s dressing-room?”

The cheerful fat man agreed, and they went round to the actress’s room.

It was the first time that Florio had been in it, and he was surprised by the luxury with which it was furnished and decorated. “Granmont knows how to do things,” he thought, as Miss Sander joyfully held out a hand, sparkling with jewels, from the sleeve of a silk dressing-gown.

“I saw you from the stage,” she said, “and I hoped you would come.”

“Alberto wishes to ask you something,” explained Olivan. “Are we interrupting you?”

There were two others in the room: a small man with a lined face, whose hair, sparse but upright, made his head look like a pincushion, or rather sketched on it straight lines, diverging slightly, like those which caricaturists draw when they wish to represent the firing of a gun or the opening of a bottle of champagne. And in fact when you looked at him you got the impression that something had just violently escaped from his head. When you recognised that it was Hector Azil, the most bitter and famous critic in the kingdom, the simile became apt. Adriana’s other visitor was a young reporter who was rapidly taking down notes when Florio and his friend came in.

“Are we interrupting?” Olivan asked again.

“No,” replied the actress with a smile, “I don’t suppose that this gentleman will object to go on with the interview while you are here.”

The gentleman nodded.

“I’ve got all I need,” he said, “but since I have the good fortune to find here the renowned Mr. Azil. . . if he doesn’t object,” and he turned to the critic:

“Are you hard at work, sir?”

“Very hard, my friend,” replied the critic, suddenly adopting the expression of a victim.

“That is good news for us who admire your talent.”

“In this country of ours, to tell a man that he has talent is to remind him of a lunatic asylum.”

“Are you not gratified by your literary reputation?”

“My literary reputation? Anyone who brings himself to write in a dull book an idiotical phrase like ‘stroke by stroke the bell tolled out the hour of midnight,’ has already won a literary reputation. It isn’t worth the trouble.”

“What is your opinion of the contemporary theatre?”

“It is nothing but a pen of cuckolds. It does nothing but describe sympathetically and minutely the genera, sub-genera, species, and varieties of men whose wives deceive them, telling us what each of them did in his own case, as if there was the least interest in it.”

“What are your views on novels? Have you read Magnus?”

“No, I keep from reading bad work even to scorn it. There is always a bit of stupidity which sticks to one. It is like being near a man who is humming a tune. You know that it is a disgusting trick, but you end by copying it.”

“But Magnus has an admirable style.”

“People say that because he uses odd words. Nothing is easier. It is a trick only of those who have nothing to say. A writer with something beautiful or new to say tries to let everyone understand him. A rare word in a page sticks out like a displaced cobble stone in a street. You trip over it, the artistic value is destroyed, and you lose the flow of ideas in hunting up the word in a dictionary.”

“Do you care to say something about politics?”

“I am past the age for anecdotes about wolves.”

“Perhaps some incident in your own life?”

“I cannot tell you about the most interesting incident, because I was under chloroform at the time. They were operating on my liver.”

“I fear that the gentleman is going to hang himself when he leaves the theatre,” whispered Truffe to Adriana; “he seems fed up with everything.”

“He is always like that,” replied the actress, “but, believe me, he is a genius, a real genius.”

When the journalist, having put together his notes, was leaving the room, two new figures were silhouetted against the brightly-lighted passage. One of them wore the startling uniform of the No-Quarter Lancers: green trousers with a gold stripe, yellow jacket with black braid arranged like the ribs of a skeleton, a shining helmet with an ivory skeleton as the badge, and a white cape with gold braid carelessly thrown over one shoulder in the tradition of the regiment. The companion of this gorgeous warrior was carelessly dressed and showed unmistakably that he was an artist by wearing a curled lock of hair hanging down so as to cover one eye, a sacrifice which is the hall-mark of those who have dedicated their lives to one of the Fine Arts.

“Hail to you all,” cried out the man with the lock, waving a shabby umbrella. “Attention; I am going to recite an epic poem by mentioning only a name.”

He pointed towards the soldier and said:

“I present to you Colonel Guido de Coedere.”

Adriana uttered a low cry of surprise, and the amiable Azil fixed his monocle to stare at the new visitor who crossed in two swift strides, and, his spurs clicking, kissed the actress’s hand. The newspapers had been writing much about the Colonel because of his exploits in the war against some primitive tribes who had been stupidly resisting the civilising activities of two corps of the army. He had been the first to capture the famous Mt. Buitres, and in the action of March 5—of which doubtless everyone has heard—he had won the Palms of Temerity, with a special ribbon, the highest decoration which a soldier could win, and which, in addition to certain pecuniary advantages, carried the right to stop the traffic in any town, if the owner wished to cross from one pavement to another.

“I am a warm admirer of your art and your beauty, Miss Adriana,” declared the Colonel as soon as he had raised himself from his low salute.

“And I of your heroism, Colonel de Coedere.”

She stretched out her manicured fingers to present her guests. The brave lancer shook Olivan by the right hand, at the same time clicking the right boot against the left; he did the same courtesy but even more noisily to Alberto Truffe, who seemed enchanted with his agility. While that was going on, the eminent Azil addressed the poet.

“Are you hard at work?”

“Horribly,” replied the man who had robbed himself of one eye, although in his whole life, he had written only one sonnet.

“And how are things going in the distant lands?” Truffe asked the Colonel.

“When I started back,” was the reply, “Wulkara was hurrying to Kamsaku with other rebel chiefs and the Malamites were entrenching themselves in Tibilibi, stirred up by Jolome.”

“The devil!” cried the excellent Truffe in alarm, although he had not understood a word of the rigmarole.

The truth was that the distant colonial enterprise, whose sole purpose was to break the long idleness of the army, didn’t interest anyone.

“But General Maluquez,” continued Coedere, “has captured Hill 96.”

“That is better,” breathed the fat man; “as the general has succeeded in that achievement, we can congratulate ourselves. I am devoted to the army, sir. I have at home a picture representing some famous man, at the head of his troops, in the act of saying to the enemy, ‘You begin to fire, so that we may return it.’ It was an excellent idea and I admit that I should like to have done the same.”

“No, no. . . you have got it wrong!” protested the soldier excitedly, “these words were never spoken. If you are referring to the battle of Fontenoy, between the French and the Allies, what Charles Hay said was, ‘Fire first.’ ”

“After all, I am not quite certain,” admitted Truffe, smiling at the correction, “but it is true that I have the picture in my house.”

“Do you wear the same uniform in battle?” asked Adriana, who admired the brilliant dress of the lancer.

“Oh, no, Miss Adriana. The army on active service in Oceania wears a very simple grey uniform.”

“What a pity,” lamented the actress sincerely, for she liked stage costumes.

“Many of my comrades agree with you, and besides they think that it ought to be a historic duty, a debt of gratitude, to go into battle in dress uniform.”

“You are thinking of the battle called the Battle of the Tailors?” interposed Olivan.

“Quite so.”

“I am not very strong in history,” confessed the girl, smiling.

“The Battle of the Tailors was not exactly a battle, Miss Adriana. About a century ago, our friendly relations with our southern neighbours were suddenly interrupted. A soldier on guard on the other side of the frontier got drunk and struck one of our sentinels. In just reprisal, our patrol fired on the two companions of the aggressor. Next, an enemy company crossed the border and shot five shepherds and the master of an infant school. Justly offended, we bombarded a hamlet. And then it was impossible to stop the outbreak of war. Our army advanced to meet the enemy. The adversary was waiting for us in the great plains at our southern frontier. Our troops came down from the hills above the plain and deployed in battle order—the massed lancers with their sorrel horses and brilliant uniforms; the dragoons, in their blue coats and white breeches, on black steeds; the cuirassiers, with the body protected by shining armour; the guards, with their embroidered coats; the bombardiers, with their tall helmets, and the infantry with their plumes of peacock feathers hanging over their gay, winged hats. In the serried files of the adversary there were a few moments of stupefaction. Through their field-glasses, our leaders could see enemy officers scaling trees to see the surprising spectacle better. Our trumpets sounded, our drummers with their white leather gloves beat the drums, and our army advanced. Then arose a formidable rattle as if many rifles were being discharged. But not a single one of our men fell wounded. The noise increased, deafening and overwhelming. . . . It was the hostile army applauding frantically the magnificent spectacle of so many men so artistically apparelled. From the general commanding to the humblest batman, all had thrown down their arms to clap their hands, forgetting completely the warlike zeal which had brought them there. The hurrahs became overwhelming. Their commander advanced to meet our commander, embraced him and declared that neither in Venice nor in Nice where he had often been for the Carnival, nor in any theatre in his country, had he ever seen a spectacle so amazingly beautiful. Having said that, he took the white flag his adjutant was carrying, wiped his eyes with it, blew his nose loudly, and put the flag under his coat. He was deeply moved. The war ended. They offered us explanations and undertook to punish the culprit. As they could not find him, they hanged another soldier to a tree, because, as the generals

said, thanks to God they had plenty of soldiers and they were all much alike. That was the event called the 'Battle of the Tailors.' "

"What an interesting story!" cried Adriana. "Since I was a child I have always loved battle stories."

"Certainly they are good reading," agreed Truffe—"always someone dies in them, and that is what pleases us in good novels. Besides, but for wars, the nations would have as heroes only those ridiculous persons who haunt the quays in the hope of rescuing someone who has fallen into the water. When I read one of these familiar items in the papers, I always say to myself, 'Here is another of these notoriety seekers.' And a hero soaking with water instead of with his own blood or another's blood is no comfort to anyone."

"I am quite of your opinion, sir," agreed the poet, who until then had been insisting that the country was dead and stinking, against the opinion of Azil that it was only dead;—"I agree with you. I know a man who has specialised in one of these branches of civil heroism, and, in spite of all his efforts, it cannot be said that he made any great success of it. Have you heard of Simeon Taurido, sir?"

"Possibly," replied Truffe, in the tone of one who has heard about a great many people in his life.

The poet gazed at him through his pendent lock.

"No, you don't know anything about him," he said sadly, "because only two or three friends know him, besides a suburban picture-dealer and the confiding woman who shelters him in her boarding house. Simeon deserves a better fate. He painted still-life pictures with a mastery that I can only characterise as genius; an ash-tray, a pot of marmalade, a cheap china cup, were enough for him to turn into a picture. He is sure, and without doubt he is right, that any other kind of picture is false, because it is impossible to admit the existence of a changeless gentleman, seated for ever in an armchair, in the fashion of portraits, or of a landscape immutable in its greenness; but inanimate nature provides the desired permanence, and with it every kind of emotion can be aroused. To prove his thesis, he painted his famous picture 'Too Late.' It contained only a thermos, a portmanteau, and a railway timetable whose open pages had been hurled to the floor. Everyone who saw the pathetic canvas understood at once that the owner of these objects had lost his train, and that the misfortune had grievously annoyed him. The realism of that silent tragedy was moving."

The author of the unknown sonnet sighed deeply.

"That was an evil hour for art," he continued, "in which Taurido resolved to abandon it. Because he did abandon it. He was tired of struggling against the incomprehension of the picture-dealer and the indifference of the world. When his colour-merchant told him that he would not give him credit for another copper, he paled and murmured 'Hell.' He said no more. He returned to his house, collected a zinc pail and a fringed cloak which his hostess had lent him and sold them for what a second-hand dealer would give; he stated afterwards, when he was suspected of having intended to make money out of them, that he was unable to bear the grief of keeping articles which he had intended to immortalise in paint. From then on Simeon Taurido, without a roof or a cent, took to wandering about the town. One bitter night, as he was shivering along, he came on a street dramatically illuminated by a fire. A house on fire, gentlemen, is one of the few chances which in winter can lighten the sorrows of a vagabond. Simeon installed himself on the pavement opposite the great blaze, leaned against the wall, and, supporting himself on his heels, turned the worn and sodden soles of his boots to the radiant heat, whilst he rubbed his hands in his pockets. Thus comforted, his artistic feelings were aroused. 'Magnificent sight,' he said to another outcast who was warming himself alongside. 'Yes,' replied the other wretch, 'but no good luck is ever complete for the poor; most probably we'll be covered with chilblains.' And it was so. All the same the doleful prophecy didn't quench Simeon's spirits and he continued to enjoy the spectacle placidly. The huge flames, the clouds of smoke, and the agility with which the firemen climbed their tall ladders were interesting, but the most entertaining was to see the women come out in their underclothes and run madly across the wide space kept open by a cordon of police. Two girls who rushed out of the next house in little more than transparent chemises came and went for quite a time, tripping in the gutters, falling down and getting up, like mad butterflies, until everyone had had excellent opportunity of judging of their physical perfections. Simeon told his neighbour that the spectacle reminded him of the Russian ballet, and the latter, shaking his head sadly, mumbled that public decency in clothing had degenerated; after which, as something thrown out from one of the windows fell at his feet, he hid it under his jacket and disappeared. Taurido was an intelligent observer, and the conduct of his companion directed his attention to the lack of system with which the people were trying to save their goods. The tenants of the lower floors, thinking only to save them from burning, threw out of the windows all the mirrors and pottery they possessed, and those of the third, fourth, and fifth stories discharged sideboards, wardrobes,

and even some pianos. Excited by the example of his colleague or by the warming of his muscles by the heat, Simeon tried to get near the place where the dislodged goods were being heaped up, but the police interfered. Then, overcome by a sudden philanthropic urge, he went into one of the houses. There was nothing on fire, but Taurido could not know that, as he was blinded by the desire to help. He found an open door. He entered. He ran along a hall. He reached a dining-room. He saw a case of table silver, and a child three years old crying loudly. The parents of the child were busily throwing furniture out of the upper windows. The rescuing fever of Simeon drove him to rush at what was nearest, the case of silver. At that moment the master of the house came in intending to save a hanging clock by the same procedure as he had applied to the furniture. 'What are you doing here?' he cried. 'Save yourselves,' shouted my friend; 'I am here to help you.' 'Then carry out that child who is crying because she wants a fireman.' Simeon went out with the child. The child screamed so as to wring all hearts. People crowded round and made pathetic guesses. It was said that the parents of the child had been burnt alive and that Taurido had saved it at the risk of his own life. A reporter photographed the man and the waif, and next day the picture was in the papers with a laudatory note. Simeon had never achieved such publicity with his great work as a still-life artist. Although his belief in art had lessened, his desire for fame still lived. He believed himself to have found a technique and he adopted it. Hardly did a fire break out when he appeared, crying out, 'The children! Where are the children?' He has already saved a round dozen, and all the papers keep his photograph in stock. All the same this citizen has not yet received honour or recompense, and when he begged the mayor for something, and called on him by request, that functionary, after long consideration, said, 'I am glad to be able to offer you a reward in harmony with your tastes.' And he offered him a job in the bakehouse of a confectioner."

"That is the way of the world," said Olivan, who had been fearing that the tale would go on for ever. And to prevent any resumption, he reminded Truffe to tell Adriana why they had come.

"It is about the quarterly banquet of our club *The Seven Fat Kine*," explained Albert. "You know about it, Adriana, and also know that we always like to have a celebrated guest. We wish to have you. Next week we are to meet at *The Golden Grill*."

"I shall come," promised the pretty girl.

"It will be a high honour," added Truffe, making a low bow to Coedere, "if a famous hero like you will also join in our festivities."

“I shall certainly come,” said the lancer, casting an ardent and rapid glance at Adriana as he accepted the invitation.

And they all prepared to go because the performance was now over, and the room was filled with the noise of the crowd leaving the theatre, chatting, shuffling their feet, and moving the seats. Coedere got ahead of them all in helping Adriana into her fur coat, which he did with a slowness Florio thought unnecessary. Then when he ascertained that the actress was going to sup in a fashionable restaurant, he declared that he himself never went to bed without having first gone to that very restaurant. And so the two went off together, because Truffe and Olivan had to go to the country, whilst the critic and the poet went off to join other writers where they asked each other if they were hard at work, everyone answering sadly, but with the conviction of martyrdom, that they were working horribly hard.

IV

Which treats of a humble life and of a punch without lemon

One day a month the magnificent motor car of Archibald Granmont carried its illustrious owner to the town of Negrimia, because once a month the Board of the Smelting Company met there and to his other cares he added its chairmanship. Notwithstanding his natural good-nature, which made him ready to sacrifice himself for the advantage of others, Archibald did not take the journey with the satisfaction he got from more difficult undertakings. Perhaps in all the world there was not a more unpleasant tract than the neighbourhood of Negrimia nor any place where the hovels were lower-roofed and poorer, with walls awry and plaster peeling, as if damp had distorted them with rheumatism and infected them with leprosy. What passed for air in that place was a mixture of smoke and coal-dust which blackened the walls and the inhabitants, and kept the warmth and joy of sunlight from the muddy soil of the town. Doubtless at some time there had been trees and greenery in Negrimia, but since the mines had been worked and the region chosen as the centre of smelting and metallurgy in the kingdom, it was impossible to find a single green blade in the whole region. The mineral kingdom had triumphed over the vegetable with a stern and pitiless completeness recalling the exterminating wars of human races. Having destroyed the plants, the minerals seemed to have tried to save appearances. On the heaps of piled ashes and cinders there could often be seen strange shapes and vivid colours, the blues, greens, and purples of vitrified clinker, forming as it were blossoms of destruction; and an unsightly forest, the chimney-stalks of the factories, had replaced the old woodland and raised to the sky the thick and dirty foliage of their smoke. But not one of the birds of former times nested in Negrimia or alighted on its wastes. Mud, desert, shapeless heaps of rusty iron, roofs of corrugated metal, a constant hammering on resounding metal sheets, livid bursts of flame, mountains of coal, little trucks laden with ore traversing unsteady rails; moisture, dust, large grey rats questing between the heaps of clinker and the mounds of ashes as if they had been reduced to gnawing old iron; such was Negrimia. And passing between the factories and the waste ground and the hovels, sullen men, sad women, and bloodless children seemed all branded with the soot of Negrimia as a farmer brands the sheep in his fields to mark them as his own.

The mines were half an hour's journey from the town, and the cottages and barracks visible along the road were the dwellings of the men who worked in the bowels of the earth. The first hut at the entrance to the town, almost on the edge of the blackened highway, had been built by Abdias Marzan, and Granmont sometimes stopped at it.

When Abdias Marzan came to Negrimia he was as strong and handsome as Dionysus. Until he was twenty years old he had been a woodcutter. He had the simplicity and the roughness of a mountaineer, and he loved the free life of the woods with an unconscious affection that he had never analysed but which was revealed in the gentle happiness of his life. In the shadow of a great rock he had made his shelter of stones and mud, roofed with rough slates and so covered with briars and plants that it hardly seemed a human dwelling. In a small patch he grew potatoes and cabbages; he laid snares for rabbits and hares and sometimes he hunted wild boar with an old gun bound round with wire. When the north wind lashed the forest and the trees howled, the great rock, undercut and rugged, was like a mother raising her skirt to ward the cold blast from the woodcutter's lowly hut. A young fir tree which grew alone on the slope whistled and stretched its branches towards the gulf as if it were crying from fear and wished to escape. In these storms of wind and rain, Abdias liked to wrap himself in his cloak, warm a jug of strong ale, and sing to himself the mournful songs of the woodcutters.

He earned little, but enough. But suddenly his life took an unexpected turn. It was the day of St. Mary Cleofe.

The young man had stayed longer than usual in bed. Daylight crept through the myriad gaps in his hut and he lay stretched out, looking without seeing, and hearing without listening to the voices of the dawn. But under his comfortable slackness he felt the vigour of health as the soft earth feels when a strong shoot expands and swells in its bosom. The wood was filled with the singing of birds when Abdias went out to dash water, still cold from winter, over his sunburnt head and strong chest. Then he saw that the sun had filled the air with gold and that the buds had multiplied during the night. The firs and eucalyptus emitted odours as powerful as if the sun of July were distilling their essences. Near the hut a little bird with a red and green breast became silent at the appearance of the young man, twisted its head to look at him and then began to sing again as if making up for lost time. Abdias scrubbed his brown skin until he almost became giddy; the hurrying blood pulsed in his ears and he stood still for a moment smiling at the tumult within him.

"The birds are singing loudly inside me," he said.

He began to whistle whilst he was dressing himself. Something in his spirits seemed to foretell a coming happiness, and his body seemed lighter as if the morning air had a subtle influence. He saw a mole in its grey coat scratching up the soil with its pink toes, and cried:

"Oh the rascal! What about my poor potatoes?"

But he did not kill it as he seemed to see something amusing in its appearance. The truth was that the spring morning had a secret gentle witchery. The animals knew it and sang, the plants responded by growing greener, and never before had Marzan seen a little beast make such pretty antics or rapid jumps as a squirrel playing in the old oaks in front of him.

"What is going on in the woods to-day?" asked the woodcutter, smiling.

He didn't waste much time thinking about it, but decided that he must buy himself a new jacket. Never before had the idea seemed so happy. He decided to go down to the town at once.

In the valley he came on Donata washing linen at the edge of a stream. Her pretty arms were bare and as she was rubbing the frothing linen against the washing-board, wide and white, a black curl fell over her forehead.

"Good day," called the woodcutter.

She raised herself on her knees.

"Good day to you," she said.

Marzan stood still, smiling.

"Haven't your people a sick cow?"

She threw back the curl with the back of her wet hand and replied, also smiling:

"No, thank God, we haven't a cow sick."

"So much the better. I thought I had heard so. . . . Then all goes well?"

"All goes well," agreed the girl.

And she went on with her washing. Abdias watched for a time the soapy water pouring bubbles into the stream, where they swam with the current like little rainbow ships. In an angle of a reed-bed the bubbles had gathered into a quivering heap. Abdias slashed at the heap with his stick and owned that he had come down to buy a jacket. Donata, her words keeping time with the rhythm of her arms, said that her father had just bought one. Abdias gazed at the smooth neck, the pretty shoulders, and the strong loins of the

girl and sighed. They parted. The woodcutter bought a dearer coat than he had intended, with velveteen cuffs, big bright buttons, and a scarlet lining. As soon as he had it, perhaps even before the purchase, he found that it wouldn't satisfy him unless he could show it to Donata. When he wore his new coat he thought it indispensable to smoke a cigar. He lighted a cigar. He didn't know how to smoke, and his efforts to restrain his cough filled his eyes with tears. Donata said nothing, but treated him with a tender solicitude. When Abdias returned to his cabin, he kept the rest of the cigar and thought again of the village girl washing by the river, and concluded, somewhat vaguely, that something had to be done.

They married a year later. Donata's father strongly objected to the poverty of the woodcutter, who himself was unwilling to bury his wife in the mountain hut where he had hardly room to move. But at that time strong arms were needed in the mines of Negrimia. On the day after the wedding the young couple went there. Abdias got into the hardest of all the jobs, breathed the moist and thin air of the underground galleries, never saw the sun for days together; spent many hours expecting death when a fall blocked the exit. He pined for his hut, the wind on the mountain, and the open-air life of the woods, suffered the weary decay of lock-outs and the tense anger of strikes, learned to hate a monstrous enemy, unapproachable and impersonal —Capital, which he imagined to be the cause of all his misfortunes. Life offered to him, as to all his companions, only one gift: alcohol. Donata also had gone to work, but from the sixth year of her life in Negrimia she had become a bony woman, bad-tempered and violent. She had three daughters, but her last confinement had been bad, and after it she had suffered from giddiness and faintness, and was always complaining of odd pains which wandered about her worn-out body. Lately her legs had swollen terribly, and she vegetated, rather feeble-minded, in a deal chair under a heap of rugs. She complained that there was a cricket inside her head. But the cricket didn't stay still; sometimes it was in her right ear, sometimes it wandered to her left. The poor woman was certain that she felt it moving inside her skull, scratching with its sharp little feet, and sometimes she would slap the side of her head, to make the insect fall down like a fly from the ceiling of a room. Constanza, the eldest daughter, now fifteen, managed the house.

About five years later Abdias vomited blood for the first time. He was walking alone, on his way back from work; he gripped a railing with his enormous hand to support himself, and stood still, looking at the blood.

"I am done for," he thought, a cold chill running down his spine.

He was awake all night in his miserable bed, a load of fear on his breast and his brow fevered with gloomy thoughts. Sometimes he seemed to feel the taste of blood in his mouth. He took matches from the pocket of the coat he had thrown over his feet, spat and looked for blood. He complained to no one. He stopped smoking and drinking, hoping that abstinence would make him better. But he got weaker rapidly, he felt very ill in the underground galleries, and the uncomfortable postures forced on the miners by the position of the seams tortured him until he had to stop working. The second attack came in his house when he was putting on his boots to go out. He went back to bed, sent for the doctor, and obeyed his orders to lie still. He lay on his back for a week, almost without speaking, taking no notice of his wife and his daughters, thinking of the mountain and of death. When he got up, his exhausted state was evident. A vast horror of the mine grew stronger in him, harassing him with the presentiment that he would die if he were again to set foot in its dark galleries shored up with props and dripping with moisture, in the gloomy depths where for long he had felt as if the huge weight of the tunneled earth were pressing on his ribs.

He would not go back. He told his family of his intention bluntly, and carried it out. To their anxious enquiries about the future and even to his own forebodings his only answer was, “We’ll see.” And he waited, forgetting everything except his gloomy fears.

His few savings were soon exhausted, and the help given by a charitable association came to an end. Abdias passed many hours daily on the rusty plain behind the last factories. He would sit down on a heap of cinders, and in that forlorn waste he longed more and more for the lost paradise of the woods. He fixed his eyes on the clayey ground, scattered over with broken coal, clinkers, and fragments of sheet metal, shining or already rusty (for everything in that place soon became either black or rusty). But although he seemed to be looking at things, the unfortunate man really saw nothing but his own troubles. He went there really to listen to the sad voice within him, which whispered consoling hopes. He thought chiefly about himself and about the hilly woods where he was born, but the horror of death isolated him from everything about him.

One evening the doctor who had attended him was passing by the gloomy wastes, and stopped alongside Abdias. Abdias was sitting still, with his head bent and his hands crossed on his stick. The doctor, touched by this absorbed sorrow, spoke to him with an assumed cheerfulness.

“Are you getting your strength back?”

The miner looked at him gently.

“I am very weak now; hardly strong enough to come here; I am afraid of staying in the house, for I feel that if I were to take to bed again, I’d never get up.”

“You mustn’t think that,” urged the doctor.

“Perhaps not,” Abdias agreed sadly, “but if you will listen, I’ll tell you what I am worrying over. It isn’t anything very deep, but all the same it beats my poor wits. It seems to me that my life has been too short and too sad, and I can’t understand why. I’ve never done any harm to anybody. When you came I was asking myself if I had offended God by leaving the mountain to live this life of a mole, quarrelling with the sun and burrowing like a clothes-moth into the heart of the earth. But it is no good thinking about that or about anything else, everything is settled and done with. But the idea of dying here is too much for me. People would laugh at me if they heard me: ‘What peace can the earth bring to us who have rasped its bowels with our hands?’ Nor can it have any warmth for bones, because it is dead itself. Don’t you see, sir, that it is dead.”

He pointed to the dry plain, black and rusty. Pity seized the doctor.

“Abdias,” he said, “it is still possible to cure you. Come to my house to-morrow. I’ll get you admitted to the sanatorium at Highmount, and I’ll find someone to pay for your journey. Come to my house and bring your clothes with you. There is a train at midday.”

Suddenly happy, Abdias smiled under the sparse hairs that fringed his pale cheeks.

The doctor went off. Abdias slowly got up, raised a hand trembling with faith in the lovely dream, and uncovered his perspiring head:

“May God bless him,” he murmured.

He stood erect. A lovely miracle had been wrought, quickening all his senses. The ugly plain had suddenly beautified itself, the suffocating smoke of the air had become a sweet scent, and the clanging of the factories had turned to music. How fine are the words “to live,” and what deep and wide magic they hold? We say them hundreds of times without distinguishing them from ordinary words, and then sometime, quite suddenly, we realise all that they mean, and wonder that our weak spirit could invent a verb so marvellous, great as the universe, as magnificent as the glory of God. “To live”; all the possible tenderness in the world is expressed by these words, and no brotherhood is stronger than the link of life. Because they are alive,

flowers and wolves and sparrows, and even the stream with its restless and constant appearance of life, are our fellows.

Abdias set out for his house with hope singing in his heart as the birds hail the spring in the woods. When he reached the town he walked more uprightly than usual, and even stopped for a moment to hear the songs that some men were singing in the inn of *The Two Stoves*.

"Come in," called Jacobo, a stoker's assistant in the tinplate factory. "I'll stand treat."

The sick man refused with a smile, before asking:

"What luck have you had to make you invite me?"

"I've left that hell to-day," replied the young fellow, "and to-morrow I am off to America."

"Hell" was where the smelting furnaces produced a temperature ruinous to health. No worker there reached old age. Strong lads who began to work in that volcano when they were little more than boys died before they were forty. The wages were high, but the jobs were not coveted.

Abdias replied:

"Good luck to you, Jacobo; I am very glad."

Then he went on.

"The world isn't so bad as it seems," he meditated, "and men are kind-hearted. That youth was condemned to death, and he has been reprieved."

Night had fallen when Abdias reached his hut, and the livid glow of the tall furnaces was piercing the darkness, as the flame from a blow-pipe pierces a metal plate, opening in the clouds and smoke a passage for the moon. Constanza placed in front of her father a bowl of bread soup reddened with pimento, warm and savoury. Abdias rubbed his thin hands and smiled happily.

"I've some good news for you," he said slyly.

Little Lucila, a mite of seven years old, came close to him and pressed against the table with her little nose almost in the soup. She fixed her eyes on the spoon as it slowly rose and fell, the drops making a savoury steam. It was cold, and the sick mother kept moaning in her chair, wrapped in shawls.

"Good news?" echoed Constanza.

Abdias looked at her, still smiling, and winked.

“Splendid news—in a minute, when I’ve finished.”

He wished to keep them curious for a time. He felt so well that he would have liked to smoke a pipe. What a splendid surprise for his family when, after having waited anxiously for a time, they would hear him say:

“To-morrow I am going to a sanatorium; I shan’t have to worry any more. Good food, a good bed, sun, clean air, lying all day among the spicy pines; men I don’t even know are giving me all that, for the love of God.”

“What is your father saying, Constanza?” asked the sick woman. “Push my chair closer so that I can hear him. The beastly cricket is scratching in my right ear.”

The young woman moved the chair so that the left ear was turned towards them. Little Lucila seized the chance of her sister being occupied, to place a dirty thin little paw on her father’s arm, which was already lifting the spoon. The father looked at the child for a second in an absent-minded way.

“What is it, little grub?”

The child smiled rather timidly, and drew back a little, and then again put her hand on the coarse sleeve.

“What do you want?”

Lucila made certain that Constanza was still occupied with her mother, and quickly pulled at her father’s coat, asking him to bend down to her.

“A kiss?” guessed Abdias.

He kissed her, but the child whispered into his ear:

“Do you like it?”

“What is it that I am to like?”

Lucila suggested the bowl with her eyes.

“The soup? It’s good, very good soup.”

Lucila let him go, sighed, and blushed a little.

“When I am big, I’ll be able to make it, and put toasted bread into it.”

Abdias was lost in thought again. But his little daughter went on, after looking for a minute at the bowl, now nearly empty.

“I think I’ll put a little bit of sausage in it. Yes, I’ll often put sausage in it. Then I’ll give it to you, but only to you. Not to Constanza.”

“Not to Constanza, no,” repeated the father abstractedly.

“We’ll eat it between us, you and me,” added the child eagerly.

“That’s so.”

Lucila looked at him, as if she hoped for something, but he took no notice.

Suddenly serious, the rough little head got closer to him, and the little mouth whispered:

“Give me a little.”

Abdias offered her a spoonful, jokingly. But the little thing trembled as she stretched her neck to the coveted mouthful, and her little teeth clashed on the metal. Abdias went on eating.

But Constanza’s voice was raised:

“Luci!”

It was a scolding voice. Lucila hurriedly swallowed her mouthful and flushed deeply.

“What is Luci doing?” asked the cripple. “What is the little devil doing? Christ, the cricket has now gone to my left ear!”

“The child is eating father’s soup.”

“Who is doing that? Go to bed, Luci!”

The child burst into tears, as if something terrible had happened to her. Sobbing, the little voice cried out in a strange tone, as if she were reproaching, and not asking:

“I want food, I want food. I am terribly hungry.”

“Haven’t you had your food already?” scolded Constanza.

“No, I haven’t, I haven’t, and I am terribly hungry.”

Abdias stroked her untidy curls. His grave glance passed from Constanza to Donata. He took the child on his knees and gave her the rest of the soup.

“That’s fine,” scolded Constanza, “to eat your sick father’s supper.”

She had tears in her eyes, and, in her anger with her sister, there was also a blind rage against all the miseries of the hut.

“Be quiet,” ordered Abdias.

He fed her tenderly, and then he kissed her and sent her off to bed.

This is too much, he thought, and the selfishness of a dying man melted in love and pity for his family, who had that night tried to keep the only bowl of soup for the sick father.

Constanza came back, having undressed the child. The miner began to speak.

"Would you like to know the good news now?"

No one answered, and Abdias tried to talk cheerfully.

"I am going back to work to-morrow," he told them. "Jacobo, the stoker in the tinplate furnace-room, is off to America. I have got his job. The wages are good and from to-morrow we'll be better off than ever."

He finished, and a deep silence came on the room. Constanza thought of the "hell." She remembered Jacobo himself holding a piece of damp sacking on the end of a rod to get protection when he was shovelling into the white heat of the open furnace. She remembered that in a few seconds the moisture had dried out, and the sacking burst into flames. How many hours could her father endure work that burnt the lungs of the strongest men?

Abdias went on:

"I am now strong again. For some days I've noticed how I was getting better."

He smiled at his daughter, but she turned away her head and began to weep.

Two years had passed since they had opened the barren soil of Negrimia for Abdias. The furnaces continued to devour men and coal. The sinister group of workshops on the plain was like another island in which a Doctor Moreau tortured experimentally, not living beings, but inorganic matter. Just as the tortured animals screamed in the laboratory of Wells's strange character, so matter, apparently insensible, screamed and heaved in the workshops of Negrimia. The red ingots groaned under the pressure of the rollers, or escaped to the cement floor like long, writhing snakes, only to be recaptured by huge tongs and put under the insatiable machine again. In green flames the retorts disgorged molten metal, which hissed as it fell into new containers, or broke into rosy sparks as it touched the clay of the moulds. A swarm of sweating beings, blackened and dumb amidst the clamour, seemed like a torturer's assistants; and just as the animals of the weird doctor came from the bath of pain as monsters, but spiritually

improved, so the material, pounded, roasted, tooled, shaped, and polished, acquired a human character; it had become a machine. Something more than a human character, it had become part of humanity itself. It was the sword that lengthens the arm, the bullet that flies like a human thought, the rails on which trains carry our loads, the wires transmitting the signs and sounds of our languages, the tools which aid and better our work, the needles, the spades, the metal of the safes which hold our wealth, and of the green railings of our gardens, the fine points of pens which inscribe and diffuse our thoughts. By the labour of our mines and the pains of our workshops the earth gives birth to our younger brothers, the machines, as numerous and diverse as the animal kingdom in its range from insects to elephants.

Soon after the death of Abdias Marzan, his second daughter got work in a factory. Constanza, kept at home by the care of her sick mother, took to the illicit sale of drink. She did not pay taxes, and had not added to the scanty household furniture any of the plant of a tavern, but anyone who happened to be in the suburb and was hungry or thirsty knew that the pretty girl was ready to serve a foaming jug, or to light a few chips under the stove so as to warm a lunch.

On a hot evening in June, a huge motor, resplendent and powerful, which had just left Negrimia, skidded and stopped a few yards from the little house. A gentleman, provided with every possible accessory and equipment for making a journey by road more comfortable, irritably asked:

“What’s the matter now?”

The driver had got out of the car.

“Another cover gone, sir; the roads are very bad here.”

He stood upright by the car, with his arms folded, and snorted angrily:

“Luckily the town is still quite close; I’ll have to walk there.”

He looked at his master for instructions. The lordly bulk, with its dust-coat and fur-coat, its fur-lined cap with ear-flaps, its goggles and respirator, stirred itself to address the depressed and gloomy man seated at his right:

“Tell me, Lucio, is there anyone in the world so good-natured as I am, because I haven’t sacked this lout? What would have happened if the tyre had burst when we were half way on? Did you ever hear tell of a more careless chauffeur?”

“Many drivers are careless, Mr. Granmont, but I’ve never heard of anyone as bad as this.”

The traveller seemed quite pleased at owning an exceptional chauffeur, and mildly called to the driver:

"What are you doing here? Run into the town and get what you need."

The servant set off to Negrimia on foot, and without any great hurry. Archibald Granmont got out of most of his accessories, and began to walk up and down the road dispiritedly. The heat was suffocating. He stopped in the shade of a tall elm which reared its spreading branches not far from the cottage of Abdias, and looked idly at the humble dwelling, from the doorstep of which a young woman stared at the car. He noticed a stained deal table and two chairs against the outer wall of the building. Mr. Granmont's keen sagacity suggested that the table was not there for nothing, and when a closer inspection revealed to him the circular stains on the wood made by overflowing glasses, he hoped to find inside the materials with which his thirst and warmth could be appeased. A few questions put carefully let him ascertain that within the four dull walls of the cottage there were present an important part of the elements necessary for making a cold punch. He asked for them, and when Constanza had put them on the little table, the philanthropist brewed his mixture with scrupulous care and then called his secretary, who had not moved from the car. The eyes of the Croesus sparkled with the brilliance of the fortunate inventor of a cough syrup who hoped to gain from it honour and reward.

"Lucio," he cried, "tell me frankly what you think of this mixture."

Lucio raised the glass to his lips, took a small sip, then a longer sip, then after a long pause, during which he pursed his lips and wrinkled his brow, made his eyes converge, and performed other gestures intended to express his delight, but which really suggested a fear that he was being poisoned. Then he emptied the glass and declared:

"It is a superb punch. Never have I tasted its equal. Especially, just the right proportion of lemon."

"There is no lemon in it."

"That is why I said the right proportion; I never could bring myself to admit that it was right to put lemon in a punch."

"I always put lemon in punch," affirmed Archibald, severely; "but that girl could not give me any. You are the man with the worst palate I know, Lucio. I always wonder why I don't dismiss you."

"I venture to believe," said the sycophant hurriedly, "that your Excellency misinterpreted my words. If I had really said anything against

putting lemon in punch, I should never have another moment's happiness. Your Excellency knows that I don't always choose my words very well."

These words seemed to lead the great man into a new train of thought, for his brow wrinkled, and when he ordered his secretary to sit opposite to him at the table, his voice had lost all trace of anger.

"Expression," he murmured, and then, after a minute's pause, "words, how difficult it is to use them well."

Lucio thought it necessary to sigh deeply and sadly.

"If you were to hear me now pronounce the word '*plitocancio*,' " continued the magnate, "what would you think?"

"That I fully deserved it, sir," replied the secretary, after a moment's hesitation, and with the humblest gesture of compunction.

"You don't understand, Lucio. Listen. You know that as I have paid for an edition de luxe of all the classics, I am on the way to deserve being elected to the Academy of Literature as one of its regular members. The importance of this honour is much in my mind. Last night, before falling asleep, I was reflecting on the duties which this nomination will add to those I already have. I have given money to many poets, I have subsidised the National Theatre. But it is not enough. I must do something for our language. I am not an orator; I can't write a novel. What can I do? Yes, I can at least invent a word. And so, almost in a dream, there came to me the word which you have just heard, *plitocancio*."

Lucio looked with enthusiasm at his master, who put on a modest expression.

"It is a real discovery," he praised.

"It isn't bad," agreed Granmont. "It sounds well. But the trouble is that I don't know what it means."

Lucio thought for a moment.

"The first thing to be done," he advised, "is to investigate its etymology."

"I am afraid that it hasn't got an etymology, Lucio. I have already told you that it came to me quite suddenly. The best step would be to find a being or a thing which would suit it. We have the name, but we haven't the thing. What does the word suggest to you?"

"Please repeat it."

"*Plitocancio.* Consider it well. . . . *Plitocancio*. . . . *Plitocancio*."

Lucio contemplated the ground fixedly.

"Perhaps it might suit a dish," he ventured timidly.

Granmont looked indignant.

"*Plitocancio marinière* sounds very well," he insisted.

"No."

"But perhaps the name would suit some antediluvian monster better."

The philanthropist shook his head.

"I am beginning to think," he said, "that the name might be very suitable for a plant. Plants often have names like that. Now we have only to get someone to discover the plant."

"That is easy enough, sir," Lucio assured him; "and merely to undertake the search is half-way to success."

The protector of the poor thumped the table.

"Didn't the Geographical Society write to me a few days ago, asking for a grant towards the cost of a naturalist going to Guinea?"

"Yes, for Professor Durand."

"You must go to see that professor to-morrow. Give him a cheque and tell him he must discover the *plitocancio*. Tell him that I hope it will be a plant suitable for a garden; but that if it has to be an insect, I wish it to be a butterfly."

The chauffeur was now to be seen coming down the road, rolling the new cover. Archibald called out for his bill for the punch, and Constanza stood at the table, occupied in adding up the figures, but really wondering to what extent she could rob these gentlemen. Her lips were red, her eyes large and black, she wore a brightly coloured dress, and the girl excited the healthy appetite of those who would prefer a fruit picked from a tree to fruit served by a waiter ceremoniously on silver and crystal, with blocks of ice. Granmont, either because of his natural benevolence, or because his discovery of *plitocancio* had put him in a good temper, praised her:

"Charming girl!"

The girl went on with her calculations.

The magnate went on, but without getting more notice:

“You have a charming complexion.”

Constanza finished her calculations.

“Four half-crowns,” she said.

Lucio interrupted her with a smile, coming to the help of his master:

“Don’t you hear that this gentleman has been praising you?”

The reproach was received only by a slight shrug of the shoulders. Granmont put the coins in the girl’s hand, and then chucked her chin with his thumb and forefinger, with a paternal gesture. The girl gave a start, and perhaps inadvertently, spilt some of the wine left in a glass over the suit of the Maecenas.

“What bad manners,” protested the secretary angrily.

“Be quiet, Lucio,” ordered Granmont, “my little friend is going to let me give her a kiss for a sovereign.”

“Not for all the gold in the world, sir,” said Constanza quietly. “I think more of myself.”

Lucio called out:

“It’s a pity. Don’t you know who this gentleman is?”

Constanza kept on collecting the glasses and bottles.

“A masquerader,” she replied.

“A masquerader!”

“Leave her alone, Lucio,” advised the philanthropist, who felt embarrassed by his dust-coat and his helmet and his orange goggles. “Let her alone. What does she know?”

“Then she is going to know. Do you wish to know the name of this gentleman who has done you the honour to speak to you?”

“Don’t be a fool, Lucio,” objected the magnate feebly, sorry for the confusion to which the girl would be put.

And to keep clear of Lucio’s want of tact, he began to dust his trousers.

“This is Mr. Granmont,” announced the secretary.

Nothing happened. The girl finished collecting the bottles and glasses on a lacquer tray.

“Archibald Granmont,” repeated Lucio, “haven’t you heard?”

“I have heard; and what about it? It is a funny name, but there are others quite as ugly.”

Lucio and his master exchanged glances of consternation.

“What ignorance,” groaned the secretary.

Constanza disappeared into the cottage. The celebrated philanthropist moved slowly towards his car and sat down in it. The motor throbbed.

“So much for celebrity, Lucio,” said the great man, concealing his sadness. “Here we are at a few miles from the city and a few yards from Negrimia, and we find a person who until to-day has never heard my name mentioned.”

“It is the fault of the schoolmasters, Excellency.”

Archibald was silent. Eight miles further on he said:

“Find out who that girl is; I wish to know.”

The car was gliding over the asphalt in the city when Granmont broke the silence again.

“She is very pretty,” he said, sighing.

“Who?” said the secretary, quickly looking at the balconies and the pavement.

“That girl at Negrimia.”

“Ah!”

“Very pretty!”

“Indeed she is, Excellency.”

A quarter of an hour later, in his palace, when he had got one arm out of the sleeve of his dust-coat, Mr. Granmont placed his free hand on the shoulder of his secretary and looked at him with bitterness in his eyes.

“Shall I tell you a great truth?”

Lucio bowed respectfully.

“There is no real happiness in this life, my friend.”

He increased the pressure of his hand slightly.

“And I am almost inclined to say that there is no justice.”

Then he looked steadily at his servant for a few minutes as if to impress on him the finality of these convictions. Then he finished taking off his dust-coat, and retired with his head bent and his thumbs in his waistcoat.

V

In which twenty fat men are seated at table

Only a very hard-hearted person could have failed to smile with deep content in the fashion in which Florio Olivan smiled when from the door of *The Golden Grill* he surveyed the members of *The Seven Fat Kine*. Alberto Truffe himself stood still with his hands crossed on his stomach and his head a little inclined to one side, to say reflectively:

"Look at them, Florio! here you have the twenty best men in all the kingdom. What a soothing picture they make. Even to look at them sharpens the appetite, Florio."

The twenty men were, in fact, the original members Truffe had gathered into a club with the sole object of eating like Pantagruel, individually and collectively. There they were, eating snacks and chatting, plump, resplendent, ruddy, with double or triple necks like collars or mufflers supporting their heads on their globular bodies. Some of them used two chairs to sit in moderate comfort. Others shook the room with their heavy tread as they passed between the table laden with *hors-d'œuvres* to the table with cocktails and other drinks of various tints. Their enormous bodies quivered a little even when they were sitting, and the vibration set the glasses on the central table tinkling.

When Truffe, Florio, and Marco Massipo entered everyone stood up except one member who weighed at least twenty-four stone, and, having rashly sat down on too low a chair, could not possibly contrive to struggle to his feet.

"Well now, Truffe," said one of the members, when the salutations were over, "have you been to the kitchen?"

"I have been to the kitchen, dear friends," replied the president of *The Seven Fat Kine*, "and I am glad to be able to assure you that all is well."

A gentleman whose trousers had the shape of an inverted cone, gave his opinion:

"I would not have put a dish of prawns on the menu, Alberto; quite wrong; I am sorry I didn't know it sooner. Prawns are not a serious dish; they are well enough as an amusement, like sardines and lamb chops, but they are out of place in a meal."

“They are prawn patties, Armando!” exclaimed Truffe.

“All right, I am not going to make a fuss. But their proper place was on the sideboard. That is my conviction.”

Olivan had gone out to show Marco the splendour of the restaurant, the most renowned in the city. There were large halls with panelled roofs, floors of polished wood, windows of single panes, vases with lovely hothouse flowers and plants, silent-footed servants. In the bar, close to the dining-halls, there was a fitting of white marble with glass,—everything shone and glittered in the utmost taste in the greenish light which filtered through the thick windows. The nickel of the taps and shelves which rose in columns above the counter, reflected the trembling of the ventilators which hummed the air out of the room. The shelves were filled with bottles, strange in shape and adorned with bright labels, and, finally, almost like a caricature, there was the face of the barman who wore his white jacket with the grave pride of a field-marshal in uniform.

“What do you think of it, Marco?”

The retired superintendent of the cemetery of St. Mamed praised it sincerely.

“It is as trim and gay as the tomb of a child.”

Secretly proud of the appropriateness of his comparison, he smoothed his hair, which a waft from the ventilator had ruffled, and followed Florio to the club’s dining-room.

Guido de Coedere was already there, clad in his brightest uniform, and Adriana soon arrived, smiling and seductive, so graceful and undulating, and so slender that Truffe’s twenty companions seemed to have increased in bulk by contrast. The members of *The Seven Fat Kine* surrounded her to thank her for coming, as if they were a herd of elephants making love to a heron. The fat old gentleman in the low chair did all that a man could do to get up, with no result except to make his heavy chair creak.

“Get in front of me, Pedro,” he called to one of the members.

The member obliged, putting his wide carcase in front of the other so that Adriana could not see him, and his discourtesy was invisible.

As all the company had arrived, everyone took the place at table that had been assigned to him beforehand, and there came the moment of silence which happens at the beginning of every banquet. But a timid voice was raised:

“Our respected treasurer, Mr. Crombo, begs leave to dine by himself.”

Truffe looked with astonishment at the space which ought to have been filled by the corporation of the treasurer, and found that it was empty.

“What is this,” he scolded. “Where is Crombo?”

From the extreme end of the room, the gentleman who was anchored to his chair, called out:

“I am here, dear Truffe.”

Alberto turned to him:

“What ridiculous whim is this, my dear Mr. Crombo? How can you refuse our company? Don’t you feel well?”

“Oh,” hurriedly replied the other, “I feel all right. Take my word for it. I have never felt better. This is a most comfortable chair. All I wish is to have a little table, not too high, brought to me.”

Truffe assumed a severe tone.

“Mr. Crombo,” he interrupted, “please be so good as to come. We are keeping a lady waiting.”

The twenty-four-stone gentleman gazed anxiously at his companions, but could not bring himself to repeat, in the sight of a lady, the struggles of a toad fallen on its back.

“Are you not going to move, Mr. Crombo?”

“Certainly, Truffe, I shall move if you wish me,” said the old man in despair. “I think I could contrive to slip down to the floor, but that would be worse.”

Truffe understood.

With an indulgent twinkle in his eye, he called out:

“We require a committee to persuade the treasurer.”

Three or four of the more agile members came forward, and helped by two waiters, they closed up to Crombo, to undertake the task of persuading him, which they did by some pulling forcibly at his arms and his coat, whilst others pushed him from behind, until they got him to his seat, breathing stertorously.

The first dishes were set before the guests; but the silence was not broken until the end of the third course of the long menu, when one of the

members questioned Coedere as to the truth of the report that some of the rebels in Oceania were cannibals, and if that were so, as to what condiments they used with the victims.

"The fact is," said Coedere, "that I have had no opportunity of ascertaining the truth of these reports. Perhaps some of the tribes in the interior eat human flesh; but my service has always been in the territory of Malamo, near the coast."

"Mr. Coedere," said Truffe, giving particulars about the guest, "was the hero who was the first to capture Mount Buitres."

An imposing gentleman who had opened his mouth to receive a slice captured by his fork, then questioned the soldier:

"Ah, sir, were you really the hero of Mount Buitres? In that action the best cook I've ever had was killed. A heavy loss. It would interest me very much to learn the details of that glorious action, if you would be good enough to tell us."

"Certainly," said Coedere, "but the truth is there was very little in it. We climbed the mountain, firing as we went up one side, and the Malamitas retired down the other side."

"Was that all?" the man who had lost his cook cried out disappointedly. "All the same, for many years I've heard of Mount Buitres. I seem to remember that we captured it twenty or thirty times and that it was recaptured as often by the enemy."

"That is so, but there is an explanation unknown to most people."

"It was what they call strategy," insisted Truffe, winking so as to suggest that in his view the word had a funny meaning.

The Colonel proceeded.

"Mount Buitres was made an excuse for the State to reward merit that had hitherto passed unnoticed. You know that when that war broke out, we had been in peace with all nations for some two centuries. How many great generals, how many splendid heroes had therefore to die unknown, without the chance of having their names inscribed on the roll of History? Who could count their number? The rebellion of the Malamitas very fortunately came to break up the stagnation. And it was plainly necessary for the authorities to nurse a war which had fallen from heaven. The whole army, tired of slow promotion by seniority, longed to go into battle; but the Malamitas numbered only six thousand, including old men, women, and

children; if all our forces had fallen on them, they would have been annihilated in a single day. How was it possible with so small a mouthful to satisfy the appetites of a million of men longing for battle? The solution was a credit to our statesmen. A hundred thousand soldiers set forth to fight; four hundred thousand went with them to transport munitions, to buy food, to collect the wounded, to cook, to build barracks, to take photographs, to set up apparatus, to drive cars, to keep the records. The remaining five hundred thousand stayed behind in the metropolis keeping account of the expenditure. It was an impeccable distribution which allowed everyone to satisfy the patriotic desire of being on service. But there was still a very important problem to solve, the disposition of the hundred thousand actual warriors. It was necessary to divide the actions into doses. When with my lads I captured Mount Buitres, the rest of the troops were in forced idleness, because I monopolised the enemy. For a week this quiet was broken by the organising of the convoys. Splendid convoys, gentlemen. With each of them there came several generals and a military band. A special convoy, equally brilliant and imposing, brought us our coffee. On the eighth day, with the announcement of my promotion to captain, there came the order to abandon the mountain. We retired. A month later the company commanded by the son of the G.O.C., captured the position again. He was promoted. At later dates three lieutenant-colonels and five colonels successively captured the hill. Finally the fame of Mount Buitres became so resounding that general Maluquez decided to do it the honour of taking it at the head of his troops, a deed for which he was made a general of division. That is the history. Even to-day the mountain continues to prove that our most glorious army does not contain a single officer who would not make heroic efforts to take it."

"I call that rather good strategy," praised Truffe.

The fat man robbed by his country of his cook, and therefore rather interested in the army, asked:

"Was it in that fight that you gained the Palms of Temerity?"

"No, it was in a more terrible affair."

Adriana Sander begged:

"Tell us about it."

"You will remember the attacks of March 5, when other tribes had decided to join the Malamitas, and the rebellion had reached a climax. I then held an outlying position and had to defend it against a cloud of rebels who attacked with real courage. The attack was launched almost by surprise

about midnight, and we fought all day. The men fell like ripe fruit, and there were many moments when I thought none of us would get off with our lives. My sergeant was a brave lad of humble origin, who, before he was called up for military service, worked in a cloth factory. He had no taste for soldiering, but he did his duty contentedly because the director of the Company had offered him the post of works' inspector in the shops when he got his discharge. He was full of joy at the prospect. He professed to be very fond of me, and often had confided in me. On that day he was in charge of one of the most dangerous spots in the trenches, but he did not lose his optimism for an instant, although he saw many brave fellows bowled over beside him. The Malamitas dominated our position from a height and poured into us a constant fire. Imagine the scene; blood, noise, and groans. At dawn my man fell, wounded in a leg. I went to comfort him in the dressing-station. 'I have lost my job, Captain,' he said, when he saw me. 'Courage,' I said, 'this is nothing.' 'It isn't anything, but I can't be an inspector with a wooden leg; they would hear me stumping and would mock at me as an overseer; I shall have to put up with being in charge of a bay.' A little afterward he crawled to the parapet and continued firing. I did not stop him as I couldn't spare a single rifle. When the morning was half through he gave the other leg to his country. As he was being carried away, he met me and called out: 'There is still a future, I shall learn type-writing.' He continued to fight, did that hero, lying on some sacks, and when he had lost his left hand, he still kept firing at the enemy.

"How did we get out of our trouble? I don't quite know, but at dusk the Malamitas, whom we had repulsed several times, stopped attacking, and in the end retired. I had been wounded in the shoulder, but not severely enough to prevent me carrying on. The day had been terrible. When I took the roll-call, I found that out of my hundred and twenty soldiers, only forty-one remained alive. Only forty-one! I don't wish to conceal from you that apart from my luck in not having been killed, my good fortune was not complete. The rules of the Palms of Temerity require that for an officer to gain that high distinction, in addition to having had his own blood shed, he must have lost in battle two-thirds of his command. The Palms of Temerity are almost a patent of nobility, carry a handsome pension and valuable privileges. All that would have come to me had I lost one other soldier, one more. Very little among so many corpses. I counted the survivors again. They were forty-one. Not one less. I couldn't dream about the Palms.

"Somewhat saddened—and who would not have been sad in my case?—I went to visit my sergeant who was lying on a canvas sheet stretched on four posts. At the last minute he had lost his right hand. 'How goes it?' I

said to him. ‘I am rejoicing that they have left me anything,’ he said. But I guessed that he wasn’t altogether happy. ‘It is war,’ I reminded him. ‘So I see, sir,’ he said. ‘I am not confusing it with anything else.’ ‘See here, John,’ I said to him to encourage him, ‘we have all to take what comes to us, and to bow our heads before the inevitable; look at my case: to-day, for a trifling detail, I have lost the Palms of Temerity with the red ribbon, and yet you find me resigned to the injustice of fate.’ And I explained what had happened. He listened to me attentively and replied: ‘My Captain, this morning I was still an inspector of works; then I was reduced to superintendent of a bay; afterwards I counted on being at least a typist; when I lost a hand in addition to both legs, I thought that my director would certainly give me the job of ringing the bell which warns the workers of the times of entering and leaving the factory. In any case my daily bread was safe. More or less bread; but in any case enough to keep me alive. I had a future. But now I have none. I shall be unable to work, and if I am to live, it will have to be on the charity of others. Do you know what I am going to say, my Captain? That I am the trifling detail you require.’ ‘I don’t understand you,’ I stammered. ‘Already you have three parts of the corpse you require, and the part that remains with me in good condition, you can turn into the Palms, and I give it you as a present with great goodwill.’ I understood then what he meant, and I protested. But it was useless. Next day we found him dying; he had undone his bandages, and his blood was soaking into the ground. ‘Captain,’ he whispered in the feeblest tone, ‘I don’t wish to be buried here.’ I offered to carry him with us, and to place on his tombstone a record of his heroism. ‘It isn’t necessary,’ he said; ‘let them inscribe “*Here lies a Trifling Detail*.” ’ And he died. He was a brave man. Never can I forget that his life is the eightieth part of the Palms I wear.”

During this moving narration, the worthy members of *The Seven Fat Kine* had continued to eat so diligently that no one could suppose the interest of the story to have distracted them from their occupation. Adriana Sander, excited by the terrible anecdote, lifted her glass to Coedere in a devoted and silent toast, and the two drank with their eyes fixed on each other. Florio, in a jealous fit, began to say:

“I think that the importance given to the death and the bravery of a soldier——”

But a member interrupted him, calling out:

“Mr. President, please read the fifth article of our rules.”

“My dear Florio,” Truffe then said, “we must change the subject. Our rules forbid us to talk about death during our meetings.”

Florio shrugged his shoulders in an annoyed way, and Alberto thought it necessary to explain to the heroic colonel, fearing to earn his contempt.

“It isn’t that we are frightened by calling to mind what must come to all of us in the end, but we prefer more agreeable subjects for our conversation. We aren’t cowards, but we are kindly people. That is all.”

“Tell him, rather, Truffe, that we understand and esteem all that is pleasant in life,” exclaimed old Crombo.

“Yes, yes,” approved many of the members; “there are no good reasons to complain of life.”

Truffe went on:

“They say that a fat man is never a bad man. I don’t know, but I am certain that all the sad men I know weigh less than ten stone.”

A murmur of applause greeted this statement. But Marco Massipo interposed:

“I know of a case of fifteen stone that doesn’t support your theory.”

Crombo suggested:

“It must have been a diseased person.”

“It was the abbess of a convent of Capuchines,” replied the ex-graveyard man, “and it may be that what happened to that worthy lady has never happened in any other case since the world became a world.”

“Tell us about it,” asked several.

Massipo wagged his pensive head solemnly.

“It was a very edifying event which ought to be taught in all the schools of the kingdom. I must tell you that the abbess of Capuchines was buried in the cemetery of St. Mamed, but in saying that I do not think that I am breaking your rules, because the cemetery of St. Mamed is one of the pleasantest places in Europe, and I have always held that it was a serious mistake to close it. It would be useless, all the same, to look for the ashes of the venerable nun in her coffin, because the fact is that the tomb is empty, and the tombstone broken. One night, many years ago, this happened, and few people know the secret of so strange an emptiness. I can say something because I was told about it by the oldest of the sextons of St. Mamed, a man

who knew very many tales and all the brands of spirits under five shillings a bottle."

The narrator stopped talking to rescue with both hands his plate, which a waiter was trying to remove, and then, more contentedly, went on.

"It appears that the reverend mother had led an exemplary life, and if she did weigh fifteen stone, it was due to her sedentary habit in the convent, and not because she had eaten more than just enough to support her. When her soul left her body in the act of prayer, it went straight to heaven, and the gorgeous portals were opened widely for it without any formalities. The virtues of the old nun were known to the One who knows everything, and the Recording Angel sent the new arrival straight before the Presence. Some angels were sent for hurriedly and conveyed the abbess, who knelt in a swoon of heavenly joy. And the Lord spoke:

" 'I know your love for Me,' He said. 'I wish now to hear of the life which I gave you and of the world from which you come.'

" 'Lord,' breathed the holy woman, 'how can I recall what in Thy Presence seems more than ever a place of horrible banishment?'

"The reply gratified the All Highest, but He went on affectionately:

" 'What is your opinion about human beings?'

" 'I always thought them, Lord, vile creatures, spotted with the mire of sin, wallowing in their own wretchedness, ignorant of their infinite pettiness and their enormous wickedness.'

" 'Yes, yes,' agreed God, paternally and without anger, 'the race is a big problem and is quite incorrigible. But, no doubt, there are amongst them some beautiful and brave souls deserving a healthy admiration?'

" 'Beauty and bravery are small possessions, Lord; they lead to vanity, and time or illness destroys them.'

" 'No doubt. But possibly amongst your friends there may have been a noble soul, an intelligent spirit—— '

" 'Lord, I have read in *à Kempis* that he who parts from his friends and acquaintances brings God and His angels nearer. I gave up the deceitful commerce with mankind.'

" 'And the world?' enquired God, as if He were trying to change the subject. 'The earth itself, how did it seem to you?'

“ ‘A vale of tears, a land of sorrows, a home of strife, a cell of mortification.’

“ ‘Very true! very true! But there were other sides; sunsets, flowers, expanses of landscape.’

“ ‘I chose to pass my days in a place so dry that not even a herb of the field tried to grow in it.’

“ ‘Why did you choose such a place?’

“ ‘Why seek fleeting delights, Lord? I wanted nothing but rivers of tears in which to bathe and purify myself.’

“ ‘And fruit when it is sweet and ripe—did it not deserve a little praise? Have you never bitten with delight into a ripe peach?’

“ ‘I ate only black bread, and often on my lips were the moving words of the prophet, “Give me, oh Lord, to eat of the bread of sorrow and to drink deep of the water of my tears.” I always regarded the pleasures of the palate as a door opened to temptation.’

“ ‘Yes. . . but. . . after all, after all.’

“ ‘I kept fast rigorously, I never passed out of the doors of my convent, held my body in contempt, and valued no earthly pomp.’

“ ‘Quite so, but. . . after all, after all.’

“ ‘I understood after long meditations, what an affliction it was to live in the misery of that world down there.’

“ ‘Enough!’ commanded God.

“At the sound of the divine order, silence fell on the whole universe, and the excellent abbess hid her empurpled face. The voice of the Almighty sounded again, half in compassion, half in anger:

“ ‘Unhappy woman, how dare you condemn what is My work? You have made yourself find on the earth only blackness and sin, and sorrow and tears. Always tears, streams, lakes, oceans of tears. You have wilfully shut your eyes to what was good, what was beautiful, what was pleasing to the senses, and what was lovely, because you imagined that beauty and pleasantness were sinful. How can you condemn My creation without condemning Me? Return again to the world. Know it! Love a man, tend a flower, savour a fruit, fill your heart to the full with love for all creation, search out and understand the beauty there is in life, the joy of merely being alive, and then come back. That is My sentence.’

“And the good woman immediately found herself, small and rosy, kicking under the sheets of a cradle, once again on the earth to begin the existence to which she had been ordered.”

“At least,” said Marco Massipo in conclusion, “that was what the old sexton related, and I don’t think that there are good reasons for disbelieving him.”

Mr. Crombo tried to applaud him; but his arms were too short for anything but the tips of his fingers to meet.

“It is an admirable story,” he pronounced, “and I beg you to write it down for me, because I am sure to forget it before the dessert.”

The colonel affirmed, gazing fixedly at Adriana, that he also believed that it was possible to find in this life excellent reasons for praising the Creator, and a member named Armando stated that on one occasion he had been moved almost to the shedding of tears at the tender spectacle of a plump suckling pig, tastefully decorated with bay leaves.

“Never before,” he said, “did I realise the attractiveness of childhood.”

The conversation then became general and confused; but when Alberto Truffe stood up with a huge glass of champagne in his hand, voices fell at once, and there was complete silence. Truffe slowly raised his glass.

“Comrades,” he said, “I am going to address you, because that is my duty as president; I would much prefer, if the rules of this banquet allowed it, that we should join in singing some of the songs we love. Some of them are a little out of date now; but they bring back to us memories of our youth, and their harmonies recover for us the brighter sun of these years and our early joys, and perhaps also dear faces now hidden from us in the bosom of the earth. There is nothing, my comrades, which brings human beings closer together than meals like this; but when the time comes for the port to pass round, our voices join, urged by the poetical need of singing which comes to well-fed men, and it may be said that our souls have merged into a single soul, a soul free from all the vices; he who sings in tune does not feel pride, but the pleasure of making himself and others merry; the tenor does not envy the bass, nor the baritone the tenor, and it often happens that we enspirit even those who, although unable to sing with us, imitate the trombone with their puffed out cheeks.”

(Several voices: ‘Hear hear, very true, very true.’)

“My brothers,” continued Truffe, “each time our customs bring us together, I regard you with renewed affection, just as each one of you does

with respect to all the others. We are alone among human beings in being able to use the word ‘brothers’ without a trace of hypocrisy. No one can realise what true fraternity is until they weigh at least fifteen stone. Love, ability, wealth, are great exciters of hatred. There is never a beautiful woman who can look placidly at a rival beauty, nor can a powerful man refrain from jealousy of another powerful man, nor a scientist admit that another scientist is more useful, more profound or more widely learned. But the fat man meets every angry passion with the soft resistance of his body, just as besieged cities used to protect themselves from the ancient cannon balls by yielding mattresses. And it is useless to look for anything except a pleasant and sweet approbation in the mode in which one fat man looks at another. The root of all the sins and of all the evils is leanness. The light-fingered pickpocket is always a skeleton, you will never find a plump vagabond on the highways; if an hotel thief had to open double doors to sneak into a room, he would have to give up his exploits; a thin man is troublesome to women and quarrelsome because he is agile in attack and can escape readily if things go badly. A fat man is never haughty, because he does not wish to attract attention to his corporation by adorning it with ribbons and sashes, orders, and decorations. In short, when artists wish to personify any of the vices, they paint a lean figure. Lean persons are discontented and capable of any evil practices. Even of cannibalism. Have you not shivered sometimes in some public resort by noticing a hungry eye upon you? Our comrade, Mr. Crombo, stopped one night in front of a shop window filled with dainties; a small fellow as weak as a chicken-bone had his nose glued to the window, gazing at the good things when our friend came along. Mr. Crombo says that the slinking rascal immediately stopped in front of him as if in ecstasy, and forsaking the delicacies in the window, followed him through streets and squares, rubbing his hands and taking a toothpick from between his teeth from time to time, only to smack his lips. Mr. Crombo, who admits to have taken a cab so as to escape from that embarrassing admiration, insists that he saw in the eyes of his pursuer, exactly the expression with which the members of the *Seven Fat Kine* gaze on a specially succulent dish. He asked me if it could be true that the hungry scoundrel harboured notions of cannibalism with respect to him; I replied quite frankly that he did. That was my sincere opinion, and I took it as a duty to give a loyal warning to our friend.”

A voice:

“I disagree. Crombo would be tough. It was certainly a false alarm.”

Crombo, indignantly:

"No, no. What do you mean? Tough! I demand a hearing."

"They will tell us," continued Truffe, suppressing the interruptions, "that gluttony is a vice. What can we reply to such a childish accusation, the product of human tradition? Gluttony, gentlemen, was declared a sin for political, not moral reasons; to serve the economic interests of mankind in an age when to eat well, or even to eat at all, was a hard problem; in days when hunger had the devastating power of a plague. Tillage was scanty and inefficient; disease decimated the flocks and herds; fishing was difficult and hunting dangerous. It was necessary to ration mankind. If one man ate to satisfaction, another starved to death. In these days mobs attacked the granaries, mothers ate their own children, and the gods were appeased by burnt offerings. Commandments against gluttony, therefore, must be regarded as merely sumptuary laws, very useful in those times. If divine authority had not been claimed for these regulations, if gluttony had not been made anathema in those days, the hungry mother of whom I have just spoken, after eating one child, might have begun to gnaw another. And it was necessary to avoid such conduct ('*Well put, well put!*'). Fortunately, these centuries are far behind us. Better government of the world, more intelligent labour, have suppressed the lash of human hunger. It is possible to eat; one ought to eat.

"Stuff a man's brain with philosophy, and you may still be unable to keep him from being an evildoer. Feed him until he weighs more than fifteen stone, and he will not bring himself to kill with his own hands the chicken that is to give substance to his stew. For my part, if I am asked what would bring the coveted equality and fraternity to reign amongst men, I have complete confidence in saying: 'Make them fat.' "

The speech of the president was received with great applause. Music was heard from the adjoining room, and waiters appeared carrying the ices on blocks of ice lit by coloured electric bulbs. Crombo wished to explain that it was unfair to despise himself as an edible, but the sudden crash of a chair giving way under one of the guests, and his consequent disappearance under the table amidst the ruins of the seat, deprived the treasurer of the company's attention.

The afternoon was half over when Truffe and the guests left *The Golden Grill*. Adriana and Coedere went off together to the National Theatre, and Truffe suggested to Olivan that a coach drive would be an agreeable way of digesting the luncheon in peace.

They had almost reached the top of the hill where the trees of the Municipal Park were clustered, when Florio broke a sulky silence by declaring:

"I think that Adriana is going to the bad, Alberto."

"Ah," exclaimed Truffe, in a careless way, as if it were a joke.

"Didn't you notice how she was flirting with the officer? I tell you that she was making eyes at him. A bad business, Alberto, a very bad business."

"Why?"

"Because Granmont will hear about it, and naturally stop helping her. The silly girl ought to think of that. She should be faithful to Archibald for her own interest, and for the sake of decency."

"A few days ago you had different opinions."

"Certainly I blamed Adriana for becoming his mistress; but as things are, she ought to keep up appearances, and not open her door to all her caprices. After all, Archibald Granmont is something, means something; it is still possible that he might marry her. But this bounder, Coedere. . ."

"The real truth is, Florio, that you are now taking the side of Granmont because he is a rival that you fear less. You know that our young lady isn't in love with him; and it could only be love that would bring her to the arrogant lancer."

"No, that isn't so."

"Yes, it is so. You know quite well that Adriana is only a luxury for the millionaire, and that he'll never think of marrying her. You are speaking in a temper."

Olivan was angry.

"I thought you were a good friend of mine, Alberto. I was wrong."

Truffe shrugged his shoulders.

"If it is any comfort to you, insult me."

He settled himself in the carriage with an air of resignation. But Olivan pretended to take no notice.

They alighted on the esplanade at the top of the hill which overlooked the city. Night had fallen and lights began to shine in the massed buildings. A marble balustrade ran along the edge of an old quarry, and the two friends,

leaning on its cool whiteness, watched the stream of motor cars flowing down below, in two endless threads, rapid and noisy, between the park and the field of a fair where roundabouts were circling, swings vibrating, and where the shooting galleries were clattering. Every minute hundreds of new stars appeared in the sky or on the city, white or yellow, and all twinkling as if in impatience. The noises were amplified in the night, and here and there above the roofs the clocks in all the towers became visible. A reverberation composed of all the sounds of the city rose and fell unceasingly, and beat against their foreheads almost like a breeze, seeming a caress.

"Seriously, Alberto," said Olivan, "do you excuse the lightness of Adriana?"

"I excuse her for wishing to taste life."

"Life! life is only a filthy and painful disease; you can't think about it without being revolted by its cruelty and absurdity."

Truffe let a few minutes pass as if he had not heard the violent outbreak, and just as the irritated Olivan was about to continue his cursing, the good-natured fat man began to speak in a gentle and soothing voice:

"I understand that you are speaking in a passion, and that at any other time you would not agree with what you are saying now. No doubt many men speak like you, and have written long discourses on the burden of life. Let me tell you, dear friend, that such diatribes are vulgar and shameful. Life is not as you paint it. Life is pleasant and easy. Probably it was not always so, and there may be a kind of atavism in your bitter words; the subconscious memory of your brain cells has transmitted to you your ancestors' pain, the effects of their discomfort, of the hunger they endured, of the cold that pierced them, of the ferocity of their kin, of their struggles against hostile Nature, of their combats in the rutting season, and even of their terror of the angry gods. But now man has conquered the long ages of affliction. Civilisation now shines for us with the warmth and joy of the sun after a night of terror. I don't deny that there is a small percentage of unhappy people. We shall always have them; neither just laws nor generous hearts can prevent it. But around these unhappy beings, countless numbers, crowds and crowds and crowds, live without serious suffering, without undue sorrows, without troublesome struggles, letting their days pass over them like a gentle stream. In civilised countries life is neither bitter nor difficult; the brotherhood of man is felt more strongly and mutual help is greater. *You* are whining because you have been crossed in love, another because he wants more money. Very good! But what are these little griefs,

this growling of egoism? Small matters, indeed. You mustn't see life through your own troubles. Look at the city down there and think of what you know about it. Through its streets multitudes pass, some busy, some idle, clothed, fed, with some sort of culture and education. Any passerby, unless his disposition is not to see reality, must get the impression that everything is arranged for his service; on both sides of the street the shop windows display fine cloths, empty chairs await him, tempting foods are heaped up, jewels sparkle at him with the lure of women; they invite us, caress us with their brilliant and abundant lights, call to us with their large open mouths, and allure us with the offer of inventions, riches, and comforts surpassing our dreams. 'What is your pleasure?' one after the other calls out, and calls out to you, 'To eat? To clothe yourself? To guard your money in inviolable safes? To hear music? To dance? This way, please. I've been at the pains to select a few pretty and amiable girls who are waiting for you, although they don't know you. Also I have designed and wrought this jewel which conceals the miraculous power of brightening the eyes of your sweetheart if you offer it to her. Do you wish to know what is happening in the world? Stop in front of this loud speaker, or cast your eye on these papers containing news collected by diligent men in all the capitals of the world and sent over shining wires.' A gesture of the hand, and there stops in front of you, prompt and impersonal, a car for your service, as if the Slave of the Lamp had answered your whim. On the black wall of the night, the hand which traced the dread words at Belshazzar's feast, now inspired by a more benevolent care, writes and rubs out in letters of fire: 'Drink our Extra Dry Champagne'; 'Lotion X Cures Colds'; 'Best's Hotel is the Best.' If an impatient man seize our pocket-book, or an angry man attack us, men in helmets armed with truncheons fall on the aggressor to prevent outrages on our property or our person. Is that a small matter? Brigades of politicians, phalanxes of doctors, men in bright uniforms who can handle rifles and use guns, watch over the rights, the health and the tranquillity of all; pretty women and skilful dressmakers are abundant. Universities and charitable institutions increase in numbers. We have the services of men of genius, who by their lives of usefulness and slavery do us the double favour of their researches and of freeing us from worrying because we ourselves were not born clever. Life is good, Florio, life is good. To-day it is not a filthy disease nor any kind of bitterness. Listen to the rumour of that great city; how strong it is and how full. It is the sound of a contented and healthy heart. In all the noise there is no note of woe, not even an 'Ah me.' But even if by chance you should hear one, don't mention it; remember that by night these woods shelter many pairs of lovers."

VI

In which, although there are many serious events, the chief personality is a worm

Lawel, the engineer, was conducting the visitors over the large workshops and the sheds of concrete and steel now rising almost at the pace at which the devil in other days built castles on the rocky mountains. The place chosen as the cradle of the great enterprise was the plain which stretched its waste extent in front of Negrimia. Lawel hurried about, tireless, leaping over heaps of rubbish, climbing stairways without railings, surveying quickly the buildings still under construction, and with a light and optimistic smile explaining the lay-out of the many annexes. He led the way, tramping heavily in his high boots spotted with the red clay, his large waterproof flapping against him as he crossed an open space, or when he stood on a balcony, still unglazed, to point out the situation of a landing-place or the site of a hangar. Sometimes he turned his head round at a difficult place to call out "Take care," and then hurried on without bothering about the others.

The directors of the Lawel Stabilisers Company followed him in a compact group, thoroughly bored, getting more and more weary of the rough walking and the tiresome technical details. Dry old Alp was the only one who showed any pleasure and tried to arouse the enthusiasm of the rest with winks and weighty remarks. Olivan, Granmont, the wealthy David, and four or five of the others, for the last hour had been looking without seeing, and listening without hearing the descriptions of the engineer. Sike and Noke, the rival men of science, talked together, well behind the others.

It was near the end of autumn, and a cold wind blew over the plain, scattering clouds of smoke from the tall chimneys and in the distance raising fantastic shapes of dust. The directors, with their motoring caps drawn well down and their coat collars turned up, received Lawel's description with "Very good's," rapidly getting feebler. Suddenly Granmont, pretending to have forgotten something, left his companions. He hurried furtively, as if fearing to be called back, left the Company's land and got into his car, leaving behind the mechanic who had been watching it. He passed through the muddy streets of the town until he reached the highway on the other side, slowed down his headlong pace about two miles away, to stop in front

of an old elm, perhaps the only elm in Negrimia, through whose naked branches the wind was whistling dolefully.

Granmont alighted and went to the humble cottage, walking slowly, his brow furrowed with care. He pushed the door open, and took off his hat.

"Good day, Constanza."

Perhaps warned by hearing the car, the girl showed no surprise. She kept her seat on a stool beside the wooden chair in which her mother was almost hidden by a mountain of wraps, and replied coldly:

"Good day, sir."

Archibald sat down opposite to her, and after an awkward silence the magnate spoke with a trace of supplication in his voice:

"Constanza, Lucio has given me back the jewel I sent to you two days ago; why did you refuse it?"

She replied slowly, without looking up:

"Why was I to take it?"

"As a present from a friend."

"You are not a friend."

"What am I?"

The girl made a gesture.

"I don't know."

Granmont stirred in his chair and leant towards Constanza.

"I wish that you would not speak to me like that; even if you are going to be rude, be frank. Do you think that this jewel would have committed you?"

"Committed me?. . . to what? If I had kept it?"

"Then you think that I meant. . . that I meant to buy you?"

"Bah!"

"Constanza, listen."

The philanthropist twisted his fingers nervously. He hesitated before speaking, as if he were trying to conquer his reason or his pride.

"Have you thought over what I proposed to you?"

“How you keep on!” protested the girl, drawing herself up in evident disgust. “I am not interested in your proposals; I haven’t thought about them, and I don’t want to see you again. Do you understand now?”

Archibald broke in to explain; all his calmness had gone, and he spoke hurriedly but anxiously and resolutely.

“Be quiet, you don’t know yet. Everything depends on what you are going to decide now. Although you don’t love me to-day, later, when you know me better. . . Tell me, it isn’t necessary for you to love me? And even if you never were to come to love me, what is to prevent your happiness if we were together? Don’t you see that I can bring you happiness, that it is here at your side, more complete than you had ever dreamed of? Wait, I am just going to finish. See here, make up your mind and go for a year to a college. After that we’ll marry. That is what I intended to tell you.”

Constanza looked at him with contempt.

“You are only a silly joker, sir, and the only thing you can do for me is to leave me alone.”

She went out, muttering angrily.

The magnate was some time in getting over the shock of being turned down so completely and coldly. Then he held his forehead in his trembling hands. After a long silence he uncovered his pallid face. He fixed his eyes on the sick woman, motionless under her coverings, and said quietly:

“Did you hear her? Did you hear? Is it possible?”

The old woman looked at him sadly without replying.

“I have offered her what would make the proudest aristocrat crazy with joy, to be the wife of Archibald Granmont, and, all the same. . . why? Tell me. . . . You must have heard her talking about it, explaining something. . . . Why does she dislike me?”

The old woman nodded her head up and down, in an habitual puppet-like way.

“She says something,” she muttered. “She tells her sisters something.”

“And to you?”

“Yes, yes; also to me. She is a good daughter; a daughter who is a blessing.”

“And what does she tell you?”

“She tells about herself. But then the crickets which I have in my head go to my ears and eat up all the words which come in; yes, when I try to find them, there aren’t any.”

Granmont went close to her.

“Tell me, has Constanza a sweetheart, is that so?”

“Sweetheart? Poor girl, she hasn’t a sweetheart.”

“But perhaps she is fond of somebody?”

“I don’t know. . . I forget. You see, I used to have only one cricket. It used to run from one side to the other, but of course it couldn’t be everywhere at once, and I used to hear quite well and remember a lot. But one day I said to Constanza, ‘Constanza, I have noticed that my cricket has had a baby.’ She laughed. All right. But next day I had two crickets in my head. That is the luck I have.”

Granmont got up, quite baffled, and went off. The car glided gently to Negrimia, and the millionaire joined the group of visitors who were returning to the hotel, chilled through and tired; he happened to overtake Olivan, and walking with him did not hide his disappointment.

Olivan remarked:

“I am impatient to see Lawel’s invention in working order. It will change life in a way we can’t realise now. Don’t you think so too, Granmont?”

The philanthropist disagreed sadly.

“What will it change? Nothing that matters. Possibly customs, but not our feelings, and feelings make our happiness. It is possible to make a slow conquest of matter, but no one knows how to avoid the sad disasters of the soul. The day when our stabilised aeroplanes are cruising in the skies, we shall have done nothing but give wings to the despair which used to crawl on the ground.”

“Mr. Granmont,” laughed Olivan, “how can a fortunate man like you say such things?”

The Croesus turned his face to Olivan, as if to show him all the unhappiness written on it.

“I am nothing but one of the unhappiest men in the world,” he said; “celebrity, power, and riches are nothing if we can’t hold those we love.”

Suddenly serious in the presence of a sadness so real, Olivan turned his face away from Archibald, and murmured:

"Forgive me; I didn't know that you loved her so much."

"Loved whom?"

"Adriana."

"Adriana. Oh no; I thought you would have known. When we separated, a month ago, I knew already about her caprice for the lancer with whom she is living; and never. . . It was she, in a quite friendly talk, who told me that it was impossible for her to continue under my protection. I thought her deeply in love with her colonel; perhaps that is so. Possibly he may have wished to prove her love for him by making her give up the advantages of my friendship. However, that may be, I can assure you that it was not Adriana who made me know the bitterness of a despised love, for which neither will nor wisdom can provide a remedy; there is no cure."

They arrived at the hotel where lunch had been prepared. The mayor of Negrimia and several of the officials of the Smelting Company were waiting to salute Granmont. But probably for the first time in his life, the philanthropist cut short the greetings, let others pass in front of him, and forgot to take the head of the table.

When Olivan reached home that night, Marco gave him a sealed note in which the actress, in what seemed a terrified anxiety, begged him to come to see her at once. The cry for help made clear in the letter, and the nervous brevity with which it was written, alarmed him. He dined hurriedly and returned to the city in his car.

Adriana was living in a melancholy old suburb, full of ancient convents and dingy private mansions in narrow and shady gardens. When she separated from Granmont she had left the magnificent flat in Grand Avenue to live under the roof of Guido de Coedere in the huge dilapidated house he had inherited from his ancestors. The girl's passion for the soldier had been sudden and violent. It was she herself who had told Archibald of her resolve to give herself up to the hero, and she had had no intention of concealing in any way her new love affair. She returned to the millionaire all the costly presents he had given her, even including the little red runabout which was her favourite car and had advertised to everyone that it was the famous actress who was driving. Granmont found this abandonment rather humiliating. He was not jealous, but it annoyed him to think that people might believe that he, out of spite, had taken away from his lover the gifts

by which he had won her. When he found that she was determined, he shrugged his shoulders.

"At least," he said, "you'll keep on at the theatre. I took it for you, and if you leave it I am not going to continue with that tiresome business."

"The theatre," she said, "is my other love. And as my sweetheart is not rich, I'll continue working."

She showed herself in public with the officer, proud of her conquest; many newspapers made veiled references to her faithlessness; Adriana assumed the manners of a woman in love, and all the world could appreciate that in the second act of *Gay Susana* she appeared in costumes much less costly than those she had been accustomed to wear.

Adriana's affair with the lancer had lasted three months, and in all that time Olivan had avoided every chance of speaking to her. When he heard about the new adventure of his friend, he swore to Truffe that the pretty girl was forever dead to him. Actually he was more desperately in love than ever, and the mysterious letter aroused in the young man an anxiety which increased as he made guesses at the reason of it, until he was face to face with Adriana.

An old servant-maid introduced him to a salon with ancient, moth-eaten furniture, lighted by a lamp of eight branches, of which only three were burning. Adriana appeared almost at once, dressed in the exaggerated fashion of actresses. Florio excused himself.

"I know it is very late, but I got your letter only an hour ago."

"I was expecting you," she interrupted him, pressing his hands nervously. "I would have waited for you all night. *He* is not here; he has gone to the manœuvres. If you hadn't come I don't know what I should have done."

She sank into a chair covered in faded damask, and the tears which had been welling in her eyes since he came into the room broke into a flood as she began to sob. Olivan, alarmed by her grief, asked some anxious questions.

"Let me cry," she begged him. "It will do me good; I am so unhappy."

At length she told him the story of her troubles. Guido was a bad-tempered and brutal man, who kept persecuting her with jealous suspicions. A few days after she had given herself to him, fits of temper, angry words, and bitter reproaches began. First he reproached her about her relations with

Granmont, “As if he didn’t know about that from the first,” muttered the actress; then Coedere in his jealousy found endless ways of torturing her. In his savage suspicion, any treachery, even the lowest, seemed likely to him. He had asked her to choose between her love and her art; he didn’t wish her to continue playing in comedies, and the return from every performance was the signal for the beginning of scenes of violence, sarcastic insinuations in which the jealous man insisted that the success of an actress was due only to a woman shamelessly exposing herself to the public.

“Yesterday,” she went on, “he met Azil, the critic, in my dressing-room. He forbade me to see him again. I refused. I can’t get on the wrong side of that ill-natured man who has so much influence. Then Guido accused me of buying Azil’s good notices with my body. We had the most revolting, most disgusting and vilest dispute, the end of all self-respect. And—look.”

With a quick movement she pulled down her dress and bared one of her shoulders. On the soft white flesh, there was a large, raw bruise.

Olivan showed his distress and his rage.

“He has beaten me. Do you see?” she continued, pressing her finger so as almost to drive the polished nail into the discoloured edge of the weal.

Her tears dried up as if a flame of hatred had evaporated them. She got up and began to pace up and down on the worn carpet.

“Oh, the brute, the cad. To beat me. Of course everyone will say that I deserved it because of my stupidity; yes, and I’ll say it myself too. I have been blind, quite blind. Archibald deserved my affection a thousand times more than that man, and I never loved him. But he has finished himself. This can’t go on; it is driving me crazy. He has finished himself. I’ve made up my mind. I’ll leave him.”

“When?”

As she heard the question, she stopped beside Olivan and sat down again, leaning forward with her hands between her knees, her smooth and well-formed muscles showing through the thin robe. Her face became worried again.

“But I can’t go away, I daren’t go away, Florio,” she confessed in an almost childish voice. “I shall plunge into all sorts of horrors if I try to leave him. And he’ll do his worst. I am frightened. Don’t you understand how frightened I am? I asked you to come to advise me, to help me; you are my only friend; there is no other person in the world in whom I have such confidence. What am I to do?”

“You must go away.”

“Go where? You know that I can’t leave the town. And he would never forgive me, because he loves me. You know what he is, but he loves me.”

“He is a scoundrel.”

“But he loves me. Do you think he would have behaved like that if he didn’t love me?”

Olivan stared at her.

“You still love him?” he said.

“You don’t understand. Florio. I know that there is kindness in the depth of his heart, and that it is only jealousy that makes him violent. He would have liked to have me as a virgin, and that my first caresses should have been for him. I also. . . if only I could blot out half of my life.”

Florio rose up. He said coldly:

“I see now what you wish me to do; you wish me to go to this man to tell him not to beat you quite so violently.”

“Florio!”

“To tell him that you understand the depth of passion for you in his brutality, but that the footlights show up bruises too clearly.”

“Florio!”

“Good-bye, Adriana; you don’t need my help to settle your little tragedies.”

The girl rushed to him and seized his hands.

“You can’t go off like this. I have always thought of you as an older brother. Have you forgotten how fond you used to be of the little girl who is now a miserable woman, and needs you? Be my older brother again and help me. Tell me what to do.”

“Quit this house at once. I have my car below. I’ll leave you at some hotel, and to-morrow we can talk over things quietly.”

“But now?. . . At once?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t do it, Florio.”

“Then good-bye.”

She began to keep him back again, but this time with a more alarmed look on her face.

“Wait!” she whispered.

She fixed her large eyes on the door, the curtain in front of which moved slightly, and her hand clutched Florio’s arm. Olivan, turning suddenly, also stared at the curtain, and for an instant there was an agonising silence covering some dreadful possibility.

Suddenly the curtain was pushed back, its rings grating on the pole until its folds gathered into a column over the hinge. And the brilliant uniform of Coedere stood out against the dark background of the open door. Adriana choked a scream. Her lover came forward with his arms folded and his hands nervously clutching his sleeves, his face disfigured by contempt and rage. He stopped a few paces from the girl, making a visible effort to control the anger with which he was trembling.

“Out to the streets with you!” he ordered. “Tell me how much I owe you for your favours. . . and out to the streets!”

Olivan intervened. A violent rage took hold of him, and inflamed him against the man he hated. Deep in his mind he was sure that something terrible was going to happen.

“As there is nothing to justify your insolence,” he said, “I must suppose that you are going to ask me for an explanation.”

“I hardly know you. It is midnight, and I find you in my house when this woman thought I was away from home. I don’t want your explanations. Fright would make you lie!”

“I am not going to lie, but to tell you two truths: that not for a moment has Adriana suspected that I love her more than anyone else could love her, and that you who ill-treat women are a coward.”

He rushed at him blindly, his rising anger carrying him away. For a minute the two men formed a panting, struggling mass. Shrinking in a corner of the room, the girl, pale, in an agony of terror, showed in her eyes the anticipation of a terrible end to the struggle. The half-strangled voice of Coedere echoed in the room.

“Let go, or I’ll kill you.”

He had drawn his revolver and was holding it against Olivan’s cheek.

“Let go.”

Adriana fell on her knees in the most distant corner of the room. Olivan's hands relaxed their pressure on the lancer's throat, and finally freed it. The rivals stared at each other. The revolver was still pressed to Olivan's head. Finally the colonel lowered his arm.

"You are in my house and that saves your life. Clear out. To-morrow I'll arrange for another meeting."

Very early in the morning, Adriana came to the bungalow where Florio lived, close to the factory, in the desolate autumn fields. She was wearing a simple dark dress, and her face, pallid from the terrors and the sleeplessness of the night, was untouched by cosmetics. When her friend came into the room, Adriana began to weep silently, covering her face with her hands. Florio wished to give her advice, but anything he could think of seemed empty, and he kept silence. Then she spoke, looking at him through her tears, in a voice coming straight from her troubled heart, in a new tone, new even to herself, although she was accustomed to represent all the emotions in plays.

"I have come to beg your pardon, Florio."

Everything in her words and in her attitude showed sadness and humility.

"I didn't know what I was to you; I didn't guess that you loved me. I was only a girl given up to ambition, without sense, and with no one to guide me. But I became a woman in a few minutes, and nothing of what I was before last night is left in me. You yourself came to my heart as a new man; I never dreamed of seeing a man who would defend me like you when you rushed at Guido. Since we parted I haven't thought about the terrible hour of last night, but only about you. I think I have forgotten the sudden appearance of Coedere and your struggle, and only remember the voice in which you said that you loved me. I sought love wildly and never saw yours, yours so strong and so straight, so close to me and free from all the disgrace into which I am plunged. If you were another kind of person, if I were still the woman I was until last night, perhaps we could have had happiness together. But now I can't offer you what you deserve. I've come only to beg one thing; don't have a duel with that man."

"Adriana," replied Olivan, "what happened last night was very serious; I can't refuse the consequences. After all, it was me who. . ."

“But there are many good reasons. He is a professional soldier; he has the advantage over you of self-possession, of cool-headedness; he is accomplished in the use of weapons; you are not. He will kill you without any risk to himself. Excuse yourself on my account. Say that you don’t wish to lose your reputation by having a dispute over a woman—such as I am—for a good-for-nothing woman like me.”

Once more she began to weep disconsolately.

“For God’s sake, Adriana,” urged Olivan, “all this is senseless. Keep cool. You aren’t so disgraced and I am not in such a danger. For one thing, I don’t know if the man is going to challenge me. I hate your speaking as you do. Nothing has changed between us; we’ll continue to be the two good friends we’ve always been. All that I ask of you is, that if the scene of last night is going to make trouble for me, don’t you do anything to make me ridiculous.”

She stood up.

“You and I aren’t going to remain good friends.”

“Why not?”

“Because now your friendship won’t be enough for me.”

He had got a little pale. To break short a dangerous line of conversation, he told her, with a smile:

“Go back to the hotel, Adriana; I don’t think people should know you have been here to-day.”

Later in the day, Olivan was asked by the seconds of Coedere to name his own seconds, and the details of the duel began to be discussed. Four-and-twenty hours were spent in deciding which of the two had been the aggressor; another four-and-twenty hours were hardly enough to settle the choice of weapons, and the seconds took two more days to prepare the duelling pistols so that they would fire. At last, on a misty morning, the rivals, the witnesses, and a doctor met outside the city. Olivan came without fear, and also without hatred. He was no longer filled with the desire to strangle the lancer that had absorbed him when Adriana showed him the marks of the blows on her soft flesh. As the carriage was approaching the meeting-place, Florio felt that apart from his own death, nothing more terrible could happen than for him to kill his adversary. When he saw him, already on the field, he felt not the slightest animus. The seconds talked for a little. All four were soldiers, and whilst they were charging the pistols they were discussing the meaning of a sudden movement of troops towards the

South. During the night many trains laden with men and munitions had started in that direction, and the government and the newspapers had been making strong comments on the seizing by their southern neighbour of some petroleum wells in Asia. Coedere's regiment was under orders to start that evening, and the lancer, more concerned with the possible future war than with his own duel, added his comments to those of the seconds, and expressed his great pleasure that at last they were going to have a satisfactory kind of war.

When the ground was measured and all the preparatories finished, the Colonel and Olivan placed themselves face to face and saluted. The seconds moved aside. The signal was given (Guido was the first to fire). Florio made a sudden movement. What had happened? Blood was already staining his linen. His right shoulder was wounded. A group formed round him and he contrived to smile while the doctor helped him to bare his arm. The duel was over. Guido moved a few steps forward, gave a military salute with a correctitude beyond all criticism, and went off with his seconds. That was the end of the affair, in fact nothing very dreadful. The struggle in the house had been much more unpleasant, much fiercer. Then Olivan, his seconds, and the doctor went off together, each striving to be brighter and gayer than the others, once they had got through the serious business of affirming that Florio was a gentleman of spotless honour, who had fought like a gentleman, and taken his wound like a gentleman. They insisted on these facts so intently and with so much pleasure, that it seemed as if the lot of the victor was not the more enviable. In fact Coedere had gone off with the unconcerned mien of a clerk who had done his day's work, and was on his way home.

Alberto Truffe, Marco, and Adriana were anxiously awaiting news about the duel. Taking all the blame for the tragedy, the unhappy woman ran to hide herself, without strength to meet the truth, when Olivan's coach was seen coming along the road. Marco went to relieve her anxiety as soon as the seconds had gone, and she went into the wounded man's bedroom, and knelt beside his bed, weeping, murmuring words of gratitude, of reproach, and of love.

And no human force could take her away. At nightfall Olivan fell into a fever, and Adriana declared that she would stay to nurse him. At dawn, worn out, she slept in an armchair, close to the wounded man's bed, but very soon was on duty again. She helped the doctor in his treatment; with soft and dexterous hands she changed the bandages; she herself prepared the invalid dishes that were ordered, and gave them to him; she drew or raised the

blinds, arranged the pillows, guessed what he wished, anticipating his thought, doing everything to soften the pain of the first few days and to cheer his convalescence.

In a week, Florio, now almost completely recovered, had a momentary glimpse of facts through a rift in his placid self-absorption. He asked:

"And your theatre?"

The girl smiled, in slight confusion.

"Well. . . to tell the truth. . . I haven't the theatre."

"Is the National Theatre closed?"

"The National is still open, but I am not working there. I am not working anywhere. I have found out that I am not suited for the stage."

Florio looked at her intently.

"What has happened, Adriana?"

She suddenly became serious.

"I have already told you what has happened. The Adriana Sander you knew has become another woman. When the duel was arranged, I thought that if you were killed in it my horror of myself would prevent me ever appearing in public; and that if you survived nothing but you would matter to me. On that day I cancelled my contract. I have made up my mind never to return to the stage, and I expect love to make my life a far better thing than all the unreal lives of the theatres. Is there anything else I can do to make you forget that I didn't deserve your love?"

"There is nothing could please me better, Adriana, and it is the only way I could be happy; but all this, is it more than a temporary excitement? You aren't bad, but I am afraid you are fickle. . . . If some day. . ."

Suddenly, with a tender gesture, she closed his reproachful lips.

"Say no more."

She drew close to him and put her head on his breast. She whispered with a kind of teasing shyness:

"Is there any room in this house for a trunk or two? I've been wearing the same dress for a week."

She raised her face and for the first time offered him her lips.

"Shall I bring them here this very minute?. . . and for always?"

She ran out happily, calling to the chauffeur to get the car ready.

At midday, when Truffe arrived to take lunch with his friend, he noticed the absence of Adriana. Marco Massipo, questioned directly, said that she had gone into the town, and the fat man looked with curious eyes at Florio.

"She is coming back," the young man replied curtly.

After a moment's pause Alberto began to talk about something else, but Olivan added:

"She has gone for her trunks."

"Ah!"

The discreet fat man added not a word to that monosyllable. Then Olivan pushed away his plate angrily, and said that he was being tortured by doubts. How far was he right in giving way to his affection and allowing Adriana to live with him? Could he bear the possible blow of the girl's fickleness, as she was accustomed now to a life of excitement with constant triumphs and praise and courting? What ought he to do? Surely his friends ought to give him frank advice. Had Truffe anything to say?

Yes; Truffe thought that one ought to do what seemed best to him. For such matters there was no recipe as for cooking a partridge with cabbage. Certainly Adriana was a nice girl, and from that point of view there was nothing dangerous in what Florio was about to commit himself to. All the same he had to remember the changes in her character which might have been produced by theatrical life and the freedom of her habits. Florio would have to reckon with a great risk.

But Florio protested. It wasn't fair to be so hard on her. Adriana had gone wrong, but not from vice. In Granmont she saw the attainment of her ambitions, the conquest of fame and of luxury. Before she met Granmont, Adriana had lived almost like a pauper, and it was her honour that kept her from success. Everyone knew what the theatre was. It was a proof that she wasn't bad, that as soon as she thought herself really in love with a man, although he was not rich and could not help her in her career, she gave up having anything to do with the millionaire. That surely was the honourable course and showed real delicacy. And her behaviour to him, to Florio himself, during the past week, when she had given up everything to nurse him? No, he wouldn't listen to anything else. . . there wasn't a sweeter and better woman in the world. And although of course she had been foolish, she was certainly worth much more than the ordinary frumpish virgin.

"Very good," asked Truffe, "what are you frightened about?"

Florio made another gesture of ill-humour. To tell the truth, he didn't trust himself. He wasn't jealous, but he loved Adriana so much that he couldn't help being bitter about her former follies—about her love affairs. It was impossible to deny that she had belonged to two other men. How could he forget that? How could he fail to remember that her first passion had not been with him, that others had placed their brutal seal on her senses, and that he would have wished her to come to him pure and unspotted? Could he forgive Adriana for forgetting the strictness with which a woman ought to guard her honour? Such ideas pervaded his mind; might they not grow unbearable? There was his bitter trouble.

"And what ought Adriana to have done?" asked Truffe.

"Kept herself."

"Waited for you?"

"Or for some other honourable man."

"Do you think that is so very important?"

"Socially, enormously important. It is the root of all our judgment of women. For that reason Adriana can never hope to win complete respect. To be unspotted is the highest quality of woman."

"You have never spoken a nobler truth, sir," interposed Massipo, "but God help me if I would make too much of it."

"You don't understand anything about it, Marco."

"One sees and hears a good deal in the course of years, sir, and what I have learned about that subject, many young ladies would give a lot of money to know."

"Massipo," cried Truffe joyfully, "as dessert after a good lunch, tell us a story about your comfortable cemetery of St. Mamed."

"Story or not story, as a guide in Mr. Olivan's trouble, I would not exchange it for logarithmic tables or a textbook on electricity."

"Certainly," agreed Truffe, "and I have such faith in your words, that if Florio doesn't know your story already, you can't do better than tell it us."

Olivan agreed, and the solemn Massipo, when he had seen that the coffee was quite ready, and had filled the transparent cups with the dark liquid, began his tale:

“In the days of our fathers there was a respected gentleman, of noble family, so well brought up and so punctilious about the rules which govern the conduct of gentlemen that no one had ever seen him commit a blameworthy action, or surprised him in the whole course of his life doing anything that could be called work. He was a gentleman, as I have told you, and that is enough. He valued his honour far beyond his life, and he was not unaware that of all the vessels that can contain that precious quality, none is so brittle as the body of a woman. Although he was a good Christian, sometimes he would lament with his friends that our Lord had forgiven the Magdalen, and held that in that clemency there was to be sought the cause of women even having gone so far as to smoke cigarettes. The honourable gentleman had married a lady so virtuous that she would not allow in the poultry-yard more than one hen to every cock, and had never permitted the installation in her house of the invention of Satan known as a bathroom.

“This exemplary family contained two sons and a daughter. Inheriting the high moral principles of their parents, the boys were the most angelic in the kingdom. No one had ever seen them stopping to look at those disturbing naked statues which are in public parks, or reading a book without ecclesiastical sanction, or gazing into shop windows where, under pretext of displaying petticoats, corsets, camisoles, and stockings, there are exhibited shamelessly, to corrupt youth, lascivious wax mannequins. The exemplary parents were satisfied with their offspring, and had good reason for it. The daughter in particular had been constantly warned of the supreme value of virginity, of its transcendental significance, and of the tenacity with which it must be defended even to the extent of trampling on one’s own heart when it conceals illicit temptations. The last words of the noble lady to her daughter, when she was on her death-bed, were another warning about the fragility of virginity.

“It is probable that the worthy gentleman would have died in the same happy tranquillity as his wife, if a most unfortunate event had not perturbed the last moments of his life. One afternoon when Azucena, the beloved daughter, was watching from her balcony the people passing in the street below, the iron balustrade against which she was leaning gave way, and she fell with a terrible scream.

“As chance would have it, her petticoats caught on an iron rod projecting between the second and first floors, to carry telephone wires. And there the charming girl stuck, doubled up like a puppet, pale, and by good luck unconscious, because the slightest movement would have been fatal. . . and

exposing to anyone of average eyesight in the street more than half of her charming body.

"As soon as he was told about the dreadful accident the father hurried downstairs in panting haste, in the horrible certainty of finding his darling an unrecognisable bleeding heap on the pavement. The cries and the attitude of the people in the street revealed to him the almost miraculous chance by which Azucena had been saved. His anguish at her precarious position, which at any moment might end fatally, put him beside himself. The unhappy gentleman ran about weeping, bewailing, and praying all at once, and asking everyone to save her, which, however, no one knew how to do. But presently the cooler-headed spectators piled mattresses on the pavement on which Azucena would fall, and haste was made to send for the nearest fire-escape. These measures, and the firmness with which the girl seemed to be suspended, tranquillised the honourable gentleman a little, and also the trembling spectators who were filling the street. A young man beside the father murmured, half in admiration and half in pity:

" 'Poor girl. But isn't she well made!'

" 'Oh yes,' agreed his companion, 'she is splendidly made, the poor girl.'

"It was only then, and this is the truth, that the afflicted father noticed that the pretty victim was showing to the crowd perseveringly and with the indifference of one completely occupied with being in a faint, all the attractions to be found in the space between smooth hips and pretty ankles. Pride, decency, and the respectable prejudices of a hundred generations of honourable gentlemen, and of ladies who never received their husbands except in the dark and in long nightgowns, excited and aggravated the consternation of the excellent parent. He looked round and saw hundreds and hundreds of eyes fixed on the body visible up above, saw a stout old gentleman turn purple in the effort to gulp down a chuckle, saw near that man a pale fellow hurriedly wiping his glasses with his handkerchief; saw some boys pushing through the crowd to see from the front what they had examined from behind. The voices of the crowd, the hooting of cars held up a little way off, the gongs of the tramcars all seemed to the gentleman to be calling out 'How well she is made! How well she is made! Come and see the virtuous young lady hanging up there, showing her bottom!'

"The unhappy gentleman clenched his fists with rage. If only he could curtain off all the crowd! Shame and rage must have taken away his reason, because he suddenly cried out:

“ ‘Azucena! Cover yourself!’

“Some people began to smile. Others asked:

“ ‘What is the gentleman saying? What is he saying?’

“But he, beside himself, shouted:

“ ‘Down with your petticoats, Azucena.’

“Then a great many began to laugh loudly, and some who were close to him advised:

“ ‘Keep cool, sir, the fire-escape will come soon.’

“Maddened, as enraged as if his daughter were being violated before his eyes, he dashed indoors and went upstairs by leaps and bounds. Presently they saw him on the remains of the balcony carrying a sheet which he unfolded and held by a corner. They thought that he was going to slide down it, but his intention was only to cover up his daughter’s body. He stretched out his arm over the balcony, leant forwards, and overbalanced. A cry of horror was raised from all the spectators as he crashed on the pavement. The sheet which he still held fanned out above him. It was like a swift comet, and those who watched its falling could not go on looking at Azucena’s body.

“The orphans were left with a small fortune, and with their minds impressed by the wise advice in their father’s will, which came to them like a voice from the grave. ‘Watch over Azucena,’ he admonished the boys, and to the daughter, ‘Keep your honour.’ For the irreproachable gentleman, the latter injunction concerned only the girl’s relations to love. Among his remote ancestors there was a lady who had poisoned an official because of some political dispute, and another who had despoiled her nephews and nieces of their patrimony by an obscure and very dubious lawsuit, but the family was almost proud of these deeds, which, as all the world knew, brought no tarnish to the name. The vital and concrete point of the father’s posthumous admonition was as to when and how she should cease to be a maiden.

“Azucena’s physical attractions were so great that suitors thronged round her, and, in spite of the modesty of her life and her seclusion at the family hearth, jealously guarded by her brothers, the fame of her beauty spread far and reached all the town. Many were those who offered their hearts to her, but she showed herself timid in accepting courtship as her reason was not yet sufficiently ripe to distinguish, and she put them all off. One young gentleman, proud, violent, and wealthy, laid siege to her with more assiduity

than any of the others, and was definitely refused. The Don Juan swore that he would possess the scornful lady, whatever it might cost him, and late one afternoon when Azucena, accompanied by her older brother, was in the outskirts of the town, several men suddenly rushed at her with the intention of capturing her. The girl defended herself as best she could, and her brother, recovering from the surprise, laid about the rascals with his stick, and although they stuck a knife into him, did not slacken his efforts until the screams of the threatened young lady brought a number of people on the scene, whereupon the rascals decamped, and the brave young gentleman promptly expired.

"When the younger brother learned what had happened he wept for his senior; but gave thanks to God that Azucena had had someone to deliver her, although at so great a cost, from the dishonour which had threatened her. And life went on as usual in the house, after precautions had been taken to prevent the success of any evil design of men. The gratings were doubled, the young men-servants discharged and replaced by the old widows of two soldiers to accompany and tend the coveted beauty, who kept herself more reserved than ever, and more distrustful of the world.

"About that time two of the suitors were wounded so severely in a duel that they died without being able to say good-bye to anyone, and a little afterwards four young men of good family, one after the other, committed suicide because they could not bear life when they were disdained by the beauty.

"When Azucena was twenty-two years old, a financial crisis reduced her fortune to an insignificant amount, and her young brother decided to abandon his studies to increase the family income by working. Through the influence of friends he got a post in a bank, where he worked more than ten hours daily without raising his head from terrifying ledgers which it seemed impossible to fill. The gentle Azucena, saddened by the excessive toils of her brother, declared with tears that she had made up her mind also to work, either in some office or by taking in sewing or embroidery at home, but her brother frowned down her decision.

" 'Azucena,' he said, 'I can't believe that misfortune has made you forget what you owe yourself. An unmarried girl like you always runs a risk in being with men. And I dislike quite as much your talk about working at home. You would wear yourself out, inflame your eyes, roughen your hands, and lose your delicate grace. No, go on here as you have been doing, for a young lady has quite enough to do in worthily protecting her honour. Whilst I live and keep my strength, you'll have all you want.'

“And, in short, she continued to protect her maidenhood in that dismal house, like a precious jewel in a safe.

“For three more years the brother was still manipulating figures, working overtime to earn a little more money, and scarcely stopping to eat or to sleep. After that time his office companions with sorrow found him crouched over his desk, and when they approached him received the surprising confidence that he had now become a calculating machine; next he begged them to pledge him at a pawnbroker’s, as he wanted more money. From that instant he spoke no word that was not a figure. In a few months he died in a madhouse.

“The gentle Azucena was now sorrowful and lonely; but she altered nothing in the rigid discipline of her life. But five years later, as a solitary exception, when she was paying the gas-bill to the collector, she noticed that the humble employee was a nice young man. She was standing at the open door, and by that open door there came in the scents and the light of a spring day in which everything appeared young and gay. The collector said something, and she replied something; the pair of them laughed, and as if in a delicious dream she found herself in the strong and muscular arms of the man, allowing herself to kiss and be kissed, as if she were hypnotised.

“Nothing more happened. But when she was alone again, beside the wrought-iron balcony, Azucena came to the conclusion that she could no longer trust her will-power, that her purity was hanging as it were by her petticoats over an abyss, and if that man, so alien to her lineage, were to kiss her again, she. . . oh the terrible temptation. . . would neither think twice nor defend herself.

“The same night she dissolved six boxes of matches and without a qualm drank the liquid to the last drop.

“They buried her in St. Mamed, in the family vault, where her father and her brothers were already lying. The noble gentleman welcomed her affectionately.

“ ‘I am sure,’ he said, ‘that you behaved suitably to your upbringing and your race; but I wish to hear it from your own lips. Tell me, my daughter, your honour, which is also the family honour?’

“ ‘I bring it with me intact, dear father,’ she replied, blushing a little.

“ ‘God bless you.’

“Time passed. The mirror of gentlemen used to knock every morning at the partition which separated him from the niche of Azucena in an

affectionate salute. But one day there was no reply. The girl had fled from the family vault, and a group of skeletons, who were taking the air, met her near the common pit, weeping. A female who had been dead for two centuries came up to her.

" 'What has happened to you?' she asked.

" 'Woe is me,' moaned Azucena, 'there can't be any misfortune so great as mine. To preserve my honour my father killed himself; to defend it, one of my brothers died; to feed it, the other died; to save it, I killed myself; several young men who wished to make themselves master of it came to a bad end; while I was alive I did nothing except ward tirelessly that fragile and precious thing, a woman's virginity. And last night, dear lady, a worm ate it up, a loathsome worm. Alas! I can never again appear before my father.'

"The dead old lady said:

" 'When you have been with us a little longer, you may be able to recognise only by a glance at the skull, if the deceased during life had been an idiot, a criminal, or a learned person; but no sign will ever let you know whether the person had given way to love without the sanction of the law. Perhaps Nature thinks nothing of it, or perhaps thinks so much that she gives to one who has resisted the sweet allurement of love exactly the monstrous violator which has robbed you. Go back to the vault, and if you wish to lament, mourn for your own and other lives wasted in sterility.' "

Marco stopped talking and Truffe then opened his eyes; he had been asleep, lulled by digestion and by the grave voice of the retired cemetery superintendent.

"Go on," said the fat man, "your story is most interesting."

"I have already finished it," growled Massipo.

Florio began to laugh.

"Damn it all," he said, "perhaps there is sense in your ugly story. Besides. . . what has been done . . . is done."

And he accepted Fate.

VII

In which the Devil decides on the most important act of his career

Never had Olivan found himself so happy or his life so complete as in the honeymoon, apparently never-ending, which Adriana's love gave him, a love that was devoted and humble, alert and sweet; she appeared to rejoice at having been accepted and that the heart of another was wide-open to her tenderness. Florio felt that his life at last had come to anchor in a safe harbour and that nothing could disturb it except some entirely unimaginable storm. He had settled down to the simplest kind of happiness, the happiness that gives most, and most lasting peace to uncomplicated persons; prosperous business and the love of one woman. Adriana's charm seemed to increase day by day, and often the recollection of a gesture, of an action, of a saying of his sweetheart at some moment of his ceaseless idyll, made him look at his watch in the office of his factory, impatient to join her again.

Late in the afternoon they were accustomed to go to the town, to shop or to dine in some restaurant which seemed to have been waiting for them since the beginning of the world.

They were delighted when in one of the restaurants the menu offered to them was too plain, or when they noticed the officious discreetness of the waiter who carefully shut the door behind him and knocked before entering, taking them for an ardent couple who had to conceal a secret love. Any event set ringing all the bells of their happiness. Their joy took all colours and they forgot that they had ever thought unkindly of life.

It was on one of these occasions that the young couple first encountered the most transcendental event that human beings could imagine.

Night had fallen when the car, driven by Florio, entered the principal streets of the city, and found them strangely deserted. Farther on, a confused clamour assailed their ears, and when they came to the crossing of two wide streets, they saw people running, the vanguard of a general panic. The shopkeepers stood at the doors of their shops in alarm. Olivan slowed down and heard that the police were charging people who had been stoning the residence of a diplomat. The newspapers of the day, full of an affair about some oil wells, had abandoned the moderation with which they had hitherto dealt with the matter. Some of the leading articles demanded immediate

vengeance for outrages committed by the neighbouring country, and recalled the names of heroes and of battles, searching the archives of history with as much angry zeal as if they could turn them into munitions of war. Florio explained to Adriana the cause of the distant tumult and they went on. But when they came to the more populous quarters, the agitation increased. The women were conversing from their balconies, and groups of men discussed with anger or with sad and concerned faces some extraordinary event about to happen. In the Central Square the car could not move. A crowd, kept away from the royal palace by mounted men, awaited in solemn silence the decision of the Ministerial Council. There broke in from one of the wide streets a procession of shouting thousands, yelling loud hurrahs and cries of death. They carried placards and banners with warlike inscriptions and a group had hoisted on their shoulders a soldier with the stupid face of a peasant, madly applauding the army.

The car remained imprisoned in the serried throng, and the square was black with people under the brilliant light of the lamps and the electric signs which flashed and faded on the fronts of the buildings, spotting with changing reflections the faces anxiously turned towards the royal palace.

Here and there, indistinguishable in the crowd, more excited persons shouted “Death,” and here and there an arm protruded as if it were throwing a cry to the multitude and the multitude replied with a threatening shout. Suddenly the polished globes which crowned the great central balcony of the palace flared out. It was the signal for some announcement and the crowd was silent. The familiar figures of the rulers became visible, slightly agitated by the feeling of being watched by thousands of eyes under the cold and powerful light. The Prime Minister held out his hand, and everyone kept a strained silence. There came to Florio, indistinct and broken by the distance, a few phrases, “our glorious history,” “the national honour,” “let us show ourselves worthy of,” “war.” At the first sound of that terrible word a ferocious howl rose to the sky, and the square suddenly became white as all hands were raised to applaud.

“Long live the King!”

“The King!”

“The King!”

And amongst the ministers, now respectfully falling back, there appeared a man of medium height, with a grey beard, and eyes which shone mildly under a narrow forehead. He saluted. And the people, in a delirium, broke out into applause long and eager, stirred by enthusiasm and love.

Florio nervously gripped the wheel of the car and felt that the deep emotion of the moment had brought moisture into his eyes. The crowd-consciousness imposed itself on his own and fused it with the common feeling. If it had been possible, he would have asked for a rifle, and a leader, and a place in the front of the fight, with whomsoever it might be.

There came a relaxation of tired throats, of nerves too long under strain; the subsidence of which an expert always takes advantage to recommend crowds to disperse. It was at that moment that the strange voice was raised.

It was a voice full and strong, assured; but so pervaded with gentleness, peace, and kindness that there could have been no greater contrast with the agitated state of everyone's feelings.

"Brothers," said the voice.

Standing up on one of the seats round the central electric light, the speaker was visible to the people. He was tall and pale, and a dark and scanty beard accentuated the wasted appearance of his face; his bony hands were held out as if to protect or bless the sea of heads, and his eyes, under shaggy brows, gleamed with fanaticism. A gentle breeze blew his faded locks into an aureole round his sunken temples.

"It is Acracio," people said, "the hermit of the Black Rock."

And once more the gentle and confident voice flowed on:

"Hear me, my brothers."

In the evening at sunset, whilst birds far from their nests were still frisking in the air, Acracio, the hermit, had received a visit of Satan.

He felt the tension in Nature and in the sudden silence, deep and cold, which had often announced the coming of the Enemy; and before he raised his eyes to the black rock where he knew that the Sorrowful Angel would show his figure against the sky, he prayed. Then gently he directed the profound pity of his gaze on the Accursed.

"Acracio," he heard, "for three months I have not come to disturb your meditations. We left open a theological discussion which reminded me of the charming debates I used to have with the testy Luther, or my efforts when I conspired against the Franciscans in a Dominican monastery at Berne. To-day I want more than ever the consolation of arousing your enmity, as otherwise I shall be overcome by melancholy. Would you like to know what I have been doing recently?"

The hermit kept silence. Satan sighed sadly and said:

"For the first month I became a Frenchman. I let it be known that I had a supernatural gift of healing, only by the laying on of hands; there came to me sick people who had already been pronounced incurable by science, and I restored them to health. My doings left all the doctors for miles round about without clients. I worked real miracles. At last I was arrested for practising a profession illegally. When I was cross-examined I stated that my skill was supernatural, and it was my prayers that led to my successes. The doctors who heard me laughed. 'Cures by suggestion,' they declared, 'and suggestion can do marvels.' I was heavily fined."

Satan waited. The holy hermit kept silence.

"In the second month, I was an unemployed workman in Spain and I resorted to the protection of The Pious Dames who gave me twopence a day and stout shoes when I entered the holy fold. I wished to warm myself at the fire of faith. One day I tried to provoke a pious explosion when in affirming the existence of God they also affirmed my existence. I spoke alone with the Lady President and pretended to a cynical atheism. She replied: 'We respect the consciences of others; all that I ask you is to vote for our candidate in the elections.' "

The Rebel sighed again. Acracio persisted in his silence.

"The third month I joined a congress at which learned men from all the most civilised countries held discussions on biology. Not once was mentioned the name of Him who made all. With the approbation of everyone, men already near to the grave who ought to have been thinking of the next world, hazarded conceited guesses as to how some marine animals had moved from water to land, and how the struggle for existence had transformed them until the vertical posture emerged among arboreal animals, and the gibbons came into existence as the monkey progenitors of man. 'But,' I asked, 'how about the soul and the intelligence?' 'Intelligence,' they replied, 'is a product of the upright position. Thanks to that, the hands became organs of grasping and of defence; they could raise food, already plucked, to the mouth, and the jaws could therefore become smaller. In consequence the masticating muscles which formerly met on the top of the head, compressing it, had their insertions limited to the temporal pits; the skull, no longer compressed, could expand; the frontal and parietal bones became wider, the brain enlarged in proportion, and the nervous system became predominant. That was the origin of the intelligence of man. Moreover, our muscular fibres are like those of other vertebrates; our body

is segmented, like that of worms, our teeth are not different in kind from the hard plates which form the dermal skeleton of dogfish; in human embryos gill arches are laid down as in amphibians; our nerve-cells do not differ outwardly from those of any other animals. We are Nature's culmination, but it is not true that we were created by a direct and special act.' These things I heard, and never have I seen man so far from the Creator as when he proclaimed His causal work to be the result of chance."

The hermit raised his eyes to the Evil One and spoke:

"Certainly infidelity has mastered the world, but do you not see that it is due to your work? You have sowed salt in all souls and they have become barren. The path of knowledge leads to God, but Pride cheats man with its tinsel. It is the root of all sin because it belittles the Creator; and Pride is you. You have scattered temptations like cunning snares along all the pathways of the world; great and terrible has been the confusion of humanity between Evil and Good. God leads men by the good that is in them; you by their evil. The poor human soul was about to go mad under the rival influences when it took refuge in the sordid and shameful indifference which is such a shock to your pride. You have no pity wherewith to judge these wretches. They believe that they have made themselves neutrals in your eternal battle against God, but in truth they have not won peace, and your devices, like snakes, have entangled their feet or lie coiled in their hearts. They have cast out the images from the altars to exalt themselves; in the laughter with which they greet you there is the bitter chill with which you have wished to teach them to deny God."

The hermit stood up, troubled by a deep sadness.

"Alas, what have you done to these feeble souls? A vain longing for knowledge tortures them like an insatiable thirst, driving them to suck water drop by drop, scratching at the ground with their nails; envy embitters the good that is in them; their thoughts are confused, and between desire and fear they go from the cradle to the grave in restless terror. They see glory in slaughter and regard covetousness as a social virtue. If pride did not restrain them, they would all reveal hearts torn and hungry and souls filled with disillusion; if all the tears were to flow which pride restrains, they would flood the unhappy earth. It is your doing, accursed a thousand, thousand times. May you be hated for aeons of aeons, and may your knowledge of your own monstrosity keep you in eternal torment."

And the holy man moved away slowly and retreated into his hut. Satan remained, vexed and silent, with his curved claws scraping the lichen off the

black rock on which he was seated. Finally he got up and drew near to the humble refuge of the hermit.

"Acracio," he called.

The hermit went on praying.

"Acracio."

Lucifer's voice became pathetic and soft like that of a child who has been scolded.

"Come now," he went on after waiting uselessly for a little—"I can't think. . . the truth is. . . you have been rather hard on me. Come out a minute."

The penitent did not stir.

"Acracio," continued Satan, "this won't do. Have you made up your mind never again to listen to me? Don't carry things too far, confound it. You know quite well that you are the only one with whom I can discuss theology, and that I can't get on without talking about that. Come out; don't be obstinate. You must understand that I am not going to be revengeful; there is no question of frightening you with prodigies, or tempting you into evil thoughts, or of sending a pretty young girl to your sixty frigid years. Give me a minute."

"Get thee behind me," Acracio solemnly called out from inside his shelter.

Satan shook his head as if protesting against such conduct.

"All right," he cried, "do what you like, but I tell you——"

"Get thee behind me," insisted the hermit.

Satan stamped impatiently on the ground.

"I am just going, I am just going."

He leapt on the rock and spread his bat-like wings over the giddy abyss. But he paused again, frowning with thought, and suddenly went back to the hut.

"Acracio," he said, "we'll understand each other much better if we have a little talk. You seem to be in trouble over the human race. Please understand that human beings in themselves interest me very little, and still less in the state into which they have got themselves. What has happened to

them is not altogether my fault. But if you really think that it is in my power to do anything, tell me frankly—and I'll—I'll—I'll think it over."

Silence.

"Did you hear me?"

The hermit appeared at his door.

"Do you promise to obey at once what I tell you to do?"

"I'll make the earth double its harvest and make gold appear at your pleasure, lengthen life."

"No."

"I'll bridge the oceans, exterminate dangerous animals, increase the beauty of women."

"No."

"What do you ask!"

"Stop all your temptations."

"Oh! Acracio!"

"Remove from amongst men the Seven Deadly Sins, so that the hearts of God's creatures be pure and clean, and the lost peace of Paradise reign again on earth. Allow humanity to renew itself in a life of well-doing in which suffering and sin will never again be known."

"Well-doing? No; to create virtue is out of my power."

"But you can destroy Sin."

"I am only to destroy Sin? Is that your wish?"

"Yes."

Lucifer cast an ironical glance at the hermit and kept looking at him for a minute as if he were thinking over the audacious demand of the servant of God.

"I had never thought of that," he murmured at last. "I shall oblige you."

Once more he placed himself on the basalt rock like a tall statue on a pedestal. Night began to fall. A red beam from the setting sun, which was dissolving in the darkness, reached Satan's naked body as if it were drawn to it, and made it glow with light; his flowing locks framed his commanding forehead. Lucifer stretched his arm towards the dark horizon. The mountain

was filled with a silent, still fear, and the wide plain seemed a black lake across which the sleeping blade of a river stretched like a bridge of metal. The pale glow of the invisible and distant city stained the sky in a quarter where a few shapeless clouds gathered.

The hermit stared, shaking with the presentiment of some awful sight. A thin crescent moon shed an unreal light. Acracio saw that a strange cloud was racing across the plain and recognised suddenly and in confusion that as it drew near it took the shape of a gigantic and dreadful lion. The huge and terrible head, wreathed in a flaming mane, concealed the rest of the body. As it reached the ground, each paw seemed to take possession of the wide valley, and even of all the humbled and submissive earth, and the dust, raised as it began to walk, ascended in a cloud towards the sky as if to blot out the stars. Pride closed its eyes as if it disdained to see what was not itself; its broad chest was a wall that would turn aside storms and hurricanes; and its lashing tail had the menace and the authority of the scourge with which a lord beats his slaves.

The lion came near; the air trembled with its breath. It passed. There came behind it, equally huge and supernatural, a creeping hedgehog, a living mountain covered with spears, an untouchable mass, self-sufficing, hostile, repelling any caress with its spikes, guardians of the treasure of its egotism. Above its pointed snout its eyes were golden coins, and gold glittered under the thicket of spines ready to be thrust from its arched body. As it passed, it stole the lustre of the crystals which shone like jewels on the furrowed soil, and the golden gleam which the lights of a village threw on the river. But if a suppliant heart approached it the monster raised its spines hiding even its own eyes of metal, shut so as not to see or be seen.

It drew nearer. . . . It passed.

And behind it there came the ugly figure of a monstrous swine, routing voluptuously with short grunts; its eye alert and roving, questing lasciviously; its head bent to the mud in which it took its pleasure. Its rough hide, spotted with venereal leprosy, trembled with all forbidden delights, and in its routing there was a perpetually unsatisfied desire.

It drew near and passed.

Next came a shape of horror, a hound with dripping jaws, its eyes flaming with a yellow light. Its corrupt and corroding tongue hung from its mouth, and where its poisonous saliva fell, there gentle peace and noble deeds withered. The bony body in its mangy hide shook with rage, and none could see the evil beast and not know that it was ceaselessly prowling.

And it passed. And on its heels there came, different in pace, equal in horror, a bear, slow and pot-bellied, gross and stupid, licking its lips over honey stolen from the diligent bees. And next came a wolf, its jaws agape with the lust of rending quivering flesh. It was flecked with its own blood and the blood of others, shed in pitiless fighting, and its jaws still shook with the pleasure of carrion unearthed or of prey torn with howls, and in its sharp teeth the last red morsel which, growling and furious, with legs straining, it had torn from a victim of blind and brutal rage.

And, behind them all, straying, uncertain, stupid, a lazy ass. It stopped from time to time to bray loudly; it stumbled, cropped in the shadows, mooned along. On its flanks and its belly the wet and dirty mud, in which it had wallowed, hung in ugly clouts.

Acracio saw that the seven monstrous beasts were those chosen by the Christian Fathers as the symbol and image of the Seven Sins. The miraculous clearness of the night made them more visible, moving across the plain, a procession of unimaginable monsters. The hermit fell on his knees and closed his eyes, overcome by horror. The air was heavy with the bestial fumes; the quiet night was filled with a pestilence as intolerable as an opened grave. Behind the hermit's hut, near the dark thicket of firs, the mountain gaped to swallow, one after the other, the members of the devil's flock.

Acracio was still prostrate on the hard ground. Satan came up to him again.

"I have obeyed you," he announced; "the Seven Deadly Sins will no longer trouble mankind. Go to the city and carry the good news to your brothers. From the moment that you announce it, the life that you long for will begin."

And he spread his strong membranous wings.

The words spoken by Acracio next evening, after an eager day's journey, in the Central Square, were rapidly made known to the whole world. There was general stupefaction. Then came a joyous reaction. Nothing had as yet changed, or, to be more exact, no very deep modification could be noticed in the life of individuals or of the community, steadied by the inertia of centuries; but souls expanded, intoxicated with happiness at the hope of perfection and good fortune. The newspapers published long articles in which they tried to sketch the panorama of the life of a future without evil.

Prominent persons, and even the modest representatives of professions and offices, were interviewed. One day, in response to a suggestion, the world was decorated with banners and posters and paper garlands. There were solemn processions and thanksgiving services in all the temples of all the earth. Pilgrims from the four points of the compass visited the hermit's hut. It was agreed to call all men "brothers," instead of the formulae dictated by pride or by courtesy. There was a general and disturbing upheaval. Leading Socialists announced flamboyantly in their newspapers that Satan's action implied the triumph of financial equality, and therefore, although they had been accustomed to treat the Devil with contempt, they found no difficulty in praising his conduct in this signal step, and in admitting that without such an unexpected support human brotherhood would have remained for many centuries only a torturing hope.

PART II

I

Thanks to which, the reader can peep into the coffers of Theophilus Alp and the stomach of Truffe

On a spring day five years later, when the odd dozen workmen still employed at the *foie gras* factory arrived in the morning, they found Florio Olivan sitting on a stone bench in the courtyard. With him were the faithful and gloomy Marco and a kind of collapsed wine-sack, very different from the Alberto Truffe of former days. The workmen took off their caps respectfully, and stood in front of the master in a timid and anxious group.

"My friends," he said, "the end has come; the factory has to shut down. For a long time we haven't received a single order. We were able to sell about half our output a year ago when *foie gras* was recommended for scalds. But it seems to be a failure even for external use, and you know that nobody eats it. Out of regard for you, our oldest hands, I kept you on as long as I could, But I cannot any longer; I am ruined. The collapse of the Savings Bank, of which I heard only last night, has put the finishing touch to my business. I wished to give you this bad news myself so that you might see how sorry I am about it. Most of you used to work under my father—you are like brothers to me."

Sorrow choked his voice. The workmen stood still, restlessly turning their caps in their hands. One of the oldest of them asked in a low voice, almost as if he were speaking to himself:

"What is to become of us? There is no work to be had anywhere. The countryside is full of poor devils ready to work for nothing but bread enough to keep them from starving."

But no one replied to his words. Florio wished to end the painful scene, and rising up said:

"Good-bye, my friends."

"Mr. Olivan. . . ."

The old man came forward to him, holding out his hand. Florio wrung it. He was pale. The unhappy workmen moved off between the sheds, in silence. When they were at a distance some of them turned to look at the factory, and to talk over the shock they had received.

Massipo rattled his bunch of keys and Florio broke off his reflections.

"Let us go," he said.

The three, all silent, passed between the worksheds and the dispatch room, taking a look round before the final closing. In front of the coops, Florio asked:

"How many ducks are left?"

Marco said contemptuously:

"There is only one left."

"Set it free."

Massipo went in and came out with the tortured creature. Its long stay in darkness, forced feeding, and its cramped position in the narrow wire cage, had turned the miserable bird into a swollen and suffering globe of feathers. It could not stand on its legs, and fell over with a quack. Truffe's face with its pendulous cheeks showed a deep pity.

"Poor thing," he said, "it's liver must be the size of a child's head."

The three men looked meditatively at the sick bird. Truffe remarked:

"You know, Florio, when we still had Sin, all our thoughts were twisted. Five years ago you would have been proud at having put this little creature into the state in which we see it, and I would have thought greedily about eating its inside. Now I can't think without pity of the torture which the innocent, blind, and deformed little wretch has had to bear. Have you ever thought over the unnatural trade to which you had devoted your life? Better not, or your conscience would keep you from sleeping. Certainly gluttony blinded us so that we considered quite natural, thoroughly respectable, and lawful, the cruelties we inflicted on so many little animals. How many lobsters have I cooked alive over a slow fire? How many ducks have I kept in confinement, pushing balls of food down their throats with my fingers? Did I worry over the shrinking of oysters when I popped them alive into mustard sauce? It all seemed as right to me as to eat my vegetable soup today. Certainly it was wicked, but my stomach kept my heart quiet about it. What are you going to do with the duck?"

"I don't know?"

"Give it to me. I'll take it to the humanitarian farm of Crombo, our former treasurer of *The Seven Fat Kine*. It was he who awakened my remorse. He has turned vegetarian, and is devoting his life to redressing, so

far as he can, the wrong he has done. He has turned his old park into a home for animals; those whose succulence used to tempt him most now live in safety under his care. He no longer is capable of robbing a hen of a single egg. When he sees this duck, he'll weep. I am sure of that."

Massipo undertook to place the duck in the friendly hands of the old glutton, and went into the house to ask Adriana if she would care to go with them to the city. The young woman came out at once. She wore a grey dress, a kind of tunic, and her hair was carelessly bound with a black ribbon. Wide stout sandals protected her feet. Her skin was tanned by the sun and rough from the country air, and it was long since she had touched her complexion with powder. Perhaps that was why her fine eyes looked smaller and less sparkling.

"Adriana, we must hurry," exclaimed Florio. "It is late already and I must see Alp before the Bank closes."

They set off for the city, on foot in the dusty road.

Five years ago, as they passed along, Truffe would have rejoiced at the sight of the wide-spreading fields. In these past times the fertile plain, well watered by streams from the mountains, would have been a vast carpet chequered with every tint of green. Great centres of consumption were near, transport was convenient and rapid, so that production was encouraged. Cultivation was skilled, the land yielded its utmost, and the rural population was prosperous and almost rich. Every property was tended and guarded as carefully as if it were a garden. Under the scientific horticulture of the district, fruits were produced so improved in quality, abundance, and size, and so different from the wild products of Nature, that it seemed as if man, having mastered the secret of life, had recreated them to serve his own purposes. The vines yielding the best vintages of the country extended to the slopes of the most distant hills, where in autumn they glowed with a fiery purple, rich as the face of a wine-bibber, in a Bacchic harmony of colour and purpose.

But it had ceased to be a laughing plain. Fine cultivation had vanished and everything gave the impression of tillage abandoned to the careless production of Nature. There were wide potato-fields, whitened only by their own simple blossoms; there was the monotonous green of wheat in great square fields between which the thin petals of poppies fluttered like scarlet butterflies; there were dull vegetables. And there were also stretches of waste, uncultivated ground where the soil was turning to dust, and where nettles and brambles and weeds were spreading. More than two-thirds of the

vines had been torn up to be used as firewood in the last hard winter, or had shot out straggling, unpruned branches, no one having bothered to train them. Not even the warm enchantment which spring cast over the whole valley could disguise the decay and poverty of the properties, formerly so prosperous. Anyone who compared the old splendour with the present squalor must have explained the change either by some sudden fatigue of the earth itself, or by a saddened disinclination of men.

As the sight was not new to the three wayfarers, the few words they spoke were about very different matters. All Truffe's fortune and Olivan's investments were in the Bank directed by Alp, and, the evening before, an alarming report had reached the two friends that the organiser of the Savings Bank had failed. Olivan's anxiety was great. The fat man thought that something might yet be saved.

When they reached the city the clocks were striking one. Adriana, who was walking between the two men without any sign of being tired, whispered into Florio's ear, faintly blushing.

"Yes," he agreed, "perhaps we'll find some place here."

He looked about him. A few paces off, on the pavement in front of them there was to be seen the building occupied by *The Golden Grill*. When he recognised it, Florio indicated it to her with a glance.

"Go in," he said, "we'll join you later."

The young woman hurried and entered the restaurant by a door on the right with the sign, "Ladies' Entrance."

"She is hungry," Olivan explained, when his sweetheart had disappeared, "and we might have a bite ourselves. The Bank must be closed by now, and our visit will have to wait until the afternoon."

They too crossed the street. *The Golden Grill* was no longer the luxurious place of other times, with waxed floors, sumptuous rooms with orchestras constantly playing behind banks of exotic flowers. There had disappeared from the outside the signs and bills-of-fare to tempt the appetite of the passerby. Three words only, in black letters, appeared over the door, "Under-Ministry of Vitamins." Nothing more. Light but untransparent curtains stretched across the large windows, guarding impenetrably the mysteries of the interior. The capacious halls had been divided by screens and partitions of unpainted deal into narrow compartments. The tables were of iron and marble, the seats were rush chairs, or benches which age had made even more uncomfortable.

A head waiter, depressed and dirty, with a filthy beard, received the two friends.

"We are quite full," he said, "and unless the gentlemen are willing to take their nutriment together, they will have to wait."

"We'll take our nourishment together," replied Florio, "we are old friends."

The head waiter bowed and showed them into one of the hutches, bringing another chair. Truffe read the bill-of-fare and chose raw tomatoes, cabbage and potatoes, fruit and bread. Florio asked for a slice of meat in addition. Between mouthfuls and after a deep sigh, Truffe commented:

"There is no doubt, my friend, that life has lost one of its greatest pleasures. In our enlightenment we see that every civilised person used to practise the vice of gluttony, from the magnate who flavoured liver with truffles, to the working man who took his four pints with roast kid on Sundays in the country. It might be said that gluttony was one of the most important factors of civilisation. Gluttony led to the improvement of agriculture, to an increase in the quality and quantity of the fruit-harvest, and to the labours of the aviculturalist and the breeder in making fowl and flesh more succulent. Thousands and thousands of industries came into existence and flourished because the human stomach and palate were vicious, and the same vice made large districts wealthy, because their wine was good, their asparagus tender, their poultry famous, or the oysters from their shores plentiful. Cookery was a profound science and a difficult art. Some dishes required the hand of an architect to shape them, and they had to have the beauty and the colours of a fine picture. Yes, it was an Art, Florio, an Art tuned to the palate as music is tuned to the ear. And now many, who like you gained their livelihood in the service of gluttony, are in misery. A month ago I saw the owner of the greatest wholesale importing house for York hams; now he is engaged in buying old dentures on behalf of a Company which extracts the gold from their settings. But that is a very unimportant side of the change we are enduring. Gluttony had come to hide the true nature of the act of eating; the accessory and unnecessary were more attractive than the thing itself, and under the grateful conception of the 'pleasures of the table,' our brutal subjection to the need of nutrition was hidden. Now that the gloss Sin brought to us has been removed, we are left with the bare necessity, tyrannical and brutal. To eat, for the human race to-day, is only this, to satisfy an imperious natural need, and as things are, it is impossible to have joy at the table. We human beings are ashamed of all our natural necessities. The act of eating has become purely physiological, and it revolts us, as it is

an expression of our weakness; it has become a mere animal function and we eat like animals, who may combine to capture their prey but separate to devour it. Beasts have never celebrated a banquet or known the joy of providing good fare for others. They have hunger, but not gluttony. Since we have lost the old Sin, we have gained a new sense of shame—the shame of eating.

"No woman would dare to bite the breast of a chicken or a piece of bread in our presence; we retreat to single rooms to swallow our ration with no more pleasure than we used to take in shaving. We are retracing the path of civilisation. Many years ago I read in the *Bulletin of the Paris Society of Anthropology* a memoir by Haan, in which he described the horror and disgust displayed by many savage tribes when a man ate in public or in the presence of his family."

"I didn't know that precedent. But we can experience that sense of shame now, as we realise that to see a man move his jaws to chew up food is a sight neither interesting nor pretty."

"No, it isn't pretty; but a meal used to be a festivity; and all the same they used to work their jaws just as we do now. The feeling that all our companions were sharing our pleasure, so far from lessening it, made us all happier. When dessert was reached the women were prettier and the men cleverer. Gluttony was a sin; there is no doubt about that; but in a way it made us better, and existence was brighter after an abundant and choice meal. It was the hour for reconciliations, forgiveness, and gifts, and the time when the hearts of women were most open."

Truffe sighed again.

"Now I am only a poor, sad creature, dear Florio, I look on the world and on people in quite a different way, and often when night comes I weep without knowing why. Many men who ate badly were poets of genius, but none of them reached the gift of joy, Florio; they wept melodiously, that was all they did."

The meal over, they went out. Adriana was waiting for them at the door of the dining-rooms reserved for women, and they walked together to the offices of the Savings Bank.

A crowd was waiting in front of the building, and on seeing it Olivan realised at once that last night's report of the failure was correct.

"I am afraid everything is lost," he complained.

They made their way through the crowd without difficulty. Brooding men with a strange expression neither of grief nor despair, but rather of indifference and weariness; women badly dressed, their hair disordered, who had been sitting on the steps or on the edge of the pavement, moved aside to let them pass. Leaning against the door, Andres, Alp's secretary, with his hands in his pockets, was whistling softly with a satisfied air as if the catastrophe had not touched him.

"Can the Director see us?" asked Florio.

"I think not," replied the young man, without changing his attitude; "he is in his office; but in a quarter of an hour he will have to talk with those who are waiting."

"Who are they?"

"Depositors of the Savings Bank which is in liquidation. He has summoned them to give them back their money. These are the only visitors. Everything else is finished."

He winked and smiled.

"Everything is finished. I also shall get back my money."

He added, interrupting himself:

"Can you wait? The director has very little to say to the gentlemen now with him."

He went off to bring a chair for Adriana and resumed his old posture, without ceasing to smile and wink cheerfully.

"Have you come to seek your money?"

"We have come to speak to Alp."

"All right, all right. . . . I don't wish to be inquisitive. But we have advised everyone to take away their money. Mr. Alp has written them a touching circular. There remain about a thousand depositors who have not yet applied; perhaps they don't want it. He has urged them to come and there they are. Actually none of them owns more than a few pounds. I am the largest creditor of the Bank; up to now I haven't drawn my money out of respect to it."

"Where are you going to deposit it?"

Andres began to laugh as if the question were amusing.

“Where am I going to place it? You needn’t worry about that. I have worked it all out. My wife and I have often talked it over. I intend to spend it up to the last farthing. That is what I’ll do with my savings. Now I see the error of my ways like very many others who have been living in Sin, and the only thing that worries me is that I can’t make up for lost time. I stored up money for my old age as if I were sure of living, and couldn’t see that I was throwing away the present for an uncertain future. If you understand the matter rightly, my prudence was only a secret Avarice. Anxiety about feebleness that might possibly come later on should not really be strong enough to make us sacrifice the pleasures of youth. It is certainly a problem. But the prudence of saving is only a mask for the sinful pleasure of Avarice, which has always found an excuse and a temptation in provident pity for the weakness of old age. But now, fortunately, we have been set free from that Sin. I shall never save again.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll tell you. Something that we would have thought foolish—almost a crime—the worst kind of waste. How my wife and I have laughed over our plan! What do you think we are going to do when we have drawn our money? We are going to Salvot to take the mineral waters.”

“Are you ill?”

Young Andres burst out laughing.

“No,” he said when he could speak again, “we are not ill. That is the joke. And, all the same, you don’t really believe that if we were ill, the waters would do us any good? No, my wife and I were never caught by that bait, and there was no extravagance that could have caused us more pain than to pay money for water bottled as if it were wine. Throwing away money, nothing else! So now we are saying that it would be a splendid penance to spend the fruits of our Avarice on water. We are starting early next month. At Salvot they are said to take the patients to the springs in carriages if walking tires them. My wife wishes to go in a carriage every day. That is a notion she has had ever since I assured her that in her old age she would have a bath-chair. Very good; now she will have a carriage. We know everything we shall have to do; drink the water, let the water settle; look at the scenery; drink. When I tell Juana, ‘Now you have a sovereign’s worth of water inside you,’ I am sure she won’t be able to hear it, without twisting herself with laughing. No, nothing more amusing could happen to anyone!”

“And afterwards?”

“What. . . afterwards? I am young; I used to work for a man who was sickly, bitter, and disillusioned, but that man no longer exists; now I shall work better for a man who is young and strong and understands the happiness of merely being alive; I don’t know where he will be to-morrow, but I know that he is here before you in body and soul.”

He was going to say something more when a bell sounded.

“The Director is calling me. Please pass into the hall. I am going to summon the people who are outside.”

He took them to the hall in which the general meetings used to be held, and then went to open the large doors for the public. The crowd came in quietly without jostling or quarrelling, silent and docile. The sound of their footsteps had hardly died down, when a red curtain was drawn, uncovering the chairman’s table, and the Director of the Savings Bank appeared. After a slight bow, he fixed his glasses, coughed, waited until the answering coughs were stilled and spoke in a firm voice:

“Gentlemen, in a few minutes there will come to an end between us the relations of administrator and administrated which have united us so satisfactorily, and it is my wish to give you an affectionate farewell. The Savings Bank is about to disappear. There are no longer savings banks in the world. The sins which fermented in us clouded our understanding to the extent of making us think that we were carrying out a task of merit, when, in fact, we were serving the Devil. Without realising it, I myself was one of his most diligent agents. With my circulars and my speeches I led into Avarice hundreds of men who came to be clients of the Bank, and more than once I denounced savages publicly because they knew nothing about saving. I retract. Now I know that riches create a thirst and leave it unsatisfied, and that, as St. Paul said, ‘We brought nothing into this world, and we shall take nothing out of it.’ He loses his life who devotes it to laying up treasure, and gold affects with its own coldness the hearts of those who love it. It is a striking fact, gentlemen, that Saving is the most perverse child of Avarice because it is a direct and crude offence to God. Saving, in short, is distrust, and distrust alone inspires it. The man who sees how God feeds his sparrows and yet allows himself to doubt His pity, fearing to find himself unprovided for, commits the sin of saving. The man who saves is without faith. We have been told that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, and that we ought to regard every day as if it were our last day, and yet instead of that we have given ourselves up to making provision for distant old age. Lest your resolution should weaken or some accident deprive you of the money to supply your wants, you have brought your money here to be kept securely.

You have had more confidence in our combination locks than in the Divine mercy. Let us rejoice at having recognised our error. Go and take that which belongs to you, and spend it in wise pleasure or in satisfying your daily wants. When the last of you passes out, the doors of the Savings Bank will be closed never to reopen. And now. . . forgive a man who has incited you to Sin without knowing what he was doing. Go with God."

The excellent Alp, quite upset, wiped his eyes. Young Andres called out pleasantly to the depositors to direct them towards the counters where other employees awaited them. Then Florio went up to the Director and aroused him from his absorbed melancholy by putting his hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, my dear friend," cried Alp, "You are here? Have you seen? It is the end of everything!"

"And my money, Alp?"

The financier sunk his white head still lower between his narrow shoulders.

"Everything is lost, Olivan. Our House yesterday had to declare bankruptcy. We could not help it. More than a hundred men have come to ask me the same question as you in the last few days, 'And my money?' But what can I say? Does anyone know where the money of anyone is to-day and what it is worth? The most substantial businesses have melted away as quickly as a lump of sugar in a glass of water; the industrial crisis which has spread through the world has brought down the most powerful banks. I seem to hear these houses crashing down on their cellars. Even the establishments supported by State aid are hardly doing anything; their operations are minute. What is going to happen after this universal collapse? No one knows and it seems as if no one cared."

"I care; it is ruin for me."

"Yours is a special case; people like you who have lost everything usually complain; they are preoccupied by an acute difficulty. But I have seen here in this office immensely wealthy men who only said 'We must be resigned', when they heard that their fortune had been reduced to a twentieth part. I think you know David, the multi-millionaire. When they told him that his automobile works had been closed down, he was with me. The failure meant for him the turning of two million pounds into smoke. It was the third business of his which had collapsed in the year. He gave me the telegram to read. 'Here is another of the strange features of our times,' he said to me, 'No one is using motor cars now,' and he calmly lighted a cigar. I could not

help telling him, ‘Never have I seen a man pass from wealth to poverty more calmly than you.’ ‘I am as rich now as I was before,’ he replied. ‘I know your situation exactly,’ I said, ‘and if you have more than fifty thousand pounds left, I have never understood business affairs.’ ‘That is the figure,’ he confessed, ‘but I don’t need even that amount to continue my usual life. You know very well that I’ve never spent more than the twentieth part of my income. Money I used only to make money. Another million didn’t bring me another dish, or jewel, or pretty girl; it was a figure that produced hermaphroditically another little figure every year. There is a limit to the well-being, to the pleasures of a rich man, but there is no limit to his Avarice. Do you think that I had any interest in motor cars? I never drove a car myself, and I know nothing about their machinery. It was the profit from manufacturing them which interested me. I used to regard myself quite honestly as a business man; but that was merely a phrase, as I know quite well now, to cover up a form of Avarice. The type of miser who heaped up golden coins has long disappeared. Money is no longer made of gold; but even if it were, there would not be enough in the world to sate the thirst of a miser of to-day. Avarice had become more subtle, more intellectual; like love it employed a fetish. Our fetish consisted of figures. We did not gloat over heaps of metal or over dirty bank notes; we did something cleaner, and equally voluptuous; we kept accounts. When I could write six zeros to the right of a figure to state my wealth, I had greater happiness, infinitely greater happiness than Shylock’s when his claw-like black nails clutched his gold in the way in which mummified painters used to draw him. Zeros to the right of another figure. . . these are the miser’s money to-day, circular like coins, but more beautiful, more bewitching, more disturbing, more powerful. And in each one of them the business man sees a different colour and sparkle, and they ring to a different note. The last zeros are common copper; from the fourth to the sixth, silver; from the sixth to the eighth, gold. The first zero of the billion, my friend, of what marvellous substance is it made? Do you know? No, no one who hasn’t reached the point of being able to write his fortune in these figures can know. In the Arabian story of the four-leaved clover, three leaves were of different metals; the fourth, of diamonds, was to be found only in Paradise. So also the miraculous zero of the billion. To be able to write it, after the most scrupulous count, was the highest felicity attainable. Was; but no longer is. Avarice has disappeared from amongst mankind. My fortune was in figures; it was figures; what I required for my needs formerly as now is little; what I still own is enough. I am as rich as ever.’

“So the wealthy David spoke to me, my friends, and although a few years ago the roof of my head would have been raised when I heard of such ruin, now I could bear it with his own stoicism.”

“Listen, Alp. David’s name reminds me that I had a number of shares in the Lawel Stabilisers. If I were to sell them?. . .”

“If you were to give them away, it would be difficult to find anyone to accept such useless scrip. They have not yet finished building the workshops, and I don’t think they will ever be finished.

“At the last meeting when we tried to call up part of the capital subscribed in order to continue the construction, no one would pay a cent. I can assure you that it was worth listening to these gentry. Old Stup raised his voice to say that he had never had any intention of flying as that did not interest him, and that he wished to hear no more of the business. His initial subscription and enthusiasm were for the chance of making fifty per cent; but now that he was free from sinful Avarice he could conceive of no reason which could persuade him to support the scheme. He hardly ever leaves his house; he walks only in his own garden, he has no friends outside the town. What was the sense of his going even into the fastest and safest of aeroplanes? No, the stabilisers had no interest for him; they could leave him out of count. And off he went. The rest of them said that old Stup had stated their own views exactly, and we got only a couple of sovereigns.”

“And science?”

“Not a single shareholder was a man of science; they were all business men.”

“But progress? dear Alp.”

“Progress, my friend, has not feet and cannot walk by itself. The most useful invention is no more than a curiosity whilst it remains in the laboratory, and if it gets into books it is no more than a theory. To make it really beneficial it must be industrialised. Capitalists come on the scene, eager to gain more money, they supply wheels of gold and push the invention; progress is not progress except in that way; thus it advances and spreads. Thus was it with the telephone, with printing, with electricity, and with aviation.”

“Everything isn’t like that, Alp. The kind of people you mix with give you these ideas; but there are people who work for the good of others without being driven by Avarice. I shall find some of them to carry out the scheme.”

“Go and try it.”

They left him. Florio stood still in the street, crushed by realising his situation.

“And now?” asked Truffe timidly.

“I don’t know what to do,” said the young man; “I never dreamed of such a disaster coming.”

“You won’t do anything, Florio,” said the young woman bitterly. “You have always been timid. You will be terrified at facing life just as other things terrified you. You go on believing that you have a sensitive mind; but I know quite well that it is only cowardice, and nothing but cowardice.”

II

In which Olivan refused a throne, and contented himself with a post

Since he had come to the capital, Florio went every morning to the park to brood in despair and wearisome idleness. He was accustomed to country life, and sometimes he had to leave the dirty and noisy streets and stroll along the gravel paths between the beds of flowers and the poplars of the public pleasure ground. Their smiling elegance was as pleasant as in the times of Temptation, but the visitors were different. The wide asphalt drives were no longer crowded with shining motors, on whose soft seats idlers lolled, delighted to go quickly from anywhere to anywhere, paradoxically slaves to speed, like the dwarf kings in fairy tales who had their trains carried by gigantic grooms. People no longer sought the pleasure of looking at each other; the dress of a pretty woman was not discussed, and no flirt assembled a group of admirers on the lawns or on the flowery terraces of the tea pavilions. Every face wore an expression of preoccupation or discontent. Ragged beggars warmed themselves in the sun, lying on the soft grass, or pestered the passerby with monotonous requests for charity. Never had beggars been so numerous in the kingdom; they straggled across the village streets and blackened the avenues of the city, sordid, shaggy, with a bovine resignation in their looks, but clinging as tenaciously as parasites and with the parasitic capacity for reproduction. As factory after factory closed its doors, it sent hundreds, thousands, of families into beggary. At first there was stupefaction over their bad luck; next, an eager but fruitless quest for other work; at last, as hunger and wretchedness turned the screw a little more every day, the torture became unbearable, and men, women, and children slunk out of their lurking-places and with outstretched hands, whined for alms. All over the world, millions and millions of beings had given up any hope of food except from charity. There seemed to be no remedy for the increasing evil. The feeling which in the darkest periods of the Middle Ages conferred almost a halo of superiority on every beggar, awoke in the public conscience a mixture of respect, fear, and the superstitious Christian esteem for poverty. What civilisation had condemned and tried to extirpate, revived in the charter the times of misery bestowed on the miserable.

One morning Florio sat down to rest on a bench near the great lake. On his left were the many-shaped booths and tents of the fair, like a little city

still asleep. It was surrounded by trees, and it might have been an enchanted dream in which a sudden spell had stilled the little horses of the roundabout in their last fantastic postures, and arrested the dolls of the organ—a shepherdess, a lady, a conductor, baton in his up-raised hand, frozen like his music. Only a flag fluttered from the top of a painted canvas dome like a bird caught by a wing.

A hunchbacked dwarf, lurking in front of his "Pim-pam-pum," like a spider in its web, a few paces from Florio, bowed to the seated gentleman.

"Will the kind gentleman throw a few balls at my dolls? An hour's exercise for two shillings."

Florio did not answer.

"Good prizes," went on the little man; "splendid exercise and very amusing."

He subsided bitterly when continued deep silence followed his offer, and slowly came across to sit down beside Olivan.

"Will the kind gentleman give a copper to the poor hunchback? Excuse me, sir, but I am hungry."

Florio looked at the sad old face, battered by the blows of life, as the dolls were battered by being struck with the wooden balls. He complied with the request.

"It seems that trade is rather bad," he suggested.

"Trade?" replied the poor man. "There hasn't been any trade for five years. Why? Five years ago, a gentleman had to wait his turn if he wished to give a smack, a hard blow on the face of the policeman or the bride, which were the favourites of my 'Pim-pam-pum.' I made money; the life was easy; I didn't think I was doing any harm with a game so innocent. Very respectable gentlemen, sir, with long beards, used to have matches with their own children against my dolls. When the bride was knocked over and showed her fat white legs, or when the policeman with his big moustache and heavy eyebrows was hit, everyone laughed, again and again, in the merriest way, and my jests applauded the good hits. But all that is over. Now nobody comes to this rotting show. I keep it because I sleep in it, and a few kind souls give me a little help from time to time."

"No one comes to play?"

"No, not a soul. It is strange, isn't it? Not a single person. As if the plague were here. My friend Matt, who has the shooting-gallery on the other

side of the fair, has the same luck. Nobody, never, for five years."

"Why?"

"I don't quite know. I have been told. . . . Once a gentleman was sitting on this seat, just like you, and we talked. He tried to explain to me. It seems that 'Pim-pam-pum' is an invention born of human Anger. 'What is the fun of it,' he said, 'except what comes from human wickedness? If you were to set up meaningless blocks instead of dolls, nobody would wish to throw your balls against them. They are stoning the policeman in effigy; they are stoning another man's wife in effigy; in fact, they are stoning human beings represented by your figures. It was a release for Anger without any risk or any punishment. Did you not notice how the eyes of your customers gleamed as they selected their victim? Did you not stop to pay attention to their rage, to their cruel grin, to the eagerness with which they tried to kill by proxy your proxy human beings? You lived by wrath, by human fury, although neither you nor your customers suspected it; and now, now that Sin has been abolished, no one wishes to calm his angry passions by this sport.' That is what he said to me, and I suppose it is true. Anyway, I can't find another explanation."

Olivan grumbled:

"Everything is upside-down in the world."

"Yes," groaned the hunchback, "everything is upside-down."

And taking the alms Florio had given him, he sat down again beside his booth, motionless and grotesque, like his own mannikins.

Florio kept in the train of thought in which the words of the hunchback had left him. He reflected on many other strange results of the disappearance of Sin. Affairs that no one could have thought to have been rooted in vice, or indeed to have had any relations with it, had collapsed like buildings without cement; actions formerly esteemed even by the most virtuous, had ceased among men, although often it was impossible to trace their relations with Evil which was subterranean and widespread, and buried under conventions accumulated and codified by the approval of hundreds and thousands of generations. This had happened with most of the public spectacles. Closed were the circuses to which people had gone to take their pleasure in the risks of the lion-tamer, the equilibrist, or the dancing clown. But it was not so obvious why theatres had had to close, even although only the works of great geniuses were put on the stage. Of course no one cared to go to see the legs and the frills of the girls at the Folly Theatre, where they used to

present, sumptuously staged, the lightest of light operas with no other pretension than the attractions of a few dozen pretty women; but just as little emotion was raised now by any of the dramas formerly regarded as profound works of genius. Othello seemed a senseless puppet to the new vision of humanity, unexcited by violence, and so ignorant of jealousy that since the disappearance of Lust, women, young and old, matrons or virgins, could go and come at their ease, without protection and without being accosted, enjoying more liberty even than the men of former days, although they never used it in any departure from a chastity imposed and preserved without any effort, as it was never assaulted by covetous desire. Was there any more chance of understanding the behaviour of the avaricious and cruel Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*? Or the avid, revolting, obstinate love—the very spirit of carnal excitement, even if disguised and restrained by custom—of Romeo and Juliet? No, not one of the old human passions could now stir the heart, because human beings no longer saw themselves mirrored in them, but could only regard them as events in the life of beings from some other world. There was lacking what captures us in works of art; seeing one's self so marvellously and intimately reflected that we give a superstitious reverence to the artist whom we call a "creator," and humble ourselves before him in praise.

". . . You see in me what I myself did not know."

Only one spectacle had attracted public devotion increasingly—boxing. At first sight this seemed in strange contradiction to the new order. Nevertheless it was readily understood that there was no harm in boxing; for clearly enough, it was the only case in which two men could hit each other until they were knocked out, without any feeling of anger, and still having the highest regard for each other.

Florio ceased his meditations to find out the reason of a singular circumstance which he had just noticed.

On one of the benches nearest to the lake were seated two children of twelve or thirteen years of age, clad in old uniforms of the Asylum Granmont. Their legs and arms protruded from their suits more than enough to show that they had been wearing these suits an unconscionable time; but if any other indication were necessary, the number of stains and rents in the dirty cloth would have allowed the least calculating person to judge that more than four years were necessary for even a boy to get his uniform into so deplorable a state.

The two creatures, with their hands folded over their hollow bellies and staring at nothing, seemed to be taking advantage of the nutritive force which naturalists ascribe to the sun in the case of young tarantulas. One of the two children had a head so large that it would seem to be impossible for him to keep upright unless he spun round like a top. The other had to put up with a head so minute that if he could return to the asylum without it, the inspectors would be a long time before they blamed him for the loss.

The appearance of the two asylum boys was quite enough to absorb the attention of anyone who had little to do; but it was not merely their presence that made Florio abandon his reflections, and get up in his seat with his mouth open and his eyebrows raised, to see better an astonishing sight. Olivan noticed first on the wide stone border of the lake a little red fish, shining with moisture, reflecting the sun as if it were part of the surface of the water itself; the little fish writhed in quick contortions for a few seconds, and then leapt gracefully on to the sand of the garden. Once on land, it continued twisting with increasing contortions until it became covered with dust, and then moved, still writhing, straight to the bench on which the boys were sitting, climbed up the right leg of the boy with the minute head and reached his hands, without the boy giving any sign of noticing so strange an event, or abandoning his air of abstraction, but rather, on the contrary, appearing more abstracted than ever. A few minutes afterwards another little fish repeated, with the same contortions, the pilgrimage of the first, choosing, however, to climb to the knees of the large-headed boy, who caught hold of it and put it in his pocket in the calmest way.

But then Florio suspected something, and decided to investigate. He approached the bench where the pupils of Granmont appeared to be absorbed in watching the flight of the butterflies, and stood in front of them. He could see the line of which they held one end, the other, no doubt, having a hook in the water.

“Are you fishing here?” he asked.

The large-headed one looked at him with drowsy eyes, and then lightly pushed the other with his elbow.

“Pedrito,” he said, “this gentleman asks if we are fishing.”

The microcephalous boy replied without changing his position:

“The gentleman is very kind to interest himself in our affairs. Thank him, Jacobito.”

Jacobito moved the enormous globe with which his body ended.

“Thank you very much, sir.”

Then he squinted horribly and put out his tongue until its tip touched the point of his nose, which joined in, with a grotesque contortion of its own. Pedrito approved his behaviour with an affectionate glance.

“It is clear that Jacobito likes you, sir,” said Pedrito, “because he doesn’t make faces like that at everyone. In the Asylum when the other boys wish to laugh at his grimaces, it is necessary to beat him. But there is no reason for you to stay longer, sir. You have seen his best.”

“Very good,” said Olivan, “I’ll go to find a keeper.”

“Quite so; but if you are a good sport you will give us a half-hour’s start. Jacobito can’t run except uphill.”

“Why?”

“Because when he leans forward to climb, his head overbalances and he has to run not to fall. If you have practised, as you must have done, balancing a stick on your nose, you know quite well that you often have to dash forward to prevent it falling to the ground.”

“That is right, Pedrito,” joined in the other, quite pleased with the scientific turn, as he thought, the conversation was taking. “What did our grammar master tell us that it is called?”

“The law of momentum,” gravely replied the small-headed boy.

Florio could not help laughing at the impudent assurance of the ragged louts.

“I won’t tell on you,” he offered, “but you must promise to give up this amusement. It is a crime to kill these poor fish which are here to please everyone.”

“But this is not an amusement, sir.”

“What is it, then?”

“It is our dinner.”

Jacobito agreed so vehemently that it was to be feared that his head would break the thin stem of his neck.

“Your dinner?” repeated Olivan in surprise. “Do you mean to tell me that they don’t give you food at the Asylum?”

“Just so, sir. There is nothing to eat in the Asylum. First they put the great hall into the pot; next the school table; last of all we ate up the beds. All that was six months ago. Nothing eatable remains.”

Florio understood that the boy meant that they had sold the furniture to buy food, and this surprised him, because he supposed that Archibald’s munificence to the Asylum would have been continued.

“Then,” he said, “Mr. Granmont. . .”

The large head and the small head were shaken sadly. It was long since Granmont had abandoned his charity. When he stopped paying, the high officials of the Asylum tried many devices to excite his pity to a renewal of his generosity. All the inmates were taken to sing a hymn under the balconies of the magnate, conducted by the games master, who himself had six children and had drawn no salary for six months. Archibald confined himself to regaling them with lemonade. A little afterwards he was visited by a deputation of professors and nuns to whom he said that he had no intention of taking any further part in the Asylum, and he could not understand why he had ever thought of giving a home, teaching, and food, to a set of children who were of no interest to him and whose parents he didn’t know. Finally, they decided to send to him Pedrito and Jacobito—for whom he always had had a weakness, and whom he used to call the “pride of the Asylum”—to recite to him a touching and appealing poem. As the owner of the large head had an excellent memory, the recital of the strophes were entrusted to him. The poem began, “May it please you, kind sir.” Before the third verse was finished, Archibald ordered them to be taken away. Now the Asylum had no other support than the charity of a very few. Some of the children had died, others haunted the streets and the churches as bootblacks; and all eked out a living by devices such as had surprised Florio that day.

After having told their story, Pedrito said that they must be off to open and clean the six fishes they had caught, as otherwise there was a risk of their decomposing. Olivan watched them moving away, misshapen skeletons, walking with a curious stiffness forced on them by the fear of bursting through their tight clothes with any sudden movement. When they had passed out of sight, the young man continued his stroll in the park.

When he had walked less than a hundred yards along the central avenue, bordered with palms, he noticed a gentleman walking in front, close to the row of seats, dressed much more smartly than was often seen in these days. He noticed that the gentleman went up to passers-by to offer them something or to make some request, which they appeared to refuse politely.

At the end of the avenue, the gentleman, who had turned back, was about to pass Florio, when he examined him closely, stopped in front of him and politely raised his brown derby hat.

“Good day,” he said.

“Good day.”

“Would this be any use to you?” the unknown person asked.

He opened his coat and showed the young man a golden crown with a diamond cross, which he was carrying hidden under his arm. Florio looked with wonder at the unexpected object, and when he raised his eyes to the face of the offerer, saw a pointed grey beard and gentle eyes looking at him with a sorrowful anxiousness. Olivan suddenly recognised him and took off his hat.

“Your Majesty!” he was just able to stammer.

“No, don’t be on ceremony with me,” begged the speaker; “certainly I am Juan the Fourth; but it gives me no pleasure to be reminded of it. Tell me, would not this suit you?”

“Sir, I do not understand.”

“It is quite simple. Do you happen to have the qualifications of a king?”

“Qualifications of a king?”

“Enough ability to rule the people; the sensitiveness necessary to share all their needs and all their sorrows; the will to serve the people even at the cost of the greatest sacrifices; sufficient intelligence to take care not only of the passing moment, but of the years to come, of the centuries which wait their turn to be unfolded in the great roll of History?”

“Oh, sir!” exclaimed Florio, confused.

“Could you do all that?”

“No, your Majesty.”

The man with the grey beard dispiritedly nodded his head.

“Nor can I!” he almost whispered.

He took Olivan’s arm and led him along one of the side walks. The narrow forehead of the monarch wrinkled with his effort at thinking. In a moment or two he added:

“Nor can I! I have begged to be relieved very many times, but my ministers cannot find a substitute. And so I decided to hunt for one myself. Just as Haroun-al-Raschid went into the streets of Bagdad to judge of the happiness of his subjects, I am searching to see if one of mine could carry the burden of my crown. I have traversed all the streets, the cafés, the market; I have offered this diadem to men of high estate and of low. Uselessly! I am beginning to think that there is no one in the kingdom who could serve as king.”

Florio protested respectfully:

“Your Majesty is an excellent sovereign.”

“I thought that myself until five years ago. Yes, I would have died assured that I was a great monarch. The wealth and power of the nation were increasing; I was always at work; before lunch I changed my clothes twice; in the afternoon three times, and then again for the evening. The perspicacity required to decide when an admiral’s uniform is most suitable, when that of a general of artillery, when evening dress, when a ribboned hunting-jacket, exhausts the most powerful brain in twenty years. And signing! Oh! signing without cease! I was present at theatrical functions and saw more than twenty thousand foundation stones laid. And if then anyone had said that I was a bad king, I should have hurried him off to gaol; if anyone had disputed my throne, I should have hurled my troops against him, confident that I was defending the most sacred of legal rights. Besides, no doubt you have heard speak of Divine right. But you cannot know how much I felt supported by that right, protected by that grace. I believed that God in truth had conferred on me the duty of ruling over the forty million inhabitants of my States. And as God had chosen me, as He had selected me, that counted for something, did it not? Besides, my great-grandfather was king; my grandfather was king; my father was king! Could I be anything except a king? That seemed clear to me.”

“Certainly,” agreed Olivan.

Juan IV stopped to turn his sad eyes on him.

“Pride, my friend, nothing but Pride. Do you wish to know what I really am? A poor devil, a useless person.”

“Your Majesty!”

“All right; I ought not to have said that; it isn’t quite true. It is true that I do not actually rule my people and that I do not know or understand anything of the difficult complexity of their problems; but all the same I

have some special knowledge and some usefulness. I am a formidable collector of spurs, the greatest collector of spurs in the world. I was born for that, as others are born to be sociologists or economists. If I were not a king, still my collection of spurs would have given me an extraordinary reputation. I am a king, and nothing is said about my collection; in exchange History will praise me or blame me for actions which truly I have neither inspired nor known about. It is a disability attached to the vocation. Do you know about my museum?"

"I must confess. . ."

"There is nothing to touch it. I am the owner of fifteen thousand pairs of spurs, of every century and every country, of every shape and every material; of iron and of gold, of bronze, and of fish-scales; side by side are the pointed Moorish spur, the old German spur with three stars and chased buckles; small goads alongside great rowels set with long points; the blunt spurs of the Argentine horsemen, and the *vaqueras* of the Mexican cowboys, wide and beautiful; Etruscan and French; those worn by the lancers in the last war and the strange wooden spurs of the primitive Patagonians. I could talk indefinitely about swivels and cases, rowels and mountings, inlaying and fixing, and every kind of engraving. All these things I really know. If they would only leave me my collection and take away my crown! It is very hard on me to remain in this undeserved high position, raised by an accident of birth above so very many men who are abler, more prudent, better, wiser, more honest, more compassionate, and braver than, if you come to look at it, I am myself. So heavy a burden embitters my life to a pitch beyond human endurance so that, as you must see, no one can have strength to bear it, now that Pride has been removed from mankind."

"But, sir, surely there is a kind of humility in accepting one's fate?"

"Perhaps so, but only when one's fate affects no one but oneself. That isn't my case. You don't know how many and how terrible menaces threaten society. There has not been a time like this in the history of the world. It would seem as if everything were disintegrating into a common and indescribable terror, and were slipping back to primitive chaos. Poverty, hunger, disorder, the overthrow of the foundations of humanity. Horrible, horrible; I listen to my ministers, and I don't know! I don't know! In such circumstances how can I ask myself to be content with my fate? I can't help crying: 'I don't understand, I am no use, I am all to pieces; there is a mistake; I did not come into the world to rule a people; I don't know what to do; I don't know what to say; let them seek out someone else.' "

He moved his crown from under the left arm to under the right, and walked on in silence. Then he asked in a friendly tone:

"Who are you?"

Florio briefly gave information about himself and explained at length, encouraged by the attention of the illustrious listener, the difficulties brought to his life by the closing of his factory and the failure of Alp's bank.

"And what are you thinking of doing now?" asked Juan IV.

"Struggle as much as is necessary."

"Are you brave?"

"Yes."

"You seem intelligent."

"I suppose I have some good sense."

His Majesty looked at him more closely.

"Would it suit you to become my secretary?" he proposed without more ado.

"Sir, me. . ." stammered Olivan in astonishment.

"Think it over. I can't pay much; the royal income has been much reduced. The work is heavy. Don't think I am offering you a bargain. Three days ago I dismissed the man who held the post, the Marquis of the Alps. One of his great-great-grandfathers saved the life of one of my ancestors, and since then he and his descendants have enjoyed the privilege of being given the shirt which the King wears every year on the day of St. Eleutherius. They never asked for anything else, and seemed contented with their favour. But on the eighteenth of April last, when I gave him my shirt, the Marquis flushed, frowned, and said that the farce had lasted already too many centuries, and that he would like to know what I should do if he were to send me one of his socks on Pentecost Sunday. I dismissed him and I haven't seen him since. In truth, the court has changed, and I don't know of anyone who belonged to it five years ago. If you accept my offer you will see a very curious state of affairs."

"But, sir, in the court there must be many more worthy of the post than I am."

"I should like to know their names. I can tell you that very few of my nobles have enough grammar to write a letter. I admit that in other days I

could not have used the services of a maker of *foie gras* as secretary; but things are different. If it does not suit you, I shall advertise in the newspapers."

"As that is so, your Majesty, I accept with gratitude and will do my best not to give you reason for regretting it. In my circumstances a salary of £200 a month. . ."

"No! No! A hundred pounds!"

"I beg your pardon, £100 a month will free me from serious worry."

"Then we need say no more. Will you come to the palace with me?"

"With much pleasure."

"Please be so good as to carry this bauble for me; my arm is tired."

He handed him the royal crown, and the two left the park with no further talk.

III

Which contains more subjects than an epitaph could hold

The royal palace no longer displayed the profusion of guards and lackeys in brilliant finery which used to give the wide gateway of the royal domain an air of inviolability. A single porter smoked his pipe under the splendid gateway, and no one scolded him if in the hotter summer evenings he unbuttoned his coat and exposed his coloured shirt to the cool air. The complicated ceremonial of the palace life was slowly disappearing, and the twelve men in embroidered tunics who used to give loud trumpet-calls every time the sovereign entered or went out, had been replaced by a lazy gentleman, lean but lyrical, who regaled himself by playing the royal hymn on an ocarina when occasion required it.

Florio went to his duties very early and left them late; he helped the King in public business and accompanied him on almost every occasion when the royal presence was required.

Thus he came to know the most brilliant members of the court, those who still remained round the throne where they had been all their lives and who did not know where to go or what to do outside that sumptuous environment. Their old formality and arrogance had faded like the gold of their uniforms; the cessation of ceremonies had compelled them to pass the melancholy days in idleness. They lolled in unceremonial attitudes on the divans in the Hall of Tapestries, staying there hour after hour, without talking, listless, each self-absorbed.

The principal functionary, the Duke of the Atlantic Ocean, the most illustrious personage of the kingdom because of his ancient lineage, was at the pinnacle of this hill of tribulation. Seated in a splendid armchair, at the door leading into the private rooms of the monarch, he passed the long hours, sighing and groaning, although no one could extract from him the tale of his troubles. Heavy tears often moistened the collar of his coat, and when he left his corner to go away, his bows to whomsoever he met were so profound and so humble that one wished to give him alms.

One morning when Florio entered the Hall of Tapestries to attend an audience of the King, he saw the old Duke under the huge lamp of rock-crystal prisms, whispering with the fifteen or twenty nobles who still attended, and who had left their seats to listen to something which, judging

from their expressions, was very interesting. The heads of all were bowed in a grave gesture. The Count of Soimas groaned:

"It is horrible, horrible."

But when they noticed the presence of Olivan, they all became silent and retreated to their usual corners.

"A conspiracy," the former manufacturer said to himself, disturbed and looking askance at them.

He went in to the King and waited. It was almost the time when the Prime Minister brought the resolutions of the Privy Council to the King for signature and he soon arrived carrying a bulky portfolio under his arm. He was a man of forty with a high forehead, square jaws, and eyebrows separated by deep furrows of fatigue over the hooked nose and piercing eyes. He had been a manufacturer of safes, and his reputation as a man of energy and a great economist had brought him to the head of the government at a time when the old professional politicians, after a public admission of their incapacity, had retired into anonymity. Two men accompanied the Prime Minister; one was Magnus, the famous novelist, whose books had been translated into every language; the other was short, grey-faced, with his hair erect as if some force had turned each separate hair into a pop-gun. Olivan recognised him, he was Hector Azil, the famous critic whom he had met one night long ago in Adriana's dressing-room.

"Sir," said the Prime Minister, addressing the King, "I present the two new Ministers whom I propose. I hope and believe that I have made a good choice. Mr. Magnus has the reputation of being one of the best brains of the kingdom. With regard to Hector Azil, everyone knows how much the country is indebted to his writings, which have scourged the ineptitudes and corrected the mistakes of the Ministers, stimulating them to better things. It will be a pleasure to me if they please you."

The King bowed to the two gentlemen.

"I am very pleased to have your assistance," he said. "You will find out soon that I am quite ignorant of State affairs, and I wish to warn you before you discover it for yourselves. But perhaps one of you would accept the crown. . . perhaps Mr. Magnus?. . ."

"Oh!" protested the novelist.

"Perhaps then, Mr. Azil?"

“No! No!” refused the critic. “Let me stay as I am, although I think it folly for me to mix myself in the present confusion. You are more than sufficient. Why make me come into things which don’t concern me?”

“But that is just what I have been saying myself for the last five years, Mr. Azil,” said the King rather heatedly. “You must know that I am a poor sort of man, the simple father of a family, and yet—I remember now that you yourself have already described me as that.”

“I don’t think so; it would not be just.”

“No? Why not just?”

“Your Majesty,” interrupted the Prime Minister, “we have no time to lose. There are some very grave matters to be discussed. The revenue from the taxes has fallen again; more seriously than any of the reductions which have alarmed us before. The industrial level continues to fall as the water-level falls in a leaking tank. Agriculture is going back to an alarmingly primitive state. We have no funds for education or for public works; many of the railways have stopped working and the tracks are getting overgrown. Now a new misfortune has come on us; the largest factories in Negrimia have closed down. The crisis is spreading to all the metal industries. As for the National Armament Works, we cannot keep them going another day. Their uselessness is now so plain that all we spend on them is a mere State squandering. We don’t know how to increase the revenue; we must reduce expenditure. But how?”

“But how?” repeated Juan IV.

“I was at work all day yesterday studying the problem. If we were to disband the army, it would be a great temporary alleviation of our financial position.”

“Disband the army?” enquired Magnus, as if he had heard incorrectly.

“Abolish it,” explained the Prime Minister.

“And what would happen then?”

“Nothing; nothing could happen. Almost all the nations have taken that step. We have kept up our armies out of respect to our statutes and to vested interests. But in the present state of society, armed force is useless; just as useless as the safes I used to manufacture; there are no longer military ‘incidents,’ or wars, nor will there be any in the future; never again will Anger make men raise their hands. Let us disband our armies and nothing will happen except that we shall increase the numbers of the unemployed. It

will be a repetition of what happened when we suppressed the police. A deputation of veterans came to interview me on the disastrous results of their suppression. ‘And what would you have me do?’ I asked. ‘For four years you have received wages from the treasury which you did not earn. How many thieves did you capture during that time? Your marches through the mountains which used to harbour bandits, what have they been except pleasant and healthy excursions? No one robs now; no one murders; the gaols fortunately are empty; the nation has no need of you now, and I can’t pay for a luxury.’ They were convinced and accepted their fate; just like me, myself, to whom the new order of things, as to many others, has brought evil, not good. And as for the substantial economy we made in the public offices, that was still easier. Do you know what happened, Mr. Magnus?”

“I have heard something about it.”

“The most unexpected and extraordinary thing. It was not during my tenure of office, as it happened very soon after the ceasing of the Temptations. Of their own accord, not at the instigation of anyone, not even by concerted agreement, thousands and thousands of officials resigned. They all stated that conscience compelled them to abandon the duties on which they had been engaged until then, dominated by Sloth, in Sloth, and for Sloth. The public offices closed on the same day as the casinos. Do you remember? Now there are only a few dozen men at work in each department. But—I have been off the subject too long. I desire to know the opinion of your Majesty on the disbanding of the armed forces of land and sea?”

Juan IV stirred in his seat.

“Good God! And what do I know?. . . You must decide.”

“What is your opinion, Azil?”

The critic shrugged his shoulders.

“My dear Prime Minister, it must be as you think. My opinion is yours. Besides, I can say that any decision will earn my congratulations.”

Magnus gave his views with more energy. Certainly the army and the navy were superfluous organisations, already anachronisms, and their maintenance was both useless and costly. There should be no delay. And the resolution was adopted. Next it was decided that Azil and Magnus should proceed to Negrimia that very day to enquire into, and prevent, so far as was possible, the crisis which was turning the chief industrial centre of the kingdom into a graveyard of dead activities. Florio was to accompany the

Ministers as secretary. As he went out to collect some documents, he surprised the noblemen in a group round the Duke of the Atlantic Ocean, who was lifting his hands to heaven in the most pathetic moment of an harangue to which they were listening with close attention.

"Can we continue," he was saying, "to endure it?"

But he saw Olivan and cut short his peroration. He lowered his hands, crossed them on his stomach, and retired to his usual seat. The others followed his example.

"Aha," muttered Florio, "either all the novels I have read are lies, or here is a plot being hatched against the King."

He hurried back to rejoin the new Ministers, who at once went to the carriage which was waiting for them in front of the Palace, and the party started for Negrimia.

"In fact," said Olivan, without being able to conceal a smile at Azil's state of confusion, "in fact, my dear sir, if all that is happening now had been described by Mr. Magnus in one of his novels, in one of the forecasts in which writers of genius indulge, no one would have believed it to be possible. If it were seen that a king selected as secretary an unknown man whom he had met in a public park and had offered him his crown! And how could it have been supposed that to get candidates for ministerial office it would have been necessary to drag out of their houses people who had never dreamed of such a thing happening? Your reluctant bad humour, gentlemen, is a new thing in political life."

Magnus replied:

"I don't think that what has happened is at all extraordinary. I don't like it, but it does not surprise me. It is a natural consequence of what the Devil caused when he granted the hermit's request. Nothing but unmeasured Pride could have inspired our statesmen with the conviction that they possessed a superiority in fact so unfounded and so absurd that it became ridiculous as soon as the magnifying-glasses of Pride had been broken. And these glasses were interposed not only between themselves and the people, but between themselves and their own souls. I have never ridiculed the mania the King has of offering his crown. The same reasons which cause him to make the offer, hinder others from accepting it, and if anyone were to accept that symbol from him, he would have to be an exceptional person thinking himself able to exercise sovereignty over the nation in all the wide and innumerable duties of a monarch. I don't believe that such a man exists. You

accepted the post of secretary, not from vanity, but because you believed you had sufficient ability."

"And because I needed the salary."

"Of course. As for me, the belief that good sense is as useful in a Minister as anything else, and a horror of idleness have led me to undertake the duty. But on the slightest suspicion of failure I'll give it up."

"Aren't you writing?"

"I am not writing, for the same reason that makes Juan IV wish not to be king. Surprisingly, the same vice bound both of us, the same things influenced both of us. Do you know any human claim more rooted in Pride than the claim to be an artist? I wished to be like a god, creating men and women, lives and struggles. I was consumed with a love of being esteemed, honoured, and praised, and that gives a good definition of Pride. Dante called it the pretension of surpassing others. Tell me, do you know any artist who has not harboured in his brain and his heart this grasping Sin? It could be said almost that without that Sin there would be no sufficient urge to create. I don't write novels now, and I don't know of anyone who devotes himself to that proud craft. I hope that our friend, Mr. Azil, who so often used to castigate my defects as a writer, is pleased with my present inactivity."

Azil protested:

"Why do you say that, my dear Magnus? I have always considered you a great novelist."

"I don't want to reproach you in the slightest way, my friend; all that is over, and self-esteem, the first-born of Pride, has left the world with his mother. But no one criticised me with such passion as you did."

"A moment ago, Magnus, you confessed to us your former sin of Pride. Why should I not admit that I gave way, against my will, to Envy? I never was able to create, much as I coveted the power. The triumphs of others brought to me not satisfaction, but displeasure. My attitude to them was hostility, a basal and almost unconscious hostility which I confused with honourable examination; I sought out all the chinks in their armour to slip in the cold blade of my criticism; I turned round everything in my hands, seeking its weak side, its vulnerable point. There is no human achievement upon which some imperfection has not fallen, like the leaf on Siegfried's shoulder when he bathed in the blood of the dragon. It was there I planted the dart of my satire. I understand now that I was trying to bring others

down below my own level, to console myself for my own incapacity. But tell me, Magnus, truthfully—didn't you get any benefit from my bilious diatribes?"

The novelist appeared to reflect.

"Yes," he said, after a pause, "and it isn't the first time that I have thought so. Yes; the injustice of your attacks annoyed me, but compelled me to seek out new resources for my art, and stimulated my longing for perfection. I believe if your bitter and discordant voice had not mingled with the chorus of praise, I might have fallen asleep in satisfied vanity and come to believe that I was a genius, even when I was filling up the counterfoils in my cheque-book. Do you remember *The Herons*? It is my best book. My having written it is due to you. I thought it out and composed it in a spirit of desperate revenge, because you had accused me of being no more than a reporter devoid of imagination.

"I knew it, Magnus, and yours was not the only good work due to my envious onslaughts. I exercised a beneficial influence on the lives and thoughts of many. Certainly that was not my intention; but it happened all the same. Several governors, stung by my envenomed darts, corrected their mistakes, increased their knowledge, avoided error, and forced themselves to be better men, more just, more sympathetic, when they saw the malevolent portraits of themselves in my bitter articles. My complaints reproved the ambitious. Envy often became a sentinel at the gates of the Good. A more exact metaphor would be that Envy, in the hands of Good, was often the whip lashing other sins."

"I believe you are right, Azil; there were many strange paradoxes in the life of those days. Now. . . I should like to understand better. . . now. . ."

"Now," repeated the critic, shrugging his shoulders, "does anyone know whither mankind is going?"

They fell into a moody silence. They were now passing across the reddened and arid plain over which the manufacturing town reared itself. When they entered the dirty and ugly streets of Negrimia they were overcome by all that met their eyes. A ragged crowd, having heard of the visit of the Ministers, spread out to display their hungry faces and skeleton-like bodies. Men on whose pale cheeks the hair was like a harsh thick growth of moss on ruins; half-naked women, whose emaciation was made more visible by the stains of coal-dust on their flabby skins; eyes glinting with a sad light under eyelids reddened by the dimness of the furnace rooms or by the darkness of the deep galleries of the lamp-lit mines. A vapour of

sweat, of sickness, of a human crowd, pervaded the precincts. And besides the pain of that wide and unrelieved spectacle, repeated in every street of the town, there was the further horror of the silence of Negrimia; a silence as impressive as the former perpetual clamour of hammers, rollers, cranes, pulleys; of metal hammered, cut, flattened, moulded in tireless machinery; of the roars from the smelting-retorts, the hissing of water on the glowing clinker, the hoarse voices of the lathes, the resounding clamour of thousands and thousands of wheels revolving unceasingly, of the sirens calling men to work, of the orders of the foremen directing the mathematically exact work in the shops. The unceasing hurly-burly had become silent, and the silence oppressed the mind with the kind of shock received by mid-Atlantic passengers when the engines of a steamship suddenly stop.

The manager and the technical staff of the works were awaiting the directors in the offices of the Smelting Works. A deputation of the workers was present at the meeting. Magnus asked them to explain in detail the causes and the extent of the crisis which had paralysed the most important manufactories of the kingdom. Among the men met to discuss the grave event—scientists, such as Sike and Noke, inventors such as Lawel, financial experts like Granmont—silence, complete and disturbing, reigned. They looked at each other, as if trying to discern from the faces of their fellows, what spokesman could best describe the dolorous gravity of the position. In the end it was Archibald Granmont who raised his perturbed voice.

For some time the factories had dragged out a precarious existence. There was almost no market. Certainly the cause was not to be looked for in Negrimia. Negrimia was only a very sensitive index of the industrial decay of the whole country. For example, the great manufactory of artistic crystal flasks in which the perfumes of the kingdom had been marketed, had closed its doors because there was no more demand for scents. In the same way the continuous decrease in manufacture had reduced the work of the machine-shops, and this reduction reacted on metallurgy, and the whole chain of events affected the mining industry. At first it was decided to dismiss some of the hands; the staff had been reduced to a minimum. Next wages were cut. Now a new reduction of wages and of hands was necessary, and the men objected to it.

“To what do you attribute the industrial decay?” asked Magnus.

Granmont, with his head sunk in his shoulders, sighed:

“Who knows?”

"It is a very complex phenomenon," put in Lawel, "but the chief cause is the disappearance of Sloth."

"Sir," reproached the novelist, "this hardly seems the moment for paradoxes."

"If you will allow me to explain what I said, I shall convince you. Idleness was the primitive condition of mankind, and underneath the nostalgia we feel for Paradise, there lies a deeper nostalgia for idleness. When the sun was larger and radiated a greater heat, the earth enjoyed perpetual summer and there was no struggle for existence. But the state of the world changed. The angel with the flaming sword put Adam and Eve into the darkness of a world where existence was bitter and difficult, and where everything had to be won in toil and sorrow; the fruits of the earth and the achievements of man—property, knowledge, the clothing which wards off cold, and the softness of the bed on which we lie. A stern law which we must obey or perish! But man has never abandoned the hope of Paradise; the sweet attraction of its idleness was transmitted to us by our first parents, from generation to generation, undying and besetting, like the taint of original sin! We worked to regain Paradise. Our labour began with the flint axe and has reached the aeroplane and Einstein's mathematics. We have surprised the secret of many laws of Nature; our range increases from year to year: we fly amongst the clouds and course along wide highways. But no one understood the terrible and laborious pathway of mankind. We did not realise that all our efforts were only a titanic struggle to regain the ease of Paradise. In skyscrapers a lift spares us the fatigue of climbing; comfortable furniture is at our service; we hear the voice of a distant friend without leaving our rooms; fires kindle and lights glow at the turn of a switch; machines relieve us of much of our fatigue, and in our dizzy projection by railroad or through the air, our feet are still; we have only to move levers. Civilisation, the whole of civilisation, is no more than a wide spiral leading from the laziness of primitive men to the laziness of the men of the future. Man works because of his horror of work, because of a tenacious and hopeful longing to free himself from work. And so it was said, formerly as to-day, 'labour is virtuous, idleness is evil.' But these were only voices trying to prevent the allurement of idleness distracting men from the work of redemption and so postponing or preventing the coming of an age in which, thanks chiefly to chemistry and physics, the world should become a great Paradise in which men, free from the slavery of toil, could devote themselves to living. To living. Because, can you call it living when through long years a man, day by day, has to spend his energy in brushing tables, in mining coal, in drawing plans, in piling one on the other the bricks of a

wall? The life of the community is an image of the life of the individual, and just as an individual, emerging from the pleasant idleness of childhood, toiled laboriously to secure a new and richer idleness in his maturity, so Humanity dreamed in the hope of the future—a future still distant, for the world is still young—in which it could recreate itself in repose, sometimes remembering, like a frightening nightmare, the ages in which life, and a miserable life, was preserved only by torturing fatigue of brain and muscles."

"But nothing of that has changed."

"It has all changed because we have ceased to covet idleness. There are no longer lazy people. No one wants a machine. Do you know to what it is we owe the harnessing of steam? We owe it to the idleness of a young man. I could bring to mind many other cases in which Sloth led to progress. But what is the use? My theory is easily understood and strong enough not to need the support of examples."

"I don't think that what you are saying is absurd, Mr. Lawel," interrupted Azil. "But however that may be, we are here to seek some way out of the dispute rather than to discuss its causes. What is the last word of the masters?"

"The masters," said Granmont, "cannot give way. If the proposed reduction of wages and hands is not accepted, we shall close the works, and Negrimia will be nothing but a cold, useless heap."

There was silence.

"Quite certainly," said Azil, as if he were speaking to himself, "there has never been a greater need for coming to terms. Why will the workers not make up their minds to this sacrifice?"

The old foreman who was the leader of the group of workmen replied:

"Because we could not live on the wages they offer, sir. Many of our brothers are in horrible want; sickness is in our homes. Until recently the owners paid the costs of a sanatorium where we went when our hard toil had broken our health. There was also a pension scheme in operation, and there were legal rules for our retirement. All these have ceased, although now they are more necessary than ever."

"They cost too much," interrupted Archibald.

"Less than fifteen years ago, the schemes were mature and had ceased to be a heavy burden."

“I must tell you that we never approved of the reduction they made in our profits. In strict fact, we were not bound to undertake the charge of the health and happiness of all our employees at the expense of our own pockets.”

The old man nodded his head.

“It is true,” he admitted. “Never shall I forget the struggle we had with you to compel you to grant us these benefits, or the evening about a month after the strike had begun, when we surrounded this very house when the directors were holding a meeting. Our funds were exhausted, and hunger and despair were guests in our huts. That day we were ready for anything, for the most terrible things. Mr. Granmont, don’t you remember the expression of our faces when you appeared at that window to warn us to keep calm. God forgive me, but we would not have stopped at murder. We were thousands of desperate men, and in our rage we would have turned the town into a heap of ashes. You knew it. Our cries and our hostile attitude made it clear. You understood that you were in the jaws of the wolf, and that in the enraged crowd there were men who had reached such a state of hatred that they would have exchanged all the advantages and benefits we were seeking, for the pleasure of dragging the body of an owner through the streets of Negrimia. That evening you signed an acceptance of our demands. Afterwards you bragged of being the most bountiful and considerate of masters, and you held up the sanatorium, the lending bank, and the scheme of pensioning as models of humanitarian rule, and of the most cordial relations between Labour and Capital. But we knew, and you also knew, that it was a triumph gained by Anger, and that if so many brows had not scowled and fists been clenched under these balconies, nothing would have been done for us. We have been in charge of the crucibles in which bronze was melted for hundreds, even thousands of statues, to immortalise the effigies of those who in some way or other had brought benefits to mankind; but there has not been erected yet that glorious monument, greater than all other monuments, which deserves our gratitude as the most potent and the most solicitous of all the benefactors of Labour; high over the world should be raised a statue to Anger, to that strong Anger which hardened our voices and strengthened our hands in no gesture of supplication, Anger, more useful to Labour than pity or reason.”

The old man bent his head again.

“But now, gentlemen, we are deprived of that ally,” he continued, “nothing will happen, however cruel your decisions. Only, if a way out is

not found, we shall have to scatter through the world seeking our bread, and you will not find anyone to take our places."

Magnus turned beseeching eyes to Granmont.

"Mr. Granmont," he said, "we look to you for a settlement of the dispute. You have the reputation of being a philanthropist, gained by your generous deeds, and in this crisis. . ."

Archibald held out his hands as if to ward off the words from his ears.

"Don't go on!" he cried. "I cannot listen to any reference to my philanthropy without getting excited. No! I am not a philanthropist. What do you mean by a philanthropist? A man from whom you can beg money with a good chance of getting it. Very good; I have not enough for that, and I don't know why I should hurry to the rescue of other people. There was a time in my life when I did many things that I don't understand now. I founded a cheap canteen, a public library, an orphan asylum; I subsidised scientific research, I paid for an expedition to Central Africa, and I published an edition of the Classics. And children don't excite my pity, Africa is nothing to me, and the Classics don't interest me. What did I get from all that? Certainly I was crazy, but I am cured now. Don't appeal to my philanthropy, Mr. Magnus. If we could do anything for these men we would not refuse; but the position is as I have described. A fatality has come to all of us. There are the factories. Let the Government take them over, if it likes. We shall close down to-morrow. It is our unanimous decision, and we have no more to say."

Nothing said afterwards altered the situation, and when the conference came to an end, everyone was tired and dismayed.

Florio took advantage of the presence of the engineers of the Company of Stabilisers to press them to carry on the abandoned work. Sike and Noke listened with a gentle smile. The latter replied, fixing his grey eyes on those of his companion, as if to secure his agreement:

"We have worked enough; now we are old men, and we don't know what life might be. The younger men must take our place."

Sike added:

"We are retiring for a reason more powerful than weariness. But it is a secret which we are going to keep to ourselves. That is so, Noke?"

"Certainly, Sike."

And the two scientists shook hands effusively.

“Have you too given up the undertaking for some mysterious reason?” Olivan asked Lawel when they were alone.

The inventor made a gesture of indifference.

“I am still, as I always was, a rather sceptical person with more imagination than activity; and if you remember the conversation we had on the day when the Company was inaugurated, you will easily understand my withdrawal. I told you then, ‘Just as these men round about us don’t care a bit about the stabiliser, but only about the profits they hope to get from it, so also my motive was only my love for Celia.’ I worked because of my eagerness to win her. She was proud, and I meant to offer her a name I had made famous; she was rich, and I wished my fortune to equal hers. But now —I tell you quite frankly—I am no longer in love with her. I see her as she is, frivolous, empty-minded, unintelligent. Her wealth doesn’t tempt me and her beauty doesn’t attract me. What I did for her, the time I spent in studies and experiments, the agonies I suffered, the disappointments, the fevers, the long and trying struggle. . . . I don’t wish to go through these again. I should have to have a motive equally strong. And, tell me, what motive can we have now? The proud hope we used to call glory is dead in every soul; the unbridled longing for riches has ceased to be a reason for our actions.”

“But another love?”

“And do you think that if I were to fall in love now it would be necessary to perform prodigies to flatter the vanity, or the covetousness which no longer exists in women? You know quite well it is not necessary. The sentiment of love has acquired a kind of serenity not far removed from indifference. There are no longer heroes. There is no purple, it has been suddenly blotted out from the dreams of women. Even with Celia herself, who used to be so exacting and haughty, any man, even the humblest of men, is just as good as me. And so we let life pass, with little bitterness, with little effort, with little sacrifice. I have lost my compass. I ask what is the Pole of my actions—and I don’t know.”

On returning from Negrimia the two Ministers and Florio went to the Palace to report the lamentable result of their investigation. The King and the Prime Minister were awaiting them, and listened sadly to the bad news. Magnus had not finished the complete account of what he had seen and heard in the town of iron and coal, when there was heard an increasing sound of footsteps in the passage, and someone knocked three times gently at the door of the council room.

“Come in!” ordered the King.

The carved wooden door opened and displayed the flabby corpulence of the Duke of the Atlantic Ocean with all the noblemen of the court in the passage behind him.

Olivan’s heart leapt. “The plot against the State,” he thought.

But in fact there was no menace in the attitude of the nobles who had been assembling outside the door. Their faces were pale and gloomy, with an expression of suffering rather than of violence; eyes reddened with traces of tears. The gelatinous Duke bowed and sighed deeply, before he raised his honied voice:

“We humbly beg your Majesty’s pardon for troubling him, but we could not resist any longer.”

“Come in, come in all of you,” ordered the King in alarm. “What is the matter with you?”

They came in slowly. The Duke looked at Juan IV with an apologetic gesture, discomposing his large face. “Sir,” and he began to weep in irrepressible woe. Several of the nobles uttered sobs. Large tears dropped from the eyes of the Marquis de la Perita upon his moustaches, which had been twisted to point upwards with a hot iron, and little by little the moisture ungummed them so that the points hung down.

“Now then, Duke,” growled the King. “Can I be told what you want?”

“Oh, sir, sir! What we have to tell you is so sad.”

“Then out with it quick!”

The master of ceremonies wrung his fleshy hands.

“Sir, for a long time a torturing idea has deprived me of all rest. How it came to me, I don’t know. Certainly in the lonely hours I have passed whilst on duty in your Majesty’s service, I have acquired a strange habit of reflecting on life. One day it occurred to me to think that. . . but no, I must go back to the beginning. At the beginning I took little notice of my apprehensions. I set down my bad thoughts to a possible bad digestion, and at once I took a pill to get rid of them. But alas! it was nothing else than conscience speaking within me, your Majesty. Three years I brooded over it, incubating my resolution in the fever of a sorrowful repentance. And now I have decided.”

The King looked at him with stupefaction.

"Decided on what, Duke?"

"Your pardon, Majesty; unless I explain myself, my conclusions will be so incomprehensible that you will take me for a madman. Once when I was alone on duty in the Hall of Tapestries, it occurred to me to look at myself in one of the large mirrors in which my figure was completely reflected. I admit that I did this several times, and with a good deal of satisfaction. 'There,' I said to myself, 'is the Duke of the Atlantic Ocean,' and I examined myself almost with reverence. I saw, in fact, what many people saw when I entered a theatre, or when I attended your Majesty at some public ceremony—myself in my resplendent uniform. Why should I be the only person in the world who did not enjoy the sight of the Duke of the Atlantic Ocean? I had that vision before me in a mirror, and I congratulated myself on being that personage, golden and magnificent, filled with the bluest blood known in the world. Historical blood, and an historical name! Completely authentic and reputable! But that time, sir, after having contemplated myself for a while, I underwent a kind of loss of personality, a momentary doubling such as often happens and can be induced easily by staring with close attention at one's own reflection. It seemed to me that the personage looking at me from half a yard away was not me, and the cold hardness of his gaze wounded me like an insult. I looked at the image from the buckled shoes to the lock of hair on his forehead, and laughed to myself: 'What a puppet!' I exclaimed, turning my back on him. I confess that I repented quickly, and was disgusted with my behaviour. But something irremediable had happened, something which seemed to have made me lose my self-respect, and when I went back to my chair in the farthest corner of the Hall, I began to pass judgment on myself with the severity that would be applied to a stranger. As a matter of fact, what am I? I asked. The Duke of the Atlantic Ocean, the chief member of the court after the royalties themselves; a man who is wealthy, powerful, respected, knight of almost all the known Orders. My place in society is pre-eminent. But why? What have I done to reach that elevation? I recalled the course of my life. No, I had done nothing! Nor had my father, nor my grandfather nor my great-grandfather. All of these had lived, like myself, on the renown and the achievement of an ancestor still more distant; Diego de Lostan, also called the Crocodile, because of the hardness of his heart. Allow me, sir, to recall the deed for which that man gained the golden spurs of a noble. It was at the siege of Rocalina. Many brave captains had perished in attempts to reduce that heroic city. Each assault only filled the moats with more bodies, and from the heroes who had struggled to the foot of the walls there soon arose, perfuming the air, an appetising smell of fried flesh—in the happy phrase of

our great historian, Father Theodosius—so much burning oil was poured from the battlements by the besieged. Diego the Crocodile kept his armies round the city during the cold of two winters and the heat of two summers. But it held out. Then my distant ancestor conceived a devilish plan. The oldest daughter of the enemy prince lived with her grandparents in a castle far from the scene of war. Diego sent to capture her, and when she arrived in his camp announced to the prince that he would take fearful vengeance on the young girl if he did not give up Rocalina within four-and-twenty hours. His messenger was assassinated. Next day, under the angry or sorrowful eyes of the warriors grouped on the wall, a priest married with burlesque ceremonial the unhappy young girl to one of Diego's soldiers, a misshapen monster, bow-legged and hairy, with squinting eyes and toothless from some disease. Then they put the young lady with the husband the devil had given her in a cage of wire-netting close to the walls, so that they could be seen. The monster, indifferent to the jests of his companions and the unsuitability of the situation, took possession of the virgin before the eyes of all. In vain the unhappy father begged his bowmen to send their arrows against the girl so that her death might anticipate the cruel outrage, but none could bring himself to put an end to her grace and beauty. What they did was to rush out, burning with a furious rage, forgetting all the counsels of prudence. They threw open the formidable gates and deployed against the invaders, hatred in their hands, in their eyes, on their lips, and in their hearts. That was exactly what Diego de Lostan had foreseen. On the open field the victory was his. He himself cut down, wounded, and killed so many enemies that it was uncertain if the flaming red of his sword was caused by human blood or by the heat of so many strokes. That night the city burned over the bodies of all its inhabitants, who had been put to the sword without pity or pardon. Such was the exploit by which my distant ancestor gained the fief of great territories and ennobled his descendants."

A loud sob was heard. The Marquis de la Perita could not restrain himself, he cried like a baby.

"Sir," continued the Duke of the Atlantic Ocean, still addressing the King, "day after day I have been thinking over these events, and every hour that I have meditated on them I have been plunged into deeper consternation. How could we have passed our lives, so many of us, generation after generation, in an aureole of fame, caressed by fortune, honoured on the social pinnacle, exactly because of that terrible deed which not one of us ever condemned in public or in private? Is it credible that we should have behaved in that way? If you consider it, you must conclude that we were all mad, and that we lived among madmen? Sir, how can I make the

world forget who I am and from what an origin I come? How shall I forget it myself? What price must be paid for forgiveness for so strange a Pride? I have mourned deeply, asking myself these perplexing questions. I have discussed them with my companions, whom your Majesty now sees before you, and we have wept together. They also have original ancestors of whose murders and robberies they boasted until light came to their souls. We all come here with the same longing and the same request."

"Yes, yes," sobbed the Marquis de la Perita.

"But Marquis," observed Juan IV, "were your ancestors also conquerors?"

"No, Majesty," explained the Duke, "they were rich men of business. His great-grandfather, the founder of his line, had the honour of giving to your great-grandfather the estate of Los Claveles, the revenues of which brought two hundred thousand pounds a year. Then he was ennobled. But that same ancestor had first stolen it himself, so to speak. He was a great thief, to speak plainly, and his father was as bad. It is true that since then the family has produced no robber."

The Marquis assented, bathed in tears.

"And now, what are your intentions?"

"Now we most humbly beg your Majesty's permission to leave his service. We propose to found a religious Order in which we may be of some use to our fellows, our fellows in the new significance which we give to the word, that is to say, all mankind."

"Most certainly, Duke, but I can give you more than my permission. I am still the owner of several palaces which are no use to me. Choose the one that will suit you best and take it as your retreat."

"Many thanks, sir, but our Order cannot be monastic. Its purpose will oblige us to traverse the world without cease. We have meditated with the most scrupulous patience on the kind of task to which we are going to devote our energies. We could be no use as teachers; we have not the vocation for sick-nursing; as preachers we could not count on the help of the Holy Spirit. One of us proposed that we should devote ourselves to the making of chocolates and liqueurs, an occupation, as is well known, very pleasing in the eyes of God; but there is none of us who could make them with the new science and get the old quality. But I think that in the end we have got an excellent inspiration."

"Speak, Duke!"

“Sir, by good fortune there is no longer war on the earth, and it is impossible that another Diego the Crocodile could arise, or that a Cain should praise himself for having shed the blood of his brother. But, spread in the streets and squares, in the alleys and gardens in all the cities, in all the countries of the world, there still exist thousands and thousands of statues, carved stones, monuments and memorials of all kinds, to the glory of the slaughters which men called ‘feats of arms,’ before Temptation had disappeared. No one has noticed, sir, that although Sin has fled from us, its altars remain. It would cost money to wipe out these relics, and the States are now too poor. We shall demolish these fetishes of the old and cruel violence, until not a trace remains to show where the wrongful human devotion was enshrined. That will be our task. The names which record countless slaughters, the effigies of bronze of those whose hearts were of bronze, the women brandishing the heroic laurel grown on blood-stained soil; all will be dismantled, melted, destroyed, until there shall not be left in the memory of man a record of such horror. As yet we have not settled what to call our Order. Perhaps we shall call ourselves The Redressing Masons. In a few days our wanderings will begin, a pickaxe on our shoulders, and in our spirits the comfort of trying to expiate our sins.”

IV

In which there is described the portent that love must listen to Reason

Statistics revealed a new danger only too plainly; the population was decreasing at an alarming rate. The demographic details were discomforting; the worst feature was not that hardship was increasing the death-rate, but that the birth-rate was becoming lower progressively until it did not represent more than ten per cent of the rate before the disappearance of Sin. The phenomenon was universal. Some periodicals published calculations as to the date of the approaching extinction of the human race.

In vain prizes were offered for fecundity, and work was guaranteed to men with more than two children. Nobody paid attention to what was necessary for the common good, or to the dismal outlook for humanity. The Government could not suggest any device, and the King, in despair of his inability to deal with the new danger, went the length of offering his entire collection of spurs to stimulate the remiss production of subjects. Having made this sacrifice, Juan IV was sulky and taciturn for several days. But his Ministers restored his peace of mind by informing him that they saw no practical advantage in his offer, and that he could continue to keep his mouldy pieces of metal, although all the same his magnanimous offer could be published in *The Gazette*, so that the public might know his good intentions.

Amongst the measures with which it was proposed to attack the dangerous figures was the appointment of a commission to make a personal appeal to possible fathers of families. The commission divided the city into districts and visited all the married couples to explain to them their responsibilities, and to stimulate them to procreation on moral, social, political, and religious grounds. All the employees of the State and of the city were charged with the duty. Florio had assigned to him four long streets in District 3.

There was a barber's shop in the first house he visited. Florio consulted his notes. They stated: "Manuel de los Manueles, hairdresser; had an only son, seven years ago." He pushed open the door, on which a placard advertised the services of a manicurist, and went in. Mirrors glimmered in the dark little room. Two chairs opened their empty arms. There was a smell of hair and leather and scented alcohol.

“The master?” asked Olivan, peering into the darkness.

“Come in, sir,” cried a man, laying down the paper he was reading by the light of the window.

“Manuel de los Manueles?” enquired Florio.

“No, the master is out; he will be back in a few minutes; but it is all right. I am his assistant.”

“It is a personal matter.”

“Then.”

Florio opened the door in a hesitating way. At the same moment the assistant barber, who had been staring at him, stepped towards him.

“Excuse me. . . are you not Mr. Olivan?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you recognise me?”

Florio shook his head, whilst he looked at him closely.

“It was a good many years ago—and in this dress—it is difficult——”

But Olivan interrupted him, his memory suddenly coming back.

“Coedere!”

“That is me,” agreed the former colonel of the ‘No-Quarter’ Lancers. “I am very glad to see you, my friend,” he added, holding out his hand. “How are you?”

“I must confess I didn’t expect to find you in a white coat,” stammered Florio, “although it is true that we have all changed our conditions to an unbelievable extent.”

“That is true enough. Sit down. There are hardly ever clients at this time. And the *foie gras*? Smashed? Of course. Mrs. Michael, here is the gentleman who used to make the best *foie gras* in the kingdom.”

A little old lady, in mourning, almost invisible in a dark corner of the room near a glass-topped table with manicure tools, made a bow and dozed off again.

“Life is rotten,” grumbled Coedere, sitting down beside Florio. “I don’t believe there is a single contented person on the whole surface of the earth. And yet we have to bless our luck for having any kind of table to sit at. I

know about a thousand men whose health would be better if they could work their jaws on anything except grumbling."

"How did you come to choose——?"

Coedere interrupted:

"Choose? No, I didn't choose. What could I do? A year after the disbanding of the army I had spent the last cent of my small fortune. It was necessary to live, and I found that I was no good for anything. I could ride, give an order, command squadrons; but these accomplishments were useless in the new kind of life, and were useless for any science, any office, any of the varieties of human labour. I followed chance, like you yourself, perhaps, and like many others. I was already at the end of things, when passing along this street one morning, I saw the notice that Mr. Manuel required an assistant. 'Good,' I said to myself, 'as I can shave myself, I can shave others.' And here I am. It is a kind of continuation of my destiny, because, as you see, I am still living by weapons."

He pointed to the razors shining on the marble slab.

Florio smiled.

"One might say," he jested, "that you are a penitent from Anger."

The ex-colonel dissented with a gesture.

"Of Anger, in particular? I don't think that that is quite right. It is an erroneous judgment very common among people who have no knowledge of the matter. I know what I am talking about. Eighty per cent of generals and other officers in times of peace, that is to say in normal times, are given up to Sloth. And during war, do you think that there is Anger in war?"

"Where else?"

"There are cruelty, violence, hard hearts, contempt of human life; but Anger, no; I have not felt Anger or noticed it in others. Anger hurled me against you that night when I surprised you in my house; but when I was ordered to protect a convoy or to attack the enemy, it was not Anger that inspired me. No, I am not a monster of that kind. In my first month of apprenticeship in this shop, I have seen blood on the cheeks of my clients under the edge of my razor. . . it upset me, believe me. You ought to know that an army dominated by Anger would be hopelessly at the mercy of the enemy, would fight like a blind man, and would be conquered easily. An angry general would be likely to be recalled as a very grave danger to the success of a campaign. In wars Anger remains in the hearths and the people,

raving, but unable to bite, fomented by the rulers, the orators, and the newspapers."

"Then those who are fighting. . ."

"They serve the Sin of Cupidity. Wars almost always have been nothing but servants of Greed. The first time a tribe launched an attack on another tribe it was a quarrel over a hunting ground. I remember reading in Max Müller that the word *gavishti*, which in the Vedas is used for battles, means literally a 'struggle for cattle.' Afterwards we fought to keep or to extend our markets, to capture territory which produced something necessary for us. Take, as an example, oil wells. Commerce and industry were the arbiters who settled when and where the guns were to sound. Even religious wars had a flavour of covetousness. All conquest is robbery, and to the series of terrible violences with which it was achieved, we gave the name 'war,' and hid its real significance behind a mask of flowery words of which the poets and the politicians made pretty nosegays. It was not Anger, Olivan, although I am not going to say that I haven't felt Anger, as on that night. . . . I don't know what you think, but it seems to me that Anger had become the least serious of all the Sins. It had become, so to speak, degenerate, attenuated—it could be compared with those diseases which in the course of many generations lose their virulence and do not kill, although they still remain diseases. Education has had more effect on the Sin of Anger than on any of the others. I did not kill you that night for a reason which, when you look at it in cold blood, is trivial—because you were in my house! Doesn't the obstacle seem out of proportion? What had that to do with killing you? And thus men inhibited their violence. When we had our duel I had stopped hating you."

"Nor did I hate you."

"How is Adriana?"

Olivan shrugged his shoulders.

"All right; she is always indoors."

"What does she do?"

"Nothing."

"What does she think about?"

"Nothing; she has never thought."

"Yes, quite true."

At that moment the glass door was opened suddenly, and there came into the shop a man of about forty years, tall and strong, with a large and jovial face. As he bustled in, the old manicurist stirred in her corner, and Coedere rose up.

"Here is the master," he said. "Master, this gentleman is asking for you."

"In a moment, sir," said the barber, hurrying into his white coat.

"I am not a customer," declared Olivan, declining the chair to which the barber was directing him. "An official duty has brought me here. Are you married?"

"Yes," agreed the barber, in surprise.

He listened without blinking to the exhortations made to him by Florio, in the name of humanity and by order of the Government, and took the sheaf of propaganda offered him, written by Magnus and printed.

Then he scratched his head with the comb he still kept in his hand.

"All this means that I am required to have more children?"

Olivan confirmed that. The negligent father hesitated for a few minutes.

"No," he said at last, "I won't obey this order. Another child would be too much of an upset. I have always worked hard, and I earn little enough to keep my household just going. What good would another child be to us? And leaving out my own selfish point of view, I should object to bring into the world a being whose happiness I couldn't secure. I don't want another son at all, and I suppose that the world will get on very well without another barber twenty years from now."

"If everyone were to take your view. . ."

"May I tell you what I think is the cause of the trouble, how we think now and didn't before. Now we have to say to ourselves when we are going to lie with our wives, 'It is right to have a child; I am going to beget a child in the exercise of my legal rights and to fulfil my duty.' But formerly when you kissed a pouting mouth, you thought just as much about a child as you think of the pain in your liver you may get from a drink. You don't think I thought for a single moment about my little Manuel when I helped my wife to take off her bridal veil? My wife was then the prettiest girl all round here. Always fresh, always smelling good, always nicely dressed, and smart. She had a look in her eye which burned me like a flame. Oh, sir, no soft and plump woman, among all that there were in the world, could have had a husband more in love with her than I was. When I was working, if I heard

her step in the room upstairs, I thought of the heaving of her firm white breasts, and it was a mercy I didn't absent-mindedly cut the throat of a client. Now. . . for a long time now. . . my wife. . . nobody would recognise her."

"Your wife," croaked the old manicurist from her corner, "is like all the women to-day. It is unbelievable how they have let themselves go."

"Yes," the barber agreed sadly, "they are all the same."

"They are all alike," Mrs. Michael confirmed, coming up to them. "Where has the art of pleasing disappeared to? It doesn't exist. Clothes are no longer beautiful; they are chosen merely as a covering against cold and damp, but not because they reveal or create grace. I was the most famous modiste of the kingdom; my costumes were jewels, and they were paid for as if they were jewels; every woman clad in one of them was a silken flower. Men fell victims to those enhancements of femininity without analysing or understanding them. They did not know what it was attracted them in the female swathed in furs and chiffon. They were subjected to the kind of attraction there is in opening the velvety husk of an almond or in stripping a ruddy orange of its soft skin to reach the sweet and desirable juice. Silks and furs were a prelude to softness, just as pearls anticipated sheen, little pieces of the hidden flesh, wrought into a collar to excite the imagination. They thought it merely an effort to reach elegance, when in truth it was an effort to excite love, to provoke men's desire. Nothing more aroused the envy of a woman than another woman better dressed; childishness, it would be called: but it was not so; on the contrary it was the most serious and deep-seated feeling that could affect her, because she envied in the adornments of the other, that other's superiority in attracting the most enviable male. But now? Of what use am I to anyone? I have seen women wrapped in the old overcoats of their husbands; the usual dress is like a coarse and patched sack. In vain will you seek on toilet tables the gracious and fragile armaments which formerly completed or increased women's charms. You cannot deny that going into a dressing-room was like entering a sanctuary. The suave and wonder-working sticks, which like fairy fingers used to redden the dullest lips, and those which darkened loving eyes, and the scents which gave to each woman a perfume of her own, distinct as the scent of the carnation differs from the scent of the rose, and the creams from which the skin drank clearness and softness. . . none of these will you now see in use. This manicuring, down to which I have come, is being ruined, just like the others, and for the same reason. The wish to please has been blotted out of women; their own beauty no longer interests them. I am not sorry that I am

near the end of my days as I shall then be free from seeing the continual growth of ugliness and the way commonness is spreading over the world."

The old lady, having poured out her opinions, retreated in a dignified way to her corner, and Florio hurriedly took his departure to pursue his duties, after having told Coedere how glad he was to have met him again.

The next citizen whom he visited lived in a house which showed the remains of a former splendour. He had to do with a gentleman still young and of intelligent appearance. He listened to Florio attentively and disagreed politely. Fresh exhortations from the commissioner seemed to arouse a little bad temper.

"No, don't go on! Don't go on!" he exclaimed. "I have my own ideas about this farce, and the Government is not going to make me change them. Forgive my speaking plainly, but. . . if we had to listen to the Government. . ."

"The Government speaks for humanity."

"Very good; if we had to obey humanity, we should have to perform a ridiculous act which. . ."

"Ridiculous, sir?"

"The most grotesque of all actions. Out of respect to you, I won't go into details, but. . . you can recall them yourself. What beauty is there in it, or grace, or worthiness? Only a mixture of intoxication and epilepsy could induce actions to be compared with it. Why do you think it is that all animals—according to well-established observations—are depressed after that act? Because their intelligence, then set free, lets them realise how ridiculous they had been. It is not our fault, that I admit; it is a mistake of Nature, a lack of consideration for us; but that is no reason why we should give in to it."

"I venture to ask you to consider that for uncounted centuries no man has had any but words of grateful thanks for what you call a mistake."

"No; I can't quite agree with that. Several have complained before now. But anyhow, I can't believe that you are going to accept the views of primitive men about it, as they simply followed their instincts and had their seasons of rut just like other animals. And for civilised man, it was merely concealed Lust. Lust clouded the mind and kept it from understanding. Lust was a new snare adopted by instinct when its power was weakening. We were unable to resist the forceful natural urge towards the female in the damp woods of primitive man. Nor could we resist the lasciviousness which

inflamed our blood until the mind was made crazy; but we can resist the scientific and humanitarian arguments of the Government. No one will beget a child because he is ordered to do so in *The Gazette*." And he gently ushered Florio into the street.

In almost all the other efforts he made to carry out his official task, Florio got similar refusals. Upset by his failure and by his repeated efforts, he returned home about dusk. The room where Adriana was waiting was in darkness, and his wife's silhouette was visible against the window where, with her chin in her hand, she was watching the street.

Olivan went in without being noticed. His feet touched another pair of feet, and when he stretched out his arms he found a head which made no movement to withdraw itself.

"Good evening, sir," said the head, speaking close to the stomach of Florio. "Here I have been waiting for you, like the mummy for the anthropologist."

"Good evening, Massipo," replied Olivan cheerfully, recognising his employee. "How are you?"

"I'd be better if you hadn't put your finger in my eye; but if you would take your foot off mine, all would be well."

"I am sorry, Marco. Why did you not turn on the light?"

"Madam preferred not to, although I told her that darkness was bad for the liver."

"I've got a headache," explained Adriana from her seat.

Olivan turned up the light and sat down beside his old assistant.

"What has brought you here?" he asked. "Is there anything new inside my old walls?"

"I am able to report that all goes on as usual, sir, because, although there are more spiders, there are fewer flies. When are you going there?"

"I don't think that I'll ever go back, Marco; it would only sadden me to look at those ruins."

"It is certainly not very amusing."

"If they did not remind me of my father's efforts, and my own work and so great a part of my life, I should have sold them long since."

“As for that, you needn’t upset yourself; the old place is safe enough. Even if you were to offer it for fifty pounds, I don’t believe you would find a purchaser. Everyone wishes to sell now, but there is no one who will make up his mind to buy. You can’t get more for the richest land in the valley than a couple of acres of rough hillside would have fetched formerly.”

Marco twisted his hat in his bony fingers, and added:

“I have been thinking that there is no need to have a caretaker on the property. There is nothing there of any great value, and even if there were, there are no thieves. Sometimes vagabonds go into the pens to sleep, but they do no harm except to frighten the rats.”

“Do you wish to go?”

“If you need me I won’t go.”

“But. . .”

“But I have very good news.”

Marco looked at Olivan as he said that, and winked one of his eyes, which were sparkling with pleasure.

“They are going to reopen the cemetery of St. Mamed,” he added smiling.

“And accordingly. . .”

“Yes; they have thought of me. It seems that more people than ever are dying. There is much want, and people can’t find work. It is a bad business.”

“Have you accepted yet?”

“I was there this morning to see what was doing,” Marco equivocated. “Now there is no reason to insist on the closing of St. Mamed. The neighbourhood is deserted; there are only ruinous and empty houses. All the inhabitants were working people who have died or have emigrated.”

“Emigrated; to where?”

“I don’t know. They say that all the world is in the same state. But there is nothing like hunger for shifting people.”

Surprised at himself for having talked so much, Marco suddenly rose to his feet.

“To-night I am still going to sleep at the works,” he said. “I must get back. But I am not going to say good-bye to you. When I am at St. Mamed

I'll be able to come to see you often, if I am not intruding."

"I hope you'll come, Marco. Good luck to you."

"Thank you, sir."

He was moving towards the passage, when he stopped to say:

"People are like wine, sir; they improve vastly when laid down in wood."

"Perhaps so."

"You are never upset by them then. There is no place so agreeable as a cemetery."

"No doubt, Marco."

"Unbroken peace."

"Certainly."

"Most instructive. . . if you would care. . ."

He kept twisting his hat and began to walk away. But when he was at the door he said in a low voice, looking at Florio with the air of making an important and pleasant suggestion:

"I am told that the curatorship of the historical family vaults at St. Mamed will soon be vacant."

Olivan smiled slightly.

"Thank you, Marco, that is a very good tip, my friend."

He sent him off. The old keeper of the pens shook his head as if he had been the witness of a real loss of intelligence and began to go downstairs.

Florio returned to the room where he had left his young wife in her distressed attitude. She was still sitting at the window and both of them kept silence, letting their thoughts go up to the dark sky like an invisible vapour. Adriana was leaning her head against the balcony railing, pale, with her eyes shut, as if she were seeking relief from weariness or from pain. Florio then asked her, without changing his comfortable position in his chair:

"Are you ill?"

"Yes."

She spoke without looking at him, in a depressed voice. Then she added:

“But my illness is only boredom. For many months now, for years, I’ve been sick to death of everything.”

Florio remarked, crossing his legs, idly:

“It is our own fault when we get bored. It is a kind of anaemia of the mind, a lack of red blood corpuscles in the imagination. When one has no ideas or only very poor ones, one gets bored. It is usually a congenital disease. There is no cure for it.”

“But it may also come from always having a completely ordinary person beside one.”

“I know that cause too.”

“Because I can’t believe,” went on Adriana, working herself into a rage, “that even you yourself think you have any unusual qualities.”

“Only one: patience.”

“If there were ever a stupid and colourless man in the world,” continued the young woman, as if she had not heard the interruption, “it is you; a common mind in a common body. You have never done or said anything out of the way. I don’t know how I could ever have loved you.”

“You were an instrument of the justice of providence; I had to suffer for my sins.”

“But I may as well tell you,” cried out Adriana, rising up, “that I was able to put you out of my heart without any regret or sorrow, as soon as I knew what you were.”

She went to the back of the room and began to sob bitterly.

“I know that I am only a burden on you,” she sobbed out. “You would like to be rid of me, to break our bonds, which are only kept up by habit. All right! I’ll leave your house this very night. You don’t know how to make me happy or to be happy with me. . . . Now, to-night! Things must come to an end! We have deceived ourselves too long!”

Her own words increased her distress, and her voice was drowned in her pitiful sobs. Olivan remained seated at the window a few seconds. Then he got up and slowly went over to the young woman. His face was no longer cold and hard, but showed gentleness and pity. He put a caressing hand on the woman’s bent head.

“And where could you go, dear wife, and what should I do without you? I don’t know if it is only habit, or if it is still love, but I am fond of you. And

you are fond of me. What has died in us is the splendour of passion, that desire which held us in a constant ecstasy and kept us in a restless fire. We no longer desire each other, my sweetheart, and when desire goes, it leaves our souls disenchanted, we didn't know how much of our happiness was due to it, our happiness that we thought was due to affection; we didn't know that it held us in a white magic. All your beauty was not in you, but in the desire of my eyes; your skin was not as soft as I thought when I caressed it with covetous hands, and your breath seemed to be the sweetest of perfumes because I was under a spell. Why did I long for you with a love more painful and more jealous, but stronger, when I saw the hungry eyes of the multitude admiring your beauty on the stage, unless desire were arousing my egoism and my longing, and the fear that my own passion would be frustrated. Affection is wide, free and generous like a fertile plain, its horizon limited only by the skies; desire gives no wider world to those in its thrall than the circle of a pair of arms. It was not affection that made the home, but desire raised its walls and contrived the savour of prison and savour of fortress that there is in every house; desire also it was that created the admirable and self-sufficient concretion of life, the satisfying synthesis of all the universe can give, the one man with one woman. Affection moves us, but desire chains us, and its power is so great that it transforms everything into a wonder. To eyes kindled by desire there is always perfection, invincible, dazzling, irreplaceable, and enthralling."

But the young woman, weeping, still insisted:

"But you are sometimes very cruel to me."

"And you are very hard to me. Now at last we see each other as we are, because we are no longer blinded by the longing which used to make everything beautiful. Boredom is the child of long life together without passion. Sometimes our useless proximity exasperates us, and we see in each other the defects to which we were blind before, and they are thorns in our flesh. I remember, Adriana, that in our honeymoon days, when I rose in the morning rested and tranquil, satisfied by completed passion, and I watched you, still sleepy in bed, or absorbed in the long task of your toilet table, I used to go to my work thinking, 'She is a dear little doll, nothing more; a delicious detail of my life.' When I joined you again at lunch, 'How lovely she is, and how delightful that she is fond of me; if my work is half my life, Adriana is the other and more enchanting half.' And at night, when my desire for you had grown, 'I couldn't live without this woman; the world holds nothing but her for me.' Now we are always in a cold and unending morning."

“But, all the same, we are still young and fit. . . .”

“But humanity has been deprived of Lust.”

“But we are fond of each other.”

“But only with the quietude that used to come with old age. Perhaps that kind of feeling is more dignified—all the same, I am not quite sure why, but certainly it isn’t the delicious old human love.”

He began again to stroke the pensive head caressingly.

“There is something else missing between us, Adriana.”

“What is missing, Florio?”

“That fear of losing you—that gratitude for your faithfulness. . . . And, more than anything, the sweet compassion which you aroused in me, and the pleasant satisfaction of feeling good. You came grieving for your sin; tenderly and in delicate submission, you tried to blot out, to put away what you had been. Together we created a gentle soul, all mine, white and beautiful, and cherished its growth in you. In the sweetness of your words, in the affection of your eyes, in the appeal of your open arms, there was a quality of repentance. Eiderdown is less soft than a repentant soul. And I rejoiced in the warmth and tenderness of your spirit bathed in my forgiveness. So profound and so ineffable is the joy of forgiving, Adriana, that the pain of Sin is a small price for it. But this delight has vanished, for Sin has ceased. We can no longer cover the pathways of our heart with the velvety softness of forgiveness, to be ready for the penitent approaching us on sinful feet.”

V

The Seven Pillars

New hordes of wretches had reached the city. They were homeless people, starving and dirty, with tangled hair, ragged beards, their dusty skins blackened by the sun. Some had come from far-distant countries and had bound in dirty rags their feet torn by the stones of the roads and the thorns of the woods. They squatted in churches, in abandoned buildings which threatened collapse; they swarmed in the streets, and stretched themselves to rest on the cobbles of the great squares; their sour smell poisoned the air. When it was plain that no food was to be found, many quitted the city, to move onwards without direction or goal. The dull despair which had brought them, took them away. And others filled their places.

As years went on, all the evils increased that arose when Temptation was removed. Property had almost ceased to exist. At first it suffered a heavy depreciation, then it cracked and foundered, when its supports gave way. Authority had vanished, as it no longer was upheld by violent means, and men moved about the wide world like animals in fear.

With the violence of a spiritual plague, a debilitating mysticism spread over mankind. The most deeply rooted of all the superstitions was a belief in the end of the world. In minds weak from hunger, any event, any sign—the distant glow of a fire, an earthquake, a scarlet moon, and even the most trivial causes, aroused terror, and the terror spread from heart to heart until crowds fled, they knew not why or whither, in spasms of fear, trampling down those who were prostrate in prayer or in an abandonment of fatalism.

One morning when Florio was on his way back from sitting with Truffe, who had been ill for some time, he saw pouring into the wide street a crowd maddened by one of these frequent panics. The collapse of a ruined house happened to be the cause of the idea that the final catastrophe of the world had begun. To escape from the blind rush of the fugitives, Olivan hurriedly crossed the threshold of a humble dwelling and took refuge inside. He was waiting quietly for the noise of the crowd to cease. As he peered into the squalid room he saw a thin old man, who in his turn looked affectionately at him from the rough bench on which he was resting.

“Praised be the holy name of God,” said the old man in greeting, smiling gently at Florio. “But please open the door again, brother; the house in

which I am living is never closed."

Florio moved towards him.

"You are Acracio, the hermit," he said, looking at him in recognition.

"I am he."

Since Sin had ceased to exist Acracio had returned to the haunts of men, but he very seldom left the hut in which he had taken refuge when he came to the city.

Olivan sat down facing the old saint, in a brooding silence, with his eyes turned towards the floor of beaten earth. The noise of trampling feet became more distant. The old hermit was again absorbed in his prayers.

"You have destroyed the happiness of mankind," said Olivan.

He spoke without raising his head, and with no reproach in his voice, in the tone, dulled by long-standing resignation, of one talking about what could not be helped. The ascetic turned his simple eyes on him and affirmed gently:

"I have freed men from Evil."

"I don't know if it was Evil, but I do know that now they are living in misery."

The old man shook his apostolic head.

"It was Evil, and all creation breathed in its damnable slavery. The world was ruled by the Seven Deadly Sins. Few were the souls who were free from that leprosy of hell."

Florio did not reply. In the street, quietness had been restored. After a time Olivan, sadly, and as if speaking to himself, objected:

"Yes, the infernal leprosy had reached everyone, but all the same, life was pleasanter then. The removal of Pride broke the spring of many good actions. Charity and Philanthropy were often the fruits of that Sin. To gain a distinction, to get a knighthood, to earn ephemeral commemoration in marble, thousands and thousands of men did good, and supported useful enterprises. Noblemen, proud of their descent; scientists, pleased with the reputations won by the miracles of science; artists, rejoicing in the fame of their works, all were proud and were led by Pride. A large part of human organisation rested on Pride. And, in ultimate analysis, what was the proud man? The truth is that he was dependent on others, in perpetual anxiety, more concerned with shocks to his vanity than is the miser with the

depredations of thieves. I knew a proud man who founded schools and asylums and was a patron of science. His self-worship had prevented him from ever falling in love, until a poor and ignorant girl scorned him. In his anxiety to conquer the will of one who obstinately rejected him, he suffered a real martyrdom. Do you remember the case of Aman in the Bible? Aman, rich, extravagant, a prince of princes, the first minister of Ahasuerus, was unhappy, and all that he had achieved seemed worthless to him, because when he passed by in a brilliant procession, one Mardocheus, a man of no account, refused to rise and do him reverence. And so were they all; but in their brains and their hands what a power to influence men!"

"In the end we are as dust; we die and our grandeur vanishes," commented Acracio. "But many learned men have spent their lives for the good of humanity with no thought of praise."

"Certainly it was sometimes not the desire for praise. Have you heard of Sike and Noke? Their lives were a constant sacrifice. They seemed to shun fame and riches; they put aside with a careless gesture all the trappings of vanity with which others turn their breasts into an exhibition. They were quoted as exemplars of a disinterested devotion to science. But the little devil in the bottom of their hearts, which led them, is called Envy. Every triumph of Sike was a tribulation for Noke. Every success of Noke turned Sike passionately to new researches and studies. Pride, that strange manifestation of the evil and the useless, as St. Bernard called it, that desire to be as a god, drives man along the path of knowledge, but they would have halted often if they had not been stimulated by Envy. There is a minor kind of Envy, a jealousy rather unimportant which causes small individual tragedies and which passes with us as the official Sin, but there is another Envy to which we pay respect, and which disguises itself under the name of stimulus, of emulation, and which we encourage, as if it were something really useful. And it was so. Envy prevented idleness, stimulated the will, and was a spur for those who used it, and a restraint for those who feared it. Envy kept awake, always alert, the indispensable critical faculty. Like reins, it guided and restrained the ambitious."

"Envy was the brother of Hatred and of Anger."

"Do you know what we owed to Anger, Acracio? The whole of our social organisation. Violence set the boundaries of the peoples; violence had to stand behind even the most just laws to secure obedience to them; violence brought property into existence, watched over it, disciplined mankind, made order possible amongst the hordes of humanity, sometimes came to the support of reason, but more often took its place, was the chief

agent in bringing about human inequality, and without it hierarchies would not have existed nor the ordered layers of humanity. The strongest ape in the woods was the chief of the band. And so amongst ourselves he ruled who could make himself feared. We might almost say that our society had Anger as its father and Fear as its mother, for these are two congruous emotions, and by their coming together we can explain the origin of all. Even to submit ourselves to God, we have to speak of His Anger, and we cannot imagine laws without punishments. Punishment and the fear of punishment arise as spontaneous ideas in our conscience, and the symbolic image of Justice earned the sword of death in its hand. Only fear made man a domesticated animal. Having reached that grade, he has continued to ascend, supported by Fear and Anger, like prisoners who try to escape by supporting themselves on their knees and elbows in the angle of a wall. Fear of those above keeps those below in subjection, enduring their discomforts and controlling their restlessness; fear of those below compels those above to make concessions, overcoming the selfishness of their luck. And now there are no leaders, no authority, no respect for law, and the world is like an arena filled with a purposeless crowd, brooding in confusion and despair. There is no stern, angry hand, enforcing its will. There is no fear and no obedience."

"But the awful sin of Cain no longer occurs amongst men."

"That is true. But am I trying to deny that good has been produced? I am only placing alongside the mountain of benefits the heap of ruins of the disintegration that has befallen us. The influence of Covetousness has also disappeared. And what has followed? It has been like a paralysis of the social body. No human mind can grasp all the ramifications of that Sin. Its roots spread so widely through modern life that it could not be plucked without dragging with it, in a solid mass, progress and much of civilisation. If Pride is at the root of all evil, Covetousness is the most widespread, the most powerful, and the most dynamic of forces. There may be persons who follow reason and charity, and who do not give way to Anger; but you will not find a single trader, a single manufacturer, whose motive is a romantic unselfishness. The desire for riches turns a man into Atlantis. Any enterprise, however difficult, will find heroes prepared for it, if only there is treasure at its end. There is no human need, no pleasure, no human emotion that is not exploited by Covetousness. Covetousness cared only for gold, but to win gold it was necessary to pass through dangerous trials like those in the fairy tales when young knights tried to win princesses. It was not a generous aspiration to help which placed the great Transatlantic ships on the seas, which girdled the earth with railways, which wrought costly fabrics, and continuously increased the ease and the delights of living. It was the

desire for gold; and we had reached a stage when it was not gold which brought pleasure, but pleasures were invented to attract gold. Look round you, think of all that you have seen on the earth, and tell me if there is anything not marked with the stamp of Covetousness. But that was inevitable; it was another stimulus, widespread and powerful. It ceased, and all it supported has collapsed."

"Riches are a deceitful illusion."

"By all means; but the thirst for them worked miracles."

"The rich man loved Sloth and Gluttony."

"But also many who hadn't a cent. Believe me. I should like you to know the theory of an engineer friend of mine about Idleness. He insists that Sloth is what makes men work. At first sight this conclusion and the arguments which he brought to support it, appear to be a clever jest. All the same, the truth is that it is impossible to enjoy Idleness unless one has worked hard and long. As for Gluttony, I am inclined to agree with my friend, Alberto Truffe, that it was included among the Deadly Sins for economic reasons which are no longer valid. Perhaps also on hygienic grounds. But Gluttony sharpened our understanding so as to create new kinds of animals and plants and to improve cultivation. The industries and trades supported by Gluttony were half those of the world. And—why not add this? Gluttony innocently increased the pleasure of life."

"That is an abominable theory. Gluttony bestialises us. It is one of the two heads of the body of Sin. Saint Gregory in his *Morals* says about it something more profound and with a little more authority than could occur to this Truffe friend of yours. Is he a philosopher?"

"He was more than a philosopher. He was the best stomach of the kingdom. He called himself a 'conscientious glutton.' He believed that the brotherhood of man would be made closer by our getting fatter. He assured me that in a body of more than fifteen stone there is no evil, just as some microbes of disease cannot live above the height of 3000 feet or at a temperature above boiling point."

"The fool!"

There was a brief silence in the room. Olivan continued, but more sadly:

"I don't know if humanity can survive this upheaval; but even if it does overcome many difficulties and discover the necessary incentives, how is it to escape the trouble that has come from the abolition of Lust? The world is

losing its inhabitants. The miseries which produce hunger and disease do not produce children. . . .”

“There always will be persons ready to produce children from the pure pleasure of seeing themselves in them.”

“There are very few of these. But, admitting that this should happen universally and that the grave menace should be overcome, do you know what serious ills we should still suffer? The lessening of desire, the conversion of passion into a tranquil emotion, would not only remove a strong enchantment from life, but would destroy the most powerful of human motives. Woman would cease to make herself beautiful, to adorn herself. The work of preparing the incitements to her charms would cease for the multitudes who, from the hunter of pelts and plumes to the modiste, from the cultivator of silkworms to the jeweller, were devoted to the service of her insatiable desire to express herself, to beautify herself, to be like a flower.”

“The only new evil that I admit is the loss of modesty.”

“You must not confuse modesty with adornment. Modesty is merely a convention. It doesn’t exist now in the old sense, but in fact it is stronger since the assaults on it have disappeared. Clothes and all female apparel were not invented to protect modesty, but to attract the male, to increase his desire and to make her more desirable. With us it represented the bright plumage of birds—a sexual lure. But that is not the most serious side; I began with what was only superficial. There are graver consequences of the disappearance of Lust. The attraction of sex was the leading motive of our conduct. Although often unconsciously, we were always subservient to it. Woman was behind everything; for her we risked our lives, passed long years in study, and sought success whatever it might be and whatever cost. We thought we were acting from other motives, but in truth there was nothing else than this, woman, the woman, perhaps still unknown to us, but who would come towards us with open arms, a living and delicious guerdon of our victory. Fame was nothing if we could not offer it to a woman; riches gave us keys of gold to unlock her heart. Sometimes we would think that all that pleased us was to rise above other men, to gain their notice and their respect. But we overlooked, or did not wish to confess to ourselves, that the tribute from our fellows, admitting our superiority, was a means of making our own worth clear to women: as if we were saying to them, ‘Now you see that my rivals, who used to be your suitors, admit that I am their better.’ If you make the objection that some learned men have been misogynists, I reply that hatred is an obsession as strong as love, and respects the same

values, but inversely. Love pervaded mankind. Art almost entirely depended on it and fed on the romance of the struggle between the sexes. What was the origin of the sadness almost reaching horror, the pity and contempt, inspired in us by old age, except its incapacity for love? And it was nothing else. Old age is wiser, more prudent, with a wider understanding and a more delicate palate for all the pleasures; death may be closer to a child than to an old man. But old age has lost carnal love. That is its shattering inferiority, its sentence of banishment. Once the flame of Lust has died down in us, a complete lassitude pervades our souls. Before we lost it, we all had our steeds ready saddled for the quest of the blue bird, of the tree that talked, of the fountain that poured out gold with which we could pay for the ownership of a woman's beautiful body. But now. . . what need to say more?"

"Your error is serious. You are confusing vice and virtue. You suppose that there is Lust in all love. Your judgment is childish. Lust is the unlawful use, a disordered appetite for pleasure."

"I know that. And who has not fallen into that vice? Even the person who thinks himself most moral, sins from excess. Shall I tell you the truth about lawful use and orderly appetite? Probably that virtuous rule was practised by man only when he obeyed blindly the seasons of rut like the other animals. It is not in treatises on morals that you will find the most instructive and exact opinions on that subject, but in medical books. They will tell you if there is any man or any woman completely normal in their behaviour in relation to love. A hug, a simple hug, an action of which we are not ashamed, and do not think perverse, is nothing less than a mild but definite exhibition of sadism. Is fetishism not morbid? But it is fetishism when a man keeps the flower which had perfumed and taken perfume from the bosom of his sweetheart. Think of it; an innocent, poetical action, and yet of the same family as the *Stiefelmanie* described by Octave Mirbeau."

The ascetic meditated on the horrors he was hearing. Then, after a time, he said:

"All men are not as evil as you paint them; they don't all act like that, always led by Sin."

"Sin which seemed good—and it was often impossible to distinguish; Sin, of which we saw no more than the flower and the fruit, and not the roots. But all the same, the pure and the good have been despoiled of one of the greatest pleasures."

"Which?"

“The pleasure of compassion, of pity towards evil; the pleasure of befriending the sinner and taking loving care of him as if of a sick person, and of restoring to him a mind clean and strong; the pleasure of bestowing the warmth of a heart on him, and the affection of a brother.”

Silence again fell between the two.

“The Seven Deadly Sins,” continued Olivan, “were the seven pillars on which rested our society; civilisation, progress; our customs, our laws, our work, our well-being, even our emotions, rested their enormous and age-long weight on them. The seven strong pillars fell, and everything fell. Humanity is now wandering amongst ruins.”

Acracio raised his deeply furrowed forehead. His white hair, in the horizontal light, fell about him like an aureole.

“Our life endures but a moment, my brother,” he protested, “and you are thinking only of what is but a slight and fugitive fragment of eternity. Even if what you have been saying were correct, it is not true that man can live only in Sin and by Sin. Admit that humanity of to-day and civilisation of to-day are based on Evil. It may be that all the civilisations that have existed on the earth have been based on Sin, with Cruelty as their only restraint, with Covetousness as their guide, with Pride as their counsellor, with Envy as their incentive, tarnishing love, praising force, glorifying Cain and bowing down to Croesus. But humanity is still young and is still in its childhood. In the mysterious future yet to come, perhaps better men will arise who shall know how to found their happiness and their progress on Good. Such a civilisation must come to pass, perhaps in the most remote future, and what has broken down now will seem a primitive barbarism. And even if it should never come, if we are always to be as we are now, we must continue hoping for its coming, as an only alleviation for those who realise and endure the evil, and the error, the injustice and the sinful desires of men. Believe in this future, and your hope will bring you a joy, the pure unselfish joy of what we shall never taste. There is something which foretells the reality of that distant happiness; our longing that it may come. All that has happened to mankind was first an aspiration of mankind.”

Some wanderers from distant lands led the crusade. Their tattered clothing and their emaciated faces were ample witnesses of their long travel and mortal weariness: but their eyes shone with the light of hope. In their hands, calloused by staves, they now carried holly boughs, and their shaggy hair, whitened with the dust of deserts, was entangled in the dark green

prickly leaves. There were six men, tall, bony, and with sun-blackened skins. There was a quality of inspiration or of madness in the stiffness of their attitudes and in the wild ardour with which they chanted a hymn, threatening and appealing, swelling their naked chests, and tossing beards, ragged and blackened like fire-stricken mountain briars.

A countless multitude followed their resolute lead; men and women of all kinds and of all races, enfeebled by all the misfortunes and saddened by all the longings, who had joined the company, in all places, in far lands and in near lands, compelled by the magnet of a new hope. Towards the east the plain was dark with the multitudes, and the dust of their passing clouded the calm April air.

They entered the city, pervading it and surrounding it, overwhelming it like the waters of a flood. It became known that they were on pilgrimage to the Black Rock, to the place where the Rebel had made himself visible, to beg him to restore the old order, to throw open the fortress in which the Seven Deadly Sins were sleeping in idleness, so that all the monsters of Temptation might again be unleashed on the world.

In joy, trembling with impatience, in confident eagerness, in an anguished hope of redemption, the wretched citizens were infected by the mob excitement of the wretched pilgrims. They mingled with them, sharing their ardour, vibrating even more strongly because their intoxication was newer; they left their lairs, burst out from the ruins in which they had been sheltering, and merged in the moving stream as soon as they met it and knew its goal. For many hours the ragged hordes hurried through the streets, neither curiosity nor discouragement distracting them from their course, serried, close-packed, irresistible, like the columns of marching ants in tropical forests. They kept singing their hymn with a zeal reinvigorated by the nearness of their goal after their laborious journey; they displayed the gloomy zeal of moribund persons, attracted by faith to some miracle-working shrine.

In the same exaltation and the same pain, sharing the longing for past times, learned men and soldiers, shopkeepers and artisans, artists and civil servants, nobles and the mob, mingled together in the common flood of despair. Their passage lasted hours and hours; half-naked women, with their hanging breasts exposed, old people hardly able to resist the thrusting of those behind them; youths with glaring eyes displaying, as their emblem, holly, sacred to Satan. The streets resounded with the tramp of feet, with a panting as of gigantic lungs; now the strange monotony of the hymn, and again the reverberation of the crowd reflected from the ground and from the

walls of the houses compressing into narrow bands what had been wide in the plains. And again the huge panting of tired lungs. . . ah . . . ah. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people. . . ah!. . . ah! Anon, there could be heard a pilgrim asking in a suffocated voice:

"Where is the Black Rock?"

And a voice from a native of the invaded city replied, excitedly, gaily, enthusiastically:

"Near, quite near now, a day's journey."

The black ant-like streams flowed through the last streets. Then, forming a patch on the road, there were left in the silent streets, stretched on the broken asphalt, or supported on the kerb, as on a pillow, the bodies of pilgrims who were worn out, incapable of any further effort. There were some fifteen or twenty. Beside a pool of water in which her right hand was lying, a woman had fallen, motionless, her glassy eyes staring in death; her old skirts were disarranged so as to expose her naked legs, purple and swollen. Close to her a pallid man with sunken eyes and a mouth like a hard slit through which his breath hissed, contrived to keep upright, leaning against the wall, and staggered a few drunken paces. Then he fell again, clawed against the wall with his bony fingers, and managed to walk on.

"Sin," he implored, in a final delirium, "give us Sin."

His dragging feet stumbled over a cobble-stone. He fell headlong, finally beaten, and struck the ground with his face. He lay doubled up. He stirred slightly. Then he seemed to have fainted or to be dead. Between his cheek and the asphalt a trickle of blood, grew, drop by drop, into a figure of eight.

Then there reached the city a distant but resounding clamour. It was like the far-off rumour of a stormy sea. The vanguard of the moving crowd had recognised on the horizon, dim and blue, the outline of the famous mountain. A scream of anguish and of hope burst out from the crowd.

"Satan! Satan! Give us back Sin! Satan!"

The last stragglers were then passing Acracio's hut. Erect in the shadow the holy man watched the halting progress of the wretched creatures, and pity and sorrow flooded his gentle heart.

Suddenly, perturbed but resolved, he joined the stragglers and marched out of the city with them.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the ebook edition.

[The end of *The Seven Pillars* by Wenceslao Fernández-Flórez]