

Folle-Farine

Ouida

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FOLLE–FARINE

By

OUIDA

AUTHOR OF "UNDER TWO FLAGS," "PUCK," "IDALIA" "TWO LITTLE WOODEN SHOES,"
ETC.

Un gazetier fumeux qui se croit un flambeau
Dit au pauvre qu'il a noyé dans les ténèbres:
Où donc l'aperçois–tu ce Créatur du Beau?
Ce Rédresseur qui tu célèbres?" BAUDELAIRE

FOLLE–FARINE.

BOOK I. DUST.

CHAPTER I.

NOT the wheat itself; not even so much as the chaff; only the dust from the corn. The dust which no one needs or notices; the mock farina which flies out from under the two revolving circles of the grindstones; the impalpable cloud which goes forth to gleam golden in the sun a moment, and then is scattered; on the wind; into the water; up in the sunlight; down in the mud: what matters? who cares?

Only the dust: a mote in the air; a speck in the light; a black spot in the living daytime; a colourless atom in the immensity of the atmosphere, borne up one instant to gleam against the sky, dropped down the next to lie in a fetid ditch.

Only the dust: the dust that flows out from between the grindstones, grinding exceeding hard and small, as the religion which calls itself Love avers that its God does grind the world.

"It is a nothing, less than nothing. The stones turn; the dust is born; it has a puff of life; it dies. Who cares? No one. Not the good God; not any man; not even the devil. It is a thing even devil–deserted. Ah, it is very like you,"

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said the old miller, watching the mill–stones.

Folle–Farine heard—she had heard a hundred times,—and held her peace.

Folle–Farine: the dust; only the dust.

As good a name as any other for a nameless creature. The dust; sharp–winnowed and rejected of all, as less worthy than even the shred husks and the shattered stalks.

Folle–Farine,—she watched the dust fly in and out all day long from between the grindstones. She only wondered why, if she and the dust were thus kindred and namesakes, the wind flew away with the dust so mercifully, and yet never would fly away with her.

The dust was carried away by the breeze, and wandered wherever it listed. The dust had a sweet short summer–day life of its own ere it died. If it were worthless, it at least was free. It could lie in the curl of a green leaf, or on the white breast of a flower. It could mingle with the golden dust in a lily, and almost seem to be one with it. It could fly with the thistledown, and with the feathers of the dandelion, on every roving wind that blew.

In a vague, dreamy fashion, the child wondered why the dust was so much better dealt with than she was.

"Folle–Farine! Folle—Folle—Folle—Farine!" the other children hooted after her, echoing the name by which the grim humour of her bitter–tongued taskmaster had called her. She had got used to it, and answered to it as others to their birth–names.

It meant that she was a thing utterly useless, absolutely worthless; the very refuse of the winnowings of the flail of fate. But she accepted that too, so far as she understood it; she only sometimes wondered in a dull fierce fashion why, if she and the dust were sisters, the dust had its wings whilst she had none.

All day long the dust flew in and out and about as it liked, through the open doors, and among the tossing boughs, and through the fresh cool mists, and down the golden shafts of the sunbeams; and all day long she stayed in one place and toiled, and was first beaten and then cursed, or first cursed and then beaten,—which was all the change that her life knew. For herself, she saw no likeness betwixt her and the dust; for that escaped from the scourge and flew forth, but she abode under the flail always.

Nevertheless, Folle–Farine was all the name she knew.

The great black wheel churned and circled in the brook water, and lichens and ferns and mosses made lovely all the dark, shadowy, silent place; the red mill roof gleamed in the sun, under a million summer leaves; the pigeons came and went all day in and out of their holes in the wall; the sweet scents of ripening fruits in many orchards filled the air; the great grindstones turned and turned and turned, and the dust floated forth to dance with the gnat and to play with the sunbeam.

Folle–Farine sat aloft, on the huge wet timbers above the wheel, and watched with her great sorrowful eyes, and wondered again, after her own fashion, why her namesake had thus liberty to fly forth whilst she had none.

Suddenly a shrill screaming voice broke the stillness savagely.

"Little devil!" cried the miller, "go fetch me those sacks, and carry them within, and pile them; neatly, do you hear? Like the piles of stone in the road."

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Folle–Farine swung down from the timbers in obedience to the command, and went to the heap of sacks that lay outside the mill; small sacks, most of them; all of last year's flour.

There was an immense gladiolus growing near, in the mill–garden, where they were; a tall flower all scarlet and gold, and straight as a palm, with bees sucking into its bells, and butterflies poisoning on its stem. She stood a moment looking at its beauty; she was scarce any higher than its topmost bud, and was in her way beautiful, something after its fashion. She was a child of six or eight years, with limbs moulded like sculpture, and brown as the brook water; great lustrous eyes, half savage and half soft; a mouth like a red pomegranate bud, and straight dark brows—the brows of the friezes of Egypt.

Her only clothing was a little short white linen kirtle, knotted around her waist, and falling to her knees; and her skin was burned, by exposure to the sun, to a golden brown colour, though in texture it was soft as velvet, and showed all the veins like glass. Standing there in the deep grass, with the scarlet flower against her, and purple butterflies over her head, an artist would have painted her and called her by a score of names, and described for her some mystical or noble fate: as Anteros, perhaps, or as the doomed son of Procne, or as some child born to the Forsaken in the savage forest of Naxos, or conceived by Persephone, in the eternal night of hell, whilst still the earth lay black and barren and fruitless, under the ban and curse of a bereaved maternity.

But here she had only one name, Folle–Farine; and here she had only to labour drearily and stupidly, like the cattle of the field, and without their strength, and with barely so much even as their scant fare and begrudged bed.

The sunbeams that fell on her might find out that she had a beauty which ripened and grew rich under their warmth, like that of a red flower bud or a golden autumn fruit. But nothing else ever did. In none of the eyes that looked on her had she any sort of loveliness. She was Folle–Farine; a little wicked beast that only merited at best a whip and a cruel word, a broken crust and a malediction; a thing born of the devil, and out of which the devil needed to be scourged incessantly.

The sacks were all small; they were the property of the peasant proprietors of the district: the department of Calvados. But though small they were heavy in proportion to her age and power. She lifted one, although with effort, yet with the familiarity of an accustomed action: poised it on her back, clasped it tight with her round slender arms, and carried it slowly through the open door of the mill. That one put down upon the bricks, she came for a second,—a third,—a fourth,—a fifth,—a sixth, working doggedly, patiently and willingly, as a little donkey works.

The sacks were in all sixteen; before the seventh she paused.

It was a hot day in the late summer: she was panting and burning with exertion; the bloom in her cheeks had deepened to scarlet; she stood a moment, resting, bathing her face in the sweet coolness of a white tall tuft of lilies.

The miller looked round where he worked, amongst his beans and cabbages, and saw.

"Little mule! Little beast!" he cried. "Would you be lazy—you!—who have no more right to live at all than an eel, or a stoat, or a toad!"

And as he spoke he came towards her. He had caught up a piece of rope with which he had been about to tie his beans to a stake, and he struck the child with it. The sharp cord bit the flesh cruelly, curling round her bare chest and shoulders, and leaving a livid mark.

She quivered a little, but she said nothing; she lifted her head and looked at him, and dropped her hands to her sides. Her eyes glowed fiercely; her red curling lips shut tight; her straight brows drew together.

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"Little devil! Will you work now?" said the miller. "Do you think you are to stand in the sun and smell at flowers—you! Pouf-f-f!"

Folle-Farine did not move.

"Pick up the sacks this moment, little brute," said the miller. "If you stand still a second before they are housed, you shall have as many stripes as there are sacks left untouched. Oh, hère: do you hear?"

She heard, but she did not move.

"Do you hear," he pursued. "As many strokes as there are sacks, little wretch. Now—I will give you three moments to choose. One!"

Folle-Farine still stood mute and immovable, her head erect, her arms crossed on her chest. A small, slender, bronze-hued, half-nude figure amongst the ruby hues of the gladioli and the pure snow-like whiteness of the lilies.

"Two!"

She stood in the same attitude, the sacks lying untouched at her feet, a purple-winged butterfly lighting one her head.

"Three!"

She was still mute; still motionless.

He seized her by the shoulder with one hand, and with the other lifted the rope.

It curled round her breast and back, again and again and again; she shuddered, but she did not utter a single cry. He struck her the ten times; with the same number of strokes as there remained sacks uncarried. He did not exert any great strength, for had he used his uttermost he would have killed her, and she was of value to him; but he scourged her with a merciless exactitude in the execution of his threat, and the rope was soon wet with drops of her bright young blood.

The noonday sun fell golden all around; the deep sweet peace of the silent country reigned everywhere; the pigeons fled to and fro in and out of their little arched homes; the millstream flowed on, singing a pleasant song; now and then a ripe apricot dropped with a low sound on the turf; close about was all the radiance of summer flowers; of heavy rich roses, of yellow lime tufts, of sheaves of old-fashioned comely phlox, and all the delicate shafts of the graceful lilies. And in the warmth the child shuddered under the scourge; against the light the black rope curled like a serpent darting to sting; among the sun-fed blossoms there fell a crimson stain.

But never a word had she uttered. She endured to the tenth stroke in silence.

He flung the cord aside amongst the grass. "Daughter of devils!—what strength the devil gives!" he muttered.

Folle-Farine said nothing. Her face was livid, her back bruised and lacerated, her eyes still glanced with undaunted scorn and untamed passion. Still she said nothing; but, as his hand released her, she darted as noiselessly as a lizard to the water's edge, set her foot on the lowest range of the woodwork, and in a second leaped aloft to the highest point, and seated herself astride on that crossbar of timber on which she had been throned when he had summoned her first, above the foam of the churning wheels, and in the deepest shadow of innumerable leaves.

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Then she lifted up a voice as pure, as strong, as fresh as the voice of a mavis in May time, and sang, with reckless indifference, a stave of song in a language unknown to any of the people of that place; a loud fierce air, with broken words of curious and most dulcet melody, which rang loud and defiant, yet melancholy, even in their rebellion, through the foliage, and above the sound of the loud mill water.

"It is a chaunt to the foul fiend," the miller muttered to himself. "Well, why does he not come and take his own; he would be welcome to it." And he went and sprinkled holy water on his rope, and said an ave or two over it to exorcise it.

Every fibre of her childish body ached and throbbed; the stripes on her shoulders burned like flame; her little brain was dizzy; her little breast was black with bruises; but still she sang on, clutching the timber with her hands to keep her from falling into the foam below, and flashing her proud eyes down through the shade of the leaves.

"Can one never cut the devil out of her?" muttered the miller, going back to his work amongst the beans.

After a while the song ceased; the pain she suffered stifled her voice despite herself; she felt giddy and sick, but she sat there still in the shadow, holding on by the jutting woodwork, and watching water foam and eddy below.

The hours went away; the golden day died; the greyness of evening stole the glow from the gladioli and shut up the buds of the roses; the lilies gleamed but the whiter in the dimness of twilight; the vesper chimes were rung from the cathedral two leagues away over the fields.

The miller stopped the gear of the mill; the grindstones and the water–wheels were set at rest; the peace of the night came down; the pigeons flew to roost in their niches; but the sacks still lay uncarried on the grass, and a spider had found time to spin his fairy ropes about them.

The miller stood on his threshold, and looked up at her where she sat aloft in the dusky shades of the leaves.

"Come down and carry these sacks, little brute," he said. "If not—no supper for you to–night."

Folle–Farine obeyed him and came down from the huge pile, slowly, her hands crossed behind her back, her head erect, her eyes glancing like the eyes of a wild hawk.

She walked straight past the sacks, across the dew–laden turf, through the tufts of the lilies, and so silently into the house.

The entrance was a wide kitchen, paved with blue and white tiles, clean as a watercress, filled with the pungent odour of dried herbs, and furnished with brass pots and pans, with walnut presses, with pinewood tressels, and with strange little quaint pictures and images of saints. On one of the tressels were set a jug of steaming milk, some rolls of black bread, and a big dish of stewed cabbages. At the meal there was already seated a lean, brown, wrinkled, careworn old serving woman, clad in the blue kirtle and the white head gear of Normandy.

The miller stayed the child at the threshold.

"Little devil—not a bit nor drop to–night if you do not carry the sacks."

Folle–Farine said nothing, but moved on, past the food on the board, past the images of the saints, past the high lancet window, through which the moonlight had begun to stream, and out at the opposite door.

There she climbed a steep winding stairway on to which that door had opened, pushed aside a little wooden wicket, entered a loft in the roof, loosened the single garment that she wore, shook it off from her, and plunged

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into the fragrant mass of daisied hay and of dry orchard mosses which served her as a bed. Covered in these, and curled like a dormouse in its nest, she clasped her hands above her head, and sought to forget in sleep her hunger and her wounds. She was well used to both.

Below there was a crucifix, with a bleeding God upon it: there was a little rudely sculptured representation of the Nativity; there was a wooden figure of St. Christopher; a portrait of the Madonna, and many other symbols of the church. But he child went to her bed without a prayer on her lips, and with a curse on her head, and bruises on her body.

Sleep, for once, would not come to her. She was too hurt and sore to be able to lie without pain: the dried grasses, so soft to her usually, were like thorns beneath the skin that still swelled and smarted from the stripes of the rope. She was feverish; she tossed and turned in vain; she suffered too much to be still; she sat up and stared with her passionate wistful eyes, at the leaves that were swaying against the square casement in the wall, and the moonbeam that shone so cold and bright across her bed.

She listened, all her sense awake, to the noises of the house. There were not many: a cat's mew, a mouse's scratch, the click–clack of the old woman's step, the shrill monotony of the old man's voice, these were all. After a while even these ceased; the wooden shoes clattered up the wooden stairs, the house became quite still; there was only in the silence the endless flowing murmur of the water breaking against the motionless wheels of the mill.

Neither man nor woman had come near to bring her anything to eat or drink. She had heard them muttering their prayers before they went to rest, but no hand unlatched her door. She had no disappointment, because she had had no hope. She had rebellion, because Nature had grafted it in her; but she went no further. She did not know what it was to hope. She was only a young wild animal, well used to blows, and drilled by them, but not tamed.

As soon as the place was silent, she got out of her nest of grass, slipped on her linen skirt, and opened her casement—a small square hole in the wall, and merely closed by a loose deal shutter, with a hole cut in it, scarcely bigger than her head. A delicious sudden rush of summer air met her burning face; a cool cluster of foliage hit her a soft blow across the eyes as the wind stirred it. They were enough to allure her.

Like any other young cub of the woods, she had only two instincts—air and liberty.

She thrust herself out of the narrow window with the agility that only is born of frequent custom, and got upon the shelving thatch of a shed which sloped a foot or so below, slid down the roof, and swung herself by the jutting bricks of the outhouse wall on to the grass. The house dog, a brindled mastiff, that roamed loose all night about the mill, growled and sprang at her; then, seeing who she was, put up his gaunt head and licked her face, and turned again to resume the rounds of his vigilant patrol.

Ere he went, she caught and kissed him, closely and fervently, without a word. The mastiff was the only living thing that did not hate her; she was grateful, in a passionate, dumb, unconscious fashion. Then she took to her feet, ran, as swiftly as she could, along the margin of the water, and leaped like a squirrel into the wood, on whose edge the mill stood.

Once there she was content.

The silence, the shadows, the darkness where the trees stood thick, the pale quivering luminance of the moon, the mystical eërie sounds that fill a woodland by night, all which would have had terror for tamer and happier creatures of her years, had only for her a vague entranced delight. Nature had made her without one pulse of fear; and she had remained too ignorant to have been ever taught it.

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It was still warm with all the balmy breath of midsummer: there were heavy dews everywhere; here and there on the surface of the water, there gleamed the white closed cups of the lotus; through the air there passed, now and then, the soft, grey, dim body of a night–bird on the wing; the wood, whose trees were pines, and limes, and maples, was full of a deep dreamy odour; the mosses that clothed many of the branches hung, film–like, in the wind in lovely coils and web–like phantasies.

Around stretched the vast country, dark and silent, as in a trance, the stillness only broken by some faint note of a sheep's bell, some distant song of a mule–driver passing homeward.

The child strayed onward through the trees, insensibly soothed, and made glad, she knew not why, by all the dimness and the fragrance round her.

She stood up to her knees in the shallow freshets that every now and then broke up through the grasses: she felt the dews, shaken off the leaves above, fall deliciously upon her face and hair; she filled her hands with the night–blooming marvel–flower, and drank in its sweetness as though it were milk and honey; she crouched down and watched her own eyes look back at her from the dark gliding water of the river.

Then she threw herself on her back upon the mosses—so cool and moist that they seemed like balm upon the bruised hot skin—and lay there looking upward at the swift mute passage of the flitting owls, at the stately flights of the broad–winged moths, at the movement of the swift brown bats, at the soft trembling of the foliage in the breeze, at the great clouds slowly sailing across the brightness of the moon. All these things were infinitely sweet to her with the sweetness of freedom, of love, of idleness, of rest, of all things which her life had never known; so dumbly may the young large–eyed antelope feel the beauty of the forest in the hot lull of tropic nights, when the speed of the pursuer has relaxed, and the aromatic breath of the panther is no more against its flank.

She lay there long, quite motionless, tracing, with a sort of voluptuous delight, all movements in the air, all changes in the clouds, all shadows in the leaves. All the immense multitude of ephemeral life which, unheard in the day, fills the earth with innumerable whispering voices after the sun has set, now stirred in every herb and under every bough around her.

The silvery ghost–like wing of an owl touched her forehead once. A little dormouse ran across her feet. Strange shapes floated across the cold white surface of the water. Quaint things, hairy, filmy–winged, swam between her and the stars. But none of these things had terror for her; they were things of the night, with which she felt vaguely the instinct of kinship.

She was only a little wild beast, they said, the offspring of darkness, and vileness, and rage and disgrace. And yet, in a vague imperfect way, the glories of the night, its mysterious charm and solemn beauty, its melancholy and lustrous charm, quenched the fierceness in her dauntless eyes, and filled them with dim wondering tears, and stirred the half–dead soul in her to some dull pain, some nameless ecstasy, that were not merely physical.

And then, in her way, being stung by these, and moved, she knew not why, to a strange sad sense of loneliness and shame, and knowing no better she prayed.

She raised herself on her knees, and crossed her hands upon her chest, and prayed after the fashion that she had seen men and women and children pray at roadside shrines and crosses; prayed aloud, with a little beating breaking heart, like the young child she was.

"Oh Devil! if I be indeed thy daughter, stay with me; leave me not alone: lend me thy strength and power, and let me inherit of thy kingdom. Give me this, oh great Lord, and I will praise thee and love thee always."

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She prayed in all earnestness, in all simplicity, in broken, flattering language; knowing no better; knowing only that she was alone on the earth and friendless, and very hungry and in sore pain, whilst this mighty unknown King of the dominion of darkness, whose child she ever heard she was, had lost her, or abandoned her; and reigned afar in some immortal world oblivious of her misery.

The silence of the night alone gave back the echo of her own voice. She waited breathless for some answer, for some revelation, some reply; there only came the pure cold moon, sailing straight from out a cloud, and striking on the waters.

She rose sadly to her feet, and went back along the shining course of the stream, through the grasses and the mosses, and under the boughs, to her little nest under the eaves.

As she left the obscurity of the wood and passed into the fuller light, her bare feet glistening, and her shoulders wet with the showers of dew, a large dark shape flying down the wind smote her with his wings upon the eyes, lighted one moment on her head, and then swept onward lost in shade. At that moment, likewise, a radiant golden globe flashed to her sight, dropped to her footsteps, and shone an instant in the glisten from the skies.

It was but a great goshawk seeking for its prey; it was but a great meteor fading and falling at its due appointed hour; but to the heated, savage, dreamy fancy of the child it seemed an omen, an answer, a thing of prophecy, a spirit of air; nay, why not Him himself?

In legends, which had been the only lore her ears had ever heard, it had been often told he took such shapes as this.

"If he should give me his kingdom!" she thought; and her eyes flashed alight; her heart swelled; her cheeks burned. The little dim untutored brain could not hold the thought long or close enough to grasp, or sift, or measure it; but some rude rich glory, impalpable, unutterable, seemed to come to her and bathe her in its heat and colour. She was his offspring, so they all told her; why not, then, also his heir?

She felt, as felt the goatherd or the charcoal–burner in those legends she had fed on, who was suddenly called from poverty and toil, from hunger and fatigue, from a fireless hearth, and a bed of leaves, to inherit some fairy empire, to ascend to some region of the gods.

Like one of these, hearing the summons to some great unknown imperial power smite all his poor pale barren life to splendour, so Folle–Farine, standing by the water's side in the light of the moon, desolate, ignorant, brute–like, felt elected to some mighty heritage unseen of men. If this were waiting for her in the future, what matter, now, were stripes or wounds or woe?

She smiled a little, dreamily, like one who beholds fair visions in his sleep, and stole back over the starlit grass, and swung herself upward by the tendrils of ivy, and crouched once more down in her nest of mosses.

And either the courage of the spirits of darkness, or the influence of instincts dumb but nascent, was with her; for she fell asleep in her little loft in the roof as though she were a thing cherished of heaven and earth, and dreamed happily all through the hours of the slowly–rising dawn: her bruised body and her languid brain and her aching heart all stilled and soothed, and her hunger and passion and pain forgotten; with the night–blooming flowers still clasped in her hands, and on her closed mouth a smile.

For she dreamed of her Father's kingdom, a kingdom which no man denies to the creature that has beauty and youth, and is poor and yet proud, and is of the sex of its mother.

CHAPTER II.

IN one of the most fertile and most fair districts of northern France there was a little Norman town, very, very old and beautiful exceedingly by reason of its ancient streets, its high peaked roofs, its marvelous galleries and carvings, its exquisite greys and browns, its silence and its colour, and its rich still life.

Its centre was a great cathedral, noble as York or Chartres; a cathedral, whose spire shot to the clouds, and whose innumerable towers and pinnacles were all pierced to the day, so that they blue sky shone and the birds of the air flew all through them. A slow brown river, broad enough for market boats and for corn barges, stole through the place to the sea, lapping as it went the wooden piles of the houses, and reflecting the quaint shapes of the carvings, the hues of the signs and the draperies, the dark spaces of the dormer windows, the bright heads of some casement–cluster of carnations, the laughing face of a girl leaning out to smile on her lover.

All around it lay the deep grass unshaven, the leagues on leagues of fruitful orchards, the low blue hills tenderly interlacing one another, the fields of colza, where the white head–dress of the women workers flashed in the sun like a silvery pigeon's wing. To the west there were the deep green woods, and the wide plains golden with gorse of Arthur's and of Merlin's lands; and beyond, to the northward, was the dim stretch of the ocean breaking on a yellow shore, whither the river ran, and wither led straight shady roads, hidden with linden and with poplar trees, and marked ever and anon by a wayside wooden Christ, or by a little murmuring well crowned with a crucifix.

A beautiful, old, shadowy, ancient place: picturesque everywhere; often silent, with a sweet sad silence that was chiefly broken by the sound of bells or the chaunting of choristers. A place of the Middle Ages still. With lanterns swinging on cords from house to house as the only light; with wondrous scroll–works and quaint signs at the doors of all its traders; with monks' cowls and golden croziers and white–robed acolytes in its streets; with the subtle smoke of incense coming out from the cathedral door to mingle with the odours of the fruits and flowers in the market–place; with great flat–bottomed boats drifting down the river under the leaning eaves of its dwellings; and with the galleries of its opposing houses touching so nearly that a girl leaning on one could stretch a Provence rose or toss an Easter egg across to her neighbour in the other.

Doubtless, there were often squalor, poverty, dust, filth, and uncomeliness within these old and beautiful homes. Doubtless often the dwellers therein were housed like cattle and slept like pigs, and looked but once out the woods and waters of the landscapes round for one hundred times that they looked at their hidden silver in an old delf jug, or at their tawdry coloured prints of St. Victorian or St. Scævola.

But yet much of the beauty and the nobility of the old, simple, restful rich–hued life of the past still abode there, and remained with them. In the straight, lithe form of their maidens, untrammelled by modern garb, and moving with the free majestic grace of forest does. In the vast, dim, sculptured chambers, where the grandam span by the wood fire, and the little children played in the shadows, and the lovers whispered in the embrasured window. In the broad market–place, where the mules cropped the clover, and the tawny awnings caught the sunlight, and the white caps of the girls framed faces fitted for the pencils of the missal painters, and the flush of colour from mellow wall–fruits and grape–clusters glanced amidst the shelter of deepest freshest green. In the perpetual presence of their cathedral, which through sun and storm, through frost and summer, through noon and midnight stood there amidst them, and watched the galled oxen tread their painful way, and the scourged mules droop their humble heads, and the helpless harmless flocks go forth to the slaughter, and the old weary lives of the men and women pass through hunger and cold to the grave, and the sun and the moon rise and set, and the flowers and the children blossom and fade, and the endless years come and go, bringing peace, bringing war; bringing harvest, bringing famine; bringing life, bringing death; and beholding these, still said to the multitude in its terrible irony, "Lo! your God is Love."

This little town lay far from the great Paris highway and all greatly frequented tracks. It was but a short distance

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from the coast, but near no harbour of greater extent than such as some small fishing village had made in the rocks for the trawlers. Few strangers ever came to it, except some wandering painters or antiquaries. It sent its apples and eggs, its poultry and honey, its colza and corn, to the use of the great cities; but it was rarely that any of its own people went thither.

Now and then some one of the oval-faced, blue-eyed, lithe-limbed maidens of its little homely households would sigh and flush and grow restless, and murmur of Paris; and would steal out in the break of a warm grey morning whilst only the birds were still waking; and would patter away in her wooden shoes over the broad, white, southern road, with a stick over her shoulder, and a bundle of all her worldly goods upon the stick. And she would look back often, often, as she went; and when all was lost in the blue haze of distance save the lofty spire which she still saw through her tears, she would say in her heart, with her lips parched and trembling, "I will come back again."

But none such ever did come back.

They came back no more than did the white sweet sheaves of the lilies which the women gathered and sent to be bought and sold in the city—to gleam one faint summer night in a gilded balcony, and to be flung out the next morning, withered and dead.

One amongst the few who had thus gone whither the lilies went, and of whom people would still talk as their mules paced homewards through the lanes at twilight, had been Reine Flamma, the daughter of the miller of Yprès.

Yprès was a beechen-wooded hamlet on the northern out-skirt of the town, a place of orchards and wooded tangle; through which there ran a branch of the brimming river, hastening to seek and join the sea, and caught a moment on its impetuous way, and forced to work by the grim millwheels that had churned the foam-bells there for centuries. The millhouse was very ancient; its timbers were carved all over into the semblance of shields and helmets, and crosses, and fleur-de-lis, and its frontage was of quaint parqueted work, black and white, except where the old blazonries had been.

It had been handed down from sire to son of the same race through many generations—a race hard, keen, unlearned, superstitious, and caustic-tongued—a race wedded to old ways, credulous of legend, chaste of life, cruel of judgement; harshly strong, yet ignorantly weak; a race holding dearer its heirloom of loveless, joyless, bigoted virtue even than those gold and silver pieces which had ever been its passion, hidden away in earthen pipkins under old apple-roots, or in the crannies of wall timber, of in secret nooks of oaken cupboards.

Claude Flamma, the last of this toilsome, God-fearing, man-begrudging, Norman stock, was true to the type and the traditions of his people.

He was too ignorant even to read; but priests do not deem this a fault. He was avaricious; but may will honour a miser quicker than a spendthrift. He was cruel; but in the market-place he always took heed to give his mare a full feed, so that if she were pinched of her hay in her stall at home none were the wiser, for she had no language but that of her wistful black eyes; and this is a speech to which men stay but little to listen. The shrewd, old, bitter-tongued, stern-living man was feared and respected with the respect that fear begets; and in truth he had a rigid virtue in his way, and was proud of it, with scorn for those who found it hard to walk less straightly and less circumspectly than himself.

He married late; his wife died in childbirth; his daughter grew into the perfection of womanhood under the cold, hard, narrow rule of his severity and his superstition. He loved her, indeed, with as much love as it was possible for him ever to feel, and was proud of her beyond all other things; saved for her, toiled for her, muttered ever that it was for her when at confession he related how his measures of flour had been falsely weighted, and how he had

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filched from the corn brought by the widow and the fatherless. For her he had sinned: from one to whom the good report of his neighbours and the respect of his own conscience were as the very breath of life, it was the strongest proof of love that he could give. But this love never gleamed one instant in his small sharp grey eyes, nor escaped ever by a single utterance from his lips. Reprimand, homily, or cynical rasping sarcasm, was all she ever heard from him. She believed that he despised, and almost hated her; he held it well for women to be tutored in subjection and in trembling.

At twenty-two Reine Flamma was the most beautiful woman in Calvados, and the most wretched.

She was straight as a pine; cold as snow; graceful as a stem of wheat: lovely and silent; with a mute proud face, in which the eyes alone glowed with a strange, repressed, speechless passion and wishfulness. Her life was simple, pure, chaste, blameless, as the lives of the many women of her race who, before her, had lived and died in the shadow of that water-fed wood had always been. Her father rebuked and girded at her, continually dreaming that he could paint whiter even the spotlessness of this lily, refine even the purity of this virgin gold.

She never answered him anything, nor in anything contradicted his will; not one amongst all the youths and maidens of her birthplace had ever heard so much as a murmur of rebellion from her; and the priests said that such a life as this would be fitter for the cloister than the marriage-bed. None of them ever read the warning that these dark blue slumbering eyes would have given to any who should have had the skill to construe them right. There were none of such skill there; and so she, holding her peace, the men and women noted her ever with a curious dumb reverence, and said amongst themselves that the race of Flamma would die well and nobly in her.

"A saint!" said the good old gentle bishop of the district, as he blessed her one summer evening in her father's house, and rode his mule slowly through the pleasant poplar lanes and breeze-blown fields of colza back to his little quiet homestead, where he tended his own cabbages and garnered his own honey.

Reine Flamma bowed her tall head meekly, and took his benediction in silence.

The morning after, the miller, rising as his custom was at daybreak, and reciting his paternosters, thanked the Mother of the World that she had given him thus strength and power to rear up his motherless daughter in purity and peace. Then he dressed himself in his grey patched blouse, groped his way down the narrow stair, and went in his daily habit to undraw the bolts and unloose the chains of his dwelling.

There was no need that morning for him; the bolts were already back; the house-door stood wide open; on the threshold a brown hen perched pluming herself; there were the ticking of the clock; the chirping of the birds, the rushing of the water; these were the only sounds upon the silence.

He called his daughter's name: there was no answer. He mounted to her chamber: it had no tenant. He searched hither and thither, in the house, and the stable, and the granary: in the mill, and the garden, and the wood; he shouted, he ran, he roused his neighbours, he looked in every likely and unlikely place: there was no reply.

There was only the howl of the watch-dog, who sat with his face to the south and mourned unceasingly.

And from that day neither he nor any man living there ever heard again of Reine Flamma.

Some indeed did notice that at the same time there disappeared from the town one who had been there through all that spring and summer. One who had lived strangely, and been clad in an odd rich fashion, and had been whispered as an Eastern prince by reason of his scattered gold, his unfamiliar tongue, his black-browed, star-eyed, deep-hued beauty, like the beauty of the passion-flower. But none had ever seen this stranger and Reine Flamma in each other's presence; and the rumour was discredited as a foulness absurd and unseemly to be said of a woman whom their bishop had called a saint. So it died out, breathed only by a few mouths, and it came

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to be accepted as a fact that she must have perished in the deep fast-flowing river by some false step on the mill-timber, as she went at dawn to feed her doves, or by some strange sad trance of sleep-walking, from which she had been known more than once to suffer.

Claudis Flamma said little; it was a wound that bled inwardly. He toiled, and chaffered, and drove hard bargains, and worked early and late with his hireling, and took for the household service an old Norman peasant-woman more aged than himself, and told no man that he suffered. All that he ever said was, "She was a saint: God took her;" and in his martyrdom he found a hard pride and a dull consolation.

It was no mere metaphoric form of words with him. He believed in miracles and all manner of Divine interposition, and he believed likewise that she, his angel, being too pure for earth, had been taken by God's own hand up to the bosom of Mary. This honour which had befallen his first-begotten shed both sanctity and splendour on his cheerless days; and when the little children and the women saw him pass, they cleared from this way as from a prince's, and crossed themselves as they changed words with one whose daughter was the bride of Christ.

So six years passed away; and the name of Reine Flamma was almost forgotten, but embalmed in memories of religious sanctity, as the dead heart of a saint is embedded in amber and myrrh.

At the close of the sixth year there happened what many said was a thing devil-conceived and wrought out by the devil to the shame of a pure name, and to the hindrance of the people of God.

One winter's night Claudis Flamma was seated in his kitchen, having recently ridden home his mare from the market in the town.

The fire burned in ancient fashion on the hearth, and it was so bitter without that even his parsimonious habits had relaxed, and he had piled some wood, liberally mingled with dry moss, that cracked, and glowed, and shot flame up the wide black shaft of the chimney.

The day's work was over; the old woman-servant sat spinning flax on the other side of the fire; the great mastiff was stretched sleeping quietly on the brick floor; the blue pottery, the brass pans, the oaken presses that had been the riches of his race for generations, glimmered in the light; the doors were barred, the shutters closed; around the house the winds howled, and beneath its walls the fretting water hissed.

The miller, overcome with the past cold and present warmth, nodded on his wooden settle and slept, and muttered dreamily in his sleep, "A saint—a saint!—God took her."

The old woman, hearing, looked across at him, and shook her head, and went on with her spinning with lips that moved inaudibly: she had been wont to say, out of her taskmaster's hearing, that no woman who was beautiful was ever a saint as well. And some thought that this old creature, Marie Pitchou, who had used to live in a miserable hut on the other side of the wood, had known more than she had chosen to tell of the true fate of Reine Flamma.

Suddenly a blow on the panels of the door sounded through the silence. The miller, awakened in a moment, started to his feet and grasped his ash staff with one hand, and with the other the oil-lamp burning on the tressel. The watch-dog arose, but made no hostile sound.

A step crushed the dead leaves without and passed away faintly; there was stillness again; the mastiff went to the bolted door, smelt beneath it, and scratched at the panels.

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On the silence there sounded a small, timid, feeble beating on the wood from without; such a slight fluttering noise as a wounded bird might make in striving to rise.

"It is nothing evil," muttered Flamma. "If it were, evil the beast would not want to have the door opened. It may be some one sick or stray."

All this time he was in a manner charitable, often conquering the niggardly instincts of his character to try and save his soul by serving the wretched. He was a miser, and he loved to gain, and loathed to give; but since his daughter had been taken to the saints he had striven with all his might to do good enough to be taken likewise to that heavenly rest.

Any crust bestowed on the starveling, any bed of straw afforded to the tramp, caused him a sharp pang; but since his daughter had been taken he had tried to please God by this mortification of his own avarice and diminution of his own gains. He could not vanquish the nature that was engrained in him. He would rob the widow of an ephah of wheat, and leave his mare famished in her stall, because it was his nature to find in all such saving a sweet savour; but he would not turn away a beggar or refuse a crust to a wayfarer, lest, thus refusing, he might turn away from him an angel unawares.

The mastiff scratched still at the panels; the sound outside had ceased.

The miller, setting the lamp down on the floor, gripped more firmly the ashen stick, undrew the bolts, turned the stout key, and opened the door slowly, and with caution. A loud gust of wind blew dead leaves against his face; a blinding spray of snow scattered itself over his bent stretching form. In the darkness without, whitened from head to foot, there stood a little child.

The dog went up to her and licked her face with kindly welcome. Claudis Flamma drew her with a rough grasp across the threshold, and went out into the air to find whose footsteps had been those which had trodden heavily away after the first knock.

The snow, however, was falling fast; it was a cloudy moonless night. He did not dare to go many yards from his own portals, lest he should fall into some ambush set by robbers. The mastiff too was quiet which indicated that there was no danger near, so the old man returned, closed the door carefully, drew the bolts into their places, and came towards the child, whom the woman Pitchou had drawn towards the fire.

She was a child of four or five years old; huddled in coarse linen and in a little red garment of fox's skin, and blanched from head to foot, for the flakes were frozen on her and on the hood that covered, gipsy-like, her curls. It was a strange, little, ice-cold, ghost-like figure, but out of the mass of icicles and whiteness there glowed great beaming frightened eyes and a mouth like a scarlet berry; the radiance and the contrast of it were like the glow of holly fruit thrust out from a pile of drifted snow.

The miller shook her by the shoulder.

"Who brought you?"

"Phratos," answered the child, with a stifled sob in her throat.

"And who is that?"

"Phratos," answered the child again.

"Is that a man or a woman?"

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The child made no reply; she seemed not to comprehend his meaning. The miller shook her again, and some drops of water fell from the ice that was dissolving in the warmth.

"Why are you come here?" he asked, impatiently.

She shook her head, as though to say none knew so little of herself as she.

"You must have a name," he pursued harshly and in perplexity. "What are you called? Who are you?"

The child suddenly raised her great eyes that had been fastened on the leaping flames, and flashed them upon his in a terror of bewildered ignorance—the piteous terror of a stray dog.

"Phratos," she cried once more, and the cry now was half a sigh, half a shriek.

Something in that regard pierced him and startled him; he dropped his hand off her shoulder, and breathed quickly; the old woman gave a low cry, and staring with all her might at the child's small dark, fierce, lovely face, fell to counting her wooden beads and mumbling many prayers.

Claudis Flamma turned savagely on her as if stung by some unseen snake, and willing to wreak his vengeance on the nearest thing that was at hand.

"Fool! cease your prating!" he muttered, with a brutal oath. "Take the animal and search her. Bring me what you find."

Then he sat down on the stool by the fire, and braced his lips tightly, and locked his bony hands upon his knees. He knew what blow awaited him; he was no coward, and he had manhood enough in him to press any iron into his soul and tell none that it hurt him.

The old woman drew the stranger aside to a dusky corner of an inner chamber, and began to despoil her of her coverings. The creature did not resist; the freezing cold and long fatigue had numbed and silenced her: her eyelids were heavy with the sleep such cold produces, and she had not strength, because she had not consciousness enough, to oppose whatsoever they might choose to do to her. Only now and then her eyes opened, as they had opened on him, with a sudden lustre and fierceness, like those in a netted animal's impatient but untamed regard.

Pitchou seized and searched her eagerly, stripping her of her warm fox-skin wrap, her scarlet hood of wool, her little rough hempen shirt, which were all dripping with the water from the melted snow.

The skin of the young waif was brown, with a golden bloom on it; it had been tanned by hot suns, but it was soft as silk in texture, and transparent, showing the course of each blue vein. Her limbs were not well nourished, but they were of perfect shaped and delicate bone; and the feet were the long, arched, slender feet of the southern side of the Pyrenees.

She allowed herself to be stripped and wrapped in a coarse piece of homespun linen; she was still half frozen, and in a state of stupor, either from amazement or from fear. She was quite passive, and she never spoke. Her apathy deceived the old crone, who took it for docility, and who, trusting to it, proceeded to take advantage of it, after the manner of her kind. About the small shapely head there hung a band of glittering coins; they were not gold, but the woman Pitchou thought they were, and seized them with gloating hands and ravenous eyes.

The child started from her torpor, shook herself free, and fought to guard them—fiercely, with tooth and nail, as the young fox whose skin she had worn might have fought for its dear life. The old woman on her side strove as resolutely; long curls of the child's hair were clutched in the struggle; she did not wince or scream, but she

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fought—fought with all the breath and blood that were in her tiny body.

She was no match, with all her ferocity and fury, for the sinewy grip of the old peasant; and the coins were torn off her forehead and hidden away in a hole in the wood, out of her sight, where the old peasant hoarded all her precious treasures of copper coins and other trifles that she managed to secrete from her master's all–seeing eyes.

They were little metal sequins engraved with Arabic characters, chained together after the Eastern fashion. To Pitchou they looked a diadem of gold worthy of an empress.

The child watched them thus removed in perfect silence; from the moment they had been wrenched away, and the battle had been finally lost to her, she had ceased to struggle, as though disdainful of a fruitless contest. But a great hate gathered in her eyes, and smouldered there like a half–stifled fire—it burnt on for many a long year afterwards, unquenched.

When Pitchou brought her a cup of water and a roll of bread, she would neither eat nor drink, but turned her face to the wall,—mute.

"Those are just her father's eyes," the old woman muttered. She had seen them burn in the gloom of the evening through the orchard trees, as the stars had risen, and Reine Flamma listened to the voice that wooed her to her destruction.

She let the child be, and searched her soaked garments for any written word or any token that might be on them. Fastened roughly to the fox's skin there was a faded letter. Pitchou could not read; she took it to her master.

Claudis Flamma grasped the paper and turned its superscription to the light of the lamp.

He could not read, but yet at sight of the characters his tough frame trembled, and his withered skin grew red with a sickly, feverish quickening of the blood.

He knew them.

Once, in a time long dead, he had been proud of those slender letters that had been so far more legible than any that the women of her class could pen, and on beholding which the good bishop had smiled, and passed a pleasant word concerning her being almost fitted to be his own clerk and scribe.

For a moment, watching those written cyphers that had no tongue for him, and yet seemed to tell their tale so that they scorched and withered up all the fair honour and pious peace of his old age, a sudden faintness, a sudden swooning sense seized him for the first time in all his life; his limbs failed him, he sank down on his seat again, he gasped for breath; he needed not to be told anything, he knew all. He knew that the creature whom he had believed so pure that God had deemed the earth unworthy of her youth was—his throat rattled, his lips were covered with foam, his ears were filled with a rushing, hollow sound, like the roaring of his own mill–waters in a time of storm.

All at once he started to his feet, and glared at the empty space of the dim chamber, and struck his hands wildly together in the air, and cried aloud:

"She was a saint, I said—a saint! A saint in body and soul! And I thought that God begrudged her, and held her too pure for man!"

And he laughed aloud—thrice.

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The child hearing, and heavy with sleep, and eagerly desiring warmth, as a little frozen beast that coils itself in snow to slumber into death, startled by that horrible mirth, came forward.

The shirt fell off her as she moved. Her little naked limbs glimmered like gold in the dusky light; her hair was as a cloud behind her; her little scarlet mouth was half open, like the mouth of a child seeking its mother's kiss; her great eyes, dazzled by the flame, flashed and burned and shone like stars. They had seen the same face ere then in Calvados.

She came straight to Claudis Flamma as though drawn by that awful and discordant laughter, and by that leaping ruddy flame upon the hearth, and she stretched out her arms and muttered a word and smiled, a little dreamily, seeking to sleep, asking to be caressed, desiring she knew not what.

He clenched his fist, and struck her to the ground. She fell without a sound. The blood flowed from her mouth.

He looked at her where she lay, and laughed once more. "She was a saint!--a saint! And the devil begot in her that!"

Then he went our across the threshold and into the night, with the letter still clenched in his hand.

The snow fell, the storm raged, the earth was covered with ice and water; he took no heed, but passed through it, his head bare and his eyes blind.

The dog let him go forth alone, and waited by the child.

CHAPTER III.

ALL night long he was absent.

The old serving woman, terrified in so far as her dull brutish nature could be roused to fear, did what she knew, what she dared. She raised the little wounded naked creature, and carried her to her own pallet bed; restored her to consciousness by such rude means as she had knowledge of, and staunched the flow of blood.

She did all this harshly, as it was her custom to do all things, and without tenderness or even pity, for the sight of this stranger was unwelcome to her, and she also had guessed the message of that unread letter.

The child had been stunned by the blow, and she had lost some blood, and was weakened and stupefied and dazed; yet there seemed to her rough nurse no peril for her life, and by degrees she fell into a feverish, tossing slumber, sobbing sometimes in her sleep, and crying perpetually on the unknown name of Phratos.

The old woman Pitchou stood and looked at her. She, who had always known the true story of the disappearance which some had called death and some had deemed a divine interposition, had seen before that transparent brown skin, those hues in cheeks and lips like the carnation leaves, that rich, sun-fed, dusky beauty, those straight dark brows.

"She is his sure enough," she muttered. "He was the first with Reine Flamma. I wonder has he been the last."

And she went down the stairs chuckling, as the low human brute will at any evil thought.

The mastiff stayed beside the child.

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She went to the fire and threw more wood on, and sat down again to her spinning-wheel, and span and dozed, and span and dozed again.

She was not curious: to her, possessing that thread to the secret of the past, which her master and her townsfolk had never held, it all seemed natural. It was an old, old story; there had been thousands like it; it was only strange because Reine Flamma had been held a saint.

The hours passed on; the lamp paled, and its flame at last died out; in the loft above, where the dog watched, there was no sound; the old woman slumbered undisturbed, unless some falling ember of the wood aroused her.

She was not curious, nor did she care how the child fared. She had led that deadening life of perpetual labour and of perpetual want in which the human animal becomes either a machine or a devil. She was a machine; put to what use she might be—to spin flax, to card wool, to wring a pigeon's throat, to bleed a calf to death, to bake or stew, to mumble a prayer or drown a kitten, it was all one to her. If she had a preference it might be for the office that hurt some living thing; but she did not care; all she heeded was whether she had pottage enough to eat at noonday, and the leaden effigy of her Mary safe round her throat at night.

The night went on, and passed away; one gleam of dawn shone through a round hole in the shutter; she wakened with a start to find the sun arisen, and the fire dead upon the hearth.

She shook herself and stamped her chill feet upon the bricks, and tottered on her feeble way, with frozen body, to the house door. She drew it slowly open, and saw by the light of the sun that it had been for some time morning.

The earth was everywhere thick with snow; a hoar frost sparkled over all the branches; great sheets of ice were whirled down the rapid mill-stream; in one of the leafless boughs a robin sang, and beneath the bough a cat was crouched, waiting with hungry eager eyes, patient even in its famished impatience.

Dull as her sympathy was, and slow her mind, she started as she saw her master there.

Claudis Flamma was at work; the rough, hard, rude toil which he spared to himself no more than to those who were his hirelings. He was carting wood; going to and fro with huge limbs of trees that men in youth would have found it a severe task to move; he was labouring breathlessly, giving himself no pause, and the sweat was on his brow, although he trod ankle deep in snow, and although his clothes were heavy with icicles.

He did not see or hear her; she went up to him and called him by name; he started, and raised his head and looked at her.

Dull though she was, she was in a manner frightened by the change upon his face; it had been lean, furrowed, weather-beaten always, but it was livid now, with bloodshot eyes, and a bruised, broken, yet withal savage look that terrified her. He did not speak, but gazed at her like a man recalled from some drugged sleep back to the deeds and memories of the living world.

The old woman held her peace a few moments; then spoke out in her own blunt, dogged fashion.

"Is she to stay?"

Her mind was not awake enough for any curiosity; she only cared to know if the child stayed: only so much as would concern her soup kettle, her kneaded dough, her spun hemp, her household labour.

He turned for a second with the gesture that a trapped fox may make, held fast, yet striving to essay a death grip; then he checked himself, and gave a mute sign of assent, and heaved up a fresh log of wood, and went on with his

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labours, silently. She knew of old his ways too well to venture to ask more. She knew, too, that when he worked like this, fasting and in silence, there had been long and fierce warfare in his soul, and some great evil done for which he sought to make atonement.

So she left him, and passed in to the house, and built up afresh her fire, and swept her chamber out, and fastened up her round black pot to boil, and muttered all the while,—

"Another mouth to feed; another breast to tend."

And the thing was bitter to her; because it gave trouble and took food.

Now, what the letter had been, or who had deciphered it for him, Claudis Flamma never told to any man; and from the little strange creature no utterance could be ever got.

But the child who had come in the night and the snow tarried at Yprès from that time thenceforward.

Claudis Flamma nourished, sheltered, clothed her; but he did all these begrudgingly, harshly, scantily; and he did all these with an acrid hate and scorn, which did not cease, but rather grew with time.

The blow which had been her earliest welcome was not the first that she received from him by many; and whilst she was miserable exceedingly, she showed it, not as children do, but rather like some chained and untamed animal, in fearless stupor and in sudden, sharp ferocity. And this the more because she spoke but a very few words of the language of the people amongst whom she had been brought; her own tongue was one full of round vowels and strange sounds, a tongue unknown to them.

For many weeks he said not one word to her, cast not one look at her; he let her lead the same life that was led by the beetles that crawled in the timbers, or by the pigs that couched and were kicked in the straw. The woman Pitchou gave her such poor scraps of garments or of victuals as she chose; she could crouch in the corner of the hearth where the fire warmth reached; she could sleep in the hay in the little loft under the roof; so much she could do and no more.

After that first moment in which her vague appeal for pity and for rest had been answered by the blow that struck her senseless, the child had never made a moan, nor sought for any solace.

All the winter through she lay curled up on the tiles by the fence, with her arms round the great body of the dog and his head upon her chest; they were both starved, beaten, kicked, and scourged, with brutal words oftentimes; they had the community of misfortune, and they loved one another.

The blow on her head, the coldness of the season, the scanty food that was cast to her, all united to keep her brain stupefied and her body almost motionless. She was like a young bear that is motherless, wounded, frozen, famished, but which, coiled in an almost continual slumber, keeps its blood flowing and its limbs alive. And, like the bear, with the spring she awakened.

When the townsfolk and the peasants came to the mill, and first saw this creature there, with her wondrous vivid hues, and her bronzed half-naked limbs, they regarded her in amazement, and asked the miller whence she came. He set his teeth, and answered ever:

"The woman that bore her was Reine Flamma."

The avowal was a penance set to himself, but to it he never added more; and they feared his bitter temper and his caustic tongue too greatly to press it on him, or even to ask him whether his daughter were with the living or the

dead.

With the unfolding of the young leaves, and the loosening of the frost–bound waters, and the unveiling of the violet and the primrose under the shadows of the wood, all budding life revives, and so did hers. For she could escape from the dead, cold, bitter atmosphere of the silent and loveless house, where her bread was begrudged, and the cudgel was her teacher, out into the freshness and the living sunshine of the young blossoming world, where the birds and the beasts and the tender blue flowers and the curling green boughs were her comrades, and where she could stretch her limbs in freedom, and coil herself among the branches, and steep her limbs in the coolness of waters, and bathe her aching feet in the moisture of rain–filled grasses.

With the spring she arose, the true forest animal she was; wild, fleet, incapable of fear, sure of foot, in unison with all the things of the earth and air, and stirred by them to a strange, dumb, ignorant, passionate gladness.

She had been scarce seen in the winter; with the breaking of the year the people from more distant places, who rode their mules down to mill on their various errands, stared at this child and wondered amongst themselves greatly, and at length asked Claudis Flamma whence she came.

He answered ever, setting hard his teeth:

"The woman that bore her was one accursed, whom men deemed a saint—Reine Flamma."

They dared not ask him more; for many were his debtors.

But when they went away, and gossiped amongst themselves by the wayside well or under the awnings of the market stalls, they said to one another that it was just as they had thought long ago; the creature had been no better than her kind; and they had never credited the fable that God had taken her, though they had humoured the miller because he was aged and in his dotage. Whilst one old woman, a withered and witch–like crone, who had toiled in from the fishing village with a kreel upon her back and the smell of the sea about her rags, heard, standing in the market–place, and laughed, and mocked them, these seers who were so wise after the years had gone, and when the truth was clear.

"You knew, you knew, you knew!" she echoed, with a grin upon her face. "Oh yes! you were so wise! Who, seven years through, said that Reine Flamma was a saint, and taken by the saints into their keeping? And who hissed at me for a foul–mouthed crone when I said that the devil had more to do with her than the good God, and that the black–browed gipsy, with jewels for eyes in his head, like the toad, was the only master to whom she gave herself? Oh–hè, you were so wise!"

She mocked them, and they were ashamed, and held their peace; well knowing that indeed no creature amongst them had ever been esteemed so pure, so chaste, and so honoured of heaven as had been the miller's daughter.

Many remembered the "gipsy with the jewelled eyes," and was those brilliant, fathomless, midnight eyes reproduced in the small rich face of the child whom Reine Flamma, as her own father said, had borne in shame whist they had been glorifying her apotheosis. And it came to be said, as time went on, that this unknown stranger had been the fiend himself, taking human shape for the destruction of one pure soul, and the confusion of all true children of the church.

Legend and tradition still held fast their minds in this remote, ancient, and priest–ridden place; in their belief the devil was still a living power, traversing the earth and air in search of souls, and not seldom triumphing: of metaphor or myth they were not ignorant; Satan to them was a personality, terrific, and oftentimes irresistible, assuming at will shapes grotesque or awful, human or spiritual. Their forefathers had beheld him; why not they?

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So the henhucksters and poulterers, the cider makers and tanners, the fisherfolk from the sea-board, and the peasant proprietors from the country round, came at length in all seriousness to regard the young child at Yprès as a devil-born thing. "She was hell-begotten," they would mutter, when they saw her; and they would cross themselves, and avoid her if they could.

The time had gone by, unhappily, as they considered, when men had been permitted to burn such creatures as this; they knew it and were sorry for it; the world, they thought, had been better when Jews had blazed like torches, and witches had crackled like firewood; such treats were forbidden now, they knew, but many, for all that, thought within themselves that it was a pity it should be so, and that it was mistaken mercy in the age they lived in which forbade the purifying of the earth by fire of such as she.

In the winter time, when they first saw her, unusual floods swept the country, and destroyed much of their property; in the spring which followed there were mildew and sickness everywhere: in the summer there was a long drought, and by consequence there came a bad harvest, and great suffering and scarcity.

There were not a few in the district who attributed all these woes to the advent of the child of darkness, and who murmured openly in their huts and homesteads that no good would befall them so long as this offspring of hell were suffered in their midst.

Since, however, the time was past when the broad market-place could have been filled with a curious, breathless, eager crowd, and the grey cathedral have grown red in the glare of flames fed by a young living body, they held their hands from doing her harm, and said these things only in their own ingle-nooks, and contented themselves with forbidding their children to consort with her, and with drawing their mules to the other side of the road when they met her. They did not mean to be cruel; they only acted in their own self-defence, and dealt with her as their fellow-countrymen dealt with a cagote—"only."

Hence, when, with the reviving year the child's dulled brain awakened, and all the animal activity in her sprang into vigorous action, she found herself shunned, marked, and glanced at with averted looks of mingled dread and scorn. "A daughter of the devil!" she heard again and again muttered as they passed her; she grew to take shelter in this repute as in a fortress, and to be proud, with a savage pride, of her imputed origin.

It made her a little fierce, mute, fearless, reckless, all-daring, and all enduring animal. An animal in her ferocities, her mute instincts, her supreme patience, her physical perfectness of body and of health. Perfect of shape and hue; full of force to resist; ignorant either of hope or fear; desiring only one thing, liberty; with no knowledge, but with unerring instinct.

She was at an age when happier creatures have scarce escaped from their mother's arms; but she had not even thus early a memory of her mother, and she had been shaken off to live or die, to fight or famish, as a young fox whose dam has been flung to the hounds is driven away to starve in the winter woods, or save himself, if he have strength, by slaughter.

She was a tame animal only in one thing:—she took blows uncomplainingly, and as though comprehending that they were her inevitable portion.

"The child of the devil!" they said. In a dumb, half unconscious fashion, this five-year-old creature wondered sometimes why the devil had not been good enough to give her a skin that would not feel, and veins that would not bleed.

She had always been beaten ever since her birth; she was beaten here; she thought it a law of life, as other children think it such to have their mother's kiss and their daily food and nightly prayer.

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Claudis Flamma did after his manner his duty by her. She was to him a thing accursed, possessed, loathsome, imbued with evil from her origin; but he did what he deemed his duty. He clothe her, if scantily; he fed her, if meagrely; he lashed her with all the caustic gibes that came naturally to his tongue; he set her hard tasks to keep her from idleness; he beat her when she did not, and not seldom when she did, them. He dashed holy water on her many times; and used a stick to her without mercy.

After this light he did his duty. That he should hate her, was to fulfil a duty also in his eyes; he had always been told that it was right to abhor the things of darkness; and to him she was a thing of utter darkness, a thing born of the black ruin of a stainless soul, begotten by the pollution and corruption of an infernal tempter.

He never questioned her as to her past—that short past, like the span of an insect's life, which yet had sufficed to gift her with passions, with instincts, with desires, even with memories,—in a word, with character:—a character he could neither change nor break; a thing formed already, for good or for evil, abidingly.

He never spoke to her except in sharp irony or in curt command. He set her hard tasks of bodily labour which she did not dispute, but accomplished so far as her small strength lay, with a mute dogged patience, half ferocity, half passiveness.

In those first winter days of her arrival he called her Folle–Farine; taking the most worthless, the most useless, the most abject, the most despised thing he knew in all his daily life from which to name her; and the name adhered to her, and was the only one by which she was ever known.

Folle–Farine!—as one may say, the Dust.

In time she grew to believe that it was really hers; even as in time she began to forget that strange, deep, rich tongue in which she had babbled her first words, and to know no other tongue than the Norman–French about her.

Yet in her there existed imagination, tenderness, gratitude, and a certain wild and true nobility, though the old man Flamma would never have looked for them, never have believed in them. She was devil born: she was of devil nature in his eyes.

Upon his mill–ditch, foul and foetid, refuse would sometimes gather, and receiving the seed of the lily, would give birth to blossoms born stainless out of corruption: but the allegory had no meaning for him. Had any one pointed it out to him he would have taken the speaker into his orchard, and said:

"Will the crab bear a fruit not bitter? Will the nightshade give out sweetness and honey? Fool!—as the stem so the branch, as the sap so the blossom."

And this fruit of sin and shame was poison in his sight.

CHAPTER IV.

THE little dim mind of the five–year–old child was not a blank; it was indeed filled to overflowing with pictures of a country that her tongue could not have told of, even had she spoken the language of the people amidst whom she had been cast.

A land altogether unlike that in which she had been set down on that bitter night of snow and storm: a land noble and wild, and full of colour, broken into vast heights and narrow valleys, clothed with green beechwoods and with forests of oak and of walnut, filled with the noise of torrents leaping from crag to crag, and of brown mountain streams rushing, broad and angry, through wooded ravines. A land made beautiful by moss–grown water–mills,

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and lofty greenways of grey rock; and still shadowy pools, in which the bright fish leaped, and mules' bells that rang drowsily through leafy gorges; and limestone crags that pierced the clouds, spire–like, and fantastic in a thousand shapes; and high blue crests of snow–topped mountains, whose pinnacles glowed to the divinest flush of rose and amber with the setting of the sun.

This land she remembered vaguely, yet gloriously, as the splendours of a dream of Paradise rest on the brain of some young sleeper waking in squalor, cold, and pain. But the people of the place she had been brought to could not comprehend her few, shy, sullen words, and her strange imperfect trills of song; and she could not tell them that this land had been no realm enchanted of fairy or of fiend, but only the forest region of the Liébana.

Thither, one rich autumn day, a tribe of Spanish gypsies had made their camp. They were a score in all; they held themselves one of the noblest branches of their wide family; they were people with pure Eastern blood in them, and all the grace and the gravity of the Oriental in their forms and postures.

They stole horses and sheep; they harried cattle; they stopped the mules in the passes, and lightened their load of wine–skins: they entered the posada, when they deigned to enter one at all, with neither civil question nor show of purse, but with a gleam of the teeth, like a threatening dog, and the flash of the knife, half drawn out of the girdle. They were low thieves and mean liars; wild daredevils and loose livers; loathers of labour and lovers of idle days and plundering nights; yet they were beautiful, with the noble, calm, scornful beauty of the East, and they wore their rags with an air that was in itself an empire.

They could play, too, in heavenly fashion, on their old three–stringed viols; and when their woman danced on the sward by moonlight, under the broken shadows of some Moorish ruin, clanging high their tambourines above their graceful heads, and tossing the shining sequins that bound their heavy hair, the muleteer or the herdsman, seeing them from afar, shook with fear, and thought of the tales told him in his childhood by his grandam of the spirits of the dead Moors that rose to revelry, at midnight, in the haunts of their old lost kingdom.

Amongst them was a man yet more handsome than the rest, taller and lither still; wondrous at leaping and wrestling, and all athletic things; surest of any to win a woman, to tame a horse, to strike down a bull at a blow, to silence an angry group at a wineshop with a single glance of his terrible eyes.

His name was Taric.

He had left them often to wander by himself into many countries, and at times when, by talent or by terrorism, he had netted gold enough to play the fool to his fancy, he had gone to some strange city, where credulity and luxury prevailed, and there had lived like a prince, as his own phrase ran, and gamed and intrigued, and feasted, and roystered right royally whilst his gains lasted.

Those spent, he would always return awhile, and lead the common, roving, thieving life of his friends and brethren, till the fit of ambition or the run of luck were again on him. Then his people would afresh lose sight of him to light on him, velvet–clad, and wine–bibbing, in some painter's den in some foreign town, or welcomed him ragged, famished, and foot–weary, on their own sunburnt sierras.

And the mystery of his ways endeared him to them; and they made him welcome whenever he returned, and never quarrelled with him for his faithlessness; but if there were anything wilder or wickeder, bolder or keener, on hand than was usual, his tribe would always say—"Let Taric lead."

One day their camp was made in a gorge under the great shadows of the Picos da Europa, a place that they loved much, and settled in often, finding the chestnut woods and the cliff caverns fair for shelter, the heather abounding in grouse, and the pools full of trout, fair for feeding. That day Taric returned from a year–long absence, suddenly standing, dark and mighty, between them and the light, as they lay around their soup kettle, awaiting

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their evening meal.

"There is a woman in labour, a league back; by the great cork–tree, against the bridge;" he said to them. "Go to her some of you."

And, with a look to the women which singled out two for the errand, he stretched himself in the warmth of the fire, and helped himself to the soup, and lay quiet, vouchsafing them never a word, but playing meaningly with the knife handle thrust into this shirt; for he saw that some of the men were about to oppose his share of a common meal which he had not earned by a common right.

It was Taric—a name of some terror came to their fierce souls.

Taric, the strongest and fleetest and most well favoured of them all; Taric, who had slain the bull that all the matadors had failed to daunt; Taric, who had torn up the young elm, when they needed a bridge over a flood, as easily as a child plucks up a reed; Taric, who had stopped the fiercest contrabandista in all those parts, and cut the man's throat with no more ado than a butcher slits a lamb's.

So they were silent, and let him take his portion of the fire and of the broth, and of the thin red wine.

Meanwhile the two gypsies, Quità and Zarâ, went on their quest, and found things as he had said.

Under the great cork–tree, where the grass was long and damp, and the wood grew thickly, and an old rude bridge of unhewn blocks of rock spanned, with one arch, the river as it rushed downward from its limestone bed aloft, they found a woman just dead, and a child just born.

Quità looked the woman all over hastily, to see if, by any chance, any gold or jewels might be one her; there were none. There was only an ivory cross on her chest, which Quità drew off and hid. Quità covered her with a few boughs and left her.

Zarâ wrapped the child in a bit of her woolen skirt, and held it warm in her breast, and hastened to the camp with it.

"She is dead, Taric," said Quità, meaning the woman she had left.

He nodded his handsome head.

"This is yours, Taric?" said Zarâ, meaning the child she held.

He nodded again, and drank another drop of wine, and stretched himself.

"What shall we do with her?" asked Quità.

"Let her lie there," he answered her.

"What shall we do with it?" asked Zarâ.

He laughed, and drew his knife against own brown throat in a significant gesture.

Zarâ said no word to him, but she went away with the child under some branches, on which was hung a tattered piece of awning, orange striped, that marked her own especial resting place.

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Out of the group about the fire, one man, rising, advanced, and looked Taric full in the eyes.

"Has the woman died by foul means?"

Taric, who never let any living soul molest or menace him, answered without offence, and with a savage candour.

"No—that I swear. I used no foul play against her. Go look at her if you like. I loved her well enough while she lived. But what does that matter? She is dead. So best. Women are as many as the mulberries.

"You loved her, and you will let the wolves eat her body?"

Taric laughed.

"There are few wolves in the Liébana. Go and bury her if you choose, Phratos."

"I will," the other answered him; and he took his way to the cork–tree by the bridge.

The man who spoke was called Phratos.

He was not like his tribe in anything: except in a mutual love for a life that wandered always, and was to no man responsible, and needed no roof–tree, and wanted no settled habitation, but preferred to dwell wild with the roe and the coney, and to be hungry and unclad, rather than to eat the good things of the earth in submission and in durance.

He had not their physical perfection: an accident at his birth had made his spine misshapen, and his gait halting. His features would have been grotesque in their ugliness, except for the sweet pathos of the eyes and the gay archness of the mouth.

Amongst a race noted for its singular beauty of face and form Phratos alone was deformed and unlovely; and yet both deformity and unloveliness were in a way poetic and uncommon; and in his rough sheepskin garments, knotted to his waist with a leathern thong, and with his thick tangled hair falling down on his shoulders, they were rather the deformity of the brake–haunting faun, the unloveliness of the moon–dancing satyr, than those of a man and a vagrant. With the likeness he had the temper of the old dead gods of the forest and rivers; he loved music, and could make it, in all its innumerable signs and songs, give a voice to all creatures and things of the world, of the waters and the woodlands; and for many things he was sorrowful continually, and for other things he for ever laughed and was glad.

Though he was misshapen, and even, as some said, not altogether straight in his wits, yet his kin honoured him.

For he could draw music from the rude strings of his old viol that surpassed their own melodies as far as the shining of the sun on the summits of the Europa surpassed the trembling of the little lamps under the painted road–side Calvaries.

He was only a gypsy; he only played as the fancy moved him, by a bright fountain at a noonday halt, under the ruined arches of a Saracenic temple; before the tawny gleam of a vast dim plain at sunrise; in a cool shadowy court, where the vines shut out all light; beneath a balcony at night, when the moonbeams gleamed on some fair unknown face, thrust for a moment from the darkness through the white magnolia flowers. Yet he played in suchwise as makes women weep, and holds children and dogs still to listen, and moves grown men to shade their eyes with their hands, and think of old dead times, when they played and prayed at their mothers' knees.

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And his music had so spoken to himself that, although true to his tribe and all their traditions, loving the vagrant life in the open air, and being incapable of pursuing any other, he yet neither stole nor slew, neither tricked nor lied, but found his way vaguely to honesty and candour, and, having found them, clove to them, so that none could turn him: living on such scant gains as were thrown to him for his music from balconies and posada windows and wine– house doors in the hamlets and towns through which he passed, and making a handful of pulse and a slice of melon, a couch of leaves and a draught of water, suffice to him for his few and simple wants.

His people reproached him, indeed, with demeaning their race by taking payment in lieu of making thefts; and they mocked him often, and taunted him, though in a manner they all loved him,—the reckless and bloodstained Taric most, perhaps, of all. But he would never quarrel with them, neither would he give over his strange ways which so incensed them, and with time they saw that Phratos was a gifted fool, who like other mad simple creatures, had best be left to go on his own way unmolested and without contradiction.

If, too, they had driven him from their midst, they would have missed his music sorely; that music which awoke them at break of day soaring up through their roof of chestnut leaves like a lark's song piercing the skies.

Phratos came now to the dead woman, and drew off the boughs, and looked at her. She was quite dead. She had died where she had first sunk down, unable to reach her promised resting place. It was a damp green nook on the edge of the bright mountain river, at the entrance of that narrow gorge in which the encampment had been made.

The face, which was white and young, lay upward, with the shadows of the flickering foliage on it; and the eyes, which Quità had not closed, were large and blue; her hair, which was long and brown, was loose, and had got wet amongst the grass, and had little buds of flowers and stray golden leaves twisted in it.

Phratos felt sorrow for her as he looked.

He could imagine her history.

Taric, whom many women had loved, had besought many a one thus to share his fierce free life for a little space, and then drift away out of it by chance, or be driven away from it by his fickle passions, or be taken away like this woman by death.

In her bosom, slipped in her clothes, was a letter. It was written in a tongue he did not know. He held it awhile, thinking, then he folded it up and put it in his girdle,—it might be of use, who could tell? There was the child, there, that might live; unless the camp broke up and Zarâ left it under a walnut tree to die, with the last butterflies of the fading summer, which was in all likelihood all she would do.

Nevertheless he kept the letter, and when he had looked long enough at the dead creature, he turned to the tools he had brought with him, and set patiently to make her grave.

He could only work slowly, for he was weak of body, and his infirmity made all manual toil painful to him. His task was hard, even though the earth was so soft from recent heavy rains.

The sun set whist he was still engaged on it; and it was quite nightfall before he had fully accomplished it. When the grave was ready he filled it carefully with the golden leaves that had fallen, and the thick many–coloured mosses that covered the ground like a carpet.

Then he laid the body tenderly down within that forest shroud, and, with the moss like a winding sheet between it and the earth which had to fall on it, he committed the dead woman to her resting place.

It did not seem strange to him, or awful, to leave her there.

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He was a gypsy, and to him a grave under a forest tree and by a mountain stream seemed the most natural rest at last that any creature could desire or claim. No rites seemed needful to him, and no sense of any neglect, cruel or unfitting, jarred on him in thus leaving her in her loneliness, with only the cry of the bittern or the bell of the wild roe as a requiem.

Yet a certain sorrow for this unknown and lost life was on him, Bohemian though he was, as he took up his mattock and turned away, and went backward down the gorge, and left her to lie there for ever, through rain and sunshine, through wind and storm, through the calm of the summer and the flush of autumn, and the wildness of the winter, when the swollen stream should sweep above her tomb, and the famished beasts of the hills would lift up their voices around it.

When he reached the camp, he gave the letter to Taric.

Taric, knowing the tongue it was written in, and being able to understand the character, looked at it, and read it through by the light of the flaming wood. When he had done so he tossed it behind, in among the boughs, in scorn.

"The poor fool's prayer to the brute that she hated!" he said, with a scoff.

Phratos lifted up the letter and kept it.

In a later time he found some one who could decipher it for him.

It was the letter of Reine Flamma to the miller at Yprès, telling him the brief story of her fatal passion, and imploring from him mercy to her unborn child should it survive her and be ever taken to him.

Remorse and absence had softened to her the harshness and the meanness of her father's character; she only remembered that he had loved her, and had deemed her pure and faithful as the saints of God. There was no word in the appeal by which it could have been inferred that Claudis Flamma had been other than a man much wronged and loving much, patient of heart, and without blame in his simple life.

Phratos took the letter and cherished it. He thought it might some day serve her offspring. This old man's vengeance could not, he thought, be so cruel to the child as might be the curse and the knife of Taric.

"She must have been beautiful?" said Phratos to him, after a while, that night; "and you care no more for her than that."

Taric stretched his mighty limbs in the warmth of the flame, and made his answer:

"There will be as good grapes on the vines next year as any we gathered this. What does it signify?—she was only a woman.

"She loved me; she thought me a god, a devil, a prince, a chief,—all manner of things;—the people thought so, too. She was sick of her life. She was sick of the priests and the beads, and the mill and the market. She was fair to look at, and the fools called her a saint. When a woman is young and has beauty, it is dull to be worshipped—in that way.

"I met her in the wood one summer night. The sun was setting. I do not know why I cared for her—I did. She was like a tall white lily; these women of ours are only great tawny sunflowers.

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"She was pure and straight of life; she believed in heaven and hell; she was innocent as a child unborn; it was tempting to kill all that. It is so easy to kill it when a woman loves you. I taught her what passion and freedom and pleasure and torment all meant. She came with me,—after a struggle, a hard one. I kept her loyally while the gold lasted; that I swear. I took her to many cities. I let her have jewels and music, and silk dresses, and fine linen. I was good to her; that I swear.

"But after a bit she pined, and grew dull again, and wept in secret, and at times I caught her praying to the white cross which she wore on her breast. That made me mad. I cursed her and beat her. She never said anything; she seemed only to love me more, and that made me more mad.

"Then I got poor again, and I had to sell her things one by one. Not that she minded that, she would have sold her soul for me. We wandered north and south; and I made money sometimes by the dice, or by breaking a horse, or by fooling a woman, or by snatching a jewel off one of their dolls in their churches; and I wanted to get rid of her, and I could not tell how. I had not the heart to kill her outright.

"But she never said a rough word, you know, and that makes a man mad. Maddalena or Kara or Rachel—any of them,—would have flown and struck a knife at me, and hissed like a snake, and there would have been blows and furious words and bloodshed; and then we should have kissed, and been lovers again, fast and fierce. But a woman who is quiet, and only looks at you with great, sad, soft eyes, when you strike her,—what is one to do?

"We were horribly poor at last; we slept in barns and haylofts; we ate berries and drank the brook water. She grew weak, and could hardly walk. Many I time I have been tempted to let her lie and die in the hedgeway or on the plains, and I did not,—one is so foolish sometimes for sake of a woman. She knew she was a burden and curse to me,—I may have said so, perhaps; I do not remember.

"At last I heard of you in the Liébana, from a tribe we fell in with on the other side of the mountains, and so we travelled her on foot. I thought she would have got to the women before her hour arrived. But she fell down there, and could not stir; and so the end came. It is best as it is. She was wretched, and what could I do with a woman like that, who would never hearken to another lover, nor give up her dead God on his cross, nor take so much as a broken crust if it were stolen, nor even show her beauty to a sculptor to be carved in stone—for I tried to make her do that, and she would not. It is best as it is. If she had lived we could have done nothing with her. And yet I see her sometimes as I saw her that night, so white and so calm, in the little green wood, as the sun set—"

His voice ceased, and he took up a horn full of vino clarete; and drained it, and was very still, stretching his limbs to bask in the heat of the fire. The wine had loosened his tongue, and he had spoken from his heart,—truthfully.

Phratos, his only hearer, was silent.

He was thinking of the great blue sightless eyes that he had closed, and of the loose brown hair on which he had flung the wet leaves and the earth-clogged mosses.

"The child lives?" he said, at length.

Taric, who was sinking to sleep after the long fatigues of a heavy tramp through mountain passes, stirred sullenly with an oath.

"Let it go to hell," he made answer.

And these were the only words of baptism that were spoken over the nameless daughter of Taric the gypsy and of Reine Flamma.

Folle–Farine

That night Phratos called out to him in the moonlight the woman Zarâ, who came from under her tent, and stood under the glistening leaves, strong and handsome, with shining eyes and snowy teeth.

"The child lives still?" he asked.

Zarâ nodded her head.

"You will try and keep it alive?" he pursued.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"What is the use? Taric would rather it were dead."

"What matter what Taric wishes. Living or dead, it will not hinder him. A child more or less with us, what is it? Only a draught of goat's milk or a handful of meal. So little; it cannot be felt. You have a child of your own, Zarâ: you cared for it?"

"Yes," she answered, with a sudden softening gleam of her bright savage eyes.

She had a brown, strong, year–old boy, who kicked his naked limbs on the sward with joy at Phratos' music.

"Then have pity on the motherless creature," said Phratos, wooingly. "I buried that dead woman; and her eyes, though there was no sight in them, still seemed to pray to mine—and to pray for her child. Be merciful, Zarâ. Let the child have the warmth of your arms and the defence of your strength. Be merciful, Zarâ; and your seed shall multiply and increase tenfold, and shall be stately and strong, and shall spread as the branches of the plane–trees, on which the storm spends its fury in vain, and beneath which all things of the earth can find refuge. For never was a woman's pity fruitless, nor the fair deeds of her days without recompense."

Zarâ listened quietly, as the dreamy, poetic, persuasive words stole on her ear like music. Like the rest of her people, she half believed in him as a seer and prophet; her teeth shone out in a soft sudden smile.

"You are always a fool, Phratos," she said; "but it shall be as you fancy."

And she went in out of the moonlit leaves and the clear cool, autumn night into the little dark stifling tent, where the new–born child had been laid away in a corner upon a rough–and–ready bed of gathered dusky fir–needles.

"It is a little cub, not worth the saving; and its dam was not of our people," she said to herself, as she lifted the wailing and alien creature to her bosom.

"It is for you, my angel, that I do it," she murmured, looking at the sleeping face of her own son.

Outside the tent the sweet strains of Phratos' music rose sighing and soft; and mingling, as sounds mingle in a dream, with the murmurs of the forest leaves and the rushing of the mountain river. He gave her the only payment in his power.

Zarâ, hushing the strange child at her breast, listened, and was half–touched, half–angered.

"Why should he play for this little stray thing, when he never played once for you, my glory?" she said to her son, as she put the dead woman's child roughly away, and took him up in its stead, to beat together in play his rosy hands and cover his mouth with kisses.

Folle–Farine

For even from these, the world's outcasts, this new life of a few hours' span was rejected as unworthy and despised.

Nevertheless, the music played on through the still forest night; and nevertheless, the child grew and thrived.

The tribe of Taric abode in the Liébana or in the adjacent country along the banks of the Deva during the space of four years and more, scarcely losing in that time the sight, either from near or far, of the rosy peaks of the Europa.

He did not abide with them; he quarrelled with them violently concerning some division of a capture of wineskins, and went on his own way to distant provinces and cities; to the gambling and the roystering, the woman–fooling and the bull–fighting, that his soul lusted after always.

His daughter he left to dwell in the tent of Zarâ, and under the defence of Phratos.

Once or twice, in sojourns of a night or two amongst his own people, as the young creature grew in stature and strength, Taric had glanced at her, and called her to him, and felt the liveness of her limbs and the weight of her hair, and laughed as he thrust her from him, thinking that, in time to come, she—who would know nothing of her mother's dead God on the cross, and of her mother's idle weak scruples,—might bring him a fair provision in his years of age, when his hand should have lost its weight against men and his form its goodness in the sight of women.

Once or twice he had given her a kick of his foot, or blow with his leathern whip, when she crawled in the grass too near his path, or lay asleep in the sun as he chanced to pass by her.

Otherwise he had nought to do with her, absent or present; otherwise he left her to chance and the devil, who were, as he said, according to the Christians, the natural patrons and sponsors of all love children. Chance and the Devil, however, had not wholly their way in the Liébana; for beside them there was Phratos.

Phratos never abandoned her.

Under the wolfskin and pine boughs of Zarâ's tent there was misery very often.

Zarâ had a fresh son born to her with each succeeding year; and having a besotted love for her own offspring, had little but indifference and blows for the stranger who shared their bed and food. Her children, brown and curly, naked and strong, fought one another like panther cubs, and rode in a cluster like red mountain–ash berries in the sheep–skin round her waist, and drank by turns out of the pitcher of broth, and slept all together on dry ferns and mosses, rolled in warm balls one in another like young bears.

But the child who had no affinity with them, who was not even wholly of their tribe, but had in her what they deemed the taint of gentile blood, was not allowed to gnaw her bare bone or her ripe fig in peace if they wished for it; was never carried with them in the sheep–skin nest, but left to totter after in the dust or mud as best she might; was forced to wait for the leavings in the pitcher, or go without if leavings there were none; and was kicked away by the sturdy limbs of these young males when she tried to creep for warmth's sake in amongst them on their fern bed. But she minded all this little; since in the Liébana there was Phratos.

Phratos was always good to her. The prayer which those piteous dead eyes had made he always answered. He had always pity for the child.

Many a time, but for his remembrance, she would have starved outright or died of cold in those wild winters, when the tribe huddled together in the caverns of the limestone, and the snow–drifts were driven up by northern winds and blocked them there for many days. Many a time but for his aid she would have dropped on their march

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and been left to perish as she might on the long sunburnt roads, in the arid mid–summers, when they gypsies plodded on their dusty way through the sinuous windings of hill–side paths and along the rough stones of dried–up watercourses, in gorges and passages known alone to them and the wild deer.

When her throat was parched with the torment of long thirst, it was he who raised her to drink from the rill in the rock, high above, to which the mothers lifted their eager children leaving her to gasp and gaze unpitied. When she was driven away from the noonday meal by the hungry and clamorous youngsters, who would admit no share of their partridge broth and stewed lentils, it was he who bruised the maize between the stones for her eating, and gathered for her the wild fruit of the quince and the mulberry.

When the sons of Zarâ had kicked and bruised and spurned her from the tent, he would lead her away to some shadowy place where the leaves grew thickly, and play her such glad and bouyant tunes that the laughter seemed to bubble from the listening brooks and ripple amongst the swinging boughs, and make the wild hare skip with joy, and draw the timid lizard from his hole to frolic. And when their way was long, and the stony paths cruel to her little bare feet, he would carry her aloft on his misshapen shoulders, where his old viol always travelled; and would beguile the steep way with a thousand quaint, soft, grotesque conceits of all the flowers and leaves and birds and animals: talking rather to himself than her, yet talking with a tender fancifulness, half humour and half pathos, that soothed her tired sense like a lullaby. Hence it came to pass that the sole creature whom she loved and who had pity for her was the uncouth, crippled, gay, sad, gentle, dauntless creature whom his tribe had always held half–wittol and half–seer.

Thus the life in the hills of the Liébana went on till the child of Taric had entered her sixth year.

She had both beauty and grace; she had the old Moresco loveliness in its higher type; she was fleet as the roe, strong as the young lizard, wild as the wood–partridge on the wing; she had grace of limb from the postures and dances with which she taught herself to keep time to the sweet, fantastic music of the viol; she was shy and sullen, and fierce and savage, to all save himself, for the hand of every other was against her; but to him, she was docile as the dove to the hand that feeds it. He had given her a string of bright sequins to hang on her hair, and when the peasants of the mountains and valleys saw her by the edge of some green woodland pool, whirling by moonlight to the sound of his melodies, they took her to be some unearthly spirit, and told wonderful things over their garlic of the elf crowned with stars they had seen dancing on a round lotus leaf in the hush of the night.

In the Liébana she was beaten often, hungry almost always, cursed fiercely, driven away by the mothers, mocked and flouted by the children; and this taught her silence and ferocity. Yet in the Liébana she was happy, for one creature loved her, and she was free—free to lie in the long grass, to bathe in the still pools, to watch the wild things of the woods, to wander ankle deep in forest blossoms, to sleep under the rocking of pines, to run against the sweet force of the wind, to climb the trees and swing cradled in leaves, and to look far away at the snow on the mountains, and to dream, and to love, and to be content in dreaming and loving, their mystical glory that awoke with the sun.

One day in the red autumn, Taric came; he had been wholly absent more than two years.

He was superb to the sight still, with matchless splendour of face and form, but his carriage was more reckless and disordered than ever, and in his gem–like and night–black eyes, there was a look of cunning and of subtle ferocity new to them.

His life had gone hardly with him, and to the indolence, the passions, the rapacity, the slothful sensuality of the gypsy—who had retained all the vices of his race whilst losing their virtues of simplicity in living, and of endurance under hardship—the gall of a sharp poverty had become unendurable: and to live without dice, and women, and wine, and boastful brawling, seemed to him to be worse than any death.

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The day he returned, they were still camped in the Liébana; in one of its narrow gorges, overhung with a thick growth of trees, and coursed through by a headlong hillstream, that spread itself into darkling breadths and leafy pools, in which the fish were astir under great snowy lilies and a tangled web of water plants.

He strode into the midst of them, as they sat round their camp–fire lit beneath a shelf of rock, as his wont was; and was welcomed and fed and plied with such as they had, with that mixture of sullen respect and incurable attachment which his tribe preserved, through all their quarrels, for this, the finest and the fiercest, the most fickle and the most faithless of them all.

He gorged himself, and drank, and said little.

When the meal was done, the young of the tribe scattered themselves in the red evening light under the great walnuts; some at feud, some at play.

"Which is mine?" he asked, surveying the children. They showed her to him. The sequins were round her head; she swung on a bough of ash; the pool beneath mirrored her; she was singing as children sing, without words, yet musically and gladly, catching at the fireflies that danced above her in the leaves.

"Can she dance?" he asked lazily of them.

"In her own fashion,—as a flower in the wind," Phratos answered him, with a smile; and willing to woo for her the good graces of her father, he slung his viol off his shoulders and tuned it, and beckoned the child.

She came, knowing nothing who Taric was; he was only to her a fierce–eyed man like the rest, who would beat her, most likely, if she stood between him and the sun, or overturned by mischance his horn of liquor.

Phratos played, and all the gypsy children, as their wont was, danced.

But she danced all alone, and with a grace and a fire that surpassed theirs. She was only a baby still; she had only her quick ear to guide her, and her only teacher was such inborn instinct as makes the birds sing and the young kids gambol.

Yet she danced with a wondrous subtlety and intensity of ardour beyond her years; her small brown limbs glancing like bronze in the fire–glow, the sequins flashing in her flying hair, and her form flung high in air, like a bird on the wing, or a leaf on the wind; never still, never ceasing to dart, and to leap, and to whirl, and to sway, yet always with a sweet dreamy indolence, even in her fiery unrest.

Taric watched her under his bent brow until the music ceased, and she dropped on the grass spent and panting like a swallow after a long ocean flight.

"She will do," he muttered.

"What is it you mean with the child?" some women asked.

Taric laughed.

"The little vermin is good for a gold piece or two," he answered.

Phratos said nothing, but he heard.

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After awhile the camp was still; the gypsies slept. Two or three of their men went out to try and harry cattle by the light of the moon if they should be in luck; two others went forth to set snares for the wood partridges and rabbits; the rest slumbered soundly, the dogs curled to a watching sleep of vigilant guard in their midst.

Taric alone sat by the dying fire. When all was very quiet, and the stars were clear in the midnight skies, the woman Zarâ stole out of her tent to him.

"You signed to me," she said to him in a low voice. "You want the child killed?"

Taric showed his white teeth like a wolf.

"Not I; what should I gain?"

"What is it you want, then, with her?"

"I mean to take her, that is all.—See here—a month ago, on the other side of the mountains, I met a fantoccini player. It was at a wine–shop, hard by Luzarches. He had a woman–child with him who danced to his music, and whom the people praised for her beauty, and who anticked like a dancing dog, and who made a great deal of silver. We got friends, he and I. At the week's end the brat died: some sickness of the throat, they said. Her master tore his hair and raved; the little wretch was worth handfuls of coin to him. For such another he would give twelve gold pieces. He shall have her. She will dance for him and me; there is plenty to be made in that way. The women are fools over a handsome child; they open their larders and their purses. I shall take her away before sunrise; he says he teaches them in seven days, by starving them and giving them the stick. She will dance while she is a child. Later on—there are the theatres; she will be strong and handsome, and in the great cities, now, a woman's comeliness is as a mine of gold ore. I shall take her away by sunrise."

"To sell her?"

The hard fierce heart of Zarâ rebelled against him; she had no tenderness save for her own offspring, and she had maltreated the stray child many a time; yet the proud liberty and the savage chastity of her race were roused against him by his words.

Taric laughed again.

"Surely; why not? I will make a dancing dog of her for the peasants' pastime; and in time she will make dancing dogs of the nobles and the princes for her own sport. It is a brave life—none better."

The gypsy woman stood, astonished and irresolute. If he had flung his child in the river, or thrown her off a rock, he would have less offended the instincts and prejudices of her clan.

"What will Phratos say?" she asked at length.

"Phratos? A rotten fig for Phratos! What can he say—or do? The little beast is mine; I can wring its neck if I choose, and if it refuse to pipe when we play for it, I will."

The woman sought in vain to dissuade him; he was inflexible. She left him at last, telling herself that it was no business of hers. He had a right to do what he chose with his own. So went down and lay down amongst her brown–faced boys, and was indifferent, and slept.

Taric likewise slept, upon a pile of moss under the ledge of the rock, lulled by the heat of the fire, which, ere lying down, he had fed with fresh boughs of resinous wood.

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When all was quite still, and his deep quiet breathing told that his slumber was not one easily broken, a man softly rose from the ground and threw off a mass of dead leaves that had covered him, and stood erect, a dark, strange, misshapen figure, in the moonlight: it was Phratos.

He had heard, and understood all that Taric meant for the present and the future of the child: and he knew that when Taric vowed to do a thing for his own gain, it were easier to uproot the chain of the Europa than to turn him aside from his purpose.

"It was my doing!" said Phratos to himself bitterly, as he stood there, and his heart was sick and sore in him, as with self–reproach for a crime.

He thought awhile, standing still in the hush of the midnight; then he went softly, with a footfall that did not waken a dog, and lifted up the skins of Zarâ's tent as they hung over the fir–poles. The moonbeams slanting through the foliage strayed in, and showed him the woman, sleeping among her rosy robust children, like a mastiff with her litter of tawny pups; and away from them, on the bare ground closer to the entrance, the slumbering form of the young daughter of Taric.

She woke as he touched her, opening bright bewildered eyes.

"Hush! it is I, Phratos," he murmured over her, and the stifled cry died on her lips.

He lifted her up in his arms and left the tent with her, and dropped the curtain of sheepskin, and went out into the clear, crisp, autumn night. Her eyes had closed again, and her head had sunk on his shoulder heavy with sleep; she had not tried to keep awake one moment after knowing that it was Phratos who had come for her; she loved him, and in his hold feared nothing.

Taric lay on the ledge of the rock, deaf with the torpor of a half–drunken slumber, dreaming gloomily; his hand playing in his dreams with the knife that was thrust in his waist–band.

Phratos stepped gently past him, and through the outstretched forms of the dogs and men, and across the died–out embers of the fire, over which the emptied soup–kettle still swung, as the night–breeze blew to and fro its chain. No one heard him.

He went out from their circle and down the path of the gorge in silence, carrying the child. She was folded in a piece of sheepskin, and in her hair there were still sequins. They glittered in the white light as he went; as the wind blew, it touched the chords of the viol on his shoulder, and struck a faint musical sighing sound from them.

"Is it morning?" the child murmured, half asleep.

"No, dear; it is night," he answered her, and she was content and slept again—the strings of the viol sending a soft whisper in her drowsy ear, each time that the breeze arose and swept across them.

When the morning came, it found him far on his road, leaving behind him the Liébana.

There followed a bright month of autumn weather. The child was happy as she had never been.

They moved on continually through the plains and the fields, the hills and the woods, the hamlets and the cities; but she and the viol were never weary. They rode aloft whist he toiled on. Yet neither was he weary, for the viol murmured in the wind, and the child laughed in the sunshine.

It was late in the year.

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The earth and the sky were a blaze of russet and purple, and scarlet and gold. The air was keen and swift, and strong like wine. A summer fragrance blended with a winter frost. The grape harvest had been gathered in, and had been plentiful, and the people were liberal and of good humour.

Sometimes before a wine–shop or beneath a balcony, or in a broad market–square at evening, Phratos played; and the silver and copper coins were dropped fast to him. When he had enough by him to get a crust for himself, and milk and fruit for her, he did not pause to play, but moved on resolutely all the day, resting at night only.

He bought her a little garment of red foxes' furs; her head and feet were bare. She bathed in clear running waters, and slept in a nest of hay. She saw vast towers, and wondrous spires, and strange piles of wood and stone, and rivers spanned by arches, and great forests half leafless, and plains red in stormy sunset light, and towns that lay hid in soft gold mists of vapour; and saw all these as in a dream, herself borne high in air, wrapped warm in fur, and lulled by the sweet familiar fraternity of the old viol. She asked no questions, she was content, like a mole or a dormouse; she was not beaten or mocked, she was never hungry nor cold; no one cursed her, and she was with Phratos.

It takes time to go on foot across a great country, and Phratos was nearly always on foot.

Now and then he gave a coin or two, or a tune or two, for a lift on some straw–laden waggon, or some mule–cart full of pottery or of vegetables, that was crawling on its slow way through the plains of the marshy lands, or the poplar lined leagues of the public highways. But as a rule he plodded on by himself, shunning the people of his own race, and shunned in return by the ordinary populace of the places through which he travelled. For they knew him to be a Spanish gypsy, by his skin and his garb and his language, and by the starry–eyed Arab–faced child who ran by his side in her red fur and her flashing sequins.

"There is a curse written against all honest folk on every one of those shaking coins," the peasants muttered as she passed them.

She did not comprehend their sayings, for she knew none but her gypsy tongue, and that only very imperfectly; but she knew by their glance that they meant that she was something evil; and she gripped tighter Phratos' hand—half–terrified, half–triumphant.

The weather grew colder and the ground harder. The golden and scarlet glories of the south and of the west, their red leafage and purple flowers, gorgeous sunsets and leaping waters, gave place to the level pastures, pale skies, leafless woods, and dim grey tints of the northerly lands.

The frosts became sharp, and mists that came from unseen seas enveloped them. There were marvelous old towns; cathedral spires that arose, ethereal as vapour; still dusky cities, aged with many centuries, that seemed to sleep eternally in the watery halo of the fog; green cultivated hills, from whose smooth brows the earth–touching clouds seemed never to lift themselves; straight sluggish streams, that flowed with leisurely laziness through broad flat meadow lands, white with snow and obscure with vapour. For these they had exchanged the pomp of dying foliage, the glory of crimson fruits, the fierce rush of the mistral, the odours of the noël–born violets, the fantastic shapes of the aloes and olives rasing their dark spears and their silvery network against the amber fires of a winter dawn in the rich south–west.

The child was chilled, oppressed, vaguely awe–struck, and disquieted; but she said nothing; Phratos was there and the viol.

She missed the red forests and the leaping torrents, and the prickly fruits, and the smell of the violets and the vineyards, and the wild shapes of the cactus, and the old myrtles that were hoary and contorted with age. But she did not complain nor ask any questions; she had supreme faith in Phratos.

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One night, at the close of a black day in mid–winter, the sharpest and hardest in cold that hey had ever encountered, they passed through a little town whose roadways were mostly canals, and whose spires and roofs and pinnacles and turrets and towers were all beautiful with the poetry and the majesty of a long perished age.

The day had been bitter; there was snow everywhere; great blocks of ice choked up the water; the belfry chimes rang shrilly through the rarified air; the few folks that were astir were wrapped in wool or sheepskin; through the casements there glowed the ruddy flush of burning logs; and the muffled watchmen passing to and fro in antique custom on their rounds called out, under the closed houses, that it was the eight of the night in a heavy snowstorm.

Phratos paused in the town at an old hostelry to give the child a hot drink of milk and a roll of rye bread. There he asked the way the wood and the mill of Yprès.

They told it him sullenly and suspiciously: since for a wild gypsy of Spain the shrewd, thrifty, plain people of the north had no liking.

He thanked them, and went on his way, out of the barriers of the little town along a road by the river towards the country.

"Art thou cold, dear?" he asked her, with more tenderness than common sense in his voice.

The child shivered under her little fur skin, which would not keep out the searching of the hurricane and the driving of the snowflakes; but she drew her breath quickly, and answered him, "No."

They came to a little wood, leafless and black in the gloomy night; a dead crow swung in their faces on a swaying pear–tree; the roar of the mill–stream loudly filled what otherwise would have been an intense silence.

He made his way in by a little wicket, through an orchard and through a garden, and so to the front of the mill–house. The shutters were not closed; through the driving of the snow he could see within. It looked to him—a houseless wanderer from his youth up—strangely warm and safe and still.

An old man sat on one side of the wide hearth; an old woman, who span, on the other; the spinning–wheel turned, the thread flew, the logs smoked and flamed, the red glow played on the blue and white tiles of the chimney–place, and dance on the pewter and brass on the shelves; from the rafters there hung smoked meats and dried herbs and strings of onions; there was a crucifix, and below it a little Nativity, in wax and carved wood.

He could not tell that the goodly stores were only gathered there to be sold later at famine prices to a starving peasantry; he could not tell that the wooden god was only worshipped in a blind, bigoted, brutal selfishness, that desired to save its own soul, and to leave all other souls to eternal damnation.

He could not tell; he only saw old age and warmth, and comfort; and what the people who hooted him as a heathen called the religion of Love.

"They will surely be good to her?" he thought. "Old people, and prosperous, and alone by their fireside."

It seemed that they must be so.

Any way, there was no other means to save her from Taric.

His hear was sore within him, for he had grown to love the child; and to the vagrant instincts of his race the life of the house and of the hearth seemed like the life of the cage for the bird. Yet Phratos, who was not altogether as his

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own people were, but had thought much and often in his own wild way, knew that such a life was the best for a woman child,—and, above all, for a woman child who had such a sire as Taric.

To keep her with himself was impossible. He had always dwelt with his tribe, having no life apart from theirs; and even if he had left them, wherever he had wandered, there would Taric have followed, and found him, and claimed the child by his right of blood. There was no other way to secure her from present misery and future shame, save only this; to place her with her mother's people.

She stood beside him, still and silent, gazing through the snowflakes at the warmth of the mill–kitchen within.

He stooped over her, and pushed between her fur garment and her skin the letter he had found on the breast of the dead woman in the Liébana.

"Thou wilt go in there the old man yonder, and sleep by that pleasant fire to–night," he murmured to her. "And thou wilt be good and gentle, and even as thou art to me always; and to–morrow at noontide I will come and see how it fares with thee."

Her small hands tightened upon his.

"I will not go without thee," she muttered in the broken tongue of the gypsy children.

There were food and milk, fire and shelter, safety from the night and storm there, she saw; but these were nought to her without Phratos. She struggled against her fate as the young bird struggles against being thrust into the cage,—not knowing what captivity means, and yet afraid of it and rebelling by instinct.

He took her up in his arms, and pressed her close to him, and for the first time kissed her. For Phratos, though tender to her, had no woman's foolishness, but had taught her to be hardy and strong, and to look for neither caresses nor compassion—knowing well that to the love child of Taric in her future years the first could only mean shame, and the last could only mean alms, which would be shame likewise.

"Go, dear," he said softly to her; and then he struck with his staff on the wooden door, and lifting its latch, unclosed it; and thrust the child forward, ere she could resist, into the darkness of the low entrance place.

Then he turned and went swiftly himself through the orchard and wood into the gloom and the storm of the night.

He knew that to show himself to a northern householder were to do her evil and hurt; for between the wanderer of the Spanish forests and the peasant of the Norman pastures there could be only defiance, mistrust, and disdain.

"I will see how it is with her to–morrow," he said to himself as he faced again the wind and the sleet. "If it be well with her—let it be well. If not, she must come forth with me, and we must seek some lair where her wolf–sire shall not prowl and discover her. But it will be hard to find; for the vengeance of Taric is swift of foot and has a far–stretching hand and eyes that are sleepless.

And his heart was heavy in him as he went. He had done what seemed to him just and due to the child and her mother; he had been true to the vow he had made answering the mute prayer of the sightless dead eyes; he had saved the flesh of the child from the whip of the trainer, and the future of the child from the shame of the brothel; he had done thus much in saving her from her father, and he had done it in the only way that was possible to him.

Yet his heart was heavy as he went; and it seemed to him even as though he had thrust some mountain bird with pinions that would cleave the clouds, and eyes that would seek the sun, and a song that would rise with the dawn, and a courage that would breast the thunder, down into the darkness of a trap, to be shorn and crippled and

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silenced for evermore.

"I will see her to-morrow," he told himself; restless with a vague remorse, as though the good he had done had been evil.

But when the morrow dawned there had happened that to Phratos which forbade him to see whether it were well with her that day or any day in all the many years that came.

For Phratos that night, being blinded and shrouded in the storm of snow, lost such slender knowledge as he had of that northern country, and wandered far afield, not knowing where he was in the wide white desert, on which no single star-ray shone.

The violence of the storm grew with the hours. The land was a sheet of snow. The plains were dim and trackless as a desert. Sheep were frozen in their folds, and cattle drowned amidst the ice in the darkness. All lights were out, and the warning peals of the bells were drowned in the tempest of the winds.

The land was strange to him, and he lost all knowledge where he was. Above, beneath, around, were the dense rolling clouds of snow. Now and then through the tumult of the hurricane there was blown a strange harsh burst of jangled chimes that wailed a moment loudly on the silence and then died again.

At many doors he knocked: the doors of little lonely places standing in the great colourless waste.

But each door, being opened cautiously, was with haste shut in his face again.

"It is a gypsy," the people muttered, and were afraid; and they drew their bars closer and huddled together in their beds, and thanked their saints that they were safe beneath a roof.

He wrapped his sheepskin closer round him and set his face against the blast.

A hundred times he strove to set his steps backwards to the town, and a hundred times he failed; and moved round and round vainly, never escaping the maze of the endless white fields.

Now the night was long, and he was weakly.

In the midst of the fields there was a cross, and at the head of the cross hung a lantern. The wind tossed the light to and fro. It flickered on the head of a woman. She lay in the snow, and her hand grasped his foot as he passed her.

"I am dead," she said to him: "dead of hunger. But the lad lives—save him."

And as she spoke, her lips closed together and her throat rattled, and she died.

The boy slept at her feet, and babbled in his sleep, delirious.

Phratos stooped down and raised him. He was a child of eight years, and worn with famine and fever, and his gaunt eyes stared hideously up at the driving snow.

Phratos folded him in his arms, and went on with him: the snow had nearly covered the body of his mother.

All around him were the fields. There was no light, except from the lantern on the cross. A few sheep huddled near without a shepherd. The stillness was intense. The bells had ceased to ring, or he had wandered far from the

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sound of them.

The lad was senseless; he muttered drearily foolish words of fever; his limbs hung in a dead weight; his teeth chattered. Phratos, bearing him, struggled on: the snow was deep and drifted heavily; every now and then he stumbled and plunged to his knees in a rift of earth or in a shallow pool of ice.

At last his strength, feeble at all times, failed him; his arms could bear their burden no longer; he let the young boy slip from his hold upon the ground; and stood, breathless and broken, with the snowflakes beating on him.

"The woman trusted me," he thought; she was a stranger, she was a beggar, she was dead. She had no bond upon him, neither could she ever bear witness against him. Yet he was loyal to her.

He unwound the sheepskin that he wore, and stripped himself of it, and folded it about the sick child, and with a slow laborious effort drew the little body under the frail shelter of a knot of furze, and wrapped it closely round, and left it there.

It was all that he could do.

Then, with no defence between him and the driving cold, he strove once more to find his road.

It was quite dark; quite still.

The snow fell ceaselessly; the white wide land was pathless as the sea.

He stumbled on as a mule may that being blind and bruised yet holds its way from the sheer instinct of its sad dumb patience.

His veins were frozen; his beard was ice; the wind cut his flesh like a scourge; a sickly dreamy sleepiness stole on him.

He knew well what it meant.

He tried to rouse himself; he was young, and his life had its sweetness; and there were faces he would fain have seen again, and voices whose laughter he would fain have heard.

He drew the viol round and touched its strings; but his frozen fingers had lost their cunning, and the soul of the music was chilled and dumb: it only sighed in answer.

He kissed it softly as he would have kissed a woman's lips, and put it in his bosom. It had all his youth in it.

Then he stumbled onward yet again, feebly, being a cripple and cold to the bone, and pierced with a million thorns of pain.

There was no light anywhere.

The endless wilderness of the ploughed lands stretched all around him; where the little hamlets clustered the storm hid them; no light could penetrate the denseness of that changeless gloom; and the only sound that rose upon the ghastly silence was the moaning of some perishing flock locked in a flood of ice, and deserted by its shepherd.

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But what he saw and what he heard were not these; going barefoot and blindfold to his death, the things of his own land were with him; the golden glories of sunsets of paradise; the scarlet blaze of a wilderness of flowers; the sound of the fountains at midnight; the glancing of the swift feet in the dances; the sweetness of songs sad as death sung in the desolate courts of the old palaces; the deep dreamy hush of white moons shining through lines of palms straight on a silvery sea. These arose and drifted before him, and he ceased to suffer or to know, and sleep conquered him; and he dropped down on the earth noiselessly and powerlessly as a leaf sins; and the snow fell and covered him.

When the morning broke a peasant, going to his labour in the fields while the stormy winter sun rose red over the whitened world, found both his body and the child's.

The boy was warm and living, still beneath the shelter of the sheepskin: Phratos was dead.

The people succoured the child, and nursed and fed him so that his life was saved; but to Phratos they only gave such burial as the corby gives the stricken deer.

"It is only a gypsy; let him lie," they said; and they left him there, and the snow kept him.

His viol they robbed him of, and cast it as a plaything to their children. But the children could make no melody from its dumb strings.

For the viol was faithful; and its music was dead too.

And his own land and his own people knew him never again; and never again at evening was the voice of his viol heard in the stillness; and never again did the young men and the maidens dance to his bidding, and the tears and the laughter rise and fall at his will, and the beasts and the birds frisk and sing at his coming, and the children in his footsteps cry:—"Lo, it is summer, since Phratos is here!"

BOOK II. "Yo contra todos, y todos contra yo."

CHAPTER I.

THE hottest sun of a hot summer shone on a straight dusty road. An old man was breaking stones by the wayside; he was very old, very bent, very lean, worn by ninety years if he had been worn by one; but he struck yet with a will, and the flints flew in a thousand pieces under his hammer, as though the youth and the force of nineteen years instead of ninety were at work on them.

When the noon bell rang from a little odd straight steeple, with a slanting roof, that peered out of the trees to the westward, he laid his hammer aside, threw off his brass-plated cap, wiped his forehead of its heat and dust, sat down on his pile of stones, and took out hard black crust and munched it with teeth that were still strong and white.

The noontide was very quiet; the heat was intense, for there had been no rainfall for several weeks; there was one lark singing high up in the air, with its little breast lifted to the sun; but all the other birds were mute and invisible, doubtless hidden in some delicious shadow, swinging drowsily on tufts of linden bloom, or underneath the roofing of broad chestnut leaves.

The road on either side was lined by the straight forms of endless poplars, standing side by side as sentinels. The fields were all ablaze on every acre with the gold of ripening corn or mustard, and the scarlet flame of innumerable poppies. Here and there they were broken by some little house, white or black, or painted in bright

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colours, which lifted up amongst its leaves a little tower like a sugar–loaf or a carved gable, and a pointed arch beneath it. Now and then they were divided by rows of trees standing breathless in the heat, or breadths of apple orchards, some with early fruits already ripe, some with fruits as yet green as their foliage.

Through it all the river ran, silver in the light; with shallow fords, where the deep–flanked bullocks drank; and ever and anon an ancient picturesque bridge of wood, time–bronzed and moss–embroidered.

The old man did not look round once; he had been on these roads a score of years; the place had to him the monotony and colourlessness which all long familiar scenes wear to the eyes that are weary of them.

He was ninety–five; he had to labour for his living; he ate black bread; he had no living kith or kin; no friend save in the mighty legion of the dead; and he sat in the scorch of the sun; he hated the earth and the sky, the air and the landscape: why not? They had no loveliness for him; he only knew that the flies stung him and that the red ants could crawl through the holes in his shoes, and bite him sharply with their little piercing teeth.

He sat in such shade as the tall lean poplar gave, munching his hard crusts; he had a fine keen profile and a long white beard that were thrown out as sharply as a sculpture against the golden sunlight, in which the gnats were dancing. His eyes were fastened on the dust as he ate; blue piercing eyes that had still something of the fire of their youth; and his lips under the white hair moved a little now and then, half audibly.

His thoughts were with the long dead years of an unforgotten time—a time that will be remembered as long as the earth shall circle round the sun.

With the present he had nothing to do; he worked to satisfy the lingering cravings of a body that age seemed to have lost all power to kill; he worked because he was too much of a man still to beg, and because suicide looked to his fancy like a weakness, but life for all that was over with him; life in the years of his boyhood had been a thing so splendid, so terrible, so drunken, so divine, so tragic, so intense, that the world seemed now to him to have grown pale and grey and pulseless, with no sap in its veins, no hue in its suns, no blood in its humanity.

For his memory held the days of Thermidor; the weeks of the White Terror; the winter dawn, when the drums rolled out a King's threnody; the summer nights, when all the throats of Paris cried "Marengo!"

He had lived in the wondrous awe of that abundant time when every hour was an agony or a victory; when every woman was a martyr or a bacchanal; when the same scythe that had severed the flowering grasses served also to cleave the fair breasts of the mother, the tender throat of the child; when the ground was purple with the blue blood of men as with the juices of out–trodden grapes, and when the waters were white with the bodies of virgins as with the moon–fed lilies of summer. And how he sat here by the wayside, in the dust and the sun, only feeling the sting of the fly and the bite of the ant; and the world seemed dead to him, because so long ago, though his body still lived on, his soul had cursed God and died.

Through the golden notes of the dancing air and of the quivering sunbeams, whilst high above the lark sang on, there came along the road a girl.

She was bare–footed and bare–throated, lithe of movement, and straight and supple, as one who passed her life on the open lands and was abroad in all changes of the weather.

She walked with the free and fearless measure of the country women of Rome or the desert–born women of Nubia; she had barely entered his sixteenth year; but her bosom and limbs were full and firm, and moulded with almost the luxuriant splendor of maturity; her head was not covered after the fashion of the country, but had a scarlet kerchief wound about, and on it she bore a great flat basket, filled high with fruits and herbs and flowers; a mass of colour and of blossom, through whose leaves and tendrils her dark level brows and her great eyes, blue

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black as a tempestuous night, looked out, set straight against the sun.

She came on, treading down the dust with her long and slender feet, that were such feet as a sculptor would give his Cleopatra or his Phryne. Her face was grave, shadowed, even fierce; and her mouth, though scarlet as a berry and full and curled, had its lips pressed close to one another, like the lips of one who has long kept silence, and may keep it—until death.

As she saw the old man her eyes changed and lightened with a smile which for the moment banished all the gloom and savage patience from her eyes, and made them mellow and lustrous as a southern sun.

She paused before him, and spoke, showing her beautiful white teeth, small and even, like rows of cowrie shells.

"You are well, Marcellin?"

The old man started, and looked up with a certain gladness on his own keen visage, which had lost all expression save such as an intense and absorbed retrospection will lend.

"Fool!" he made answer, harshly yet not unkindly. "When will you know that so long as an old man lives so long it cannot be 'well' with him?"

"Need one be a man, or old, to answer so?"

She spoke in the accent and the language of the province, but with a voice rich and pure and cold; not the voice of the north, or of any peasantry. She put her basket down from off her head, and leaned against the trunk of the poplar beside him, crossing her arms upon her bare chest.

"To the young everything is possible; to the old nothing," he said curtly.

Her eyes gleamed with a fierce thirsty longing; she made him no reply.

He broke off half his dry bread and tendered it to her. She shook her head and motioned it away; yet she was as hungered as any hawk that has hunted all through the night and the woods, and has killed nothing. The growing life, the superb strength, the lofty stature of her made her need constant nourishment, as young trees need it; and she was fed as scantily as a blind beggar's dog, and less willingly than a galley slave.

The kindly air had fed her richly, strongly, continually; that was all.

"Possible!" she said slowly, after awhile. "What is possible? I do not understand."

The old man, Marcellin, smiled grimly.

"You see that lark? It soars there, and sings there. It is possible that a fowler may hide in the grasses; it is possible that it may be shot as it sings; it is possible that it may have the honour to die in agony to grace a rich man's table. You see?"

She mused a moment; her brain was rapid in intuitive perception, but barren of all culture; it took her many moments to follow the filmy track of a metaphorical utterance. But by degrees she saw his meaning, and the shadow settled over her face again.

"The possible, then, is only—the worse?" she said slowly.

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The old man smiled still grimly.

"Nay; our friends the priests say there is a 'possible' which will give—one day—the fowler who kills the lark the wings of the lark, and the lark's power to sing *Laus Deo* in heaven. I do not say—they do."

"The priests!"

All the scorn of which her curved lips were capable curled on them, and a deep hate gathered in her eyes—a hate that was unfathomable and mute.

"Then there is no 'possible' for me," she said bitterly, "if so be that priests hold the gifts of it?"

Marcellin looked up at her from under his bushy white eyebrows; a glance fleet and keen as the gleam of blue steel.

"Yes, there is," he said curtly. "You are a woman child, and have beauty: the devil will give you one."

"Always the devil!" she muttered. There was impatience in her echo of the words, and yet there was an awe also as of one who uses a name that is mighty and full of majesty, although familiar.

"Always the devil!" repeated Marcellin. "For the world is always of men."

His meaning this time lay too deep for her, and passed her; she stood leaning against the poplar, with her head bent and her form motionless in the sunlight like a statue of bronze.

"If men be devils they are my brethren," she said suddenly: "why do they then so hate me?"

The old man stroked his beard.

"Because Fraternity is Hate. Cain said so; but God would not believe him."

She mused over the saying; silent still.

The lark dropped down from heaven, suddenly falling through the air, mute. It had been struck by a sparrow-hawk, which flashed black against the azure of the skies and the white haze of the atmosphere; and which flew down in the track of the lark and seized it ere it gained the shelter of the grass and bore it away within his talons.

Marcellin pointed to it with his pipe-stem.

"You see there are many forms of the 'possible'"—

"When it means Death," she added.

The old man took his pipe back and smoked.

"Of-course—Death is the key-note of creation."

Again she did not comprehend; a puzzled pain clouded the lustre of her eyes.

"But the lark praised God—why should it be so dealt with?"

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Marcellin smiled grimly.

"Abel was praising God; but that did not turn aside the steel."

She was silent yet again; he had told her that old story of the sons born of Eve, and the one whom, hearing it, she had understood and pitied had been Cain.

At that moment, through the roadway that wound across the meadows and through the corn lands and the trees, there came in sight a gleam of scarlet that was not from the poppies, a flash of silver that was not from the river, a column of smoke that was not from the weeds that burned on the hillside.

There came a cloud, with a melodious murmur softly rising from it: a cloud that moved between the high flowering hedges, the tall amber wheat, the slender poplars, and the fruitful orchards; a cloud that grew larger and clearer as it drew more near to them, and left the green water meadows and winding field paths for the great high road.

It was a procession of the Church.

It drew closer and closer by slow imperceptible degrees, until it approached them; the old man sat upright, not taking his cap from his head nor his pipe from his mouth; the young girl ceased to lean for rest against the tree, and stood with her arms crossed on her breast.

The Church passed them; the great gilt crucifix held aloft, the scarlet and the white of the robes catching the sunlight; the silver chains and silver censers gleaming; the fresh young voices of the singing children cleaving the air like a rush of wind; the dark shorn faces of the priests bowed over open books, the tender sound of the bells ringing across the low deep monotony of prayer.

The Church passed them; the dust of the parched road rose up in a choking mass; the heavy mist of the incense hung darkly on the sunlit air; the tramp of the many feet startled the birds from their rest, and pierced through the noonday silence.

It passed them, and left them behind it; but the fresh leaves were choked and whitened; the birds were fluttered and affrightened; the old man coughed, the girl strove to brush the dust motes from her smarting eyelids.

"That is the Church!" said the stone-breaker, with a smile. "Dust—terror—a choked voice—and blinded eyes."

Now she understood; and her beautiful curled lips laughed mutely.

The old man rammed some more tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

"That is the Church!" he said. "To burn incense and pray for rain, and to fell the forests that were the rainmakers."

The procession passed away out of sight, going along the highway and winding by the course of the river, calling to the bright blue heavens for rain; whilst the little bells rang and the incense curled and the priest prayed themselves hoarse, and the peasants toiled footsore, and the eager steps of the choral children trod the tiny gnat dead in the grasses and the bright butterfly dead in the dust.

The priests had cast a severer look from out their down-dropped eyelids; the children had huddled together, with their voices faltering a little; and the boy choristers had shot out their lips in gestures of defiance and opprobrium as they had passed these twain beneath the wayside trees. For the two were both outcasts.

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"Didst thou see the man that killed the king?" whispered to another one fair and curly-headed baby, who was holding in the sun her little, white, silver-fringed banner, and catching the rise and fall of the sonorous chaunt as well as she could with her little, lisping tones.

"Didst thou see the daughter of the devil?" muttered to another a handsome golden brown boy, who had left his herd untended in the meadow to don his scarlet robes and swing about the censer of his village chapel.

And they all sang louder, and tossed more incense on high, and marched more closely together under the rays of the gleaming crucifix as they went; feeling that they had been beneath the shadow of the powers of darkness, and that they were purer and holier and more exalted, because they had thus passed by in scorn what was accursed with psalms on their lips, with the cross as their symbol.

So they went their way through the peaceful country with a glory of sunbeams about them—through the corn, past the orchards, by the river, into the heart of the old brown, quiet town, and about the foot of the great cathedral, where they kneeled down into the dust and prayed, then rose and sang the "Angelus."

Then, the tall dark-visaged priest, who had led them all thither under the standard of the golden crucifix, lifted his voice alone and implored God, and exhorted man; implored for rain and all the blessings of harvest, exhorted to patience and the imitation of God.

The people were moved and saddened, and listened, smiting their breasts; and after a while rising from their knees, many of them in tears, dispersed and went their ways, muttering to one another:—"We have had no such harvests as those of old since the men that slew a saint came to dwell here;" and answering to one another:—"We had never such droughts as these in the sweet cool weather of old, before the offspring of hell was amongst us."

For the priests had not said to them, "Lo! your mercy is parched as the earth, and your hearts as the heavens are brazen."

CHAPTER II.

IN the days of his youngest youth, in the old drunken days that were dead, this old stone-breaker Marcellin had known such life as it is given to few men to know—a life of the soul and the senses; a life of storm and delight; a life mad with blood and wine; a life of divinest dreams; a life when women kissed them, and bade them slay; a life when mothers blessed them and bade them die; a life, strong, awful, splendid, unutterable; a life seized at its fullest and fiercest and fairest, out of an air that was death, off an earth that was hell.

When his cheeks had had a boy's bloom and his curls a boy's gold he had seen a nation in delirium; he had been one of the elect of a people; he had uttered the words that burn, and wrought the acts that live; he had been of the Thousand of Marsala; and he had been of the avengers in Thermidor: he had raised his flute-like voice from the tribune, and he had cast in his vote for the death of a king; passions had been his playthings, and he had toyed with life as a child with a match; he had beheld the despised enthroned in power, and desolation left within kings' palaces; he too had been fierce, and glad, and cruel, and gay, and drunken, and proud, as the whole land was; he had seen the white beauty of the royal women bare in the hands of the mob, and the throats that princes had caressed kissed by the broad steel knife; he had had his youth in a wondrous time, when all men had been gods or devils, and all women martyrs or furies.

And now,—he broke stones to get daily bread, and those who passed him by cursed him, saying:

"This man slew a king."

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For he had outlived his time, and the life that had been golden and red at its dawn was now grey and pale as the ashes of a fire grown cold; for in all the list of the world's weary errors there is no mistake so deadly as age.

Years before, in such hot summer weather as this, against which the Church had prayed, the old man, going homewards to his little cabin amidst the fields, had met a little child coming straight towards him in the full crimson glow of the setting sun, and with the flame of the poppies all around her.

He hardly knew why he looked at her, but when he had once looked his eyes rested there.

She had the hues of his youth about her; in that blood-red light, amongst the blood-red flowers, she made him think of women's forms that he had seen in all their grace and their voluptuous loveliness clothed in the red garment of death, and standing on the dusky red of the scaffold as the burning mornings of the summers of slaughter had risen over the land.

The child was all alone before him in that intense glow as of fire; above her there was a tawny sky, flushed here and there with purple; around her stretched the solitary level of the fields burnt yellow as gold by the long mouths of heat. There were stripes on her shoulders blue and black from the marks of a thong.

He looked at her, and stopped her, why he hardly knew, except that a look about her, beaten but yet unsubdued, attracted him. He had seen the look of yore in the years of his youth, on the faces of the nobles he hated.

"Have you been hurt?" he asked her in his harsh, strong voice. She put her heavy load of faggots down and stared at him.

"Hurt?" She echoed the word stupidly. No one ever thought she could be hurt; what was done to her was punishment and justice.

"Yes. Those stripes—they must be painful?"

She gave a gesture of assent with her head, but she did not answer.

"Who beat you?" he pursued.

A cloud of passion swept over her beat face.

"Flamma."

"You were wicked?"

"They said so."

"And what do you do when you are beaten?"

"I shut my mouth."

"For what?"

"For fear they should know it hurt me—and be glad."

Marcellin leaned on his elm stick, and fastened on her his keen passionless eyes with a look which, for him who shunned and was shunned by all his kind, was almost sympathy.

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"Come to my hut," he said to her. "I know a herb that will take the fret and the ache out of your bruises."

The child followed him passively, half stupidly; he was the first creature that had ever bidden her go with him, and this rough pity of his was sweet to her, with an amazing incredible balm in it which only those can know who see raised against them every man's hand, and hear on their ears the mockery of all the voices of their world.

Under reviling, and contempt, and constant rejection, she had become savage as a trapped hawk, wild as an escaped panther; but to him she was obedient and passive, because he had spoken to her without a taunt and without a curse, which until now had been the sole two forms of human speech that she had heard.

His little hut was in the midst of those spreading cornfields, set where two pathways crossed each other, and stretched down the gentle slope of the cultured lands to join the great highway—a hut of stones and plaited rushes, with of roof of thatch, where the old republican, hardy of frame and born of a toiling race, dwelt in solitude, and broke his scanty bitter bread without lament, if without content.

He took some leaves of a simple herb that he knew, soaked them with water, and bound them on her shoulders, not ungently, though his hand was so rough with labour, and, as men said, had been so often red with carnage.

Then he gave her a draught of goat's milk, sweet and fresh, from a wooden bowl; shared with her the dry black crusts that formed his only evening meal; bestowed on her a gift of a rare old scarlet scarf of woven wools and eastern broideries, one of the few relics of his buried life; lifted the faggots on her back, so that she could carry them with greater ease; and set her on her homeward way.

"Come to me again," he said, briefly, as she went across the threshold.

The child bent her head in silence, and kissed his hand quickly and timidly, like a grateful dog that is amazed to have a caress, and not a blow.

"After a forty years' vow I have broken it; I have pitied a human thing," the old man muttered as he stood in his doorway looking after her shadow as it passed small and dark across the scarlet light of the poppies.

"They call him vile, and they say that he slew men," thought the child, who had long known his face, though he had never noted hers; and it seemed to her that all mercy lay in her father's kingdom—which they called the kingdom of evil. The cool moist herbs slaked the heat of her bruises; and the draught of milk had slaked the thirst of her throat.

"Is evil good?" she asked in her heart as she went through the tall red poppies.

And from that evening thenceforward Folle–Farine and Marcellin cleaved to one another, being outcasts from all others.

CHAPTER III.

AS the religious gathering broke up and split in divers streams to divers ways, the little town returned to its accustomed stillness—a stillness that seemed to have in it the calm of a thousand sleeping years, and the legends and the dreams of half a score of old dead centuries.

On market–days and saint–days, days of high feast or of perpetual chaffering, the town was full of colour, movement, noise, and population.

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The country people crowded in, filling it with the jingling of mule–bells; the fisher people came, bringing with them the crisp salt smell of the sea and the blue of the sea on their garments; its own tanners and ivory carvers, and fruiterers, and lacemakers turned out by the hundred in all the quaint variety of costumes which their forefathers had bequeathed to them, and to which they were still wise enough to adhere. But at other times when the fishers were in their hamlets, and the peasantry on their lands and in their orchards, and the townsfolk at their labours in the old renaissance mansions, which they had turned into tanneries, and granaries, and wool–sheds, and workshops, the place was profoundly still; scarcely a child at play in the streets, scarcely a dog asleep in the sun.

When the crowds had gone the priests laid aside their vestments, and donned the black serge of their daily habit, and went to their daily avocations in their humble dwellings.

The crosses and the censers were put back upon their altars, and hung up upon their pillars.

The boy choristers and the little children put their white linen and their scarlet robes back in cupboards and presses, with heads of lavender and sprigs of rosemary to keep the moth and the devil away, and went to their fields, to their homes, to their herds, to their paper kites, to their daisy chains, to the poor rabbits they pent in a hutch, to the poor flies they killed in the sun.

The town became quite still, the market place quite empty; the drowsy silence of a burning, cloudless afternoon was over all the quiet places about the cathedral walls, where of old the bishops and the canons dwelt; grey shady courts; dim open cloisters; houses covered with oaken carvings, and shadowed with the spreading branches of chestnuts and of lime–trees that were as aged as themselves.

Under the shelter of one of the lindens, after the populace had gone, there was seated on a broad stone bench the girl who had stood by the wayside erect and unbending as the procession had moved before her.

She had flung herself down in dreamy restfulness. She had delivered her burden of vegetables and fruit at a shop near by, whose awning stretched out into the street like a toadstool yellow with the sun. The heat was intense; she had been on foot all day; she sat to rest a moment, and put her burning hands under a little rill of water that spouted into a basin in a niche in the wall. An ancient well, with a stone image of the Madonna sculptured above, and a wreath of vine–leaves in stone running around, in the lavish ornamentation of an age when men loved loveliness for its own sake, and begrudged neither time nor labour in its service.

She leaned over the fountain, kept so cool by the roofing of the thick green leaves; there was a metal cup attached to the basin by a chain, and she filled it at the running thread of water, and stooped her lips to it again and again thirstily.

The day was sultry; the ways were long and white with powdered limestone; her throat was still parched with the dust raised by the many feet of the multitude; and although she had borne in the great basket which now stood empty at her side, cherries, peaches, mulberries, melons, full of juice and lusciousness, this daughter of the devil had not taken even one to freshen her dry mouth.

Folle–Farine stooped to the water and played with it, and drank it, and steeped her lips and her arms in it; lying there on the stone bench, with her bare feet curled one in another, and her slender round limbs full of the voluptuous repose of a resting panther. The coolness, the murmur, the clearness, the peace, the soft flowing movement of water, possess an ineffable charm for natures that are passion–tossed, feverish, and full of storm.

There was a dreary peace about the place, too, which had charms likewise for her; in the dusky arch of the long cloisters, in the grey lichen–grown walls, in the broad pammets of the paven court, in the clusters of strange delicate carving beneath and below; in the sculptured friezes where little nests that the birds had made in the spring still rested, and in the dense brooding thickness of the boughs which brought the sweetness and the

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shadows of the woods into the heart of the peopled town.

She stayed there, loath to move; loath to return where a jeer, a bruise, a lifted stick, a muttered curse, were all her greeting and her guerdon.

As she lay thus, one of the doors in the old houses in the cloisters opened; the head of an old woman was thrust out, crowned with the high fan–shaped comb, and the towering white linen cap, that are the female note of that especial town.

The old woman was the mother of the sacristan, and she, looking out, shrieked shrilly to her son:

"Georges, Georges! come hither. The devil's daughter is drinking the blest water!"

The sacristan was hoeing amongst his cabbages in the garden behind his house, surrounded with clipt yew, and damp from the deep shade of the cathedral, that overshadowed it.

He ran out at his mother's call, hoe in hand, himself an old man, though stout and strong.

The well in the wall was his especial charge and pride; immeasurable sanctity attached to it.

According to tradition, the water had spouted from the stone itself, at the touch of a branch of blossoming pear, held in the hand of St. Jerome, who had returned to earth in the middle of the fourteenth century, and dwelt for a while near the cathedral, working at the honourable trade of a cordwainer, and accomplishing mighty miracles throughout the district. It was said that some of his miraculous power still remained in the fountain, and that even yet, those who drank on St. Jerome's day, in full faith and with believing hearts, were, oftentimes, cleansed of sin, and purified of bodily diseases.

Wherefore on that day, throngs of peasantry flocked in from all sides, and crowded round it, and drank; to the benefit of the sacristan in charge, if not to that of their souls and bodies.

Summoned by his mother, he flew to the rescue of the sanctified spring.

"Get you gone!" he shouted. "Get you gone, you child of hell! How durst you touch the blessed basin? Do you think that God struck water from the stone for such as you?"

Folle–Farine lifted her head and looked him in the face with her audacious eyes, and laughed; then tossed her head again, and plunged it into the bright living water, till her lips, and her cheeks, and all the rippling hair about her temples sparkled with its silvery drops.

The sacristan, infuriated at once by the impiety and the defiance, shrieked aloud.

"Insolent animal! Daughter of Satan! I will teach you to taint the gift of a saint with the lips of the devil!"

And he seized her roughly with one hand upon her shoulder, and with the other raised the hoe and brandished the wooden staff of it above her head in threat to strike her; whilst his old mother, still thrusting her lofty head–gear and her wrinkled face from out of the door, screamed to him to show he was a man, and have no mercy.

As his grasp touched her, and the staff cast its shadow across her, Folle–Farine sprang up, defiance and fury breathing from all her beautiful fierce face.

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She seized the staff in her right hand, wrenched it with a swift movement from his hold, and catching his head under her left arm, rained blows on him from his own weapon with a sudden gust of breathless rage which blinded him, and lent to her slender muscular limbs, the strength and force of man. Then, as rapidly as she had seized and struck him, she flung him from her with such violence that he fell prostrate on the pavement of the court; caught up the metal pail which stood by ready filled, dashed the water over him where he lay, and turning from him without a word, walked across the courtyard slowly, and with a haughty grace in all the carriage of her bare limbs, and the folds of her ragged garments; bearing the empty osier–basket on her head, deaf as the stones around to the screams of the sacristan and his mother.

In these secluded cloisters, and in the high noontide, when all were sleeping or eating in the cool shelter of their darkened houses, the old woman's voice remained unheard.

The saints heard, no doubt, but they were too lazy to stir from their niches in that sultry noontide; except the baying of a chained dog aroused, there was no answer to the outcry, and Folle–Farine passed out into the market place unarrested, and not meeting another living creature.

As she turned into one of the squares that led to the open country, she saw in the distance one of the guardians of the peace of the town moving quickly towards the cloisters, with his glittering lace shining in the sun, and his long scabbard clattering upon the stones. She laughed a little as she saw.

"They will not come after me," she said to herself. "Thy are too afraid of the devil."

She judged rightly; they did not come.

She crossed the wide scorching square, whose white stones blazed in the glare of the sun.

There was nothing in sight except a stray cat prowling in a corner, and three sparrows quarrelling over a foul–smelling heap of refuse.

The quaint old houses round seemed all asleep, with the shutters closed like tired eyelids over their little dim, aged, orbs of windows. The gilded vanes on their twisted chimneys, and carved parapets, pointed motionless to the warm south. There was not a sound except for the cawing of some rooks, who built their nests high aloft in the fretted pinnacles of the cathedral.

Undisturbed she crossed the square, and took her way down the crooked street that led her homeward to the outlying country. It was an old, twisting, dusky place, with the water flowing through its centre as its only roadway; and in there were the oldest houses of the town, all of timber, black with age, and carved with the wonderful florid fantasies and grotesque conceits of the years when a house was to its master a thing beloved and beautiful, a bulwark, an altar, a heritage, an heirloom to be dwelt in all the days of a long life, and bequeathed in all honour and honesty to a noble offspring.

The street was very silent, the ripple of the water was the chief sound that filled it. Its tenants were very poor, in many of its antique mansions the beggars shared shelter with the rats and the owls. In one of these dwellings, however, there were still some warmth and colour.

The orange and scarlet flowers of a nasturtium curled up its twisted pilasters; the big, fair clusters of hydrangea filled up its narrow casements; a breadth of many–coloured saxifrage, with leaves of green and rose, and blossoms of purple and white, hung over the balcony rail, which five centuries earlier had been draped with cloth of gold; and a little yellow song bird made music in the empty niche from which the sculptured flower–de–luce had been so long torn down.

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From the window a woman looked, leaning with folded arms above the rose–tipped saxifrage, and beneath the green–leaved vine.

She was a fair woman, white as the lilies, and she had silver pins in her amber hair, and a mouth that laughed sweetly. She called to Folle–Farine,

"You brown thing; why do you stare at me?"

Folle–Farine started and withdrew the fixed gaze of her lustrous eyes.

"Because you are beautiful," she answered curtly.

All beautiful things had a fascination for her. This woman above was very fair to see, and she looked at her as she looked at the purple butterflies in the sun; at the stars shining down through the leaves; at the vast, dim, gorgeous figures in the cathedral windows; at the happy children running to their mothers with their hands full of primroses, as she saw them in the woods at spring–time; at the laughing groups round the wood–fires in the new year time when she passed a lattice pane that the snow–drift had not blocked; at all the things that were so often in her sight, and yet with which her life had no part or likeness.

She stood there on the rough flints, in the darkness cast from the jutting beams of the house; and the other happier creature leaned above there in the light, white and rose–hued, and with the silver bells of the pins shaking in her yellow tresses.

"You are old Flamma's grand–daughter," cried the other from her leafy nest above. "You work for him all day long at the mill?"

"Yes."

"And your feet are bare, and your clothes are rags, and you go to and fro like a packhorse, and the people hate you? You must be a fool. Your father was the devil, they say; why do you not make him give you good things?"

"He will not hear," the child muttered wearily; had she not besought him endlessly with breathless prayers?

"Will he not? Wait a year—wait a year."

"What then?" asked Folle–Farine, with a quick startled breath.

"In a year you will be a woman, and he always hears women, they say."

"He hears you?"

The fair woman above laughed:

"Perhaps; in his fashion. But he pays me ill as yet," and she plucked one of the silver pins from her hair, and stabbed the rosy foam of the saxifrage through and through with it; for she was but a gardener's wife, and was restless and full of discontent.

"Get you gone," she added quickly, "or I will throw a stone at you, you witch; you have the evil eye, they say, and you may strike me blind if you stare so."

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Folle–Farine went on her way over the sharp stones with a heavy heart. That picture in the casement head had made that passage bright to her many a time; and when at last that picture had moved and spoken, it had only mocked her and reviled her as the rest did.

The street was dark for her like all the others now.

The gardener's wife, leaning there, with the green and gold of the vineleaves brushing her hair, looked after her down the crooked way.

"That young wretch will be more beautiful than I," she thought; and the thought was bitter to her, as such a one is to a fair woman.

Folle–Farine went slowly and sadly through the street with her head dropped, and the large osier basket trailing behind her over the stones.

She was well used to be pelted with words hard as hailstones, and usually heeded them little, or gave them back with sullen, fierce defiance. But from this woman they had wounded her; for that bright bower of golden leaves and scarlet flowers she had faintly fancied some stray beam of light might wander even to her.

She was soon outside the gates of the town, and beyond the old walls, where the bramble and the lichen grew over the huge stones of ramparts and fortifications, useless and decayed from age.

The country roads and paths, the silver streams and the wooden bridges, the lanes through which the market mules picked their careful way, the fields in which the white–capped peasant women and the brindled oxen were at work, stretched all before her in a radiant air, sweet with the scent of ripening fruits from many orchards.

Here and there a wayside crucifix rose dark against the sun; here and there a chapel bell sounded from under some little peaked red roof. The cattle dozed beside meadow ditches that were choked with wild flowers; the dogs lay down beside their sheep and slept.

At the first cottage which she passed, the housewife sat out under a spreading chestnut tree, weaving lace upon her knee.

Folle–Farine looked wistfully at the woman, who was young and pretty, and who darted her swift skilled hand in and out around the bobbins, keeping time meanwhile with a mirthful burden that she sang.

The woman looked up and frowned as the girl passed by her.

A little way farther on there was winehouse by the roadside, built of wood, vine–wreathed, and half hidden in the tall flowering briars of its garden.

Out of the lattice there was leaning a maiden with the silver cross on her bosom shining in the sun, and her meek blue eyes smiling down from under the tower of her white cap. She was reaching a carnation to a student who stood below, with long fair locks and ruddy cheeks, and a beard yellow with the amber down of twenty years; and who kissed her white wrist as he caught the red flower.

Folle–Farine glanced at the pretty picture with a dull wonder and a nameless pain: what could it mean to be happy like that?

Half a league onward she passed another cottage shadowed by a sycamore–tree, and with the swallows whirling around its tall twisted stone chimneys, and a beurré pear covering with branch and bloom its old grey walls. An

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aged woman sat sipping coffee in the sun, and a young one was sweeping the blue and white tiles with a broom, singing gaily as she swept.

"Art thou well placed, my mother?" she asked, pausing to look tenderly at the withered brown face, on which the shadows of the sycamore leaves were playing.

The old mother smiled, steeping her bread in the coffee bowl.

"Surely, child; I can feel the sun and hear you sing."

She was happy though she was blind.

Folle–Farine stood a moment and looked at them across a hedge of honeysuckle.

"How odd it must be to have anyone to care to hear your voice like that!" she thought; and she went on her way through the poppies and corn, half softened, half enraged.

Was she lower than they because she could find no one to care for her or take gladness in her life? or was she greater than they because all human delights were to her as the dead letters of an unknown tongue?

Down a pathway fronting her, which ran midway between the yellowing seas of wheat and a belt of lilac clover, and over which a swarm of bees was murmuring, there came a country–woman, crushing the herbage under her heavy shoes, ragged, picturesque, sunbrowned, swinging deep brass pails as she went to the herds on the hillside. She carried a child twisted into the folds of her dress; a boy, half asleep, with his curly head against her breast.

As she passed, the woman drew her kerchief over her bosom, and over the brown rosy face of the child.

"She shall not look at thee, my darling," she muttered. "Her look withered Rémy's little limb." And she covered the child jealously, and turned aside, so that she should tread a separate pathway through the clover, and needed not to brush the garments of the one she was compelled to pass.

Folle–Farine heard, and laughed aloud.

She knew of what the woman was thinking.

In the summer of the previous year, as she had passed the tanyard on the western bank of the river, the tanner's little son, rushing out in haste, had curled his mouth in insult at her, and clapping his hands, hissed in a child's love of cruelty the mocking words which he had heard his elders use of her. In answer, she had only turned her head and looked down at him with calm eyes of scorn.

But the child, running out fast, and startled by that regard, had slipped upon a shred of leather and had fallen heavily, breaking his left leg at the knee.

The limb, unskillfully dealt with, and enfeebled by a tendency to disease, had never been restored, but hung limp, crooked, useless, withered from below the knee. Through all the country side the little cripple, Rémy, creeping out into the sun upon his crutches, was pointed out in a passionate pity as the object of her sorcery, the victim of her vengeance.

When she had heard what they said she had laughed as she laughed now, drawing together her straight brows and showing her glistening teeth.

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All the momentary softness died in her now as the peasant covered the boy's face and turned aside into the clover. She laughed aloud, and swept on through the half–ripe corn with that swift, harmonious, majestic movement which was inborn in her, as it is inborn in the deer or the antelope; singing again as she went those strange wild airs, like the sigh of the wind, which were all the language which lingered in her memory from the land that had seen her birth.

To such aversion as this she was too well used for it to be a matter of even notice to her. She knew that she was marked and shunned by the community amidst which her lot was cast; and she accepted proscription without wonder and without resistance.

Folle–Farine: the Dust. What lower thing did earth hold?

In this old–world district, amidst the pastures and cornlands of Normandy, superstition had taken a hold which the passage of centuries and the advent of revolution had done very little to lessen.

Few of the people could read, and fewer still could write. They knew nothing but what their priests and their politicians told them to believe. They went to their beds with the poultry, and rose as the cock crew: they went to mass, as their ducks to the osier and weed ponds; and to the conscription as their lambs to the slaughter.

They understood that there was a world beyond them, but they remembered it only as the best market for their fruit, their fowls, their lace, their skins. Their brains were as dim as were their oil–lit streets at night; though their lives were content and mirthful, and for the most part pious. They went out into the summer meadows chanting aves, in seasons of drought to pray for rain on their parching orchards, in the same credulity with which they groped through the winter fog, bearing torches and chanting dirges to gain a blessing at seed time on their bleak black fallows.

The beauty and the faith of the old Mediæval life were with them still; and its faith were its bigotry and its cruelty likewise.

They led simple and contented lives; for the most part honest, and amongst themselves cheerful and kindly; preserving much grace of colour, of costume, of idiosyncrasy, because apart from the hueless communism and characterless monotony of modern cities.

But they believed in sorcery and in devilry; they were brutal to their beasts, and could be as brutal to their foes; they were steeped in legend and tradition from their cradles; and all the darkest superstitions of dead ages still found home and treasury in their hearts and at their hearths.

Therefore, believing her a creature of evil, they were inexorable against her; and thought that in being so they did their duty.

They had always been a religious people in this birth country of the Flamma race; the strong poetic reverence of their forefathers, which had symbolised itself in the carving of every lintel, corbel, or buttress in their streets, and in the fashion of every spire on which a weather–vane could gleam against the sun, was still in their blood; the poetry had departed, but the bigotry remained.

Their ancestors had burned wizards and witches by the score in the open square of the cathedral place, and their grandsires and grandams had in brave, dumb, ignorant peasant fashion held fast to the lily and the cross, and gone by hundreds to the salutation of the axe and the baptism of the sword in the red days of revolution.

They were the same people still; industrious, frugal, peaceful, loyal, wedded to old ways and to old relics, content on little, and serene of heart; yet, withal, where they feared or where they hated, brutal with the brutality begotten

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of abject ignorance. And they had been so to this outcast whom they all called Folle–Farine.

When she had first come amidst them, a little desolate foreign child, mute with the dumbness of an unknown tongue, and cast adrift amongst strange people, unfamiliar ways, and chill blank glances, she had shyly tried in a child's vague instincts of appeal and trust to make friends with the other children that she saw, and to share a little in the mothers' smiles and the babies' pastimes that were all around her in the glad green world of summer.

But she had been denied and rejected with hard words and harder blows; at her coming the smiles had changed to frowns, and the pastime into terror.

She was proud, she was shy, she was savage; she felt rather than understood that she was suspected and reviled; she ceased to seek her own kind, and only went for companionship and sympathy to the creatures of the fields and the woods, to the things of the earth and the sky and the water.

"Thou art the devil's daughter!" half in sport hissed the youths in the market–place against her as the little child went amongst them, carrying a load for her grandsire, heavier than her arms knew how to bear.

"Thou wert plague–spotted from thy birth," said the old man himself, as she strained her small limbs to and fro the floors of his storehouses, carrying wood or flour or tiles or rushes, or whatever there chanced to need such convoy.

"Get thee away, we are not to touch thee!" hissed the six–year old infants at play by the river when she waded in amidst them to reach with her lither arms the far–off water–flower which they were too timorous to pluck, and tendered it to the one who had desired it.

"The devil begot thee, and my cow fell ill yesterday after thou hadst laid hands upon her!" muttered the old women, lifting a stick as she went near to their cattle in the meadows to brush off with a broad dockleaf the flies that were teasing the poor, meek, patient beasts.

So, cursed when she did her duty and driven away when she tried to do good, her young soul had hardened itself and grown fierce, mute, callous, isolated.

There were only the four–footed things, so wise, so silent, so tender of heart, so bruised of body, so innocent, and so agonised, that had compassion for her, and saved her from utter desolation. In the mild sad gaze of the cow, in the lustrous suffering eyes of the horse, in the noble frank faith of the dog, in the soft bounding glee of the lamb, in the unwearied toil of the ass, in the tender industry of the bird, she had sympathy and she had example.

She loved them and they loved her.

She saw that they were sinless, diligent, faithful, devoted, loyal servers of base masters; loving greatly, and for their love goaded, beaten, overtasked, slaughtered.

She took the lesson to heart; and hated men and women with a bitter hatred.

So she had grown up for ten years, caring for no human thing, except in a manner for the old man Marcellin, who was, like her, proscribed.

The priest had striven to turn her soul what they had termed heavenward; but their weapons had been wrath and intimidation. She would have none of them. No efforts that they or her grandsire made had availed; she would be starved, thrashed, cursed, maltreated as they would; she could not understand their meaning, or would not submit herself to their religion.

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As years went on they found the contest hopeless, so had abandoned her to the devil, who had made her; and the daughter of one whom the whole province had called saint had never passed within church–doors or known the touch of holy water save when they had cast it on her as an exorcism. And when she met a priest in the open roads or on the byepaths of the fields, she always sang in loud defiance her wildest melodies.

Where had she learnt these?

They had been sung to her by Phratos, and taught by him.

Who had he been?

Her old life was obscure to her memory, and yet glorious even in that dimness.

She did not know who those people had been with whom she had wandered, nor in what land they had dwelt.

But that wondrous free life remained on her remembrance as a thing never to be forgotten or to be known again; a life odorous with bursting fruits and budding flowers; full of strangest and of sweetest music; spent for ever under green leaves and suns that had no setting; for ever beside fathomless waters and winding forests; for ever rhymed to melody and soothed to the measure of deep winds and drifting clouds.

For she had forgotten all except its liberty and its loveliness; and the old gypsy life of the Liébana remained with her only as some stray fragment of an existence passed in another world from which she was now an exile, and revived in her only in the fierce passion of her nature, in her bitter, vague rebellion, in her longing to be free, in her anguish of vain desires for richer hues and bluer skies and wilder winds than those amidst which she toiled.

At times she remembered likewise the songs and the melodies of Phratos; remembered them when the moon rays swept across the white breadth of water lilies, or the breath of the spring stole through the awakening woods; and when she remembered them she wept—–wept bitterly, where none could look on her.

She never thought of Phratos as a man; as of one who had lived in a human form, and was now lying dead in an earthly grave. Her memory of him was as of some nameless creature half divine, whose footsteps brought laughter and music, with eyes bright as a bird's, yet sad as a dog's, and a voice for ever singing; clad in goat's hair, gigantic and gay: a creature that had spoken tenderly to her, that had bidden her laugh and rejoice, that had carried her when she was weary; that had taught her to sleep under the dewy leaves, and to greet the things of the night as soft sisters, and to fear nothing in the whole living world, in the earth, or the air, or the sky, and to tell the truth though a falsehood were to save the bare feet from flintstones, and naked shoulders from the stick, and an empty body from hunger and thirst. A creature that seemed to her in her memories even as the faun seemed to the fancies of the children of the Piræus; a creature half man and half animal, glad and grotesque, full of mirth and of music, belonging to the forest, to the brook, to the stars, to the leaves, wandering like the wind, and, like the wind, homeless.

This was all her memory; but she cherished it; in the face of the priests she bent her straight black brows and curled her scornful scarlet lips, but for the sake of Phratos she held one religion; though she hated men she told them never a lie, and asked of them never alms.

She went now along the white level roads, the empty basket balanced on her head, her form moving with the free harmonious grace of desert women, and she sang as she went the old sweet songs of the broken viol.

She was friendless and desolate; she was ill–fed, she was heavily tasked; she toiled without thanks; she was ignorant of even so much knowledge as the peasants about her had; she was without a past or a future, and her present had in it but daily toil and bitter words; hunger, and thirst, and chastisement.

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Yet for all that she sang;—sang because the vitality in her made her dauntless of all evil; because the abundant life opening in her made her glad in despite of fate; because the youth, and the strength, and the soul that were in her could not utterly be brutalised, could not wholly cease from feeling the gladness of the sun, the coursing of the breeze, the liberty of nature, the sweet quick sense of living.

Before long she reached the spot where the old man Marcellin was breaking his stones.

His pile was raised much higher; he sat astride on a log of timber and hammered the flints on and on, on and on, without looking up; the dust, where the tramp of the people had raised it, was still thick on the leaves and the herbage; and the prayers and the chaunts had failed as yet to bring the slightest cloud, the faintest rain mist, across the hot unbroken azure of the skies.

Marcellin was her only friend; the proscribed always adhere to one another; when they are few they can only brood and suffer, harmlessly; when they are many they rise as with one foot and strike as with one hand. Therefore, it is always perilous to make the lists of any proscription over long.

The child, who was also an outcast, went to him and paused; in a curious, lifeless, bitter way they cared for one another; this girl who had grown to believe herself born of hell, and this man who had grown to believe that he had served hell.

With the bastard Folle–Farine and with the regicide Marcellin the people had no association, and for them no pity; therefore they had found each other by the kinship of proscription; and in a way there was love between them.

"You are glad, since you sing!" said the old man to her as she passed him again on her homeward way, and paused again beside him.

"The birds in cages sing," she answered him. "But, think you they are glad?"

"Are they not?"

She sat down a moment beside him, on the bank which was soft with moss, and odorous with wild flowers curling up the stems of the poplars and straying over into the corn beyond.

"Are they? Look. Yesterday I passed a cottage, it is on the great south road; far away from her. The house was empty; the people, no doubt, were gone to labour in the fields; there was a wicker cage hanging to the wall, and in the cage there was a blackbird. The sun beat on his head; his square of sod was a dry clod of bare earth; the heat had dried every drop of water in his pan; and yet the bird was singing. Singing how? In torment, beating his breast against the bars till the blood started, crying to the skies to have mercy on him and to let rain fall. His song was shrill; it had a scream in it; still he sang. Do you say the merle was glad?"

"What did you do?" asked the old man, still breaking his stones with a monotonous rise and fall of his hammer.

"I took the cage down and opened the door."

"And he?"

"He shot up in the air first, then dropped down amidst the grasses, where a little brook which the drought had not dried was still running; and he bathed and drank and bathed again, seeming mad with the joy of the water. When I lost him from sight he was swaying among the leaves on a bough over the river; but then he was silent."

"And what do you mean by that?"

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Her eyes clouded; she was mute. She vaguely knew the meaning it bore to herself, but it was beyond her to express it. All things of nature had voices and parables for her, because her fancy was vivid and her mind was dreamy; but that mind was still too dark, and too profoundly ignorant, for her to be able to shape her thoughts into metaphor or deduction.

The bird had spoken to her; by his silence as by his song; but what he had uttered she could not well utter again. Save, indeed, that song was not gladness, and neither was silence pain.

Marcellin, although he had asked her, had asked needlessly; for he also knew.

"And what, think you, the people said when they went back and found the cage empty?" he pursued, still echoing his words and hers by the ringing sound of the falling hammer.

A smile curled her lips.

"That was no thought of mine," she said carelessly. "They had done wickedly to cage him; to set him free I would have pulled down their thatch, or stove in their door, had need been."

"Good!" said the old man briefly, with a gleam of light over his harsh lean face.

He looked up at her as he worked, the shivered flints flying right and left.

"It was a pity to make you a woman," he muttered, as his keen gaze swept over her.

"A woman!" She echoed the words dully and half wonderingly; she could not understand it in connection with herself.

A woman; that was a woman who sat in the sun under the fig tree, working her lace on a frame; that was a woman who leaned out of her lattice tossing a red carnation to her lover; that was a woman who swept the open porch of their house, singing as she cleared the dust away; that was a woman who strode on her blithe way through the clover, carrying her child at her breast.

She seemed to have no likeness to them, no kindred with them; she, a beast of burden, a creature soulless and homeless; an animal made to fetch and carry, to be cursed and beaten, to know neither love nor hope, neither past nor future, but only a certain dull patience and furious hate, a certain dim pleasure in labour and indifference to pain.

"It was a pity to make you a woman," said the old man once more. "You might be a man worth something; but a woman!—a thing that has no medium; no haven between hell and heaven; no option save to sit by the hearth to watch the pot boil and suckle the children, or to go out into the streets and the taverns to mock at men and to murder them. Which will you do in the future?"

"What?"

She scarcely knew the meaning of the word. She saw that the female creatures round her were of all shades of age, from the young girls with their peach-like cheeks to the old crones brown and withered as last year's nuts; she knew that if she lived on she would be old likewise; but of a future she had no conception, no ideal. She had been left too ignorant to have visions of any other world hereafter than this one which the low-lying green hills and the arc of the pale blue sky shut in upon her.

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She had one desire, indeed—a desire vague yet fierce—the desire for liberty. But it was such desire as the bird which she had freed had known; the desire of instinct, the desire of existence, only; her mind was powerless to conceive a future, because a future is a hope, and of hope she knew nothing.

The old man glanced at her, and saw that she had not comprehended. He smiled with a certain bitter pity.

"I spoke idly," he said to himself; "slaves cannot have a future. But yet—"

Yet he saw that the creature who was so ignorant of her own powers, of her own splendours, of her own possibilities, had even now a beauty as great as that of a lustrous eastern-eyed passion-flower; and he knew that to a woman who has such beauty as this the world holds out in its hand the tender of at least one future—one election, one kingdom, one destiny.

"Women are loved," she said suddenly; "will any one love me?"

Marcellin smiled bitterly.

"Many will love you, doubtless—as the wasp loves the peach that he kisses with his sting, and leaves rotten to drop from the stem!"

She was silent again, revolving his meaning; it lay beyond her, both in the peril which it embodied from others, and the beauty in herself which it implied. She could reach no conception of herself, save as what she now was, a body servant of toil, a beast of burden like a young mule.

"But all shun me, as even the wasp shuns the bitter oak apple," she said, slowly and dreamily; "who should love me, even as the wasp loves the peach?"

Marcellin smiled his grim and shadowy smile. He made answer—

"Wait!"

She sat mute once more, revolving this strange, brief word in her thoughts—strange to her, with a promise as vague, as splendid, and as incomprehensible as the prophecy of empire to a slave.

"The future?" she said, at last. "That means something that one has not, and that is to come—is it so?"

"Something that one never has, and that never comes," muttered the old man, wearily cracking the flints in two; "something that one possesses in one's sleep, and that is farther off each time that one awakes; and yet a thing that one sees always—sees even when one lies a-dying, they say—for men are fools."

Folle-Farine listened, musing, with her hands clasped on the handles of her empty basket, and her chin resting upon them, and her eyes watching a maimed butterfly drag its wings of emerald and diamond through the hot, pale, sickly dust.

"I dream!" she said, suddenly, as she stooped and lifted the wounded insect gently on to the edge of a leaf. "But I dream wide awake."

Marcellin smiled.

"Never say so. They will think you mad. That is only what foolish things, called poets, do."

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"What is a poet?"

"A foolish thing—I tell you—mad enough to believe that men will care to strain their eyes, as he strains his, to see the face of a God who never looks and never listens."

"Ah!"

She was so accustomed to be told, that all she did was unlike to others, and was either wicked or was senseless, that she saw nothing except the simple statement of a fact in the rebuke which he had given her. She sat quiet, gazing down into the thick white dust of the road, bestirred by the many feet of mules and men that had trodden through it since the dawn.

"I dream beautiful things," she pursued slowly. "In the moonlight most often. I seem to remember, when I dream—so much! so much!"

"Remember—what should you remember? You were but a baby when they brought you hither."

"So they say. But I might live before, in my father's kingdom. In the devil's kingdom? Why not?"

"Why not, indeed! Perhaps we all lived there once; and that is why we all, through all our lives, hanker to get back to it!"

"I ask him so often to take me back, but he does not seem ever to hear."

"Chut! He will hear in his own good time. The devil never passes by a woman."

"A woman!" she repeated. The word seemed to have no likeness and no fitness with herself.

A woman—she!—a creature made to be beaten, and worn at, and shunned, and loaded like a mule, and driven like a bullock!

"Look you," said the old man, resting his hammer for a moment, and wiping the sweat from his brow. "I have lived in this vile place forty years. I remember the woman that they say bore you—Reine Flamma. She was a beautiful woman, and pure as snow, and noble, and innocent. She wearied God incessantly. I have seen her stretched for hours at the foot of that cross. She was wretched; and she entreated her God to take away her monotonous misery, and to give her some life new and fair. But God never answered. He left her to herself. It was the devil that heard—and replied."

"Then, is the devil juster than their God?"

Marcellin leaned his hammer on his knee, and his voice rose clear and strong; as it had rung of yore from the tribune.

"He looks so, at the least. It is his wisdom, and that is why his following is so large. Nay, I say, when God is deaf the devil listens.

"That is his wisdom, see you.

"So often the poor little weak human soul, striving to find the right way, cries feebly for help, and none answer.

"The poor little weak soul is blind and astray in the busy streets of the world.

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"It lifts its voice, but its voice is so young and so feeble, like the pipe of a newly-born bird in the dawn, that it is drowned in the shouts and the manifold sounds of those hard, crowded, cruel streets, where every one is for himself, and no man has ears for his neighbour. It is hungered, it is athirst, it is sorrowful, it is blinded, it is perplexed, it is afraid.

"It cries often, but God and man leave it to itself.

"Then the devil, who hearkens always, and who, though all the trumpets blowing their brazen music in the streets bray in his honour, yet is too wise to lose even the slightest sound of any in distress—since of such are the largest sheaves of his harvest—comes to the little soul, and teaches it with tenderness, and guides it towards the paths of gladness, and fills its lips with the bread of sweet passions, and its nostrils with the savour of fair vanities, and blows in its ear the empty breath of men's lungs, till that sickly wind seems divinest music.

"Then is the soul dazzled and captured, and made the devil's for evermore; half through its innocence, half through its weakness; but chiefly of all because God and man would not hear its cries while yet it was sinless and only astray."

He ceased, and the strokes of his hammer rang again on the sharp flint stones.

She had listened with her lips parted breathlessly, and her night-like eyes dilated. In the years of his youth the old man had possessed that rare power which can tip words with fire, and send them burning and keen into the coldest heart; and the power was still there, when it woke up from the stupor of a life of toil, and the silence of a harsh old age. In the far distant time, when he had been amidst the world of men, he had known how to utter the words that charmed to stillness a raging multitude. He had not altogether lost this eloquence at such rare times as he still cared to break his silence, and to unfold the unforgotten memories of a life long dead.

He would speak thus to her, but to no other.

Folle-Farine listened, mute and breathless, her eyes uplifted to the sun, where it was sinking westward through a pomp of golden and of purple cloud. He was the only creature who ever spoke to her as though she likewise were human; and she followed his words with dumb unquestioning faith, as a dog its master's footsteps.

"The soul! What is the soul?" she muttered at length.

He caught in his hand the beautiful diamond-winged butterfly, which now, freed of the dust and drinking in the sunlight, was poised on a foxglove in the hedge growing near him, and held it against the light.

What is it that moves this creature's wings, and glances in its eyes, and gives it delight in the summer's warmth, in the orchid's honey, and in the lime-tree's leaves?"

"I do not know; but I know that I can kill it—with one grind of my heel."

"So much we know of the soul—no more."

She freed it from his hand.

"Whoever made it, then, was cruel. If he could give it so much power, why not have given it a little more, so that it could escape you always?"

"You ask what men have asked ten times ten thousand years—since the world began—without an answer. Because the law of all creation is cruelty, I suppose; because the dust of death is always the breath of life. The

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great man, dead, changes to a million worms, and lives again in the juices of the grass above his grave. It matters little. The worms destroy; the grasses nourish. Few great men do more than the first, or as much as the last."

"But get you homeward," he continued, breaking off his parable; "it is two hours past noon, and if you be late on the way you pay for it with your body. Begone."

She nodded her head, and went; he seldom used gentle words to her, and yet she knew, in a way, that he cared for her; moreover, she rejoiced in that bitter, caustic contempt in which he, the oldest man amidst them, held all men.

His words were the only thing that had aroused her dulled brain to its natural faculties; in a manner, from him she had caught something of knowledge—something, too, of intellect; he alone prevented her from sinking to that absolute unquestioning despair which surely ends in idiocy or in self-murder.

She pursued her way in silence across the fields, and along the straight white road, and across a wooden bridge that spanned the river, to her home.

There was a gentler lustre in her eyes and her mouth had the faint light of a half smile upon it; she did not know what hope meant; it never seemed possible to her that her fate could be other than it was, since so long the messengers and emissaries of her father's empire had been silent and leaden-footed to her call.

Yet, in a manner, she was comforted, for had not two mouths that day bidden her "wait"?

She entered at length the little wood of Yprès, and heard that rush and music of the deep mill water, which was the sole thing she had learned to love in all the place.

Beyond it were the apple orchards and fruit gardens which rendered Claudis Flamma back full recompense for the toil they cost him—recompense so large, indeed, that many disbelieved in that poverty which he was wont to aver weighed so hardly and so tightly on him. Both were now rich in all their mature abundance, since the stream which rushed through them had saved them from the evil effects of the long drought so severely felt in other districts. The cherry trees were scarlet with their latest fruit; the great pumpkins glowed amongst their leaves in tawny orange heaps; little russet-breasted bullfinches beat their wings vainly at the fine network that enshrouded the paler gold of the wall apricots; a grey cat was stealing amongst the delicate yellows of the pear-shaped marrows; where a round green wrinkled melon lay a-ripening in the sun, a gorgeous dragon-fly was hovering, and a mother-mavis, in her simple coif of brown and white and grey, was singing with all the gladness of her sunny summer joys.

Beyond a hedge of prickly thorn the narrower flower garden stretched, spanned by low stone walls, made venerable by the silvery beards of lichens; and the whole earth was full of colour from the crimson and the golden gladioli; from the carmine-hued carnations; from the deep-blue lupins, and the Gloire de Dijon roses; from the green slender stems, and the pure white cups, of the virginal lilies; and from the gorgeous beetles, with their purple tunics and their shields of bronze, like Grecian hoplites in battle array. While everywhere, above this sweet glad garden world, the butterflies, purple and jewelled, the red-starts in their ruby coats, the dainty azure-winged blue-warblers, the golden-girdled wasp with his pinions light as mist, and the velvet-coated bee with his pleasant harvest song, flew ever in the sunlight, murmuring, poising, praising, rejoicing.

The place was beautiful in its own simple, quiet way; lying in a hollow, where the river tumbled down in tow or three short breaks and leaps which broke its habitual smooth and sluggish form, and brought it in a sheet of dark water and with a million foam-bells against the walls of the mill-house and under the ponderous wheels.

The wooden house itself also was picturesque, in the old fashion common when men built their dwellings slowly and for love; with all its countless carvings black by age, its jutting beams shapen into grotesque human likeness

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and tragic masks; its parquetted work run over by the green cups of stoneworks, and its high roof with deep shelving eave bright with diapered tiles of blue and white and rose, and alive all day with curling swallows, with pluming pigeons, with cooing doves.

It was beautiful; and the heart of Reine Flamma's young daughter doubtless would have clung to it, with all a child's instinct of love and loyalty to its home, had it not been to her only a prison-house wherein three bitter gaolers for ever ruled her with a rod of iron—bigotry and penury and cruelty.

She flung herself down a moment in the garden, on the long grass under a mulberry tree, ere she went in to give her account of the fruit sold and the monies brought by her.

She had been on foot since four o'clock in the dawn of that sultry day; her only meal had been a bowl or cold milk and a hunch of dry bread crushed in her strong small teeth. She always toiled hard at such bodily labour as was set to her; to domestic work, to the work of the distaff and spindle, of the stove and the needle, they had never been able to break her; they had found that she would be beaten black and blue ere she would be bound to it; but against open air exertion she had never rebelled, and she had in her all the strength and the swiftness of the nomadic race of the Liébana, and had nought of their indolence and their dishonesty.

She was very hungry, she was again thirsty; yet she did not break off a fruit from any bough about her; she did not steep her hot lips in any one of the cool juicy apricots which studded the stones of the wall beyond her.

No one had ever taught her honesty, except indeed in that dim dead time when Phratos had closed her small hands in his whenever they had stretched out to some forbidden thing, and had said, "Take the goods the gods give thee, but steal not from men." And yet honest she was, by reason of the fierce proud savage independence in her, and her dim memories of that sole friend loved and lost.

She wanted many a thing, many a time;—nay, nearly every hour that she lived, she wanted those sheer necessities which make life endurable; but she had taught herself to do without them rather than owe them by prayer or plunder to that human race which she hated, and to which she always doubted her own kinship.

Buried in the grass, she now abandoned herself to the bodily delights of rest, of shade, of coolness, of sweet odours: the scent of the fruits and flowers was heavy on the air; the fall of the water made a familiar tempestuous music on her ear; and her fancy, poetic still, though deadened by a life of ignorance and toil, was stirred by the tender tones of the numberless birds that sang about her.

"The earth and the air are good," she thought, as she lay there watching the dark leaves sway in the foam and the wind, and the bright-bosomed birds float from blossom to blossom.

For there was latent in her, all untaught, that old pantheistic instinct of the divine age, when the world was young, to behold a sentient consciousness in every leaf unfolded to the light; to see a soul in every created thing the day shines on; to feel the presence of an eternal life in every breeze that moves, in every grass that grows; in every flame that lifts itself to heaven; in every bell that vibrates on the air; in every moth that soars to reach the stars.

Pantheism is the religion of the poet; and nature had made her a poet, though man as yet had but made of her an outcast, a slave, and a beast of burden.

"The earth and the air are good," she thought, watching the sun-rays pierce the purple heart of a passion-flower, the shadows move across the deep brown water, the radiant butterfly alight upon a lily, the scarlet-throated birds dart in and out, through the yellow feathery blossoms of the limes.

All birds were her friends.

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Phratos had taught her in her infancy many notes of their various songs, and many ways and means of luring them to come and rest upon her shoulder and peck the berries in her hands. She had lived so much in the open fields and amongst the woods that she had made her chief companions of them. She could emulate so deftly all their voices, from the call of the wood dove to the chant of the blackbird, and from the trill of the nightingale to the twitter of the titmouse, that she could summon them all to her at will, and have dozens of them fluttering around her head and swaying their pretty bodies on her wrist.

It was one of her ways that seemed to the peasantry so weird and magical; and they would come home from their fields on a spring day–break and tell their wives in horror how they had seen the devil's daughter in the red flush of the sunrise, ankle–deep in violets, and covered with birds from head to foot, hearing their whispers, and giving them her messages to carry in return.

One meek–eyed woman had dared once to say that St. Francis had done as much, and it had been accredited to him as a fair action and virtuous knowledge; but she was frowned down and chattered down by her louder neighbours, who told her that she might look for some sharp judgment of heaven for daring to couple together the blessed name of the holy saint and the accursed name of this foul spirit.

But all they could say could not break the charmed communion between Folle–Farine and her feathered companions.

She loved them and they her. In the hard winter she had always saved some of her scanty meal for them, and in the springtime and the summer they always rewarded her with floods of songs and soft caresses from their nestling wings.

There were no rare birds, no birds of moor and mountain, in that cultivated and populous district; but to her all the little home–bred things of pasture and orchard were full of poetry and of character.

The robins, with that pretty air of boldness with which they veil their real shyness and timidity; the strong and saucy sparrows, powerful by the strength of all mediocrities and majorities; all the dainty families of finches in their gay apparellings; the plain brown bird that filled the night with music; the gorgeous oriole ruffling in gold, the gilded princeling of them all; the little blue warblers, the violets of the air; the kingfishers who had hovered so long over the forget–me–nots upon the rivers that they had caught the colours of the flowers on their wings; the bright black–caps green as the leaves, with their yellow waistcoats and velvet hoods, the innocent freebooters of the woodland liberties: all these were her friends and lovers, various as any human crowds of court or city.

She loved them; they and the fourfooted beasts were the sole things that did not flee from her; and the woeful and mad slaughter of them by the peasants was to her a grief passionate in its despair. She did not reason on what she felt; but to her a bird slain was a trust betrayed, an innocence defiled, a creature of heaven struck to earth.

Suddenly on the silence of the garden there was a little shrill sound of pain; the birds flew high in air, screaming and startled; the leaves of a bough of ivy shook as with a struggle.

She rose and looked; a line of twine was trembling against the foliage; in its noosed end the throat of the mavis had been caught; it hung tremblingly and clutching at the air convulsively with its little drawn up feet. It had flown into the trap as it had ended its joyous song and soared up to join its brethren.

There were a score of such traps set in the miller's garden.

She unloosed the cord from about its tiny neck, set it free, and laid it down upon the ivy: the succour came too late; the little gentle body was already without breath; the feet had ceased to beat the air; the small soft head had drooped feebly on one side; the lifeless eyes had started from their sockets; the throat was without song for

evermore.

"The earth would be good but for men," she thought, as she stood with the little dead bird in her hand.

Its mate, which was poised on a rose bough, flew straight to it, and curled round and round about the small slain body, and piteously bewailed its fate, and mourned, refusing to be comforted, agitating the air with trembling wings, and giving out vain cries of grief.

Vain; for the little joyous life was gone; the life that asked only of God and Man a home in the green leaves; a drop of dew from the cup of a rose; a bough to swing on in the sunlight; a summer day to celebrate in song.

All the winter through, it had borne cold and hunger and pain without lament; it had saved the soil from destroying larvæ, and purified the trees from all foul germs; it had built its little home unaided, and had fed its nestlings without alms; it had given its sweet song lavishly to the winds, to the blossoms, to the empty air, to the deaf ears of men; and now it lay dead in its innocence; trapped and slain because human greed begrudge it a berry worth the thousandth part of a copper coin.

Out from the porch of the mill–house Claudis Flamma came, with a knife in his hand and a basket, to cut lilies for one of the choristers of the cathedral, since the morrow would be the religious feast of the Visitation of Mary.

He saw the dead thrush in her hand, and chuckled to himself as he went by.

"The tenth bird trapped since sunrise," he said, thinking how shrewd and how sure in their make were these traps of twine that he set in the grass and the leaves.

She said nothing; but the darkness of disgust swept over her face, as he came in sight in the distance.

She knelt down and scraped a hole in the earth; and laid moss in it and put the mavis softly on its green and fragrant bier, and covered it with handfuls of fallen rose leaves and with a sprig or two of thyme.

Around her head the widowed thrush flew ceaselessly, uttering sad cries;—who now should wander with him through the sunlight?—who now should rove with him above the blossoming fields?—who now should sit with him beneath the boughs hearing the sweet rain fall between the leaves?—who now should wake with him whilst yet the world was dark, to feel the dawn break, ere the east were red, and sing a welcome to the unborn day?

CHAPTER IV.

MEANWHILE Claudis Flamma cut the lilies for the cathedral altars, muttering many holy prayers as he gathered the flowers of Mary.

When the white lily sheaves had been borne away, kept fresh in wet moss, by the young chorister who had been sent for them, the miller turned to her.

"Where is the money?"

She, standing beside the buried bird, undid the leathern thong about her waist, opened the pouch, and counted out the coins, one by one, on the flat stone of a water tank amongst the lilies and the ivy.

There were a few silver pieces of slight value and some dozens of copper ones. The fruit had been left at various stalls and houses in small portions, for it was the custom to supply it fresh each day.

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He caught them up with avidity, bit and tested each, counted them again and again, and yet again; after the third enumeration he turned sharply on her.

"There are two pieces too little: what have you done with them?"

"There are two sous short," she answered him curtly. "Twelve of the figs for the tanner Florian were rotten."

"Rotten!—they were but over ripe."

"It is the same thing."

"You dare to answer me?—animal! I say they had only tasted a little too much of the sun. It only made them the sweeter."

"They were rotten."

"They were not. You dare to speak! If they had been rotten, they lay under the others; he could not have seen—"

"I saw."

"You saw! Who are you?—a beggar—a beast—a foul offspring of sin. You dared to show them to him, I will warrant?"

"I showed him that they were not good."

"And gave him back the two sous?"

"I took seven sous for what were good. I took nothing for the rotten ones."

"Wretch! you dare to tell me that!"

A smile careless and sarcastic curled her mouth; her eyes looked at him with all their boldest, fiercest lustre.

"I never steal—not even from you, good Flamma."

"You have stolen now!" he shrieked, his thin and feeble voice rising in fury at his lost coins and his discovered treachery. "It is a lie that the figs were rotten; it is a lie that you took but seven sous. You stole the two sous to buy you bread and honey in the streets, or to get a drink at the wine shops. I know you; I know you; it is a devil's device to please your gluttonous appetite. The figs rotten!—not so rotten as is your soul would they be though they were black as night and though they stank as river mud! Go back to Denis Florian and bring me the two sous, or I will thrash you as a thief."

She laughed a hard, scornful, reckless laughter.

"You can thrash me; you cannot make me a thief."

"You will not go back to Florian?"

"I will not ask him to pay for what was bad."

"You will not confess that you stole the money?"

"I should lie if I did."

"Then strip."

She set her teeth in silence; and without a moment's hesitation unloosened the woollen sash knotted round her waist, and pushed down the coarse linen tunic from about her throat.

The white folds fell from off the perfect curves of her brown arms, and left bare her shining shoulders, beautiful as any sculptured Psyche's.

She was not conscious of degradation in her punishment; she had been bidden to bow her head and endure the lash from the earliest years she could remember. According to the only creed she knew, silence and fortitude and strength were the greatest of all virtues.

She stood now in the cross lights among the lilies as she had stood when a little child, erect, unquailing, and ready to suffer; insensible of humiliation because unconscious of sin; and so tutored by severity and exposure that she had as yet none of the shy shame and the fugitive shrinking of her sex. She had only the boldness to bear, the courage to be silent, which she had had when she had stood amongst the same tall lilies, in the same summer radiance, in the years of her helpless infancy.

She uncovered herself to the lash as a brave hound crouches to it; not from inborn cowardice, but simply from the habit of obedience and of endurance.

He had used her as the Greeks the Helots; he always beat her, when she was at fault, to teach her to be faultless; and, when without offence, beat her to remind her that she was the offspring of humiliation, and a slave.

He took, as he had taken in an earlier time, a thick rope which lay coiled upon the turf ready for the binding of some straying boughs; and struck her with it, slowly. His arm had lost somewhat of its strength, and his power was unequal to his will. Still rage for the loss of his copper pieces, and the sense that she had discovered the fraudulent intention of his small knavery, lent force to his feebleness; as the scourge whistled through the air and descended on her shoulders it left bruised, swollen marks to stamp its passage, and curling, adder-like, bit and drew blood.

Yet to the end she stood mute and motionless, as she had stood in her childhood; not a nerve quivered, not a limb flinched: the colour rushed over her bent face and her bare chest, but she never made a movement; she never gave a sound.

When his arm dropped from sheer exhaustion, she still said not one word; she drew tight once more the sash about her waist, and fastened afresh the linen of her bodice.

The bruised and wounded flesh smarted and ached and throbbed; but she was used to such pain, and bore it as their wounds were borne by the women of the Spartan games.

"Your two sous have brought you bitterness," he muttered with a smile. "You will scarce find my fruit rotten again in haste. There are bread and beans within; go get a meal; I want the mule to take flour to Barbizène."

She did not go within to eat; the bruises and the burning of her skin made her feel sick and weak. She went away and cast herself at full length in the shade of the long grasses of the orchard; resting her chin upon her hands, cooling her aching breast against the soft damp moss; thinking, thinking, thinking, of what she hardly knew, except, indeed, that she wished that she were dead, like the bird she had covered with the leaves.

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He did not leave her long to even so much peace as this; his shrill voice soon called her from her rest; he bade her get ready the mule and go.

She obeyed.

The animal was saddled with his wooden pack; as many sacks as he could carry were piled upon the framework; she put her hand upon his bridle, and set out to walk to Barbizène which was two leagues away.

"Work is the only thing to drive the devil that begat her out of her," muttered the miller, as he watched the old mule pace down the narrow, tree-shadowed road that led across the fields: and he believed that he did rightly in this treatment of her.

It gratified the sharp hard cruelty of temper in him, indeed, but he did not think that in such self-indulgence he ever erred. He was a bitter, cunning, miserly old man, whose solitary tenderness of feeling and honesty of pride had been rooted out for ever when he had learned the dishonour of the woman whom he had deemed a saint. In the ten years of time which had passed since first the little brown large-eyed child had been sent to seek asylum with him, he had grown harder and keener and more severe with each day that rose.

Her presence was abhorrent to him, though he kept her, partly from a savage sense of duty, partly from the persuasion that she had the power in her to make the strongest and the cheapest slave he had ever owned. For the rest, he sincerely and devoutly believed that the devil, in some witchery of human guise, had polluted his daughter's body and soul, and that it was by the foul fiend and by no earthly lover that she had conceived and borne the creature who now abode with him.

Perhaps, also, as was but natural, he sometime felt more furious against this offspring of hell because ever and again some gleam of fantastic inborn honour, some strange savage instinct of honesty, would awake in her and oppose him, and make him ashamed of those small and secret sins of chicanery wherein his soul delighted, and for which he compounded with his gods.

He had left her mind a blank, because he thought the body laboured hardest when the brain was still asleep, which is true; she could not read; she could not write; she knew absolutely nothing.

Yet there was a soul awake in her; there were innumerable thoughts and dreams brooding in her fathomless eyes; there was a desire in her, fierce and unslaked, for some other life than this life of the packhorse and of the day labourer which alone she knew.

He had done his best to degrade and to brutalise her, and in much he had succeeded; but he had not succeeded wholly. There was a liberty in her that escaped his thralldom; there was a soul in her that resisted the deadening influence of her existence.

She had none of the shame of her sex; she had none of the timorous instincts of womanhood. She had a savage stubborn courage, and she was insensible of the daily outrages of her life. She would strip bare to his word obediently, feeling only that it would be feeble and worthless to dread the pain of the lash. She would bathe in the woodland pool, remembering no more that she might be watched by human eyes than does the young tigress that has never beheld the face of man.

In all this she was brutalised and degraded by her tyrant's bondage: in other things she was far higher than he, and escaped him.

Stupefied as her mind might be by the exhaustion of severe physical labour, it had still irony and it had still imagination; and under the hottest heats of temptation there were two things which by sheer instinct she resisted,

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and resisted so that neither of them had ever been forced on her—they were falsehood and fear.

"It is the infamous strength of the devil!" said Claudis Flamma, when he found that he could not force her to deviate from the truth.

The world says the same of those who will not feed it with lies.

CHAPTER V.

THAT long dry summer was followed by an autumn of drought and scarcity.

The prayers of the priests and peoples failed to bring down rain. The wooden Christs gazed all day long on parching lands and panting cattle. Even the broad deep rivers shrank and left their banks to bake and stink in the long drought.

The orchards sickened for lack of moisture, and the peasants went about with feverish faces, ague-stricken limbs, and trembling hearts. The corn yielded ill in the hard scorched ground, and when the winter came it was a time of dire scarcity and distress.

Claudis Flamma and a few others like him alone prospered.

The mill-house at Yprès served many purposes. It was a granary, a market, a baker's shop, an usurer's den, all in one.

It looked a simple and innocent place. In the summer time it was peaceful and lovely, green and dark and still, with the blue sky above it, and the songs of birds all around; with its old black timbers, and its many-coloured orchards, and its pretty leafy gardens, and its grey walls washed by the hurrying stream. But in the winter it was very dreary, utterly lonely. The water roared, and the leafless trees groaned in the wind, and the great leaden clouds of rain or fog enveloped it duskily.

To the starving, wet, and woe-begone peasants who would go to it with aching bones and aching hearts, it seemed desolate and terrible. They dreaded with a great dread the sharp voice of its master—the hardest and the shrewdest and the closest fisted Norman of them all.

For they were most of them his debtors, and so were in a bitter subjugation to him, and had to pay those debts as best they might with their labour or their suffering; with the best of all their wool, or oil, or fruit; often with the last bit of silver that had been an heirloom for five centuries, or with the last bit of money buried away in an old pitcher under their apple tree to be the nest egg of their little pet daughter's dowry.

And yet Claudis Flamma was respected among them; for he could outwit them, and was believed to be very wealthy, and was a man who stood well with the good saints and with holy Church:—a wise man, in a word, with whom these northern folks had the kinship of mutual industry and avarice.

For the most part the population around Yprès was thrifty and thriving in a cautious, patient, certain way of well-doing; and, by this portion of it, the silent old miser was much honoured as man laborious and penurious, who chose to live on a leek and a rye loaf, but who must have, it was well known, put by large gains in the thatch of his roof or under the bricks of his kitchen.

By the smaller section of it—poor, unthrifty, loose-handed fools—who belied the province of their birth so far as to be quick to spend and slow to save, and who therefore fell into want and famine and had to borrow of others

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their children's bread, the old miller was hated with a hate deeper and stronger because forced to be mute, and to submit, to cringe, and to be trod upon, in the miserable servitude of the hopeless debtor.

In the hard winter which followed on that sickly autumn these and their like fell farther in the mire of poverty than ever, and had to come and beg of Flamma loans of the commonest necessities of their bare living. They knew that they would have to pay a hundredfold in horrible extortion when the spring and summer should bring them work, and give them fruit on their trees and crops on their little fields; but they could do no better.

It had been for many years the custom to go to Flamma in such need; and being never quit of his hold, his debtors never could try for aid elsewhere.

The weather towards the season of Noel became frightfully severe; the mill stream never stopped, but all around it was frozen, and the swamped pastures were sheets of ice. The birds died by thousands in the open country, and several of the sheep perished in snow storms on the higher lands.

There was dire want in many of the hovels and homesteads, and the bare harvests of a district, usually so opulent in the riches of the soil, brought trouble and dearth in their train.

Sickness prevailed because the old people and the children in their hunger ate berries and roots unfit for human food; the waters swelled, the ice melted, and many homes were flooded, and some even swept away.

Old Pitchou and Claudis Flamma alone were content; the mill wheel never stopped work, and famine prices could be asked for in this extremity.

Folle–Farine worked all that winter, day after day, month after month, with scarcely a word being spoken to her, or scarcely an hour being left her that she could claim as her own.

She looked against the snow as strangely as a scarlet rose blossoming in frost there could have done; but the people that came to and fro, even the young men amongst them, were too used to that dark vivid silent face of hers, and those lithe brown limbs that had the supple play and the golden glow of the East in them, to notice them as any loveliness; and if they did note them on some rare time, thought of them only as the marks of a vagrant and accursed race.

She was so unlike to themselves that the northern peasantry never dreamed of seeing beauty in her; they turned their heads away when she went by, striding after her mule or bearing her picher from the well with the free and vigorous grace of a mountain or desert–born creature.

The sheepskin girt about her loins, the red kerchief knotted to her head, the loose lithe movements of her beautiful limbs, the sullen fire and fierce dreams in her musing eyes,—all these were so unlike themselves that they saw nothing in them except what was awful or unlovely.

Half the winter went by without a kind word to her from any one except such as in that time of suffering and scarcity Marcellin spoke to her. So had every winter gone since she had come there—a time so long ago that the memory of Phratos had become so dim to her that she often doubted if he also were not a mere shadow of a dream like all the rest.

Half the winter she fared hardly and ate sparingly, and did the work of the mule and the bullocks: indifferent and knowing no better, and only staring at the stars when they throbbed in the black skies on a frosty night, and wondering if she would ever go to them, or if they would ever come to her—those splendid and familiar yet unknown things that looked on all the misery of the earth, and shone on tranquilly and did not seem to care.

Folle-Farine

Time came close on to the new year, and the distress and the cold were together at their height. The weather was terrible; and the poor suffered immeasurably.

A score of times a-day she heard them ask bread at the mill, and a score of time saw them given a stone; she saw them come in the raw fog, pinched and shivering, and sick with ague, and she saw her grandsire deny them with a grating sarcasm or two, or take from them fifty times its value for some niggard grant of food.

"Why should I think of it, why should I care?" she said to herself; and yet she did both, and could not help it.

There was among the sufferers one old and poor, who lived not far from the mill, by name Manon Dax.

She was a little old hardy brown woman, shrivelled and bent, yet strong, with bright eyes like a robin's, and a tough frame, eighty years old.

She had been southern born, and the wife of a stone cutter; he had been dead fifty years, and she had seen all her sons and daughters and their offspring die too; and had now, left on her hand to rear, four young great-grandchildren, almost infants, who were always crying to her for food as new-born birds cry in their nests.

She washed a little, when she could get any linen to wash, and she span, and she picked up the acorns and the nuts, and she tilled a small plot of ground that belonged to her hut, and she grew cabbages and potatoes and herbs on it, and so kept a roof over her head, and fed her four nestlings, and trotted to and fro in her wooden shoes all day long, and worked in hail and rain, in drought and tempest, and never complained, but said that God was good to her.

She was anxious about the children, knowing she could not live long—that was all. But then she felt sure that the Mother of God would take care of them, and so was cheerful; and did what the day brought her to do, and was content.

Now on Manon Dax, as on thousands of others, the unusual severity of the winter fell like a knife.

She was only one amongst thousands. Nobody noticed her; still it was hard.

All the springs near her dwelling were frozen for many weeks; there was no well nearer than half a league; and half a league out and half a league back every other day over ground sharp and slippery with ice, with two heavy pails to carry, is not a little when one is over eighty, and has only a wisp of woollen serge between the wind and one's withered limbs.

The acorns and horse-chestnuts had all been disputed with her fiercely by boys rough and swift, who foresaw a time coming in which their pigs would be ill-fed. The roots in her little garden plot were all black and killed by the cold. The nettles had been all gathered and stewed and eaten.

The snow drove in through a big hole in her roof. The woods were ransacked for every bramble and broken bough by reivers younger and more agile than herself; she had nothing to eat, nothing to burn.

The children lay in their little beds of hay and cried all day long for food, and she had none to give them.

"If it were only myself!" she thought, stopping her ears not to hear them; if it had been only herself it would have been so easy to creep away into the corner among the dry grass, and to lie still till the cold froze the pains of hunger and made them quiet; and to feel numb and tired, and yet glad that it was all over, and to murmur that God was good, and so to let death come—content.

Folle-Farine

But it was not only herself.

The poor are seldom so fortunate—they themselves would say so unhappy—as to be alone in their homes.

There were the four small lives left to her by the poor dead foolish things she had loved,—small lives that had been rosy even on so much hunger, and blithe even amidst so much cold; that had been mirthful even at the flooding of the snowdrift, and happy even over a meal of mouldy crusts, or of hips and haws from the hedges. Had been—until now, when even so much as this could not be got, and when their beds of hay were soaked through with snow-water; now—when they were quite silent, except when they sobbed out a cry for bread.

"I am eighty-two years old, and I have never since I was born asked man or woman for help, or owed man or woman a copper coin," she thought, sitting by her black hearth, across which the howling wind drove, and stopping her ears to shut out the children's cries.

She had often known severe winters, scanty food, bitter living,—she had scores of times in her long years been as famished as this, and as cold, and her house had been as desolate.

Yet she had borne it all and never asked for an alms, being strong and ignorant, and being also in fear of the world, and holding a debt a great shame.

But now she knew that she must do it, or let those children perish; being herself old and past work, and having seen all her sons die out in their strength before her.

The struggle was long and hard with her.

She would have to die soon, she knew, and she had striven all her lifetime so to live that she might die saying, "I have asked nothing of any man."

This perhaps, she thought sadly, had been only a pride after all; a feeling foolish and wicked, that the good God sought now to chasten.

Any way she knew that she must yield it up and go and ask for something; or else those four small things, that were like a cluster of red berries on a leafless tree, must suffer and must perish.

"It is bitter, but I must do it," she thought. "Sure it is strange that the good God cares to take any of us to himself through so sharp a way as hunger. It seems, if I saw His face now, I should say, 'Not heaven for me, Monseigneur: only bread and a little wood.'"

And she rose up on her bent stiff limbs, and went to the pile of hay on which the children were lying, pale and thin, but trying to smile, all of them, because they saw the tears on her cheeks.

"Be still, my treasures," she said to them, striving to speak cheerily, and laying her hands on the curls of the eldest born; "I go away for a little while to try and get you food. Be good, Bernardou, and take care of them till I come back."

Bernardou promised, being four years old himself; and she crept out of the little black door of the hut into the white road and the rushing winds.

"I will go to Flamma," she said to herself.

It was three in the afternoon, nearly dark at the season of midwinter. The business of the day was done.

Folle-Farine

The people had come and gone, favoured or denied, according to such sureties as they could offer.

The great wheel worked on in the seething water; the master of the mill sat against the casement to catch the falling light, adding up the sums in his ledger—crooked little signs such as he had taught himself to understand, though he could form neither numerals nor letters with his pen.

All around him in the storehouses there were corn, wood, wool, stores of every sort of food. All around him, in the room he lived in, there were hung the salt meats, the sweet herbs, and the dried fruits, that he had saved from the profusion of other and healthier years. It pleased him to know that he held all that, and also withheld it.

It moved him with a certain saturnine glee to see the hungry wistful eyes of the peasants stare longingly at all those riches, whilst their white lips faltered out an entreaty—which he denied. It was what he liked; to sit there and count his gains after his fashion, and look at his stores and listen to the howling wind and driving hail, and to chuckle to think how lean and cold and sick they were outside—those fools who had mocked him because his saint had been a gipsy's leman.

To be prayed to for bread, and give the stone of a bitter denial; to be implored with tears of supplication, and to answer with a grim jest; to see a woman come with children dying for food, and to point out to her the big brass pans full of milk, and say to her, "All that makes butter for Paris," and then to see her go away wailing and moaning that her child would die, and tottering feebly through the snow—all this was sweet to him.

Before his daughter had gone from him, he had been, though a hard man, yet honest, and had been, though severe, not cruel; but since he had been aware of the shame of the creature whom he had believed in as an angel, every fibre in him had been embittered and salted sharp with the poignancy of an acrid hate towards all living things. To hurt and to wound, and to see what he thus struck bleed and suffer, was the only pleasure life had left for him. He had all his manhood walked justly, according to his light, and trusted in the God to whom he prayed; and his God and his trust had denied and betrayed him, and his heart had turned to gall.

The old woman toiled slowly through the roads which lay between her hut and the water-mill.

They were roads which passed through meadows and along corn-fields, beside streamlets, and amongst little belts of woodland, lanes and paths green and pleasant in the summer, but now a slough of frozen mud, and whistled through by north-east winds. She held on her way steadily, stumbling often, and often slipping and going slowly, for she was very feeble from long lack of food, and the intensity of the cold drove through and through her frame.

Still she held on, bravely, in the teeth of the rough winds and of the coming darkness, though the weather was so wild that the poplar trees were bent to the earth, and the little light in the Calvary lamp by the river blew to and fro, and at last died out. Still she held on, a little dark tottering figure, with a prayer on her lips and a hope in her heart.

The snow was falling, the clouds were driving, the waters were roaring in the twilight: she was only a little black speck in the vast grey waste of the earth and the sky, and the furious air tossed her at times to and fro like a withered leaf. But she would not let it beat her; she groped her way with infinite difficulty, grasping a bough for strength, or waiting under a tree for breath a moment, and thus at last reached the mill-house.

Such light as there was left showed her the kitchen within, the stores of wood, the strings of food; it looked to her as it had looked to Phratos, a place of comfort and of plenty; a strong safe shelter from the inclement night.

She lifted the latch and crept in, and went straight to Claudis Flamma, who was still busy beneath the window with those rude signs which represented to him his earthly wealth.

Folle-Farine

She stood before him white from the falling snow, with her brown face working with a strong emotion, her eyes clear and honest, and full of an intense anxiety of appeal.

"Flamma," she said simply to him, "we have been neighbours fifty years and more—thou and I, and many have borrowed of thee to their hurt and shame, but I never. I am eighty-two, and I never in my days asked anything of man or woman or child. But I come to-night to ask bread of you,—bread for the four little children at home. I have heard them cry three days, and have had nothing to give them save a berry or two off the trees. I cannot bear it any more. So I have come to you."

He shut his ledger, and looked at her. They had been neighbours, as she had said, half a century and more; and had often knelt down before the same altar, side by side.

"What dost want?" he asked simply.

"Food," she made answer; "food and fuel. They are so cold—the little ones."

"What canst pay for them?" he asked.

"Nothing—nothing now. There is not a thing in the house except the last hay the children sleep on. But if thou wilt let me have a little—just a little—while the weather is so hard, I will find means to pay when the weather breaks. There is my garden; and I can wash and spin. I will pay faithfully. Thou knowest I never owed a brass coin to any man. But I am so old, and the children are so young—"

Claudis Flamma got up and walked to the other side of the kitchen. Her eyes followed him with wistful, hungry longing.

Where he went there stood pans of new milk, baskets of eggs, rolls of bread, piles of faggots. Her feeble heart beat thickly with eager hope, her dim eyes glowed with pleasure and with thankfulness.

He came back and brought to her a few sharp rods, plucked from a thorn tree.

"Give these to thy children's children," he said, with a dark smile. "For these—and for no more—will they recompense thee when they shall grow to maturity."

She looked at him startled and disquieted, yet thinking that he meant but a stern jest.

"Good Flamma, you mock me," she murmured, trembling; "the babes are little and good. Ah, give me food quickly, for God's sake! A jest is well in season, but to an empty body and a bitter heart it is like a stripe."

He smiled, and answered her in this harsh grating voice,

"I give thee the only thing given without payment in this world—advice. Take it or leave it."

She reeled a little as if he had struck her a blow with his fist, and her face changed terribly, whilst her eyes stared without light or sense in them.

"You jest, Flamma! You only jest!" she muttered. "The little children starve, I tell you. You will give me bread for them? Just a little bread? I will pay as soon as the weather breaks."

"I can give nothing. I am poor, very poor," he answered her, with the habitual lie of the miser; and he opened his ledger again, and went on counting up the dots and crosses by which he kept his books.

Folle–Farine

His servant Pitchou sat spinning by the hearth: she did not cease her work, nor intercede by a word.

The poor can be better to the poor than any princes; but the poor can also be more cruel to the poor than any slave drivers.

The old woman's head dropped on her breast, she turned feebly, and felt her way, as though she were blind, out of the house and into the air.

It was already dark with the darkness of descending night.

The snow was falling fast. Her hope was gone: all was cold—cold as death.

She shivered and gasped, and strove to totter on: the children were alone. The winds blew and drove the snow flakes in a white cloud against her face; the bending trees creaked and groaned as though in pain; the roar of the mill–water filled the air.

There was now no light: the day was gone, and the moon was hidden; beneath her feet the frozen earth cracked and slipped and gave way.

She fell down; being so old and so weakly she could not rise again, but lay still with one limb broken under her, and the winds and the storm beating together upon her.

"The children! the children!" she moaned feebly, and then was still: she was so cold, and the snow fell so fast; she could not lift herself nor see what was around her; she thought that she was in her bed at home, and felt as though she would soon sleep.

Through the dense gloom around her there came a swiftly moving shape, that flew as silently and as quickly as a night bird, and paused as though on wings beside her.

A voice that was at one timid and fierce, tender and savage, spoke to her through the clouds of driven snow spray.

"Hush, it is I! I—Folle–Farine. I have brought you my food. It is not much—they never give me much. Still it will help a little. I heard what you said—I was in the loft. Flamma must not know; he might make you pay. But it is all mine, truly mine, take it."

"Food—for the children!"

The blessed word aroused her from her lethargy; she raised herself a little on one arm, and tried to see whence the voice came that spoke to her. But the effort exhausted her; she fell again to the ground with a groan—her limb was broken.

Folle–Farine stood above her; her dark eyes gleaming like a hawk's through the gloom, and full of a curious, startled pity.

"You cannot get up; you are old," she said, abruptly. "See—let me carry you home. The children! yes, the children can have it. It is not much; but it will serve."

She spoke hastily and roughly; she was ashamed of her own compassion. What was it to her, whether any of these people lived or died? They had always mocked and hated her.

Folle–Farine

"If I did right, I should let them rot, and spit on their corpses," she thought, with the ferocity of vengeance that ran in her oriental blood.

Yet she had come out in the storm, and had brought away her food for strangers, though she had been at work all day long, and was chilled to the bone, and was devoured with a ravenous hunger.

Why did she do it?

She did not know. She scorned herself. But she was sorry for this woman, so poor and brave, with her eighty–two years, and so bitterly denied in her extremity.

Manon Dax dimly caught the muttered words, and feebly strove to answer them, whilst the winds roared and the snow beat upon her fallen body.

"I cannot rise," she murmured; "my leg is broken, I think. But it is no matter. Go you to the little ones; whoever you are, you are good, and have pity. Go to them, go. It is no matter for me. I have lived my life—any way. It will soon be over. I am not in pain—indeed."

Folle–Farine stood in silence a moment, then she stooped and lifted the old creature in her strong young arms, and with that heavy burden set out on her way in the teeth of the storm.

She had known the woman, and the little ones, by sight and name long and well.

Once or twice when she had passed by them, the grandam, tender of heart, but narrow of brain, and believing all the tales of her neighbours, had drawn the children closer to her, under the wing of her serge cloak, lest the evil eye that had bewitched the tanner's youngest born, should fall on them, and harm them in like manner.

Nevertheless the evil eyes gleamed on her with a wistful sorrow, as Folle–Farine bore her with easy strength and a sure step, through the frozen woodland ways, as she would have borne the load of wood, or the sack of corn, which she was so well used to carry to and fro like a packhorse.

Manon Dax did not stir, she did not even strive to speak again; she was vaguely sensible of a slow, buoyant, painless movement, of a close soft pressure that sheltered her from the force of the winds, of a subtle warmth that stole through her emaciated aching frame, and made her drowsy and forgetful, and content to be still.

She could do no more. Her day for struggle and for work was done.

Once she moved a little. Her bearer paused and stopped and listened.

"Did you speak?"

Manon Dax gave a soft troubled sigh.

"God is good," she muttered, like one speaking in a dream.

Folle–Farine held on her way, as before her Phratos had once held on his; fiercely blown, blinded by the snow, pierced by the blasts of the hurricane, but sure of foot on the ice as a reindeer, and sure of eye in the dark as a night–hawk.

"Are you in pain?" she asked once of the burden she carried.

There was no answer.

"She is asleep," she thought; and went onward.

The distance of the road was nothing to her, fleet and firm of step, and inured to all hardships of the weather; yet it cost her an hour to travel it, heavily weighted as she was, soaked with snow-water, blown back continually by the opposing winds, and forced to stagger and to pause by the fury of the storm.

At last she reached the hut.

The wind had driven open the door. The wailing cries of the children echoed sorrowfully on the stillness, answered by the bleating of sheep, cold and hungry in their distant folds. The snow had drifted in unchecked; all was quite dark.

She felt her way within over the heaps of the snow, and being used by long custom to see in the gloom, as the night-haunting beasts and birds can see, she found the bed of hay, and laid her burden gently down on it.

The children ceased their wailing; the two eldest ones crept up close to their grandmother; and pressed their cheeks to hers, and whispered to her eagerly, with their little famished lips:

"Where is the food, where is the food?"

But there was still no answer.

The clouds drifted a little from the moon which had been so long obscured; it shone for a moment through the vapour of the heavy sky; the whitened ground threw back the rays increased tenfold; the pale gleam reached the old still face of Manon Dax.

There was a feeble smile upon it—the smile with which her last words had been spoken in the darkness; "God is good!"

She was quite dead.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL that night Folle-Farine tarried with the children.

The youngest had been suffocated whilst they had been alone, by the snow that had fallen through the roof, from which its elders had been too small and weakly to be able to drag it out, unaided. She laid it, stiff already in the cold night, beside the body of its old grandam, who had perished in endeavouring to save it; they lay together, the year-old child and the aged woman, the broken bud and the leafless bough. They had died of hunger, as the birds die on the moors and plains; it is a common fate.

She stayed beside the children, who were frightened and bewildered and quite mute. She divided such food as she had brought between them, not taking any herself. She took off the sheepskin which she wore in winter tied round her loins as her outdoor garment, and made a little nest of it for the three, and covered them with it. She could not close the door, from the height of the drifted snow, and the wind poured in all night long, though in an hour the snow ceased to fall.

Now and then the clouds parting a little, let a ray of the moon stray in; and then she could see the quiet faces of

the old woman and the child.

"They die of famine—and they die saying their 'God is good,'" she thought; and she pondered on it deeply, with the bitter and melancholy irony which life had already taught her.

The hours of the night dragged slowly on; the winds howled above the trembling hovel; the children sobbed themselves to sleep at last, lulled by the warmth of the sheepskin, in which they crept together like young birds in a nest.

She sat there patiently; frozen and ravenous; yet not drawing a corner of the sheepskin to her own use, nor regretting a crumb of the bread she had surrendered.

She hated the human race, whose hand was always against her. She had no single good deed to thank them for, nor any single gentle word. Yet she was sorry for that old creature, who had been so bitterly dealt with all her years through, who had died saying "God was good." She was sorry for those little helpless, unconscious starving animals, who had lost the only life that could labour for theirs.

She forgave—because she forgot—that in other winters this door had been shut against her as against an accursed thing, and these babes had mocked her in their first imperfect speech.

The dawn broke; the sharp grey winter's day came; the storm had lulled; but the whole earth was frost-bound and white with snow, the air was piercing, the sky dark and overcast.

She had to leave them; she was bound to her daily labour at the mill; she knew that if when the sun rose she were found to be absent, she and they too would surely suffer. What to do for them she could not tell. She had no friend save Marcellin, who himself was as poor as these. She never spoke to any living thing, except a sheep-dog, or a calf bleating for its mother, or a toil-worn bullock staggering over the ploughed clods.

Between her, and all those around her, there were perpetual enmity and mistrust, and scarcely so much of a common bond as lies in a common humanity. For in her title to a common humanity with them they disbelieved; while she in her scorn rejected all claim to it.

At daybreak there passed by the open door in the mist, a peasant going to his cattle in the fields beyond, pushing through the snow a rude hand-cart full of turnips, and other winter food.

She rose and called to him.

He stared and stood still.

She went to the doorway and signed to him.

"Old Manon is dead. Will you tell the people? The children are here, alone, and they starve."

"Manon Dax dead?" he echoed stupidly: he was her nearest neighbour, and he had helped her to fetch her washing-water sometimes from the well half a league away, and when his wife had been down, with fever and ague, the old woman had nursed her carefully and well through many a tedious month.

"Yes, I found her on the road, in the snow, last night. She had broken her leg, and she was dead before I got here. Go and send some one. The little children are all alone, and one of them is dead too."

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It was so dark still, that he had not seen at first who it was that addressed him, but slowly, as he stared and stared, and drew nearer to her, he recognised the scarlet girdle, the brown limbs, the straight brow, the fathomless eyes.

He feared her, with a great fear rising there suddenly before him, out of that still white world of dawn and shadow.

He dropped the handles of his cart and fled; a turn in the road, and the darkness of the morning, soon hid him from sight. She thought that he had gone to summon his people, and she went back and sat again by the sleeping children, and watched the sad still faces of the dead.

The peasant flew home as swiftly as his heavy shoes and the broken ice of the roads would allow.

His cabin was at some distance, at a place where, amidst the fields, a few huts, a stone crucifix, some barns and stacks, and a single wineshop made up a little village, celebrated in the district for its wide spreading orchards and their excellence of fruits.

Even so early the little hamlet was awake; the shutters were opened; the people were astir; men were brushing the snow from their thresholds; women were going out to their field–work; behind the narrow lattices the sleepy eyes and curly heads of children peered, while their fingers played with the fanciful encrustations of the frost.

The keeper of the tavern was unbarring his house door; a girl broke the ice in a pool for her ducks to get at the water; a few famished robins flew to and fro songless.

His own wife was on her doorstep; to her he darted.

"Manon Dax is dead!" he shouted.

"What of that?" said his wife, shouldering her broom; a great many had died that winter, and they were so poor and sharp–set with famine themselves, that they had neither bread nor pity to spare.

"This of that!" cried the old man, doggedly, and full of the excitement of his own terrors. "The young devil of Yprès has killed her, that I am sure. She is there in the hut in the dark, with her eyes glaring like coals. And for what should she be there if not for evil? Tell me that."

"Is it possible?" his wife cried, incredulous, yet willing to believe.

The girl left her ducks, the wineshop–keeper his door, the women their cabins, and came and stood round the bearer of such strange news: very welcome news in a raw frost–bitten dawn, when a day was beginning that would otherwise have had nothing more wonderful in it than tidings of how a litter of black pigs thrived, and how a brown horse had fared with the swelling in the throat.

They were very dull there from year's end to year's end; once a month, may be, a letter would come in from some soldier–son or brother, or a pedlar coming to buy eggs would bring likewise some stray rumour from the outer–world;—beyond this there was no change, they heard nothing, and saw nothing, seldom moving a league away from that stone crucifix, round which their homes were clustered.

The man Flandrin had nothing truly to tell; he had fled horrified to be challenged, in the twilight and the snow, by a creature of such evil omen. But when he had got an audience, he was too true an orator, and not such a fool as to lose it for such a little beggarly matter as the truth; and his tongue clacked quickly of all which his fears and fancies had conceived, until he had talked himself and his listeners into the full belief that Manon Dax being belated had encountered the evil glance of the daughter of all evil, and had been slain thereby in most cruel

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sorcery.

Now, in the whole neighbourhood, there was nothing too foul to be credible of the begotten of the fiend—a fiend whom all the grown men and women remembered so well in his earthly form, when he had come to ruin poor Reine Flamma's body and soul, with his eyes like jewels, and his strength passing the strength of all men.

The people listened, gaping, and wonderstruck, and forgetting the bitterness of the cold, being warmed with those unfailing human cordials of foul suspicion and of gratified hatred. Some went off to their daily labour, being unable to spare time for more gossip; but divers women who had nothing to occupy them remained about Flandrin.

A shrivelled dame, who owned the greatest number of brood-hens in the village, and who had only one son, a priest, and who was much respected and deferred to by her neighbours, spoke first when Flandrin had ended his tale for the seventh time, it being a little matter to him that his two hungry cows would be lowing all the while vainly for their morning meal.

"Flandrin, you have said well, beyond a doubt; the good soul has been struck dead by sorcery. But, you have forgot one thing, the children are there, and that devil of Yprès is with them. We—good Christians and true—should not let such things be. Go, and drive her out and bring the young ones hither."

Flandrin stood silent.

It was very well to say that the devil should be driven out, but it was not so well to be the driver.

"That is as it should be," assented the other woman. "Go, Flandrin, and we—we will take the little souls in for this day, and then give them to the public charity, better cannot be done. Go."

"But mind that thou dost strike that beast, Folle-Farine, sharply!" cried his wife.

"If thou showest her the cross, she will have to grovel and flee," said another.

"Not she," grumbled an old dame, whose son was a priest. "One day my blessed son, who is nearly a saint, Heaven knows, menaced her with his cross, and she stood straight, and fearless, and looked at it, and said, 'By that sign you do all manner of vileness in this world, and say you are safe to be blest in another; I know!' and so laughed and went on. What are you to do with a witch like that—eh?"

"Go, Flandrin," shrieked the women in chorus, "Go! Every minute you waste the little angels are nearer to hell!"

"Come yourselves with me, then," said Flandrin, sullenly. "I will not go after those infants, it is not a man's work."

In his own mind he was musing on a story which his priests had often told him, of swine into which exorcised devils had entered, and despatched swiftly down a slope to a miserable end; and he thought of his own pigs, black, fat, and happy, worth so much to him in the market.

Better, he mused, that Manon Dax's grandchildren should be the devil's prey, than those, his choicest, swine.

The women jeered him, menaced him, flouted him, besought him. But vainly—he would not move alone. He had become possessed of the terrors of his own fancy had created; and he would not stir a step for all their imprecations.

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"Let us go ourselves, then!" screamed his wife at length, flourishing above her head the broom with which she had swept the snow. "Men are ever cowards. It shall never be said of me, that I left those babes to the fiend while I gave my own children their porridge by the fire!"

There was a sentiment in this that stirred all her companions to emulation. They rushed into their homes, snatched a shovel, a staff, a broom, a pig-stick, each whatever came uppermost, and dragging Flandrin in the midst, went down the sloping frozen road between its fringe of poplars.

They were not very sure in their own minds, why they went, nor for what they went; but they had a vague idea of doing what was wise and pious, and they had a great hate in their hearts against the child. They sped as fast as the slippery road would let them, and their tongues flew still faster than their feet; the cold of the daybreak made them sharp and keen on their prey, as the air was on themselves; they screamed fable on fable hoarsely, their voices rising shrilly above the whistling of the winds, and the creaking of the trees, and they inflamed each other with ferocious belief in the sorcery they were to punish.

They were in their way virtuous; they were content on very little; they toiled hard from their birth to their grave; they were most of them chaste wives and devoted mothers, they bore privation steadily, and they slaved in fair weather and foul without a complaint. But they were narrow of soul, greedy of temper, bigoted and uncharitable, and, when they thought themselves or their offspring menaced, implacable.

They were of the stuff that would be burned for a creed, and burn others for another creed.

It is the creed of the vast majority of every nation; the priests and lawgivers of every nation have always told their people that it is a creed holy and honourable—how can the people know that it is at once idiotic and hellish?

Folle-Farine sat within on the damp hay under the broken roof, and watched the open door.

The children were still asleep. The eldest one in his sleep had turned and caught her hand, and held it.

She did not care for them. They had screamed, and run behind the woodstock, or their grandam's skirts, a hundred times when they had seen her on the road or in the orchard.

But she was sorry for them; almost as sorry as she was for the little naked woodpigeons when their nests were scattered on the ground in a tempest, or for the little starveling rabbits when they screamed in their holes for the soft white mother that was lying, tortured and twisted, in the jaws of a steel-trap.

She was sorry for them—half roughly, half tenderly sorry—with some shame at her own weakness, and yet too sincerely sorry to be able to persuade herself to leave them to their fate there, all alone with their dead. For in the savage heart of Taric's daughter there was an innermost corner wherein her mother's nature slept.

She sat there quite still, watching the porch, and listening for footsteps.

The snow was driven in encircling clouds by the winds, the dense fog of the dawn lifted itself off the surrounding fields; the branches of the trees were beautiful with hanging icicles; from the meadow hard-by there wailed unceasingly the mournful moaning of Flandrin's cattle, deserted of their master, and hungry in their wooden sheds.

She heard a distant convent clock strike six: no one came. Yet she had resolved not to leave the children all alone, though Flamma should come and find her there, and thrash her for her absence from his tasks. So she sat still, and waited.

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After a little she heard the crisp cracking of many feet on the frozen snow and ice-filled ruts of the narrow road; she heard a confused clatter of angry voices breaking harshly on the stillness of the winter morning.

The light was stronger now, and through the doorway she saw the little passionate crowd of angry faces as the women pressed onward down the hill with Flandrin in their midst.

She rose, and looked out at them, quietly.

For a minute they paused—irresolute, silent, perplexed: at the sight of her they were half daunted; they felt the vagueness of the crime they came to bring against her.

The wife of Flandrin recovered speech first, and dared them to the onslaught.

"What!" she screamed, "nine good Christians fearful of one daughter of hell? Fie! for shame! Look; my leaden Peter is round my neck! Is he not stronger than she any day?"

In a moment more, thus girded at and guarded at the same time, they were through the door and stood on the mud floor of the hearth, close to her, casting hasty glances at the poor dead body on the hearth, whose fires they had left to die out all through that bitter winter.

They came about her in a fierce, gesticulating, breathless troop, flourishing their sticks in her eyes, and casting at her all their various charges in one breath. Flandrin stood a little aloof, sheepishly on the threshold, wishing that he had never said a word of the death of Manon Dax to his good wife and neighbours.

"You met that poor saint and killed her in the snow with your witcheries!" one cried.

"You have stifled that poor babe where it lay!" cried another.

"A good woman like that!" shrieked a third, "who was well and blithe and praising God only a day ago, for I saw her myself come down the hill for our well water!"

"It is as you did with the dear little Rémy, who will be lame all his life, through you," hissed a fourth. "You are not fit to live; you spit venom like a toad."

"Are you alive, my angels?" said a fifth, waking the three children noisily, and rousing their piercing cries. "Are you alive after that witch has gazed on you? It is a miracle! The Saints be praised!"

Folle-Farine stood mute and erect for the moment, not comprehending why they thus with one accord fell upon her. She pointed to the bodies on the hearth, with one of those grave and dignified gestures which were her birthright from the old oriental race.

"She was cold and hungry," she said curtly, her mellow accent softening and enriching the provincial tongue which she had learned from those amidst whom she dwelt. "She had fallen, and was dying. I brought her here. The young child was killed by the snow. I stayed with the rest because they were frightened and alone. There is no more to tell. What of it?"

"Thou hast better come away. What canst thou prove?" whispered Flandrin to his wife.

He was afraid of the storm he had invoked, and would fain have stilled it. But that was beyond his power. The women had not come forth half a league in the howling winds of a midwinter daybreak only to go back with a mere charity done, and with no vengeance taken.

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They hissed, they screamed, they hurled their rage at her; they accused her of a thousand crimes; they filled the hut with clamor as of a thousand tongues; they foamed, they spat, they struck her with their sticks; and she stood quiet, looking at them, and the old dead face of Manon Dax which lay upward in the dim light.

The eldest boy struggled in the grasp of the peasant woman who had seized him, and stretched his arms, instead, to the one who had fed him, and whose hand he had held all through his restless slumber in that long and dreary night. The woman covered his eyes with a scream.

"Ah--h!" she moaned, "see how the innocent child is bewitched! It is horrible!"

"Look on that;--oh infernal thing!" cried Flandrin's wife, lifting up her treasured figure of Peter. "You dare not face that blessed image. See--see all of you--how she winces, and turns white!"

Folle-Farine had shrunk a little as the child had called to her. Its gesture of affection was the first that she had ever seen towards her in any human thing.

She laughed aloud as the image of Peter was thrust in her face. She saw it was some emblem and idol of their faith, devotedly cherished. She stretched her hand out, wrenched it away, trampled on it, and tossed it through the doorway into the snow, where it sank and disappeared. Then she folded her arms, and waited for them.

There was a loud shriek at the blasphemy of the impious act; then they rushed on her.

They came inflamed with all the fury which abject fear and bigoted hatred can beget in minds of the lowest and most brutal type. They were strong, rude, ignorant, fanatical peasants, they abhorred her, they believed no child of theirs safe in its bed while she walked abroad alive. Beside such women, when in wrath and riot, the tiger and they hyæna are as the lamb and the dove.

They set on her with furious force, flung her, trod on her, beat her, kicked her with their wood-shod feet, with all the malignant fury of the female animal that fights for its offspring's and its own security.

Strong though she was, and swift, and full of courage, she had no power against the numbers who had thrown themselves on her, and borne her backward by dint of their united effort, and held her down to work their worst on her.

She could not free herself nor return their blows, nor lift herself to wrestle with them; she could only deny them the sweetness of wringing from her a single cry, and that much she did.

She was mute while the rough hands flew at her, the sticks struck at her, the heavy feet were driven against her body, the fingers clutched at her long hair, and twisted and tore at it--she was quite mute throughout.

"Prick her in the breast, and see if the devil be still in her. I have heard say there is no better way to test a witch!" cried Flandrin's wife, writhing in rage for the outrage to the Petrus.

Her foes needed no second bidding; they had her already prostrate in their midst, and a dozen eager hands seized a closer grip upon her, pulled her clothes from her chest, and, holding her down on the mud floor, searched with ravenous eyes for the signet marks of hell.

The smooth skin baffled them; its rich and tender hues were without spot or blemish.

"What matter; what matter?" hissed Rose Flandrin. "When our fathers hunted witches in the old time, did they stop for that? Draw blood, and you will see."

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She clutched a jagged rusty nail from out the wall, and leaned over her prey.

"It is the only babe that will ever cling to thee!" she cried, with a laugh, as the nail drew blood above the heart.

Still Folle-Farine made no sound and asked no mercy.

She was powerless, defenceless, flung on her back amidst her tormentors, fastened down by treading feet and clenching hands; she could resist in nothing, she could not stir a limb, still she kept silence, and her proud eyes looked unquailing into the hateful faces bent to hers.

The muscles and nerves of her body quivered with a mighty pang, her chest heaved with the torture of indignity, her heart fluttered like a wounded bird—not at the physical pain, but at the shame of these women's gaze, the loathsome contact of their reckless touch. The iron pierced deeper, but they could not make her speak.

Except for her eyes, that glowed with a dusky fire as they glanced to and fro, seeking escape, she might have been a statue of olive wood, flung down by ruffians to make a bonfire.

"If one were to drive the nail to the head, she would not feel!" cried the women, in furious despair, and were minded, almost, to put her to the uttermost test.

Suddenly from the doorway Flandrin raised an alarm:

"There is our notary close at hand, on the road on his mule! Hist! Come out quickly. You know how strict he is, and how he forbids us ever to try and take the law into our own keeping. Quick—as you love your lives—quick!"

The furies left their prey, and scattered and fled; the notary was a name of awe to them, for he was a severe man, but just.

They seized the children, went out with them into the road, closed the hut door behind them, and moved down the hill; the children wailing sadly, and the eldest trying to get from them and go back.

The women looked mournful and held their heads down, and comforted the little ones; Flandrin himself went to his cattle in the meadow.

"Is anything amiss?" the old white-haired notary asked, stopping his favourite grey mule at sight of the little calvacade.

The women, weeping, told him that Manon Dax was dead, and the youngest infant likewise—of cold, in the night, as they supposed. They dared to say no other thing, for he had many times rebuked them for their lack of charity and their bigoted cruelties and superstitions, and they were quaking with fear lest he should by any chance enter the cottage and see their work.

"Flandrin, going to his cow, saw her first, and he came to us and told us," they added, crossing themselves fervently, and hushing little Bernardou, who wanted to get from them and return; "and we have taken the poor little things to carry them home; we are going to give them food, and warm them awhile by the stove, and then we shall come back and do all that is needful for the beloved dead who are within."

"That is well. That is good and neighbourly of you," said the notary, who liked them all, having married them all, and registered their children's births, and who was a good old man though stern; kindly and very honest.

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He promised them to see for his part that all needed by the law and by the church should be done for their old lost neighbour, and then urged his fat mule into a trot, for he had been summoned to a rich man's sick bed in that early winter morning, and was in haste lest the priest should be beforehand with him there.

"How tender the poor are to the poor! Those people have not bread enough for themselves, and yet they burden their homes with three strange mouths. Their hearts must be true at the core, if their tongues sometimes be foul," he mused, as he rode the mule down through the fog.

The women went on, carrying and dragging the children with them, in a sullen impatience.

"To think we should have had to leave that fiend of Yprès!" they muttered in their teeth. "Well, there is one thing, she will not get over the hurt for days. Her bones will be stiff for many a week. That will teach her to leave honest folk alone."

And they traversed the road slowly; muttering to one another.

"Hold thy noise, thou little pig!" cried Flandrin's wife, pushing Bernardou on before her. "Hold thy noise, I tell you, or I will put you in the black box in a hole in the ground, along with thy great-grandmother."

But Bernardou wept aloud, refusing to be comforted or terrified into silence. He was old enough to know that never more would the old kindly withered brown face bend over him as he woke in the morning, nor the old kindly quavering voice croon him country ballads and cradle songs at twilight by the bright wood fire.

Little by little the women carrying the children crept down the slippery slope, half ice and half mud in the thaw, and entered their own village, and therein were much praised for their charity and courage.

For when they praise, as when they abuse, villages are loud of voice and blind of eye, much as are the cities.

Their tongues, and those of their neighbours, clacked all day long, noisily and bravely, of their good and their great deeds; they had all the sanctity of martyrdom, and all the glory of victory, in one.

True, they had left all their house and field work half done;—"but the Holy Peter will finish it in his own good time, and avenge himself for his outrage," mused the wife of Flandrin, sorrowing over her lost Petrus in the snowdrift, and boxing the ears of little Bernardou, as he huddled in her chimney corner, to make him cease from weeping.

When they went back with their priest at noon to the hut of old Manon Dax to make her ready for her burial, they trembled inwardly lest they should find their victim there, and lest she should lift her voice in accusation against them. Their hearts misgave them sorely. Their priest, a cobbler's son, and almost as ignorant as themselves, would be, they knew, on their own side; but they were sensible that they had let their fury hurry them into acts which could easily be applauded by their neighbours, but not so easily justified to the law.

"For the law is over good," said Rose Flandrin, "and takes the part of all sorts of vile creatures. It will protect a rogue, a brigand, a bullock, a dog, a witch, a devil—anything,—except now and then an honest woman."

But their fears were groundless; she was gone; the hut when they entered it had no tenants except the lifeless famished bodies of the old grandam and the year-old infant.

When Folle-Farine had heard the hut door close, and the steps of her tormentors die away down the hill, she had tried vainly several times to raise herself from the floor, and had failed.

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She had been so suddenly attacked and flung down and trampled on, that her brain had been deadened, and her sense had gone for the first sharp moment of the persecution.

As she lifted herself slowly, and staggered to her feet, and saw the blood trickle where the nail had pierced her breast, she understood what had happened to her; and her face grew savage and dark, and her eyes fierce and lustful, like the eyes of some wild beast rising wounded in his lair.

It was not for the hurt she cared; it was the shame of defeat and outrage that stung her like a whip of asps.

She stood awhile looking at the dead face of the woman she had aided.

"I tried to help you," she thought. "I was a fool. I might have known how they pay any good done to them."

She was not surprised; her mind had been too deadened by a long course of ill usage to feel any wonder at the treatment with which she had been repaid.

She hated them with the mute unyielding hatred of her race, but she hated herself more because she had yielded to the softness of sorrow and pity for any human thing; and more still because she had not been armed and on her guard, and had suffered them to prevail and to escape without her vengeance.

"I will never come abroad without a knife in my girdle again," she thought—this was the lesson that her charity had brought her as its teaching.

She went out hardening her heart, as she crept through the doorway into the snow and the wind, so that she should not leave one farewell word or token of gentleness with the dead, that lay there so tranquil on the ashes of the hearth.

"She lied, even in her last breath!" thought Folle-Farine. "She said that her God was good!"

She could hardly keep on her own homeward way. All her limbs were stiff and full of pain. The wound in her chest was scarcely more than skin deep, yet it smarted sorely and bled still. Her brain was dull, and her ears were filled with strange noises from the force with which she had been flung backward on her head.

She had given her sheepskin to the children, as before her Phratos had done; and one of the peasants had carried the youngest away in it. The sharpness of the intense cold froze the blood in her as she crawled through a gap in the poplar hedge, and under the whitened brambles and grasses, beyond, to get backward to the mill by the path that ran through the woods and pastures.

The sun had risen, but was obscured by fog, through which it shed a dull red ray here and there above the woods in the east.

It was a bitter morning, and the wind, though it had abated, was still rough, and drove the snow in clouds of powder hither and thither over the fields. She could only move very slowly, very stiffly; the thorns tearing her, the snow blinding her, the icicles lacerating her bare feet as she moved.

She wondered, dimly, why she lived. It seemed to her that the devil, when he had made her, must have made her out of sport and cruelty, and then tossed her into the world to be a scapegoat and a football for any creature that might need one.

That she might end her own life never occurred to her; her intelligence was not awake enough to see that she need not have borne its burden one hour more, so long as there had been one pool in the woods deep enough to drown

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her under its green weeds and lily leaves any cool summer night. Nay,—that she had but to lie down, then and there, where she was, beneath the ice-dropping trees, and let the sleep that weighed so heavily on her eyelids come, dreamless and painless, and there would be an end of all for her, as for the frozen rabbits and the birds that strewed the upland meadows, starved and stiff.

She did not know;—and had she known, wretched though existence was to her, death would not have allured her. She saw that the dead might be slapped on their cheek, and could not lift their arm to strike again—a change that would not give her vengeance could have had no sweetness and no succour for her. The change she wanted was to live, not to die.

By tedious and painful efforts, she dragged herself home by the way of the lanes and pastures; hungry, lame, bleeding, cold and miserable, with her eyes burning, and her hands and her head hot with fever.

She made her way into the mill-yard and tried to commence her first morning's work; the drawing of water from the well for the beasts and for the house, and the sweeping down of the old wide court round which the sheds and storehouses ran.

She never dreamed of asking either for food or pity, either for sympathy or remission of her labours. She set to work at once, but for the only time since Phratos had brought her thither, the strength and vigour of her frame had been beaten.

She was sick and weak; her hand sank off the handle of the windlass; and she dropped stupidly on the stone edge of the well, and sat there leaning her head on her hands.

The mastiff came and licked her face tenderly. The pigeons left the meal flung to them on the snow, and flew merrily about her head in pretty fluttering caresses. The lean cat came and rubbed its cheek softly against her, purring all the while. The woman Pitchou saw her, and she called out of the window to her master.

"Flamma! there is thy gad—about, who has not been a' bed all night."

The old man heard, and came out of his mill to the well in the courtyard.

"Where hast been?" he asked sharply of her. "Pitchou says thou hast not lain in thy bed all night long. Is it so?"

Folle-Farine lifted her head slowly, with a dazed stupid pain in the look of her eyes.

"Yes, it is true," she answered, doggedly.

"And where hast been then?" he asked, through his clenched teeth; enraged that his servant had been quicker of eye and ear than himself.

A little of her old dauntless defiance gleamed in her face through its stupor and langour, as she replied to him with effort in brief phrases.

"I went after old Manon Dax, to give her my supper. She died in the road, and I carried her home. And the youngest child was dead too. I stayed there because the children were alone; I called to Flandrin and told him; he came with his wife and other women, and they said I had killed old Dax; they set on me, and beat me, and pricked me for a witch. It is no matter. But it made me late."

In her glance upward, even in the curtness of her words, there was an unconscious glimmer of appeal, a vague fancy that for once she might, perhaps, meet with approval and sympathy, instead of punishment and contempt.

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She had never heard a kind word from him, nor one of any compassion, and yet a dim unuttered hope was in her heart, that for once he might condemn her persecutors and pardon her.

But the hope was a vain one, like all which she had cherished since first the door of the mill-house had opened to admit her.

Flamma only set his teeth tighter. In his own soul he had been almost ashamed of his denial to his old neighbour, and had almost feared, that it would lose him the good will of that good heaven which sent him so mercifully such a sharp year of famine to enrich him. Therefore, it infuriated him, to think that this offspring of a foul sin should have had pity and charity, where he had lacked them.

He looked at her and saw with grim glee, that she was black and blue with bruises, and that the linen which she held together across her bosom had been stained with blood.

"Flandrin and his wife are honest people, and pious," he said, in answer to her. "When they find a wench out of her bed at night, they deal rightly with her, and do not hearken to any lies that she may tell them of feigned alms-giving to cover her vices from their sight. I thank them that they did so much of my work for me. They might well prick thee for a witch; but they will never cut so deep into thy breast, as to be able to dig the mark of the devil out of it. Now, up and work, or it will be worse for thee."

She obeyed him.

There during the dark winter's day, the pain which she endured, with her hunger and the cold of the weather, made her fall thrice, like a dead thing, on the snow of the court, and the floors of the sheds. But she lay insensible till the youth in her brought back consciousness, without aid; in those moments of faintness, no one noticed her save the dog, who came and crept to her to give her warmth, and strove to wake her with the kisses of his rough tongue.

She did her work as best she might; neither Flamma nor his servant once spoke to her.

"My women dealt somewhat roughly with thy wench at break of day, good Flamma," said the man Flandrin, meeting him in the lane that afternoon, and fearful of offending the shrewd old man who had so many of his neighbours in his grip. "I hope thou wilt not take it amiss? The girl maddened my dame—spitting on her Peter, and throwing the blessed image away in a ditch."

"The woman did well," said Flamma coldly, driving his grey mare onward through the fog.

Flandrin could not tell whether he were content, or were displeased.

Claudis Flamma hardly knew which he was, himself; he held her as the very spawn of hell itself, and yet it was loathsome to him, that his neighbours should also know, and say, that a devil had been the only fruit of that fair offspring of his own, whom he and they had so long held as a saint.

The next day and the next, and the next again after that, she was too ill to stir; they beat her and called her names, but it was of no use; they could not get work out of her; she was past it, and beyond all rousing of their sticks, or of their words.

They were obliged to let her be. She stayed for nearly four days in the hay in her loft; devoured with fever, and with every bone and muscle in pain. She had a pitcher of water by her and drank continually, thirstily, like a sick dog. With rest and no medicine but the cold spring water, she recovered: she had been delirious in a few of the hours, and had dreamed of nothing but of the old life in the Liébana, and of the old sweet music of Phratos. She

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remained there untended, shivering and fever-stricken, until the strength of her youth returned to her. She rose on the fifth day weaker, but otherwise little the worse; with the soft sad songs of her old friend the viol ringing always through her brain.

The fifth day from the death of Manon Dax, was the day of the new year.

There was no work being done at the mill; the wheel stood still, locked fast, for the deep stream was close bound in ice; frost had returned, and the country was white with snow two feet deep, and bleak and bare, and rioted over by furious cross winds.

Flamma and Pitchou were in the kitchen when she entered it; they looked up, but neither spoke to her. In being ill—for the first time since they had had to do with her,—she had committed, for the millionth time, a crime.

There was no welcome for her in that cheerless place, where scarcely a spark of fire was allowed to brighten the heart, and where the hens, straying in from without, sat with ruffled feathers, chilled and moping, and where the Black Forest clock in the corner, had stopped from the intense cold.

There was no welcome for her—she went out into the air, thinking the woods, even at midwinter, could not be so lonesome as was the cheerless house.

The sun was shining through a rift in the stormy clouds, and the white roofs, and the ice-crusting waters, and the frosted trees, were glittering in its light.

There were many dead birds about the paths. Claudis Flamma had thought their famine-time a good one, in which to tempt them with poisoned grain.

She wondered where the dog was who never had failed to greet her,—a yard farther on she saw him.

He was stretched stiff and lifeless beside the old barrel that had served him as a kennel; his master had begrudged him the little straw needful to keep him from the hurricanes of those bitter nights; and he had perished quietly, without a moan, like a sentinel slain at his post—frozen to death in his old age after a life of faithfulness repaid with blows.

She stood by him a while with dry eyes, but with an aching heart. He had loved her, and she had loved him; and many a time she had risked a stroke of the lash to save it from his body; and many a time she had sobbed herself to sleep in her earlier years, with her arms curled round him, as round her only friend and only comrade in bondage and in misery.

She stooped down; kissed him softly on his broad grizzled forehead, and lifted his corpse into a place of shelter, and covered it tenderly, so that he should not be left to the crows and the kites, until she should be able to make his grave in those orchards in which he had loved so well to wander, and in which he and she had spent all their brief hours of summer liberty and leisure.

She shuddered as she looked her last on him; and filled in the snow above his tomb, under the old twisted pear tree, beneath which, he and she had so often sat together in the long grasses, consoling one another for scant fare and cruel blows by the exquisite mute sympathy which can exist betwixt the canine and the human animal when the two are alone, and love and trust each other, only, out of all the world.

Whilst the dog had lived, she had had two friends; now that he slept for ever in the old grey orchard, she had but one left.

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She went to seek this one.

Her heart ached for a kind glance—for a word that should be neither of hatred or of scorn. It was seldom that she allowed herself to know such a weakness. She had dauntless blood in her; she came of a people that despised pity, and who knew how to live hard, and to die hard, without murmur or appeal. Yet she had clung to the old mastiff, who was savage to all save herself; so she still clung to the old man Marcellin who to all save herself was a terror and a name of foul omen.

He was good to her in his own fierce and rugged way; and they had the kinship of the proscribed; and they loved one another in a strange, silent, savage manner, as a yearling wolf cub and an aged grizzled bear might love each other in the depths of forest, where the foot of the hunter and the fangs of the hound were alike against the young and the old.

She had not seen him for six days. She felt ill, and weak, and cold, and alone. She thought she would go to him in his hut, and sit a little by his lonely hearth, and hear him tell strange stories of the marvelous time when he was young, and the world was drunk with a mad sweet dream which had never come true upon earth.

Her heart was in wild revolt, and a fierce futile hate gnawed ever in it. She had become used to the indignities of the populace, and the insults of all the people who went to and fro her grandsire's place; but each one pierced deeper and deeper than the last, and left a longer scar, and killed more and more of the gentler and better instincts which had survived in her through all the brutalising debasement of her life.

She could not avenge the outrage of Rose Flandrin and her sisterhood, and being unable to avenge it, she shut her mouth and said nothing of it, as her habit was. Nevertheless it festered and rankled in her; and now and then the thought crossed her—why not take a flint and a bit of tow, and burn them all in their beds as they slept in that little hollow at the foot of the hill?

She thought of it often—would she ever do it? She did not know.

It had a taint of cowardice in it; yet a man that very winter had fired a farmstead for far less an injury, and had burned to death all who had lain therein that night. Why should she not kill and burn these also? They had never essayed to teach her to do better, and when she had tried to do good to one of them, the others had set on her as a witch.

In the afternoon of this first day of the year she had to pass through their hamlet to seek Marcellin.

The sun was low and red; the dusky light glowered over the white meadows and through the leafless twilight of the woods; here and there a solitary tree of holly reared itself, scarlet and tall, from the snowdrifts; here and there a sheaf of arrowy reeds pierced the sheets of ice that covered all the streams and pools.

The little village lay with its dark round roofs, cosy and warm, with all the winter round. She strode through it erect, and flashing her scornful eyes right and left; but her right hand was inside her skirt. For such was the lesson which the reward for her charity had taught her—a lesson not lightly to be forgotten, nor swiftly to be unlearned again.

In its simple mode, the little place, like its greater neighbours, kept high festival for a fresh year begun.

Its crucifix rose, bare and white, out of a crown of fir boughs and many wreaths of ruddy berries. On its cabin windows the light of wood cracking and blazing within glowed brightly. Through them she saw many of their interiors as she went by in the shadow without.

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In one the children knelt in a circle round the fire, roasting chestnuts in the embers with gay shouts of laughter. In another, they romped with their big sheepdog, decking him with garlands of ivy and laurel.

In one little brown room a betrothal party made merry; in another, that was bright with Dutch tiles, and hug round with dried herbs and fruits, an old matron had her arm round the curly head of a sailor lad, home for a short glad hour.

In the house of Flandrin a huge soup-pot smoked with savoury odour, and the eyes of his wife were soft with a tender mirth as she watched her youngest-born playing with a Punch, all bells and bright colours, and saw the elder ones cluster round a gilded Jesus of sugar.

In the wine-shop, the keeper of it, having taken to himself a wife that day, kept open house to his friends, and he and they were dancing to the music of a horn and a fiddle, under rafters bedecked with branches of fir, with many-hued ribands, and with little oil-lamps that blew to and fro in the noise of the romp. And all round were the dark still woods, and in the midst rose the crucifix; and above, on the height of the hill, the little old hut of Manon Dax stood dark and empty.

She looked at it all, going through it, with her hand on her knife.

"One spark," she thought, playing with the grim temptation that possessed her—"one spark on the dry thatch, and what a bonfire they would have for their feasting!"

The thought was sweet to her.

Injustice had made her ravenous and savage. When she had tried to do well, and to save life, these people had accused her of taking it by evil sorcery.

She felt a longing to show them what evil indeed she could do, and to see them burn, and to hear them scream vainly, and then to say to them with a laugh, as the flames licked up their homes and their lives, "Another time, take care how you awake a witch!"

Why did she not do it? She did not know; she had brought out a flint and tinder in the pouch that hung at her side. It would be as easy as to pluck a sere leaf; she knew that.

She stood still and played with her fancy, and it was horrible and sweet to her—so sweet because so horrible.

How soon their mirth would be stilled!

As she stood thinking, there, and in her fancy seeing the red glare that would light up that peaceful place, and hearing the roar of the lurid flames that would drown the music, and the laughter, and the children's shouts, out of the twilight there rose to her a small dark thing, with a halo round its head: the thing was Bernardou, and the halo was the shine of his curling hair in the lingering light.

He caught her skirts in his hands, and clung to her and sobbed.

"I know you—you were good that night. The people all say you are wicked, but you gave us your food, and held my hand. Take me back to gran'mère—oh, take me back!"

She was startled and bewildered.

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This child had never mocked her, but he had screamed and run from her in terror, and had been told a score of stories that she was a devil, who could kill his body and soul.

"She is dead, Bernardou," she answered him; and her voice was troubled, and sounded strangely to her as she spoke for the first time to a child without being derided or screamed at in fear.

"Dead! What is that?" sobbed the boy. "She was stiff and cold, I know, and they put her in a hole; but she would waken, I know she would, if she only heard us. We never cried in the night but she heard in her sleep, and got up and came to us. Oh, do tell her--do, do tell her!"

She was silent; she did not know how to answer him, and the strangeness of any human appeal made to her bewildered her and made her mute.

"Why are you out in the cold, Bernardou?" she asked him suddenly, glancing backward through the lattice of the Flandrins' house, through which she could see the infants laughing and shaking the puppet with gilded bells.

"They beat me; they say I am naughty, because I want gran'mère," he said, with a sob. "they beat me often, and oh! if she knew, she would wake and come. Do tell her--do! Bernardou will be so good, and never vex her, if only she will come back!"

His piteous voice was drowned in tears.

His little life had been hard; scant fare, cold winds, and naked limbs had been his portion; yet the life had been bright and gleeful to him, clinging to his grandam's skirts as she washed at the tub or hoed in the cabbage-ground, catching her smile when he brought her the first daisy of the year, running always to her open arms in any hurt, sinking to sleep always with the singing of her old ballads on his ear.

It had been a little life, dear, glad, kindly, precious to him, and he wept for it; refusing to be comforted by sight of a gilded puppet in another's hand, or a sugared Jesus in another's mouth, as they expected him to be.

It is the sort of comfort that is always offered to the homeless, and they are always thought ungrateful if they will not be consoled by it.

"I wish I could take you, Bernardou!" Folle-Farine murmured, with a momentary softness that was exquisitely tender in its contrast to her haughty and fierce temper. "I wish I could."

For one wild instant the thought came to her to break from her bonds, and take this creature who was as lonely as herself, and to wander away and away into that unknown land which stretched around her, and of which she knew no more than one of the dark leaves knew that grew in the snow-filled ditch.

But the thought passed unuttered; she knew neither where to go nor what to do.

Her few early years in the Liébana were too dream-like and too vaguely remembered to be any guide to her; and the world seemed only to her in her fancies as a vast plain, dreary and dismal, in which every hand would be against her, and every living thing be hostile to her. Beside, the long habitude of slavery was on her, and it is a yoke that eats into the flesh too deeply to be wrenched off without many an effort.

As she stood thinking, with the child's eager hands clasping her skirts, a shrill voice called from the woodstack and dung-heap outside Flandrin's house:

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"Bernardou! Bernardou! thou little plague. Come within. What dost do out there in the dark? Mischief, I will warrant."

The speaker strode out, and snatched and bore and clutched him away; she was the sister of Rose Flandrin, who lived with them, and kept the place and the children in order.

"Thou little beast!" she muttered, in fury. "Dost dare talk to the witch that killed thy grandmother? Thou shalt hie to bed, and sup on a fine whipping. Thank God, thou goest to the hospital tomorrow! Thou woudst bring a dire curse on the house in reward for our alms to thee."

She dragged him in and slammed—to the door, and his cries echoed above the busy shouts and laughter of the Flandrin family, gathered about the tinselled Punch and the sugared Jesus, and the soup-pot, that stewed them a fat farm-yard goose for their supper.

Folle-Farine listened awhile, with her hand clenched on her knife; then she toiled onward through the village, and left it and its carols and carousings behind her in the red glow of the sinking sun.

She thought no more of setting their huts in a blaze; the child's words had touched and softened her; she remembered the long patient bitter life of the woman who had died of cold and hunger in her eighty-second year, and yet who had thus died saying to the last, "God is good."

"What is their God?" she mused. "They care for him, and he seems to care nothing for them whether they be old or young."

Yet her heat was softened, and she would not fire the house in which little Bernardou was sheltered.

His was the first gratitude that she had ever met with, and it was sweet to her as the rare blossom of the edelweiss to the traveller upon the highest Alpine summits—a flower full of promise, born amidst a waste.

The way was long to where Marcellin dwelt, but she walked on through the fields that were in summer all one scarlet glow of poppies, and were now a white sheet of frozen water.

The day was over, the evening drew nigh, the sound of innumerable bells in the town echoed faintly from the distance, over the snow: all was still.

On the night of the new year the people had a care that the cattle in the byers, the sheep in the folds, the dogs in the kennels, the swine in the styes, the old cart-horses in the sheds, should have a full meal and a clean bed, and be able to rejoice.

In all the country round there were only two that were forgotten—the dead in their graves, and the daughter of Taric.

Folle-Farine was cold, hungry, and exhausted, for the fever had left her enfeebled; and from the coarse food of the mill-house her weakness had turned.

But she walked on steadily.

At the hut where Marcellin dwelt she knew that she would be sure of one welcome, one smile; one voice that would greet her kindly; one face that would look on her without a frown.

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It would not matter, she thought, how the winds should howl and the hail drive, or how the people should be merry in their homes and forgetful of her and of him. He and she would sit together over the little fire, and give back hate for hate and scorn for scorn, and commune with each other, and want no other cheer or comrade.

It had been always so since he had first met her at sunset amongst the poppies, then a little child of eight years old. Every new-year's night she had spent with him in his hovel; and in their own mute way they had loved one another, and drawn closer together, and been almost glad, though often pitcher and platter had been empty, and sometimes even the hearth had been cold.

She stepped bravely against the wind, and over the crisp firm snow, her spirits rising as she drew near the only place that had ever opened its door gladly to her coming; her heart growing lighter as she approached the only creature to whom she had ever spoken her thoughts without derision or told her woes without condemnation.

His hut stood by itself in the midst of the wide pastures, and by the side of a stream.

A little light was wont to twinkle at that hour through the crevices of its wooden shutter; this evening all was dark, the outline of the hovel rose like a rugged mound against the white wastes round it. The only sound was the far-off chiming of the bells that vibrated strangely on the rarefied sharp air.

She crossed the last meadow where the sheep were folded for the night, and went to the door and pushed against it to open it—it was locked.

She struck it with her hand.

"Open, Marcellin—open quickly. It is only I."

There was no answer.

She smote the wood more loudly, and called to him again.

A heavy step echoed on the mud floor within; a match was struck, a dull light glimmered; a voice she did not know muttered drowsily, "Who is there?"

"It is I, Marcellin," she answered. "It is not night. I am come to be an hour with you. Is anything amiss?"

The door opened slowly, an old woman, whose face was strange to her, peered out into the dusk. She had been asleep on the settle by the fire, and stared stupidly at the flame of her own lamp.

"Is it the old man, Marcellin, you want?" she asked.

"Marcellin, yes—where is he?"

"He died four days ago. Get you gone; I will have no tramps about my place."

"Died!"

Folle-Farine stood erect, without a quiver in her face or in her limbs; but her teeth shut together like a steel clasp, and all the rich and golden hues of her skin changed to a sickly ashen pallor.

"Yes, why not?" grumbled the old woman. "To be sure men said that God would never him die, because he killed St. Louis; but myself I never thought that. I knew the devil would not wait more than a hundred years for

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him—you can never cheat the devil, and he always seems stronger than the saints—somehow. You are that thing of Yprès, are you not? Get you gone!"

"Who are you? Why are you here?" she gasped.

Her right hand was clenched on the door-post, and her right foot was set on the threshold, so that the door could not be closed.

"I am an honest woman and a pious; and it befouls me to dwell where he dwelt," the old peasant hissed in loud indignation. "I stood out a whole day, but when one is poor and the place is offered quit of rent, what can one do?—and it is roomy and airy for the fowls, and the priest has flung holy water about and purified it, and I have a Horse-shoe nailed up, and a St. John in the corner. But be off with you, and take your foot from my door."

Folle-Farine stood motionless.

"When did he die; and how?" she asked in her teeth.

"He was found dead on the road, on his heap of stones, the fourth night from this," answered the old woman, loving to hear her own tongue, yet dreading the one to whom she spoke. "Perhaps he had been hungered, I do not know; or more likely the devil would not wait any longer; anyways, he was dead—the hammer in his hand. Max Liében, the man that travels with the wooden clocks, found him. He lay there all night. Nobody would touch him. They say they saw the mark of the devil's claws on him. At last they got a dung-cart, and took him away before the sun rose. He died just under the great Calvary—it was like his blasphemy. They have put him in the common ditch. I think it shame to let the man that slew a saint be in the same grave with all the poor honest folk who feared God, and were Christians though they might be beggars and outcasts. Get you gone, you be as vile as he. If you want him go ask your father the foul fiend for him—they are surely together now."

And she drove the door to, and closed it, and barred it firmly within.

"Not but what the devil can get through the chinks," she muttered, as she turned the wick of her lamp up higher.

Folle-Farine went back over the snow; blind, sick, feeling her way through the twilight as though it were the darkness of night.

"He died alone—he died alone," she muttered, a thousand times, as she crept shivering through the gloom; and she knew that now her own fate was yet more desolate. She knew that now she lived alone without one friend on earth.

The death on the open highway; the numbness, and stillness, and deafness to all the maledictions of men; the shameful bier made at night on the dung-cart, amidst loathing glances and muttered curses; the nameless grave in the common ditch with the beggar, the thief, the harlot, and the murderer;—these, which were so awful to all others, seemed to her as sweet as to sink to sleep on soft unshorn grass, whilst rose leaves are shaken in the wind, and fall as gently as kisses upon the slumberer.

For she in her youth and in the splendour of her strength, and in the blossom of her beauty, gorgeous as a passion-flower in the sun, envied bitterly the old man who had died at his work on the public road, hated by his kind, and weighted with the burden of nigh a hundred years.

Since his death was not more utterly lonely and desolate than was her life; and to all taunts and to all curses the ears of the dead are deaf.

BOOK III. "L'Artiste est un dieu tombé, qui se souvient du temps quand il créa un monde."

CHAPTER I.

NIGHT had come; a dark night of earliest spring. The wild day had sobbed itself to sleep after a restless life with fitful breath of storm and many sighs of shuddering breezes.

The sun had sunk, leaving lone tracks of blood–red light across one–half the heavens.

There was a sharp crisp coldness as of lingering frost in the gloom and the dulness. Heavy clouds, as yet unbroken, hung over the cathedral and the clustering roofs around it in dark and starless splendour.

Over the great still plains which stretched eastward and southward, black with the furrows of the scarce–budded corn, the wind blew hard; blowing the river and the many streamlets spreading from it into foam; driving the wintry leaves, which still strewed the earth thickly, hither and thither in legions; breaking boughs that had weathered the winter hurricanes, and scattering the tender blossoms of the snowdrops and the earliest crocuses in all the little moss–grown garden ways.

The smell of wet grass, of the wood–born violets, of trees whose new life was waking in their veins, of damp earths turned freshly upwards by the plough, were all blown together by the riotous breezes.

Now and then a light gleamed through the gloom where a little peasant boy lighted home with a torch some old priest on his mule, or a boat went down the waters with a lamp hung at its prow. For it grew dark early, and people used to the river read a threat of flood on its face.

A dim glow from the west, which was still tinged with the fire of the sunset, fell through a great square window set in a stone building, and striking across the sicklier rays of an oil lamp reached the opposing wall within.

It was a wall of grey stone, dead and lustreless like the wall of a prison–house, over whose surface a spider as colourless as itself dragged slowly its crooked hairy limbs loaded with the moisture of the place, which was an old tower, of which the country folk told strange tales, where it stood among the rushes on the left bank of the stream.

A man watched the spider as it went.

It crept on its heavy way across the faint crimson reflection from the glow of the sunken sun.

It was fat, well–nourished, lazy, content; its home of dusky silver hung on high, where its pleasure lay in weaving, clinging, hoarding, breeding. It lived in the dark; it had neither pity nor regret; it troubled itself neither for the death it dealt to nourish itself, nor for the light without, into which it never wandered; it spun and thrived and multiplied.

It was an emblem of the man who is wise in his generation; of the man whom Cato the elder deemed divine; of the Majority and the Mediocrity who rule over the earth and enjoy its fruits.

This man knew that was wise; that those who were like to it were wise also; wise with the only wisdom which is honoured of other men.

He had been unwise—always; and therefore he stood watching the sun die, with hunger in his soul, with famine

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in his body.

For many months he had been half famished, as were the wolves in his own northern mountains in the winter solstice. For seven days he had only been able to crush a crust of hard black bread between his teeth. For twenty hours he had not done even so much as this. The trencher on his tressel was empty; and he had not wherewithal to refill it.

He might have found some to fill it for him no doubt. He lived amidst the poor, and the poor to the poor are good, though they are bad and bitter to the rich. But he did not open either his lips or his hands. He consumed his heart in silence; and his vitals preyed in anguish on themselves without his yielding to their torments.

He was a madman; and Cato, who measured the godliness of man by what they gained, would have held him, accursed;—the madness that starves and is silent for an idea is an insanity, scouted by the world and the gods. For it is an insanity unfruitful; except to the future. And for the future who cares,—save these madmen themselves?

He watched the spider as it went.

It could not speak to him as its fellow once spoke in the old Scottish story. To hear as that captive heard, the hearer must have hope, and a kingdom,—if only in dreams.

This man had no hope; he had a kingdom indeed, but it was not of earth; and, in an hour of sheer cruel bodily pain, earth alone has dominion over power and worth.

The spider crawled across the grey wall; across the glow from the vanished sun; across a coil of a dead passion–vine, that strayed loosed through the floor; across the classic shapes of a great cartoon drawn in chalks upon the dull rugged surface of stone.

Nothing arrested it; nothing retarded it, as nothing hastened it. It moved slowly on; fat, lustreless, indolent, hueless; reached at length its den, and there squatted aloft, loving the darkness; its young swarming around, its prey held in its forceps, its nest cast about.

Through the open casement there came on the rising wind of the storm, in the light of the last lingering sunbeam, a beautiful night–moth, begotten by some cruel hot–house heat in the bosom of some frail exiled tropical flower.

It swam in on trembling pinions, and alighted on the golden head of a gathered crocus that lay dying on the stones—a moth that should have been born to no world save that of the summer world of a Midsummer Night's Dream.

A shape of Ariel and Oberon; slender, silver, purple, roseate, lustrous–eyed, and gossamer–winged.

A creature of woodland waters and blossoming forests; of the yellow chalices of kingcups and the white breasts of river lilies, of moonbeams that strayed through a summer world of shadows, and dewdrops that glistened in the deep folded hearts of roses. A creature to brush the dreaming eyes of a poet, to nestle on the bosom of a young girl sleeping: to float earthwards on a fallen star, to slumber on a lotus life.

A creature that amidst the still soft hush of woods and waters still tells, to those who listen, of the world when the world was young.

The moth flew on, and poised on the faded crocus leaves which spread out their pale gold on the level of the grey floor.

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It was weary, and its delicate wings drooped; it was storm–tossed, wind–beaten, drenched with mist and frozen with the cold; it belonged to the moon, to the dew, to the lilies, to the forget–me–nots, and to the night; and it found that the hard grip of winter had seized it whilst yet it had thought that the stars and the summer were with it. It lived before its time,—and it was like the human soul, which being born in the darkness of the world dares to dream of light, and, wandering in vain search of a sun that will never rise, falls and perishes in wretchedness.

It was beautiful exceedingly; with the brilliant tropical beauty of a life that is short–lived. It rested a moment on the stem of the pale flower, then with its radiant eyes fastened on the point of light which the lamp thrust upward, it flew on high; and, spreading out its transparent wings and floating to the flame, kissed it, quivered once, and died.

There fell among the dust and cinder of the lamp a little heap of shrunken fire–scorched blackened ashes.

The wind whirled them upward from their rest, and drove them forth into the night to mingle with the storm–scourged grasses, the pale dead violets, the withered snow–flowers, with all things frost–touched and forgotten.

The spider sat aloft, sucking the juices from the fettered flies, teaching its spawn to prey and feed; content in squalor and in plentitude; in sensual sloth, and in the increase of its body and its hoard.

He watched them both: the success of the spider, the death of the moth; trite as a fable; ever repeated as the tides of the sea; the two symbols of humanity; of the life which fattens on greed and gain, and the life which perishes of divine desire.

Then he turned and looked at the cartoons upon the wall; shapes grand and dim, the children of his genius, a genius denied by men.

His head sank on his chest, his hand tore the shirt away from his breast, which the pangs of a bodily hunger that he scorned, devoured, indeed, but which throbbed with a pain more bitter than that of even this lingering and ignoble death. He had genius in him, and he had to die like a wolf on the Armorican wolds, yonder westward, when the snows of winter hid all offal from its fangs.

It was horrible.

He had to die for want of the crust that beggars gnawed in the kennels of the city; he had to die of the lowest and commonest need of all—the sheer animal need of food.

"J'avais quelque chose là!" was, perhaps, the most terrible of all those death–cries of despair which the guillotine of Thermidor wrung from the lips of the condemned. For it was the despair of the bodily life for the life of the mind which died with it.

When a man clings to life for life's sake, because it is fair and sweet, and good to the sight and the senses, there may be weakness in his shudder at its threatening loss. But when a man is loth to lose life, although it be hard and joyless and barren of all delights, because this life gives him power to accomplish things greater than he, which yet without him must perish, there is the strength in him, as there is the agony, of Prometheus.

With him it must die also: that deep dim greatness within him which moves him, despite himself; that nameless unspeakable force, which compels him to create and to achieve; that vision by which he beholds worlds beyond him not seen by his fellows.

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Weary of life indeed he may be; of life material, and full of subtlety; of passion, of pleasure, of pain; of the kisses that burn, of the laughs that ring hollow, of the honey that so soon turns to gall, of the sickly fatigues and the tired cloyed hunger that are the portion of men upon earth. Weary of these he may be; but still if the gods have breathed on him and made him mad, with the madness that men have called genius, there will be that in him greater than himself, which he knows,—and cannot know without some fierce wrench and pang,—will be numbed and made impotent, and drift away, lost for evermore, into that eternal Night which is all that men behold of death.

It was so with this man now.

Life was barren of all delight for him, full of privation, of famine, of obscurity, of fruitless travail and of vain desire; yet because he believed that he had it in him to be great, or rather because, with a purer and more impersonal knowledge, he believed that it was within his power to do that which, when done, the world would not willingly let die, it was loathsome to him to perish thus of the sheer lack of food, as any toothless snake would perish in its swamp.

He stood opposite to the great white cartoons on which his soul had spent itself; creations which seemed but vague and ghostly in the shadows of the chamber, but in which he saw, or at the least believed he saw, the title-deeds of his own heirship to the world's kingdom of fame.

For himself he cared nothing; but for them—he smiled bitterly as he looked: "They will light some bakehouse fire to pay those that may throw my body in a ditch," he thought.

And yet the old passion had so much dominion still that he instinctively went nearer to his latest and best-beloved creations, and took the white chalks up and worked once more by the dull sullen rays of the lamp behind him.

They would be torn down on the morrow and thrust for fuel into some housewife's kitchen-stove. What matter?

He loved them; they were his sole garniture and treasure; in them his soul had gathered all its dreams and all its pure delights: so long as his sight lasted he sought to feed it on them; so long as his hand had power he strove to touch, to caress, to enrich them.

Even in such an hour as this, the old sweet trance of Art was upon him.

He was devoured by the deadly fangs of long fast; streaks of living fire seemed to scorch his entrails; his throat and lungs were parched and choked; and ever and again his left hand clenched on the bones of his naked chest as though he could wrench away the throes that gnawed it. He knew that worse than this would follow; he knew that tenfold more torment would await him; that limbs as strong, and muscles as hard, and manhood as vigorous as his, would only yield to such death as this slowly, doggedly, inch by inch, day by day. He knew; and he knew that he could not trust himself to go through that uttermost torture without once lifting his voice to summon the shame of release from it. Shame—since release would needs be charity.

He knew full well; he had seen all forms of death; he had studied its throes, and portrayed its horrors. He knew that before dawn—it might be before midnight—this agony would grow so great that it would conquer him; and that to save himself from the cowardice of appeal, the shame besought alms, he would have to use his last powers to drive home a knife hard and sure through his breast-bone. Yet he stood there, almost forgetting this, scarcely conscious of any other thing than of the passion that ruled him.

Some soft curve in a girl's bare bosom, some round smooth arm of a sleeping woman, some fringe of leaves against a moonlit sky, some broad-winged bird sailing through shadows of the air, some full-orbed lion rising to leap on the nude soft indolently-folded limbs of a dreaming virgin, palm-shadowed in the East;—all these he

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gazed on and touched, and looked again, and changed by some more inward curve or deepened line of his chalk stylus.

All these usurped him; appealed to him; were well beloved and infinitely sad; seemed ever in their whiteness and their loneliness to cry to him,——"Whither dost thou go? Wilt thou leave us alone?"

And as he stood, and thus caressed them with his eyes and touch, and wrestled with the inward torment which grew greater and greater as the night approached, the sudden sickly feebleness of long hunger came upon him; the grave–like coldness of his fireless chamber slackened and numbed the flowing of his veins; his brain grew dull and all its memory ceased, confused and blotted. He staggered once, wondering dimly and idly as men wonder in delirium, if this indeed were death: then he fell backwards senseless on his hearth.

The last glow of day died off the wall. The wind rose louder, driving in through the open casement a herd of withered leaves. An owl flew by, uttering weary cries against the storm.

On high the spider sat, sucking the vitals of its prey, safe in its filth and darkness; looking down ever on the lifeless body on the hearth, and saying in its heart,——"Thou Fool!"

CHAPTER II.

AS the night fell, Folle–Farine, alone, steered herself down the water through the heart of the town, where the buildings were oldest, and where on either side there loomed through the dusk, carved on the black timbers, strange masks of satyr and of faun, of dragon and of griffin, of fiend and of martyr.

She sat in the clumsy empty market–boat, guiding the tiller rope with her foot.

The sea flowing in stormily upon the coast sent the tide of the river inland with a swift impetuous current, to which its sluggish depths were seldom stirred. The oars rested unused in the bottom of the boat; she glided down the stream without exertion of her own, quietly, easily, dreamily.

She had come from a long day's work, lading and unlading timber and grain for her taskmaster, and his fellow farmers, at the river wharf at the back of the town, where the little sea–trawlers and traders, with their fresh salt smell and their brown sails crisp from fierce sea winds, gathered for traffic with the corn barges and the egg–boats of the land.

Her day's labour was done, and she was repaid for it by the free effortless backward passage home through the shadows of the water–streets; where in the overhanging buildings, ever and anon, some lantern swinging on a cord from side to side, or some open casement arched above a gallery, showed the dark sad wistful face of some old creature kneeling in prayer before a crucifix, or the gold ear–rings of some laughing girl leaning down with the first frail violets of the year fragrant in her bodice.

The cold night had brought the glow of wood–fires in many of the dwellings of that poor and picturesque quarter; and showed many a homely interior through the panes of the oriel and lancet windows, over which brooded sculptured figures seraph–winged, or carven forms helmeted and leaning on their swords.

In one of them there was a group of young men and maidens gathered round the wood nut–burning, the lovers seeking each other's kiss as the kernels broke the shells; in another, some rosy curly children played at soldiers with the cuirass and sabre which their grandsire had won in the army of the empire; in another, before a quaint oval old–fashioned glass, a young girl all alone made trial of her wedding wreath upon her fair forehead, and smiled back on her own image with a little joyous laugh that ended in a sob; in another, a young bearded

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workman carved ivory beside his hearth, whilst his old mother sat knitting in a high oak chair; in another, a sister of charity, with a fair Madonna's face, bent above a little pot of home-bred snowdrops, with her tears dropping on the white heads of the flowers, whilst the sick man, of whom she had charge, slept and left her a brief space for her own memories, her own pangs, her own sickness, which was only of the heart—only—and therefore hopeless.

All these Folle-Farine saw, going onward in the boat on the gloom of the water below.

She did not envy them; she rather, with her hatred of them, scorned them. She had been freeborn, though now she was a slave; the pleasures of the home and hearth she envied no more that she envied the imprisoned bird its seed and water, its mate and song, within the close cage bars.

Yet they had a sort of fascination for her. She wondered how they felt, these people who smiled and span, and ate and drank, and sorrowed and enjoyed, and were in health and disease, at feast and at funeral, always together, always bound in one bond of a common humanity; these people, whose God on the cross never answered them; who were poor, she knew; who toiled early and late; who were heavily taxed; who fared hardly and scantily; yet who for the main part contrived to be mirthful and content, and to find some sunshine in their darkened hours, and to cling to one another, and in a way be glad.

Just above her was the corner window of a very ancient house, encrusted with blazonries and carvings. It had been a prince-bishop's palace; it was now the shared shelter of half a score of lace weavers and of ivory workers, each family in their chamber, like a bee in its cell.

As the boat floated under one of the casements, she saw that it stood open; there was a china cup filled with house-born primroses on the broad sill; there was an antique illuminated Book of Hours lying open beside the flowers; there was a strong fire-light shining from within; there was an old woman asleep and smiling in her dreams beside the hearth; by the open book was a girl, leaning out into the chill damp night, and looking down the street as though in search for some expected and thrice-welcome guest.

She was fair to look at, with dark hair twisted under her towering white cap, and a peach-like cheek and throat, and her arms folded against her blue kerchief crossed upon her chest.

Into the chamber, unseen by her, a young man stole across the shadows, and came unheard behind her and bent his head to hers, and kissed her ere she knew that he was there. She started with a little happy cry and pushed him away with pretty provocation; he drew her into his arms and into the chamber; he shut—to the lattice, and left only a dusky reflection from within shining through the panes made dark by age and dust.

Folle-Farine had watched them; as the window closed her head dropped, she was stirred with a mournful, passionate, contemptuous wonder; what was this love that was about her everywhere, and yet with which she had no share? She only thought of it with haughtiest scorn; and yet—

There had come a great darkness on the river, a surly roughness in the wind; the shutters were now closed in many of the houses of the water-street, and their long black shadows fell across the depth that severed them, and met and blended in the twilight.

The close of this day was stormy; the wind blew the river swiftly; the heavy raw mists were setting in from the sea as the night descended. She did not heed these; she liked the wild weather best; she loved the rush of a chill wind amongst her hair, and the moisture of blown spray upon her face; she loved the manifold phantasies of the clouds, and the melodies of the blast coming over the sands and the rushes. She loved the swirl and rage of the angry water, and the solitude that closed in round her with the darkness.

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The boat passed onward through the now silent town; only in one other place the light glowed through the unshuttered lattices that were ruddy and emblematic with the paintings of the Renaissance. It was the window of the gardener's wife.

At that season there could bloom neither saxifrage nor carnation; but some green-leaved winter shrub with rosy laden berries had replaced them, and made a shining frame all round the painted panes.

The fair woman was within; her delicate head rose out of the brown shadows round, with a lamp burning above it and a little oval mirror before. Into the mirror she was gazing with a smile, whilst with both hands about her throat she clasped some strings of polished shells brought to her from the sea.

"How white and how warm and how glad she is!" thought Folle–Farine, looking upward; and she rowed in the gloom through the sluggish water with envy at her heart.

She was growing harder, wilder, worse, with every day; more and more like some dumb fierce forest beast, that flees from every step and hates the sound of every voice.

Since the night that they had pricked her for a witch, the people had been more cruel to her than ever; they cast bitter names at her as she went by; they hissed and hooted her as she took her mule through their villages, or passed them on the road with her back bent under some load of faggots, or of winter food; once or twice they stoned her, and chance alone had saved her from injury.

For it was an article of faith in all the hamlets round that she had killed old Manon Dax. The Flandrins said so, and they were good pious people who would not lie. Every dusky evening when the peasantry, through the doors of their cabins, saw the gleam of her bright red girdle and the flash of her hawk's eyes, where she plodded on through the mist on her tyrant's errands, they crossed themselves and told each other for the hundredth time the tale of her iniquities over their pan of smoking chestnuts.

It had hardened her tenfold; it had made her brood on sullen dreams of a desperate vengeance.

Marcellin, too, was gone; his body had been eaten by the quicklime in the common ditch, and there was not even a voice so stern as his to bid her a good morrow. He had been a harsh man, of dark repute and bitter tongue; but in his way he had loved her; in his way, with the eloquence that had remained to him, and by the strange stories that he had told her of that wondrous time wherein his youth had passed, when men had been as gods and giants, and women either horrible as the Medusa or sublime as the Iphigenia, he had done something to awaken her mind; to arouse her hopes; to lift her up from the torpor of toil, the lusts of hatred, the ruinous apathy of despair. But he was dead; and she was alone; and was abandoned utterly to herself.

She mourned for him with a passionate pain that was all the more despairing, because no sound of it could ever pass her lips to any creature.

To and fro continually she went by the road on which he had died alone; by the heap of broken stones, by the wooden crucifix, by the high hedge and the cornlands beyond. Every time she went the blood beat in her brain, the tears swelled in her throat; she hated with a hatred that consumed her, and was ready to ripen into any deadly deed, the people who had shunned him in his life, and in his death derided and insulted him, and given him such burial as they gave the rotten carcass of some noxious beast.

Her heart was ripe for any evil that should have given her vengeance; a dull cold sense of utter desolation and isolation was always on her; the injustice of the people began to turn her blood to gall, her courage into cruelty; there began to come upon her the look of those who brood upon a crime.

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It was, in truth, but the despairing desire to live that stirred within her; to know, to feel, to roam, to enjoy, to suffer still, if need be; but to suffer something else than the endless toil of the field-ox and tow-horse, something else than the unavenged blow that pays the ass and the dog for their services.

The desire to be free grew upon her with all the force and fury inherited from her father's tameless and ever-wandering race; if a crime could have made her free she would have seized it.

She was in the prison of a narrow and hated fate; and from it she looked out on the desert of an endless hate, which stretched around her without one blossom of love, one well-spring of charity, rising in its deathlike waste.

The dreamy imaginations, the fantastic pictures that had been so strong in her in her early years, were still there, though distorted by ignorance and inflamed by despair. Though, in her first poignant grief for him, she had envied Marcellin his hard-won rest, his grave in the public ditch of the town, it was not in her to desire to die. She was too young, too strong, too restless, too impatient, and her blood of the desert and the forest was too hot.

What she wanted was to live. Live as the great moor bird did that she had seen float one day over these pale, pure, blue skies, with its mighty wings outstretched in the calm grey weather; which came none knew whence, and which went none knew whither; which poised silent and stirless against the clouds; then called with a sweet wild love-note to its mate, and waited for him as he sailed in from the misty shadows where the sea lay; and with him rose yet higher and higher in the air; and passed westward, cleaving the fields of light, and so vanished;—a queen of the wind, a daughter of the sun; a creature of freedom, of victory, of tireless movement, and of boundless space, a thing of heaven and liberty.

* * * * *

The evening became night; a night rough and cold almost as winter.

There was no boat but hers upon the river, which ran high and strong. She left the lights of the town behind her, and came into the darkness of the country. Now and then the moon shone a moment through the storm wrack, here and there a torch glimmered, borne by some wayfarer over a bridge.

There was no other light.

The bells of the cathedral chiming a miserere, sounded full of woe behind her in the still sad air.

There stood but one building between her and her home, a square strong tower built upon the edge of the stream, of which the peasants told many tales of horror. It was of ancient date, spacious, and very strong. Its upper chambers were used as a granary by the farm-people who owned it; the vaulted hall was left unused by them, partly because the river had been known to rise high enough to flood the floor; partly because legend had bequeathed to it a ghastly repute of spirits of murdered men who haunted it.

No man or woman in all the country round dared venture to it after nightfall; it was all that the stoutest would do to fetch and carry grain there at broad day; and the peasant who, being belated, rowed his market-boat past it when the moon was high, moved his oar with one trembling hand, and with the other crossed himself unceasingly.

To Folle-Farine it bore no such terror.

The unconscious pantheism breathed into her earliest thoughts, with the teachings of Phratos, made her see a nameless mystical and always wondrous beauty in every blade of grass that fed on the dew, and with the light, rejoiced; in every bare brown stone that flashed to gold in bright brook waters, under a tuft of weed; in every hillside stream that leaping and laughing sparkled in the sun; in every wind that wailing went over the sickness of

the weary world.

For such a temper, no shape of the day or the night, no mystery of life or of death can have terror; it can dread nothing, because every created thing has in it a divine life and an eternal mystery.

As she and the boat passed out into the loneliness of the country, with fitful moon gleams to light its passage, the weather and the stream grew wilder yet.

There were on both sides strips of the silvery inland sands, beds of tall reeds, and the straight stems of poplars, ghost–like in the gloom. The tide rushed faster; the winds blew more strongly from the north; the boat rocked, and now and then was washed with water, till its edges were submerged.

She stood up in it, and gave her strength to its guidance; it was all that she could do to keep its course straight, and steer it so that it should not grate upon the sand, nor be blown into the tangles of the river reeds. For herself she had no care, she could swim like any cygnet; and, for her own sport, had spent hours in water at all seasons. But she knew that to Claudis Flamma the boat was an honoured treasure, since to replace it would have cost him many a hard–earned and well loved piece of money.

As she stood thus upright in the little tossing vessel, against the darkness and the winds, she passed the solitary building; it had been placed so low down against the shore that its front walls, strong of hewn stone, and deep bedded in the soil, were half submerged in the dense growth of the reeds and of the willowy osiers which grew up and brushed the great arched windows of its haunted hall. The lower half of one of the seven latticed windows had been blown wide open; a broad square casement, braced with iron bars, looking out upon the river, and lighted by a sickly glimmer of the moon.

Her boat was swayed close against the wall, in a sudden lurch, caused by a fiercer gust of wind and higher wave of the strong tide; the rushes entangled it; it grounded on the sand; there was no chance, she knew, of setting it afloat again without her leaving it to gain a footing on the sand, and use her force to push it off into the current.

She leaped out without a moment's thought amongst the rushes, with her kirtle girt up close above her knees. She sank to her ankles in the sand, and stood to her waist in the water.

But she was almost as light and sure of foot as a moor–gull, when it lights upon the treacherous mosses of a bog; and standing on the soaked and shelving bank, she thrust herself with all her might against her boat, dislodged it, and pushed it out once more afloat.

She was about to wade to it and spring into it, before the stream had time to move it farther out, when an owl flew from the open window behind her. Unconsciously she turned her head to look whence the bird had come.

She saw the wide dark square of the opened casement; the gleam of a lamp within the cavern–like vastness of the vaulted hall. Instinctively she paused, drew closer, and forgot the boat.

The stone sills of the seven windows were level with the topmost sprays of the tall reeds and the willowy underwood; they were, therefore, level with herself. She saw straight in; saw, so far as the pale uncertain fusion of moon and lamp rays showed them, the height and width of this legend–haunted place; vaulted and pillared with timber and with stone; dim and lonely as a cathedral crypt, and with the night–birds flying to and fro in it, as in a ruin, seeking their nests in its rafters and in the capitals of its columns.

No fear, but a great awe fell upon her. She let the boat drift on its way unheeded; and stood there at gaze like a forest doe.

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She had passed this grain tower with every day or night that she had gone down the river upon the errands of her taskmaster; but she had never looked within it once, holding the peasants' stories and terrors in the cold scorn of an intrepid courage.

Now, when she looked, she for the first time believed—believed that the dead lived and gathered there.

White, shadowy, countless shapes loomed through the gloom, all motionless, all noiseless, all beautiful, with the serene yet terrible loveliness of death.

In their midst burned a lamp; as the light burns night and day in the tombs of the kings of the east.

Her colour paled, her breath came and went, her body trembled like a leaf; yet she was not afraid. An ecstasy of surprise and faith smote the dull misery of her life. She saw at last another world than the world of toil in which she had laboured without sigh and without hope, as the blinded ox laboured in the brick-field, treading his endless circles in the endless dark, and only told that it was day by blows.

She had no fear of them—these, whom she deemed the dwellers of the lands beyond the sun, could not be more cruel to her than had been the sons of men. She yearned to them, longed for them; wondered with rapture and with awe if these were the messengers of her father's kingdom; if these would have mercy on her, and take her with them to their immortal homes—whether of heaven or of hell, what mattered it?

It was enough to her that it would not be of earth.

She raised herself upon the ledge above the rushes, poised herself lightly as a bird, and with deft soundless feet dropped safely on the floor within, and stood in the midst of that enchanted world. Stood motionless, gazing upwards with rapt eyes, and daring barely to draw breath with any audible sigh, lest she should rouse them, and be driven from their presence. The flame of the lamp, and the moonlight, reflected back from the foam of the risen waters, shed a strange, pallid, shadowy light on all the forms around her.

"They are the dead, surely," she thought, as she stood amongst them; and she stayed there with her arms folded on her breast to still its beating, lest any sound should anger them and betray her; a thing lower than the dust—a mortal amidst this great immortal host.

The mists and the shadows between her eyes and them parted them as with a sea of dim and subtle vapour, through which they looked white and implacable as a summer cloud, when it seems to lean and touch the edge of the world in a grey, quiet dawn.

They were but the creations of an artist's classic dreams, but to her they seemed to thrill, to move, to sigh, to gaze on her; to her, they seemed to live with that life of the air, of the winds, of the stars, of silence and solitude, and all the nameless liberties of death, of which she dreamed when, shunned, and cursed, and hungered, she looked up to the skies at night from a sleepless bed.

They were indeed the dead: the dead of that fair time when all the earth was young, and men communed with their deities, and loved them, and were not afraid. When their gods were with them in their daily lives; and when in every breeze that curled the sea, in every cloud that darkened in the west, in every water-course that leaped and sparkled in the sacred cedar groves, in every bee-sucked blossom of wild thyme that grew purple by the marble temple steps, the breath and the glance of the gods were felt, the footfall and the voice of the gods were heard.

They were indeed the dead: the dead who—dying earliest, whilst yet the earth was young enough to sorrow for its heroic lives, to embalm them, to remember them, and to count them worthy of lament—perished in their bodies, but lived for ever immortal in the traditions of the world.

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From every space of the sombre chamber some one of these gazed on her through the mist.

Here the silver dove of Argos winged her way through the iron jaws of the dark sea–gates; here the white Io wandered, in exile and unresting, for ever scourged on by the sting in her flesh, as a man by the genius in him.

Here the glad god whom all the woodlands loved, played in the moonlight, on his reeds, to the young stags that couched at his feet in golden beds of daffodils and asphodel. Here over a darkened land the great Demeter moved, bereaved and childless, bidding the vine be barren, and the fig trees stay fruitless, and the seed of the sown furrows lie strengthless to multiply and fill the sickles with the ripe increase.

Here the women of Thebes danced upon Cithæron in the mad moonless nights, under the cedars, with loose hair on the wind, and bosoms that heaved and brake through their girdles of fawnskin. Here at this labour, in Pheræ, the sun–god toiled as a slave; the highest wrought as the lowest; while wise Hermes stood by and made mirth of the kingship that had bartered the rod of dominion for the mere music which empty air could make in a hollow reed.

Here, too, the brother gods stood, Hypnos and Oneiros, and Thanatos; their bowed heads crowned with the poppy and moonwort, the flowering fern, and the amaranth, and, pressed to their lips, a white rose, in the old sweet symbol of silence; fashioned in the same likeness, with the same winged feet which yet fall so softly, that no human ears hear their coming; the gods that most of all have pity on men, the gods of the Night and of the Grave.

These she saw; not plainly, but through the wavering shadows, and the halo of the vapours which floated, dense and silvery as smoke, in from the misty river.

Their lips were dumb, and for her they had no name nor story, and yet they spoke to her with familiar voices. She knew them, she knew that they were gods, and yet were dead; and in the eyes of the forest–god, who piped upon his reeds, she saw the eyes of Phratos look on her with their tender laughter and their unforgotten love.

Just so had he looked so long ago—so long!—in the deep woods at moonrise, when he had played to the bounding fawns, to the leaping waters, to the listening trees, to the sleeping flowers.

They had called him an outcast—and lo!—she found him a god.

She sank on her knees, and buried her face in her hands, and wept—weep with grief for the living lost for ever, wept with joy that the dead for ever lived.

Tears had rarely sprung to her proud rebellious eyes; she deemed them human things, things of weakness and of shame; she had thrust them back and bitten her lips till the blood came, in a thousand hours of pain, rather than that men should be able to see them and exult. The passion had its way for once, and spent itself, and passed; she rose trembling and pale; with her eyes wet and dimmed in lustre, like stars that shine through rain. She looked around her fearfully.

She thought that the gods might rise in wrath against her, even as mortals did, for daring to be weary of her life.

As she rose, she saw for the first time before the cold hearth the body of a man.

It was stretched straightly out on the stone floor; the chest was bare; upon the breast the right hand was clenched close and hard; the limbs were in profound repose; the head was lit by the white glimmer from the moon; the face was calm and colourless, and full of sadness.

In the dim strange light it looked white as marble, colossal as a statue, in that passionless rest, that dread repose.

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Instinctively she drew nearer to him; breathless and allured she bent forward and looked closer on his face.

He was a god, like all the rest, she thought; but dead—not as they were dead, with eyes that still rejoiced in the light of cloudless suns, and with lips that still smiled with a serene benignity and an eternal love,—but dead, as mortals die, without hope, without release, with their breath frozen on their tired lips, and bound on their hearts eternally the burden of their sin and woe.

She leaned down close by his side, and looked on him—sorrowful, because, he alone of all the gods was stricken there, and he alone had the shadow of mortality upon him.

Looking thus she saw that his hands were clenched upon his chest, as though their latest effort had been to tear the bones asunder, and wrench out a heart that ached beneath them; she saw that this was not a divine, but a human form,—dead indeed as the rest were, but dead by a man's death of assassination, or disease, or suicide, or what men love to call the "act of heaven," whereby they mean the self-sown fruits of their own faults and follies.

Had the gods slain him—being a mortal—for his entrance there?

Marcellin in legends had told of her of such things.

He was human; with a human beauty; which yet white was cold and golden, full of serenity and sadness, was like the sun—god's yonder, and very strange to her whose eyes had only rested on the sunburnt, pinched, and rugged faces of the populace around her.

That beauty allured her; she forgot that he had against her the crime of that humanity which she hated. He was too her like some noble forest beast, some splendid bird of prey, struck down by a bolt from some murderous bow, strengthless and senseless, yet majestic even in its fall.

"The gods slew him because he dared to be too like to themselves," she thought, "else he could not be so beautiful,—he,—only a man, and dead?"

The dreamy intoxication of fancy had deadened her to all sense of time or fact. The exaltation of nerve and brain made all fantastic phantasies seem possible to her as truth.

Herself, she was strong; and desolate no more, since the eyes of the immortals had smiled on her, and bade her welcome there; and she felt an infinite pity on him, inasmuch as with all his likeness to them he yet, having incurred their wrath, lay helpless there as any broken reed.

She bent above him her dark rich face, with a soft compassion on it; she stroked the pale heavy gold of his hair, with fingers brown and lithe, but infinitely gentle; she fanned the cold pain of his forehead, with the breath of her rose-like mouth; she touched him, stroked him, gazed on him, as she would have caressed and looked on the velvet hide of the stag, the dappled plumage of the hawk, the white leaf of the lily.

A subtle, vague pleasure stole on her, a sharp sweet sorrow moved her,—for he was beautiful, and he was dead.

"If they would give him back his life?" she thought; and she looked for the glad forest god playing on his reed amidst the amber asphodels, he who had the smile and the glance of Phratos. But she could see his face no more.

The wind rose, the moon was hidden, all was dark save the flicker of the flame of the lamp; the storm had broken and the rain fell: she saw nothing now but the bowed head of Thanatos, holding the rose of silence to his lips.

On her ear there seemed to steal a voice from the darkness, saying:

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"One life alone can ransom another. Live immortal with us; or for that dead man—perish."

She bowed her head where she knelt in the darkness; the force of an irresistible fate seemed upon her; that sacrifice which is at once the delirium and divinity of her sex had entered into her.

She was so lowly a thing; a creature so loveless and cursed; the gods, if they took her in pity, would soon scorn her as men had scorned; whilst he whom they had slain there—though so still, so white and mute, so powerless,—he looked a king amongst men, though the gods for his daring had killed him.

"Let him live!" she murmured. "As for me,—I am nothing—nothing. Let me die as the Dust dies—what matter?"

The wind blew the flame of the lamp into darkness; the moon still shone through the storm on to the face of Thanatos.

He alone heard. He—the only friend who, come he early or late, fails no living thing at the last.

He alone remained, and waited for her: he, whom alone of all the gods—for this man's sake—she chose.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN the trance of her delirious imaginations passed, they left her tranquil, but with the cold of death seeming to pass already from the form she looked on into hers. She was still crouching by his body on the hearth; and knew what she had chosen, and did not repent.

He was dead still;—or so she thought;—she watched him with dim dreaming eyes, watched him as women do who love.

She drew the fair glistening hair through her hands; she touched the closed and blue-veined eyelids tenderly; she laid her ear against his heart to hearken for the first returning pulses of the life she had brought back to him.

It was no more to her the dead body of a man, unknown, unheeded, a stranger, and because a mortal, of necessity to her a foe. It was a nameless wondrous mystic force and splendour to which she had given back the pulse of existence, the light of day; which was no more the gods', nor any man's, no more the prey of death, nor the delight of love; but hers—hers—shared only with the greatness she had bought for him.

Even as she looked on him she felt the first faint flutter in his heart; she heard the first faint breath upon his lips.

His eyes unclosed and looked straight at hers, without reason or lustre in them, clouded with a heavy and delirious pain.

"To die—of hunger—like a rat in a trap!" he muttered in his throat, and strove to rise; he fell back, senseless, striking his head upon the stones.

She started; her hands ceased to wander through his hair, and touch his cold lips as she would have touched the cup of a flower; she rose slowly to her feet. She had heard; and the words, so homely and so familiar in the lives of all the poor, pierced the wild faiths and visions of her heated brain, as a ray of the clear daybreak pierces through the purple smoke from altar fires of sacrifice.

The words were so terrible, and yet so trite; they cleft the mists of her dreams as tempered steel cleaves folds of gossamer.

"To die—of hunger!"

She muttered the phrase after him—shaken from her stupor by its gaunt and common truth.

It roused her to the consciousness of all his actual needs.

Her heart rebelled even against her newly found immortal masters, since, being in wrath, they could not strike him swiftly with their vengeance, but had killed him thus with these lingering and most bitter pangs, and had gathered there as to a festival to see him die.

As she stooped above him, she could discern the faint earthy cavernous odour, which comes from the languid lungs and empty chests of one who has long fasted, almost unto death.

She had known that famine odour many a time ere then; in the hut of Manon Dax, and by the hedge rows, and in the ditches, that made the sick beds of many another, as old, as wretched, and as nobly stubborn against alms; in times of drought or in inclement winters, the people in all that country side suffered continually from the hunger torment; she had often passed by men and women, and children, crouching in black and wretched cabins, or lying fever stricken on the cold stony fields, glad to gnaw a shred of sheepskin, or suck a thorny bramble of the fields to quiet the gnawing of their entrails.

She stood still beside him, and thought.

All light had died; the night was black with storm; the shadowy shapes were gone; there were the roar of the rushing river, and the tumult of the winds and rains upon the silence; all she saw was this golden head; this colourless face; this lean and nerveless hand that rested on the feebly beating heart;—these she saw still as she would have seen the white outlines of a statue in the dark.

He moved a little, with a hollow sigh.

"Bread,—bread,—bread!" he muttered. "To die for bread!—"

At the words, all the quick resource and self reliance which the hard life she led had sharpened and strengthened in her, awoke amidst the dreams and passions, and meditations of her mystical faiths, and her poetic ignorance.

The boldness and the independence of her nature roused themselves; she had prayed for him to the gods, and to the gods given herself for him; that was well—if they kept their faith. But if they forsook it? The blood rushed back to her heart with its old proud current; alone, she swore to herself to save him. To save him in the gods' despite.

In the street that day, she had found the half of a roll of black bread. It had lain in the mud, none claiming it: a sulky lad passed it in scorn, a beggar with gold in his wallet kicked it aside with his crutch; she took it and put it by for her supper; so often some stripe or some jibe replaced a begrudged meal for her at Flamma's board.

That was all she had. A crust dry as a bone, which could do nothing towards saving him, could be of no more use to pass those clenched teeth, and warm those frozen veins, than so much of the wet sand gathered up from the river shore. Neither could there be any wood, which, if brought in and lit, would burn. All the timber was green and full of sap, and all, for a score square leagues around, was at that hour drenched with water.

She knew that the warmth of fire to dry the deadly dampness in the air, the warmth of wine to quicken the chillness and the torpor of the reviving life, were what were wanted beyond all other things. She had seen famine in all its stages, and she knew the needs and dangers of that fell disease.

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There was not a creature in all the world, who would have given her so much as a loaf or a faggot; even if the thought of seeking human aid had ever dawned on her.

As it was, she never even dreamed of it; every human hand,—to the rosy fist of the smallest and fairest child,—was always clenched against her; she would have sooner asked for honey from a lot of snakes, or sought a bed of roses in a swarm of wasps, than have begged mercy or aid at any human hearth.

She knew nothing, either, of an social laws that might have made such need as this, a public care on public alms. She was used to see men, women, and children perishing of want; she had heard people curse the land that bore, and would not nourish, them. She was habituated to work hard for every bit or drop that passed her lips; she lived amidst multitudes who did the same; she knew nothing of any public succour to which appeal could in such straits be made.

If bread were not forthcoming, a man or a woman had to die for lack of it, as Manon Dax and Marcellin had done; that seemed to her a rule of fate, against which there was no good in either resistance or appeal.

What could she do? she pondered. Whatever she would do, she knew that she had to do quickly. Yet she stood irresolute.

To do anything, she had to stoop herself down to that sin to which no suffering or privation of her own had ever tempted her.

In a vague fierce fashion, unholpen and untaught, she hated all sin.

All quoted it as her only birthright; all told her that she was imbued with it body and soul; all saw it in her slightest acts, in her most harmless words; and she abhorred this, the one gift which men cast to her as her only heirloom, with a strong scornful loathing which stood her in the stead of virtue.

With an instinctive cynicism which moved her continually, yet to which she could have given no name, she had loved to see the children and the maidens,—those who held her accursed, and were themselves held so innocent and just,—steal the ripe cherries from the stalk, pluck the forbidden flowers that nodded over the convent walls, pierce through the boundary fence to reach another's pear, speak a lie softly to the old greyheaded priest, and lend their ripe lips to a soldier's rough salute, whilst she, the daughter of hell, pointed at, despised, shunned as a leper, hunted as a witch,—kept her hands soiless and her lips untouched.

It was a pride to her, to say in her teeth, "I am stronger than they," when she saw the stolen peach in their hand, and heard the lying word on their tongue. It had a savage sweetness for her, the will with which she denied herself the luxurious fruit that, unseen, she could have reached a thousand times from the walls when her throat was parched and her body empty; with which she uttered the truth, and the truth alone, though it brought the blows of the cudgel down on her shoulders; with which she struck aside in disdain, the insolent eyes, and mocking mouths of the youths, who would fain have taught her, that if beggared of all other things, she was at least rich in form and hue.

She hated sin, for sin seemed to her only a human word for utter feebleness; she had never sinned for herself, as far as she knew; yet to serve this man, on whose face she had never looked before that night, she was ready to stoop to the thing which she abhorred.

She had been so proud of her freedom for all those frailties of passion, and greed, and self pity, with which the souls of the maidens around her were haunted;—so proud, with the chaste, tameless arrogance of the women of her race, that was bred in their blood, and taught them as their first duty, by the oriental and jealous laws of their vengeful and indolent masters.

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She had been so proud!—yet the cleanliness of hand and heart, this immunity from her enemies' weakness, this independence which she had worn as a buckler of proof against all blows, which she had girded about her as a zone of purity more precious than gold—this, the sole treasure she had, she was about to surrender for the sake of a stranger.

It was a greater gift, and one harder to give, than this mortal life she had offered for his to his gods.

As she kneeled on the stone floor beside him, her heart was torn with a mute and violent struggle; her bent face grew dark and rigid, her haughty brows knit together in sadness and conflict.

In the darkness he moved a little; he was unconscious, yet ever, in that burning stupor, one remembrance, one regret, remained with him.

"That the mind of a man can be killed for the want of the food thrown to swine!" he muttered drearily, in the one gleam of reason that shone through the delirium of his brain.

The words were broken, disjointed, almost inarticulate; but they stung her to action as the spur stings a horse.

She started erect, and crossed the chamber, leapt through the open portion of the casement, and lighted again without, knee deep in water. She lost her footing and fell, entangled in the rushes; but she rose and climbed in the darkness to where the roots of an oak stump stretched into the stream, and, gaining the shore, ran as well as the storm and the obscurity allowed her, along the bank, straight towards Yprès.

It was a wild and bitter night; the rushing of the foaming river went by her all the way; the path was flooded; she was up to her ankles in water at every step, and was often forced to wade through channels a foot deep.

She went on straight towards her home, unconscious of cold, of fatigue, of her wet clinging clothes, of the water that splashed unseen in the black night up against her face as her steps sank into some shaking strip of marsh, some brook that, in the rising of the river, ran hissing and swelling to twice its common height.

All she was sensible of was of one inspiration, one purpose, one memory that seemed to give her the wings of the wind, and yet to clog her feet with the weight of lead,—the memory of that white and senseless face, lying beneath the watch of the cruel gods.

She reached Yprès, feeling and scenting her way by instinct, as a dog does, all through the tumult of the air and against the force of the driving rains. She met no living creature; the weather was too bad for even a beggar to be afoot in it, and even the stray and homeless beasts had sought some shelter from a ruined shed or crumbling wall.

As softly as a leaf may fall she unloosed the latch of the orchard, stole through the trees, and took her way in an impenetrable gloom, with the swift sure flight of one to whom the place had long been as familiar by night as day.

The uproar of wind and rain would have muffled the loudest tread. The shutters of the mill-house were all closed; it was quite still. Flamma and his serving people were all gone to their beds, that they might save by sleep the cost of wood and candle.

She passed round to the side of the house, climbed up the tough network of a tree of ivy, and without much labour loosed the fastenings of her own loft window, and entering there passed through the loft into the body of the house.

Opening the door of the landing-place noiselessly, she stole down the staircase, making no more sound than a hare makes stealing over mosses to its form. The ever-wakeful lightly-sleeping ears of a miser were near at hand;

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but even they were not aroused; and she passed down unheard.

She went hardily, fearlessly, her mind once set upon the errand. She did not reason with herself, as more timorous creatures might have done, that being half starved, and paid not at all, as recompense for strong and continual labour, she was but about to take a just due withheld, a fair wage long overdue. She only resolved to take what another needed by a violence which she had never employed to serve her own needs, and having resolved went to execute her resolution with the unhesitating dauntlessness that was bred in her, flesh and bone.

Knowing all the turns and steps of the obscure passages, she quickly found her way to the store chambers where such food and fuel as were wanted in the house were stored.

The latter was burnt and the former eaten sparingly and grudgingly, but the store of both was at this season of the year fairly abundant.

It had more than once happened that the mill had been cut off from all communication with the outer world by floods that had reached its upper casements, and Claudis Flamma was provided against any such accidents; the more abundantly as he had more than once found it a lucrative matter in such seasons of inundation to lower provisions from his roof to boats floating below when the cotters around were in dire need and ready to sell their very souls for a bag of rice or string of onions.

Folle–Farine opened the shutter of the store–room and let in the faint grey glimmer from the clearing skies.

A bat which had been resting from the storm among the rafters fluttered violently against the lattice; a sparrow driven down the chimney in the hurricane flew up from one of the shelves with a twittering outcry.

She paused to open the lattice for them both, and set them free to fly forth into the still sleeping world; then she took an old rush basket that hung upon a nail, and filled it with the best of such homely food as was to be found there—loaves, and meats, and rice, and oil, and a flask of the richest wine—wine of the south, of the hue of the violet, sold under secrecy at a high charge and profit.

That done, she tied together as large a bundle of brushwood and of faggots as she could push through the window, which was broad and square, and thrust it out by slow degrees; put her basket through likewise, and lowered it carefully to the ground; she followed them herself with the agility born of long practice, and dropped on the grass beneath.

She waited but to close and refasten the shutter from without, then threw the mass of faggots on her shoulders, and carrying in her arms the osier basket, took her backward way through the orchards to the river.

She had not taken either bit or drop for her own use.

She was well used to carry burdens as heavy as the mules bore, and to walk under them unassisted for many leagues to the hamlets and markets round about. But even her strength of bronze had become fatigued; she felt frozen to the bone; her clothes were saturated with water, and her limbs were chill and stiff. Yet she trudged on, unblenching and unpausing, over the soaked earth, and through the swollen water and the reeds, keeping always by the side of the stream, that was so angry in the darkness; by the side of the grey flooded sands, and the rushes that were blowing with a sound like the sea.

She met no living creature except a fox, who rushed between her feet, holding in its mouth a screaming chicken.

Once she stumbled and struck her head and breast with a dull blow against a pile of wood which, in the furious weather, was unseen by her. It stunned her for the instant, but she rallied and looked up with eyes as used to

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pierce the deepest gloom as any goshawk's; she discerned the outline of the Calvary, towering high and weird-like above the edge of the river, where the priests and people had placed it, so that the boatmen could abase themselves and do it honour as they passed the banks.

The lantern on the cross shone far across the stream, but shed no light upon the path she followed.

At its foot she had stumbled and been bruised upon her errand of mercy; the reflection of its rays streamed across to the opposing shore, and gave help to a boat load of smugglers landing stolen tobacco in a little creek.

She recovered herself and trudged on once more along the lonely road.

"How like their god is to them!" she thought: the wooden crucifix was the type of her persecutors; of those who flouted and mocked her, who flung and pierced her as a witch; who cursed her because she was not of their people.

The cross was the hatred of the world incarnated to her; it was in Christ's name that Marcellin's corpse had been cast on the dung and in the ditch; it was in Christ's name that the women had avenged on her the pity which she had shown to Manon Dax; it was in Christ's name that Flamma had scourged her because she would not pass rotten figs for sweet. For the name of Christ is used to cover every crime, by the peasant who cheats his neighbour of a copper coin, as by the sovereign who massacres a nation for a throne.

She left the black cross reared there against the rushes, and plodded on through sand and rain and flood, bearing her load: in Christ's name they would have seized her as a thief.

The storm abated a little, and every now and then a gleam of moonlight was shed upon the flooded meadows. She gained the base of the tower, and by means of the length of rope let, by degrees, the firewood and the basket through the open portion of the window on to the floor below, then again followed them herself.

Her heart thrilled as she entered.

Her first glance to the desolate hearth showed her that the hours of her absence had brought no change there.

The gods had not kept faith with her, they had not raised him from the dead.

"They have left it all to me," she thought, with the old strange sweet yearning in her heart over this life that she had bought with her own.

She first flung the faggots and brushwood on the hearth, and set them on fire to burn, fanned by the breath of the wind. Then she poured out a little of the wine, and kneeled down by him, and forced it drop by drop through his colourless lips, raising his head upon her as she kneeled.

The wine was pure and old; it suffused his attenuated frame as with a rush of new blood; under her hand his heart moved with firmer and quicker movement.

She broke bread in the wine and put the soaked morsels to his mouth as softly as she would have fed some little shivering bird made nestless by the hurricane.

He was unconscious still, but he swallowed what she held to him, without knowing what he did; a slight warmth gradually spread over his limbs; a strong shudder shook him. His eyes looked dully at her through a film of exhaustion and of sleep.

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"J'avais quelque chose là!" he muttered, incoherently, his voice rattling in his hollow chest, as he raised himself a little on one arm. "J'avais quelque chose là!" and with a sigh he fell back once more—his head tossing in uneasiness from side to side.

Amidst the heat and mists of his aching brain, one thought remained with him—that he had created things greater than himself, and that he died like a dog, powerless to save them. The saddest dying words that the air ever bore on its breath—the one bitter vain regret of every genius that the common herds of men stamp out under leaden hoofs, as they slay their mad cattle or their drunken mobs—stayed on the blurred confusion of his mind, which, in its stupor and its helplessness, still knew that once it had been strong to create—that once it had been clear to record—that once it had dreamed the dreams that save men from the life of the swine—that once it had told to the world the truth divested of lies,—and that none had seen, none had listened to, none had believed.

There is no more terrible woe upon earth than the woe of the stricken brain, which remembers the days of its strength, the living light of its reason, the sunrise of its proud intelligence, and knows that these have passed away like a tale that is told; like a year that is spent; like an arrow that is shot to the stars, and flies aloft, and falls in a swamp; like a fruit that is too well loved of the sun, and so, over-soon ripe, is dropped from the tree and forgot on the grasses, dead to all joys of the dawn and the noon and the summer, but still alive to the sting of the wasp, to the fret of the aphid, to the burn of the drought, to the theft of the parasite.

She only dimly understood, and yet she was smitten with awe and reverence at that endless grief which had no taint of cowardice upon it, but was pure as the patriot's despair, impersonal as the prophet's agony.

For the first time, the intellect in her consciously awoke. For the first time she heard a human mind find voice even in its stupor and its wretchedness to cry aloud, in reproach to its unknown Creator:

"I am yours! Shall I perish with the body? Why have you ever bade me desire the light and seek it, if for ever you must thrust me into the darkness of negation? Shall I be Nothing?—like the muscle that rots, like the bones that crumble, like the flesh that turns to ashes, and blows in a film on the winds? Shall I die so? I?—the mind of a man, the breath of a god?"

Time went by; the chimes from the cathedral tolled dully through the darkness, over the expanse of the flood.

The light from the burning wood shone redly and fitfully. The sigh and moan of the tossed rushes, and of the water birds, awakened and afraid, came from the outer world on the winds that blew through the desolation of the haunted chamber. Grey owls flew in the high roof, taking refuge from the night. Rats hurried noiseless and eager over the stones of the floor, seeking stray grains that fell through the rafters from the granaries above.

She noticed none of these things; she never looked up nor around: all she heard was the throb of the delirious words on the silence, all she saw was the human face in the clouded light through the smoke from the flame.

The glow of the fire shone on the bowed head of Thanatos, the laughing eyes of Pan, Hermes' fair cold derisive face, and the majesty of the Lykegênês toiling in the ropes that bound him to the mill-stones to grind bread, for the mortal appetites and the ineloquent lips of men.

But at the gods she barely looked; her eyes were bent upon the human form beside her.

She crouched beside him, half kneeling and half sitting: her clothes were drenched, the fire scorched, the draughts of air froze her; she had neither eaten nor drunk since the noon of the day; but she had no other remembrance than of this life which had the beauty of the sun-king and the misery of the beggar.

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He lay long, restless, unconscious, muttering strange sad words, at times of sense, at times of folly, but always, whether lucid or delirious, words of rebellion against his fate, of a despairing lament for the soul in him that would be with the body quenched.

After awhile the feverish mutterings of his voice grew lower and less frequent; his eyes seemed to become sensible of the glare of the fire, and to contract and close in a more conscious pain; after a yet longer time he ceased to stir so restlessly, ceased to sigh and shudder; he grew quite still, his breath came tranquilly, his head fell back, and he sank to a deep sleep.

The personal fears, the womanly terrors, which would have assailed creatures at once less savage and less innocent never moved her for an instant. That there was any strangeness in her action, any peril in this solitude, she never dreamed. Her heart, bold with the blood of Taric, could know no physical fear; and her mind at once ignorant and visionary, her temper at once fierce and unselfish, kept from her all thought of those suspicions, which would fall on and chastise an act like hers; suspicions, such as would have made women less pure and less dauntless tremble at that lonely house, that night of storm, that unknown fate which she had taken into her own hands, unwitting and unheeding whether good or evil might be the issue thereof.

To her he was beautiful, he suffered, she had saved him from death, and he was hers: and this was all that she remembered. She dealt with him as she would have done with some forest beast or bird that she should have found frozen in the woods of winter.

His head had fallen on her, and she crouched unwearied in the posture that gave him easiest rest. With a touch so light that it could not awaken him, she stroked the lustreless gold of his hair, and from time to time felt for the inaudible beating of his heart.

Innumerable dreams, shapeless, delicious, swept through her brain, as the echoes of some music, faint yet unutterably sweet, that half arouses and half soothes some sleeper in a grey drowsy summer dawn.

For the first time since the melodies of Phratos had died for ever from off her ear she was happy.

She did not ask wherefore,—neither of herself nor of the gods did she question whence came this wonder—flower of her nameless joy. She only sat quiet, and let the hours drift by, and watched this stranger as he slept, and was content.

So the night passed.

Whilst yet it seemed night still, the silence trembled with the pipe of waking birds, the darkness quivered with the pale first rays of dawn.

Over the flood and the fields the first light broke. From the unseen world behind the mist, faint bells rang in the coming day.

He moved in his sleep, and his eyes unclosed, and looked at her face as it hung above him, like some drooped rose heavy with the too great sweetness of a summer shower.

It was but the gaze of a moment, and his lids dropped again, weighted with the intense weariness of a slumber that held all his senses close in its leaden chains. But the glance, brief though it was, had been conscious;—under it a sudden flush passed over her, as the life stirs in the young woodlands at the near coming of the spring. For the first time since her birth she became wholly human.

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A sharp terror made her tremble like a leaf; she put his head softly from her on the ground, and rose, quivering, to her feet.

It was not the gods whom she feared, it was herself. She had never once known that she had beauty, any more than the flower knows it blowing on the wind. She had passed through the crowds of fair and market, not knowing why the youths looked after her with cruel eyes all aglow. She had walked through them, indifferent and unconscious, only thinking that they wanted to hunt her down as an unclean beast, and dared not, because her teeth were strong.

She had taken a vague pleasure in the supple grace of her own form, as she saw it mirrored in some woodland pool where she had bathed amidst the water–lilies; but it had been only such an instinctive and unstudied pleasure as the swan takes in seeing her silver breast shine back to her, on the glassy current adown which she sails.

Now,—as she rose and stood, as the dawn broke, beside him, on the hearth, and heard the birds' first waking notes, that told her the sun was even then touching the edge of the veiled world to light, a hot shame smote her, and the womanhood in her woke.

She looked down on herself, and saw that her soaked skirts were knotted above her knees, as she had bound them when she had leaped from the boat's side; that her limbs were wet and glistening with river water, and the moisture from the grasses, and the sand and shingle of the shore; and that the linen of her vest, threadbare with age, left her arms bare to the shoulders, and showed, through its rents, the gleam of her warm brown skin and the curves of her shining shoulders.

A sudden horror came upon her, lest he should awake again and see her as she was;—wet, miserable, half–clothed, wind–tossed like the rushes, outcast and ashamed.

She did not know that she had beauty in her; she did not know that even as she was, she had an exquisite grace in her savage loveliness, as storm–birds have in theirs against the thunder–cloud and the lightning blaze of their water–world in tempest.

She felt a sudden shrinking from all chance of his clearer and more conscious gaze; a sudden agony of shy dread, and longing to hide herself under the earth, or take refuge in the depths of the waters, rather than meet the eyes to which she had given back the light of life cast on her in abhorrence and in scorn. That he could have any other look for her, she had no thought.

She had been an outcast amongst an alien people too long to dream that any human love or gratitude or praise could ever fall on her. She had been too long cursed by every tongue, to dream that any human voice could ever arise in honour or in welcome to a thing so despised and criminal as she. For the gift which she had given this man too would only live to curse her;—that she had known when she had offered it.

She drew her rude garments closer, and stole away with velvet footfall, through the twilight of the dawn; her head hung down, and her face was flushed as with some great guilt.

With the rising of the day all her new joy was dead. With the waking of the world, all her dreams shrank back into secrecy and shame. The mere timid song of the linnet in the leafless bushes seemed sharp on her ear, calling on her to rise and go and toil with the beasts of the share and the shaft, as the creature of labour, of exile, of namelessness, and of despair, that men had made her.

At the casement, she turned and cast one lingering glance upon him where he slept; then once more she launched herself into the dusky watery mists of the cold dawn.

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She had made no more sound in her passing than a bird makes in its flight.

The sleeper never stirred, but dreamed on motionless, in the darkness and the silence, and the drowsy warmth.

He dreamed indeed, of a woman's form, half-bare, golden of hue like a fruit of the south, blue veined, and flushed to changing rose heats, like an opal's fire; with limbs strong and yet slender, gleaming wet with water, and brown arched feet shining with silvery sands; with mystical eyes, black as night and amorous-lidded; and a mouth like the half-closed bud of a flower, which sighing seemed to breathe upon him the fragrance of dim cedar-woods shrouded in summer rains, of honey-weighted heather blown by moorland winds, of almond blossoms shed like snow against a purple sea; of all things air-born, sun-fed, fair and free.

But he saw these only as in a dream; and, as a dream, when he awakened they had passed.

Though still dark from mists and heavy clouds, the dawn grew on to morning as she went noiselessly away over the grey sands, the wet shore paths, the sighing rushes.

The river-meadows were all flooded, and on the opposite banks the road was impassable; but on her side she could still find footing, for the ground there had a steeper rise, and the swollen tide had not reached in any public roadway too high for her to wade, or draw herself by the half-merged bushes through it on the homeward tracks to Yprès.

The low sun was hidden in a veil of water. The old convent-bells of all the country-side rang through the mists. The day was very young as yet; but the life of the soil and the stream was waking as the birds were. Boats went by on the current, bearing a sad freightage of sheep drowned in the night, and ruined peasants, whose little wealth of stack and henhouse had been swept down by the unlooked-for tide.

From the distant banks, the voices of women came muffled through the fog, weeping and wailing for some lost lamb, choked by the water in its fold, or some pretty breadth of garden, just welcome to their sight with snowdrops and with violets, that had been laid desolate and washed away.

Through the clouds of vapour that curled in a dense opaque smoke from the wet earth, there loomed the dusky shapes of oxen; their belled horns sending forth a pleasant music from the gloom. On the air there was an odour from soaked grasses and upturned sods, from the breath of the herds lowing hock deep in water, from the green knots of broken primrose roots sailing by on the brown rough river.

A dying bush of grey lavender swept by on the stream; it had the fresh earth of its lost garden home still about it; and in its stems a robin had built her little nest. The nest streamed in tatters and ruin on the wind, the robin flew above the wreck fluttering and uttering shrill notes of woe.

Folle-Farine saw nothing.

She held on her way blindly, mutely, mechanically, by sheer force of long habit. Her mind was in a trance: she was insensible of pain or cold, of hunger or fever, of time or place.

Yet she went straight home, as the horse being blinded will do, to the place where its patience and fealty have never been recompensed with any other thing than blows.

As she had groped her way through the gloom of the night, and found it, though the light of the roadside Christ had been turned from her, so in the same blind manner she had groped her way to her own conceptions of honesty and duty. She hated the bitter and cruel old man, with a slave's hatred, mute and enduring, that nothing could have changed; but all the same she served him faithfully. She was an untamed animal indeed, that he had yoked to his

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ploughshare; but she did her work loyally and doggedly; and whenever she had shaken her neck free of the yoke, she returned and thrust her head through it again, whether he scourged her back to it or not.

It was partially from the force of habit which is strong upon all creatures; it was partially from a vague instinct in her to work out her right to the begrudged shelter which she received, and not to be beholden for it for one single hour to any charity.

The mill was at work in the twilight when she reached it.

Claudis Flamma screamed at her from the open door of the loft, where he was weighing corn for the grinding.

"You have been away all night long!"

She was silent; standing below in the wet garden.

He cast a foul word at her, new upon his lips. She was silent all the same; her arms crossed on her breast, her head bent.

"Where is the boat?—that is worth more than your body. And soul you have none."

She raised her head and looked upward.

"I have lost the boat."

She thought that, very likely, he would kill her for it. Once when she had lost an osier basket, not a hundredth part of the cost of this vessel, he had beaten her till every bone in her frame had seemed broken for many a week. But she looked up quietly, standing there amongst the dripping bushes and the cheerless grassy ways.

That she never told a lie, he above in the loft knew by long proof; but this was in his sight only a piece with the strength born in her from the devil; the devil had in all ages told so many truths to the confusion of the saints of God.

"Drifted where?"

"I do not know—on the face of the flood,—with the tide."

"You had left it loose?"

"I got out to push it off the sand. It had grounded. I forgot it. It went adrift."

"What foul thing were you at meanwhile?"

She was silent.

"If you do not say, I will cut your heart out with a hundred stripes!"

"You can."

"I can! you shall know truly that I can! Go, get the boat—find it above or below water—or to the town prison you go as a thief."

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The word smote her with a sudden pang. For the first time her courage failed her. She turned and went in silence at his bidding.

In the wet daybreak, through the swollen pools and the soaked thickets, she searched for the missing vessel; knowing well that it would be scarcely less than a miracle which could restore it to her; and that the god upon the cross worked no miracles for her;—a child of sin.

For several hours she searched; hungry, drenched, ready to drop with exhaustion, as she was used to see the overdriven cattle sink upon the road.

She passed many peasants; women on their mules, men in their barges, children searching for such flotsam and jetsam as the water might have flung upon the land from the little flooded gardens, and the few riverside cabins, which it had invaded in the night. She asked tidings of the boat from none of these. What she could not do for herself, it never occurred to her that others could do for her. It was an ignorance that was strength.

At length, to her amaze, she found it; saved for her by the branches of a young tree, which, being blown down, had fallen into the stream, and had caught the boat hard and fast as in a net.

At sore peril to herself she dislodged it with infinite labour from the entanglement of the boughs, and at scarce less peril, rowed on her homeward way upon the swollen force of the turbid river; full against the tide which again was flowing inland, from the sea that beat the bar, away to the northward, in the full sunrise.

It was far on in the forenoon, as she drew near the orchards of Yprès, brown in their leaflessness, and with grey lichens blowing from their boughs, like hoary beards of trembling paupers shaking in the icy breaths of charity.

She saw that Claudis Flamma was at work amidst his trees, pruning and delving in the red and chilly day.

She went up the winding stairs, planks green and slippery with wet river reeds, which led straight through the apple orchards to the mill.

"I have found the boat," she said, standing before him; her voice was faint and very tired, her whole body drooped with fatigue, her head for once was bowed.

He turned with his billhook in his hands. There was a leap of gladness at his heart; the miser's gladness over recovered treasure; but he showed such welcome neither in his eye nor words.

"It is well for you that you have," he said with bitter meaning. "I will spare you half the stripes:—strip."

Without a word of remonstrance, standing before him in the grey shadow of the lichens, and the red mists of the morning, she pushed the rough garments from her breast and shoulders, and vanquishing her weakness, drew herself erect to receive the familiar chastisement.

"I am guilty—this time," she said to herself as the lash fell:—she was thinking of her theft.

CHAPTER IV.

A SCORE of years before, in a valley of the far north, a group of eager and silent listeners stood gathered about one man, who spoke aloud with fervent and rapturous oratory.

It was in the green Norwegian spring, when the silence of the winter world had given way to a million sounds of

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waking life from budding leaves and nesting birds, and melting torrents and warm winds, fanning the tender primrose into being, and wooing the red Alpine rose to blossom.

The little valley was peopled by a hardy race of herdsmen and of fishers; men who kept their goat flocks on the steep sides of the mountains, or went down to the deep waters in search of a scanty subsistence. But they were a people simple, noble, grave, even in a manner heroic and poetic, a people nurtured on the old grand songs of a mighty past, and holding a pure faith in the traditions of a great sea–sovereignty. They listened, breathless, to the man who addressed them, raised on a tribune of rough rock, and facing the ocean, where it stretched at the northern end of the vale; a man peasant–born himself, but gifted with a native eloquence; half–poet, half–preacher; fanatic and enthusiast; one who held it as his errand to go to and fro the land, raising his voice against the powers of the world, and of wealth, and who spoke against these with a fervour and force which, to the unlearned and impressionable multitudes that heard him, seemed the voice of a genius heaven–sent.

When a boy he had been a shepherd, and dreaming in the loneliness of the mountains, and by the side of the deep hill–lakes far away from any sound or steps of human life, a madness, innocent, and in its way beautiful, had come upon him.

He believed himself born to carry the message of grace to the nations; and to raise up his voice against those passions whose fury had never assailed him, and against those riches whose sweetness he had never tasted. So he had wandered from city to city, from village to village; mocked in some places, revered in others; protesting always against the dominion of wealth, and speaking with a strange pathos and poetry which thrilled the hearts of his listeners, and had in it, at times, almost the menace and the mystery of a prophet's upbraiding.

He lived very poorly; he was gentle as a child; he was a cripple and very feeble; he drank at the wayside rills with the dogs; he lay down on the open fields with the cattle; yet he had a power in him that had its sway over the people, and held the scoffers and the jesters quiet under the spell of his tender and flute–like voice.

Raised above the little throng upon the bare red rock, with the green fiords and the dim pine–woods stretching round him as far as his eye could reach, he preached, now to the groups of fishers and herdsmen, and foresters and hunters; protesting to this simple people against the force of wealth, and the lust of possession, as though he preached to princes and to conquerors.

He told them of what he had seen in the great cities through which he had wandered; of the corruption and the vileness, and the wantonness; of the greed in which the days and the years of men's lives were spent; of the amassing of riches for which alone the nations cared, so that all loveliness, all simplicity, all high endeavour, all innocent pastime, were abjured and derided amongst them. His voice was sweet and full as the swell of the music as he spoke to them, telling them one of the many fables and legends, of which he had gathered a full harvest, in the many lands that had felt his footsteps.

This was the parable he set before them that day, whilst the rude toilers of the forests and the ocean stood quiet as little children, hearkening with upturned faces and bated breath, as the sun went down behind the purple pines.

"There lived once in the east, a great king; he dwelt far away, amongst the fragrant fields of roses, and in the light of suns that never set.

"He was young, he was beloved, he was fair of face and form; and the people as they hewed stone, or brought water, said amongst themselves, 'Verily, this man is as a god; he goes where he lists, and he lies still or rises up as he pleases; and all fruits of all lands are culled for him; and his nights are nights of gladness, and his days, when they dawn, are all his to sleep through or spend as he wills.' But the people were wrong. For this king was weary of his life.

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"His buckler was sown with gems, but his heart beneath it was sore. For he had been long bitterly harassed by foes who descended on him as wolves from the hills in their hunger, and he had been long plagued with heavy wars and with bad rice harvests, and with many troubles to his nation that kept it very poor, and forbade him to finish the building of new marble palaces, and the making of fresh gardens of delight, on which his heart was set. So he, being weary of a barren land and of an empty treasury, with all his might prayed to the gods that all he touched might turn to gold, even as he had heard had happened to some magician long before in other ages. And the gods gave him the thing he craved; and his treasury overflowed. No king had ever been so rich, as this king now became in the short space of a single summer-day.

"But it was bought with a price.

"When he stretched out his hand to gather the rose that blossomed in his path, a golden flower scentless and stiff was all he grasped. When he called to him the carrier-dove that sped with a scroll of love words across the mountains, the bird sank on his breast a carved piece of metal. When he was athirst and shouted to his cup bearer for drink, the red wine ran a stream of molten gold. When he would fain have eaten, the pulse and pomegranate grew alike to gold between his teeth. And lo! at eventide, when he sought the silent chambers of his harem, saying, 'here at least shall I find rest,' and bent his steps to the couch whereon his best beloved slave was sleeping, a statue of gold was all he drew into his eager arms, and cold shut lips of sculptured gold were all that met his own.

"That night the great king slew himself, unable any more to bear this agony; since all around him was desolation, even though all around him was wealth.

"Now the world is too like that king, and in its greed of gold it will barter its life away.

"Look you,—this thing is certain—I say that the world will perish, even as that king perished, slain as he was slain, by the curse of its own fulfilled desire.

"The future of the world is written. For God has granted their prayer to men. He has made them rich and their riches shall kill them.

"When all green places have been destroyed in the builder's lust of gain:—when all the lands are but mountains of brick, and piles of wood and iron:—when there is no moisture anywhere; and no rain ever falls:—when the sky is a vault of smoke; and all the rivers reek with poison:—when forest and stream, and moor and meadow, and all the old green wayside beauty are things vanished and forgotten:—when every gentle timid thing of brake and bush, of air and water, has been killed, because it robbed them of a berry or a fruit:—when the earth is one vast city, whose young children behold neither the green of the field nor the blue of the sky; and hear no song but the hiss of the stream, and know no music but the roar of the furnace:—when the old sweet silence of the country-side, and the old sweet sounds of waking birds, and the old sweet fall of summer showers, and the grace of a hedge-row bough, and the glow of the purple heather, and the note of the cuckoo and cushat, and the freedom of waste and of woodland, are all things dead, and remembered of no man:—then the world, like the Eastern king, will perish miserably of famine and of drought, with gold in its stiffened hands, and gold in its withered lips, and gold everywhere:—gold that the people can neither eat nor drink, gold that cares nothing for them, but mocks them horribly:—gold for which their fathers sold peace and health, and holiness and liberty:—gold that is one vast grave."

His voice sank, and the silence that followed was only filled with the sound of the winds in the pine-woods, and the sound of the sea on the shore.

The people were very still and afraid; for it seemed to them that he had spoken as prophets speak, and that his words were words of truth.

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Suddenly on the awe–stricken silence an answering voice rang, clear, scornful, bold, and with the eager and fearless defiance of youth.

"If I had been that king, I would not have cared for woman, or bird, or rose. I would have lived long enough to enrich my nation, and mass my armies, and die a conqueror. What would the rest have mattered? You are mad, O Preacher! to rail against gold. You flout a god that you know not, and that never has smiled upon you."

The speaker stood outside the crowd with a dead sea–bird in his hand; he was in his early boyhood, he had long locks of bright hair that curled loosely on his shoulders, and eyes of northern blue, that flashed like steel in their scorn.

The people, indignant and terrified at the cold rough words which blasphemed their prophet, turned with one accord to draw off the rash doubter from that sacred audience place, but the Preacher stayed their hands with a gesture, and looked sadly at the boy.

"Is it thee, Arslàn—dost thou praise gold?—I thought thou hadst greater gods."

The boy hung his head and his face flushed.

"Gold must be power always," he muttered. "And without power what is life?"

And he went on his way out from the people with his dead bird, which he had slain with a stone that he might study the exquisite mystery of its silvery hues.

The Preacher followed him dreamily with his glance.

"Yet he will not give his life for gold," he murmured. "For there is that in him greater than gold, which will not let him sell it, if he would."

CHAPTER V.

AND the words of the Preacher had come true; so true that the boy Arslàn, grown to manhood, had dreamed of fame, followed the genius in him, and having failed to force the world to show faith in him, had dropped down dying on a cold hearth, for sheer lack of bread, under the eyes of the gods.

It had long been day when he awoke.

The wood smouldered, still warming the stone chamber. The owls that nested in the ceiling of the hall were beating their wings impatiently against the closed casements, blind with the light and unable to return to their haunts and homes. The food and the wine stood beside him on the floor; the fire had scared the rats from theft.

He raised himself slowly, and by sheer instinct ate and drank with the avidity of long fast. Then he stared around him blankly, blinded like the owls.

It seemed to him that he had been dead; and had risen from the grave.

"It will be to suffer it all over again in a little space," he muttered dully.

His first sensation was disappointment, anger, weariness. He did not reason. He only felt.

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His mind was a blank.

Little by little a disjointed remembrance came to him. He remembered that he had been famished in the coldness of the night, had endured much torment of the body, had fallen headlong and lost his consciousness. This was all he could recall.

He looked stupidly for awhile at the burning logs; at the pile of brambles; at the flask of wine, and the simple stores of food. He looked at the grey closed window, through which a silvery daylight came. There was not a sound in the house; there was only the cracking of the wood and the sharp sealike smell of the smoking pine boughs, to render the place different from what it had been when he last had seen it.

He could recall nothing, except that he had starved for many days; had suffered, and must have slept.

Suddenly his face burned with a flush of shame. As sense returned to him, he knew that he must have swooned from weakness produced by cold and hunger; that some one must have seen and succoured his necessity; and that the food which he had half unconsciously devoured must have been the food of alms.

His limbs writhed and his teeth clenched as the thought stole on him.

To have gone through all the aching pangs of winter in silence, asking aid of none, only to come to this at last! To have been ready to die in all the vigour of virility, in all the strength of genius, only to be saved by charity at the end! To have endured, mute and patient, the travail of all the barren years, only at their close to be called back to life by aid that was degradation!

He bit his lips till the blood started, as he thought of it. Some eyes must have looked on him, in his wretchedness. Some face must have bent over him in misery. Some other human form must have been near his in this hour of his feebleness and need, or this thing could never have been. He would have died alone and unremembered of man, like a snake in its swamp or a fox in its earth. And such a death would have been to him tenfold preferable to a life restored to him by such means as these.

Death before accomplishments is a failure, yet withal may be great; but life saved by alms is a failure, and a failure for ever inglorious.

So the shame of this ransom for death far outweighed with him the benefit.

"Why could they not let me be?" he cried in his soul against those unknown lives which had weighed his own with the fetters of obligation. "Rather death than a debt! I was content to die; the bitterness was passed. I should have known no more. Why could they not let me be!"

And his heart was hard against them. They had stolen his only birthright—freedom.

Had he craved life so much as to desire to live by shame he would sooner have gone out into the dusky night and have snatched food enough for his wants from some rich husbandman's granaries, or have stabbed some miser at prayers, for a bag of gold:—rather crime than the debt of a beggar.

So he reasoned; stung and made savage by the scourge of enforced humiliation. Hating himself because, in obedience to mere animal craving, he had taken and eaten, not asking whether what he took was his own.

He had closed his mouth, living, and had been ready to die mute, glad only that none had pitied him; his heart hardened itself utterly against this unknown hand which had snatched him from death's dreamless ease and ungrudged rest, to awaken him to a humiliation that would be as ashes in his teeth so long as his life should last.

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He arose slowly, and staggered to the casement.

He fancied he was delirious, and had distempered visions of the food so long desired. He knew that he had been starving long—how long? Long enough for his brain to be weak and visited with phantoms. Instinctively he touched the long round rolls of bread, the shape of the wine flask, the wicker of the basket: they were the palpable things of common life; they seemed to tell him that he had not dreamed.

Then it was charity? His lips moved with a curse.

That was his only thanksgiving.

The windows were unshuttered; through them he looked straight out upon the rising day—a day rainless and pale, and full of cool softness, after the deluge of the rains.

The faint sunlight of a spring that was still chilled by winter was shed over the flooded fields and swollen streams; snow-white mists floated before the languid passage of the wind; and the moist land gave back, as in a mirror, the leafless trees, the wooden bridges, the belfries and the steeples, and the strange sad bleeding Christs.

On all sides near, the meadows were sheets of water, the woods seemed to drift upon a lake; a swan's nest was washed past on broken rushes, the great silvery birds beating their heavy wings upon the air, and pursuing their ruined home with cries. Beyond, everything was veiled in the twilight of the damp grey vapour; a world half seen, half shrouded, lovely exceedingly, filled with all divine possibilities and all hidden powers: a world such as Youth beholds with longing eyes in its visions of the future.

"A beautiful world!" he said to himself; and he smiled wearily as he said it.

Beautiful, certainly; in that delicious shadow; in that vague light: in that cloud-like mist, wherein the earth met heaven.

Beautiful, certainly; all those mystical shapes rising from the sea of moisture which hid the earth and all the things that toiled on it. It was beautiful, this calm, dim, morning world, in which there was no sound except the distant ringing of unseen bells; this veil of vapour, whence sprang these fairy and fantastic shapes that cleft the watery air; the land to the sky, in which all homely things took grace and mystery, and every common and familiar form became transfigured.

It was beautiful; but this landscape had been seen too long and closely by him for it to have power left to cheat his senses.

Under that pure and mystical veil of the refracted rain things vile, and things full of anguish, had their being:—cattle in the slaughter-houses; the drunkards in the hovels; disease and debauch and famine; the ditch, that was the common grave of all the poor; the hospital, where pincers and knives tore the living nerves in the inquisition of science; the fields, where the women toiled bent, cramped, and hideous; the dumb driven beasts, patient and tortured, for ever blameless, yet for ever accursed:—all these were there beneath that lovely veil, through which there came so dreamily the slender shafts of spires and the chimes of half heard bells.

He stood and watched it long, so long that the clouds descended and the vapours shifted away, and the pale sun-rays shone clearly over a disenchanting world, where roof joined roof and casement answered casement, and the figures on the crosses became but rude and ill-carved daubs; and the cocks crew to one another, and the herdsmen swore at their flocks, and the oxen flinched at the goad, and the women went forth to their field work; and all the charm was gone.

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Then he turned away.

The cold fresh breath of the morning had breathed upon him, and driven out the dull, delicious fancies that had possessed his brain. The simple truth was plain before him: that he had been seen by some stranger in his necessity and succoured.

He was thankless; like the sick, to whom unwelcome aid denies the refuge of the grave, calling him back to suffer, and binding on his shoulders the discarded burden of life's infinite weariness and woes.

He was thankless; for he had grown tired of this fruitless labour, this abortive combat; he had grown tired of seeking credence and being derided for his pains, while other men prostituted their powers to base use and public gain, receiving as their wages honour and applause; he had grown tired of toiling to give beauty and divinity to a world which knew them not when it beheld them.

He had grown tired, though he was yet young, and had strength, and had passion, and had manhood. Tired—utterly, because he was destitute of all things save his genius, and in that none were found to believe.

"I have tried all things, and there is nothing of any worth." It does not need to have worn the imperial purples and to be lying dying in old age to know thus much in all truth and all bitterness.

"Why did they give me back my life?" he said in his heart, as he turned aside from the risen sun.

He had striven to do justly with this strange, fleeting, unasked gift of existence, which comes, already warped, into our hands, and is broken by death ere we can set it straight.

He had not spent it in riot or madness, in lewd love or in gambling greed; he had been governed by great desires, though these had been fruitless, and had spent his strength to a great end, though this had been never reached.

As he turned from looking out upon the swollen stream that rushed beneath his windows, his eyes fell upon the opposite wall, where the white shapes of his cartoons were caught by the awakening sun.

The spider had drawn his dusty trail across them; the rat had squatted at their feet; the darkness of night had enshrouded and defaced them; yet with the morning they arose, stainless, noble, undefiled.

Amongst them there was one colossal form, on which the sun poured with its full radiance.

This was the form of a captive grinding at a mill–stone; the majestic symmetrical supple form of a man who was also a god.

In his naked limbs there was a supreme power; in his glance there was a divine command; his head was lifted as though no yoke could ever lie on that proud neck; his foot seemed to spurn the earth as though no mortal tie had ever bound him to the sod that human steps bestrode: yet at the corn–mill he laboured, grinding wheat like the patient blinded oxen that toiled beside him.

For it was the great Apollo in Pheræ.

The hand which awoke the music of the spheres had been blood–stained with murder; the beauty which had the light and lustre of the sun had been darkened with passion and with crime; the will which no other on earth or in heaven could withstand had been bent under the chastisement of Zeus.

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He whose glance had made the black and barren slopes of Delos to laugh with fruitfulness and gladness,—he whose prophetic sight beheld all things past, present, and to come, the fate of all unborn races, the doom of all unspent ages,—he, the Far–Striking King, laboured here beneath the curse of crime, greatest of all the gods, and yet a slave.

In all the hills and vales of Greece his Io pæan sounded still.

Upon his holy mountains there still arose the smoke of fires of sacrifice.

With dance and song the Delian maidens still hailed the divinity of Lêtô's son.

The wave of the pure Ionian air still rang for ever with the name of Delphinios.

At Pytho and at Clarus, in Lycia and in Phokis, his oracles still breathed forth upon their fiat terror or hope into the lives of men; and still in all the virgin forests of the world the wild beasts honoured him wheresoever they wandered, and the lion and the boar came at his bidding from the deserts to bend their free necks and their wills of fire meekly to bear his yoke in Thessaly.

Yet he laboured here at the corn–mill of Admetus; and watching him at his bondage there stood the slender, slight, wing–footed Hermes, with a slow, mocking smile upon his knavish lips, and a jeering scorn in his keen eyes, even as though he cried:

"O, brother, who would be greater than I! For what hast thou bartered to me the golden rod of thy wealth and thy dominion over the flocks and the herds? For seven chords strung on a shell—for a melody not even thine own! For a lyre outshone by my syrinx hast thou sold all thine empire to me. Will human ears give heed to thy song now thy sceptre has passed to my hands? Immortal music only is left thee, and the vision foreseeing the future. O god! O hero! O fool! what shall these profit thee now?"

Thus to the artist by whom they had been begotten the dim white shapes of the deities spoke. Thus he saw them, thus he heard, whilst the pale and watery sunlight lit up the form of the toiler in Pheræ.

For even as it was with the divinity of Delos, so is it likewise with the genius of a man, which, being born of a god, yet is bound as a slave to the grindstone. Since even as Hermes mocked the Lord of the Unerring Bow, so is genius mocked of the world, when it has bartered the herds and the grain, and the rod that metes wealth, for the seven chords that no ear, dully mortal, can hear.

And as he looked upon this symbol of his life, the captivity and the calamity, the strength and the slavery of his existence overcame him; and for the first hour since he had been born of a woman Arslàn buried his face in his hands and wept.

He could bend great thoughts to take the shapes that he chose, as the chained god in Pheræ bound the strong kings of the desert and the forest to carry his yoke; yet, like the god, he likewise stood fettered to the mill to grind for bread.

CHAPTER VI.

A VALLEY long and narrow, shut out from the rest of the living world by the ramparts of stone that rose on either side to touch the clouds; dense forests of pines, purple as night, where the erl–king rode and the bear–king reigned; at one end mountains, mist, and gloom, at the other end the ocean; brief days with the sun shed on a world of snow, in which the sounds of the winds and the moans of the wolves alone were heard in the solitude;

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long nights of marvelous magnificence with the stars of the arctic zone glowing with an unbearable lustre above a sea of phosphorescent fire; those were Arslàn's earliest memories—those had made him what he was.

In that pine-clothed Norwegian valley, opening to the sea, there were a few homesteads gathered together round a little wooden church, with great torrents falling above them, and a profound loneliness around; severed by more than a day's journey from any other of the habitations of men.

There a simple idyllic life rolled slowly on through the late and lovely spring times, when the waters loosened and the seed sprouted, and the white blossoms broke above the black ground: through the short and glorious summers, when the children's eyes saw the elves kiss the roses, and the fairies float on the sunbeam, and the maidens braided their fair hair with blue cornflowers to dance on the eve of St. John: through the long and silent winters, when an almost continual night brooded over all things, and the thunder of the ocean alone answered the war of the wind-torn forests, and the blood-red blaze of the northern light gleamed over a white still mountain world, and within doors, by the warm wood fire, the youths sang Scandinavian ballads, and the old people told strange Sagas, and the mothers, rocking their new-born sons to sleep, prayed God for mercy to have on all human lives drowning at sea and frozen in the snow.

In this Alpine valley, hidden amidst stupendous walls of stone, bottomless precipices, and summits that touched the clouds, there was a cottage even smaller and humbler than most, and closest of all to the church. It was the house of the pastor. The old man had been born there, and had lived there all the years of his life save a few that he had passed in a town as a student; and he had wedded a neighbour who, like himself, had known no other home than this one village. He was gentle, patient, simple, and full of tenderness; he worked like his people all the week through, in the open weather, amongst his fruit-trees, his little breadth of pasturage, his herb-garden, and his few sheep. On the seventh day he preached to the people the creed that he himself believed in with all the fond, unquestioning, implicit faith of the young children who lifted to him their round wandering eyes.

He was good; he was old: in his simple needs and his undoubting hopes he was happy; all the living things of his little world loved him, and he loved them. And fate lit on him to torture him, as it is its pleasure to torture the innocent.

It sent him a daughter who was fair to sight, and had a voice like music; a form lithe and white, with hair of gold, and eyes like her own planets. She had never seen any other spot save her own valley; but she had the old Berserker blood in her veins, and she was restless; the sea tempted her with an intense power; she desired passionately, without knowing what she desired.

The simple pastoral work, the peaceful household labours, the girls' garland of alpine flowers, the youths' singing in the brief rose twilight, the saga told the thousandth time around the lamp in the deep mid-winter silence; these things would not suffice for her. The old Scandinavian madness was her veins. And one day the sea tempted her too utterly; beyond her strength,—as a lover, after a thousand entreaties, one day tempts a woman, and one day finds her weak.

The sea vanquished her, and she went—whither?

They hardly knew: to these old people the world that lay behind their mountain fortress was a blank. It might be a paradise; it might be a prison. They could not tell. They suffered their sorrow meekly; they never cursed her; they did not even curse their fate because they had given life to a woman child.

After awhile they heard of her.

She wrote them tender and glowing words; she was well, she was proud, she was glad, she had found those who told her that she had a voice which was as a gift of gold, and that she might sing in triumph to the nations. Such

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tidings came from time to time; brief welcome words, first teeming with hope, then delirious with triumph, yet ever ending with a short sad sigh of conscience, a prayer for pardon—pardon for what? The letters never said: perhaps only for the sin of desertion.

The slow salt tears of age fell on these glowing pages in which the heart of a young, vain-glorious, tender creature stamped itself; but the old people never spoke of them to others. "She is happy, it does not matter for us." This was all they said, yet this gentle patience was a martyrdom too sharp to last; when that year closed the mother was in her grave, and the old man left alone.

The long silent winter came, locking the valley within its fortress of ice, severing it from all the rest of the breathing human world; and the letters ceased. He would not let them say that she had forgotten; he chose to think that the severance was due to the wall of snow which was built up between them rather than to any division of her ingratitude and oblivion.

The sweet sudden Norwegian spring came, all the white and golden flowers breaking up from the hard crust of the soil, and all the loosened waters rushing with a shout of liberty to join the sea.

The summer followed with the red mountain roses blossoming by the brooks, and the green mountain grasses blowing in the wind, with the music of the herd-bells ringing down the passes, and the sound of the fife and of the reed-pipe calling the maidens to the dance.

In the midst of the summer, one night, when all the stars were shining above the valley, and all the children slept under the roofs with the swallows, and not a soul was stirring, save where here and there a lover watched a light glow in some lattice underneath the eaves, a half-dead woman dragged herself feebly under the lime-tree shadows of the pastor's house, and struck with a faint cry upon the door and fell at her father's feet, broken and senseless. Before the full day had dawned she had given birth to a male child; and died as her son's eyes opened to the morning light.

He inherited no name, and they called him after his grandsire, Arslàn.

When his dead daughter lay stretched before him in the sunlight, with her white large limbs folded to rest, and her noble fair face calm as a mask of marble, the old pastor knew little—nothing—of what her life through these two brief years had been. Her lips had scarcely breathed a word since she had fallen senseless on his threshold. That she had triumph he knew; that she had fallen into dire necessities he saw.

Whether she had surrendered art for the sake of love, or whether she had lost the public favour by some caprice of the public, whether she had been eminent or obscure in her career, whether it had abandoned her or she had abandoned it, he could not tell, and he knew too little of the world to be able to learn.

That she had travelled her weary way homeward to her native mountains that her son might not perish among strangers, he knew; but no more. Nor was more ever known by any living soul. In life there are so many histories which are like broken boughs that strew the ground after a storm, snapped short at either end, so that none know the crown of them nor the root.

The child whom she had left grew in goodliness and strength and stature, until the people said that he was like that child-king, whom their hero Frithiof raised upon his buckler above the multitude; and who was not afraid, but boldly gripped the brazen shield, and smiled fearlessly at the noonday sun.

He had his mother's golden Scandinavian beauty; the beauty of sculpture, white as the snow, of unusual height, and largely moulded; and his free life amidst the ice-fields and the pinewoods, and on the wild northern seas, developed both health and strength to their uttermost perfection.

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The people admired and wondered at him; they did not love him. The lad was cold, dauntless, silent; he repelled their sympathies and disdained their pastimes. He chose rather to be by himself than with them. He was never cruel; but he was never tender; and when he did speak he spoke with a sort of eloquent scorn and caustic imagery that seemed to them extraordinary in one so young. But his grandfather loved him greatly; and reared him tenderly and wisely; and braced him with a scholar's lore and with a mountaineer's exposure, so that both brain and body had their due.

He was a simple childlike broken old man; but in this vigorous youth that unfolded itself beside him his age seemed to strike fresh root, and he had wisdom and skill enough to guide its development justly. The desire of his soul was that his grandson should succeed him in the spiritual charge of that tranquil valley, and thus escaped the dire perils of the cities in which the mother's life had been caught and consumed like a moth's in flame. But Arslàn's eyes looked ever across the ocean with that look in them which had been in his mother's, and when the old man spoke of this holy and peaceful future, he was silent.

Moreover, he—who had never beheld but the rude paintings on panels of pine that decorated the little red church under the firs and lindens,—he had the gift of art in him.

He had few and rough means only with which to make his crude and unguided essays; but the delirium of it was on him, and the peasants of his village gazed awe-stricken and adoring before the things which he drew on every piece of pine-wood, on every smooth breadth of sea-worn granite, on every bare surface of lime-washed wall that he could find at liberty for his usage.

When they asked him what, in his manhood, he would do, he said little. "I will never leave the old man," he made answer; and he kept his word. Up to his twentieth year he never quitted the valley. He studied deeply, after his own manner, but nearly all his days were passed in the open air alone; in the pure cold air of the highest mountain summits, amidst the thunder of the furious torrents; in the black recesses of lonely forests, where none, save the wolf and the bear, wandered with him; or away on the vast expanse of the sea, where the storm drove the great arctic waves like scourged sheep, and the huge breakers seized the shore as a panther its prey.

On such a world as this, and in the marvelous nights of the north, his mind fed itself and gained its full powers. The feeble life of the old man held him to this lonely valley that seemed filled with the coldness, the mystery, the unutterable terror and majesty of the arctic pole, to which it looked; but, unknown to him, it thus fettered him likewise where alone the genius in him could take its full shape and full stature.

Unknown to him, in these years it took the depth, the strength, the patience, the melancholy, the virility of the North; took these never to be lost again.

In the twentieth winter of his life an avalanche engulfed the pastor's house, and the little church by which it stood; covering both beneath a mountain of earth and snow and rock and riven trees. Some of the timbers withstood the shock, and the roof remained standing uncrushed above their heads. The avalanche fell some little time after midnight: there were only present in the dwelling himself, the old man, and a serving woman.

The woman was killed on her bed by the fall of a beam upon her; he and the pastor still lived: lived in perpetual darkness without food or fuel, or any ray of light.

The wooden clock stood erect, uninjured; they could hear the hours go by in slow succession. The old man was peaceful and even cheerful; praising God often; and praying that help might come to this beloved one. But his strength could not hold out against the icy cold, the long hunger, the dreadful blank around. He died ere the first day had wholly gone by, at even-song; saying still that he was content, and still praising God who had rewarded his innocence with shame, and recompensed his service with agony. For two more days and nights, Arslàn remained in his living tomb, enshrouded in eternal gloom, alone with the body of his grandfather, stretching out

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his hands ever and again to meet the icy touch rather than be without companionship.

On the morning of the third day the people of the village, who had laboured ceaselessly, reached him; and he was saved.

As soon as the spring broke, he left the valley and passed over the mountains, seeking a new world. His old familiar home had become hateful to him; he had no tie to it save two low graves, still snow-covered underneath a knot of tall stone-pines; the Norse passion of wandering was in his veins as it had been in his mother's before him; he mutely desired freedom, colour, knowledge, art, fame, as she had desired them, and he went: turning his face from that lowly green nest lying like a lark's between the hills.

He did not go as youth mostly goes, blind with a divine dream of triumph: he went, consciously, to a bitter combat as the sea kings of old, whose blood ran in his veins, and whose strength was in his limbs, had gone to war, setting their prow hard against the sharp salt waves and in the teeth of an adverse wind.

He was not without money. The pastor, indeed, had died almost penniless; he had been always poor, and had given the little he possessed to those still poorer. But the richest landowner in the village, the largest possessor of flocks and herds, dying childless, had bequeathed his farm and cattle to Arslàn; having loved the lad's dead mother silently and vainly. The value of these realised by sale gave to Arslàn, when he became his own master, what, in that valley at least, was wealth; and he went without care for the future on this score into the world of men; his mind full of dreams and the beautiful myths of dead ages; his temper compounded of poetry and coldness, of enthusiasm and of scepticism; his one passion a supreme ambition, pure as snow in its instinct, but half savage in its intensity.

From that spring, when he had passed away from his birthplace as the winter snows were melting on the mountain sides, and the mountain flowers were putting forth their earliest buds under the pine boughs, until the time that he now stood solitary, starving, and hopeless before the mocking eyes of his Hermes, twelve years had run their course, and all through them he had never once again beheld his native land.

Like the Scandinavian Regner, he chose rather to perish in the folds, and by the fangs, of the snakes that devoured him than return to his country with the confession of defeat. And despite the powers that were in him, his life had been a failure, an utter failure—as yet.

In his early youth he had voyaged often, with men who went to the extreme north in search of skins and such poor trade as they could drive with Esquimaux or Koraks; he had borne their dangers and their poverty, their miseries and their famine, for sake of seeing what they saw;—the pathless oceans of the ice realm, the trailing pines alone in a white snow world, the red moon fantastic and horrible in a sky of steel, the horned clouds of reindeer rushing through the endless night, the arch of the aurora spanning the heavens with their fire. He had passed many seasons of his boyhood in the silence, the solitude, the eternal desolation, and the mute mystery of that Arctic world, which for no man has either sympathy or story; and in a way he had loved it, and was often weary for it; in a way its spirit remained with him always; and its inexorable coldness, its pitiless indifference to men's wants and weakness, its loneliness and its purity, and its scorn, were in all the works of his hand; blended in a strange union with the cruelty, and the voluptuousness, and the gorgeousness of colour, which gave to everything he touched the glow and the temper of the east.

Thus, what he did pleased none; being for one half the world too chill, and being for the other half too sensual.

The world had never believed in him; and he found himself in the height and maturity of his powers condemned to an absolute obscurity. Not one man in a million knew his name.

During these years he had devoted himself to the study of art with an undeviating subservience to all its tyrannies.

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He had studied humanity in all its phases; he had studied form with all the rigid care that it requires; he had studied colour in almost every land that lies beneath the sun; he had studied the passions in all their deformities, as well as in all their beauties; he had spared neither himself nor others in pursuit of knowledge. He had tried most vices, he had seen all miseries, he had spared himself no spectacle, however loathsome; he had turned back from no license, however undesired, that could give him insight into empire over human raptures and affliction. Neither did he spare himself any labour however costly, however exhausting, to enrich his brain with that varied learning, that multifarious science which he held needful to every artist who dared to desire greatness.

The hireling beauty of the wanton, the splendour of the sun and sea, the charnel lore of anatomy, the secrets of dead tongues and buried nations, the horrors of the lazar wards and pest-houses, the glories of golden deserts and purple vineyards, the flush of love on a young girl's cheek, the rottenness of corruption on a dead man's limbs, the hellish riot of a brothel, the divine calm of an eastern night; all things alike he studied, without abhorrence as without delight, indifferent to all save for one end,—knowledge and art.

So entirely and undividedly did this possess him that it seemed to have left him without other passions; even as the surgeon dissects the fair lifeless body of some beautiful dead women, regardless of loveliness or sex, intent on the secret of disease, the mystery of formation, which he seeks therein, so did he study the physical beauty of women and their mortal corruption, without other memories than those of art. He would see the veil fall from off the limbs of a creature lovely as a goddess, and would think only to himself—"How shall I render this so that on my canvas it shall live once more?"

One night, in the hot, close streets of Damascus, a man was stabbed,—a young Maronite—who lay dying in the roadway, without sign or sound, whilst his assassins fled; the silver Syrian moon shining full on his white and scarlet robe, his calm, upturned face, his lean hand knotted on the dagger he had been spared no time to use; a famished street dog smelling at his blood.

Arslàn, passing through the city, saw and paused beside him; stood still and motionless, looking down on the outstretched figure; then drew his tablets out and sketched the serene, rigid face, the flowing, blood-soaked robes, the hungry animal mouthing at the wound. Another painter, his familiar friend, following on his steps, joined him a little later, and started from his side in horror—

"My God! what do you do there?" he cried. "Do you not see?—that man is dying!"

Arslàn looked up—"I had not thought of that," he answered.

It was thus always with him.

He was not cruel. To animals he was humane, to women gentle, to men serene; but his art was before all things with him, and with humanity he had little sympathy; and if had passions, they had wakened no more than as the drowsy tigress wakes in the hot hush of noon, half indifferent, half lustful, to strike fiercely what comes before her, and then, having slain, couches herself and sleeps again.

But for this absolute surrender of his life, his art had as yet recompensed him nothing.

Men did not believe in him; what he wrought saddened and terrified them; they turned aside to those who fed them on simpler and on sweeter food.

His works were great, but they were such as the public mind deems impious. They unveiled human corruption too nakedly, and they shadowed forth visions too exalted, and satires too unsparing, for them to be acceptable to the multitude. They were compounded of an idealism clear and cold as crystal, and of a reality cruel and voluptuous as love. They were penetrated with an acrid satire and an intense despair: the world caring only for a honied

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falsehood and a gilded gloss in every art, would have none of them.

So far these twelve long years his labour had been waste, his efforts fruitless. Those years had been costly to him in purse;—travel, study, gold flung to fallen women, sums spent on faithless friends, utter indifference to whosoever robbed him, so long as he was left in peace to pursue lofty aims and high endeavours—all these did their common work on wealth which was scanty in the press of the world, though it had appeared inexhaustible on the shores of the north sea.

His labours also were costly, and they brought him no return.

The indifference to fortune in a man of genius looks, to a man of the world, the stupor of idiocy: from such a stupor he was shaken one day to find himself face to face with beggary.

His works were seen by few, and these few were antagonistic to them.

All ways to fame were closed to him, either by the envy of other painters, or by the apathies and the antipathies of the nations themselves. In all lands he was repulsed; he roused the jealousy of his compeers and the terror of the multitudes. They hurled against him the old worn-out cry that the office of art was to give pleasure, not pain; and when his money was gone, so that he could no longer, at his own cost, expose his works to the public gaze, they and he were alike obliterated from the public marts; they had always denied him fame, and they at last thrust him quickly into oblivion, and abandoned him to it without remorse, and even with contentment.

He could, indeed, with the facile power of eye and touch that he possessed, have easily purchased a temporary ease and evanescent repute, if he had given the world from his pencil those themes for which it cared, and descended to the common spheres of common art. But he refused utterly to do this. The best and greatest thing in him was his honesty to the genius wherewith he was gifted; he refused to prostitute it; he refused to do other than to tell the truth as he saw it.

"This man blasphemes; this man is immoral," his enemies had always hooted against him. It is what the world always says of those who utter unwelcome truths in its unwilling ears.

So the words of the old Skald by his own northern seashores came to pass; and at length, for the sake of art, it came to this, that he perished for want of bread.

For seven days he had been without food, except the winter berries which he broke off the trees without, and such handfuls of wheat as fell through the disjointed timbers of the ceiling, for whose possession he disputed with the rats.

The sheer absolute poverty, which leaves the man whom it has seized without so much as even a crust wherewith to break his fast, is commoner than the world in general ever dreams. For he was now so poor that for many months he had been unable to buy fresh canvas on which to work, and had been driven to chalk the outlines of the innumerable fancies that pursued him upon the bare smooth grey stone walls of the old granary in which he dwelt.

He let his life go silently away without complaint, and without effort, because effort had been so long unavailing, that he had discarded it in a contemptuous despair.

He accepted his fate, seeing nothing strange in it, and nothing pitiable; since many better men than he had borne the like. He could not have altered it without beggary or theft, and he thought either of these worse than itself.

There were hecatombs of grain, bursting their sacks, in the lofts above; but when, once on each eighth day, the maltster owning them sent his men to fetch some from the store, Arslàn let the boat be moored against the wall, be

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filled with barley, and be pushed away again down the current, without saying once to the rowers, "Wait; I starve!"

And yet, though like a miser, amidst his gold, his body starved amidst the noble shapes and the great thoughts that his brain conceived and his hand called into substance, he never once dreamed of abandoning for any other the career to which he had dedicated himself from the earliest days that his boyish eyes had watched the fires of the Arctic lights glow above the winter seas.

Art was to him as mother, brethren, mistress, offspring, religion—all that other men hold dear. He had none of these, he desired none of them; and his genius sufficed to him in their stead.

It was an intense and reckless egotism, made alike cruel and sublime by its intensity and purity, like the egotism of a mother in her child. To it, as the mother to her child, he would have sacrificed every living creature; but to it also, like her, he would have sacrificed his very existence as unhesitatingly. But it was an egotism which, though merciless in its tyranny, was as pure as snow in its impersonality; it was untainted by any grain of avarice, of vanity, of selfish desire; it was independent of all sympathy; it was simply and intensely the passion for immortality:—that sublime selfishness, that superb madness, of all great minds.

Art had taken him for its own, as Demeter, in the days of her desolation, took the child Demophoon to nurture him as her own on the food of gods, and to plunge him through the flames of a fire that would give him immortal life. As the pusillanimous and sordid fears of the mortal mother lost to the child for evermore the possession of Olympian joys and of perpetual youth, so did the craven and earthly cares of bodily needs hold the artist back from the radiance of the life of the soul, and drag him from the purifying fires. Yet he had not been utterly discouraged; he strove against the Metanira of circumstance; he did his best to struggle free from the mortal bonds that bound him; and, as the child Demophoon mourned for the great goddess that had nurtured him, refusing to be comforted, so did he turn from the base consolations of the sense and the appetites, and beheld ever before his sight the ineffable majesty of that Mater Dolorosa who once and for ever had anointed him as her own.

Even now as the strength returned to his limbs and the warmth to his veins, the old passion, the old worship, returned to him.

The momentary weakness which had assailed him passed away. He shook himself with a bitter impatient scorn for the feebleness into which he had been betrayed; and glanced around him still with a dull wonder as to the strange chances which the past night had brought. He was incredulous still; he thought that his fancy, heated by long fasting, might have cheated him; that he must have dreamed; and that the food and fuel which he saw must surely have been his own.

Yet reflection told him that this could not be; he remembered that for several weeks his last coin had been spent; that he had been glad to gather the birds' winter berries to crush beneath his teeth, and gather the dropped corn from the floor to quiet the calm of hunger; that for many a day there had been no fire on the hearth, and that only a frame which long sunless northern winters had braced to such hardihood in early youth, had enabled him to resist and endure the cold. Therefore, it must be charity. Charity!—as the hateful truth came home to him, he met the eyes of the white, slender, winged Hermes: eyes that from out that colourless and smiling face seemed to mock him with a cruel contempt.

His was the old, old story—the rod of wealth bartered for the empty shell that gave forth music.

Hermes seemed to know it and to jeer him.

Hermes, the mischief–monger, and the trickster of men; the inventive god who spent his days in cajoling his brethren, and his nights in the mockery of mortals; the messenger of heaven who gave Pandora to mankind;

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Hermes, the eternal type of unscrupulous Success, seemed to have voice and cry to him:—"Oh fool, fool, fool! who listens for the music of the spheres, and disdains the only melody that men have ears to hear—the melody of gold!"

Arslàn turned from the great cartoon of the gods in Pheræ, and went out into the daylight, and stripped and plunged into the cold and turbulent stream. Its chilliness and the combat of its current braced his nerves and cleared his brain.

When he was clad, he left the grain–tower with the white forms of its gods upon its walls, and walk slowly down the banks of the river. Since life had been forced back upon him he knew that it was incumbent upon his manhood to support it by the toil of his hands if men would not accept the labour of his brain.

Before, he had been too absorbed in his pursuit, too devoted to it, body and soul, to seek to sustain existence by sheer manual exertion which was the only thing that he had left untried for self–maintenance. In a manner too he was too proud; not too proud to labour, but too proud to easily endure to lay bare his needs to the knowledge of others. But now, human charity must have saved him; a charity which he hated as the foulest insult of his life; and he had no chance save to accept it like a beggar bereft of all shame, or to seek such work as would give him his daily bread.

So he went; feebly, for he was still weak from the length of his famine.

The country was well known to him, but the people not at all. He had come by hazard on the old ruin where he dwelt, and had stayed there full a year.

These serene blue skies, these pale mists, these corn–clad slopes, these fields of pleasant of plenteous abundance, these quiet homesteads, these fruit–harvests of this Norman plain were in a contrast intense, yet soothing, to all that his life had known. These old quaint cities, these little villages that seemed always hushed with the sound of bells, these quiet streams on which the calm sunlight slept so peacefully, these green and golden lands of plenty that stretched away to the dim grey distant sea,—all these had had a certain charm for him.

He had abided with them, partly because amidst them it seemed possible to live on a handful of wheat and a draught of water, unnoticed and unpitied, partly because, having come hither on foot through many lands and by long hardships, he had paused there weary and incapable of farther effort.

Whilst the little gold he had had on him had lasted he had painted innumerable transcripts of the ancient buildings, and of its summer and autumnal landscapes. And of late—through the bitter winter—of late it had seemed to him that it was as well to die here as elsewhere.

When a man knows that his dead limbs will be huddled into the common ditch of the poor, the nameless, and the unclaimed, and that his dead brain will only serve for soil to feed some little rank wayside poisonous weed, it will seldom seem of much moment in what earth the ditch be dug, by what feet the sward be trod.

He went on his way seeking work; he did not care what, he asked for any that might serve to use such strength as hunger had left in him, and to give him his daily bread. But this is a great thing to demand in the world, and so he found it.

They repulsed him everywhere.

They had their own people in plenty, they had their sturdy, tough, weather–beaten women, who laboured all day in rain, or snow, or storm, for a pittance, and they had these in larger numbers than their field–work needed. They looked at him askance; this man with the eyes of Arctic blue and the grave gestures of a king, who only asked to

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labour as the lowest amongst them. He was a stranger to them; he did not speak their tongue with their accent; he looked, with that white beauty and that lofty stature, as though he could crush them in the hollow of his hand.

They would have none of him.

"He brings misfortune!" they said amongst themselves; and they would have none of him.

He had an evil name with them. They said at eventide by their wood-fires that strange things had been seen since he had come to the granary by the river.

Once he had painted, from the pretty face of a stonecutter's little fair son, a study of the wondrous child Zagreus gazing in the fatal mirror; the child was laughing, and happy, and healthful at noon, crowned with carnations and river lilies, and by sunset he was dead—dead like the flowers that were still amongst his curls.

Once a girl had hired herself as a model to him for an Egyptian wanton, half a singer and half a gipsy—handsome, lithe, fantastic, voluptuous: the very night she left the granary she was drowned in crossing a wooden bridge of the river, which gave way under the heavy tramp of the fantoccini player who accompanied her.

Once he had sketched, for the corner of an oriental study, a rare-plumaged bird of the south, which was the idol of a water-carrier of the district, and the wonder of all the children round: and from that date the bird had sickened and drooped, and lost its colours, and pined until it died.

The boy's death had been from a sudden seizure of one of the many ills of infancy; the dancing girl's had come from a common accident due to the rottenness of old worn water-soaked timber; the mocking-bird's had arisen from the cruelty of captivity and the chills of northern winds; all had been the result of simple accident and natural circumstance. But they had sufficed to fill with horror the minds of a peasantry always bigoted and strongly prejudiced against every stranger; and it became to them a matter of implicit credence that whatsoever living thing should be painted by the artist Arslàn would assuredly never survive to see the rising of the morrow's sun.

In consequence, for leagues around they shunned him; not man, nor woman, nor child would sit to him as models; and now, when he sought the wage of a daily labour amongst them, he was everywhere repulsed. He had long repulsed human sympathy, and in its turn it repulsed him.

At last he turned and retraced his steps, baffled and wearied; his early habits had made him familiar with all manner of agricultural toil; he would have done the task of the sower, the herdsman, the hewer of wood, or the charcoal-burner; but they would none of them believe this of one with his glance and his aspect; and solicitation was new to his lips and bitter there as gall.

He took his way back along the line of the river; the beauty of the dawn had gone, the day was only now chilly, heavy, with a rank moisture from the steaming soil. Broken boughs and uprooted bushes were floating on the turgid water, and over all the land there hung a sullen fog.

The pressure of the air, the humidity, the colourless stillness that reigned throughout, weighed on lungs which for a score of years had only breathed the pure strong rarified air of the north; he longed with a sudden passion to be once more amidst his native mountains under the clear steel-like skies, and beside the rush of the vast wild seas. Were it only to die as he looked on them, it were better to die there than here.

He longed, as men in deserts thirst for drink, for one breath of the strong salt air of the north, one sight of the bright keen sea-born sun as it leapt at dawn from the waters.

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The crisp cold nights, the heavens which shone as steel, the forests filled with the cry of the wolves, the mountains which the ocean ceaselessly assailed, the mighty waves which marched erect like armies, the bitter Arctic wind which like a sabre cleft the darkness; all these came back to him, beloved and beautiful in all their cruelty, desired by him, with a sick longing for their freshness, for their fierceness, for their freedom.

As he dragged his tired limbs through the grasses and looked out upon the sullen stream that flowed beside him, an oar struck the water, a flat black boat drifted beneath the bank, a wild swan disturbed rose with a hiss from the sedges.

The boat was laden with grain; there was only one rower in it, who steered by a string wound round her foot.

She did not lift her face as she went by him; but her bent brow and her bosom grew red, and she cut the water with a swifter, sharper stroke; her features were turned from him by that movement of her head, but he saw the eastern outline of the cheek and chin, the embrowned velvet of the skin, the half-bare beauty of the heaving chest and supple spine bent back in the action of the oars, the long slender and arched shape of the naked foot, round which the cord was twined;—their contour and their colour struck him with a sudden surprise.

He had seen such oftentimes, eastwards, on the banks of golden rivers, treading, with such feet as these, the sands that were the dust of countless nations; bearing, on such shoulders as these earthen water-vases that might have served the feasts of Pharaohs; showing such limbs as these against the curled palm branches and the deep blue sky upon the desert's edge.

But here!—a face of Asia amongst the corn-lands of Northern France? It seemed to him strange; he looked after her with wonder.

The boat went on down the stream without any pause; the sculls cleaving the heavy tide with regular and resolute monotony; the golden piles of the grain and the brown form of the bending figure soon hidden in the clouds of river-mist.

He watched her, only seeing a beggar-girl rowing a skiff full of corn down a sluggish stream. There was nothing to tell him that he was looking upon the saviour of his body from the thralls of death; if there had been, in his mood, then, he would have cursed her.

The boat glided into the fog which closed behind it; a flock of water-birds swam out from the rushes and darted at some floating kernels of wheat that had fallen over the vessel's side; they fought and hissed, and flapped and pecked amongst themselves over the chance plunder; a large rat stole amidst them unnoticed by them in their exultation, and seized their leader and bore him struggling and beating the air with blood-stained wings away to a hole in the bank; a mongrel dog, prowling on the shore, hearing the wild duck's cries, splashed into the sedges, and swam out and gripped the rat by the neck in bold sharp fangs, and bore both rat and bird, bleeding and dying, to the land; the owner of the mongrel, a peasant making ready the ground for colza in the low-lying fields, snatched the duck from the dog to bear it home for his own eating, and kicked his poor beast in the ribs for having ventured to stray without leave and to do him service without permission.

"The dulcet harmony of the world's benignant law!" thought Arslàn, as he turned aside to enter the stone archway of his own desolate dwelling. "To live one must slaughter—what life can I take?"

At that moment the setting sun pierced the heavy veil of the vapour, and glowed through the fog.

The boat, now distant, glided for a moment into the ruddy haze, and was visible; the water around it, like a lake of flame, the white steam above it, like the smoke of a sacrifice fire.

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Then the sun sank, the mists gathered closely once more, all light faded, and the day was dead.

He felt stifled and sick at heart as he returned along the reedy shore towards his dreary home. He wondered dully why his life would not end: since the world would have none of him, neither the work of his brain nor the work of his hands, it seemed that he had no place in it.

He was half resolved to lie down in the water there, amongst the reeds, and let it flow over his face and breast, and kiss him softly and coldly into the sleep of death. He had desired this many times; what held him back from its indulgence was not "the child within us that fears death," of which Plato speaks; he had no such misgiving in him, and he believed death to be a simple rupture and end of all things, such as any man had right to seek and summon for himself; it was rather that the passion of his art was too strong in him, that the power to create was too intense in him, so that he could not willingly consign the forces and the fantasies of his brain to that annihilation to which he would, without thought or pause, have flung his body.

As he entered the haunted hall which served him as his painting-room, he saw a fresh fire of logs upon the hearth, whose leaping flames lighted the place with cheerful colour, and he saw on the stone bench fresh food, sufficient to last several days, and a brass flagon filled with wine.

A curious emotion took possession of him as he looked. It was less surprise at the fact, for his senses told him it was the work of some charity which chose to hide itself, than it was wonder as to who, in this strange land, where none would even let him earn his daily bread, knew enough or cared enough to supply his necessities thus. And with this there arose the same intolerant bitterness of the degradation of alms, the same ungrateful hatred of the succour that seemed to class him amongst beggars, which had moved him when he had awakened with the dawn.

He felt neither tenderness nor gratitude, he was only conscious of humiliation.

There were in him a certain coldness, strength, and indifference to sympathy, which, whilst they made his greatness as an artist, made his callousness as a man. It might have been sweet to others to find themselves remembered and pitied by another at an hour when their forces were spent, their fate friendless, and their hopes all dead. But it was not so to him, he only felt like the desert animal which, wounded, repulses every healing hand, and only seeks to die alone.

There was only one vulnerable, one tender nerve in him, and this was the instinct of his genius. He had been nurtured in hardihood, and had drawn in endurance with every breath of his native air; he would have borne physical ills without one visible pang, and would have been indifferent to all mortal suffering; but for the powers in him, for the art he adored, he had a child's weakness, a woman's softness.

He could not bear to die without leaving behind his life some work the world would cherish.

Call it folly, call it madness, it is both: the ivory Zeus that was to give its sculptor immortality, lives but in tradition; the bronze Athene, that was to guard the Piræus in eternal liberty, has long been levelled with the dust; yet with every age the artist still gives life for fame, still cries, "Let my body perish, but make my work immortal!"

It was this in him now which stirred his heart with a new and gentler emotion; emotion which, while half disgust, was also half gladness. The food was alms-given, since he had not earned it, and yet—by means of this sheer bodily subsistence—it would be possible for him to keep alive those dreams, that strength, by which he still believed it in him to compel his fame from men.

He stood before the Phoebus in Pheræ, thinking; it stung him with a bitter torment; it humiliated him with a hateful burden—this debt which came he knew not whence, and which he never might be able to repay. And yet

his heart was strangely moved; it seemed to him that the fate which thus wantonly, and with such curious persistence, placed life back into his hands, must needs be one that would bear no common fruit.

He opposed himself no more to it.

He bent his head and broke bread, and ate and drank of the red wine:—he did not thank God or man as he broke his fast; he only looked in the mocking eyes of Hermes, and said in his heart:—

"Since I must live, I will triumph!"

And Hermes smiled: Hermes the wise, who had bought and sold the generations of men so long ago, in the golden age, and who knew so well how they would barter away their greatness and their gladness, and their bodies and their souls, for one sweet strain of his hollow reed–pipe, for one sweet glance of his soulless Pandora's eyes.

Hermes—Hermes the liar, Hermes the wise,—knew how men's oaths were kept.

BOOK IV. "The desire of the moth for the star."

CHAPTER I.

AT the close of that day Claudis Flamma discovered that he had been robbed—robbed more than once: he swore and raved and tore his hair for loss of a little bread and meat and oil and a flagon of red wine.

He did not suspect his grand–daughter; accusing her perpetually of sins of which she was innocent, he did not once associate her in thought with the one offence which she had committed. He thought that the window of his store–house had been forced from the exterior; he made no doubt that his spoiler was some vagabond from one of the river barges. By such tramps his hen–house and his apple–lofts had often previously been invaded.

She heard his lamentations and imprecations in unbroken silence; he did not question her; and without a lie she was able to keep her secret. In her own sight she had done a foul thing—a thing that her own hunger had never induced her to do. She did not seek to reconcile herself to her action by any reflection that she had only taken what she had really earned a thousand times over by her service; her mind was not sufficiently instructed, and was of too truthful a mould to be capable of the deft plea of a sophistry.

She could dare the thing; and do it, and hold her peace about it, though she should be scourged to speak; but she could not tamper with it to excuse it to herself; for this she had neither the cunning nor the cowardice.

Why had she done it?—done for a stranger what no pressure of need had made her do for her own wants? She did not ask herself; she followed her instinct. He allured her with his calm and kingly beauty, which was like nothing else her eyes had ever seen; and she was drawn by an irresistible attraction to this life which she had bought at the price of her own from the gods. Yet stronger even than this sudden human passion which had entered into her was her dread lest he whom she had ransomed from death should know of his debt to her.

Under such a dread, she never opened her lips to anyone on this thing which she had done. Silence was natural to her; she spoke so rarely, that many in the province believed her to be dumb; no sympathy had ever been shown to her to woo her to disclose either the passions that burnt latent in her veins, or the tenderness that trembled stifled in her heart.

Thrice again did she take food and fuel to the water–tower undetected, both by the man whom she robbed, and the man whom she succoured. Thrice again did she find her way to the desolate chamber in its owner's absence and

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refill the empty platters and warm afresh the cold blank hearth. Thrice again did Claudis Flamma note the diminution of his stores, and burnish afresh his old rusty fowling–piece, and watch half the night on his dark staircase, and prepare with his own hands a jar of poisoned honey and a bag of poisoned wheat, which he placed, with a cruel chuckle of grim glee, to tempt the eyes of his spoilers.

But the spoiler, being of his own household, saw this trap set, and was aware of it.

In a week or two the need for these acts which she hated ceased. She learned that the stranger for whom she thus risked her body and soul, had found a boatman's work upon the water which, although a toil rough and rude, and but poorly paid, still sufficed to give him bread. Through she was herself so pressed with hunger, many a time, that as she went through the meadows and hedgerows she was glad to crush in her teeth the tender shoots of the briars, and the acrid berry of the brambles, she never again, unbidden, touched so much as a mouldy crust thrown out to be eaten by the poultry.

Flamma, counting his possessions greedily night and morning, blessed the saints for the renewed safety of his dwelling, and cast forth the poisoned wheat as a thank–offering to the male birds who were for ever flying to and fro their nested mates in the leafless boughs above the earliest violets, and whose little throats were strangled even in their glad flood of nuptial song, and whose soft bright eyes grew dull in death ere even they had looked upon the springtide sun.

For it was ever thus that Folle–Farine saw men praise God.

She took their death to her own door, sorrowing and full of remorse.

"Had I never stolen the food, these birds might never have perished," she thought, as she saw the rosy throats of the robins and bullfinches turned upward in death on the turf. She blamed herself bitterly with an aching heart.

The fatality which makes human crime recoil on the innocent creatures of the animal world oppressed her with its heavy and hideous injustice. Their God was good, they said: yet for her sin and her grandsire's greed the harmless song–birds died by the score in torment.

"How shall a God be good who is not just?" she thought.

In this mute young lonely soul of hers Nature had sown a strong passion for justice, a strong instinct towards what was righteous. As the germ of a plant born in darkness underground will, by sheer instinct, uncurl its colourless tendrils, and thrust them through crevices and dust, and the close structure of mortared stones, until they reach the light and grow green and strong in it, so did her nature strive, of its own accord, through the gloom enveloping it, towards those moral laws which in all ages and all lands remain the same, no matter what deity be worshipped, or what creed be called the truth.

Her nascent mind was darkened, oppressed, bewildered, perplexed, even like the plant which, forcing itself upward from its cellar, opens its leaves not in pure air and under a blue sky, but in the reek and smoke and foetid odours of a city. Yet, like the plant, she vaguely felt that light was somewhere; and as vaguely sought it.

With most days she took her grandsire's boat to and fro the town, fetching or carrying; there was no mode of transit so cheap to him as this, whose only cost was her fatigue. With each passage up and down the river, she passed by the dwelling of Arslàn.

Sometimes she saw him; once or twice, in the twilight, he spoke to her; she only bent her head to hide her face from him, and rowed more quickly on her homeward way in silence. At other times, in his absence, and when she was safe from any detection, she entered the dismal solitudes where he laboured, and gazed in rapt and awed

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amazement at the shapes that were shadowed forth upon the walls.

The service by which he gained his daily bread was on the waters, and took him often leagues away—simple hardy toil, amongst fishers and canal-carriers and bargemen. But it left him some few days, and all his nights, free for art; and never in all the years of his leisure had his fancy conceived and his hand created more exquisite dreams and more splendid phantasies than now in this bitter and cheerless time, when he laboured amidst the poorest for the bare bread of life.

"De belles choses peuvent se faire dans une cave;" and in truth the gloom of the cellar gives birth to an art more sublime than the light of the palace can ever beget.

Suffering shortens the years of the artist, and kills him oftentimes ere his prime be reached; but in suffering alone are all great works conceived. The senses, the passions, the luxuries, the lusts of the flesh, the delirium of the desires, the colours, the melodies, the fragrance, the indolences,—all that made the mere "living of life" delightful, all go to enrich and to deepen the human genius which steepes itself in them; but it is in exile from these that alone it can rise to its greatest.

The grass of the Holy River gathers perfume from the marvelous suns, and the moonless nights, and the gorgeous bloom of the east, from the aromatic breath of the leopard and the perfume of the fallen pomegranate, and the sacred oil that floats in the lamps, and the caress of the girl-bathers' feet, and the myrrh-dropping unguents that glide from the maidens' bare limbs in the moonlight,—the grass holds and feeds on them all. But not till the grass has been torn from the roots, and been crushed, and been bruised and destroyed, can the full odours exhale of all it has tasted and treasured.

Even the imagination of man may be great, but it can never be at its greatest until one serpent, with merciless fangs, has bitten it through and through, and impregnated it with passion and with poison,—that one deathless serpent which is Memory.

Arslàn had never been more ceaselessly pursued by innumerable phantasies, and never had given to these a more terrible force, a more perfect utterance, than now, when the despair which possessed him was absolute,—when it seemed to him that he had striven in his last strife with fate, and been thrown never to rise again,—when he kept his body alive by such soulless ceaseless labour as that of the oxen in the fields—when he saw every hour drift by, barren, sullen, painful,—when only some dull yet staunch instinct of virility held him back from taking his own life in the bleak horror of these fruitless days,—when it seemed to him that his oath before Hermes, to make men call him famous, was idle as a sigh of a desert wind through the hollow ears of a skull bleaching white on the sand.

Yet he had never done greater things—never in the long years through which he had pursued and studied art.

With the poor wage that he earned by labour he bought by degrees the tools and pigments lacking to him, and lived on the scantiest and simplest food, that he might have wherewith in order to render into shape and colour the imaginations of his brain.

And it was on these that the passionate, wondering, half-blinded eyes of Folle-Farine looked with awe and adoration in those lonely hours when, in his absence, she stole into his chamber, and touching nothing, scarcely daring to breathe aloud, crouched on the bare pavement mute and motionless, and afraid with a fear that was the sweetest happiness her brief youth had ever known.

Though her own kind had neglected and proscribed her, with one accord, there had been enough in the little world surrounding her to feed the imaginative senses latent in her,—enough of the old mediæval fancy, of the old ecclesiastical beauty, of the old monastic spirit, to give her a consciousness, through a dumb one, of the existence

of art.

Untaught though she was, and harnessed to the dreary mill–wheel round of a hard physical toil, she yet had felt dimly the charm of the place in which she dwelt.

Where the fretted pinnacles rose in hundreds against the sky,—where the common dwellings of the poor were panelled and parquettèd and carved in a thousand fashions,—where the graceful and the grotesque and the terrible were mingled in an inextricable, and yet exquisite, confusion,—where the grey squat jug that went to the well, and the jolting beam to which the clothes' line was fastened, and the creaking sign that swung above the smallest wine–shop, and the wooden gallery on which the poorest troll hung out her many–coloured rags, had all some trace of a dead art, some fashioning by a dead hand,—where all these were, it was not possible for any creature dowered by nature with any poetic instinct to remain utterly unmoved and unawakened in their midst.

Of the science and the execution of art she was still absolutely ignorant; the powers by which it was created still seemed a magic incomprehensible, and not human; but its meaning she felt with that intensity which is the truest homage of all homage to its influence.

Day after day, therefore, she returned and gazed on the three gods of forgetfulness, and on all the innumerable forms and fables which bore them company; the virgin field of her unfilled mind receiving the seeds of thought and of fancy that were scattered so largely in this solitude, lying waste, bearing no harvest.

Of these visits Arslàn himself knew nothing; towards him her bold wild temper was softened to the shyness of a doe.

She dreaded lest he should ever learn what she had done; and she stole in and out of the old granary, unseen by all, with the swiftness and the stealthiness which she shared in common with other untamed animals which, like her, shunned all man and woman kind.

And this secret—in itself so innocent, yet for which she would at times blush in her loneliness, with a cruel heat that burnt over all her face and frame—changed her life, transfigured it from its objectless, passionless, brutish dulness and monotony, into dreams and into desires.

For the first time she had in her joy and fear; for the first time she became human.

All the week through he wrought perforce by night; the great windows stood wide open to the bright cold moons of early spring; he worked only with black and white using colour only at sunrise, or on the rare days of his leisure.

Often at nightfall she left her loft, as secretly as a fox its lair, and stole down the river, and screened herself amongst the grasses, and watched him where he laboured in the mingling light of the moon and of the oil–lamp burning behind him.

She saw these things grow from beneath his hand, these mighty shapes created by him; and he seemed to her like a god, with the power to beget worlds at his will, and all human life in its full stature out from a little dust.

The contrast of this strength, of this power which he wielded, with the helpless exhaustion of the body in which she had found him dying, smote her with a sorrow and a sweetness that were like nothing she had ever known. That a man could summon hosts at his command like this, yet perish for a crust!—that fusion of omnipotence and powerlessness, which is the saddest and strangest of all the sad strange things of genius, awoke an absorbing emotion in her dormant heart!

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She watched him thus for hours in the long nights of a slow–footed spring, in whose mists and chills and heavy dews her inured frame took no more harm than did the green corn shooting through the furrows.

She was a witness to his solitude. She saw the fancies of his brain take form. She saw the sweep of his arm call up on the blank of the wall, or on the pale spaces of the canvas, these images which for her had alike such majesty and such mystery. She saw the faces beam, the eyes smile, the dancing–women rise, the foliage uncurl, the gods come forth from the temples, the nereids glide through the moonlit waters, at his command, and beneath his touch.

She saw him also in those moments when, conceiving no eyes to be upon him, this man, whom mankind denied, loosened rein to the bitterness in him; and, standing weary and heartsick before these creations for which his generation had no sight, and no homage, let the agony of constant failure, of continual defeat, overcome him, and cursed aloud the madness which possessed him, which drove him on for ever in this ungrateful service, and would not let him do as other men did—tell the world lies, and take its payment out in gold.

Until now she had hated all things, grieved for none, unless, indeed, it were for a galled ox toiling wounded and tortured on the field; or a trapped bird, shrieking in the still midnight woods.

But now, watching him, hearing him, a passionate sorrow for a human being possessed her. And to her eyes he was so beautiful in that utter unlikeness to herself and to all men whom she had seen. She gazed at him, never weary of that cold, fair, golden beauty, like the beauty of his sun–god; of those serene deep–lidded eyes, which looked so often past her at the dark night skies; of those lithe and massive limbs, like the limbs of the gladiator that yonder on the wall strained a lion to his breast in the deadly embrace of combat.

She gazed at him until she loved him with the intense passion of a young and ignorant life, into whose gloom no love had ever entered. With this love the instinct of her womanhood arose, amid the ignorance and savagery of her nature; and she crouched perpetually under the screen of the long grass to hide her vigil, and whenever his eyes looked from his easel outward to the night she drew back, breathless and trembling, she knew not why, into the deepest shadow.

Meantime, with that rude justice which was in her, she set herself atonement for her fault—the fault through which those tender little bright–throated birds were stretched dead amongst the first violets of the year.

She laboured harder and longer than ever for her task–master, and denied herself the larger half of even those scanty portions which were set aside for her of the daily fare, living on almost nothing, as those learn to do who are reared under the roof of the French poor. To his revilings she was silent, and under his blows patient. By night she toiled secretly, until she had restored the value of that which she had taken.

Why did she do it? She could not have told.

She was proud of the evil origin they gave her; she had a cynical gladness in her infamous repute; she scorned women and hated men; yet all the same she kept her hands pure of thefts and her lips pure of lies.

So the weeks went on till the hardness of winter gave way to the breath of the spring, and in all the wood and orchard around the water–mill of Yprès the boughs were green with buds, and the ground was pale with primroses—a spring all the sweeter and more fertile because of the severity of the past winter.

It became mid–April. It was market–day for all the country lying round that wondrous cathedral–spire, which shot into the air far–reaching and ethereal, like some fountain whose column of water had been arrested aloft and changed to ice.

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The old quiet town was busy, with a rich sunshine shed upon it, in which the first yellow butterflies of the year had begun to dance.

It was high noon, and the highest tide of the market.

Flower-girls, fruit-girls, egg-sellers, poultry-hucksters, crowds of women, old and young, had jolted in on their docile asses, throned on their sheepskin saddles; and now, chattering and chaffering, drove fast their trade. On the steps of the cathedral boys with birds'-nests, knife-grinders making their little wheels fly, cobblers hammering, with boards across their knees, travelling pedlars with knapsacks full of toys and mirrors, and holy images, and strings of beads, sat side by side in amicable competition.

Here and there a priest passed, with his black robe and broad hat, like a dusky mushroom amongst a bed of many-hued gillyflowers. Here and there a soldier, all colour and glitter, showed like a gaudy red tulip in bloom amidst tufts of thyme.

The old wrinkled leathern awnings of the market stalls glowed like copper in the brightness of noon. The red tiles of the houses edging the great square were gilded with yellow houseleeks. The little children ran hither and thither with big bunches of primroses or sheaves of blue wood hyacinths, singing. The red and blue serges of the young girls' bodices were like the gay hues of the anemones in their baskets. The brown faces of the old dames under the white roofing of their headgear were like the russet faces of the home-kept apples which they had garnered through all the winter.

Everywhere in the shade of the flapping leather, and the darkness of the wooden porches, there were the tender blossoms of the field and forest, of the hedge and garden. The azure of the hyacinths, the pale saffron of the primroses, the cool hues of the meadow daffodils, the ruby eyes of the cultured jonquils, gleamed amongst wet rushes, grey herbs, and freshly budded leafage. Plovers' eggs nestled in moss-lined baskets; sheaves of velvet-coated wallflowers poured fragrance on the air; great plumes of lilac nodded on the wind, and amber feathers of laburnum waved above the homelier masses of mint and marjoram, and sage and chervil.

It was high noon, but the women still found leisure time to hear the music of their own tongues, loud as the clacking of mill paddles. In one corner an eager little group was gathered round the stall of a favourite flower-seller, who wore a bright crimson gown, and a string of large silver beads about her neck, and a wide linen cap, that shaded her pretty rosy face as a great snowy mushroom may grow between the sun and a little ruddy wild strawberry.

She had brown eyes that were now brimming over with tears as she stood surrounded by all the treasures of spring. She held clasped in her arms a great pot with a young almond tree growing in it, and she was weeping as though her heart would break, because a tile had fallen from a roof above and crushed low all its pink splendour of blossom.

"I saw her look at it," she muttered. "Look at it as she passed with her wicked eyes; and a black cat on the roof mewed to her; and at that moment the tile fell. Oh, my almond tree; oh, my little darling; the only one out of three I saved through the frosts; the very one that was to have gone this night to Paris."

"Thou art not alone, Edmée," groaned an old woman, tottering from her nut-stall with a heap of ruffled, blood-stained, brown plumage held up in her hand. "Look! As she went by, my poor brown hen—the best sitter I have, good for eggs with every sunrise from Lent to Noel—just cackled and shook her tail at her; and at the very instant a huge yellow dog rushed in and killed the blessed bird—killed her in her basket! A great yellow beast that no one had ever seen before, and that vanished again into the earth like lightning."

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"Not worse than she did to my precious Rémy," said a tanner's wife, who drew after her, clinging to her skirts, a little lame, mis-shapen, querulous child.

"She hath the evil eye," said an old decrepid man who had served in the days of his boyhood in the Army of Italy, as he sat washing fresh lettuces in a large brass bowl, by his grandson's herb-stall.

"You remember how we met her in the fields last Feast-night of the Three Kings?" asked a youth looking up from plucking the feathers out from a living, struggling, moaning, goose. "Coming singling through the fog, like nothing earthly; and a moment later a torch caught little Jocelin's curls and burnt him till he was so hideous that his mother could scarce have known him. You remember?"

"Surely we remember," they cried in a hearty chorus round the broken almond tree. "Was there not the good old Dax this very winter killed by her if ever and creature were killed by foul means, though the law would never listen to the the Flandrins when they said so?"

"And little Bernardou," added one who had not hitherto spoken. "Little Bernardou died a month after his grandam, in hospital. She had cast her eye on him, and the poor little lad never rallied.

"A jettatrice ever brings misfortune," muttered the old soldier of Napoléon, washing his last lettuce and lighting a fresh pipe.

"Or does worse," muttered the mother of the crippled child. "She is not for nothing the devil's daughter, mark you."

"Nay, indeed," said an old woman, knitting from a ball of wool with which a kitten played amongst the strewn cabbage leaves and the crushed sweet-smelling thyme. "Nay, was it not only this very winter that my son's little youngest brother threw a stone at her, just for luck, as she went by in her boat through the town; and it stuck her and drew blood from her shoulder; and that self-same night a piece of the oaken carvings in the ceiling gave way and dropped upon the little angel as he slept, and broke his arm above the elbow:—she is a witch; there is no question but she is a witch."

"If I were sure so, I would think it well to kill her," murmured the youth, as he stifled the struggling bird between his knees.

"My sister met her going through the standing corn last harvest time, and the child she brought forth a week after was born blind, and is blind now," said a hard-visaged woman, washing turnips in a brass basin of water.

"I was black-and-blue for a month when she threw me down and took from me that hawk I had trapped; and she went and fastened my wrist in the iron instead," hissed a boy of twelve, in a shrill piping treble, as he slit the tongue of a quivering starling.

"They say she dances naked by moonlight in the water with imps!" cried a bright little lad who was at play with the kitten.

"She is a witch, there is no doubt about that," said again the old woman who sat knitting on the stone bench in the sun.

"And her mother such a saint!" sighed another old dame who was grouping green herbs together for salads.

And all the while the girl Edmée clasped her almond tree and sobbed over it.

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"If she were only here," swore Edmée's lover, under his breath, stealing his hand where the silver beads lay, and striving his best to console her.

At that moment the accused came towards them, erect in the full light.

She had passed through the market with a load of herbs and flowers for one of the chief hostelries in the square, and was returning with the flat broad basket balanced empty on her head.

Something of their mutterings and curses reached her, but she neither hastened nor slackened her pace; she came on straightly towards them with her firm step, and her eyes flashing hard against the sun.

She gave no sign that she had heard except that the blood darkened a little in her cheeks, and her mouth shut close with a haughtier scorn. But the sight of her answering in that instant to their hate, the sight of her with the sunshine on her scarlet sash and her slender golden limbs, added impulse to their rage.

They had talked themselves into a passionate belief in her as a thing hellborn and unclean, that brought all manner of evil fates amongst them. They knew that holy water had never reached her; that a church's door had never opened to her; they had heard their children hoot her many a time unrebuked, they had always hated her with the cruelty begotten by a timid cowardice or a selfish dread. They were ripe to let their hate take shape in speech and act. The lover of Edmée loosened his hand from the silver beads about her throat, and caught up, instead, a stone.

"Let us see if her flesh feel!" he cried, and cast it.

It fell short of her, being ill-aimed; she did not slacken her speed, nor turn out of her course; she still came towards them erect and with an even tread.

"Who lamed my Rémy?" screamed the cripple's mother.

"Who broke my grandson's arm?" cackled the old woman that sat knitting.

"Who withered my peach-tree?" the old gardener hooted.

"Who freed the devil-bird and put me on the trap?" yelled the boy with the starling.

"Who flung the tile on the almond?" shouted the flower-girl's lover.

"Who made my sister bring forth a little beast, blind as a mole?" shrieked the woman, washing in the brazen bowl.

"Who is a witch—who dances naked? —who bathes with devils at the full moon?" cried the youth who had plucked the goose bare alive; and he stooped for a pebble, and aimed better than his comrade, and flung it at her as she came.

"It is a shame to see the child of Reine Flamma so dealt with," murmured the old creature that was grouping her salads.

But her voice found no echo. The old soldier even rebuked her. "A jettatrice should be killed for the good of the people," he mumbled.

Meanwhile she came nearer and nearer. The last stone had struck her upon the arm; but it had drawn no blood; she walked on with firm, slow steps into their midst; unfaltering.

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The courage did not touch them; they thought it only the hardihood of a thing that was devil–begotten.

"She is always mute like that; she cannot feel. Strike, strike, strike!" cried the cripple's mother; and the little cripple himself clapped his small hands and screamed his shrill laugh. The youths, obedient and nothing loth, rained their stones on her as fast as their hands could fling them. Still she neither paused nor quailed; but came on straightly, steadily, with her face set against the light.

Their impatience and their eagerness made their aim uncertain; the stones fell fast about her on every side, but one alone struck her—a jagged flint that fell where the white linen shirt opened on her chest. It cut the skin, and the blood started; the children shrieked and danced with delight: the youths rushed at her inflamed at once with her beauty and their own savage hate.

"Stone her to death! stone her to death!" they shouted; she only laughed, and held her head erect and stood motionless where they arrested her, without the blood once paling in her face or her eyes once losing their luminous calm scorn. The little cripple clapped his hands, climbing on his mother's back to see the sight, and his mother screamed again and again above his laughter. "Strike! strike! strike!"

One of the elder lads seized her in his arms to force her on her knees while the others stoned her. The touch of him roused all the fire slumbering in her blood. She twisted herself round in his hold with a movement so rapid that it served to free her; struck him full on the eyes with her clenched hand a blow that sent him stunned and staggering back; then, swiftly as lightning flash, drew her knife from her girdle, and striking out with it right and left, dashed through the people, who scattered from her path as sheep from the spring of a hound.

Slowly and with her face turned full upon them, she backed her way across the market–place. The knife, turned blade outward, was pressed against her chest. None of them dared to follow her; they thought her invulnerable and possessed.

She moved calmly with a firm tread backward—backward—backward; holding her foes at bay; the scarlet sash on her loins flashing bright in the sun; her level brows bent as a tiger bends his ere he leaps. They watched her, huddling together frightened and silent. Even the rabid cries of the cripple's mother had ceased. On the edge of the great square she paused a moment; the knife still held at her chest, her mouth curled in contemptuous laughter.

"Strike now!" she cried to them; and she dropped her weapon, and stood still.

But there was not one amongst them who dared lift his hand. There was not so much as a word that answered her.

She laughed aloud, and waited for their attack, while the bell in the tower above them tolled loudly the strokes of noon. No one amongst them stirred. Even the shrill pipe of the lame boy's rejoicing had sunk, and was still.

At that moment, through the golden haze of sunbeams and of summer dust that hung above the crowd, she saw the red gleam of the soldiers of the state; and their heavy tramp echoed on the silence as they hastened to the scene of tumult. She had no faith in any justice which these would deal her; had they not once dragged her before the tribunal of their law when she had forced asunder the iron jaws of that trap in the oak wood to give freedom to the bleeding hawk that was struggling in it whilst its callow birds screamed in hunger in their nest in the branches above?

She had no faith in them; nor in any justice of men; and she turned and went down a twisting lane shaded from the sun, and ran swiftly as a doe through all its turns, and down the steps leading to the water–side. There her boat was moored; she entered it and pulled herself slowly down the river, which now at noontide was almost deserted, whilst the shutters of the houses that edged it on either side were all closed to keep out the sun.

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A boatman stretched half asleep upon the sacks in his barge; a horse dozing in his harness on the towing–path; a homeless child who had no one to call him into shelter from the heat, and who sat and dappled his little burning feet in the flowing water; these and their like were all there were here to look on her.

She rowed herself feebly, with one oar gradually out of the ways of the town; her left arm was strained, and, for the moment, useless; her shoulders throbbed with bruises; and the wound from the stone still bled. She staunched the blood by degrees, and folded the linen over it, and went on; she was so used to pain, and so strong, that this seemed to her to be but little. She had passed through similar scenes before, though the people had rarely broken into such open violence towards her, except that winter's day in the hut of Manon Dax.

The heat was great, though the season was but mid–April.

The sky was cloudless; the air without a breeze. The white blossoms of peach–trees bloomed between the old brown walls of the wooden houses. In the galleries, between the heads of saints and the faces of fauns, there were tufts of home–bred lilies of the valley and thick flowering bushes of golden genista. The smell of mignonette was sweet upon the languid breeze, and here and there, from out the darkness of some open casement, some stove–forced crimson or purple azalea shrub glowed; for the people's merchandise was flowers, and all the silent water–streets were made lovely and fragrant by their fair abundance.

The tide of the river was flowing in, the stream was swelling over all the black piles, and the broad smooth strips of sand that were visible at low water; it floated her boat inward with it without trouble, past the last houses of the town, past the budding orchards and grey stone walls of the outskirts, past the meadows and the corn–fields and the poplars of the open country. A certain faintness had stolen on her with the gliding of the vessel and the dizzy movement of the water; pain and the loss of blood filled her limbs with an unfamiliar weakness; she felt giddy, and half blind, and almost powerless to guide her course.

When she had reached the old granary where it stood amongst the waterdocks and rushes, she checked the boat almost unconsciously, and let it drift in amidst the reeds and lie there. Then she pulled herself feebly up through the shallow pools, and across the stone sill of the casement, into the chamber where she had leaned to live a life that was utterly apart from the actual existence to which chance had doomed her.

It was the height of noon; at such an hour the creator of these things she loved was always absent at the toil which brought him his daily bread; she knew that he never returned until the evening, never painted except at earliest dawn.

The place was her own in the freedom of solitude; all these shapes and shadows in which imagination and tradition had taken visible shape were free to her; she had grown to love them with a great passion, to seek them as consolers and as friends.

She crept into the room; its coolness, its calm, its dimmed refreshing light seemed like balm after the noise of the busy market–place and the glare of the cloudless sunshine. A sick sense of fatigue and of feebleness had assailed her more strongly. She dropped down in the gloom of the place on the broad, cold flags of the floor, in the deepest shadow, where the light from without did not reach, and beneath the cartoon of the Gods of Oblivion.

Of all the forms with which he had people its loneliness, these had the most profound influence on her in their fair, passionless, majestic beauty, in which it seemed to her that the man who had begotten them had repeated his own likeness. For they were all alike, yet unlike; of the same form and feature, yet different even in their strong resemblance, like elder and younger brethren who hold a close companionship. For Hypnos was still but a boy with his blue–veined eyelids closed, and his mouth rosy and parted like that of a slumbering child, and above his golden head a star rose in the purple night. Oneiros standing next was a youth whose eyes smiled as though they beheld visions that were welcome to him; in his hand, amongst the white roses, he held a black wand of sorcery,

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and around his bended head there hovered a dim silvery nimbus. Thanatos alone was a man full grown; and on his calm and colourless face there were blended an unutterable sadness, and an unspeakable peace; his eyes were fathomless, far–reaching, heavy laden with thought, as though they had seen at once the heights of heaven and the depths of hell; and he, having thus seen, and knowing all things, had leaned that there was but one good possible in all the universe,—that one gift which his touch gave, and which men in their blindness shuddered from and cursed. And above him and around him there was a great darkness.

So the gods stood, and so they spoke, even to her; they seemed to her as brethren, masters, friends—these three immortals who looked down on her in their mute majesty.

They are the gods of the poor, of the wretched, of the outcast, of the proscribed,—they are the gods who respect not persons nor palaces,—who stay with the exile and flee from the king,—who leave the tyrant of the world to writhe in torment, and call a smile beautiful as the morning on the face of a beggar child,—who turn from the purple beds where wealth and lust and brutal power lie, and fill with purest visions the darkest hours of the loneliest nights, for genius and youth,—they are the gods of consolation and of compensation,—the gods of the exile, of the orphan, of the outcasts, of the poet, of the prophet, of all whose bodies ache with the infinite pangs of famine, and whose hearts ache with the infinite woes of the world, of all who hunger with the body or the soul.

And looking at them, she seemed to know them as her only friends,—as the only rulers who ever could loose the bands of her fate and lead her forth to freedom—Sleep, and Dreams, and Death.

They were above her where she sank upon the stone floor; the shadows were dark upon the ground; but the sun rays striking through the distant window against the opposite wall fell across the head of the boy Hypnos, and played before his silver sandalled feet.

She sat gazing at him, forgetful of her woe, her task, the populace that had hooted her abroad, the stripes that awaited her at home. The answering gaze of the god magnetised her; the poetic virus which had stirred dumbly in her from her birth awoke in her bewildered brain. Without knowing what she wanted, she longed for freedom, for light, for passion, for peace, for love.

Shadowy fancies passed over her in a tumultuous pageantry; the higher instincts of her nature rose and struggle to burst the bonds in which slavery and ignorance and brutish toil had bound them; she knew nothing, knew no more than the grass knew that blew in the wind, than the passion–flower knew that slept unborn in the uncurled leaf; and yet withal she felt, saw, trembled, imagined, and desired, all mutely, all blindly, all in confusion and in pain.

For the second time the weakness of tears rushed into her fearless eyes, which had never quailed before the fury of any living thing; her head fell on her chest; she wept bitterly,—not because the people had injured her,—not because her wounded flesh ached and her limbs were sore,—but because a distance so immeasurable, so unalterable, severed her from all of which these gods told her without speech.

The sun–rays still shone on the bright head of Hypnos, while the stones on which she sat, and her own form, were dark in shadow; as though the bright boy pitied her, as though he, the world's consoler, had compassion for this thing so lonely and accursed of her kind, the dumb violence of her weeping brought its own exhaustion with it.

The drowsy heat of noon, pain, weariness, the faintness of fasting, the fatigue of conflict, the dreamy influences of that place, had their weight on her. Crouching there half on her knees, looking up ever in the faces of the three Immortals, the gift of Hypnos descended upon her and stilled her; its languor stole through her veins; its gentle pressure closed her eyelids; gradually her rigid limbs and her bent body relaxed and unnerved; she sank forward, her head lying on her outstretched arms, and the stillness of a profound sleep encompassed her.

And Oneiros added his gift also; and a throng of dim, delirious dreams floated through her brain, and peopled her slumber with fairer things than the earth holds, and made her mouth smile while yet her lids were wet.

Thanatos alone gave nothing, but looked down on her with his dark, sad eyes, and held his finger on his close-pressed lips, as though he said:—"Not yet."

CHAPTER II.

HER sleep remained unbroken; there was no sound to disturb it. The caw of a rook in the top of the poplar-tree, the rushing babble of the water, the cry of a field-mouse caught amongst the rushes by an otter, the far-off jingle of mules' bells from the great southern road that ran broad and white beyond the meadows, the gnawing of the rats in the network of timbers which formed the vaulted roof, these were all the noises that reached this solitary place, and these were both too faint and too familiar to awaken her.

Heat and pain made her slumber heavy, and the forms on which her waking eyes had gazed made her sleep full of dreams. Hour after hour went by; the shadows lengthened, the day advanced: nothing came to rouse her. At length the vesper bell rang over the pastures and the peals of the Ave Maria from the cathedral in the town were audible in the intense stillness that reigned around.

As the chimes died, Arslàn crossed the threshold of the granary and entered the desolate place where he had made his home. For once his labour had been early completed, and he had hastened to employ the rare and precious moments of the remaining light.

He had almost stepped upon her ere he saw her, lying beneath his cartoons of the sons of Nyx. He paused and looked down.

Her attitude had slightly changed, and had in it all the abandonment of youth and of sleep; her face was turned upward, with quick silent breathings parting the lips; her bare feet were lightly crossed; the linen of her loose tunic was open at the throat, and had fallen back from her right arm and shoulder: the whole supple grace and force that were mingled in her form were visible under the light folds of her simple garments. The sun still lingered on the bright bowed head of Hypnos, but all light had died from off the stone floor where she was stretched.

As she had once looked on himself, so he now looked on her.

But in him there arose little curiosity and still less pity; he recognized her as the girl whom, with the face of old Egypt, he had seen rowing her boat-load of corn down the river, and whom he had noticed for her strange unlikeness to all around her.

He supposed that mere curiosity had brought her there, and sleep overtaken her in the drowsiness of the first heat of the budding year.

He did not seek to rouse her, nor to spare her any shame or pain which at her waking, she might feel. He merely saw in her a barbaric and yet beautiful creature; and his only desire was to use the strange charms in her for his art.

A smooth-planed panel stood on an easel near; turning it where best the light fell, he began to sketch her attitude rapidly, in black and white. It was quickly done by a hand so long accustomed to make such transcripts; and he soon went further to that richer portraiture which colour alone can accomplish. The stone pavement; the brown and slender limbs; the breadth of scarlet given by the sash about her loins; the upturned face, whose bloom was as

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brilliant as that of a red carnation blooming in the twilight of some old wooden gallery; the eyelids, tear-laden still; the mouth that smiled and sighed in dreaming; on the wall above, the radiant figure of the young god which remained in full sunlight whilst all beneath was dark;—these gave a picture which required no correction from knowledge, no addition from art.

He worked on for more than an hour, until the wood began to beam with something of the hues of flesh and blood, and the whole head was thrown out in colour, although the body and the limbs still remained in their mere outline.

Once or twice she moved restlessly, and muttered a little, dully, as though the perpetual unsparing gaze bent on her with a scrutiny so cold, and yet so searching, disturbed or magnetized her even in her sleep. But she never awakened, and he had time to study and to trace every curve and line of the half-developed loveliness before him with as little as pity, with as cruel an exactitude, as that with which the vivisector tears asunder the living animal whose sinews he severs, or the botanist plucks to pieces the new-born flower whose structures he desires to examine.

The most beautiful women, who had bared their charms that the might see them live again upon his canvas, had seldom had power to make his hand tremble a moment in such translation. To the surgeon all sex is dead, all charm is gone from the female corpse that his knife ravages in search of the secrets of science; and to Arslàn the women whom he modelled and pourtrayed were nearly as sexless, nearly as powerless to create passion or emotion. They were the tools of his art; no more.

When, in the isolation of the long northern winters, he had sat beside the pine-wood that blazed on his hearth while the wolves howled down the deserted village street, and the snow drifted up and blocked from sight the last pane of the lattice and the last glimpse of the outer world, he had been more enamoured of the visions that visited him in that solitude than he had ever been since of the living creatures whose beauty he recorded in his works.

He had little passion in him, or passion was dormant; and he had sought women, even in the hours of love, with coldness and with something of contempt for that licence which, in the days of his comparative affluence, he had not denied himself. He thought always— *De ces basiers puissants comme un dictame, De ces transports plus vifs que des rayons, Que reste-t-il? C'est affruex, ô mon âme! Rien qu'un dessin fort pâle aux trois crayons.*" And for those glowing colours of passion which burned so hotly for an instant, only so soon to fade out into the pallor of indifference or satiety, he had a contempt which almost took the place and the semblance of chastity.

He worked on and on, studying the sleeper at his feet, with the passionless keenness of a science that was as merciless in its way as the science which tortures and slaughters in order to penetrate the mysteries of sentient existence.

She was beautiful in her way, this dark strange foreign child, who looked as though her native home must have been where the Nile lily blooms, and the black brows of the Sphinx are bent against the sun.

She was beautiful, like a young leopard, like a young python, coiled there, lightly breathing, and mute and motionless and unconscious. He painted her as he would have painted the leopard or python lying asleep in the heavy hush of a noon in the tropics. And she was no more to him than these would have been.

The shadows grew longer; the sunlight died off the bright head of the boy Hypnos; the feathery reeds on the bank without got a red flush from the west; there came a sudden burst of song from a boat-load of children going home from the meadows where they had gathered the first cowslips of the season in great sheaves that sent their sweetness on the air though the open window as they went by beneath the walls.

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The shouts of the joyous singing rang shrilly through the silence; they pierced her ear and startled her from her slumber; she sprang up suddenly, with a bound like a hart that scents the hounds, and stood fronting him; her eyes opened wide, her breath panting, her nerves strained to listen and striving to combat.

In the first bewildered instant of her awakening she thought that she was still in the market-place of the town and that the shouts were from the clamour of her late tormenters.

He turned and looked at her.

"What do you fear?" he asked her, in the tongue of the country.

She started afresh at the sound of his voice, and drew her disordered dress together, and stood mute, with her hands crossed on her bosom, and the blood coming and going under her transparent skin.

"What do you fear?" he asked again.

"I fear?"

She echoed his cowardly word with a half-tremulous defiance; the heroism of her nature, which an hour earlier had been lashed to its fullest strength, cast back the question as an insult; but her voice was low and husky, and the blood dyed her face scarlet as she spoke. For she feared him; and for the moment she had forgotten how she had come there and all that had passed, except that some instinct of the long-hunted animal was astir in her to hide herself and fly.

But he stood between her and the passage outward, and pride and shame held her motionless. Moreover, she still listened intently: the confused voices of the children still seemed to her like those of the multitude by whom she had been chased; and she was ready to leap tiger-like upon them, rather than let them degrade her in his sight.

He looked at her with some touch of interest: she was to him only some stray beggar girl, who had trespassed into his solitude; yet there was that in her untamed regard, in her wide open eyes, in the stag-like grace of her attitude, in the sullen strength which spoke in her reply, that warmed him to closer notice of all these.

"Why are you in this place?" he asked her, slowly. "You were asleep here when I came, more than an hour ago."

The colour burned in her face; she said nothing.

The singing of the children was waxing fainter, as the boat floated from beneath the wall on its homeward way into the town. She ceased to fancy these cries the cries of her foes, and recollection began to revive in her.

"Why did you come?" he repeated, musing how he should persuade her to return to the attitude sketched out upon the easel.

She returned his look with the bold truthfulness natural to her, joined with that apprehensiveness of chastisement which becomes second nature to every creature that is for ever censured, cursed, and beaten for every real or imagined fault.

"I came to see those," she answered him, with a backward movement of her hand, which had a sort of reverence in it, up to the forms of the gods above her. The answer moved him; he had not thought to find a feeling so high as this in this ragged, lonely, sunburnt child; and, to the man for whom, throughout a youth of ambition and of disappointment, the world had never found the voice of favour, even so much appreciation as lay in this outcast's homage had its certain sweetness. For a man may be negligent of all sympathy for himself, yet never, if he be poet

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or artist, will he be able utterly to teach himself indifference to all sympathy for his works.

"Those!" he echoed, in surprise. "What can they be to you?"

She coloured at the unconcealed contempt that lay in his last word; her head drooped; she knew that they were much to her—friends, masters, teachers divine and full of pity. But she had no language in which to tell him this; and if she could have told him, she would have been ashamed. Also, the remembrance of those benefits to him, of which he was ignorant, had now come to her through the bewilderment of her thoughts, and it locked her lips to silence.

Her eyes dropped under his; the strange love she bore him made her blind and giddy and afraid; she moved restlessly, glaring round with the half-timid, half-fierce glances of a wild animal that desires to escape and cannot.

Watching her more closely, he noticed for the first time the stains of blood upon her shoulder, and the bruise on her chest, where the rent in her linen left it bare.

"You have been hurt?" he asked her, "or wounded?"

She shook her head.

"It is nothing."

"Nothing? You have fallen or been ill treated, surely?"

"The people struck me."

"Struck you? With what?"

"Stones."

"And why?"

"I am Folle-Farine."

She answered him with the quiet calm of one who offers an all-sufficient reply.

But the reply to him told nothing: he had been too shunned by the populace, who dreaded the evil genius which they attributed to him, to have been told by them of their fancies and follies; and he had never essayed to engage either their companionship or their confidence. To be left to work, or to die, in solitude undisturbed was the uttermost that he had ever asked of any strange people amidst whom he had dwelt.

"Because you are Folle-Farine?" he repeated. "Is that a reason to hate you?"

She gave a gesture of assent.

"And you hate them in return?"

She paused a moment, glancing still hither and thither all round, as a trapped bird glances, seeking his way outward.

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"I think so," she muttered; "and yet—I have had their little children in my reach, many a time by the water when the woods were all quiet, and I have never killed one yet."

He looked at her more earnestly than he had done before. The repressed passion that glanced under her straight dusky brows, the unspoken scorn which curled on her mouth, the nervous meaning with which her hands clenched on the folds of linen on her breast, attracted him; there was a force in them all which aroused his attention. There were in her that conscious power for ferocity, and that contemptuous abstinence from its exercise, which lie so often in the fathomless regard of the lion; he moved nearer to her, and addressed her more gently.

"Who are you?" he asked, "and why have these people such savage violence against you?"

"I am Folle-Farine," she answered him again, unable to add anything else.

"Have you no other name?"

"No."

"But you must have a home? You live—where?"

"At the mill with Flamma."

"Does he also ill-use you?"

"He beats me."

"When you do wrong?"

She was silent.

"Wrong?" "Right?"

They were but words to her—empty and meaningless. She knew that he beat her more often because she told truth or refused to cheat. For aught that she was sure of, she might be wrong, and he right.

Arslan looked at her musingly. All the thought he had was to induce her to return to the attitude necessary to the completion of his picture.

He put a few more questions to her; but the replies told him little. At all times silent, before him a thousand emotions held her dumb. She was afraid, besides, that at every word he might suspect the debt he owed to her, and she dreaded its avowal with as passionate a fear as though, in lieu of the highest sacrifice and service, her action had been some crime against him. She felt ashamed of it, as of some unholy thing; it seemed to her impious to have dared to give him back a life that he had wearied of, and might have wished to lose.

"He must never know: he must never know," she said to herself.

She had never imagined what fear meant until she had looked on this man's face. Now she dreaded, with an apprehension which made her start like a criminal at every sound, lest he should ever know of this gift of life which, unbidden, she had restored to him: which, being thus given, her instinct told her he would only take as the burden of an intolerable debt, of an unmeasurable shame.

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Perfect love casts out fear, runs the tradition; rather, surely, does the perfect love of a woman break the courage which no other thing could ever daunt, and set foot on the neck that no other yoke would ever touch.

By slow degrees he got from her such fragments of her obscure story as she knew. That this child, so friendless, ill-treated, and abandoned, had been the saviour of his own existence, he never dreamed. A creature beaten and half starved herself could not, for an instant, look to him one likely to have possessed even such humble gifts as food and fuel.

Besides, his thoughts were less with her than with the interrupted study on his easel, and his one desire was to induce her to endure the same watch upon her, waking, which had had power to disturb her even in her unconsciousness. She was nothing to him, save a thing that he wished to turn to the purpose of his art—like a flower that he plucked on his way through the fields, for the sake of its colour, to fill in some vacant nook in a mountain foreground.

"You have come often here?" he asked her, whilst she stood before him, flushing and growing pale, irresolute and embarrassed, with her hands nervously gathering the folds of her dress across her chest, and her sad, lustrous, troubled eyes glancing from side to side in a bewildered fear.

"Often," she muttered. "You will not beat me for it? I did no harm."

"Beat you? Amongst what brutes have you lived? Tell me, why did you care to come?"

Her face dropped.

"They are beautiful, and they speak to me," she murmured, with a pathetic, apologetic timidity in her voice.

He laughed a little; bitterly.

"Do they? They have few auditors. But you are beautiful, too, in your way. Has no one ever told you so?"

"I?"

She glanced at him half-wistfully, half-despairingly; she thought that he spoke in derision of her.

"You," he answered. "Why not? Look at yourself here: all imperfect as it is, you can see something of what you are.

Her eyes fell for the first time on the broad confused waves of dull colour, out of whose depths her own face arose, like some fair drowned thing tossed upward on a murky sea. She started with a cry as if he had wounded her, and stood still trembling.

She had looked at her own limbs floating in the opaque water of the bathing pool, with a certain sense of their beauty wakening in her; she had tossed the soft, thick, gold-flecked darkness of her hair over her bare shoulder, with a certain languor and delight; she had held a knot of poppies against her breast, to see their hues contrast with her own white skin;—but she had never imagined that she had beauty.

He watched her, letting the vain passion he thus taught her creep with all its poison into her veins.

He had seen such wonder and such awed delight before in Nubian girls with limbs of bronze and eyes of night, who had never thought that they had loveliness—though they had seen their forms in the clear water of the wells every time that they had brought their pitchers thither, and who had only awakened to that sweet supreme sense of

Folle-Farine

power, and of possession when first they had beheld themselves live again upon his canvas.

"You are glad?" he asked her at length.

She covered her face with her hands.

"I am frightened!"

Frightened she knew not why, and utterly ashamed to have lain thus in his sight, to have slept thus under his eyes, yet filled with ecstasy, to think that she was lovely enough to him to be raised amidst those marvelous dreams which people and made heaven of his solitude.

"Well then—let me paint you there," he said, after a pause. "I am too poor to offer you a reward for it. I have nothing—"

"I want nothing," she interrupted him, quickly, while a dark shadow, half wrath, half sorrow, swept across her face.

He smiled a little.

"I cannot boast the same. But, since you care for all these hapless things that are imprisoned here, do me, their painter, this one grace. Lie there, in the shadow again, as you were when you slept, and let me go on with this study of you till the sun sets."

A glory beamed over all her face. Her mouth trembled, her whole frame shook like a reed in the wind.

"If you care!" she said, brokenly, and paused. It seemed to her impossible that this form of hers, which had been only deemed fit for the whip, for the rope, for the shower of stones, could have any grace or excellence in his sight; it seemed to her impossible that this face of hers, which nothing had ever kissed except the rough tongue of some honest dog, and which had been blown on by every storm—wind, beaten on by every summer sun, could have colour, or shape, or aspect that could ever please him!

"Certainly I care. Go yonder and lie as you were lying a few moments ago—there in the shadow, under these gods."

She was used to give obedience—the dumb unquestioning obedience of the pack—horse or the sheep—dog, and she had no idea for an instant of refusal. It was a great terror to her to hear his voice and feel his eyes on her, and be so near to him; yet it was equally a joy sweeter and deeper than she had ever dreamed of as possible. He still seemed to her like a god, this man under whose hand flowers bloomed, and sun-rays smiled, and waters flowed, and human forms arose, and the gracious shapes of a thousand dreams grew into substance. And yet, in herself, this man saw beauty!

He motioned her with a careless, gentle gesture, as one motions a timid dog, to the spot over which the three brethren watched hand in hand; and she stretched herself down passively and humbly, meekly as the dog stretches himself to rest at his master's command. Over all her body the blood was leaping; her limbs shuddered; her breath came and went in broken murmurs; her bright-hued skin grew dark and white by turns; she was filled with a passionate delight that he had found anything in her to desire or deem fair; and she quivered with a tumultuous fear that made her nervous as any panting hare. Her heart beat as it had never done when the people had raged in their fury around her.

Folle-Farine

One living creature had found beauty in her; one human voice had spoken to her gently and without a curse; one man had thought her a thing to be entreated and not scorned;—a change so marvelous in her fate transfigured all the world for her, as though the gods above had touched her lips with fire. But she was mute and motionless; the habit of silence and of repression had become her second nature: no statue of marble could have been stiller, or in semblance more lifeless, than she was where she rested on the stones. Arslàn noticed nothing of this; he was intent upon his work. The sun was very near its setting, and every second of its light was precious to him. The world indeed he knew would in all likelihood never be the wiser or the richer for anything he did; in all likelihood he knew all these things that he created were destined to moulder away undisturbed save by the rats that might gnaw, and the newts that might traverse, them. He was buried here in the grave of a hopeless penury, of an endless oblivion. They were buried with him; and the world wanted neither him nor them.

Still, having the madness of genius, he was as much the slave of his art as though an universal fame had waited his lowliest and lightest effort.

With a deep breath that had half a sigh in it he threw down his brushes when the darkness fell. While he wrought, he forgot the abject bitterness of his life; when he ceased work, he remembered how hateful a thing it is to live when life means only deprivation, obscurity, and failure.

He thanked her with a few words of gratitude to her for her patience, and released her from the strain of the attitude.

She rose slowly with an odd dazzled look upon her face, like one coming out of great darkness into the full blaze of day. Her eyes sought the portrait of her own form, which was still hazy and unformed, amidst a mist of varying hues: that she should be elected to have a part with those glorious things which were the companions of his lowliness seemed to her a wonder so strange and so immeasurable that her mind still could not grasp it.

For it was greatness to her: a greatness absolute and incredible. The men had stoned, the women cursed, the children hooted her; but he selected her—and her alone—for that supreme honour which his hand could give.

Not noticing the look upon her face he placed before her on the rude bench, which served in that place for a table, some score of small studies in colour, trifles brilliant as the rainbow, birds, flowers, insects, a leaf of fern, an orchid in full bloom, a nest with a blue warbler in it, a few peasants by a wayside cross, a child at a well, a mule laden with autumn fruit—anything which in the district had caught his sight or stirred his fancy.

He bade her choose from them.

"There is nothing else here," he added. "But since you care for such things, take as may of them as you will as recompense."

Her face flushed up to the fringes of her hair; her eyes looked at the sketches in longing. Except for the scarlet scarf of Marcellin, this was the only gift she had ever had offered her. And all these reproductions of the world around her were to her like so much sorcery. Owning one, she would have worshipped it, revered it, caressed it, treasured it; her life was so desolate and barren that such a gift seemed to her as handsfull of gold and silver would seem to a beggar were he bidden to take them and be rich.

She stretched out her arms in one quick longing gesture; then as suddenly withdrew them, folding them on her chest, whilst her face grew very pale. Something of its old dark proud ferocity gathered on it.

"I want no payment," she said, huskily, and she turned to the threshold and crossed it.

"Wait. I did not mean to hurt you. Will you not take them as reward?"

"No."

She spoke almost suddenly; there was a certain sharpness and dulness of disappointment at her heart. She wanted, she wished, she knew not what. But not that he should offer her payment.

"Can you return to-morrow? or any other day?" he asked her, thinking of the sketch unfinished on the sheet of pinewood. He did not notice the beating of her heart under her folded arms, the quick gasp of her breath, the change of the rich colour in her face.

"If you wish," she answered him below her breath.

"I do wish, surely. The sketch is all unfinished yet."

"I will come then."

She moved away from him across the threshold as she spoke; she was not afraid of the people, but she was afraid of this strange, passionate sweetness, which seemed to fill her veins with fire and make her drunk and blind.

"Shall I go with you homeward?"

She shook her head.

"But the people who struck you!—they may attack you again?"

She laughed a little; low in her throat.

"I showed them a knife!—they are timid as hares."

"You are always by yourself?"

"Always."

She drew herself with a rapid movement from him and sprang into her boat where it rocked amidst the rushes against the steps; in another instant she had thrust it from its entanglement in the reeds, and pulled with swift, steady strokes down the stream into the falling shadows of the night.

"You will come back?" he called to her as the first stroke parted the water.

"Yes," she answered him; and the boat shot forward into the shadow.

Night was near and the darkness soon enclosed it; the beat of the oars sounding faintly through the silence of the evening.

There was little need to exact the promise from her.

Like Persephone she had eaten of the fatal pomegranate seed, which, whether she would or no, would make her leave the innocence of youth, and the light of the sun and the blossoms of the glad green spring-time world, and draw her footsteps backward and downward to that hell which none,—once having entered it,—can ever more forsake.

Folle-Farine

She had drifted away from him into the shadows of evening as they died from the shore and the stream into the gloom of the night.

He thought no more of pursuing her than he thought of chasing the melted shadows.

Returning to his chamber he looked for some minutes at the panel where it leaned against the wall, catching the first pallid moon-gleam of the night.

"If she should not come, it will be of little moment," he thought. "I have nearly enough for remembrance there."

And he went away from the painting, and took up charcoal and turned to those anatomical studies whose severity he never spared himself, and for whose perfecting he pursued the science of form even in the bodies of the dead.

From the moment that his hand touched the stylus he forgot her; for she was no more to him than a chance bird that he might have taken from its home amidst the ripe red autumn foliage and caged for a while to study its grace and colour, its longing eye and drooping wing; and then tossed up into the air again, when he had done with it, to find its way to freedom, or to fall into the fowler's snare;—what matter which?

CHAPTER III.

THE boat went on into the darkness under the willow banks, past the great Calvary, whose lanthorn was just lit and glimmered through the gloom.

She knew by heart the old familiar way; and the water was as safe to her as the broadest, straightest road at noonday. She loved it best thus; dusky: half seen; muttering on through the silence; full of the shadows of the clouds and of the boughs; black as a fresh dug grave where some ruined wall leaned over it; broken into little silvery gleams where it caught the light from a saint's shrine or a smith's forge.

By day a river is but the highway of men; it is but a public bridge betwixt the country and the town; but at night it grows mystical, silent, solitary, unreal, with the sound of the sea in its murmurings and the peace of death in its calm; at night, through its ceaseless whisperings, there always seem to arise echoes from all the voices of the drowned multitudes of the ocean whence it comes, and from all the voices of the living multitudes of the city whither it goes.

It was quite dark when she reached the landing steps; the moon was just rising above the sharp gables of the mill-house, and a lanthorn was moving up and down behind the budded boughs as Claudis Flamma went to and fro in his wood-yard.

At the jar of the boat against the steps he peered through the branches, and greeted her with a malignant reprimand. He timed her services to the minute; and here had been a full half-day of the spring weather wasted, and lost to him. He drove her indoors with sharp railing and loud reproaches; not waiting for an answer, but heaping on her the bitterest terms of reviling that his tongue could gather.

In the kitchen a little low-burning lamp lit dully the poverty and dreariness of the place, and shed its orange rays on the ill-tempered, puckered, gloomy face of the old woman Pitchou sitting at her spindle; there was a curious odour of sun-dried herbs and smoke-dried fish that made the air heavy and pungent; the great chimney yawned black and fireless; a starveling cat mewed dolorously over an empty platter; under a tawdry-coloured print of the Flight into Egypt, there hung on a nail three dead blackbirds, shot as they sang the praises of the spring; on a dresser, beside a little white basin of holy water, there lay a grey rabbit, dead likewise, with limbs broken and bleeding from the trap in which it had writhed helpless all through the previous night.

Folle-Farine

The penury, dulness, and cruelty, the hardness, barrenness, and unloveliness of this life in which she abode had never struck her with a sense so sharp as that which now fell on her; crossing the threshold of this dreary place after the shadows of the night, the beauty of the gods, the voice of praise, the eyes of Arslàn.

She came into the room, bringing with her the cool fragrance of damp earth, wet leaves, and wild flowers; the moisture of the evening was on her clothes and hair; her bare feet sparkled with the silvery spray of dew; her eyes had the look of blindness yet of lustre that the night air lends; and on her face there was a mingling of puzzled pain and of rapturous dreaming wonder, which new thought and fresh feeling had brought there to break up its darkness into light.

The old woman, twirling a flaxen thread upon her wheel, looked askance at her, and mumbled—"like mother, like child." The old man, catching up the lamp, held it against her face, and peered at her under his grey bent brows.

"A whole day wasted!" he swore for the twentieth time, in his teeth. "Beast! What hast thou to say for thyself?"

The old dogged ferocity gathered over her countenance, chasing away the softened perplexed radiance that had been newly awakened there.

"I say nothing," she answered.

"Nothing! nothing!" he echoed after her. "Then we will find a way to make thee speak. Nothing!—when three of the clock should have seen thee back hither at latest, and five hours since then have gone by without account. You have spent it in brawling and pleasure—in shame and iniquity—in vice and in violence, thou creature of sin!"

"Since you know, why ask?"

She spoke with steady contemptuous calm. She disdained to seek refuge from his fury by pleading the injuries that the townsfolk had wrought her; and of the house by the river, she would not have spoken though they had killed her. The storm of his words raged on uninterrupted.

"Five hours, five mortal hours, stolen from me, your lawful work left undone that you may riot in some secret abomination that you dare not to name. Say where you have been, what you have done, you spawn of hell, or I will wring your throat as I wring a sparrow's!"

"I have done as I chose."

She looked him full in the eyes as she spoke, with the look in her own that a bull's have when he lowers his head to the charge and attack.

"As you choose! Oh-ho! You would speak as queens speak—you—a thing less than the worm and the emmet. As you choose—you!—who have not a rag on your back, not a crust of rye bread, not a leaf of salad to eat, not a lock of hay for your bed, that is not mine—mine—mine. As you choose. You!—you thing begotten in infamy; you slave; you beggar; you sloth! You are nothing—nothing less than the blind worm that crawls in the sand. You have the devil that bred you in you, no doubt; but it shall go hard if I cannot conquer him when I bruise your body and break your will."

As he spoke he seized her to strike her; in his hand he already gripped an oak stick that he had brought in with him from his timber-yard, and he raised it to rain blows on her, expecting no other course than the dumb, passive, scornful submission with which she had hitherto accepted whatsoever he had chosen to do against her.

Folle–Farine

But in lieu of the creature, silent and stirless, who before had stood to receive his lashes as though her body were of bronze or wood, that felt not, a leonine and superb animal sprang up in full rebellion. She started out of his grasp, her lithe form springing from his seizure as a willow bough that has been bent to earth springs back, released, into the air.

She caught the staff in both her hands, wrenched it by a sudden gesture from him, and flung it away to the farther end of the chamber; then she turned on him as a hart turns brought to bay.

Her supple body was erect like a young pine; her eyes flushed with a lustre he had never seen in them; the breath came hard and fast through her dilated nostrils; her mouth curled and quivered.

"Touch me again!" she cried aloud, while her voice rang full and imperious through the stillness. "Touch me again; and by the heaven and hell you prate of, I will kill you!"

So sudden was the revolt, so sure the menace, that he old man dropped his hands and stood and gazed at her aghast and staring; not recognizing the mute, patient, dog–like thing that he had beaten at will, in this stern, fearless, splendid, terrible creature, who faced him in all the royalty of wrath, in all the passion of insurrection.

He could not tell what had altered her, what had wrought this transformation, what had changed her as by sorcery; he could not tell that what had aroused a human soul in her had been the first human voice that she had listened to in love; he could not tell that her body had grown sacred to her because a stranger had called her beautiful, and that her life for the first time had acquired a worth and dignity in her sight because one man had deemed it fair.

He could not tell; he could only see that for the first time his slave had learned somewhere, and in some wise, what freedom meant; and had escaped him. This alone he saw; and, seeing it, was startled and afraid.

She waited, watching him some moments, with cold eyes of disdain, in which a smouldering fire slept, ready to burst into an all–devouring flame.

There was not a sound in the place; the woman spinning stopped her wheel, wondering in a half–stupid, savage fashion; the lean cat ceased its cries; there was only the continual swish of the water in the sluices under the wall without, and the dull ticking of the old Black Forest clock, that kept a fitful measure of the days and nights in its cracked case of painted wood, high up, where the thyme, and the sage, and the onions hung among the twisted rafters.

Folle–Farine stood still, her left hand resting on her hip, her lips curved scornfully and close, her face full of passion, which she kept as still as the dead birds hanging on the wall; whilst all the time the tawny smoky hues of the oil–lamp were wavering with an odd fantastic play over her head and limbs.

Before this night, she had always taken every blow and stripe patiently, without vengeance, without effort, as she saw the mule and the dog, the horse and the ox, take theirs in their pathetic patience, in their noble fortitude. She had thought that such were her daily portion as such as was the daily bread she broke.

But now, since she had awakened with the smile of the gods upon her, now, she felt that sooner than endure again that indignity, that outrage, she would let her tyrant kill her in his hate, if so he chose, and cast her body to the mill–stream, moaning through the trees beneath the moon; the water, at least, would bear her with it, tranquil and undefiled, beneath the old grey walls and past the eyes of Arslàn.

There was that in her look which struck dumb the mouth, and held motionless the arm, of Claudis Flamma.

Folle–Farine

Caustic, savage, hard as his own ash staff though he was, he was for the moment paralysed and unmanned. Some vague sense of shame stirred heavily in him; some vague remembrance passed over him, that, whatsoever else she might be, she had been once borne in his daughter's bosom, and kissed by his daughter's lips, and sent to him by a dead woman's will, with a dead woman's wretchedness and loneliness as her sole birth–gifts.

He passed his hands over his eyes with a blinded gesture, staring hard at her in the dusky lamplight.

He was a strong and bitter old man, made cruel by one great agony, and groping his way savagely through a dark, hungry, superstitious, ignorant life. But in that moment he no more dared to touch her than he would have dared to tear down the leaden Christ from off its crucifix, and trample it under foot, and spit on it.

He turned away, muttering in his throat, and kicking the cat from his path, while he struck out the light with his staff.

"Get to thy den," he said, with a curse. "We are a–bed too late. To–morrow I will deal with thee."

She went without a word out of the dark kitchen and up the ladder–like stairs, up to her lair in the roof. She said nothing; it was not in her nature to threaten twice, or twice protest; but in her heart she knew that neither the next day, nor any other day, should that which Arslàn had called "beauty," be stripped and struck whilst life was in her to preserve it by death from that indignity.

From the time of her earliest infancy, she had been used to bare her shoulders to the lash, and take the stripes as food and wages; she had no more thought to resist them than the brave hound, who fears no foe on earth, has to resist his master's blows; the dull habits of a soulless bondage had been too strong on her to be lightly broken, and the resignation of the loyal beasts that were her comrades, had been the one virtue that she had learnt to follow.

But no at length she had burst her bonds, and had claimed her freedom.

She had tasted the freshness of liberty, and the blood burned like fire in her face as she remembered the patience and the shame of the years of her slavery.

There was no mirror in her little lair in the gabled eaves; all the mirror she had ever known had been that which she had shared with the water–lilies, when together she and they had leaned over the smooth dark surface of the mill–pond. But the moon streamed clearly through the one unshuttered window, a moon full and clear, and still cold; the spring–tide moon, from which the pale primroses borrow those tender hues of theirs, which never warm or grow deeper, however golden be the sun that my shine.

Its colourless crescent went sailing past the little square lattice hole in the wall; masses of gorgeous cloud, white and black, swept by in a fresh west wind; the fresh breath of a spring night chased away the heat and languor of the day; the smell of all the blossoms of the spring rose up from wood and orchard; the cool, drowsy murmuring of the mill–stream beneath was the only sound on the stillness, except when now and then there came the wild cry of a mating owl.

The moonbeams fell about her where she stood; and she looked down on her smooth skin, her glistening shoulders, her lustrous and abundant hair, on which the wavering light played and undulated. The most delicious gladness that a woman's life can know was in tumult in her, conflicting with the new and deadly sense of shame and ignorance. She learned that she was beautiful, at the same time that she awoke to the knowledge of her dumb, lifeless, slavish inferiority to all other human beings.

"Beautiful!" she muttered to herself, "only as a poppy as a snake, as a night moth are beautiful—beautiful—and without fragrance, or sweetness, or worth!"

Folle–Farine

And her heart was heavy, even amidst all its pleasure and triumph, heavy with a sense of utter ignorance and utter worthlessness.

The poppy was snapped asunder as a weed, the snake was shunned and cursed for his poison, the night moth was killed because his nature had made him dwell in the darkness; none of the three might have any fault in truth in them; all of the three might have only the livery of evil, and no more; might be innocent, and ask only to breathe and live for a little brief space in their world, which men called God's world.

Yet were they condemned by men, and slain, being what they were, although God made them.

Even so she felt, without reasoning, had it been, and would it be with herself.

CHAPTER IV.

IN the room below, the old Norman woman who did not fear her taskmaster, unbarred the shutter to let the moon shine in the room, and by its light put away her wheel and work, and cut a halved lettuce up upon a platter, with some dry bread, and ate them for her supper.

The old man knelt down before the leaden image, and joined his knotted hands, and prayed in a low, fierce, eager voice, while the heavy pendulum of the clock swung wearily to and fro.

The clock kept fitful and uncertain time; it had been so long imprisoned in the gloom there among the beams and cobwebs, and in this place life was so dull, so colourless, so torpid, that it seemed to have forgotten how time truly went, and to wake up now and then with a shudder of remembrance, in which its works ran madly down.

The old woman ended her supper, munching the lettuce–leaves thirstily in her toothless mouth, and not casting so much as a crumb of the crusts to the cat, who pitifully watched, and mutely implored, with great ravenous amber–circled eyes. Then she took her stick and crept out of the kitchen, her wooden shoes clacking loud on the bare red bricks.

"Prayer did little to keep holy the other one," she muttered; "unless, indeed, the devil heard and answered."

But Claudis Flamma for all that prayed on, entreating the mercy and guidance of heaven, whilst the gore dripped from the dead rabbit, and the silent song birds hung stiff upon the nail.

"Thou hast a good labourer," said the old woman, Pitchou, with curt significance, to her master, meeting him in the raw of the dawn, on the morrow, as he drew the bolts from his house–door. "Take heed that thou dost not drive her away, Flamma. One may beat a saddled mule safely, but hardly so a wolf's cub."

She passed out of the door as she spoke with mop and pail to wash down the paved court outside; but her words abode with her master.

He meddled no more with the wolf's club.

When Folle–Farine came down the stairs in the crisp, cool, sweet smelling spring morning that was breaking through the mists over the land and water, he motioned to her to break her fast with the cold porridge left from overnight, and looking at her from under his bent brows with a glance that had some apprehension underneath its anger, apportioned her a task for the early day with a few bitter words of command; but he molested her no farther, nor referred ever so faintly to the scene of the past night.

Folle–Farine

She ate her poor and tasteless meal in silence, and set about her appointed labour without protest. So long as she should eat his bread, so long, she said to herself, would she serve him. Thus much the pride and honesty of her nature taught her was his due.

He watched her furtively under his shaggy eyebrows. His instinct told him that this nameless, dumb, captive, desert animal, which he had bound as a beast of burden to his millwheels, had in some manner learned her strength, and would not long remain content to be thus yoked and driven. He had blinded her with the blindness of ignorance, and goaded her with the good of ignominy; but for all that, some way her bandaged eyes had sought and found the light, some way her numbed hide had thrilled and swerved beneath the barb.

"She also is a saint; let God take her!" said the old man to himself in savage irony, as he toiled amongst his mill gear and his sacks.

His heart was ever sore and in agony because his God had cheated him, letting him hold as purest and holiest among women the daughter who had betrayed him. In his way he prayed still; but chiefly his prayer was a passionate upbraiding, a cynical reproach. She—his beloved, his marvel, his choicest of maidens, his fairest and coldest of virgins,—had escaped him and duped him, and been a thing of passion and of foulness, of treachery and of lust, all the while that he had worshipped her. Therefore he hated every breathing thing; therefore he slew the birds in air song, the insects in their summer bravery, the lamb in its gambols, the rabbit in its play amidst the primroses. Therefore he cried to the God whom he still believed in, "Thou lettest that which was pure escape me to be defiled and be slaughtered, and now Thou lettest that which is vile escape me to become beautiful and free and strong!"

And now and then, in this woe of his which was so pitiful and yet so brutal, he glanced at her where she laboured amongst the unbudded vines and leafless fruit trees, and whetted a sickle on the whirling grindstone, and felt its edge, and thought to himself, "She was devil begotten. Would it not be well once and for all to rid men of her?" For, he reasoned, being thus conceived in infamy and branded from her birth upward, how should she be ever otherwise than to men a curse?

Where she went at her labours, to and fro amongst the bushes and by the glancing water, she saw the steel hook and caught his sideways gaze, and read his meditation.

She laughed, and did not fear.

Only she thought, "He shall not do it till I have been back there."

Before the day was done, thither she went.

He had kept her close since the sunrise.

Not sending her out on any of the errands to and fro the country, which had a certain pleasure to her, because she gained by them liberty and air, and the contentment of swift movement against fresh blowing winds. Nor did he send her to the town. He employed her through ten whole hours in out–door garden labour, and in fetching and carrying from his yard to his lofts, always within sight of his own quick eye, and within call of his harsh voice.

She did not revolt. She did what he bade her do swiftly and well. There was no fault to find in any of her labours.

When the last sack was carried, the last sod turned, the last burden borne, the sun was sinking, he bade her roughly go indoors and winnow last year's wheat in the store chambers till he should bid her cease.

She came and stood before him, her eyes very quiet in their look of patient strength.

Folle–Farine

"I have worked from daybreak through to sunset," she said, slowly to him. "It is enough for man and beast. The rest I claim."

Before he could reply she had leaped the low stone wall that parted the timber–yard from the orchard, and was out of sight, flying far and fast through the twilight of the boughs.

He muttered a curse, and let her go. His head drooped on his breast, his hands worked restlessly on the stone coping of the wall, his withered lips muttered in wrath.

"There is hell in her," he said to himself. "Let her go to her rightful home. There is one thing—"

"There is one thing?" echoed the old woman, hanging washed linen out to dry on the boughs of the half–bloomed almond–shrubs.

He gave a dreary, greed, miser's chuckle.

"One thing. I have made the devil work for me hard and well ten whole years through!"

"The devil!" mumbled the woman Pitchou, in contemptuous iteration. "Dost thou think the devil was ever such a fool as to work for thy wage of blows and of black bread? Why, he rules the world, they say! And how should he rule unless he paid his people well!"

Folle–Farine fled on, through the calm woodlands, through the pastures where the sleek herds dreamed their days away, through the young wheat and the springing colza, and the little fields all bright with promise of the spring, and all the sunset's wealth of golden light.

The league was but as a step to her, trained as her muscles were to speed and strength until her feet were fleet as are the doe's. When she had gained her goal then only she paused, stricken with a sudden shyness and terror of what she hardly knew.

An instinct, rather than a thought, turned her towards a little grass–hidden pool behind the granary, whose water, never stirred save by a pigeon's rosy foot, or by a timid plover's beak, was motionless and clear as any mirror.

Instinct, rather than thought, bent her head over it, and taught her eyes to seek her own reflection. It had a certain beauty that fascinated wonder in it to her with a curious indefinable attraction. For the first time in her life she had thought of it, and done such slight things as she could to make it greater. They were but few,—linen a little whiter and less coarse—the dust shaken from her scarlet sash; her bronze–hued hair burnished to richer darkness; a knot of wild narcissi in her bosom gathered with the dew on them as she came through the wood.

This was all; yet this was something; something that showed the dawn of human impulses, of womanly desires. As she looked, she blushed for her own foolishness; and, with a quick hand, cast the white wood flowers into the centre of the pool. It seemed to her now, though only a moment earlier she had gathered them, so senseless and so idle to have decked herself with their borrowed loveliness. As if for such things as these he cared!

Then, slowly, and with her head sunk, she entered his dwelling–place.

Arslàn stood with his face turned from her, bending down over a trestle of wood.

He did not hear her as she approached; she drew quite close to him and looked where she saw that he looked; down on the wooden bench. What she saw were a long falling stream of light hued hair, a grey still face, closed eyes, and naked limbs, which did not stir save when his hand moved them a little in their posture, and which then

dropped from his hold like lead.

She did not shudder nor exclaim; she only looked with quiet and incurious eyes. In this life of the poor such a sight has neither novelty nor terror.

It did not even seem strange to her to see it in such a place. He started slightly as he grew sensible of her presence, and turned, and threw a black cloth over the trestle.

"Do not look there," he said to her. "I had forgotten you. Otherwise—"

"I have looked there. It is only a dead woman."

"Only! What makes you say that?"

"I do not know. There are many—are there not?"

He looked at her in surprise seeing that this utter lack of interest or curiosity was true and not assumed; that awe, and reverence, and dread, and all emotions which rise in human hearts before the sight or memory of death were wholly absent from her.

"There are many indeed," he made answer, slowly. "Just there is the toughest problem—it is the insect life of the world; it is the clouds of human ephemeræ, begotten one summer day to die the next; it is the millions on millions of men and women born, as it were, only to be choked by the reek of cities, and then fade out to nothing; it is the numbers that kill one's dream of immortality!"

She looked wearily up at him, not comprehending, and, indeed, he had spoken to himself and not to her; she lifted up one corner of the cere cloth and gazed a little while at the dead face, the face of a girl young, and in a slight soft youthful manner, fair.

"It is Fortis, the rag-picker's daughter," she said, indifferently, and dropt back the sheltering cloth. She did not know what nor why she envied, and yet she was jealous of this white dead thing that abode there so peacefully and so happily with the caress of his touch on its calm limbs.

"Yes," he answered her. "It is his daughter. She died twenty hours ago,—of low fever, they say—famine, no doubt."

"Why do you have her here?"

She felt no sorrow for the dead girl; the girl had mocked and jibed her many a time as a dark witch devil-born; she only felt a jealous and restless hatred of her intrusion here.

"The dead sit to me often," he said, with a certain smile that had sadness and yet coldness in it.

"Why?"

"That they may tell me the secrets of life."

"Do they tell them?"

"A few;—most they keep. See,—I paint death; I must watch it to paint it. It is dreary work, you think? It is not so to me. The surgeon seeks his kind of truth; I seek mine. The man Fortis came to me on the river side last night. He

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said to me, 'You like studying the dead, they say; have my dead for a copper coin. I am starving;—and it cannot hurt her.' So I gave him the coin—though I am as poor as he—and I took the dead woman. Why do you look like that? It is nothing to you; the girl shall go to her grave when I have done with her.

She bent her head in assent. It was nothing to her; and yet it filled her with a cruel feverish jealousy, it weighed on her with a curious pain.

She did not care for the body lying there—it had been but the other day that the dead girl had shot her lips out at her in mockery and called her names from a balcony in an old ruined house as the boat drifted past it;—but there passed over her a dreary shuddering remembrance that she, likewise, might one day lie thus before him and be no more to him than this. The people said that he who studied death, brought death.

The old wistful longing that had moved her, when Marcellin had died, to lay her down in the cool water and let it take her to long sleep and to complete forgetfulness, returned to her again. Since the dead were of value to him, best, she thought, be of them, and lie here in that dumb still serenity, caressed by his touch and his regard. For, in a manner, she was jealous of this woman, as of some living rival who had, in her absence, filled her place and been of use to him and escaped his thought.

Any ghastliness or inhumanity in this search of his for the truth of his art amidst the frozen limbs and rigid muscles of a corpse, never occurred to her. To her he was like a deity; to her these poor weak shreds of broken human lives, these fragile empty vessels, whose wine of life had been spilled like water that runs to waste, seemed beyond measurement to be exalted when deemed by him of value.

She would have thought no more of grudging them in his employ and in his service than priests of Isis or of Eleusis would have begrudged the sacrificed lives of the beasts and birds that smoked upon their temple altars. To die at his will and be of use to him;—this seemed to her the most supreme glory fate could hold; and she envied the rag-picker's daughter lying there in such calm content.

"Why do you look so much at her?" he said at length. "I shall do her no harm; if I did, what would she know?"

"I was not thinking of her," she answered slowly, with a certain perplexed pain upon her face. "I was thinking I might be of more use to you if I were dead! You must not kill me, because men would hurt you for that; but if you wish, I will kill myself to-night. I have often thought of it lately."

He started at the strangeness and suddenness of the words spoken steadily and with perfect sincerity and simplicity in the dialect of the district, with no sense in their speaker of anything unusual being offered in them. His eyes tried to search the expression of her face with greater interest and curiosity than they had ever done; and they gained from their study but little.

For the innumerable emotions awakening in her were only dimly shadowed there, and had in them the confusion of all imperfect expressions. He could not tell whether here there was a great soul struggling through the bonds of an intense ignorance and stupefaction, or whether there were only before him an animal perfect, in its physical development, but mindless as any clod of earth.

He did not know how to answer her.

"Why should you think of death?" he said at last. "Is your life so bitter to you?"

She stared at him.

"Is a beaten dog's bitter? Or is a goaded ox's sweet?"

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"But you are so young,—and you are handsome, and a woman?"

She laughed a little.

"A woman! Marcellin said that."

"Well! What is there strange in saying it?"

She pointed to the corpse which the last sun-rays were brightening, till the limbs were as alabaster and the hair was as gold.

"That was a woman—a creature that is white and rose, and has yellow hair and laughs in the faces of men, and has a mother that kisses her lips, and sees the children come to play at her knees. I am not one. I am a devil, they say."

His mouth smiled with a touch of sardonic humour, whose acrimony and whose irony escaped her.

"What have you done so good, or so great, that your world should call you so?"

Her eyes clouded and lightened alternately.

"You do not believe that I am a devil?"

"How should I tell? If you covet the title claim it,—you have a right,—you are a woman!"

"Always a woman!" she muttered with disappointment and with impatience.

"Always a woman," he echoed as he pointed to the god Hermes. "And there is your creator."

"He!"

She looked rapidly and wistfully at the white-winged god.

"Yes. He made Woman; for he made her mind out of treachery and her words out of empty wind. Hephæstus made her heart, fusing for it brass and iron. Their work has worn well. It has not changed in all these ages!—But what is your history? Go and lie yonder, where you were last night, and tell me your story while I work."

She obeyed him and told him what she knew; lying there, where he had motioned her, in the shadow under the figures of the three grandsons of Chaos. He listened, and wrought on at her likeness.

The story, as she told it in her curt imperfect words, was plain enough to him, though to herself obscure. It had in some little measure a likeness to his own.

It awakened a certain compassion for her in his heart, which was rarely moved to anything like pity. For to him nature was so much and man so little, the one so majestic and so exhaustless, the other so small and so ephemeral, that human wants and human woes touched him but very slightly. His own, even at their darkest, moved him rather to self-contempt than to self-compassion, for these were evils of the body and of the senses.

As a boy he had had no ear to the wail of the frozen and famishing people wandering homeless over the waste of drifted snow, where but the night before a village had nestled in the mountain hollow; all his senses had been given in a trance of awe and rapture to the voices of the great winds sweeping down from the heights through the

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pine-forests, and of the furious seas below, gnashing and raging on the wreck-strewn sand. It was with these last that he had had kinship and communion, these endured always; but for the men they slew, what were they more in the great sum of time than forest-leaves or ocean driftwood?

And, indeed, to those who are alive to the nameless, universal, eternal soul which breathes in all the grasses of the fields, and beams in the eyes of all creatures of earth and air, and throbs in the living light of palpitating stars, and thrills through the young sap of forest trees, and stirs in the strange loves of wind-borne plants, and hums in every song of the bee, and burns in every quiver of the flame, and peoples with sentient myriads every drop of dew that gathers on a hare-bell, every bead of water that ripples in a brook—to these the mortal life of man can seem but little, save at once the fiercest and the feeblest thing that does exist; at once the most cruel and the most impotent; tyrant of direst destruction and bondsman of lowest captivity.

Hence, pity entered very little into his thoughts at any time; the perpetual tortures of life did indeed perplex him, as it perplexes every thinking creature, with wonder at the universal bitterness that taints all creation, at the universal death whereby all forms of life are nurtured, at the universal anguish of all existence which daily and nightly assails the unknown God in piteous protest at the inexorable laws of inexplicable miseries and mysteries. But because such suffering was thus universal, therefore he almost ceased to feel pity for it; of the two he pitied the beasts far more than the human kind:—the horse staggering beneath the lash in all the feebleness of hunger, lameness, and old age; the ox bleeding from the goad on the hard furrows, or stumbling through the hooting crowd, blind, footsore, and shivering, to its last home in the slaughter-house; the dog, yielding up its noble life inch by inch under the tortures of the knife, loyally licking the hand of the vivisector while he drove his probe through its quivering nerves; the unutterable hell in which all these gentle, kindly and long-suffering creatures dwelt for the pleasure or the vanity, the avarice or the brutality of men,—these he pitied perpetually, with a tenderness for them that was the softest thing in all his nature.

But when he saw men and women suffer he often smiled, not ill pleased. It seemed to him that the worst they could ever endure was only such simple retribution, such mere fair measure of all the agonies they cast broadcast.

Therefore he pitied her now for what repulsed all others from her—that she had so little apparent humanity, and that she was so like an animal in her strength and weakness, and in her ignorance of both her rights and wrongs. Therefore he pitied her; and there was that in her strange kind of beauty, in her half-savage, half-timid attitudes, in her curt, unlearned, yet picturesque speech, which attracted him. Besides, although solitude was his preference, he had been for more than two years utterly alone, his loneliness broken only by the companionship of boors, with whom he had not had one thought in common. The extreme poverty in which the latter months of his life had been passed, had excluded him from all human society, since he could have sought none without betraying his necessities. The alms-seeking visit of some man even more famished and desperate than himself, such as the rag-picker who had brought the dead girl to him for a few brass coins, had been the only relief to the endless monotony of his existence, a relief that made such change in it worse than its continuance.

In Folle-Farine for the first time in two long, bitter, colourless, hated years, there was something which aroused his interest and his curiosity, some one to whom impulse led him to speak the thoughts of his mind with little concealment. She seemed, indeed, scarcely more than a wild beast, half-tamed, inarticulate, defiant, shy, it might be even, if aroused, ferocious; but it was an animal whose eyes dilated in quickening sympathy with all his moods, and an animal whom, at a glance, he knew would, in time, crawl to him or combat for him as he chose.

He talked to her now, much on the same impulse that moves a man, long imprisoned, to converse with the spider that creeps on the floor, with the mouse that drinks from his pitcher, and makes him treat like an intelligent being the tiny flower growing blue and bright between the stones, which is all that brings life into his loneliness.

The prison door once flung open, the sunshine once streaming across the darkness, the fetters once struck off, the captive once free to go out again amongst his fellows, then—the spider is left to miss the human love that it has

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learnt, the mouse is left to die of thirst, the little blue flower is left to fade out as it may in the stillness and the gloom alone. Then they are nothing: but while the prison doors are still locked they are much.

Here the gaoler was poverty, and the prison was the world's neglect, and they who lay bound were high hopes, great aspirations, impossible dreams, immeasurable ambitions, all swathed and fettered, and straining to be free with dumb, mad force against bonds that would not break.

And in these, in their bondage, there were little patience, or sympathy, or softness, and to them, even nature itself at times looked horrible, though never so horrible, because never so despicable as humanity. Yet, still even in these an instinct of companionship abided; and this creature, with a woman's beauty, and an animal's fierceness and innocence, was in a manner welcome.

"Why were women ever made then?" she said, after awhile, following, though imperfectly, the drift of his last words, where she lay stretched, obedient to his will, under the shadow of the wall.

He smiled the smile of one who recalls some story he has heard from the raving lips of some friend fever-stricken.

"Once, long ago, in the far East, there dwelt a saint in the desert. He was content in his solitude: he was holy and at peace: the honey of the wild bee and the fruit of the wild tamarisk tree sufficed to feed him; the lions were his ministers, and the hyenas were his slaves; the eagle flew down for his blessing, and the winds and the storms were his messengers; he had killed the beast in him, and the soul alone had dominion; and day and night, upon the lonely air, he breathed the praise of God.

"Years went with him thus, and he grew old, and he said to himself, 'I have lived content; so shall I die purified, and ready for the kingdom of heaven.' For it was in the day when that wooden god, who hangs on the black cross yonder, was not a lifeless effigy as now, but a name of power and of might, adjuring, while his people smiled under torture, and died in the flame, dreaming of a land where the sun never set, and the song never ceased, and the faithful for ever were at rest. So the years, I say, went by with him, and he was glad and at peace.

"One night, when the thunder rolled and the rain-torrents fell to the door of his cave there came a wayfarer, fainting, sickly, lame, trembling with terror of the desert, and beseeching him to save her from the panthers.

"He was loth, and dreaded to accede to her prayer, for he said, 'Wheresoever a woman enters, there the content of man is dead.' But she was in dire distress, and entreated him with tears and supplications not to turn her adrift for the lightning and the lions to devour: and he felt the old human pity steal on him, and he opened the door to her, and bade her enter and take sanctuary there in God's name.

"But when she had entered, age, and sickness, and want fell from off her, her eyes grew as two stars, her lips were sweet as the rose of the desert, her limbs had the grace of the cheetah, her body had the radiance and the fragrance of frankincense on an altar of gold.

"And she laughed in his beard, and cried, saying 'Thou thinkest thou hast lived, and yet thou hast not loved? Oh sage! oh saint! oh fool, fool, fool!' then into his veins there rushed youth, and into his brain there came madness; the life he had led seemed but death, and eternity loathsome since passionless; and he stretched his arms to her and sought to embrace her, crying, 'Stay with me, though I buy thee with hell.' And she stayed.

"But when the morning broke she left him, laughing, gliding like a phantom from his arms, and out into the red sunlight, and across the desert sand, laughing, laughing, always, and mocking him whilst she beckoned. He pursued her, chasing her through the dawn, through the noon, through the night. He never found her; she had vanished as the rose of the rainbow fades out of the sky.

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"He searched for her in every city, and in every land. Some say he searches still, doomed to live on through every age, and powerless to die."

Arslàn had a certain power over words as over colour. Like all true painters, the fibre of his mind was sensuous and poetic, though the quality of passionate imagination was in him welded with a coldness and a stillness of temper born in him with his northern blood. He had dwelt much in Asiatic countries, and much of the philosophies and much of the phraseology of the East remained with him. Something even there seemed in him of the mingled asceticism and sensualism, the severe self-denial, with the voluptuous fancy of the saints who once had peopled the deserts in which he had in his turn delighted to dwell, free and lonely, scorning women and deserting man. He spoke seldom, being by nature silent; but when he did speak his language was unconsciously varied into picture-like formations.

She listened breathless, with the colour in her cheeks and the fire brooding in her eyes, her unformed mind catching the swift shadowy allegories of his tale by force of the poetic instincts in her.

No one had ever talked to her thus; and yet it seemed clear to her and beautiful, like the story which the great sunflowers told as they swayed to and fro in the light, like the song that the bright brook water sung as it purled and sparkled under the boughs.

"That is true!" she said, suddenly, at length.

"It is a saint's story in substance; it is true in spirit for all time."

Her breath came with a sharp, swift, panting sound. She was blinded with the new light that broke in on her.

"If I be a woman, shall I then be such a woman as that?"

Arslàn rested his eyes on her with a grave, half sad, half sardonic smile.

"Why not? You are the devil's daughter, you say. Of such are men's kingdom of heaven!"

She pondered long upon his answer; she could not comprehend it; she had understood the parable of his narrative, yet the passion of it had passed her by, and the evil shut in it had escaped her.

"Do, then, men love what destroys them?" she asked, slowly.

"Always!" he made answer, still with that same smile as of one who remembers hearkening to the delirious ravings round him in a madhouse through which he has walked—himself sane—in a bygone time.

"I do not want love," she said, suddenly, while her brain, half strong, half feeble, struggled to fit her thoughts to words. "I want, I want, to have power as the priest has on the people when he says, 'pray!' and they pray."

"Power!" he echoed, as the devotee echoes the name of his god. "Who does not? But do you think the woman that tempted the saint had none? If ever you reach that kingdom such power will become yours."

A proud glad exultation swept over her face for a moment. It quickly faded. She did not believe in a future. How many times had she not, since the hand of Claudis Flamma first struck her, prayed with all the passion of a child's dumb agony that the dominion of her Father's power might come to her. And the great Evil had never hearkened. He, whom all men around her feared, had made her no sign that he heard, but left her to blows, to solitude, to continual hunger, to perpetual toil.

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"I have prayed to the devil again and again and he will not hear," she muttered. "Marcellin says that he has ears for all. But for me he has none."

"He has too much to do to hear all. All the nations of the earth beseech him. Yonder man on the cross they adjure with their mouths indeed; but it is your god only whom in their hearts they worship. See how the Christ hangs his head: he is so weary of lip-service."

"But since they give the Christ so many temples, why do they raise none to the devil?"

"Chut! No man builds altars to his secret god. Look you: I will tell you another story. Once, in an Eastern land, there was a temple dedicated to all the deities of all the peoples that worshipped under the sun. There were many statues and rare ones; statues of silver and gold, of ivory, and agate, and chalcedony, and there were altars raised before all, on which every nation offered up sacrifice and burned incense before its divinity.

"Now, no nation would look at the god of another; and each people clustered about the feet of its own fetish, and glorified it, crying out, 'There is no god but this god.'

"The noise was fearful, and the feuds were many, and the poor king, whose thought it had been to erect such a temple, was confounded, and very sorrowful, and murmured, saying—'I dreamed to beget universal peace and tolerance and harmony; and lo! there come of my thoughts nothing but discord and war.'

"Then to him there came a stranger, veiled, and claiming no country, and he said, 'You were mad to dream religion could ever be peace, yet, be not disquieted; give me but a little space and I will erect an altar whereat all men shall worship, leaving their own gods.'

"The king gave him permission; and he raised up a simple stone, and on it he wrote, 'To the Secret Sin!' and, being a sorcerer, he wrote with such a curious power, that showed the inscription to the sight of each man, but blinded him whilst he gazed on it to all sight of his fellows.

"And each man forsook his god, and came and kneeled before this nameless altar, each bowing down before it, and each believing himself in solitude. The poor forsaken gods stood naked and alone; there was not one man left to worship one of them."

She listened; her eloquent eyes fixed on him, her lips parted, her fancy fantastic and full of dreams, strengthened by loneliness, and unbridled through ignorance, steeping itself in every irony and every phantasy, and every shred of knowledge that Chance, her only teacher, cast to her.

She sat thinking, full of a vague sad pity for that denied and forsaken God on the cross, by the river, such as she had never felt before; since she had always regarded him as the symbol of cruelty, of famine and of hatred; not knowing that these are only the colours which all deities alike reflect from the hearts of the peoples that worship them.

"If I had a god," she said, suddenly. "If a god cared to claim me—I would be proud of his worship everywhere."

Arslàn smiled.

"All women have a god; that is why they are at once so much weaker and so much happier than men."

"Who are their gods?"

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"Their name is legion. Innocent women make gods of their offspring, of their homes, of their housework, of their duties; and are as cruel as tigresses meanwhile to all outside the pale of their temples. Others—less innocent—make gods of their own forms and faces; of bright stones dug from the earth, of vessels of gold and silver, of purple and fine linen, of passions, and vanities, and desires; gods that they consume themselves for in their youth, and that they curse, and beat, and upbraid in the days of their age. Which of these gods will be yours?"

She thought a while, steadily and wearily.

"None of them," she said at last.

"None? What will you put in their stead, then?"

She thought gravely some moments again. Although a certain terse and even poetic utterance was the shape which her spoken imagination naturally took at all times, ignorance and solitude had made it hard for her aptly to marry her thoughts to words.

"I do not know," she said, wearily afresh. "Marcellin says that every God is deaf. He must be deaf—or very cruel. Look; everything lives in pain; and yet no God pities and makes an end of earth. I would—if I were He. Look; at dawn, the other day, I was out in the wood. I came upon a little rabbit in a trap; a little, pretty, soft, black-and-white thing, quite young. It was screaming in its horrible misery; it had been screaming all night. Its thighs were broken in the iron teeth; the trap held it tight; it could not escape, it could only scream—scream—scream. All in vain. When I had set it free it was mangled as if a wolf had gnawed it: the iron teeth had bitten through the fur, and the flesh, and the bone; it had lost so much blood and it was in so much pain, that it could not live. I laid it down in the braken, and put water to its mouth, and did what I could; but it was of no use. It had been too much hurt. It died as the sun rose; a little, harmless, shy creature, and only asked to nibble a leaf or two, or sleep in a little round hole, and run about merry and free. How can one care for a God since he lets these things be?"

Arslàn smiled as he heard.

"Child,—men care for a god only as a god means good to them. Men are heirs of heaven, they say; and, in right of their heritage, they make life hell to every living thing that dares dispute the world with them. You do not understand that,—tut! You are not human then. If you were human, you would begrudge a blade of grass to a rabbit, and arrogate to yourself a lease of immortality."

She did not understand him; but she felt that she was honoured by him, and not scorned as others scorned her, for being thus unlike humanity. It was a bitter perplexity to her, this earth on which she had been flung amidst an alien people; that she should suffer herself seemed little to her, it had become as a second nature; but the sufferings of all the innumerable tribes of creation, things of the woods, and the field, and the waters, and the sky, that toiled and sweated and were hunted, and persecuted and wrenched in torment, and finally perished to gratify the appetites or the avarice of humanity, these sufferings were horrible to her always: inexplicable, hideous, unpardonable,—a crime for which she hated God and Man.

"There is no god pitiful then?" she said, at length, "no god—not one?"

"Only those Three," he answered her, as he motioned towards the three brethren that watched above her.

"Are they your gods?"

A smile that moved her to a certain fear of him passed a moment over his mouth.

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"My gods?—No. They are the gods of youth and of age—not of manhood."

"What is yours then?"

"Mine?—a Moloch who consumes my offspring, yet in whose burning brazen hands I have put them and myself—for ever."

She looked at him in awe and in reverence. She imagined him the priest of some dark and terrible religion, for whose sake he lapsed his years in solitude and deprivation, and by whose powers he created the wondrous shapes that rose and bloomed around him.

"Those are gentler gods?" she said timidly, raising her eyes to the brethren above her. "Do you never—will you never—worship them?"

"I have ceased to worship them. In time—when the world has utterly beaten me—no doubt I shall pray to one at least of them. To that one, see, the eldest of the brethren, who holds his torch turned downwards."

"And that god is—?"

"Death!"

She was silent.

Was this god not her god also?

Had she not chosen him, and laid her life down at his feet for this man's sake?

"He must never know;—he must never know," she said again in her heart.

And Thanatos she knew would not betray her; for Thanatos keeps all the secrets of men—he, who alone of the gods reads the truths of men's souls, and smiles, and shuts them in the hollow of his hand, and lets the braggart Time fly on with careless feet, telling what lies he will to please the world a little space. Thanatos holds silence and can wait;—for him must all things ripen, and, at last, to him must all things fall.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN she left him that night, and went homeward, he trimmed his lamp and returned to his labours of casting and modelling from the body of the rag-picker's daughter. The work soon absorbed him too entirely to leave any memory with him of the living woman. He did not know—and had he known would not have heeded—that instead of going on her straight path back to Yprès she turned again, and, hidden amongst the rushes upon the bank, crouched half sitting and half kneeling, to watch him from the river-side. It was all dark and still, without; nothing came near, except now and then some hobbled mule turned out to forage for his evening meal, or some night-browsing cattle straying out of bounds. Once or twice a barge went slowly and sullenly by, its single light twinkling across the breadth of the stream, and the voice of its steersman calling huskily through the fog. A drunken peasant staggered across the fields singing snatches of a republican march that broke roughly on the silence of the night. The young lambs bleated to their mothers in the meadows, and the bells of the old clock towers in the town chimed the quarters with a *Laus Deo* in which all their metal tongues joined musically.

She remained there undisturbed amongst the long grasses and the tufts of the reeds, gazing always into the dimly-lighted interior where the pale rays of the oil flame lit up the white forms of the gods, the black shadows of

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the columns, the shapes of the wrestling lion and the strangled gladiator, the grey stiff frame and hanging hair of the dead body, and the bending figure of Arslàn as he stooped above the corpse and pursued the secret powers of his art into the hidden things of death.

To her there seemed nothing terrible in a night thus spent, in a vigil thus ghastly; it seemed to her only a part of his strength thus to make death,—men's conqueror,—his servant and his slave; she only begrudged every passionless touch that his grasp gave to those frozen and rigid limbs which he moved to and fro like so much clay; she only envied with a jealous thirst every cold caress that his hand lent to that loose and lifeless hair which he swept aside like so much flax.

He did not see; he did not know. To him she was no more than any bronze-winged, golden-eyed insect that should have floated in on a night breeze and been painted by him and been cast out again upon the darkness.

He worked more than half the night—worked until the small store of oil he possessed burned itself out, and left the hall to the feeble light of a young moon shining through dense vapours. He dropped his tools, and rose and walked to and fro on the width of the stone floor. His hands felt chilled to the bone with the contact of the dead flesh; his breathing felt oppressed with the heavy humid air that lay like ice upon his lungs.

The dead woman was nothing to him. He had not once thought of the youth that had perished in her; of the laughter that hunger had hushed for ever on the colourless lips; of the passion blushes that had died out for ever on the ashen cheeks; of the caressing hands of mother and of lover that must have wandered amongst that curling hair; of the children that should have slept on that white breast so smooth and cold beneath his hand. For these he cared nothing, and thought as little. The dead girl for him had neither sex nor story; and he had studied all phases and forms of death too long to be otherwise than familiar with them all. Yet a certain glacial despair froze his heart as he left her body, lying there in the flicker of the struggling moonbeams, and, himself, pacing to and fro in his solitude, suffered a greater bitterness than death in his doom of poverty and of obscurity.

The years of his youth had gone in fruitless labour, and the years of his manhood were gliding after them, and yet he had failed so utterly to make his mark upon his generation that he could only maintain his life by the common toil of the common hand-labourer, and, if he died on the morrow, there would not be one hand stretched out to save any one work of his creation from the housewife's fires or the lime-burner's furnace.

Cold to himself as to all others, he said bitterly in his soul, "What is Failure except Feebleness? And what is it to miss one's mark except to aim wildly and weakly?"

He told himself that harsh and inexorable truth a score of times, again and again, as he walked backward and forward in the solitude which only that one dead woman shared.

He told himself that he was a madman, a fool, who spent his lifetime in search and worship of a vain idolon. He told himself that there must be in him some radical weaknesses, some inalienable fault, that he could not in all these years find strength enough to compel the world of men to honour him. Agony overcame him as he thought and thought and thought, until he scorned himself; the supreme agony of a strong nature that for once mistrusts itself as feebleness, of a great genius that for once despairs of itself as self-deception.

Had he been the fool of his vanities all his youth upward; and had his fellow-men been only wise and clear of sight when they had denied him and refused to see excellence in any work of his hand? Almost, he told himself, it must be so.

He paused by the open casement, and looked outward, scarcely knowing what he did. The mists were heavy; the air was loaded with damp exhalations; the country was profoundly still; above-head only a few stars glimmered here and there through the haze. The peace, the silence, the obscurity were abhorrent to him; they seemed to close

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upon him, and imprison him; far away were all the colour and the strength and the strain and the glory of living; it seemed to him as though he were dead also, like the woman on the tressel yonder; dead in some deep sea grave where the weight of the waters kept him down and held his hands powerless, and shut his eyelids from all sight, while the living voices and the living footsteps of men came dimly on his ear from the world above; voices not one of which uttered his name; footsteps, not one of which paused by his tomb.

It grew horrible to him--this death-in-life, to which in the freshness of manhood he often himself condemned.

"Oh, God!" he, who believed in no God, muttered half aloud, "Let me be without love, wealth, peace, health, gladness, all my life long--let me be crippled, childless, beggared, hastened to the latest end of my days,--give me only to be honoured in my works; give me only a name that men cannot, if they wish, let die.

Whether any ear greater than man heard the prayer, who shall say? Daily and nightly, through all the generations of the world, the human creature implores from his Creator the secrets of his existence, and asks in vain. There is one answer indeed; but it is the answer of all the million races of the universe, which only cry, "We are born but to perish; is Humanity a thing so high or pure that it should not claim exemption for the universal and inexorable law?"

One mortal listener heard, hidden amongst the hollow sighing rushes, bathed in moonlight and the mists; and the impersonal passion which absorbed him found echo in this inarticulate imperfect soul, just wakened in its obscurity to the first faint meanings of its mortal life, as a nest-bird rouses in the dawn to the first faint pipe of its involuntary cry.

She barely knew what he sought, what he asked, and yet her heart ached with his desire, and shared the bitterness of his denial.

What kind of life he craved in the ages to come; what manner of remembrance he yearned for from the unborn races of men; what thing it was which he besought should be given to him in the stead of all love, all peace, all personal woes and physical delights, she did not know; the future to her had no meaning; and the immortal fame which he craved was an unknown god, of whose worship she had no comprehension; and yet she vaguely felt that what he sought was that his genius still should live when his body should be destroyed, and that those mute, motionless, majestic shapes which arose at his bidding should become characters and speak for him to all the generations of men when his own mouth should be sealed dumb in death.

This hunger of the soul which unmanned and tortured him, though the famine of the flesh had had no power to move him, thrilled her with the instinct of its greatness. This thirst of the mind, which could not slake itself in common desires or sensual satiety, or any peace and pleasure of the ordinary life of man, had likeness in it to that dim instinct which had made her nerves throb at the glories of the changing skies, and her eyes fill with tears at the sound of a bird's singing in the darkness of dawn, and her heart yearn with vain nameless longing as for some lost land, for some forgotten home, in the radiant hush of earth and air at sunrise.

He suffered as she suffered; and a sweet new-born sense of unity and of likeness stirred in her amidst the bitter pity of her soul. To her he was as a king; and yet he was powerless. To give him power she would have died a thousand deaths.

"The gods gave me life for him," she thought. "His life instead of mine? Will they forget?--Will they forget?"

And where she crouched in the gloom beneath the bulrushes she flung herself down prostrate in supplication, her face buried in the long damp river-grass.

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"Oh, Immortals!" she implored in benighted, wistful, passionate faith, "remember to give me his life and take mine. Do what you choose with me; forsake me, kill me; cast my body to fire, and my ashes to the wind; let me be trampled like the dust, and despised as the chaff; let me be bruised, beaten, nameless, hated always; let me always suffer and always be scorned; but grant me this one thing—to give him his desire!"

For unless the gods gave him greatness, she knew that vain would be the gift of life—the gift of mere length of years—which she had bought for him.

Her mind had been left blank as a desert, whilst in its solitude dreams had sprung forth wind-sown like wayside grasses, and vague desires wandered like wild doves; but although blank the soil was rich and deep and virgin.

Because she had dwelt sundered from her kind, she had learned no evil; a stainless though savage innocence had remained with her. She had been reared in hardship and inured to hunger until such pangs seemed to her scarce worth the counting, save perhaps to see if they had been borne with courage and without murmur. On her, profoundly unconscious of the meaning of any common luxury or any common comfort, the passions of natures more worldly-wise, and better aware of the empire of gold, had no hold at any moment. To toil dully and be hungry and thirsty, and fatigued and footsore, had been her daily portion. She knew nothing of the innumerable pleasures and powers that the rich command. She knew scarcely of the existence of the simplest forms of civilization: therefore she knew nothing of all that he missed through poverty; she only perceived, by an unerring instinct of apprehension, all that he gained through genius.

Her mind was profoundly ignorant; her character trained by cruelty only to endurance: yet the soil was not rank, but only unfilled, not barren, but only unsown; nature had made it generous, though fate had left it untilled; it grasped the seed of the first great idea cast to it and held it firm, until it multiplied tenfold.

The imagined danger to them which the peasants had believed to exist in her had been as a strong buckler between the true danger to her from the defilement of their companionship and example; they had cursed her as they had passed, and their curses had been her blessing. Blind instincts had always moved in her to the great and the good things of which no man had taught her in any wise.

Left to herself, and uncontaminated by humanity, because proscribed by it, she had known no teachers of any sort save the winds and the waters, the sun and the moon, the daybreak and the night, and these had breathed into her an unconscious heroism, a changeless patience, a fearless freedom, a strange tenderness and callousness united. Ignorant though she was, and abandoned to the darkness of all the superstitious and the sullen stupor amidst which her lot was cast, there was yet that in her which led her to veneration of the purpose of his life.

He desired not happiness, nor tenderness, nor bodily ease, nor sensual delight, but only this one thing—a name that should not perish from amongst the memories of men. And this desire seemed to her sublime, divine; not comprehending it, she yet revered it. She, who had seen the souls of the men around her set on a handful of copper coin, a fleece of wool, a load of fruit, a petty pilfering, a low gain in commerce, saw the greatness of a hero's sacrifice in this supreme self-negation which was willing to live unloved, and die forsaken by his kind, so that only the works of his hand might endure, and his thoughts be uttered in them when his body should be destroyed.

It is true that the great artist is as a fallen god who remembers a time when worlds arose at his breath, and at his bidding the barren lands blossomed into fruitfulness; the sorcery of the thyrsus is still his, though weakened.

The powers of lost dominion haunt his memory; the remembered glory of an eternal sun is in his eyes, and makes the light of common day seem darkness; the heart-sickness of a long exile weighs on him; incessantly he labours to overtake the mirage of a loveliness which fades as he pursues it. In the poetic creation by which the bondage of his material life is redeemed, he finds at once ecstasy and disgust, because he feels at once his strength and weakness. For him all things of earth and air, and sea and cloud, have beauty; and to his ear all voices of the forest

land and water world are audible.

He is as a god, since he can call into palpable shape dreams born of impalpable thought; as a god, since he has known the truth divested of lies, and has stood face to face with it, and been not afraid; a god thus. But a cripple, inasmuch as his hand can never fashion the shapes that his vision beholds; an alien, because he has lost what he never will find upon earth; a beast, since ever and again his passions will drag him to wallow in the filth of sensual indulgence; a slave, since oftentimes the divinity that is in him breaks and bends under the devilry that also is in him, and he obeys the instincts of vileness, and when he would fain bless the nations he curses them.

Some vague perception of this dawned on her; the sense was in her to feel the beauty of art, and to be awed by it though she could not have told what it was, nor why she cared for it. And to the man who ministered to it, who ruled it, and yet obeyed it, seemed to her ennobled with a greatness that was the grandest thing her blank and bitter fate had known. This was all wonderful, dreamful, awful to her, and in a half savage, half poetic way, she comprehended the one object of his life, and honoured it without doubt or question.

No day from that time passed without her spending the evening hours under the roof of the haunted corn–tower.

She toiled all the other hours through, from the earliest time that the first flush of day lightened the starlit skies; did not he toil too? But when the sun set she claimed her freedom; and her rulers did not dare to say her nay.

A new and wondrous and exquisite life slowly opened to her; the life of the imagination.

All these many years since the last song of Phratos had died off her ear, had been spent by her with no more culture and with no more pleasure than the mule had that she led with his load along the miry ways in the sharp winter–time. Yet even through that utter neglect, and that torpor of thought and feeling, some wild natural fancy had been astir in her, some vague sense wakened that brought to her in the rustle of leaves, in the sound of waters, in the curling breath of mists, in the white birth of lilies, in all the notes and hues of the open–air world, a mystery and a loveliness that they did not bear for any of those around her.

Now, in the words that Arslàn cast to her—often as idly and indifferently as a man casts bread to frozen birds on snow, birds that he pities and yet cares nothing for—the old religions, the old beliefs, became to her living truths and divine companions. The perplexities of the world grew little clearer to her, indeed; and the miseries of the animal creation no less hideous a mystery. The confusion of all things was in no wise clearer to her; even, it seemed, it deepened and grew more entangled. He could imbue her with neither credulity nor contentment; for he possessed neither, and despised both, as the fool's paradise of those who, having climbed a sand–hill, fancy that they have ascended Zion.

The weariness, the unrest, the desire, the contempt of such a life as his can furnish anodyne neither to itself nor any other. But such consolations and possessions—and these are limitless—as the imagination can create, he placed within her reach. Before, she had dreamed—dreamed all through the heaviness of toil and the gall of tyranny; but she had dreamed as a goatherd may upon a mist–swept hill by the western seas, while all the earth is dark, and only its dim fugitive waking sounds steal dully on the drowsy ear. But now, through the myths and parables which grew familiar to her, she dreamed almost as poets dream, bathed in the full flood of a setting sun on the wild edge of the Campagna; a light in which all common things of daily life grow glorious, and through whose rosy hues the only sound that comes is some rich dulcet bell which slowly swings in all the majesty and melody of prayer.

The land was no more mute to her, no more only a hard and cruel place of labour and of butchery, in which all creatures suffered and were cursed. All things rose to have their story and their symbol for her; Nature, remaining to her that one sure solace and immeasurable mystery which she had feebly felt it even in her childhood, was brought closer to her, and seemed fuller of compassion. All the forms and vices of the fair dead years of the world

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seemed to grow visible and audible to her, with those marvelous tales of the old heroic age which little by little he unfolded to her.

In the people around her, and in their faiths, she had no belief; she wanted a faith, and found one in all these strange sweet stories of a perished time.

She had never thought that there had been any other generation before that which was present on earth with herself; any other existence than this narrow and sordid one which encircled her home.

That men had lived who had fashioned those aërial wonders of the cathedral spires, and stained those vivid hues in its ancient casements, had been a fact too remote to be known to her, though for twelve years her eyes had gazed at them in reverence of their loveliness.

Through Arslàn the exhaustless annals of the world's history opened before her, the present ceased to matter to her in its penury and pain; for the treasury–houses of the golden past were opened to her sight.

Most of all she loved the myths of the Homeric and Hesiodic ages; and every humble and homely thing became ennobled to her and enriched, beholding it through the halo of poetry and of tradition.

When, aloft in the red and white apple–blossoms sparrows pecked and screamed, and spent the pleasant summer hours above in the flower–scented air in shrill dispute and sharp contention, she thought that she heard in their noisy notes the arrogant voice of Alcyone. When the wild hyacinths made the ground purple beneath the poplars and the pines, she saw in them the transformed loveliness of one who had died in the fulness of youth, at play, in a summer's noon, and died content, because stricken by the hand of the greatest and goodliest of all the gods, the god that loved him best. As the cattle, with their sleek red hides and curling horns, came through the fogs of the daybreak, across the level meadows, and through the deep dock–leaves they seemed to her no more the mere beasts of stall and share, but even as the milk–white herds that grazed of yore in the blest pastures.

All night, in the heart of the orchards, when the song of the nightingales rose on the stillness, it was no longer for her a little brown bird that sang to the budding fruit and her closed daisies, but was the voice of Ædon bewailing her son through the ages, or the woe of Philomela crying through the wilderness. When through the white hard brilliancy of noonday the swift swallow darted down the beams of light, she saw no longer in it an insect–hunter, a house–nesting creature, but saw the shape of Procne, slaughter–haunted, seeking rest and finding none. And when she went about her labours, hewing wood, drawing water, bearing the corn to the grindstones, leading the mules to the mill–stream, she ceased to despair. For she had heard the old glad story of the children of Zeus who dwelt so long within a herdsman's hut, nameless and dishonoured, yet lived to go back crowned to Thebes and see the beasts of the desert and the stones of the streets rise up and obey the magic of their song.

Arslàn in his day had given many evil gifts, but this one gift that he gave was pure and full of solace; this gift of the beauty of the past. Imperfect, obscure, broken in fragments, obscured by her own ignorance, it was indeed when it reached her; yet it came with a glory that time could not dim, and a consolation that ignorance could not impair.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT has come to that evil one? She walks the land as though she were a queen," the people of Yprès said to one another, watching the creature they abhorred as she went through the town to the river–stair or to the market–stall.

She seemed to them transfigured.

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A perpetual radiance shone in the dark depths of her eyes; a proud elasticity replaced the old sullen defiance of her carriage; her face had a sweet musing mystery and dreaminess on it; and when she smiled, her smile was soft, and sudden, like the smile of one who bears fair tidings in her heart unspoken.

Even those people, dull and plodding and taciturn, absorbed in their small trades or in their continual field labour, were struck by the change in her, and looked after her, and listened in a stupid wonder to the sonorous songs in an unknown tongue that rose so often to her lips as she strode amongst the summer grasses or led the laden mules through the fords.

They saw, even with their eyes purblind from hate, that she had thrown off their yoke, and had escaped from their narrow world, and was happy with some rich, mute, nameless happiness that they could neither evade nor understand.

The fall of evening always brought her to him; he let her come, finding a certain charm in that savage temper which grew so tame to him; in that fierce courage which to him was so humble; in that absolute ignorance which was yet so curiously blended with so strong a power of fancy and so quick an instinct of beauty. But he let her go again with indifference, and never tried by any word to keep her an hour later than she chose to stay. She was to him like some handsome, dangerous beast that flew at all others and crouched to himself. He had a certain pleasure in her colour and her grace; in making her great eyes glow, and seeing the light of a wakening intelligence break over all her beautiful, clouded, fierce face.

As she learned to hear more often the sound of her own voice, and to use a more varied and copious language, a rude eloquence came naturally to her; and, when her silence was broken, it was usually for some terse, vivid, picturesque utterance which had an artistic interest for him. In this simple and monotonous province, with its tedious sameness of life and its green arable country that tired a sight fed in youth on the grandeur of cloud-reaching mountains and the tumults of ice-tossing seas, this creature so utterly unlike her kind, so golden with the glow of tawny desert suns, and so strong with the liberty and the ferocity and the dormant passion and the silent force of some free forest animal, was in a way welcome.

All things were so new and strange to her; all the common knowledge was so utterly unknown to her; all other kinds of life were so unintelligible to her; and yet with all her ignorance, she had so swift a fancy, so keen an irony, so poetic an instinct, that it seemed to him when he spoke with her that he talked to some creature from another planet than his own.

He liked to make her smile; he liked to make her suffer; he liked to inflame, to wound, to charm, to tame her; he liked all these without passion, rather with curiosity than with interest, much as he had liked in the season of his boyhood to ruffle the plumage of a captured sea-bird; to see its eye sparkle, and then grow dull and flash again with pain, and then at the last turn soft with weary, wistful tenderness, having been taught at once the misery of bondage and the tyranny of human love.

She was a bronzed, bare-footed, fleet-limbed young outcast, so he told himself, with the scowl of an habitual defiance on her straight brows, and the curl of an untamable scorn upon her rich red lips, and a curious sovereignty and savageness in her dauntless carriage; and yet there was a certain nobility and melancholy in her that made her seem like one of a great and fallen race; and in her eyes there was a look repellent yet appealing, and lustrous with sleeping passion, that tempted him to wake what slumbered there.

But in these early spring-tide days he suffered her to come and go as she listed, without either persuasion or forbiddance on his own part.

The impassioned reverence which she had for the things he had created was only the untutored, unreasoning reverence of the savage or of the peasant; but it had a sweetness for him.

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He had been alone so long; and so long had passed since any cheek had flushed and any breast had heaved under the influence of any one of those strange fancies and noble stories which he had pictured on the walls of his lonely chamber. He had despaired of and had despised himself; despised his continual failure, despaired of all power to sway the souls and gain the eyes of his fellow-men. It was a little thing—a thing so little that he called himself a fool for taking any count of it; yet the hot tears that dimmed the sight of this young barbarian who was herself of no more value than the mill-dust that drifted on the breeze, the soft vague breathless awe that stole upon her as she gazed at the colourless shadows in which his genius spent itself, these were sweet to him with a sweetness that made him ashamed of his own weakness.

She had given the breath of life back to his body by an act of which he was ignorant; and now she gave back the breath of hope to his mind by a worship which he contemned even whilst he was glad of it.

Meanwhile the foul tongues of her enemies rang with loud glee over this new shame which they could cast at her.

"She has found a lover,—oh ho!—that brown wicked thing. A lover meet for her;—a man who walks abroad in the moonless nights, and plucks the mandrake, and worships the devil, and paints people in their own likeness, so that as the colour dries the life wastes!" So the women screamed after her often as she went; she nothing understanding or heeding, but lost in the dreams of her own waking imagination.

At times such words as these reached Claudis Flamma, but he turned a deaf ear to them: he had the wisdom of the world in him, though he was only an old miller who had never stirred ten leagues from his home; and whilst the devil served him well, he quarrelled not with the devil. In a grim way, it was a pleasure to him to think that the thing he hated might be accursed body and soul: he had never cared either for her body or her soul; so that the first worked for him, the last might destroy itself in its own darkness:—he had never stretched a finger to hold it back.

The pride and the honesty and the rude candour and instinctive purity of this young life of hers had been a perpetual hindrance and canker to him: begotten of evil, by all the laws of justice, in evil she should live and die. So Flamma reasoned; and to the sayings of his country-side he gave a stony ear and a stony glance.

She never once, after the first day, breathed a word to Arslàn about the treatment that she received at Yprès. It was not in her nature to complain; and she abhorred even his pity. Whatever she endured, she kept silence on it; when he asked her how her grandsire dealt with her, she always answered him—"it is well enough with me now." He cared not enough to doubt her.

And in a manner she had learned how to keep her tyrant at bay. He did not dare to lay hands on her now that her eyes had got that new fire, and her voice that serene contempt. His wolf-cub had shown her teeth, at last, at his lash; and he did not venture to sting her to revolt with too long use of scourge and chain. So she obtained more leisure; and what she did not spend in Arslàn's tower she spent in acquiring another art—she learned to read.

There was an old herb-seller in the market-place who was not so harsh to her as the others were, but who had now and then for her a rough kindly word out of gentleness to the memory of Reine Flamma. This woman was better educated than most, and could even write a little. To her Folle-Farine went.

"See here," she said: "you are feeble and I am strong. I know every nook and corner in the woods. I know a hundred rare herbs that you never find. I will bring you a basketful of them twice in each week, if you will show me how to read those signs that the people call letters."

The old woman hesitated. "It were as much as my life is worth to have you seen with me. The lads will stone my window. Still—." The wish for the rare herbs and, and the remembrance of the fatigue that would be spared to her rheumatic body by compliance, prevailed over her fears. She consented.

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Three times a week Folle-Farine rose while it was still dark, and scoured the wooded lands and the moss-green orchards and the little brooks in the meadows in search of every herb that grew. She knew those green places which had been her only kingdom and her only solace as no one else knew them; and the old dame's herb-stall was the envy and despair of the market-place.

Now and then a labourer earlier than the rest, or as a vagrant sleeping under a hedge-row, saw her going through the darkness with her green bundle on her head, or stooping amongst the water-courses ankle deep in rushes, and he crossed himself and went and told how he had seen the Evil Spirit of Yprès gathering the poison-weeds that made ships founder, and strong men droop and die, and women love unnatural and horrible things, and all manner of woe and sickness overtake those whom she hated.

Often, too, at this lonely time, before the day broke, she met Arslàn.

It was his habit to be abroad when others slept: studies of the night and its peculiar loveliness entered largely into many of his paintings; the beauty of water rippling in the moonbeam, of grey weeds blowing against the first faint red of dawn, of dark fields with sleeping cattle and folded sheep, of pools made visible by the shine of their folded white lilies, these were all things he cared to study. The earth has always most charm, and least pain, to the poet or the artist when men are hidden away under their roofs. Then they do not break its claim with either their mirth or their brutality; then the vile and revolting coarseness of their works, that blot it with so much deformity, is softened and obscured in the purple breadths of shadow and the dim tender gleam of stars; and it was then that he loved best to move abroad.

Sometimes the shepherd going to his flocks, or the housewife opening her shutter in the wayside cabin, or the huckster driving early his mule seawards to meet the fish that the night-trawlers had brought, saw them together thus, and talked of it; and said that these two, accursed of all honest folk, were after some unholy work—coming from the orgy of some witches' sabbath, or seeking some devil's root that would give them the treasured gold of misers' tombs, or the powers of life and death.

For these things are still believed by many a peasant's hearth, and whispered darkly as night closes in and the wind rises.

Wading in the shallow streams, with the breeze tossing her hair, and the dew bright on her sheaf of herbs, Folle-Farine paid thus the only wages that she could for leaning the art of letters.

One day he had said to her, half unconsciously, "If only you were not so ignorant!"—and since that day she had set herself to clear away her ignorance little by little, as she would have cleared brushwood with her hatchet.

It was the sweetest hour which she had ever known when she was able to stand before him and say, "The characters that men print are no longer riddles to me."

He praised her; and she was glad and proud.

It was love that had entered into her, but a great love, full of intense humility, of supreme self-sacrifice; a love that unconsciously led her to chasten into gentleness the fierce soul in her, and to try and seek light for the darkness of her mind.

He saw the influence he had on her, but he was careless of it.

A gipsy-child working for bread at a little mill-house in these Norman woods,—what use would be to her beauty of thought, grace of fancy, the desire begotten of knowledge, the poetry learned from the past?

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Still, he gave her these; partly because he pitied her, partly because in his exhaustion and solitude this creature, in her beauty and her submission, was welcome to him.

And yet he thought so little of her, and chiefly, when he thought of her, chose to perplex her or to wound her, that he might see her eyes dilate in wondering amaze, or her face quiver and flush, and then grow dark, with the torment of a mute and subdued pain.

She was a study to him, as was the scarlet rose in the garden ways, or the purple–breasted pigeon in the woods; he dealt with her as he would have dealt with the flower or the bird if he had wished to study them more nearly, by tearing the rose open at its core, or casting a stone at the blue–rock on the wing.

This was not cruelty in him; it was only habit—habit, and the callousness begotten by his own continual pain.

The pain as of a knife for ever thrust into the loins, of a cord for ever knotted hard about the temples, which is the daily and nightly penalty of those mad enough to believe that they have the force in them to change the sluggard appetites and the hungry cruelties of their kind into a life of high endeavour and divine desire.

He held that a man's chief passion is his destiny, and will shape his fate, roughhew his fate as circumstance or as hazard may. His chief, his sole passion was a great ambition—a passion pure as crystal, since the eminence he craved was for his creations, not for his name: yet it had failed to compel the destiny that he believed to be his own; and every hour he seemed to sink lower and lower into oblivion, further and further from the possibility of any fulfillment of his dreams; and the wasted years of his life fell away one by one into the gulf of the past, vain, unheard, unfruitful, as the frozen words on the deck of the ship of Pantagruel.

"What is the use?" he muttered, half aloud, one day before his paintings. "What is the use? If I die tomorrow they will sell for so much rubbish to heat a bakery store. It is only a mad waste of hours—waste of colour, of canvas, of labour. The world has told me so, many years. The world always knows what it wants. It selects unerringly. It must judge better than I do. The man is a fool, indeed, who presumes himself to be wiser than all his generation. If the world will have nothing to do with you, go and hang yourself—or if you fear to do that, dig a ditch or a grave for a daily meal. Give over dreams. The world knows what it wants, and if it wanted you would take you. It has brazen lungs to shout for what it needs; the lungs of a multitude. It is no use what your own voice whispers you unless those great lungs also shout before you, Hosannah."

So he spoke to himself in the bitterness of his soul, standing before his cartoons in which he had put all the genius there was in him, and which hung there unseen save by the spider that wove and the moth that flew over them.

Folle–Farine, who was that day in his chamber, looked at him with the wistful far–reaching comprehension which an unerring instinct taught her.

"Of a winter night," she said, slowly, "I have heard old Pitchou read aloud to Flamma, and she reads of their God, the one they hang everywhere on the crosses here; and the story ran that the populace scourged and nailed to death the one whom they knew afterwards, when too late, to have been the great man that they looked for, and that, being bidden to make their choice of one to save, they chose to ransom and honour a thief: one called Barabbas. Is it true?—If the world's choice were wrong once, why not twice?"

Arslàn smiled; the smile she knew so well, and which had no more warmth than the ice floes of his native seas.

"Why not twice? Why not a thousand times? A thief has the world's sympathies always. It is always the Barabbas—the trickster in talent, the forger of stolen wisdom, the bravo of political crime, the huckster of plundered thoughts, the charlatan of false art, whom the vox populi elects and sets free, and sends on his way rejoicing. 'Will ye have Christ or Barrabas?' Every generation is asked the same question, and every generation

gives the same answer; and scourges the divinity out of its midst, and finds its idol in brute force and low greed."

She only dimly comprehended, not well knowing why her words had thus roused him. She pondered awhile, then her face cleared.

"But the end?" she asked. "The dead God is the God of all these people round us now, and they have built great places in his honour, and they bow when they pass his likeness in the highway or the market place. But with Barabbas—what was the end? It seems that they loathe and despise him?"

Arslàn laughed a little.

"His end? In Syria maybe the vultures picked his bones, where they lay whitening on the plains—those times were primitive, the world was young. But in our day Barabbas lives and dies in honour, and has a tomb that stares all men in the face, setting forth his virtues, so that all who run may read. In our day Barabbas—the Barabbas of money greeds and delicate cunning, and the theft which has risen to science, and the assassination that kills souls and not bodies, and the crime that deals moral death and not material death—our Barabbas, who is crowned Fraud in the place of mailed Force—lives always in purple and fine linen, and ends in the odours of sanctity with the prayers of priests over his corpse."

He spoke with a certain fierce passion that rose in him whenever he thought of that world which had rejected him, and had accepted so many others, weaker in brain and nerve, but stronger in one sense, because more dishonest; and as he spoke he went straight to a wall on his right where a great sea of grey paper was stretched, untouched, and ready to his hand.

She would have spoken, but he made a motion to silence.

"Hush! be quiet," he said to her, almost harshly, "I have thought of something."

And he took the charcoal and swept rapidly with it over the dull blank surface till the vacancy glowed with life. A thought had kindled in him; a vision had arisen before him.

The scene around him vanished utterly from his sight. The grey stone walls, the square windows through which the fading sun rays fell, the level pastures and sullen streams, and paled skies without; all faded away as though they had existed only in a dream.

All the empty space about him became peopled with many human shapes that for him had breath and being, though no other eye could have beheld them. The old Syrian world of eighteen hundred years before arose and glowed before him. The things of his own life died away, and in their stead he saw the fierce flame of eastern suns, the gleaming range of marble palaces, the purple flush of pomegranate flowers, the deep colour of oriental robes, the soft silver of hills olive crested, the tumult of a city at high festival. And he could not rest until all he thus saw in his vision he had rendered as far as his hand could render it; and what he drew was this.

A great thirsty, heated, seething crowd; a crowd that had manhood and womanhood, age and infancy, youths and maidens, within its ranks; a crowd in whose faces every animal lust and every human passion were let loose; a crowd on which a noon sun without shadow streamed; a sun which parched and festered and engendered all corruption in the land on which it looked. This crowd was in a city, a city on whose flat roofs the myrtle and the cistus bloomed; above whose walls the plumes of olives waved; upon whose distant slopes the darkling cedar groves rose straight against the sky, and on whose loft temple plates of gold glistened against the shining heavens. This crowd had scourges, and stones, and goads in their hands; and in their midst they led one clothed in white, whose head was thorn-crowned, and whose eyes were filled with a god's pity and a man's reproach; and him they stoned, and lashed, and hooted.

Folle-Farine

And triumphant in the throng, whose choice he was, seated aloft upon men's shoulders, with a purple robe thrown on his shoulders, there sat a brawny, grinning, bloated, jibbering thing, with curled lips and savage eyes, and satyr's leer: the creature of greed, of lust, of obscenity, of brutality, of avarice, of desire. This thing the people followed, rejoicing exceedingly, content in the guide whom they had chosen, victorious in the fiend for whom they spurned a deity; crying, with wide-open throats and brazen lungs, "Barabbas!"

There was not a form in all this close-packed throng which had not a terrible irony in it, which was not in itself a symbol of some appetite or vice, for which women and men abjure the godhead in them.

A gorged drunkard lay asleep with his amphora broken beneath him, the stream of the purple wine lapped eagerly by ragged children. A money-changer had left the receipt of custom, eager to watch and shout, and a thief clutched both hands full of the forsaken coins and fled.

A miser had dropped a bag of gold, and stopped to catch at all the rolling pieces, regardless in his greed how the crowd trampled and trod on him. A mother chid and struck her little brown curly child, because he stretched his arms and turned his face towards the thorn-crowned captive.

A priest of the temple, with a blood-stained knife thrust in his girdle, dragged beside him, by the throat, a little tender lamb doomed for the sacrifice.

A dancing woman with jewels in her ears, and half naked to the waist, sounding the brazen cymbals above her head, drew a score of youths after her in Barabbas' train.

On one of the flat roof tops, reclining on purple and fine linen, looking down on the street below from the thick foliage of her citron boughs and her red Syrian roses, was an Egyptian wanton; and leaning beside her, tossing golden apples in her bosom, was a young centurion of the Roman guard, languid and laughing, with his fair chest bare to the heat, and his armour flung in a pile beside him.

And thus, in like manner, every figure bore its parable: and above all was the hard, hot, cruel, cloudless sky of blue, without one faintest mist to break its horrible serenity, whilst high in the azure ether and against the sun, an eagle and a vulture fought, locked close, and tearing at each other's breasts.

Six nights this conception occupied him. His days were not his own, he spent them in a rough mechanical labour which his strength executed while his mind was far away from it; but the nights were all his, and at the end of the sixth night the thing arose, perfect as far as his hand could perfect it; begotten by a chance and ignorant word as have been many of the greatest works the world has seen;—oaks sprung from the acorn a careless child has let fall.

When he had finished it his arm dropped to his side, he stood motionless; the red glow of the dawn lighting the depths of his sleepless eyes.

The artist, for one moment of ecstasy, realises the content of a god when, resting from his labours, he knows that those labours have borne their full fruit.

It is only for a moment; the greater the artist the more swiftly will discontent and misgiving overtake him, the more quickly will the feebleness of his execution disgust him in comparison with the splendour of his ideals; the more surely will he—though the world ring with applause for him—be enraged and derisive and impatient at himself.

But while the moment lasts it is a rapture; keen, pure, intense, surpassing every other. In it, fleeting though it be, he is blessed with a blessing that never falls on any other creature. The work of his brain and of his hand contents

him,—it is the purest joy on earth.

Arslàn knew that joy as he looked on the work for which he had given up sleep, and absorbed in which he had almost forgotten hunger and thirst and the passage of time.

He had known no rest until he had embodied the shapes that pursued him. He had scarcely spoken, barely slumbered an hour; tired out, consumed with restless fever, weak from want of sleep and neglect of food, he had wrought on, and on, and on, until the vision as he had beheld it lived there, recorded for the world that denied him.

As he looked on it he felt his own strength, and was glad: he had faith in himself, though he had faith in no other thing; he ceased to care what other fate befell him, so that only this supreme power of creation remained with him.

His lamp died out; the bell of a distant clock chimed the fourth hour of the passing night.

The day broke in the east, beyond the grey levels of the fields and plains; the dusky crimson of the dawn rose over the cool dark skies; the light of the morning stars came in and touched the visage of his fettered Christ;—all the rest was in shadow.

He himself remained motionless before it.

He knew that in it lay the best achievement, the highest utterance, the truest parable, that the genius in him had ever conceived and put forth;—and he knew too that he was as powerless to raise it to the public sight of men as though he were stretched dead beneath it; he knew that there would be none to heed whether it rotted there in the dust, or perished by moth or by flame; unless illness should befall him, and it should be taken with the rest to satisfy some petty debt of bread, or oil, or fuel.

There, on the wall, he had written with all the might there was in him, his warning to the age in which he lived, his message to future generations, his claims to men's remembrance after death: and there were none to see, none to read, none to ratify his heirship.

Great things, beautiful things, things of wisdom, things of grace, things terrible in their scorn and divine in their majesty, rose up about him, incarnated by his mind and his hand—and their doom was to fade and wither without leaving one human mind the richer for their story, one human soul the nobler for their meaning.

A year of labour, and the cartoon could be transferred to the permanent life of the canvas; and he was a master of colour, and loved to wrestle with its intricacies as the mariner struggles with the storm.

"But what were the use?" he pondered as he stood there. "What the use to be at pains to give it its full life on canvas? No man will ever look on it."

All labours of his art were dear to him, and none wearisome: yet he doubted what it would avail to commence the perpetuation of this work on canvas.

If the world were never to know that it existed, it would be as well to leave it there on its grey sea of paper, to be moved to and fro with each wind that blew through the broken rafters, and to be brushed by the wing of the owl and the flittermouse.

The door softly unclosed: he did not hear it.

Folle–Farine

Across the chamber Folle–Farine stole noiselessly. She had come and gone thus a score of times through those six nights of his vigil; and he had seldom seen her, never spoken to her; now and then she had touched him, and placed before him some simple meal of herbs and bread, and he had taken it half unconsciously, and drunk great draughts of water, and turned back again to his work, not noticing that she had brought to him what he sorely needed, and yet would not of himself have remembered.

She came to him without haste and without sound, and stood before him and looked;—looked with all her soul in her awed eyes.

The dawn was brighter now, red and hazy with curious faint gleams of radiance from the sun, that as yet had not risen. All the light there was fell on the crowd of Jerusalem.

She stood and gazed at it. She had watched it all grow gradually into being out from the chaos of dull spaces and confused lines. This art, which could call life from the dry wastes of wood and paper, and shed perpetual light where all was darkness, was ever to her an alchemy incomprehensible, immeasurable; a thing not to be criticised or questioned, ut adored in all its inscrutable and majestic mystery.

To her it could not have been more marvellous if his hand had changed the river sand to gold, or his touch had wakened the dead cornflowers to bloom afresh as living asphodels. But now for once she forgot the sorcery of the art in the terror and the pathos of the story it told; now for once she forgot, in the creation, its creator.

All she saw was the face of the Christ,—the pale bent face, in whose eyes there was a patience so perfect, a pity so infinite, a reproach that had no wrath, a scorn that had no cruelty. She had hated the Christ on the cross, because he was the God of the people she hated, and in whose name they reviled her. But this Christ moved her strangely—there, in the light, alone; betrayed and forsaken, while the crowd rushed on, lauding Barabbas.

Ignorant though she was, the profound meaning of the parable penetrated her with their ironies and with their woe—the parable of the genius rejected and the thief exalted.

She trembled and was silent; in her eyes sudden tears swam.

Arslàn turned and looked at her.

"Does it move you so?" he said, slowly. "Well—the world refuses me fame; but I do not know that the world could give me a higher tribute than yours."

"The world?" she echoed. "The world? You care for the world—you?—who have painted that?"

Arslàn did not answer her: he felt the rebuke.

He had drawn the picture in all its deadly irony, in all its pitiless truth, only himself to desire and strive for the wine streams, and the painted harlotry, and the showers of gold, and the false gods, of a worldly success.

Was he a renegade to his own religion; a sceptic of his own teaching?

It was not for the first time that the dreamy utterances of this untrained and imperfect intelligence had struck home to the imperious and mature intellect of the man of genius.

He flung his charcoal away, and looked at the sun as it rose.

Folle-Farine

"Care? I?" he answered her. "We, who call ourselves poets or painters, can see the truth and can tell it—we are prophets so far; but when we come down from our Horeb we hanker for the flesh—pots and the dancing women, and the bags of gold, like all the rest. We are no better than those we preach to; perhaps we are worse. Our eyes are set to the light; but our feet are fixed in the mire."

She did not hear him; and had she heard, would not have comprehended. Her eyes were still fastened on the picture, and the blood in her cheeks faded and glowed at every breath she drew, and in her eye there was the wistful wondering, trustful reverence, which shone in those of the child, who, breaking from his mother's arms, and regardless of the soldier's stripes, clung to the feet of the scourged captive, and there kneeled and prayed.

Without looking at her, Arslàn went out to his daily labour on the waters.

The sun had fully risen; the day was red and clear; the earth was hushed in perfect stillness, the only sounds there were came from the wings and voices of innumerable birds.

"And yet I desire nothing for myself," he thought. "I would lie down and die to-morrow, gladly, did I know that they would live."

Yet he knew that to desire a fame after death, was as idle as to desire, with a child's desire, the stars.

For the earth is crowded full with clay gods and false prophets, and fresh legions for ever arriving to carry on the old strife for supremacy; and if a man pass unknown all the time that his voice is audible, and his hand visible, through the sound and smoke of the battle, he will dream in vain of any remembrance when the gates of the grave shall have closed on him and shut him for ever from sight.

When the world was in its youth, it had leisure to treasure its recollections; even to pause and look back; and to see what flower of a fair thought, what fruit of a noble art, it might have overlooked or left down-trodden.

But now it is so old, and is so tired; it is purblind and heavy of foot; it does not notice what it destroys; it desires rest, and can find none; nothing can matter greatly to it; its dead are so many that it cannot count them; and being thus worn and dulled with age, and suffocated under the weight of its innumerable memories, it is very slow to be moved, and swift—terribly swift—to forget.

Why should it not be?

It has known the best, it has known the worst, that ever can befall it.

And the prayer that to the heart of a man seems so freshly born from his own desire, what is it on the weary ear of the world, save the same old, old cry which it has heard through all the ages, empty as the sound of the wind, and for ever—for ever—unanswered?

CHAPTER VII.

SHE was his absolute slave; and he used his influence with little scruple. Whatever he told her she believed: whatever he desired, she obeyed.

With little effort Arslàn persuaded her that to lend her beauty to the purpose of his art was a sacrifice pure and supreme; repaid, it might be, with immortality, like the immortality of the Mona Lisa. It was ever painful and even loathsome to her to give her beauty to the merciless imitations of art; it stung the dignity and purity that were inborn in the daughter of an outlawed people; it wounded, and hurt, and humiliated her. She knew that these

Folle-Farine

things were only done that one day the eyes of thousands and of tens of thousands might gaze on them; and the knowledge was hateful to her. But as she would have hewn wood or carried water for him, as she would have denied her lips the least morsel of bread that his might have fed thereon, as she would have gone straight to the river's edge at his bidding, and have stood still for the stream to swell and the floods to cover her, so she obeyed him, and let him make of her what he would.

He painted or sketched her in nearly every attitude, and rendered her the centre of innumerable stories.

He placed her form in the crowd of dancing-women that followed after Barabbas. He took her for Persephone, as for Phryne. He couched her on the bleak rocks and the sea-sands of barren Tenedos. He made her beauty burn through the purple passion vines and the roses of silence of the Venusberg. He pourtrayed her as Daphne, with all her soft human form changing and merging into the bitter roots and the poisonous leaves of the laurel that was the fruit of love. He drew her as Læna, whose venal lips yet, being purified by a perfect love, were sealed mute unto death, and for love's sake spake not.

He sketched her in a hundred shapes and for a hundred stories, taking her wild deer-like grace, and her supple mountain-bred strength, and her beauty that had all the richness and the freshness that sun and wind and rain and the dews of the nights can give, taking these as he in other years had taken the bloom of the grape, the blush of the sea-shell, the red glow of the desert reed, the fleeting glory of anything that, by its life or by its death, would minister to his dreams or his desires.

Of all the studies he made from her—he all the while cold to her as any priest of old to the bird that he seethed in its blood on his altars of sacrifice,—those which were slightest of all, yet of all pleased him best, were two twin studies which were fullest of that ruthless and unsparing irony with which in every stroke of his pencil he cut as with a knife into the humanity he dissected.

In the first, he painted her in all the warm, dreaming, palpitating slumber of youth, asleep in a field of poppies: thousands of the brilliant blossoms were crushed under her slender, pliant, folded limbs; the intense scarlet of the flowers burned everywhere, above, beneath, around her; purple shadow and amber light contended for the mastery upon her; her arms were lightly tossed above her head; her mouth smiled in her dreams; over her a butterfly flew, spreading golden wings to the sun; against her breast the great crimson cups of the flowers of sleep curled and glowed; amongst them, hiding and gibbering and glaring at her with elfin eyes, was the Red Mouse of the Brocken—the one touch of pitiless irony, of unsparing cynicism, that stole like a snake through the hush and the harmony and the innocence of repose.

In the second there was still the same attitude, the same solitude, the same rest, but the sleep was the sleep of death.

Stretched on a block of white marble, there were the same limbs, but livid and lifeless, and twisted in the contortions of a last agony: there was the same loveliness, but on it the hues of corruption had already stolen; the face was still turned upward, but the blank eyes stared hideously, and the mouth was drawn back from teeth closely clenched; upon the stone there lay a surgeon's knife and a sculptor's scalpel; between her lips the Red Mouse sat, watching, mouthing, triumphant.

All the beauty was left still, but it was left ghastly, dis-coloured, ruined,—ready for the mockery of the clay, for the violation of the knife,—ready for the feast of the blind-worm, for the narrow home dug in darkness and in dust.

And these two pictures were so alike and yet so unlike, so true to all the glory of youth, so true to all the ghastliness of death, that they were terrible; they were terrible even to the man who drew them with so unsparing and unflinching a hand.

Folle–Farine

Only to her they were not terrible, because they showed his power, because they were his will and work. She had no share in the shudder, which even he felt, at that visible presentment of corruption to which her beauty in its human perfection was destined: since it pleased him to do it, that was all she cared.

She would have given her beauty to the scourge of the populace, or to the fish of the sea, at his bidding. She had not asked him even what the Red Mouse meant.

She was content that he should deal with her in all things as he would. That such pourtrayals of her were cruel she never once thought: to her all others had been so brutal that the cruelties of Arslàn seemed soft as the south wind.

To be for one instant a thing in the least wished for and endeared was to her a miracle so wonderful, and so undreamt of, that it made her life sublime to her.

"Is that all the devil has done for you?" cried the gardener's wife from the vine–hung lattice, leaning out while the boat from Yprès went down the water–street beneath.

"It was scarcely worth while to be his offspring if he deal you no better gifts than that. He is as niggard as the saints are—the little mean beasts. Do you know that the man who paints you brings death they say—sooner or later—to every creature that lives again for him in his art?"

Folle–Farine, beneath the dense brown shadows cast from the timbers of the leaning houses, raised her eyes; the eyes smiled, and yet they had a look in them that chilled even the mocking, careless wanton temper of the woman who leaned above amongst the roses.

"I have heard it," she said, simply, as her oar broke the shadows.

"And you have no fear?"

"I have no fear."

The gardener's wife laughed aloud, the silver pins shaking in her yellow tresses.

"Well—the devil gives strength, no doubt. But I will not say much for the devil's wage. A fine office he set you—his daughter—to lend yourself to a painter's eyes like any wanton that he could hire in the market–place for a drink of wine. If the devil do no better than that for you—his own begotten,—I will cleave close to the saints and the angels henceforth, though they do take all the gems and the gold and the lace for their altars, and bestow so little in answer."

The boat had passed on with slow and even measure; no words of derision which they could cast at her had power to move her any more than the fret of the ruffling rooks had power to move the cathedral spires around which they beat with their wings the empty air.

The old dull, grey routine of perpetual toil was illumined and enriched. If any reviled her, she heard not. If any flung a stone at her, she caught it and dropped it on the grass, and went on with a glance of pardon. When the rude children ran after her footsteps bawling and mouthing, she turned and looked at them with a dreaming tenderness in her eyes that rebuked them and held them silenced and afraid. Now, she hated none; nor could she envy any. The women were welcome to their little joys of hearth and home; they were welcome to look for their lovers across the fields with smiling eyes shaded from the sun, or to beckon their infants from the dusky orchards to murmur fond foolish words and stroke the curls of flaxen down,—she begrudged them nothing: she, too, had her portion and her treasure.

Folle-Farine

Base usage cannot make base a creature that gives itself nobly, purely, with unutterable and exhaustless love; and whilst the people in the country round muttered at her for her vileness and disgrace, she, all unwitting and made proud, raised high above the reach of taunt and censure by a deep and speechless joy that rendered hunger, and labour, and pain, and brutal tasks, and jibing glances indifferent to her—nay, unfelt—went on her daily ways with a light richer than the light of the sun in her eyes, and in her step the noble freedom of one who has broken from bondage and entered into a heritage of grace.

She was proud as with the pride of one selected for some great dignity; graced with the grace that a supreme devotion and a supreme ignorance made possible to her. He was as a god to her; and she had found favour in his sight. Although by all others despised, to him she was beautiful; a thing to be desired, not abhorred; a creature not cursed for daring to have a breath of mortal life, but thought worthy of life eternal amidst the deathless children of his genius. It seemed to her so wonderful that, night and day, in her heart she praised God for it—that dim unknown God of whom no man had taught her, but whom she had vaguely grown to dream of and to honour, and to behold in the setting of the sun, and in the flux of the sea, and in the mysteries of the starlit skies.

Of shame to her in it she had no thought: a passion strong as fire in its force, pure as crystal in its unselfishness, possessed her for him, and laid her at his feet to be done with as he would.

She would have crouched to him like a dog; she would have worked for him like a slave; she would have killed herself if he had bidden her without a word of resistance or a moan of regret. To be touched by him one moment as his hand moved some wave of her hair or some fold of her drapery, as he studied an outline or changed an attitude, was to her the greatest glory life could know. To be a pleasure to him for one hour, to see his eyes tell her once, however carelessly or coldly, that she had any beauty fit for his portrayal, was to her the noblest fate that could befall her.

To him she was no more than the cluster of grapes to the wayfarer, who brushes their bloom off and steals their sweetness, then casts them down to be trampled on, by whosoever the next comer be. But to this creature, who had no guide except her instincts of passion and sacrifice, who had no guard except the pure scorn that had kept her from the meanness and coarseness of the vices around her, this was unintelligible, unsuspected; and if she had understood it, she would have accepted it mutely, in that abject humility which had bent the dauntless temper in her to his will.

To be of use to him,—to be held of any worth to him,—to have his eyes find any loveliness to study in her,—to be to him only as the flower which he broke from the stem to copy its bloom on his canvas, and then cast out on the sand to wither as it would,—this, even this, seemed to her the highest fate to which she could have had election.

That he only borrowed the colour of her cheek and the outline of her limbs, as he had borrowed a thousand times ere then the venal charms of the dancing-women of taverns and play-houses, and the hireling graces of the wanton who strayed in the public ways, was a knowledge that never touched her with its indignity. To her his art was a religion, supreme, passionless, eternal, whose sacrificial fires ennobled and consecrated all that they consumed.

"Though I shall die as the leaf dies in my body, yet I shall live for ever embalmed amidst the beauty of his thoughts," she told herself perpetually, and all her life became transfigured.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE day, while the year was still young, though the first thunder-heats of the early summer had come, he asked her to go with him to the sea ere the sun set.

Folle-Farine

"The sea!" she repeated. "What is that?"

"Is it possible that you do not know?" he asked, in utter wonder—"you who have lived all these years within two leagues of it!"

"I have heard of it," she said, simply; "but I cannot tell what it is."

"The man has never lived yet who could tell—in fit language. Poseidon is the only one of all the old gods of Hellas who still lives and reigns. We will go to his kingdom. Sight is better than speech."

So he took her along the slow course of the inland water through the osiers and the willows, down to where the slow river-ripples would meet the swift salt waves.

It was true what she had said, that she had never even beheld the sea. Her errands had always been to and fro between the mill and the quay in the town, no farther; she had exchanged so little communion with the people of the district that she knew nothing of whither the barges went that took away the corn and fruit, nor whence the big boats came that brought the coals and fish; when she had a little space of leisure to herself she had wandered indeed but never so far as the shore; almost always in the woods and the meadows, never where the river, widening as it ran, spread out between level banks, until, touching the sea, it became a broad estuary.

She had heard speak of the sea, indeed, as of some great highway on which men travelled incessantly to and fro; as of something unintelligible, remote, belonging to others, indifferent and alien to herself.

When she had thought of it at all, she had only thought of it as probably some wide canal black with mud and dust, and edged by dull pathways slippery and toilsome, along which tired horses towed heavy burdens all day long, that men and women might be thereby enriched.

Of the beauty and the mystery, of the infinite sweetness and solace of the sea, she knew no more than she knew of any loveliness or of any pity in human nature.

A few leagues off, where the stream widened into a bay and was hemmed in by sand-banks in lieu of its flat green pastures, there was a little fishing town, built under the great curve of beetling cliffs, and busy with all the stir and noise of mart and wharf. There the sea was crowded with many masts and ruddy with red-brown canvas; and the air was full of the salt scent of rotting sea-weed, of stiff sails spread out to dry, of great shoals of fish poured out upon the beach, and of dusky noisome cabins, foul-smelling, and made hideous by fish-wives' oaths, and the death-screams of scalded shell-fish.

He did not take her thither.

He took her half-way down the stream whilst it was still sleepily beautiful with pale grey willows and green meadow land, and acres of silvery reeds, and here and there some quaint old steeple or some apple-hidden roofs on either side its banks. But midway he left the water and stretched out across the country, she beside him, moving with that rapid, lithe, and stag-like ease of limbs which have never known restraint.

Some few people passed them on their way; a child, taking the cliff-road to his home under the rocks, with a big blue pitcher in his hands; an old man, who had a fishing-brig at sea and toiled up there to look for her, with a grey dog at his heels, and the smell of salt-water in his clothes; a goat-herd, clad in rough skins wool outward, and killing birds with stones as he went; a woman, with a blue skirt and scarlet hose, and a bundle of boughs and brambles on her head, with here and there a stray winter berry glowing red through the tender green leafage; all these looked askance at them, and the goat-herd muttered a curse, and the woman a prayer, and gave them wide way through the stunted furze, for they were both of them accursed in the people's sight.

Folle-Farine

"You find it hard to live apart from your kind?" he asked her suddenly as they gained the fields where no human habitation at all was left, and over which hung, in the radiance of the sunlit skies, the pale crescent of a week-old moon.

"To live apart?"—she did not understand.

"Yes—like this. To see no child smile, to hear no woman gossip, no man exchange good morrow with you. Is it any sorrow to you?"

Her eyes flashed fiercely.

"What does it matter? It is best so. One is free. One owes nothing—not so much as a fair word. That is well."

"I think it is well—if one is strong enough for it. It wants strength."

"I am strong."

She spoke quietly, with the firm and simple consciousness of force, which has as little of vanity in it as it has of weakness.

"To live apart," she said, after a pause, in which he had not answered. "I know what you mean—now. It is well—it is well with those men you tell me of when the world was young, who left all other men and went to live with the watercourse and the wild dove, and the rose and the palm, and the great yellow desert; was it not well?"

"So well with them that men worshipped them for it. But there is no such worship now. The cities are the kingdom of heaven; not the deserts; and he who hankers for the wilderness is stoned in the streets as a fool. And how should it be well with you, who have neither wild rose nor wild dove for compensation, but are only beaten and hooted, and hated and despised?"

Her eyes glittered, and her voice was hard and fierce as she answered him.

"See here.—There is a pretty golden thing in the west road of the town who fears me horribly, Yvonne, the pottery painter's daughter. She says to her father at evening, 'I must go read the offices to old Mother Margot;' and he says, 'Go, my daughter; piety and reverence of age are twin blossoms off one stem of a tree that grows at the right hand of God in Paradise.'

"And she goes; not to Margot, but to a little booth where there is dancing and singing and brawling, that her father has forbade her to go near by a league.

"There is an old man at the corner of the market-place, Ryno, the fruit seller, who says that I am accursed, and spits out at me as I pass. He says to the people as they go by his stall, 'See these peaches, they are smooth and rosy as a child's cheek; sweet and firm; not their like betwixt this and Paris. I will let you have them cheap, so cheap; I need sorely to send money to my sick son in Africa.' And the people pay, greedily; and when the peaches are home they see a little black speck in each of them, and all save their bloom is rottenness.

"There is a woman who makes lace at the windows of the house against the fourth gate; Marion Silvis; she is white and sleek, and blue-eyed; the priests honour her, and she never misses a mass. She has an old blind mother whom she leaves in her room. She goes out softly at nightfall, and she slips to a wine-shop full of soldiers, and her lovers kiss her on the mouth. And the old mother sits moaning and hungry at home; and a night ago she was badly burned, being alone. Now—is it well or not to be hated of those people? If I had loved them, and they me, I might have become a liar, and have thieved, and have let men kiss me, likewise."

Folle-Farine

She spoke with a thoughtful and fierce earnestness, not witting of the caustic in her own words, meaning simply what she said, and classing the kisses of men as some sort of weakness and vileness, like those of a theft and a lie; as she had come to do out of a curious, proud, true instinct that was in her, and not surely from the teaching of any creature.

She in her way loved the man who walked beside her; but it was a love of which she was wholly unconscious; a pity, a sorrow, a reverence, a cultus, a deification, all combined, that had little or nothing in common with the loves of human kind, and which still left her speech as free, and her glance as fearless, with him as with any other.

He knew that; and he did not care to change it; it was singular, and gave her half her charm of savagery and innocence commingled. He answered her merely, with a smile:

"You are only a barbarian; how should you understand that the attractions of civilization lie in its multiplications of the forms of vice? Men would not bear its yoke an hour if it did not in return facilitate their sins. You are an outcast from it;—so you have kept your hands honest and your lips pure. You may be right to be thankful—I would not pretend to decide."

"At least—I would not be as they are," she answered him with a curl of the mouth, and a gleam in her eyes: the pride of the old nomadic tribes, whose blood was in her, asserting itself against the claimed superiority of the tamed and hearth-bound races—blood that ran free and fearless to the measure of boundless winds and rushing waters; that made the forest and the plain, the dawn and the darkness, the flight of the wild roe and the hiding-place of the wood-pigeon, dearer than any roof-tree, sweeter than any nuptial bed.

She had left the old life so long;—so long that even her memories of it were dim as dreams, and its language had died off her lips in all save the broken catches of her songs; but the impulses of it were in her, vivid and ineradicable, and the scorn with which the cowed and timid races of shed and of homestead regarded her, she, the daughter of Taric, gave back to them in tenfold measure.

"I would not be as they are!" she repeated. "To sit and spin; to watch their soup pot boil; to spend their days under a close roof; to shut the stars out, and cover themselves in their beds, as swine do with their straw in the sty; to huddle altogether in thousands, fearing to do what they will, lest the tongue of their neighbour wag evil of it; to cheat a little and steal a little, and lie always when the false word serves them, and to mutter to themselves, 'God will wash us free of our sins,' and then to go and sin again stealthily, thinking men will not see and sure that their God will give them a quittance;—that is their life. I would not be as they are."

And her spirits rose, and her earliest life in the Liébana seemed to flash on her for one moment clear and bright through the veil of the weary years, and she walked erect and swiftly through the gorse, singing by his side the bold burden of one of the old sweet songs.

And for the first time the thought passed over Arslàn,

"This tameless wild doe would crouch like a spaniel, and be yoked as a beast of burden,—if I chose."

Whether or not he chose he was not sure.

She was beautiful in her way; barbaric, dauntless, innocent, savage; he cared to hurt, to please, to arouse, to study, to pourtray her; but to seek love from her he did not care.

And yet she was most lovely in her own wild fashion, like a young desert mare, or a seagull on the wing; and he wondered to himself that he cared for her no more, as he moved beside her through the thickets of the gorse and against the strong winds blowing from the sea.

Folle-Farine

There was so little passion in him.

He had tossed aside the hair of dead women and pourtrayed the limbs and the features of living ones till that ruthless pursuit had brought its own penalty with it; and the beauty of women scarcely moved him more than did the plumage of a bird or the contour of a marble. His senses were drugged, and his heart was dead; it was well that it should be so, he had taught himself to desire it; and yet—.

As they left the cliff road for the pathless downs that led toward the summit of the rocks, they passed by a little way-side hut, red with climbing creepers, and all alone on the sandy soil, like the little nest of a yellowhammer.

Through its unclosed shutter the light of the sun streamed on to the pathway; the interior was visible. It was very poor; a floor of mud, a couch of rushes; a hearth on which a few dry sticks were burning; walls lichen-covered and dropping moisture. Before the sticks, kneeling and trying to take them burn up more brightly to warm the one black pot that hung above them, was a poor peasant girl, and above her leaned a man who was her lover, a fisher of the coast, as poor, as hardy, and as simple as herself.

In the man's eyes the impatience of love was shining, and as she lifted her head, after breathing with all her strength on the smoking sticks, he bent and drew her in his arms and kissed her rosy mouth and the white lids that drooped over her blue smiling northern eyes. She let the fuel lie still to blaze or smoulder as it would, and leaned her head against him, and laughed softly at his eagerness. Arslàn glanced at them as he passed.

"Poor brutes!" he muttered. "Yet how happy they are! It must be well to be so easily content, and to find a ready-made fool's paradise in a woman's lips."

Folle-Farine, hearing him, paused, and looked also. She trembled suddenly, and walked on in silence.

A new light broke on her, and dazzled her, and made her afraid: this forest-born creature, who had never known what fear was.

The ground ascended as it stretched seaward, but on it there were only wide dull fields of colza or of grass lying, sickly and burning, under the fire of the late afternoon sun.

The slope was too gradual to break their monotony.

Above them was the cloudless weary blue; below them was the faint parched green; other colour there was none; one little dusky panting bird flew by pursued by a kite; that was the only change.

She asked him no questions; she walked mutely and patiently by his side; she hated the dull heat, the colourless waste, the hard scorch of the air, the dreary changelessness of the scene. But she did not say so. He had chosen to come to them.

A league onward the fields were merged into a heath, uncultivated and covered with short prickly furze; on the brown earth between the stunted bushes a few goats were cropping the burnt-up grasses. Here the slope grew sharper, and the earth seemed to rise up between the sky and them, steep and barren as a house-roof.

Once he asked her—

"Are you tired?"

"She shook her head.

Folle-Farine

Her feet ached, and her heart throbbed; her limbs were heavy like lead in the heat and the toil. But she did not tell him so. She would have dropped dead from exhaustion rather than have confessed to him any weakness.

He took the denial as it was given, and pressed onward up the ascent.

The sun was slanting towards the west; the skies seemed like brass; the air was sharp, yet scorching; the dull brown earth still rose up before them like a wall; they climbed it slowly, and painfully, their hands and their teeth filled with its dust, which drifted in a cloud before them. He bade her close her eyes, and she obeyed him. He stretched his arm out and drew her after him up the ascent which was slippery from drought and prickly from the stunted growth of furze.

On the summit he stood still and released her.

"Now look."

She opened her eyes with the startled half-questioning stare of one led out from utter darkness into a full and sudden light.

Then with a great cry, she sank down on the rock, trembling, weeping, laughing, stretching out her arms to the new glory that met her sight, dumb with its grandeur, delirious with its delight.

For what she saw was the sea.

Before her dazzled sight all its beauty stretched, the blueness of the waters meeting the blueness of the skies; radiant with all the marvels of its countless hues; softly stirred by a low wind that sighed across it; bathed in a glow of gold that streamed on it from the westward; rolling from north to south in slow sonorous measure, filling the silent air with the ceaseless melody of its wondrous voice.

The lustre of the sunset beamed upon it; the cool fresh smell of its water shot like new life through all the scorch and stupor of the day; its white foam curled and broke on the brown curving rocks and wooded inlets of the shores; innumerable birds, that gleamed like silver, floated or flew above its surface; all was still, still as death, save only for the endless movement of those white swift wings and the murmur of the waves, in which all meaner and harsher sounds of earth seemed lost and hushed to slumber and to silence.

The sea alone reigned, as it reigned in the young years of the earth when men were not; as, may be, it will be its turn to reign again in the years to come, when men and all their works shall have passed away and be no more seen nor any more remembered.

Arslàn watched her in silence.

He was glad that it should awe and move her thus. The sea was the only thing for which he cared; or which had any power over him. In the northern winters of his youth he had known the ocean, in one wild night's work, undo all that men had done to check and rule it, and burst through all the barriers that they had raised against it, and throw down the stones of the altar and quench the fires of the hearth, and sweep through the fold and the byre, and flood the cradle of the child and the grave of the grandsire.

He had seen its storms wash away at one blow the corn harvests of years, and gather in the sheep from the hills, and take the life of the shepherd with the life of the flock. He had seen it claim lovers locked in each other's arms, and toss the fair curls of the first-born as it tossed the riband weeds of its deeps. And he had felt small pity; it had rather given him a certain sense of rejoicing and triumph to see the water laugh to scorn those who were so wise in their own conceit, and bind beneath its chains those who held themselves masters over all beasts of the field

and birds of the air.

Other men dreaded the sea and cursed it; but he in his way loved it almost with passion, and could he have chosen the manner of his death would have desired that it should be by the sea and through the sea; a death cold and serene and dreamily voluptuous; a death on which no woman should look and in which no man should have share.

He watched her now for some time without speaking. When the first paroxysm of her emotion had exhausted itself, she stood motionless, her figure like a statue of bronze against the sun, her head sunk upon her breast, her arms outstretched as though beseeching that wondrous brightness which she saw to take her to itself and made her one with it. Her whole attitude expressed an unutterable worship. She was like one who for the first time hears of God.

"What is it you feel?" he asked her suddenly. He knew without asking; but he had made it his custom to dissect all her joys and sufferings with little heed whether he thus added to either.

At the sound of his voice she started, and a shiver shook her as she answered him slowly, without withdrawing her gaze from the waters,

"It has been there always—always—so near me?"

"Before the land, the sea was."

"And I never knew!—"

Her head dropped on her breast; great tears rolled silently down her cheeks; her arms fell to her sides; she shivered again and sighed. She knew all that she had lost—this is the greatest grief that life holds.

"You never knew," he made answer. "There was only a sand-hill between you and all this glory; but the sand-hill was enough. Many people never climb theirs all their lives long."

The words and their meaning escaped her.

She had for once no remembrance of him; nor any other sense save of this surpassing wonder that had thus burst on her—this miracle that had been near her for so long, yet of which she had never in all her visions dreamed.

She was quite silent; sunk there on her knees, motionless, gazing straight, with eyes unblenching, at the light.

There was no sound near them, nor was there anything in sight except where above against the deepest azure of the sky two curlews were circling around each other, and in the distance a single ship was gliding, with sails silvered by the sun. All signs of human life lay far behind; severed from them by those steep scorched slopes swept only by the plovers and the bees. And all the while she looked slow tears gathered in her eyes and fell, and the loud hard beating of her heart was audible in the hushed stillness of the upper air.

He waited awhile: then he spoke to her.

"Since it pains you, come away."

A great sob shuddered through her.

"Give me that pain," she muttered, "sooner than any joy. Pain? Pain? —it is life, heaven, liberty!"

Folle-Farine

For suddenly those words which she had heard spoken around her, and which had been to her like the mutterings of the deaf and the dumb, became real to her with a thousand meanings.

Men use them unconsciously, figuring by them all the marvels of their existence, all the agonies of their emotions, all the mysteries of their pangs and passions, for which they have no other names; and even so she used them now in the tumult of awe, in the torture of joy, that possessed her.

Arslàn looked at her, and let her be.

Passionless himself, except in the pursuit of his art, the passions of this untrained and intense nature had interest for him—the cold interest of analysis and dissection, not of sympathy. As he portrayed her physical beauty scarcely moved by its flush of colour and grace of mould, so he pursued the development of her mind searchingly, but with little pity and little tenderness.

The seagulls were lost in the heights of the air; the ship sailed on into the light till the last gleam of its canvas vanished; the sun sank westward lower and lower till it glowed in a globe of flame upon the edge of the water; she never moved; standing there on the summit of the cliff, with her head drooped upon her breast, her form thrown out dark and motionless against the gold of the western sky, on her face still that look of one who worships with intense honour and passionate faith an unknown God.

The sun sank entirely, leaving only a trail of flame across the heavens; the waters grew grey and purple in the shadows; one boat, black against the crimson reflections of the west, swept on swiftly with the in-rushing tide; the wind rose and blew long curls of seaweed on the rocks; the shores of the bay were dimmed in a heavy mist, through which the lights of the little hamlets dimly glowed, and the distant voices of fishermen calling to each other as they drew in their deep-sea nets came faint and weird-like.

Still she never moved; the sea at her feet seemed to magnetize her, and draw her to it with some unseen power.

She started again as Arslàn spoke.

"This is but a land-locked bay," he said, with some contempt; he who had seen the white aurora rise over the untraversed ocean of an Arctic world, "and it lies quiet enough there, like a duck pool, in the twilight. Tell me, why does it move you so?"

She gave a heavy, stifled sigh.

"It looks so free. And I—"

On her there had vaguely come of late the feeling that she had only exchanged one tyranny for another; that, leaving the dominion of ignorance, she had only entered upon a slavery still sterner and more binding. In every vein of her body there leaped and flashed and lived the old free blood of an ever-lawless, of an often-criminal, race, yet, though with its instincts of rebellion so strong in her, making her break all bonds and tear off all yokes, she was the slave of a slave—since she was the slave of love. This she did not know; but its weight was upon her.

He heard with a certain pity. He was bound himself by the chain of poverty and of the world's forgetfulness, and he had not even so much poor freedom as lies in the gilded imprisonment of fame.

"It is not free," was all he answered her. "It obeys the laws that govern it, and cannot evade them. Its flux and reflux are not liberty, but obedience—just such obedience to natural law as our life shows when it springs into being and slowly wears itself out and then perishes in its human form to live again in the motes of the air and the blades of the grass. There is no such thing as liberty; men have dreamed of it, but nature has never accorded it."

Folle-Farine

The words passed coldly over her: with her senses steeped in that radiance of light, that divinity of calm, that breadth of vision, that trance of awe, the chilliness and the bitterness of fact recoiled from off her intelligence, unabsorbed, as the cold rain-drops roll off a rose.

"It is so free!" she murmured, regardless of his words, "if I had only known—I would have asked it to take me so long ago. To float dead on it—as that bird floats—it would be so quiet there: and it would not fling me back, I think. It would have pity."

Her voice was dreamy and gentle. The softness of an indescribable desire was in it.

"Is it too late?" he said, with that cruelty which characterised all his words to her. "Can you have grown in love with life?"

"You live," she said, simply.

He was silent; the brief innocent words rebuked him. They said, so clearly yet so unconsciously, the influence that his life already had gained on hers, whilst hers was to him no more than the brown seaweed was to the rock on which the waters tossed it.

"Let us go down!" he said, abruptly, at length, "it grows late."

With one longing backward look she obeyed him, moving like a creature in a dream, as she went away, along the side of the cliff through the shadows, while the goats lying down for their night's rest started and fled at the human footsteps.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE evening, a little later, he met her in the fields on the same spot where Marcellin first had seen her as a child amongst the scarlet blaze of the poppies.

The lands were all yellow with saffron and emerald with the young corn; she balanced on her head a great brass jar; the red girdle glowed about her waist as she moved: the wind stirred the folds of her garments; her feet were buried in the shining grass; clouds tawny and purple were behind her; she looked like some Moorish phantom seen in a dream under a sky of Spain.

He paused and gazed at her with eyes half content, half cold.

She was of a beauty so uncommon, so strange, and all that was his for his art:—a great artist, whether in words, in melody, or in colour, is always cruel, or at the least seems so, for all things that live under the sun are to him created only to minister to his one inexorable passion.

Art is so vast, and human life is so little. It is to him only supremely just that the insect of an hour should be sacrificed to the infinite and eternal truth which must endure until the heavens themselves shall wither as a scroll that is held in a flame. It might have seemed to Arslàn base to turn her ignorance, and submission to his will, for the gratification of his amorous passions; but to make these serve the art to which he had himself abandoned every earthly good was in his sight justified, as the death-agonies of the youth whom they decked with roses and slew in sacrifice to the sun, were in the sight of the Mexican nation.

The youth whom the Mexicans slew, on the high hill of the city, with his face to the west was always the choicest and the noblest of all the opening flower of their manhood: for it was his fate to be called to enter into the realms

Folle-Farine

of eternal light, and to dwell face to face with the unbearable brightness without whose rays the universe would have perished frozen in perpetual night. So the artist, who is true to his art, regards every human sacrifice that he renders up to it; how can he feel pity for a thing which perishes to feed a flame that he deems the life of the world?

The steel that he draws out from the severed heart of his victim he is ready to plunge into his own vitals; no other religion can vaunt as much of its priests.

"What are you thinking of to-night?" he asked her where she came through the fields by the course of a little flower-sown brook, fringed with tall bulrushes and waving willow-stems.

She lifted her eyelids with a dreamy and wistful regard.

"I was thinking,—I wonder what the reed felt that you told me of,—the one reed that a god chose from all its millions by the waterside and cut down to make into a flute."

"Ah?—you see there are no reeds that make music now—a-days; the reeds are only good to be woven into kreens for the fruits and the fish of the market."

"That is not the fault of the reeds?"

"Not that I know; it is the fault of men most likely who find the chink of coin in barter sweeter music than the song of the syrinx. But what do you think the reed felt then?—pain to be so sharply severed from its fellows?"

"No—or the god would not have chosen it."

"What then?"

A troubled sigh parted her lips; these old fables were fairest truths to her, and gave a grace to every humblest thing that the sun shone on, or the waters begat from their foam, or the winds blew with their breath into the little life of a day.

"I was trying to think. But I cannot be sure. These reeds have forgotten. They have lost their soul. They want nothing but to feed among the sand and the mud, and grow in millions together, and shelter the toads and the newts,—there is not a note of music in them all—except when the wind rises and makes them sigh, and then they remember that long, long ago, the breath of a great god was in them."

Arslàn looked at her where she stood; her eyes resting on the reeds, and the brook at her feet; the crimson heat of the evening all about her, on the brazen amphora, on the red girdle on her loins, on the thoughtful parted lips, on the proud bent brows above which a golden butterfly floated as above the brows of Psyche.

He smiled; the smile that was so cold to her.

"Look: away over the fields, there comes a peasant with a sickle; he comes to mow down the reeds to make a bed for his cattle. If he heard you, he would think you mad."

"They have thought me many things worse. What matter?"

"Nothing at all;—that I know. But you seem to envy that reed—so long ago—that was chosen?"

"Who would not?"

Folle-Farine

"Are you so sure? The life of the reed was always pleasant;—dancing there in the light, playing with the shadows, blowing in the winds; with the cool waters all about it all day long, and the yellow daffodils and the blue bell flowers for its brethren."

"Nay:—how do you know?"

Her voice was low, and thrilled with a curious eager pain.

"How do you know?" she murmured. "Rather,—it was born in the sands, amongst the stones, of the chance winds, of the stray germs,—no one asking, no one heeding, brought by a sunbeam, spat out by a toad—no one caring where it dropped. Rather,—it grew there by the river, and such millions of reeds grew with it, that neither waters nor winds could care for a thing so common and worthless, but the very snakes twisting in and out despised it, and thrust the arrows of their tongues through it in scorn. And then—I think I see!—the great god walked by the edge of the river, and he mused on a gift to give man, on a joy that should be a joy on the earth for ever; and he passed by the lily white as snow, by the thyme that fed the bees, by the gold heart in the arum flower, by the orange flame of the tall sand-rush, by all the great water-blossoms which the sun kissed, and the swallows loved, and he came to the one little reed pierced with the snakes' tongues, and all alone amidst millions. Then he took it up, and cut it to the root, and killed it;—killed it as a reed—but breathed into it a song audible and beautiful to all the ears of men. Was that death to the reed?—or life? Would a thousand summers of life by the waterside have been worth that one thrill of song when a god first spoke through it?"

Her face lightened with a radiance to which the passion of her words was pale and poor; the vibrations of her voice grew sonorous and changing as the sounds of music itself; her eyes beamed through unshed tears as planets through the rain.

She spoke of the reed and the god:—she thought of herself and of him.

He was silent.

The reaper came nearer to them through the rosy haze of the evening, and cast a malignant eye upon them, and bent his back and drew the curve of his hook through the rushes.

Arslàn watched the sweep of the steel.

"The reeds only fall now for the market." He said, with a smile that was cruel. "And the gods are all dead—Folle-Farine."

She did not understand; but her face lost its colour, her heart sunk, her lips closed. She went on, treading down the long coils of the wild strawberries and the heavy grasses wet with the dew.

The glow from the west died, a young moon rose, the fields and the skies grew dark.

He looked, and let her go;—alone.

In this stray offspring of a cruel chance, Hermes, pitiful for once, had given him a reed through which all sweetest and noblest music might have been breathed.

But Hermes, when he gives such a gift, leaves the mortal on whom he bestows it to make or to miss the music as he may; and to Arslàn, his reed was but a reed as the rest were—a thing that bloomed for a summer-eve—a thing of the stagnant water and drifting sand—a thing that lived by the breath of the wind—a thing that a man should cut down and weave in a crown for a day, and then cast aside on the stream, and neither regret nor in anywise

remember—a reed of the river, as the rest were.

BOOK V. "If I love thee, what is that to thee?"

CHAPTER I.

"ONLY a little gold!" he thought, one day, looking on the Barabbas cartoon. "As much as I have flung away on a dancing–woman, or the dancing–woman on the jewel for her breast. Only a little gold, and I should be free; and with me these."

The thought escaped him unawares in broken words, one day, when he thought himself alone.

This was a perpetual torture to him, this captivity and penury, this aimlessness and fruitlessness, in which his years were drifting, spent in the dull bodily labour that any brainless human brute could execute as well as he, consuming his days in physical fatigue in order that a roof he despised might cover him, and a bread which was bitter as gall to him might be his to eat; knowing all the while that the real strength which he possessed, the real power that could give him an empire amidst his fellows, was dying away in him as slowly but as surely as though his brain were feasting fishes in the river mud below.

So little!—just a few handfuls of that wealth that cheats and wantons, fools and panders, gathered and scattered so easily in that world with which he had now no more to do than if he were lying in his grave,—and having this little, he would be able to compel the gaze of the world, and arouse the homage of its flinching fear, even if it should still continue to deny him other victories.

It was not the physical privations of poverty which could daunt him.

His boyhood had been spent in a health–giving and simple training, amidst a strong and hardy mountain– people. It was nothing to him to make his bed on straw; to bear hunger unblenchingly; to endure cold and heat, and all the freaks and changes of wild weather.

In the long nights of a northern winter he had fasted for weeks on a salted fish and a handful of meal; on the polar seas he had passed a winter ice–blocked, with famine kept at bay only by the flesh of the seal, and men dying around him raving in the madness of thirst.

None of the physical ills of poverty could appal him; but its imprisonment, its helplessness, the sense of utter weakness, the impotence to rise and go to other lands and other lives, the perpetual narrowness and darkness in which it compelled him to abide, all these were horrible to him; he loathed them as a man loathes the irons on his wrists, and the stone vault of his prison–cell.

"If I had only money!" he muttered, looking on his Barabbas, "ever so little—ever so little!"

For he knew that if he had as much gold as he had thrown away in earlier times to the Syrian beggar who had sat to him on his house–top at Damascus, he could go to a city and make the work live in colour, and try once more to force from men that wonder and that fear which are the highest tributes that the multitude can give to the genius which arises amidst it.

There was no creature in the chamber with him, except the spiders that wove in the darkness among the timbers.

It was only just then dawn.

Folle-Farine

The birds were singing in the thickets of the water's edge; a blue kingfisher skimmed the air above the rushes, and a dragon-fly hunted insects over the surface of the reeds by the shore; the swallows, that built in the stones of the tower, were wheeling to and fro, glad and eager for the sun.

Otherwise it was intensely silent.

In the breadth of shadow still cast across the stream by the walls of the tower, the market-boat of Yprès glided by, and the soft splash of the passing oars was a sound too familiar to arouse him.

But, unseen, Folle-Farine, resting one moment in her transit to look up at that grim grey pile in which her paradise was shut, watching and listening with the fine-strung senses of a great love, heard through the open casement the muttered words which, out of the bitterness of his heart, escaped his lips unconsciously.

She heard and understood.

Although a paradise to her, to him it was only a prison.

"It is with him as with the great black eagle that they keep in the bridge-tower, in a hole in the dark, with wings cut close and a stone tied to each foot," she thought, as she went on her way noiselessly down with the ebb tide on the river. And she sorrowed exceedingly for his sake.

She knew nothing of all that he remembered in the years of his past—of all that he had lost, whilst yet young, as men should only lose their joys in the years of their old age; she knew nothing of the cities and the habits of the world—nothing of the world's pleasures and the world's triumphs.

To her it had always seemed strange that he wanted any other life than this which he possessed.

To her, the freedom, the strength, the simplicity of it, seemed noble, and all that the heart of a man could desire from fate.

Going forth at sunrise to his daily labour on the broad golden sheet of the waters, down to the sight and the sound and the smell of the sea, and returning at sunset to wander at will through the woods and the pastures in the soft evening shadows; free to watch and pourtray with the turn of his wrist the curl of each flower, the wonder of every cloud, the smile in any woman's eyes, the gleam of any moonbeam through the leaves; or to lie still on the grass, or the sand by the shore, and see the armies of the mists sweep by over his head, and hearken to the throb of the nightingale's voice through the darkness, and gather the coolness of the dews in the hollow of his hand, and let the night go by in dreams of worlds beyond the stars;—such a life as this seemed to her beyond any other beautiful.

A life in the air, on the tide, in the light, in the wind, in the sound of salt waves, in the smell of wild thyme, with no roof to come between him and the sky, with no need to cramp body and mind in the cage of a street—a life spent in the dreaming of dreams, and full of vision and thought as the summer was full of its blossoms and fruits,—it seemed to her the life that must needs be best for a man, since the life that was freest, simplest, and highest.

She knew nothing of the lust of ambition, of the desire of fame, of the ceaseless unrest of the mind which craves the world's honour, and is doomed to the world's neglect; of the continual fire which burns in the hands which stretch themselves in conscious strength to seize a sceptre, and remain empty, only struck in the palm by the buffets of fools.

Of these she knew nothing.

Folle–Farine

She had no conception of them—of the weakness and the force that twine one in another in such a temper as his. She was at once above them and beneath them. She could not comprehend that he who could so bitterly disdain the flesh–pots and the wine–skins of the common crowd, yet could stoop to care for that crowd's Hosannas.

But yet this definite longing which she overheard in the words that escaped him she could not mistake; it was a longing plain to her, one that moved all the dullest and most brutal souls around her.

All her years through she had seen the greed of gold, or the want of it, the twin rulers of the only little dominion that she knew. Money, in her estimate of it, meant only some little sum of copper pieces, such as could buy a hank of flax, a load of sweet chestnuts, a stack of wood, a swarm of bees, a sack of autumn fruits.

What in cities would have been penury, was deemed illimitable riches in the homesteads and cabins which had been her only world.

"A little gold!—a little gold!" she pondered ceaselessly, as she went on down the current.

She knew that he only craved it, not to purchase any pleasure for his appetites or for his vanities, but only as the lever whereby he would be enabled to lift off from him that iron weight of adverse circumstances which held him down darkness as the stones held the caged eagle.

"A little gold!" she said to herself again and again as the boat drifted on to the town, with the scent of the mulberries, and the herbs, and the basket of roses, which were its cargo for the market, fragrant on the air.

"A little gold!"

It seemed so slight a thing, and the more cruel because so slight, to stand thus between him and that noonday splendour of fame which he sought to win, in his obscurity and indigence, as the blinded eagle in his den still turned his aching eyes by instinct to the sun.

Her heart was weary for him as she went.

"What use for the gods to have given him back life," she thought, "if they must give him thus with it the incurable fever of an endless desire?"

It was a gift as poisoned, a granted prayer as vain, as the immortality which they had given to Tithonus.

"A little money," he had said: it seemed a thing almost within her grasp.

Had she been willing to steal from Flamma, she could have taken it as soon as the worth of the load which she carried should have been paid to her; but by a theft she would not serve Arslàn now. No gifts would she give him but what should be pure and worthy of his touch.

She pondered and pondered, cleaving the waters with regular measures, and gliding under the old stone arches of the bridge into the town.

When she brought the boat back up the stream at noonday, her face had cleared; her mouth smiled; she rowed on swiftly, with a light sweet and glad in her eyes.

A thought had come to her.

Folle-Farine

In the market-place that day she had heard two women talk together, under the shade of their great red umbrellas, over their heaps of garden produce.

"So thou hast bought the brindled calf after all. Thou art in luck."

"Aye, in luck indeed, for the boy to rout up the old pear-tree and find those queer coins beneath it. The tree had stood there all my father's and grandfather's time, and longer too, for aught I know, and now one ever dreamed there was any treasure at the root; but he took a fancy to dig up the tree; he said it looked like a ghost, with its old grey arms, and he wanted to plant a young cherry."

"There must have been a mass of coin?"

"No,—only a few little shabby, bent pieces. But the lad took them up to the Prince Sartorian, and he is always crazed about the like; and he sent us for them quite a roll of gold, and said that the coins found were, beyond a doubt, of the Julain time—whatever he might mean by that."

"Sartorian will buy any rubbish of that sort. For my part, I think if one buried a brass button only long enough, he would give one a bank-note for it."

"They say there are marble creatures of his that cost more than would dower a thousand brides, or pension a thousand soldiers. I do not know about that. My boy did not get far in the palace; but he said that the hall he waited in was graven with gold and precious stones. One picture he saw in it was placed on a golden altar, as if it were a god. To worship old coins, and rags of canvas, and idols of stone like that,—how vile it is! while we are glad to get a nettle-salad off the edge of the road."

"But the coins gave thee the brindled calf."

"That was no goodness to us. Sartorian has a craze for such follies."

Folle-Farine had listened, and, standing by them, for once spoke.

"Who is Sartorian? Will you tell me?"

The women were from a far-distant village, and had not the infinite horror of her felt by those who lived in the near neighbourhood of the mill at Yprès.

"He is a great noble," they answered her, eyeing her with suspicion.

"And where is his dwelling?"

"Near Rioz. What do the like of you want with the like of the Prince?"

She gave them thanks for their answers, and turned away in silence with a glow at her heart.

"What is that wicked one thinking of now, that she asks for such as the Prince Sartorian?" said the women, crossing themselves, repentant that they had so far forgotten themselves as to hold any syllable of converse with the devil's daughter.

An old man plucking birds near at hand chuckled low in his throat:—

Folle-Farine

"Maybe she knows that Sartorian will give yet more gold for new faces than for old coins; and—how handsome she is, the black-browed witch!"

She had passed away through the crowds of the market, and did not hear.

"I go to Rioz myself in two days' time with the mules," she thought; and her heart rose, her glance lightened, she moved through the people with a step so elastic, and a face so radiant from the flush of a new hope, that they fell away from her with an emotion which for once was not wholly hatred.

That night, when the mill-house was quiet, and the moonbeams fell through all its small dim windows and chequered all its wooden floors, she rose from the loft where she slept, and stole noiselessly down the steep stairway to the chamber where the servant Pitchou slept.

It was a little dark chamber, with jutting beams and a casement that was never unclosed. On a nail hung the blue woolen skirt and the linen cap of the woman's working dress. In a corner was a little image of a saint and a string of leaden beads.

On a flock pallet the old wrinkled creature slept, tired out with the labour of a long day amongst the cabbage-beds and rows of lettuces, muttering as she slept of the little daily peculations that were the sweet sins of her life and of her master's.

She cared for her soul—cared very much, and tried to save it; but cheating was dear to her, and cruelty was natural: she tricked the fatherless child in his measure of milk for the tenth of a sou, and wrung the throat of the bullfinch as it sang, lest he should peck the tenth of a cherry.

Folle-Farine went close to the straw bed and laid her hand on the sleeper.

"Wake! I want a word with you."

Pichou started, struggled, glared with wide-open blinded eyes, and gasped in horrible fear.

Folle-Farine put the other hand on her mouth.

"Listen! The night I was brought here you stole the sequins off my head. Give them back to me now, or I will kill you where you lie."

The grip of her left hand on the woman's throat, and the gleam of her knife in the right, were enough, as she had counted they would be.

Old Pitchou struggled, lied, stammered, writhed, strove to scream, and swore her innocence of this theft which had waited eleven years to rise against her to Mary and her angels; but in the end she surrendered, and tottered on her shuddering limbs, and crept beneath her bed, and with terror and misery brought forth from her secret hole in the rafters of the floor the little chain of shaking sequins.

It had been of no use to her: she had always thought it of inestimable value, and could never bring herself to part from it, visiting it night and day, and being perpetually tormented with the dread lest her master should discover and claim it.

Folle-Farine seized it from her silently, and laughed—a quiet cold laugh—at the threats and imprecations of the woman who had robbed her in her infancy.

Folle–Farine

"How can you complain of me, without telling also of your own old sin?" she said, with contempt, as she quitted the chamber. "Shriek away as you choose: the chain is mine, not yours. I was weak when you stole it; I am strong enough now. You had best not meddle, or you will have the worst of the reckoning."

And she shut the door on the old woman's screams and left her, knowing well that Pitchou would not dare to summon her master.

It was just daybreak. All the world was still dark.

She slipped the sequins in her bosom, and went back to her own bed of hay in the loft.

There was no sound in the darkness but the faint piping of song birds that felt the coming of day long ere the grosser senses of humanity could have seen a glimmer of light on the black edge of the eastern clouds.

She sat on her couch with the sequins in her hand, and gazed upon them. They were very precious to her. She had never forgotten or ceased to desire them, though to possess herself of them by force had never occurred to her until that night. Their theft had been a wrong which she had never pardoned, yet she had never avenged it until now.

As she held them in her hand for the first time in eleven years, a strong emotion came over her.

The time when she had worn them came out suddenly in sharp relief from the haze of her imperfect memories. All the old forest–life for a moment revived for her.

The mists of the mountains, the smell of the chestnut–woods, the curl of the white smoke amongst the leaves, the sweet wild strains of the music, the mad grace of the old Moorish dances, the tramp through the hill passes, the leap and splash of the tumbling waters,—all arose to her for one moment from the oblivion in which years of toil and exile had buried them.

The tears started to her eyes; she kissed the little glittering coins, she thought of Phratos.

She had never known his fate.

The gipsy who had been found dead in the fields had been forgotten by the people before the same snows which had covered his body had melted at the first glimmer of the wintry sun.

Flamma could have told her; but he had never spoken one word in all her life to her, except in curt reprimand or in cruel irony. All the old memories had died out; and no wanderers of her father's race had ever come into the peaceful and pastoral district of the northern seaboard, where they could have gained no footing, and could have made no plunder.

The sight of the little band of coins, which had danced so often amongst her curls under the moonlit leaves in the Liébana to the leaping and tuneful measures of the viol, moved her to a wistful longing for the smile and the voice of Phratos.

"I would never part with them for myself," she thought; "I would die of hunger first—were it only myself."

And still she was resolved to part with them; to sell her single little treasure—the sole gift of the only creature that had ever loved her, even in the very first hour that she had recovered it.

Folle-Farine

The sequins were worth no more than any baby's woven crown of faded daisies; but to her, as to the old peasant, they seemed, by their golden glitter, a source of wealth incalculable.

At twilight that day, as she stood by Arslàn, she spoke to him, timidly.

"I go to Rioz with the two mules, at daybreak to-morrow, with flour for Flamma. It is a town, larger than the one yonder. Is there anything I might do there—for you?"

"Do? What should you do?" he answered her, with inattention and almost impatience; for his heart was sore with the terrible weariness of inaction.

She looked at him very wistfully, and her mouth parted a little as though to speak; but his repulse chilled the words that rose to her lips.

She dared not say her thoughts to him, lest she should displease him.

"If it come to nought he had best not know, perhaps," she said to herself.

So she kept silence.

CHAPTER II.

ON the morrow, before the sun was up, she set out on her way, with the two mules, to Rioz. It was a town distant some three leagues, lying to the southward.

Both the mules were heavily laden with as many sacks as they could carry: she could ride on neither; she walked between them with a bridle held in either hand.

The road was not a familiar one to her; she had only gone thither some twice or thrice, and she did not find the way long, being full of her own meditations and hopes, and taking pleasure in the gleam of new waters, and the sight of fresh fields, and the green simple loveliness of a pastoral country in late summer.

She met few people; a market-woman or two on their asses, a walking pedlar, a shepherd, or a swineherd—these were all.

The day was young, and none but the country-people were astir. The quiet roads were dim with mists; and the tinkle of a sheep's bell was the only sound in the silence.

But as the morning advanced the mists lifted, the sun grew powerful; the roads were straight and without shadow; the mules stumbled, footsore; she herself grew tired and fevered.

It was midday when she entered Rioz; a town standing in a dell, surrounded with apple orchards and fields of corn and colza, with a quaint old square tower of the thirteenth century rising amongst its roofs, and round about it old moss-green ramparts whereon the bramble and the gorse grew wild.

She led her fatigued and thirsty beasts through the nearest gateway, where a soldier sat smoking, and a girl in a blue petticoat and a scarlet bodice talked to him, resting her hands on her hips, and her brass pails on the ground.

She left the sacks of flour at their destination, which was a great bakehouse in the centre of the town; stabled the mules herself in a shed adjoining the little crazy wine-shop where Flamma had bidden her bait them, and with her

Folle-Farine

own hands unharnessed, watered, and foddered them.

The wine-shop had for sign a white pigeon; it was tumble-down, dusky, half-covered with vines that grew loose and entwined each other at their own fancy; it had a little court in which grew a great walnut-tree; there was a bench under the tree; and the shelter of its boughs was cool and very welcome in the full noon heat. The old woman who kept the place, wrinkled, shrivelled, and cheery, bade her rest there, and she would bring her food and drink.

But Folle-Farine, with one wistful glance at the shadowing branches, refused, and asked only the way to the house of Prince Sartorian.

The woman of the tavern looked at her sharply, and said, as the market-woman had said, "What does the like of you want with the Prince?"

"I want to know the way to it. If you do not tell it, another will," she answered, as she moved out of the little court-yard.

The old woman called after her that it was out by the west gate, over the hill through the fields for more than two leagues: if she followed the wind of the water westward, she could not go amiss.

"What is this baggage wanting to do with Sartorian?" she muttered, watching the form of the girl as it passed up the steep sunshiny street.

"Some evil, no doubt," answered her assistant, a stalwart wench, who was skinning a rabbit in the yard. "You know, she sells bags of wind to founder the ships, they say, and the wicked herb, bon plaisir, and the philtres that drive men mad. She is as bad as a cagote."

Her old mistress, going within to toss a fritter for one of the mendicant friars, chuckled grimly to herself.

"No one would ask the road there for any good; that is sure. No doubt she has heard that Sartorian is a choice judge of colour and shape in all the Arts!"

Folle-Farine when out by the gate, and along the water westward.

In a little satchel she carried some half-score of oil-sketches that Arslàn had given her, rich, graceful, shadowy things—girl's faces, coils of foilage, river rushes in the moonlight, a purple passion-flower blooming on a grey ruin; a child, golden-headed and bare-limbed, wading in brown waters;—things that had caught his sight and fancy, and had been transcribed, and then tossed aside, with the lavish carelessness of genius.

She asked one or two peasants, whom she met, her way; they stared, and grumbled, and pointed to some distant towers rising out of the wooden slopes,—those they said were the towers of the dwelling of Sartorian.

One hen-huckster, leading his ass to market with a load of live poultry, looked over his shoulder after her, and muttered with a grin to his wife:

"There goes a handsome piece of porcelain for the old man to lock in his velvet-lined cupboards."

And the wife laughed in answer:

"Ay; she will look well, gilded as Sartorian always gilds what he buys."

Folle–Farine

The words came to the ear of Folle–Farine: when wondered what they could mean; but she would not turn back to ask.

Her feet were weary, like her mules'; the sun scorched her; she felt feeble, and longed to lie down and sleep; but she toiled on up the sharp ascent that rose in cliffs of limestone above the valley where the river ran.

At last she came to gates that were like those of the cathedral, all brazen, blazoned, and full of scrolls and shields. She pushed one open—there was no one there to say her nay, and boldly entered the domain which they guarded.

At first it seemed to be only like the woods at home; the trees were green, the grass was long, the birds sang, the rabbits darted. But by—and–by she went farther; she grew bewildered; she was in a world strange to her.

Trees she had never seen rose like the pillars of temples; gorgeous flowers, she had never dreamed of, played in the sun; vast columns of water sprang aloft from the mouths of golden dragons or the silver breasts of dolphins; nude women, wondrous and white and still, stood here and there amidst the leafy darkness. She paused amongst it all, dazzled, and thinking that she dreamed.

She had never seen any gardens, save the gardens of the poor.

A magnolia–tree was above her; she stooped her face to one of its great fragrant creamy cups and kissed it softly. A statue of Clytie was beside her; she looked timidly up at the musing face, and touched it, wondering why it was so very cold, and would not move or smile.

A fountain flung up its spray beside her; she leaned and caught it, thinking it so much silver, and gazed at it in sorrowful wonder as it changed to water in her grasp.

She walked on like one enchanted, silently, thinking that she had strayed into some sorcerer's kingdom: she was not afraid, but glad. She walked on for a long while, always amongst these mazes of leaves, these splendours of blossom, these cloud–reaching waters, these marble forms so motionless and thoughtful.

At last she came on the edge of a great pool, fringed with the bullrush and the lotus, and the white pampas–grass, and the flame–like flowering reed, of the East and of the West. All around, the pool was sheltered with dark woods of cedar and thickets of the sea–pine. Beyond them stood afar off a great pile that seemed to her to blaze like gold and silver in the sun. She approached it through a maze of roses, and ascended a flight of marble steps on to a terrace. A doorway was open near. She entered it.

She was intent on the object of her errand, and she had no touch of fear in her whole temper.

Hall after hall, room after room, opened to her amazed vision; an endless spectacle of marvellous colour stretched before her eyes: the wonders that are gathered together by the world's luxury were for the first time in her sight; she saw for the first time in her life how the rich lived.

She moved forward, curious, astonished, bewildered, but nothing daunted.

On the velvet of the floors her steps trod as firmly and as freely as on the moss of the orchard at Yprès. Her eyes glanced as gravely and as fearlessly over the frescoed walls, the gilded woods, the jewelled cups, the brodered hangings, as over the misty pastures where the sheep were folded.

It was not in the daughter of Taric to be daunted by the dazzle of mere wealth. She walked through the splendid and lonely rooms wondering, indeed, and eager to see more; but there was no spell here such as the gardens had flung over her. To the creature free born in the Liébana no life beneath a roof could seem beautiful.

Folle-Farine

She met no one.

At the end of the fourth chamber, which she traversed, she paused before a great picture in a heavy golden frame; it was the seizure of Persephone. She knew the story, for Arslàn had told her of it.

She saw for the first time how the pictures that men called great were installed in princely splendour: this was the fate which he wanted for his own.

A little lamp, burning perfume with a silvery smoke, stood before it: she recalled the words of the woman in the market-place; in her ignorance, she thought the picture was worshipped as a divinity; as the people worshipped the great picture of the Virgin that they burned incense before in the cathedral.

She looked, with something of gloomy contempt in her eyes, at the painting which was mantled in massive gold, with purple draperies opening to display it; for it was the chief masterpiece upon those walls.

"And he cares for that!" she thought, with a sigh half of wonder, half of sorrow.

She did not reason on it, but it seemed to her that his works were greater hanging on their bare walls where the spiders wove.

"Who is 'he'?" a voice asked behind her.

She turned and saw a small and feeble man, with keen and humorous eyes, and an elfin face, delicate in its form, malicious in its meaning.

She stood silent, regarding him; herself a strange figure in that lordly place, with her brown limbs, her bare head and feet, her linen tunic, her red knotted girdle.

"Who are you?" she asked him curtly, in counter-question.

The little old man laughed.

"I have the honour to be your host."

A disappointed astonishment clouded her face.

"You! are you Sartorian?" she muttered—"the Sartorian whom they call a prince?"

"Even I," he said with a smile. "I regret that I please you no more. May I ask to what I am indebted for your presence? You seem a fastidious critic."

He spoke with good-humoured irony, taking snuff whilst he looked at the lustrous beauty of this barefooted gypsy, as he thought her, whom he had found thus astray in his magnificent chambers.

She amused him; finding her silent, he sought to make her speak.

"How did you come in hither? You care for pictures, perhaps, since you seem to feed on them like some wood-pigeon on a sheaf of corn?"

"I know of finer than yours," she answered him coldly, chilled by the amused and malicious ridicule of his tone into a sullen repose. "I did not come to see anything you have. I came to sell you these: they say in Yprès that you

Folle-Farine

care for such bits of coin."

She drew out of her bosom her string of sequins, and tendered them to him.

He took them, seeing at once that they were of no sort of value; such things as he could buy for a few coins in any bazaar of Africa or Asia. But he did not say so.

He looked at her keenly, as he asked:

"Whose were these?"

She looked in return at him with haughty defiance.

"They are mine. If you want such things, as they say you do, take them and give me their value—that is all."

"Do you come her to sell them?"

"Yes. I came three leagues to-day. I heard a woman from near Rioz say that you liked such things. Take them, or leave them."

"Who gave them to you?"

"Phratos."

Her voice lingered sadly over the word. She still loved the memory of Phratos.

"And who may Phratos be?"

Her eyes flashed at the cross-questioning.

"That is none of your business. If you think that I stole them, say so. If you want them, buy them. One or the other."

The old man watched her amusedly.

"You can be very fierce," he said to her. "Be gentle a little, and tell me whence you came, and what story you have."

But she would not.

"I have not come here to speak of myself," she said obstinately. "Will you take the coins, or leave them?"

"I will take them," he said; and he went to a cabinet in another room and brought out with him several shining gold pieces.

She fastened her eager eyes on them thirstily.

"Here is payment," he said to her, holding them to her.

Her eyes fastened on the money entranced; she touched it with a light, half-fearful touch, and then drew back and gazed at it amazed.

Folle-Farine

"All that—all that?" she muttered. "Is it their worth? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," he said with a smile. He offered her in them some thirty times their value.

She paused a moment, incredulous of her own good fortune, then darted on them as a swallow at a gnat, and took them and put them to her lips, and laughed a sweet glad laugh of triumph, and slid them in her bosom.

"I am grateful," she said simply; but the radiance in her eyes, the laughter on her mouth, the quivering excitement in all her face and form, said the same thing for her far better than her words.

The old man watched her narrowly.

"They are not for yourself?" he asked.

"That is my affair," she answered him, all her pride rising in arms. "What concerned you was their value."

He smiled and bent his head.

Fairly rebuked. But say is this all you came for? Wherever you came from, is this all that brought you here?"

She looked awhile in his eyes steadily, then she brought the sketches from their hiding-place. She placed them before him.

"Look at those."

He took them to the light and scanned them slowly and critically; he knew all the mysteries and intricacies of art, and he recognised in these slight things the hand and the colour of a master. He did not say so, but held them for some time in silence.

"These also are for sale?" he asked, at length.

She had drawn near him, her face flushed with intense expectation, her longing eyes dilated, her scarlet lips quivering with eagerness. That he was a stranger and a noble was nothing to her: she knew he had wealth; she saw he had perception.

"See here!" she said, swiftly, the music of her voice rising and falling in breathless, eloquent intonation. "Those things are to the great works of his hand as a broken leaf beside your gardens yonder. He touches a thing and it is beauty. He takes a reed, a stone, a breadth of sand, a woman's face, and under his hand it grows glorious and gracious. He dreams things that are strange and sublime; he has talked with the gods, and he had seen the worlds beyond the sun. All the day he works for his bread, and in the grey night he wanders where none can follow him; and he brings back marvels and mysteries, and beautiful, terrible stories that are like the sound of the sea. Yet he is poor, and no man sees the things of his hand; and he is sick of his life, because the days go by and bring no message to him, and men will have nothing of him; and he has hunger of body and hunger of mind. For me, if I could do what he does, I would not care though no man ever looked on it. But to him it is bitter that it is only seen by the newt, and the beetle, and the night-hawk. It wears his soul away, because he is denied of men. 'If I had gold, if I had gold!' he says, always, when he thinks that none can hear him."

Her voice trembled, and was still for a second; she struggled with herself and kept it clear and strong.

The old man never interrupted her.

Folle–Farine

"He must not know: he would kill himself if he knew; he would sooner die than tell any man. But, look you, you drape your pictures here with gold and with purple, you place them high in the light; you make idols of them, and burn incense before them. That is what he wants for his: they are the life of his life. If they could be honoured, he would not care, though you should slay him to–morrow. Go to him, and make you idols of his; they are worthier gods than ours. And what his heart is sick for is to have them seen by men. Were I he, I would not care; but he cares, so that he perishes."

She shivered as she spoke; in her earnestness and eagerness, she laid her hand on the stranger arm, and held it there; she prayed, with more passion than she would have cast into any prayer to save her own life.

"Where is he; and what do you call him?" the old man asked her quietly.

He understood the meaning that ran beneath the unconscious extravagance of her faithful and impassioned language.

He is called Arslàn; he lives in the granary–tower, by the river, between the town and Yprès. He comes from the north, far away—very, very far, where the seas are all ice and the sun shines at midnight. Will you make the things that he does to be known to the people? You have gold; and gold, he says, is the compeller of men."

"Arslàn?" he echoed.

The name was not utterly unknown to him; he had seen works signed with it at Paris and at Rome—strange things of a singular power, of an union of cynicism and idealism, which was too sensual for one half the world, and too pure for the other half.

"Arslàn?—I think I remember. I will see what I can do."

"You will say nothing to him of me?"

"I could not say much. Who are you? Whence do you come?"

"I live at the water–mill of Yprès. They say that Reine Flamma was my mother. I do not know: it does not matter."

"What is your name?"

"Folle–Farine. They called me after the mill–dust."

"A strange namesake."

"What does it matter? Any name is only a little puff of breath—less than the dust, anyhow."

"Is it? I see, you are a Communist."

"What?"

"A Communist—a Socialist. You know what that is. You would like to level my house to the ashes, I fancy, by the look on your face."

"No," she said simply, with a taint of scorn, "I do not care to do that. If I had cared to burn anything it would have been the Flandrin's village. It is odd that you should live in a palace and he should want for bread; but then he can create things, and you can only buy them. So it is even, perhaps."

The old man smiled, amused.

"You are no respecter of persons, that is certain. Come in another chamber and take some wine, and break your fast. There will be many things here that you never saw or tasted."

She shook her head.

"The thought is good of you," she said, more gently than she had before spoken. "But I never took a crust out of charity, and I will not begin."

"Charity? Do you call an invitation a charity?"

"When the rich ask the poor--yes."

Sartorian looked in her eyes with a smile.

"But when a man, old and ugly, asks a woman that is young and beautiful, on which side lies the charity then?"

"I do not favour fine phrases," she answered curtly, returning his look with a steady indifference.

"You are hard to please in anything, it would seem. Well, come hither, a moment at least."

She hesitated a moment; then thinking to herself that to refuse would seem like fear, she followed him through several chambers into one where his own mid-day breakfast was set forth.

She moved through all the magnificence of the place with fearless steps, and meditative glances, and a grave measured easy grace, as tranquil and as unimpressed as though she walked through the tall ranks of the seeding grasses on a meadow slope.

It was all full of the colour, the brilliancy, the choice adornment, the unnumbered treasures, and the familiar luxuries of a great noble's residence; but such things as these had no awe for her.

The mere splendours of wealth, the mere accumulation of luxury, could not impress her for an instant; she passed through them indifferent and undaunted, thinking to herself, "However they may gild their roofs, the roofs shut out the sky no less."

Only, as she passed by some dream of a great poet cast in the visible shape of sculpture or of painting, did her glance grow reverent and humid; only when she recognised amidst the marble forms, or the pictured stories, some one of those dear gods in whom she had a faith as pure and true as ever stirred in the heart of an Ionian child, did she falter and pause a little to gaze there with a tender homage in her eyes.

The old man watched her with a musing, studious glance from time to time.

"Let me tempt you," he said to her when they reached the breakfast-chamber. "Sit down with me and eat and drink. No? Taste these sweetmeats at the least. To refuse to break bread with me is churlish."

"I never owed nay man a crust, and I will not begin now," she answered obstinately, indifferent to the blaze of gold and silver before her, to the rare fruits and flowers, to the wine in their quaint flagons, to the numerous attendants who waited motionless around her.

Folle-Farine

She was sharply hungered, and her throat was parched with the heat and the dust, and the sweet unwonted odours of the wines and the fruits assailed all her sense; but he besought her in vain.

She poured herself out some water into a goblet of ruby glass, rimmed with a band of pearls, and drank it, and set the cup down as indifferently as though she had drunk from the old wooden bowl chained amongst the ivy to the well in the mill-yard.

"Your denial is very churlish," he said, after many a honeyed entreaty, which had met with no other answer from her. "How shall you bind me to keep bond with you, and rescue your Northern Regner from his cave of snakes, unless you break bread with me, and so compel my faith?"

She looked at him from under the dusky cloud of her hair, with the golden threads gleaming on it like sun-rays through darkness.

"A word that needs compelling," she answered him curtly, "is broken by the heart before the lips give it. It is to plant a tree without a root, to put faith in a man that needs a bond."

He watched her with keen humorous eyes of amusement.

"Where have you got all your wisdom?" he asked.

"It is not wisdom; it is truth."

"And truth is not wisdom? You would seem to know the world well."

She laughed a little short laugh, whilst her face clouded.

"I know it not at all. But I will tell you what I have seen."

"And that is—?"

"I have seen a great toadstool spring up all in one night, after rain, so big, and so white, and so smooth, and so round,—and I knew its birth was so quick, and its growth was so strong, because it was a false thing that would poison all who should eat of it."

"Well?"

"Well—when men speak over-quick and over-fair, what is that but the toadstool that springs from their breath?"

"Who taught you so much suspicion?"

Her face darkened in anger.

"Suspicion? That is a thing that steals in the dark and is afraid. I am afraid of nothing."

"So it would seem."

He mused a moment whether he should offer her back her sequins as a gift; he thought not. He divined aright that she had only sold them because she had innocently believed in the fulness of their value. He tried to tempt her otherwise.

Folle-Farine

She was young; she had a beautiful face, and a form like an Atalanta. She wore a scarlet sash girt to her loins, and seemed to care for colour and for grace. There was about her a dauntless and imperious freedom. She could not be indifferent to all those powers which she besought with such passion for another.

He had various treasures shown to her,—treasures of jewels, of gold and silver, of fine workmanship, of woven stuffs delicate and gorgeous as the wing of a butterfly.

She looked at them tranquilly, as though her eyes had rested on such things all her days.

"They are beautiful, no doubt," she said simply. "But I marvel that you—being a man—care for such things as these."

"Nay; I care to give them to beautiful women, when such come to me,—as one has come to-day. Do me one trifling grace; choose some one thing at least out of these to keep in remembrance of me."

Her eyes burned in anger.

"If I think your bread would soil my lips, is it likely I should think to touch your treasure with my hands and have them still clean?"

"You are very perverse," he said, relinquishing his efforts with regret.

He knew how to wait for a netted fruit to ripen under the rays of temptation: gold was a forcing heat—slow, but sure.

She watched him with musing eyes that had a gleam of scorn in them, and yet a certain apprehension.

"Are you the Red Mouse?" she said suddenly.

He looked at her surprised, and for the moment perplexed; then he laughed—his little low cynical laugh.

"What makes you think that?"

"I do not know. You look like it—that is all. He has made one sketch of me as I shall be when I am dead; and the Red Mouse sits on my chest, and it is glad. You see that, by its glance. I never asked him what he meant by it. Some evil, I think; and you look like it. You have the same triumph in your eye."

He laughed again, not displeased, as she had thought that he would be.

"He has painted you so? I must see that. But believe me, Folle-Farine, I shall wish for my triumph before your beauty is dead—if I am indeed the Red Mouse."

She shrunk a little with an unconscious and uncontrollable gesture of aversion.

"I must go," she said abruptly. "The mules wait. Remember him, and I will remember you."

He smiled.

"Wait, have you thought what a golden key for him will do for you when it unlocks your eagle's cage and unbinds his wings?"

"What?"

She did not understand; when she had come on this eager errand, no memory of her own fate had retarded or hastened her footsteps.

"Well, you look to take the same flight to the same heights, I suppose?"

"I?"

"Yes, you. You must know that you are beautiful. You must know so much?"

A proud light laughed like sunshine over all her face.

"Ah, yes!" she said, with a little low, glad breath, and the blaze of a superb triumph in her eyes. "He has painted me in a thousand ways. I shall live as the rose lives, on his canvas—a thing of a day that he can make immortal!"

The keen elfin eyes of the old man sparkled with a malign mirth; he had found what he wanted—as he thought.

"And so, if this dust of oblivion blots out his canvas for ever from the world's sight, your beauty will be blotted with it? I see. Well, I can understand how eager you are to have your eagle fly free. The fame of the Fornarina stands only second to the fame of Cleopatra."

"Fornarina? What is that?"

"Fornarina? One who, like you, gave the day's life of a rose, and who got eternal fire for it,—as you think to do."

She started a little, and a tremulous pain passed over the dauntless brilliance of her face, and stole its colour for awhile.

"I?" she murmured. "Ah, what does it matter for me? If there be just a little place—anywhere—wherever my life can live with his on the canvas, so that men say once now and then, in all the centuries, to each other, 'See, it is true—he thought her worthy of that, though she was less than a grain of dust under the hollow of his foot,' it will be enough for me—more than enough."

The old man was silent; watching her, the mockery had faded from his eyes; they were surprised and contemplative. She stood with her head drooped, with her face pale, an infinite yearning and resignation stole into the place of the exultant triumph which had blazed there like the pale light of morning a moment earlier.

She had lost all remembrance of time and place; the words died softly, as in a sigh of love, upon her lips.

He waited awhile; then he spoke.

"But, if you were sure that even thus much would be denied to you; if you were sure that, in casting your eagle loose on the wind, you would lose him for ever in the heights of a heaven you would never enter yourself; if you were sure that he would never give you one thought, one wish, one memory, but leave every trace of your beauty to perish as fast as the damp could rot or the worm could gnaw it; if you were sure that his immortality would be your annihilation, say, would you still bid me turn a gold key in the lock of his cage, and release him?"

She roused herself slowly from her reverie, and gazed at him with a smile he could not fathom; it was so far away from him, so full of memory, so pitiful of his doubt.

Folle-Farine

She was thinking of the night when she had found a man dying, and had bought his life back for him, with her own, from the gods.

For the past was sacred to her, and the old wild faith to her was still a truth.

But of it her lips never spoke.

"What is that to you?" she asked, briefly. "If you turn the key, you will see. It was not of myself that I came here to speak. Give him liberty, and I will give you gratitude. Farewell."

Before he had perceived what she was about to do, she had left his side, and had vanished through one of the doors which stood open, on to the gardens without.

He sent his people to search for her on the terraces and lawns, but vainly; she was fleetier than they, and had gone through the green glades in the sunlight as fast as a doe flies.

The old man sat silent.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN she had outrun her strength, for the moment, and was forced to slacken her speed, she paused to take breath on the edge of the wooded lands. She looked neither to right nor left; on her backward flight the waters had no song, the marble forms no charm, the wonder-flowers no magic for her as she went; she had no ear for the melodies of the birds, no sight for the paradise of the rose-hung ways; she had only one thought left—the gold that she had gained.

The cruelty of his words had stabbed her with each of their slow keen words as with a knife; the sickness of a mortal terror had touched her for the instant, as she had remembered that it might be her fate to be not even so much as a memory in the life which she had saved from the grave.

But with the first breath of the outer air the feebleness passed. The strength of the passion that possessed her was too pure to leave her long a prey to any thought of her own fate.

She smiled again as she looked up through the leaves at the noon-day sun.

"What will it matter how or when the gods take my life, so only they keep their faith and give me his?" she thought.

And her step was firm and free, and her glance cloudless, and her heart content, as she went on her homeward path through the heat of the day.

She was so young, she was so ignorant, she was still so astray in the human world about her, that she thought she held a talisman in those nine gold pieces.

"A little gold," he had said; and here she had it—honest, clean, worthy of his touch and usage.

Her heart leaped to the glad and bounding music of early youth, youth which does not reason, which only believes, and which sees the golden haze of its own faiths, and thinks them the promise of the future, as young children see the golden haze of their own hair and think it the shade of the angels' wings above their heads.

Folle-Farine

When she at length reached the mill-house the sun had sunk; she had been sixteen hours on foot, taking nothing all the while but a roll of rye bread that she had carried in her pouch, and a few water-cresses that she had gathered in a little brook when the mules had paused to drink there.

Yet when she had housed the grain, and turned the tired animals into their own nook of meadow to graze and rest for the night, she entered the house neither for repose nor food, but flew off again through the dusk of the falling night.

She had no remembrance of hunger, nor thirst, nor fatigue; she had only a buoyant sense of an ecstatic joy; she felt as though she had wings, and clove the air with no more effort than the belated starling which flew by her over the fields.

"A little god," he had said; and in her bosom, wrapped in a green chestnut leaf, were there not the little, broad, round, glittering pieces which in the world of men seemed to have power to gain all love, all honour, all peace, and all fealty?"

"Phratos would have wished his gift to go so," she thought to herself, with a swift, penitent, remorseful memory.

For a moment she paused and took them once more out of their hiding-place, and undid the green leaf that enwrapped them, and kissed them and laughed, the hot tears falling down her cheeks, where she stood alone in the fields amid the honey-smell of the clover in the grass, and the fruit-fragrance of the orchards all about her in the dimness.

"A little gold!—a little gold!" she murmured, and she laughed aloud in her great joy, and blessed the gods that they had given her to hear the voice of his desire.

"A little gold," he had said, only; and here she had so much!

No sorcerer, she thought, ever had power wider than this wealth bestowed on her. She did not know; she had no measurement. Flamma's eyes she had seen glisten over a tithe of such a sum as over the riches of an emperor's treasury.

She slipped them in her breast again and ran on past the reeds silvering in the rising moon, past the waters quiet on a windless air, past the dark Christ who would not look,—who had never looked, or she had loved him with her earliest love, even as for his pity she loved Thanatos.

Breathless and noiseless she severed the reeds with her swift feet, and lightly as a swallow on the wing passed through the dreary portals into Arslàn's chamber.

His lamp was lighted.

He stood before the cartoon of the Barabbas, touching it here and there with his charcoal, adding those latest thoughts, those after-graces, with which the artist delights to caress his picture, with a hand as soft and as lingering as the hand with which a mother caresses the yellow sunshine of her first-born's curls.

His face as he stood was very pale, passionless, weary, with a sadness sardonic and full of scorn for himself on his mouth, and in his eyes those dreams which went so far—so far—into worlds whose glories his hand could pourtray for no human sight.

He was thinking, as he worked, of the Barabbas.

Folle-Farine

"You must rot," he thought. "You will feed the rat and the mouse; the squirrel will come and gnaw you to line his nest; and the beetle and the fly will take you for a spawning-bed. You will serve no other end—since you are mine. And yet I am so great a fool that I love you, and try to bring you closer and closer to the thing I see, and which you are not, and never can be. For what man lives so happy as to see the Canaan of his ideals,—save as Moses saw it from afar off, only to raise his arms to it vainly, and die?"

There came a soft shiver of the air, as though it were severed by some eager bird.

She came and stood beside him, a flash like the sunrise on her face, a radiance in her eyes more lustrous than any smile; her body tremulous and breathless from the impatient speed with which her footsteps had been winged; about her all the dew and fragrance of the night.

"Here is the gold!" she cried.

Her voice was eager and broken with its too great haste.

"Gold?"

He turned and looked at her, ignorant of her meaning, astonished at her sudden presence there.

"Here is the gold!" she murmured, her voice rising swift and clear, and full of the music of triumph with which her heart was thrilling. "'A little gold,' you said, you remember?—'only a little.' And this is much. Take it—take it! Do you not hear?"

"Gold?" he echoed again, shaken from his trance of thought, and comprehending nothing and remembering nothing of the words that he had spoken in his solitude.

"Yes! It is mine," she said, her voice broken in its tumult of ecstasy—"it is mine—all mine. It is no charity, no gift to me. The chain was worth it, and I would only take what it was worth. A little gold, you said; and now you can make the Barabbas live for ever upon canvas, and compel men to say that it is great."

As the impetuous, tremulous words broke from her, she drew the green leaf with the coins in it from her bosom, and thrust it in to his hand, eager, exultant, laughing, weeping, all the silence and the control of her nature swept away in the flood of this immeasurable joy possessing her.

The touch of the glittering pieces against his hands stung him to comprehension; his face flushed over all its pallor; he thrust it away with a gesture of abhorrence and rejection.

"Money!" he muttered. "What money?—yours?"

"Yes, mine entirely; mine indeed!" she answered, with a sweet, glad ring of victory in her rejoicing voice. "It is true, quite true. They were the chains of sequins that Phratos gave me when I used to dance to his music in the mountains; and I have sold them. 'A little gold,' you said; 'and the Barabbas can live for ever.' Why do you look so? It is all mine; all yours—"

In the last words her voice lost all its proud exultation, and sank low, with a dull startled wonder in it.

Why did he look so?

His gesture of refusal she had not noticed. But the language his glance spoke was one plain to her. It terrified her, amazed her, struck her chill and dumb.

Folle-Farine

In it there was disgust, anger, loathing, even horror;—and yet there was in it also an unwonted softness, which in a woman's eyes would have shown itself by a rush of sudden tears.

"What do you think that I have done?" she murmured under her breath. "The gold is mine—mine honestly. I have not stolen it, nor begged it. I got it as I say. Why will you not take it? Why do you look at me so?"

"I? Your money? God in heaven! what can you think me?"

She grew white to the lips, all the impetuous, radiant tumult of her innocent rapture frozen into terror.

"I have done nothing wrong," she murmured with a piteous wistfulness and wonder—"nothing wrong, indeed; there is no shame in it. Will you not take it—for their sake?"

He turned on her with a severity almost savage.

"It is impossible! Good God! Was I not low enough already? How dared you think a thing so vile of me? Have I ever asked pity of any living soul?"

His voice was choked in his throat; he was wounded to the heart.

He had no thought that he was cruel; he had no intent to terrify or hurt her; but the sting of this last and lowest humiliation was so horrible to all the pride of his manhood, and so bitterly reminded him of his own abject poverty; and with all this there was an emotion in him that he had difficulty to control—being touched by her ignorance and by her gift as few things in his life had ever touched him.

She stood before him trembling, wondering, sorely afraid; all the light had died out of her face; she was very pale, and her eyes dilated strangely.

For some moments there was silence between them.

"You will not take it?" she said at last, in a hushed, fearful voice, like that of one who speaks in the sight of some dead thing which makes all quiet around it.

"Take it!" he echoed. "I could sooner kill a man out yonder and rob him. Can you not understand? Greater shame could never come to me. You do not know what you would do. There may be beasts that fall as low, no doubt, but they are curs too base for hanging. Have I frightened you? I did not mean to frighten you. You mean well and nobly, no doubt—no doubt. You do not know what you would do. Gifts of gold from man to man are bitter, and sap the strength of the receiver; but from woman to man they are—to the man shameful. Can you not understand?"

Her face burned dusky; she moved with a troubled confused effort to get away from his gaze.

"No," she said in her shut teeth. "I do not know what you mean. Flamma takes all the gold I make. Why not you, if it be gold that is honest?"

"Flamma is your grandsire—your keeper—your master. He has a right to do as he chooses. He gives you food and shelter, and in return he takes the gains of your labour. But I,—what have I ever given you? I am a stranger to you, and should have no claim on you, if I could be base enough to seek one. I am hideously poor. I make no disguise with you,—you know too well how I live. But can you not see?—if I were mean enough to take the worth of a crust from you, I should be no more worthy of the very name of man. It is for the man to give to the woman. You see."

Folle-Farine

She heard him in silence, her face still dark with the confused pain on it of one who has fallen or been struck upon the head, and half forgets and half remembers.

"I do not see," she muttered. "Whoever has, gives; what does it matter? The folly in me was its littleness: it could not be of use. But it was all I had."

"Little or great,—the riches of empires, or a beggar's dole,—there could be no difference in the infamy to me. Have I seemed to you a creature so vile or weak that you could have a title to put such shame upon me?"

Out of the bitter passion of his soul, words more cruel than he had consciousness of rose to his lips and leaped to speech, and stung her as scorpions sting.

She said nothing; her teeth clenched, her face changed as it had used to do when Flamma had beaten her.

She said nothing, but turned away; and with one twist of her hand she flung the pieces through the open casement into the river that flowed below.

They sank with a little shiver of the severed water.

He caught her wrist a second too late.

"What madness? What have you done? You throw your gold away to the river—swamp for me, when I have not a shred worth a copper—piece to pay you back in their stead! I did not mean to hurt you; it was only the truth,—you could not have shamed me more. You bring on me an indignity that I can neither requite nor revenge. You have no right to load me with debts that I cannot pay—with gifts that I would die sooner than receive. But, then, how should you know?—how should you know? If I wounded you with sharp words, I did wrong."

There was a softness that was almost tenderness in his voice as he spoke the last phrases in his self-reproach; but her face did not change, her eyes did not lose their startled horror; she put her hand to her throat as though she choked.

"You cannot do wrong—to me," she muttered, true, even in such a moment, to the absolute adoration which possessed her.

Then, ere he could stay her, she turned, without another word, and fled out from his presence into the dusk of the night.

The rushes in the moonlight sighed where they grew by the water-side above the sands where the gold had sunk.

A thing more precious than gold was dead; and only the reeds mourned for it. A thing of the river as they were, born like them from the dust, from the flood, from the wind and the foam; a thing that a god might desire, a thing that a breeze might break.

CHAPTER IV.

THE day broke tranquilly. There was a rosy light over all the earth. In the cornlands a few belated sheaves stood alone in the reaping-ground, while children sought stray ears that might still be left amongst the wild flowers and the stubble. The smell of millions of ripening autumn fruits filled the air from the orchards. The women going to their labour in their fields, gave each other a quiet good day; whilst their infants pulled down the blackberry branches in the lanes or bowled the early apples down the roads. Great clusters of black grapes were already

Folle-Farine

mellowed on the vines that clambered over cabin roof and farmhouse chimney. The chimes of the earliest bells sounded softly from many a little steeple bosomed in the rolling woods.

An old man going to his work passed by a girl lying asleep in a hollow of the ground, beneath a great tree of berries. She was lying with her face turned upward; her arms above her head; her eyelids were wet; her mouth smiled a dreamy tenderness; her lips murmured a little inaudibly; her bosom heaved with fast uneven palpitating breaths.

It was sunrise.

In the elder thicket little chaffinches were singing, and a missel-thrush gave late in the year a song of the April weather. The east was radiant with the promise of a fair day, in which summer and autumn should be wedded with gorgeous pomp of colour, and joyous chorus of the birds. The old man roughly thrust against her breast the heavy wooden shoe on his right foot.

"Get up!" he muttered, "Is it for the like of you to lie and sleep at day-dawn? Get up, or your breath will poison the grasses that the cattle feed on, and they will die of an elf-shot, surely."

She raised her head from where it rested on her out-stretched arms, and looked him in the eyes and smiled unconsciously; then glanced around and rose and dragged her steps away, in the passive mechanical obedience begotten by long slavery.

There was a shiver in her limbs; a hunted terror in her eyes; she had wandered sleepless all night long.

"Beast," muttered the old man, trudging on with a backward glance at her. "You have been at a witches' sabbath, I dare be bound. We shall have fine sickness in the styes and byres. I wonder would a silver bullet hurt you, as the fables say? If I were sure it would, I would not mind having my old silver flagon melted down, though it is the only thing worth a rush in the house."

She went on through the long wet rank grass, not hearing his threats against her. She drew her steps slowly and lifelessly through the heavy dews; her hand was sunk; her lips moved audibly, and murmured as she went, "A little gold, a little gold!"

"May be some one has shot her this very day-dawn," thought the peasant, shouldering his axe as he went down into the little wood to cut ash-sticks for the market. "She looks half dead already; and they say the devil-begotten never bleed."

The old man guessed aright. She had received her mortal wound; though it was one bloodless and tearless, and for which no moan was made, lest any should blame the slayer.

The sense of some great guilt was on her, as she stole through the rosy warmth of the early morning.

She had thought to take him liberty, honour, strength, and dominion among his fellows—and he had told her, that she had dealt him the foulest shame that his life had ever known.

"What right have you to burden me with debt unasked?" he had cried out against her in the bitterness of his soul. And she knew that, unasked, she had laid on him the debt of life.

If ever he should know?—

Folle–Farine

She had wandered on and on, aimlessly, not knowing what she did all the night through, hearing no other sound but the fierce hard scathing scorn of his reproaches.

He had told her she was in act so criminal, and yet she knew herself in intent so blameless; she felt like those of whom she had heard in the old Hellenic stories, who had been doomed by fate, guiltless themselves, to work some direful guilt, which had to be, out to its bitter end, the innocent yet the accursed instrument of destiny, even as Adrastus upon Atys.

On and on, through the moonlight she had fled, when she had left the water–tower that night; down the slope of the fields, through the late blossoms of the poppies, and the feathery haze of the ripened grasses tossed in waves from right to left; the long shadows of the clouds upon the earth, chasing her like the spectre hosts of the Aaskarreya of his Scandinavian skies.

She had dropped at last like a dying thing, broken and breathless on the ground.

There she crouched, and hid her face upon her hands; the scorch of an intolerable shame burned on it.

She did not know what ailed her; what consumed her with abhorrence of herself. She longed for the earth to yawn and cover her; for the lilies asleep in the pool, to uncloset and take her amidst them. Every shiver of a leaf, under a night–bird's passage, every motion of the water, as the willow branches swept it, made her start and shiver as though some great guilt was on her soul.

Not a breath of wind was stirring, not a sound disturbed the serenity of the early night; she heard no voice but the plaintive cry of the cushat. She saw "no snakes but the keen stars," which looked on her cold and luminous, and indifferent to human woes as the eyes of Arslàn.

Yet she was afraid; afraid with a trembling horror of herself; she who had once never known one pulse of fear, and who had smiled in the eyes of death as children in their mother's.

The thrill of a new–born, inexplicable, cruel consciousness stole like fire through her. She knew now that she loved him with that strange mystery of human love which had been for ever to her until now a thing apart from her, denied to her, half scorned, half yearned for; viewed from afar with derision, yet with desire, as a thing at once beneath her and beyond her.

All the light died; the moon rose; the while lilies shared in its pallid rays; the night birds went by on the wind. She never stirred; the passionate warmth of her frame changed to a deadly cold; her face was buried in her hands; ever and again she shivered, and glanced round, as the sound of a hare's step or the rustle of a bough by a squirrel broke the silence.

The calm night–world around her, the silvery seas of reeds, the dusky woods, the moon in its ring of golden vapour, the flickering foilage, the gleam of the glowworm in the dew, all the familiar things amidst which her feet had wandered for twelve summers in the daily measure of those beaten tracks; all these seemed suddenly strange to her—mysterious, unreal.

She longed for the day to dawn again, though day was but an hour dead. And yet she felt that at the first break of light she must flee and hide from his and every eye.

She but meant to give him honour; and he had upbraided her gift as shame.

The bitterness, the cruelty, the passion of his reproaches, stung with their poison, as, in her vision of the reed, she had seen the barbed tongues of a thousand snakes striking through and through the frail, despised, blossomless

slave of the wind.

She had thought that as the god to the reed, so might he to her say hereafter, "You are the lowliest and least of all the chance-born things of the sands and the air, and yet through you has an immortal music arisen,"—and for the insanity of her thought he had cursed her.

Towards dawn, where she had sunk down in the moss, and in the thickets of elder and thorn—where she had made her bed in her childhood many a summer night, when she had been turned out from the doors of the mill-house; there for a little while a fitful exhausted sleep came to her; the intense exhaustion of bodily fatigue overcoming and drugging to slumber the fever and the wakefulness of the mind. The thrush came out of the thorn, while it was still quite dark, and the morning stars throbbled in the skies, and sang his day-song close about her head.

In her sleep she smiled. For Oneiros was merciful; and she dreamed that she slept folded close in the arms of Arslàn, and in her dreams she felt the kisses of his lips rain fast on hers.

Then the old peasant trudging to his labour in the obscurity of the early day saw her, and struck at her with his foot and woke her roughly, and muttered, "Get thee up; is it such beggars as thee that should be a-bed when the sun breaks?"

She opened her eyes, and smiled on him unconsciously, as she had smiled in her brief oblivion. The passion of her dreams was still about her; her mouth burned, her limbs trembled; the air seemed to her filled with music, like the sound of the mavis singing in the thorn.

Then she remembered; and shuddered; and arose, knowing the sweet, mad dream, which had cheated her, a lie. For she awoke alone.

She did not heed the old man's words, she did not feel his hurt; yet she obeyed him, and left the place, and dragged herself feebly towards Yprès by the sheer unconscious working of that instinct born of habit which takes the ox or the ass back undriven through the old accustomed ways to stand beside their ploughshare or their harness faithful and unbidden.

Where the stream ran by the old mill—steps the river reeds were blowing in the wind, with sun-rays playing in their midst, and the silver wings of the swallows brushing them with a swift caress.

"I thought to be the reed chosen by the gods!" she said bitterly in her heart, "but am I not worthy—even to die."

For she would have asked of fate no nobler thing than this—to be cut down as the reed by the reaper, if so be that through her the world might be brought to hearken to the music of the lips that she loved.

She drew her aching weary limbs feebly through the leafy ways of the old mill-garden. The first leaves of autumn fluttered down upon her head; the last scarlet of the roses flashed in her path as she went; the winelike odours of the fruits were all about her on the air. It was then fully day. The sun was up; the bells rang the sixth hour far away from the high towers and spires of the town.

At the mill-house, and in the mill-yard, where usually everyone had arisen and were hard at labour whist the dawn was dark, everything was still. There was no sign of work. The light blazed on the panes of the casements under the eaves, but its summons failed to arouse the sleepers under the roof.

The bees hummed around their houses of straw; the pigeons flew to and fro between the timbers of the walls and the boughs of the fruit trees. The mule leaned his head over the bar of the gate, and watched with wistful eyes.

Folle-Farine

The cow in her shed lowed, impatient for some human hands to unbar her door, and lead her forth to her green clovered pasture. A dumb boy, who aided in the working of the mill, sat astride of a log of timber, kicking his feet amongst the long grasses, and blowing thistles down above his head upon the breeze.

The silence and the inactivity startled her into a sense of them, as no noise or movement, curses of blows, could have done. She looked around stupidly; the window-shutters of the house-windows were closed, as though it were still night.

She signed rapidly to the boy.

"What has happened? Why is the mill not at work thus late?"

The lad left off blowing the thistle feathers on the wind, and grinned, and answered on his hands:

"Flamma is almost dead, they say."

And he grinned again, and laughed, as far as his uncouth and guttural noises could be said to approach the triumph and the jubilation of laughter.

She stared at him blankly for awhile, bewildered and shaken from the stupor of her own misery. She had never thought of death and her tyrant in unison.

He had seemed a man formed to live on and on and on unchanging for generations; he was so hard, so unyielding, so hale, so silent, so callous to all pain; it had ever seemed to her—and to the country round,—that death itself would never venture to come to wrestle with him. She stood amongst the red and the purple and the russet gold of the latest summer flowers in the mill-garden, where he had scourged her as a little child for daring to pause and cool her burning face in the sweetness of the white lilies. Could that ruthless arm be unnerved even by age or death—it seemed to her quite impossible.

All was quite still. Nothing stirred, except the silvery gnats of the morning, and the bees, and the birds in the leaves. There seemed a strange silence everywhere, and the great wheels stood still in the mill-water; never within the memory of any in that countryside had those wheels failed to turn at sunrise, unless locked by a winter-frost.

She hastened her steps, and went within. The clock ticked, the lean cat mewed; other sound there was none. She left her wooden shoes at the bottom step, and stole up the steep stairs. The woman Pitchou peered with a scared face out from her master's chamber.

"Where hast been all night?" she whispered in her grating voice; "thy grandsire lies a-dying."

"Dying?"

"Aye," muttered the old peasant. "He had a stroke yester'-night, as he came from the corn fair. They brought him home in the cart. He is as good as dead. You are glad."

"Hush!" muttered the girl fiercely; and she dropt down on the topmost step, and rested her head on her hands. She had nothing to grieve for; and yet there was that in the coarse congratulations which jarred on her and hurt her.

She thought on Manon Dax dead in the snow; she thought of the song-birds dead in the traps; she thought of the poor coming—coming—coming—through so many winters to beg bread, and going away with empty hands and burdened hearts, cursing God. Was this death-bed all their vengeance? It was poor justice, and came late.

Folle–Farine

Old Pitchou stood and looked at her.

"Will he leave her the gold or no?" she questioned in herself; musing whether or no it were better to be civil to the one who might inherit all his wealth, or might be cast adrift upon the world—who could say which?

After awhile Folle–Farine rose silently and brushed her aside, and went into the room.

It was a poor chamber; with a bed of straw and a rough bench or two, and a wooden cross with a picture of the Ascension hung above it. The square window was open, a knot of golden pear leaves nodded to and fro; a linnet sang.

On the bed Claudis Flamma lay; dead already, except for the twitching of his mouth, and the restless wanderings of his eyes. Yet not so lost to life but that he knew her at a glance; and, as she entered, glared upon her, and clenched his numbed hands upon the straw, and with a horrible effort in his almost lifeless limbs, raised the right arm, that alone had any strength or warmth left in it, and pointed at her with a shriek:

"She was a saint—a saint: God took her. So I said:—and was proud. While all the while man begot on her that!"

Then with a ghastly rattle in his throat, he quivered, and lay paralysed again; only the eyes were alive, and were still speaking—awfully.

Folle–Farine went up to his bed, and stood beside it, looking down on him.

"You mean—my mother?"

It was the first time that she had ever said the word. Her voice lingered on the word, as though loth to leave its unfamiliar sweetness.

He lay and looked at her, motionless, impatient, lifeless; save only for the bleak and bloodshot stare of the stony eyes.

She thought that he had heard; but he made no sign in answer.

She sank down on her knees beside his bed, and put her lips close to him.

"Try and speak to me of my mother—once—once," she murmured, with a pathetic longing in her voice.

A shudder shook his frozen limbs. He made no answer, he only glared on her with a terrible stare that might be horror, repentance, grief, memory, fear—she could not tell.

Old Pitchou stretched her head from the corner, as a hooded snake from its hole.

"Ask where the money is hid," she hissed in a shrill whisper. "Ask—ask—while he can yet understand."

He understood, for a smile grim and horrible disturbed his tight lips a moment.

Folle–Farine did not hear.

"Tell me of my mother;—tell me, tell me," she muttered. Since a human love had been born in her heart, she had thought often of that mother whose eyes had never looked on her, and whose arms had never held her.

Folle–Farine

His face changed, but he did not speak; he gasped for breath, and lay silent; his eyes troubled and confused; it might be that in that moment remorse was with him, and there arose the vain regrets of cruel years.

It might be that dying thus, he knew that from his hearth, as from hell, mother and child had both been driven whilst his lips had talked of God.

A little bell rang softly in the orchard below the casement; the clear voice of a young boy singing a canticle crossed the voice of the linnet; there was a gleam of silver in the sun. The Church bore its Host to the dying man.

They turned her from the chamber.

The eyes of one unsanctified might not gaze upon the mysteries of the blest.

She went out without resistance; she was oppressed and stupefied; she went to the stairs, and there sat down again, resting her forehead on her hands.

The door of the chamber was a little open, and she could hear the murmurs of the priest's words, and smell the odours of the sacred chrism. A great bitterness came on her mouth.

"One crust in love—to the poor—in the deadly winters, had been better worth than all this oil and prayer," she thought. And she could see nothing but the old famished face of Manon Dax in the snow and the moonlight, as the old woman had muttered, "God is good."

The offices of the Church ceased; there reigned an intense stillness; a stillness as of cold.

Suddenly the voice of Claudis Flamma rang out loud and shrill.

"I loved her! Oh Heaven! Thou knowest!"

She rose and looked through the space of the open door into the death–chamber.

He had sprung half erect, and with his arms outstretched, gazed at the gladness and the brightness of the day. In his eyes there was a mortal agony, a passion of reproach.

With one last supreme effort, he raised the crucifix which the priests had laid upon his bare anointed breast, and held it aloft, and shook it, and spat on it, and cast it forth from him broken on the ground.

Even Thou art a lie!" he cried—it was the cry of the soul leaving the body,—with the next moment he fell back—dead.

In that one cry his heat had spoken; the cold, hard heart that yet had shut one great love and one great faith in it, and losing these, had withered and shown no wound.

For what agony had been like unto his?

Since who could render him back on earth, or in the grave, that pure white soul he had believed in? Yea—who? Not man; not even God.

Therefore, had he suffered without hope.

Folle–Farine

She went away from the house and down the stairs, and out into the ruddy noon. She took her way by instinct to the orchard, and there sat down upon a moss–grown stone within the shadow of the leaves.

All sense was deadened in her under a deep unutterable pity.

From where she sat she could see the lattice window, and the gabled end of the chamber, where the linnet sang, and the yellow fruit of the pear–tree swung. All about was the drowsy hot weather of the fruit harvest; the murmur of bees; the sweep of the boughs in the water.

Never, in all the years that they had dwelt together beneath one roof, had any good word or fair glance been given her; he had nourished her on bitterness, and for his wage paid her a curse. Yet her heart was sore for him; and judged him without hatred.

All things seemed clear to her, now that a human love had reached her; and this man also, having loved greatly and been betrayed, became sanctified in her sight.

She forgot his brutality, his avarice, his hatred; she remembered only that he had loved, and I his love been fooled, and so had lost his faith in God and man, and had thus staggered wretchedly down the darkness of his life, hating himself and every other, and hurting every other human thing that touched him, and crying ever in his blindness, "O Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief!"

And now he was dead.

What did it matter?

Whether any soul of his lived again, or whether body and mind both died for ever, what would it benefit all those whom he had slain?—the little fair birds, poisoned in their song; the little sickly children, starved in the long winters; the miserable women, hunted to their grave for some small debt of fuel or bread; the wretched poor, mocked in their famine by his greed and gain?

It had been woe for him that his love had wronged him, and turned the hard excellence of his life to stone: but none the less had it been woe to them to fall and perish, because his hand would never spare, his heart would never soften.

Her heart was sick with the cold, bitter, and inexorable law, which had let this man drag out his seventy years, cursing and being cursed; and lose all things for a dream of God; and then at the last, upon his death–bed, know the dream likewise to be false.

"It is so cruel! It is so cruel!" she muttered, where she sat with dry eyes in the shade of the leaves, looking at that window where death was.

And she had reason.

For there is nothing so cruel in life as a Faith;—the Faith, whatever its name may be, that draws a man on all his years through on one narrow path, by one tremulous light, and then at the last, with a laugh—drowns him.

CHAPTER V.

THE summer day went by. No one sought her. She did not leave the precincts of the still mill–gardens; a sort of secrecy and stillness seemed to bind her footsteps there, and she dreaded to venture forth, lest she should meet the

Folle–Farine

eyes of Arslàn.

The notary had put seals upon all the cupboards and desks. Two hired watchers sat in the little darkened room above. Some tapers burned beside his bed. The great clock ticked heavily. All the house was closed. Without burned the great roses of the late summer, and the scorch of a cloudless sun. The wheels of the mill stood still. People came and went; many women amongst them. The death of the miller of Yprès was a shock to all his countryside. There was scarce a face that did not lighten, as the peasants going to their labour, met one another in the mellow fields, and called across,

"Hast heard? Flamma is dead—at last."

No woman came across the meadows with a little candle, and kneeled down by his body, and wept and blessed the stiff and withered hands for the good that they had wrought, and for the gifts that they had given.

The hot day—hours stole slowly by; all was noiseless there where she sat, lost in the stupefied pain of her thoughts; in the deep shadow of the leaves, where the first breath of the Autumn had gilded them and varied them, here and there, with streaks of red.

No one saw her; no one remembered her, no one came to her. She was left in peace, such peace as is the lot of those for whose sigh no human ear is open, for whose need no human hand is stretched.

Once indeed, at noonday, the old serving–woman sought her, and forced on her some simple meal of crusts and eggs.

"For who can tell?" the shrewd old Norman crone thought to herself, "who can tell? She may get all the treasure: who knows? And if so, it will be best to have been a little good to her this day, and to seem as if one had forgiven about the chain of coins."

For Pitchou, like the world at large, would pardon offences, if for pardon she saw a sure profit in gold.

"Whom will he have left all the wealth to, think you," the old peasant muttered, with a cunning glitter in her sunken eyes, standing by her at noon, in the solitude, where the orchards touched the mill–stream.

"The wealth, whose wealth?" Folle–Farine echoed the word stupidly. She had had no thought of the hoarded savings of that long life of theft and of oppression. She had had no remembrance of any possible inheritance which might accrue to her by this sudden death. She had been too long his goaded and galled slave to be able to imagine herself his heir.

"Aye, his wealth," answered the woman, standing against the water with her wooden shoes deep in dock–leaves and grass, gazing, with a curious eager grasping greed in her eyes, at the creature whom she always done her best to thwart, to hurt, to starve, and to slander. "Aye, his wealth. You, who look so sharp after your bits of heathen coins, cannot for sure pretend to forget the value he must have laid by, living as he lived all the days from his youth upward. There must be a rare mass of gold hid away somewhere or another—the notary knows, I suppose—it is all in the place, that I am sure. He was too wise ever to trust money far from home; he knew well it was a gad–about, that once you part with never comes back to you. It must be all in the secret places; in the thatch, under the hearthstone, in the rafters, under the bricks. And, maybe, there will be quite a fortune. He made so much, and he lived so near. Where think you it will go?"

A faint bitter smile flickered a moment over Folle–Farine's mouth.

"It should go to the poor. It belongs to them. It was all coined out of their hearts and their bodies."

Folle–Farine

"They you have no hope for yourself:—you?"

"I?"

She muttered the word dreamily; and raised her aching eyelids, and stared in stupefaction at the old, haggard, dark, ravenous face of Pitchou.

"Pshaw! You cannot cheat me that way," said the woman, moving away through the orchard–branches, muttering to herself. "As if a thing of hell like you ever served like a slave all these years, on any other hope, than the hope of the gold! Well,—as for me, I never pretend to lie in that fashion. If it had not been for the hope of a share in the gold, I would never have eaten for seventeen years the old wretch's mouldy crusts and lentil–washings."

She hobbled, grumbling on her way back to the house, through the russet shadows and the glowing gold of the orchards.

Folle–Farine sat by the water, musing on the future which had opened to her with the woman's words of greed.

Before another day had sped, it was possible,—so even said one who hated her, and begrudged her every bit and drop that she had taken at the miser's board—possible that she would enter into the heritage of all that this long life spent in rapacious greed and gain, had gathered together.

One night earlier, paradise itself would have seemed to open before her with such a hope; for she would have hastened to the feet of Arslàn, and there poured all treasure that chance might have given her, and would have cried out of the fulness of her heart, "Take, enjoy, be free do as you will. So that you make the world of men own your greatness, I will live as a beggar all the years of my life, and think myself richer than kings!"

But now, what use would it be, though she were called to an empire? She would not dare to say to him, as a day earlier she would have said with her first breath, "All that is mine, is thine."

She would not even dare to give him all and creep away unseen, unthanked, unhonoured into obscurity and oblivion, for had he not said, "You have no right to burden me with debt."

Yet as she sat there lonely amongst the grasses, with the great mill–wheels at rest in the water and the swallows skimming the surface, that was freed from the churn and the foam of the wheels as though the day of Flamma's death had been a saint's day, the fancy which had been set so suddenly before her, dazzled her, and her aching brain and her sick despair, could not choose but play with it despite themselves.

If the fortune of Flamma came to her, it might be possible, she thought, to spend it so as to release him from his bondage, without knowledge of his own; so to fashion with it a golden temple and a golden throne for the works of his hand, that the world, which as they all said worshipped gold, should be forced to gaze in homage on the creations of his mind and hand.

And yet he had said greater shame there could come to no man, than to rise by the aid of a woman. The apple of life, however sweet and fair in its colour and savour, would be as poison in his mouth if her hand held it. That she knew, and in the humility of her great and reverent love, she submitted without question to its cruelty.

At night, she went within to break her fast, and try to rest a little. The old peasant woman served her silently, and for the first time willingly. "Who can say?" the Norman thought to herself, "Who can say? She may yet get it all, who knows?"

At night as she slept, Pitchou peered at her, shading the light from her eyes.

Folle–Farine

"If only I could know who gets the gold?" she muttered. Her sole thought was the money; the money that the notary held under his lock and seal. She wished now that she had dealt better with the girl sometimes; it would have been safer, and it could have done no harm.

With earliest dawn Folle–Farine fled again to the refuge of the wood. She shunned, with the terror of a hunted doe, the sight of people coming and going, the priests and the gossips, the sights and the sounds, and none sought her.

All the day through she wandered in the cool dewy orchard ways.

Beyond the walls of the foilage, she saw the shrouded window, the flash of the crucifix, the throngs of the mourners, the glisten of the white robes. She heard the deep sonorous swelling of the chants; she saw the little precession come out from the doorway and cross the old wooden bridge, and go slowly through the sunlight of the meadows. Many of the people followed, singing, and bearing tapers; for he who was dead had stood well with the Church, and from such there still issues for the living a fair savour.

No one came to her. What had they to do with her? a creature unbaptised, and an outcast?

She watched the little line fade away, over the green and golden glory of the fields. She did not think of herself—since Arslàn had looked at her, in his merciless scorn, she had had neither past nor future.

It did not even occur to her, that her home would be in this place no longer; it was as natural to her, as its burrow to the cony, its hole to the fox. It did not occur to her, that the death of this her tyrant could not but make some sudden and startling change in all her ways and fortune.

She waited in the woods all day; it was so strange a sense to her to be free of the bitter bondage that had lain on her life so long; she could not at once arise and understand the meaning of her freedom; she was like a captive soldier, who had dragged the cannon–ball so long, that when it is loosened from his limb, the limb feels strange, and his step sounds unaccompanied.

She was thankful, too, for the tortured beasts, and the hunted birds; she fed them, and looked in their gentle eyes, and told them that they were free. But in her own heart one vain wish only ached—she thought—

"If only I might die for him;—as the reed for the god!"

The people returned, and then after awhile all went forth again; they and their priests with them. The place was left alone. The old solitude reigned; the sound of the wood–dove only filled the quiet.

The day grew on; in the orchards it was already twilight, whilst on the waters and in the open lands farther away the sun was bright. There was a wicket close by under the boughs: a bridle–path ran by, moss–grown, and little used, but leading from the public road beyond.

From the gleam of the twisted fruit trees a low flute–like noise came to her ear in the shadow of the solitude.

"Folle–Farine,—I go on your errand. If you repent there is time yet to stay me. Say—do you bid me still set your Norse–god free from the Cave of the Snakes?"

She, startled, looked up into the roofing of the thick foilage; she saw shining on her with a quiet smile the eyes which she had likened to the eyes of the Red Mouse. They scanned her gravely and curiously: they noted the change in her since the last sun had set.

Folle-Farine

"What did he say to you for your gold?" the old man asked.

She was silent; the blood of an intolerable shame burned in her face; she had not thought that she had betrayed her motive in seeking a price for her chain of coins.

He laughed a little softly.

"Ah! You fancied I did not know your design when you came so bravely to sell your Moorish dancing-gear. Oh, Folle-Farine!--female things, with eyes like yours, must never hope to keep a secret?"

She never answered; she had risen and stood rooted to the ground, her head hung down, her breast heaving, the blood coming and going in her intolerable pain, as though she flushed and frozen under a surgeon's probe.

"What did he say to you?" pursued her questioner. "There should be but one language possible from a man of his years to a woman of yours."

She lifted her eyes and spoke at last.

"He said that I did him a foul shame: the gold lies in the sands of the river."

She was strong to speak the truth inflexibly to the full; for its degradation to herself she knew was honour to the absent. It showed him strong and cold and untempted, preferring famine and neglect and misery to any debt or burden of a service done.

The old man, leaning on the wooden bar of the gate amongst the leaves, looked at her long and thoughtfully.

"He would not take your poor little pieces? You mean that?"

She gave a sign of assent.

"That was a poor reward to you, Folle-Farine!"

Her lips grew white and shut together.

"Mine was the fault," she muttered--"the folly. He was right, no doubt."

"You are very loyal. I think your Northern god was only thus cold because your gift was such a little one, Folle-Farine."

A strong light flashed on him from her eyes.

"It would have been the same if I had offered him an empire."

"You are so sure? Does he hate you then--this god of yours?"

She quivered from head to foot; but her courage would not yield, her faith would not be turned.

"Need a man hate the dust under his foot?" she muttered in her teeth; "Because it is a thing too lowly for him to think of as he walks."

"You are very truthful."

Folle-Farine

She was silent; standing there in the shadow of the great mill-timbers.

The old man watched her with calm approving eyes, as he might have watched a statue of bronze. He was a great man, a man of much wealth, of wide power, of boundless self-indulgence, of a keen serene wisdom, which made his passions docile ministers to his pleasure, and never allowed them any mastery over himself. He was studying the shape of her limbs, the hues of her skin, the lofty slender stature of her form, and the cloud of her hair that was like the golden gleaming mane of a young desert mare.

"All these in Paris," he was thinking. "Just as she is, with just the same bare feet and limbs, the same untrammelled gait, the same flash of scarlet round her loins, only to the linen tunic a hem of gold, and on the breast a flame of opals. Paris would say that even I had never in my many years done better. The poor barbarian! she sells her little brazen sequins, and thinks them her only treasure, whilst she has all that! Is Arslàn blind, or is he only tired?"

But he spake none of his thoughts aloud. He was too wary to scare the prey he meant to secure with any screams of the sped arrow, or any sight of the curled lasso.

"Well," he said, simply, "I understand; your eagle, in recompense for your endeavours to set him free, only tears your heart with his talons? It is the way of eagles. He has wounded you sorely. And the wound will bleed many a day."

She lifted her head.

"Have I complained?—have I asked your pity, or any man's?"

"Oh, no, you are very strong! So is a lioness; but she dies of a man's wound sometimes. He has been very base to you."

"He has done as he thought it right to do. Who shall lay blame on him for that?"

"Your loyalty says so ; you are very brave, no doubt. But tell me, do you still wish this man, who wounds you so cruelly, set free?"

"Yes."

"What, still?"

"Why not?"

"Why not? Only this: that once he is let loose your very memory will be shaken from his thoughts as the dust of the summer, to which you liken yourself, is shaken from his feet!"

"No doubt."

She thought she did not let him see the agony he dealt her; she stood unflinching, her hands crossed upon her breast, her head drooped, her eyes looking far from him to where the fading sunlight gleamed still upon the reaches of the river.

"No doubt," he echoed. "And yet I think you hardly understand. This man is a great artist. He has a great destiny, if he once can gain the eye and the ear of the world. The world will fear him, and curse him always; he is very merciless to it; but if he once conquer fame, that fame will be one to last as long as the earth lasts. That I believe.

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Well, give this man what he longs for and strives for, a life in his fame which shall not die so long as men have breath to speak of art. What will you be in that great drunken dream of his, if once we make it true for him? Not even a remembrance, Folle-Farine. For though you have fancied that you, by your beauty, would at least abide upon his canvas, and so go on to immortality with his words and name, you seem not to know that so much also will do any mime who lets herself for hire on a tavern stage, or any starveling who makes her daily bread by giving her face and form to a painter's gaze. Child! what you have thought noble, men and women have decreed one of the vilest means by which a creature traffics in her charms. The first lithe-limbed model that he finds in the cities will displace you on his canvas and in his memory. Shall he go free—to forget you?"

She listened dumbly; her attitude unchanging, as she had stood in other days, under the shadow of the boughs, to receive the stripes of her master.

"He shall be free—to forget me."

The words were barely audible, but they were inflexible, as they were echoed through her locked teeth.

The eyes of her tormentor watched her with a wondering admiration; yet he could not resist the pleasure of an added cruelty, as the men of the torture-chambers of old strained once more the fair fettered from of a female captive, that they might see a little longer those bright limbs quiver, and those bare nerves heave.

"Well; be it so if you will it. Only think long enough. For strong though you are, you are also weak; for you are of your mother's sex, Folle-Farine. You may repent. Think well. You are no more to him than your eponymus, the mill-dust. You have said so to yourself. But you are beautiful in your barbarism; and here you are always near him; and with a man who has no gold to give, a woman need have few rivals to fear. If his heart eat itself out here in solitude, soon or late, he will be yours, Folle-Farine. A man, be he what he will, cannot live long without some love, more or less, for some woman. A little while, and your Norse-god alone here, disappointed, embittered, friendless, galled by poverty, and powerless to escape, will turn to you, and find a sweetness on your lips, a balm in your embrace, an opium draught for an hour, at least, in that wonderful beauty of yours. A woman who is beautiful, and who has youth, and who has passion, need never fail to make a love-light beam in the eyes of a man, if only she know how to wait, if only she be the sole blossom that grows in his pathway, the sole fruit within the reach of his hands. Keep him here, and soon or late, out of sheer despair of any other paradise, he will make his paradise in your breast. Do you doubt? Child, I have known the world many years, but this one thing I have ever known to be stronger than any strength a man can bring against it to withstand it—this one thing which fate has given you, the bodily beauty of a woman."

His voice ceased softly in the twilight—this voice of Mephistopheles—which tempted her but for the sheer sole pleasure of straining this strength to see if it should break—of deriding this faith to see if it would bend—of alluring this soul to see if it would fall.

She stood abased in a piteous shame—the shame that any man should thus read her heart,—which seemed to burn and wither up all liberty, all innocence, all pride in her, and leave her a thing too utterly debased to bear the gaze of any human eyes, to bear the light of any noonday sun.

And yet the terrible sweetness of the words tempted her with such subtle force: the passions of a fierce, amorous race ran in her blood,—the ardour and the liberty of an outlawed and sensual people were bred with her flesh and blood,—to have been the passion-toy of the man she loved for one single day,—to have felt for one brief summer night his arms hold her and his kisses answer hers, she would have consented to die a hundred deaths in uttermost tortures when the morrow should have dawned, and would have died rejoicing, crying to the last breath,—

"I have lived: it is enough!"

Folle-Farine

He might be hers! The mere thought, uttered in another's voice, thrilled through her with a tumultuous ecstasy, hot as flame, potent as wine.

He might be hers—all her own—each pulse of his heart echoing hers, each breath of his lips spent on her own. He might be hers!—she hid her face upon her hands; a million tongues of fire seemed to curl about her and lap her life. The temptation was stronger than her strength.

She was a friendless, loveless, nameless thing, and she had but one idolatry and one passion, and for this joy that they set to her lips she would have given her body and her soul. Her soul—if the gods and man allowed her one—her soul and all her life, mortal and immortal, for one single day of Arslàn's love. Her soul, for ever, to any hell they would—but his?

Not for this had she sold her life to the gods—not for this; not for the raptures of passion, the trance of the senses, the heaven of self.

What she had sworn to them, if they saved him, was for ever to forget in him herself, to suffer dumbly for him, and, whensoever they would, in his stead to die.

"Choose," said the soft wooing voice of her tempter, while his gaze smiled on her through the twilight. "Shall he consume his heart here in solitude till he loves you perforce, or shall he go free amongst the cities of men, to remember you no more than he remembers the reeds by the river?"

The reeds by the river.

The chance words that he used, by the mere hazards of speech, cut the bonds of passion which were binding so close about her.

As the river reed to the god, so she had thought that her brief span of life might be to the immortality of his; was this the fulfilling of her faith? To hold him here with his strength in chains, and his genius perishing in darkness, that she, the thing of an hour, might know delight in the reluctant love, in the wearied embrace, of a man heart-sick and heart-broken?

She shook the deadly sweetness of the beguilement off her as she would have shaken an asp's coils off her wrist, and rose against it, and was once more strong.

"What have you to do with me?" she muttered, feebly, while the fierce glare of her eyes burned through the gloom of the leaves. "Keep your word; set him free. His freedom let him use—as he will."

Then, ere he could arrest her flight, she hand plunged into the depths of the orchards, and was lost in their flickering shadows.

Sartorian did not seek to pursue her. He turned and went thoughtfully and slowly back by the grass-grown footpath through the little wood, along by the river side, to the water-tower. His horses and his people waited near, but it suited him to go thither on this errand on foot and alone.

"The Red Mouse does not dwell in that soul as yet. That sublime unreason—that grand barbaric madness! And yet both will fall to gold, as that fruit falls to the touch," he thought, as he brushed a ripe yellow pear from the shelter of the reddening leaves, and watched it drop, and crushed it gently with his foot, and smiled as he saw that though so golden on the rind, and so white and so fragrant in the flesh, at the core was a rotten speck, in which a little black worm was twisting.

He had shaken it down from idleness; where he left it, crushed in the public pathway, a swarm of ants and flies soon crawled, and flew, and fought, and fastened, and fed on the fallen purity, which the winds had once tossed up to heaven, and the sun had once kissed into bloom.

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH the orchards, as his footsteps died away, there came a shrill scream on the silence, which only the sighing of the cushats had broken.

It was the voice of the old serving–woman, who called on her name from the porch.

In the old instinct, born of long obedience, she drew her self wearily through the tangled ways of the gardens and over the threshold of the house.

She had lost all remembrance of Flamma's death, and of the inheritance of his wealth. She only thought of those great and noble fruits of a man's genius which she had given up all to save; she only thought ceaselessly, in the sickness of her heart, "Will he forget?—forget quite—when he is free?"

The peasant standing in the porch with arms a–kimbo, and the lean cat rubbing ravenous sides against her shoes, peered forth from under the rich red leaves of the creepers that shrouded the pointed roof of the door–way.

Her wrinkled face was full of malignity; her toothless mouth smiled; her eyes were full of a greedy triumph. Before her was the shady, quiet, leafy garden, with the water running clear beneath the branches; behind her was the kitchen with its floor of tiles, its strings of food, its wood–piled hearth, its crucifix, and its images of saints.

She looked at the tired limbs of the creature whom she had always hated for her beauty and her youth; at the droop of the proud head, at the pain and the exhaustion which every line of the face and the form spoke so plainly; at the eyes which burned so strangely as she came through the grey pure air, and yet had such a look in them of sightlessness and stupor.

"She has been told," thought the old serving–woman. "She has been told, and her heart breaks for the gold."

The thought was sweet to her—precious with the preciousness of vengeance.

"Come within," she said, with a grim smile about her mouth. "I will give thee a crust and a drink of milk. None shall say I cannot act like a Christian; and tonight I will let thee rest here in the loft, but no longer. With the break of day thou shalt tramp. We are Christians here."

Folle–Farine looked at her with blind eyes, comprehending nothing that she spoke.

"You called me?" she asked, the old mechanical formula of servitude coming to her lips by sheer unconscious instinct.

"Ay, I called. I would have thee to know that I am mistress here now; and I will have no vile things gad about in the night so long as they eat of my bread. To–night thou shalt rest here, I say; so much will I do for sake of thy mother, though she was a foul light o'love; when all men deemed her a saint; but to–morrow thou shalt tramp. Such hell–spawn as thou art may not lie on a bed of holy church."

Folle–Farine gazed at her, confused and still, not comprehending; scarcely awake to the voice which thus adjured her; all her strength spent and bruised, after the struggle of the temptation which had assailed her.

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"You mean," she muttered, "you mean—What would you tell me? I do not know."

The familiar place reeled around her. The saints and the satyrs on the carved gables grinned on her horribly. The yellow house-leek on the roof seemed to her so much gold, which had a tongue, and muttered, "You prate of the soul. I alone am the soul of the world."

All the green, shadowy, tranquil ways grew strange to her; the earth shook under her feet; the heavens circled around her:—and Pitchou, looking on her, thought that she was stunned by the loss of the miser's treasure!

She!—in whose whole burning veins there ran only one passion, in whose crushed brain there was only one thought—"Will he forget—forget quite—when he is free?"

The old woman stretched her head forward, and cackled out eager, hissing, tumultuous words.

"Hast thou not heard? No? Well, see then. Some said you should be sent for, but the priest and I said No. Neither Law nor Church count the love-begotten. Flamma died worth forty thousand francs, set aside all his land and household things. God rest his soul! He was a man. He forgot my faithful service, true, but the good almoner will remember all that to me. Forty thousand francs! What a man! And hardly a nettled boiled in oil would he eat some days together. Where does this money go—eh, eh? Canst guess?"

"Go?"

Pitchou watched her grimly, and laughed aloud.

"Ah, ah! I know. So you dared to hope too? Oh fool! What thing did ever he hate as he hated your shadow on the wall? The money, and the lands, and the things—every coin, every inch, every crumb—is willed away to the Bishop, to the holy Bishop in the town yonder, to hold for the will of God and the glory of his kingdom. And masses will be said for his soul, daily, in the cathedral; and the gracious almoner has as good as said that the mill shall be let to Fraçvron, the baker, who is old and has no women to his house; and that I shall dwell here and manage all things, and rule Fraçvron, and end my days in the chimney corner. And I will stretch a point and let you lie in the hay to-night, but to-morrow you must tramp, for the devil's daughter and Holy Church will scarce go to roost together.

Folle-Farine heard her stupidly, and stupidly gazed around; she did not understand. She had never had any other home, and, in a manner, even in the apathy of a far greater woe, she clove to this place; to its familiarity, and its silences, and its old woodland ways.

"Go!"—she looked down through the aisles of the boughs dreamily; in a vague sense she felt the sharpness of desolation which repulses the creature whom no human heart desires, and whom no human voice bids stay.

"Yes. Go; and that quickly," said the peasant, with a sardonic grin. "I serve the Church now. It is not for me to harbour such as thee; nor is it fit to take the bread of the poor and the pious to feed lips as accursed as are thine. Thou may'st lie here to-night—I would not be over harsh—but tarry no longer. Take a sup and a bit, and to bed. Dost hear?"

Folle-Farine, without a word in answer, turned on her heel and left her.

The old woman watched her shadow pass across the threshold, and away down the garden paths between the green lines of the clipped box, and vanish beyond the fall of drooping fig boughs and the walls of ivy and of laurel; then with a chuckle she poured out her hot coffee, and sat in her corner and made her evening meal well pleased; comfort was secured her for the few years which she had to live, and she was revenged for the loss of the

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sequins.

"How well it is for me that I went to mass every Saint's day," she thought, foreseeing easy years and plenty under the rule of the Church and of old deaf Françvron the baker.

Folle–Farine mounted the wooden ladder to the hayloft which had been her sleeping–chamber, there took the little linen and the few other garments which belonged to her, folded them together in her winter sheep–skin, and sent down the wooden steps once more, and out of the mill–garden across the bridge into the woods.

She had no fixed purpose even for the immediate hour; she had not even a tangible thought for her future. She acted on sheer mechanical impulse, like one who does sane things unconsciously, walking abroad in the trance of sleep. That she was absolutely destitute scarcely bore any sense to her. She had never realised that this begrudged roof and scanty fare, which Flamma had bestowed on her, had, wretched though they were, yet been all the difference between home and homelessness—between existence and starvation.

She wandered on aimlessly through the woods.

She paused a moment on the river's edge, and turned and looked back at the mill and the house. From where she stood, she could see its brown gables and its peaked roof rising from masses of orchard foilage, and green garden leaves; further round it, closed the dark belt of the deep chestnut woods.

She looked; and great salt tears rushed into her hot eyes and blinded them.

She had been hated by those who dwelt there, and had there known only pain, and toil, and blows, and bitter words. And yet the place itself was dear to her; its homely and simple look, its quiet garden ways, its dells of leafy shadow, its bright and angry waters, its furred and feathered creatures that gave it life and loveliness,—these had been her consolations often,—these, in a way, she loved.

Such as it was, her life had been bound up with it; and though often its cool pale skies and level lands had been a prison to her, yet her heart clove to it in this moment when she left it—for ever. She looked once at it long and lingeringly, full in the light of the rising sun; then turned and went on her way.

She walked slowly through the cool evening shadows, while the birds fluttered about her head. She did not comprehend the terrible fate that had befallen her. She did not think that it was horrible to have no canopy but the clear sky, and no food but the grain rubbed from the ripe wheat–ears.

The fever of conscious passion which had been born in her, and the awe of the lonely death that she had witnessed, were on her too heavily, and with too dreamy and delirious an absorption, to leave any room in her thoughts for the bodily perils or the bodily privations of her fate.

Some vague expectancy of some great horror, she knew not what, was on her. She was as in a trance, her brain was giddy, her eyes blind. Though she walked straightly, bearing her load upon her head, on and on as through the familiar paths, she yet had no goal, no sense of what she meant to do, or whither she desired to go.

The people were still about, going from their work in the fields, and their day at the town–market, to their homesteads and huts. Every one of them cast some word at her. For the news had spread by sunset over all the country–side that Flamma's treasures were gone to holy Church.

They were spoken in idleness, but they were sharp, flouting, merciless arrows of speech, that struck her hardly as the speakers cast them, and laughed, and passed by her. She gave no sign that she heard, not by so much as the quiver of a muscle or the glance of an eye; but she, nevertheless, was stung by them to the core. For they showed

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her how worthless and friendless a thing had dared to dream that she might be of service to the life of Arslàn.

Not one of them, man or boy, but made a mock of her as they trooped by through the purpling leaves or the tall seed-grasses. Not one of them, mother or maiden, that gave a gentle look at her, paused to remember that she was homeless, and knew no more where to lay her head that night than any sick hart driven from its kind.

She met many in the soft grey and golden evening, in the fruit-hung ways, along the edge of the meadows; fathers with their little children running by them, laden with plumes of night-shade; mothers bearing their youngest born before them on the high sheepskin saddle; young lovers talking together as they drove the old cow to her byre; old people counting their market gains cheerily; children paddling knee-deep in the brooks for cresses. None of them had a kindly glance for her;—all had a flouting word. There was not one who offered her so much as a draught of milk; not one who wished her so much as a brief good-night.

"She will quit the country now; that is one good thing," she heard many of them say of her. And they spoke of Flamma, and praised him; saying, how pure as myrrh in the nostrils was the death of one who feared God.

The night came on nearer; the ways grew more lonely; the calf bleating sought its dam, the sheep folded down close together, the lights came out under the lowly roofs; now and then from some open window in the distance there came the sound of voices singing together; now and then there fell across her path two shadows turning one to the other.

She only was alone.

What did she seek to do?

She paused on a little slip of moss-green timber that crossed the water in the open plain, and looked down at herself in the shining stream. None desired her—none remembered her; none said to her, "Stay with us a little, for love's sake."

"Surely I must be vile as they say, that all are against me!" she thought; and she pondered wearily in her heart where her sin against them could lie.

That brief delirious trance of joy that had come to her with the setting of the last day's sun, had with the sun sunk away. The visions which had haunted her sleep under the thorn-tree whilst the thrush sang, had been killed under the cold and bitterness of the waking world. She wondered, while her face grew red with shame, what she had been mad enough to dream of in that sweet, cruel slumber. For him—she felt that sooner than again look upward to his eyes she would die by a thousand deaths.

What was she to him?—a barbarous, worthless, and unlovely thing, whose very service was despised, whose very sacrifice was condemned.

"I would live as a leper all the days of my life, if, first, I might be fair in his sight one hour!" she thought; and she was unconscious of horror or of impiety in the ghastly desire, because she had but one religion, this—her love.

She crossed the little bridge, and sat down to rest on the root of an old oak on the edge of the fields of poppies.

The evening had fallen quite. There was a bright moon on the edge of the plain. The cresset lights of the cathedral glowed through the dusk. All was purple and grey and still. There were the scents of heavy earths and wild thymes and the breath of grazing herds. The little hamlets were but patches of darker shade on the soft brown shadows of the night. White sea-mists, curling and rising chased each other over the dim world.

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She sat motionless, leaning her head upon her hand.

She could not weep, as other creatures could. The hours drew on. She had no home to go to; but it was not for this that she sorrowed.

Afar off, a step trod down the grasses. A hawk rustled through the gloom. A rabbit fled across the path. The boughs were put aside by a human hand; Arslàn came out from the darkness of the woods before her.

With a sharp cry she sprang to her feet and fled, on one passionate reasonless instinct to hide herself for ever and for ever from the only eyes she loved.

Before her was the maze of the poppy–fields. In the moonlight their blossom, so gorgeous at sunset or at noon, lost all their scarlet gaud and purple pomp, and drooped like discrowned kings stripped bare in the midnight of calamity.

Their colourless flowers writhed and twined about her ankles. Her brown limbs glistened in the gleam from the skies. She tightened her red girdle round her loins and ran, as a doe runs to reach the sanctuary.

Long withes of trailing grasses, weeds that grew amongst the grasses, caught her fleet feet and stopped her. The earth was wet with dew. A tangle of boughs and brambles filled the path. For once, her sure steps failed her. She faltered and fell.

Ere he could touch her, she rose again. The scent of the wet leaves was in her hair. The rain–drops glistened on her feet. The light of the stars seemed in her burning eyes. Around her were the gleam of the night, the scent of the flowers, the smell of the woods. On her face the moon shone.

She was like a creature born from the freshness of dews, from the odour of foilage, from the hues of the clouds, from the foam of the brooks, from all things of the woods and the water. In that moment she was beautiful with the beauty of women.

"If only she could content me!" he thought. If only he cared for the song of the reed by the river!

But he cared nothing at all for anything that lived; and a pursuit that was passionless of a thing that was helpless, seemed to him base; and his feet were set on a stony and narrow road where he would not encumber his strength with a thing of her sex, lest the burden should draw him backward one rood on his way.

He had never loved her; he never would love her; his eyes were awake to her beauty, indeed, and his reason owned it beyond all usual gifts of her sex. But his senses remained cold to it: he had used it in the service of his art, and therein had scrutinised, and pourtrayed, and debased it, until it had lost to him all that fanciful sanctity, all that half–mysterious charm, which arouse the passion of love in a man to a woman.

So he let her be, and stood by her in the dusk of the night with no light in his own eyes.

"Do not fly from me," he said to her. "I have sought you, to ask your forgiveness, and—"

She stood silent, her head bent; her hands were crossed upon her chest in the posture habitual to her under any pain; her face was shrouded in the shadow; her little bundles of clothes had dropped on the grasses, and was hidden by them. Of Flamma's death and of her homelessness he had heard nothing.

"I was harsh to you," he said, gently. "I spoke, in the bitterness of my heart, unworthily. I was stung with a great shame;—I forgot that you could not know. Can you forgive?"

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"The madness was mine," she muttered. "It was I, who forgot—"

Her voice was very faint, and left her lips with effort; she did not look up; she stood bloodless, breathless, swaying to and fro, as a young tree which has been cut through near the root sways ere it falls. She knew well what his words would say.

"You are generous, and you shame me—indeed—thus," he said with a certain softness as of unwilling pain in his voice which shook its coldness and serenity.

This greatness in her, this wondrous faithfulness to himself, this silence, which bore all wounds from his hand, and was never broken to utter one reproach against him, these moved him. He could not choose but see that this nature, which he bruised and forsook, was noble beyond any common nobility of any human thing.

"I have deserved little at your hands, and you have given me much," he said slowly. "I feel base and unworthy; for—I have sought you to bid you farewell."

She had awaited her death-blow; she received its stroke without a sound.

She did not move, nor cry out, nor make any sign of pain, but standing there her form curled within itself, as a withered fern curls, and all her beauty changed like a fresh flower that is held in a flame.

She did not look at him; but waited, with her head bent, and her hands crossed on her breast as a criminal waits for his doom.

His nerve nearly failed him; his heart nearly yielded. He had no love for her; she was nothing to him. No more than any one of the dark, nude, savage women who had sat to this art on the broken steps of ruined Temples of the Sun; or the antelope-eyed creature of desert and plain who had come before him in the light of the East, and had passed as the shadows passed, and, like them, were forgotten.

She was nothing to him. And yet he could not choose but think—all this mighty love, all this majestic strength, all this superb and dreamy loveliness, would die out here, as the evening colours had died out of the skies in the west, none pausing even to note that they were dead.

He knew that he had but to say to her, "Come!" and she would go beside him, whether to shame or ignominy, or famine or death, triumphant and rejoicing as the martyrs of old went to the flames, which were to them the gates of paradise.

He knew that there would not be a blow his hand could deal which could make her deem him cruel; he knew that there would be no crime which he could bid her commit for him which would not seem to her a virtue; he knew that for one hour of his love she would slay herself by any death he told her; he knew that the deepest wretchedness lived through by his side would be sweeter and more glorious than any kingdom of the world or heaven. And he knew well that to no man is it given to be loved twice with such love as this.

Yet,—he loved not her; and he was, therefore, strong, and he drove the death-stroke home, with pity, with compassion, with gentleness, yet surely home—to the heart.

"A stranger came to me an hour or more ago," he said to her; and it seemed even to him as though he slew a life godlier and purer and stronger than his own,—an old man, who gave no name. I have seen his face—far away, long ago—I am not sure. The memory is too vague. He seemed a man of knowledge, and a man critical and keen. That study of you—the one amongst the poppies,—you remember—took his eyes and pleased him. He bore it away with him, and left in its stead a roll of paper money—money enough to take me back amongst men—to set

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me free for a little space. Oh, child! you have seen—this hell on earth kills me. It is a death in life. It has made me brutal to you sometimes; sometimes I must hurt something, or go mad."

She was silent; her attitude had not changed, but all her loveliness was like one of the poppies that his foot had trodden on, discoloured, broken, ruined. She stood as though changed to a statue of bronze.

He looked on her, and knew that no creature had ever loved him as this creature had loved. But of love he wanted nothing,—it was weariness to him; all he desired was power amongst men.

"I have been cruel to you," he said, suddenly. "I have stung and wounded you often. I have dealt with your beauty as with this flower under my foot. I have had no pity for you. Can you forgive me ere I go?"

"You have no sins to me," she made answer to him. She did not stir; nor did the deadly calm on her face change; but her voice had a harsh metallic sound, like the jar of a bell that is broken.

He was silent also. The coldness and the arrogance of his heart were pained and humbled by her pardon of them. He knew that he had been pitiless to her—with a pitilessness less excusable than that which is born of the fierceness of passion and the idolatrous desires of the senses. Man would have held him blameless here, because he had forborn to pluck for his own this red and gold reed in the swamp; but he himself knew well that, nevertheless, he had trodden its life out, and so bruised it, as he went, that never would any wind of heaven breathe music through its shattered grace again.

"When do you go?" she asked. Her voice had still the same harsh broken sound in it. She did not lift the lids of her eyes; her arms were crossed upon her breast;—all the ruins of the trampled poppy-blossom were about her, blood-red as a field where men have fought and died.

He answered her, "At dawn."

"And where?"

"To Paris. I will find fame—or a grave."

A long silence fell between them.

The church chimes, far away in the darkness, tolled the ninth hour. She stood passive, colourless as the poppies were, bloodless from the thick, dull beating of her heart. The purple shadow and the white stars swam around her. Her heart was broken; but she gave no sign. It was her nature to suffer to the last in silence.

He looked at her, and his own heart softened; almost he repented him.

He stretched his arms to her, and drew her into them, and kissed the dew-laden weight of her hair, and the curling lithe from, whence all warmth had died, and the passionate loveliness, which was cast to him, to be folded in his bosom or thrust away by his foot—as he chose.

"Oh, child, forgive me, and forget me," he murmured. "I have been base to you,—brutal, and bitter, and cold oftentimes;—yet I would have loved you, if I could. Love would have been youth, folly, oblivion; all the nearest likeness that men get of happiness on earth. But love is dead in me, I think, otherwise—"

She burned like fire, and grew cold as ice in his embrace. Her brain reeled; her sight was blind. She trembled as she had never done under the sharpest throes of Flamma's scourge.

Folle-Farine

Suddenly she cast her arms about his throat, and clung to him, and kissed him in answer with that strange, mute, terrible passion with which the lips of the dying kiss the warm and living face that bends above them, on which they know they never again will rest.

Then she broke from him, and sprang into the maze of the moonlit fields, and fled from him like a stag that bears its death—shot in it, and knows it, and seeks to hide itself and die unseen.

He pursued her, urged by a desire that was cruel, and a sorrow that was tender. He had no love for her; and yet—now that he had thrown her from him for ever—he would fain have felt those hot mute lips tremble again in their terrible eloquence upon his own.

But he sought her in vain. The shadows of the night hid her from him.

He went back to his home alone.

"It is best so," he said to himself.

For the life that lay before him he needed all his strength, all his coldness, all his cruelty. And she was only a frail female thing—a reed of the river, songless, and blown by the wind as the rest were.

He returned to his solitude, and lit his lamp, and looked on the creations which alone he loved.

"They shall live,—or I will die," he said in his own heart. With the war to which he went what had any amorous toy to do?

That night Hermes had no voice for him.

Else might the wise god had said, "Many reeds grow together by the river, and men tread them at will, and none are the worse. But in one reed of a million song is hidden; and when a man carelessly breaks that reed in twain, he may miss its music often and long,—yea, all the years of his life."

But Hermes that night spake not.

And he brake his reed, and cast it behind him.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN the dawn came, it found her lying face downward among the rushes by the river. She had run on, and on, and on blindly, not knowing where she fled, with the strange force which despair lends; then suddenly had dropped, as a young bull drops in the circus with the steel sheathed in its brain. There she had remained insensible, the blood flowing a little from her mouth.

It was quite lonely by the waterside. A crane among the sedges, an owl on the wind, a water-lizard under the stones, such were the only moving things. It was in a solitary bend of the stream; its banks were green and quiet; there were no dwellings near; and there was no light anywhere, except the dull glow of the lamp above the Calvary.

No one found her. A young fox came and smelt at her, and stole frightened away. That was all. A sharp wind rising with the reddening of the east blew on her, and recalled her to consciousness after many hours. When her eyes at length opened, with a blank stare upon the greyness of the shadows, she lifted herself a little and sat still,

Folle-Farine

and wondered what had chanced to her.

The first rays of the sun rose over the dim blue haze of the horizon. She looked at it and tried to remember, but failed. Her mind was sick and dull.

A little beetle, green and bronze, climbed in and out amongst the sand of the river-shore; her eyes vacantly followed the insect's aimless circles. She tried to think, and could not; her thoughts went feebly and madly round and round, round and round, as the beetle went in his maze of sand. It was all so grey, so still, so chill, she was afraid of it. Her limbs were stiffened by the exposure and dews of the night. She shivered and was cold.

The sun rose—a globe of flame above the edge of the world.

Memory flashed on her with its light.

She rose a little, staggering and blind, and weakened by the loss of blood; she crept feebly to the edge of the stream, and washed the stains from her lips, and let her face rest a little in the sweet, silent, flowing water.

Then she sat still amidst the long rush-like grass, and thought, and thought, and wondered why life was so tough and merciless a thing, that it would ache on, and burn on, and keep misery awake to know itself even when its death-blow had been dealt, and the steel was in its side.

She was still only half sensible of her wretchedness. She was numbed by weakness, and her brain seemed deadened by a hot pain, that shot through it as with tongues of flame.

The little beetle at her feet was busied in a yellower soil than sand. He moved round and round in a little dazzling heap of coins, and trembling paper thin as gauze. She saw it without seeing for awhile; then, all at once, a knowledge flashed on her. She saw that the money had fallen from her tunic. She guessed the truth—that in his last embrace he had slid into her bosom half that sum whereof he had spoken as the ransom which had set him free.

Her bloodless face grew scarlet with an immeasurable shame. She would have suffered far less if he had killed her.

He who denied her love to give her gold!

Better that, when he had kissed her, he had covered her eyes softly with one hand, and with the other driven his knife straight through the white warmth of her breast.

The sight of the gold stung her like a snake.

Gold!—such wage as men flung to the painted harlots gibing at the corners of the streets!

The horror of the humiliation filled her with loathing of herself. Unless she had become shameful in his sight, she thought, he could not have cast this shame upon her.

She gathered herself slowly up, and stood and looked with blind aching eyes at the splendour of the sunrise.

Her heart was breaking.

Her one brief dream of gladness was severed sharply, as with a sword, and killed for ever.

Folle-Farine

She did not reason—all thought was stunned with her; but as a woman, who loves looking on the face she loves, will see sure death written there long ere any other can detect it, so she knew, by the fatal and unerring instinct of passion, that he was gone from her as utterly and as eternally as though his grave had closed on him.

She did not even in her own heart reproach him. Her love for him was too perfect to make rebuke against him possible to her. Had he not a right to go as he would, to do as he chose, to take her or leave her, as best might seem to him? Only he had no right to shame her with what he had deemed shame to himself; no right to insult what he had slain.

She gathered herself slowly up, and took his money in her hand, and went along the river bank.

Whither?

She had no knowledge at first; but, as she moved against the white light and the cool currents of the morning air, her brain cleared a little. The purpose which had risen in her slowly matured and strengthened; without its sustenance she would have sunk down and perished, like a flower cut at the root.

Of all the world that lay beyond the pale of those golden and russet orchards and scarlet lakes of blowing poppies she had no more knowledge than the lizard at her feet.

Cities, he had often said, were as fiery furnaces that consumed all youth and innocence which touched them: for such as she to go to them was, he had often said, to cast a luscious and golden peach of the summer into the core of a wasp's nest. Nevertheless, her mind was resolute to follow him,—to follow him unknown by him; so that, if his footsteps turned to brighter paths, her shadow might never fall across his ways; but so that, if need were, if failure still pursued him, and by failure came misery and death, she would be there beside him, to share those fatal gifts which none would dispute with her or grudge.

To follow him was to her an instinct as natural and as irresistible as it is to the dog to track his master's wanderings.

She would have starved ere she would have told him that she hungered. She would have perished by the roadside ere ever she would have cried to him that she was homeless. She would have been torn asunder for a meal by wolves ere she would have bought safety or succour by one coin of that gold he had slid in her bosom, like the wages of a thing that was vile.

But to follow him she never hesitated: unless this had been possible to her, she would have refused to live another hour. The love in her, at once savage and sublime, at once strong as the lion's rage and humble as the camel's endurance, made her take patiently all wrongs at his hands, but made her powerless to imagine a life in which he was not.

She went slowly now through the country, in the hush of the waking day.

He had said that he would leave at dawn.

In her unconscious agony of the night gone by, she had run far and fast ere she had fallen; and now, upon her waking, she had found herself some league from the old mill-woods, and further yet from the tower on the river where he dwelt.

She was weak, and the way seemed very long to her; ever and again, too, she started aside and hid herself, thinking each step were his. She wanted to give him back his gold, yet she felt as though one look of his eyes would kill her.

Folle–Farine

It was long, and the sun was high, ere she had dragged her stiff and feeble limbs through the long grasses of the shore and reached the ruined granary. Crouching down, and gazing through the spaces in the stones from which so often she had watched him, she saw at once that the place was desolate.

The great Barabbas, and the painted panels and canvases, and all the pigments and tools and articles of an artist's store, were gone: but the figures on the walls were perforce left there to perish. The early light fell full upon them, sad and calm and pale, living their life upon the stone.

She entered and looked at them.

She loved them greatly; it pierced her heart to leave them there—alone.

The bound Helios working at the mill, with white Hermes watching, mute and content,—Persephone crouching in the awful shadow of the dread winged King,—the Greek youths, with doves in their breasts and golden apples in their hands,—the women dancing upon Cithæron, in the moonlight,—the young gladiator wrestling with the Libyan lion,—all the familiar shapes and stories that made the grey walls teem with the old sweet life of the heroic times, were there—left to the rat and the spider, the dust and the damp, the slow, sad death of a decay which no heart would sorrow for, nor any hand arrest.

The days would come and go, the suns would rise and set, the nights would fall, and the waters flow, and the great stars throb above in the skies, and they would be there—alone.

To her they were living things, beautiful and divine; they were bound up with all the hours of her love; and at their feet she had known the one brief dream of ecstasy that had sprung up for her, great and golden as the prophet's gourd, and as the gourd in a night had withered.

She held them in a passionate tenderness—these, the first creatures who had spoken to her with a smile, and had brought light in to the darkness of her life. She flung herself on the ground and kissed its dust, and prayed for them in an agony of prayer—prayed for them that the hour might come, and come quickly, when men would see the greatness of their maker, and would remember them, and seek them, and bear them forth in honour and in worship to the nations. She prayed in an agony; prayed blindly, and to whom she knew not; prayed, in the sightless instinct of the human heart, towards some greater strength which could bestow at once retribution and consolation.

Nor was it so much for him as for them that she thus prayed: in loving them she had reached the pure and impersonal passion of the artist. To have them live, she would have given her own life.

Then the bonds of her torment seemed to be severed; and, for the first time, she fell into a passion of tears, and stretched there on the floor of the forsaken chamber, wept as women weep upon a grave.

When she arose, at length, she met the eyes of Hypnos and Oneiros and Thanatos—the gentle gods who give forgetfulness to men.

They were her dear gods, her best beloved and most compassionate; yet their looks struck coldly to her heart.

Sleep, Dreams, and Death,—were these the only gifts with which the gods, being merciful, could answer prayer?

BOOK VI. "Dust to dust."

CHAPTER I.

AT the little quay in the town many boats were lading and unlading, and many setting their sails to go southward with their loads of eggs or of birds, of flowers, of fruit or of herbage; all smelling of summer rain and the odours of freshly ploughed earths turned up with the nest of the lark and the root of the cowslip laid bare in them.

She lost herself in its little busy crowd, and learned what she needed without any asking, in turn, question of her.

Arslàn had sailed at sunrise.

There was a little boat, with an old man in it, loaded with Russian violets from a flower–farm.

The old man was angered and in trouble: the lad who steered for him had failed him, and the young men and boys on the canals were all too busy to be willing too the voyage for the wretched pittance he offered. She heard, and leaned towards him.

"Do you go the way to Paris?"

The old man nodded.

"I will steer for you, then," she said to him; and leaped down amongst his fragrant freight. He was a stranger to her, and let her be. She did for him as well as another, since she said that she knew those waters well.

He was in haste, and, without more words, he loosened his sail, and cut his moor–rope, and set his little vessel adrift down the water–ways of the town, the violets filling the air with their odours and blue as the eyes of a child that wakes smiling.

All the old familiar streets, all the dusky gateways and dim passages, all the ropes on which the lanterns and the linen hung, all the wide carved stairways water–washed, all the dim windows that the women filled with pots of ivy and the song of birds,—she was drifting from them with every pulse of the tide, never again to return; but she looked at them without seeing them, indifferent, and having no memory of them; her brain, and her heart, and her soul were with the boat that she followed.

It was the day of the weekly market.

The broad flat–bottomed boats were coming in at sunrise, in each some cargo of green food or of farm produce: a strong girl rowing with bare arms, and the sun catching the white glint of her head–gear. Boys with coils of spotted birds' eggs, children with lapsful of wood–gathered primroses, old women nursing a wicker cage of cackling hens or hissing geese, mules and asses, shaking their bells and worsted tassels, bearing their riders high on sheepskin saddles,—these all went by her on the river, or on the towing–path, or on the broad high road that ran for a space by the water's edge.

All of these knew her well; all of these sometime of another had jeered her, jostled her, flouted her, or fled from her. But no one stopped her. No one cared enough for her to care even to wonder where she went.

She glided out of the town, and along the banks she knew so well, and passed the wood and the orchards of Yprès. But what at another time would have had pain for her, and held her with the bonds of a sad familiarity, now scarcely moved her. One great grief and one great passion had drowned all these lesser woes, and scorched to ashes all slighter memories.

Folle-Farine

All day long they sailed.

At noon the old man gave her a little fruit and a crust as part of her wage; she tried to eat them, knowing she would want all her strength.

They left the course of the stream that she knew, and sailed further than she had ever sailed; passed towns whose bells were ringing, and noble bridges gleaming in the sun, and water-mills black and gruesome, and bright orchards and vineyards heavy with the promise of fruit. She knew none of them. There were only the water flowing under the keel, and the blue sky above, with the rooks circling in it, which had the look of friends to her.

The twilight fell; still the wind served, and still they held on; the mists came, white and thick, and stars rose, and the voices from the shores sounded strangely, with here and there a note of music or the deep roll of a drum.

So she drifted out of the old life into an unknown world. But she never once looked back. Why should she?—He had gone before.

When it was quite night, they drew near to a busy town, whose lights glittered by hundreds and thousands on the bank. There were many barges and small boats at anchor in its wharves, hanging out lanterns at their mast-heads.

The old man bade her steer his boat amongst them, and with a cord he made it fast.

"This is Paris?" she asked, breathlessly.

The old man laughed.

"Paris is days' sail away."

"I asked you if you went to Paris?"

The old man laughed again.

"I said I came the Paris way. So I have done. Land."

Her face set with an anger that made him wince, dull though his conscience was.

"You cheated me," she said, briefly; and she climbed the boat's side, and shaking the violets off her, set her foot upon the pier, not stooping to waster more words.

But a great terror fell on her.

She had thought that the boat would bring her straight to Paris; and, once in Paris, she had thought that it would be as easy to trace his steps as it had been in the little town that she had left. She had had no sense of distance—no knowledge of the size of cities; the width, and noise, and hurry, and confusion of this one waterside town made her helpless and stupid.

She stood like a young lost dog upon the flags of the landing-place, not knowing whither to go, nor what to do.

The old man, busied in unlading his violets into the wicker kreels of the women waiting for them, took no notice of her. He had used her so long as he had wanted her.

Folle-Farine

There were incessant turmoil, outcry, and uproar round the landing—stairs, where large cargoes of beetroot, cabbages, and fish were being put on shore. The buyers and the sellers screamed and swore; the tawny light of oil-lamps flickered over their furious faces; the people jostled her, pushed her, cursed her, for being in the way. She shrank back in bewilderment and disgust, and walked feebly away from the edge of the river, trying to think, trying to get back her old health and her old force.

The people of the streets were too occupied to take any heed of her. Only one ragged little boy danced before her a moment, shrieking, "The gipsy! the gipsy! Good little fathers, look to your pockets!"

But she was too used to the language of abuse to be moved by it. She went on, as though she were deaf, through the yelling of the children and the chattering and chaffering of the trading multitude.

There was a little street leading off the quay, picturesque and ancient, with parquetted houses and quaint painted signs; at the corner of it sat an old woman on a wooden stool, with a huge fan of linen on her head like a mushroom. She was selling roasted chestnuts by the glare of a little horn lantern.

By this woman she paused, and asked the way to Paris.

"Paris! This is a long way from Paris."

"How far—to walk?"

"That depends. My boy went up there on foot last summer; he is a young fool, blotting and messing with ink and paper, while he talks of being a great man, and sups with the rats in the sewers! He, I think, was a week walking it. It is pleasant enough in fair weather. But you—you are a gipsy. Where are your people?"

"I have no people."

She did not know even what this epithet of gipsy, which they so often cast at her, really meant. She remembered the old life of the Liébana, but she did not know what manner of life it had been; and since Phratos had left her there, no one of his tribe or of his kind had been seen in the little Norman town among the orchards.

The old woman grinned, trimming her lantern.

"If you are too bad for them, you must be bad indeed! You will do very well for Paris, no doubt."

And she began to count her chestnuts, lest this stranger should steal any of them.

Folle-Farine took no notice of the words.

"Will you show me which is the road to take?" she asked. Meanwhile the street boy had brought three or four of his comrades to stare at her; and they were dancing round her with grotesque grimace, and singing, "Houpe là, Houpe là! Burn her for a witch!"

The woman directed her which roads to go as well as she could for the falling darkness, and she thanked the woman and went. The street children ran at her heels like little curs, yelling and hissing foul language; but she ran too, and was swifter than they, and outstripped them, the hardy training of her limbs standing her in good service.

How far she ran, or what streets she traversed, she could not tell; the chestnut-seller had said. "Leave the pole-star behind you," and the star was shining behind her always, and she ran south steadily.

Folle-Farine

Great buildings, lighted casements, high stone walls, groups of people, troopers drinking, girls laughing, men playing dominoes in the taverns, women chattering in the coffee-houses, a line of priests going to a death-bed with the bell ringing before the Host, a line of soldiers filing through great doors as the drums beat the return into barracks,—thousands of these pictures glowed in her path a moment, with the next to fade and give place to others. But she looked neither to the right or left, and held on straightly for the south.

Once or twice a man halloed after her, or a soldier tried to stop her. Once, going through the gateway in the southern wall, a sentinel challenged her, and levelled his bayonet only a second too late. But she eluded them all by the swiftness of her apparition, and she got out safe beyond the barriers of the town, and on to the road that led to the country,—a road quiet and white in the moonlight, and bordered on either side with the tall poplars and the dim, bare, reaped fields which looked to her like dear familiar friends.

It was lonely, and she sat down on a stone by the wayside and rested. She had no hesitation in what she was doing. He had gone south, and she would go likewise; that she might fail to find him there, never occurred to her. Of what a city was she had not yet any conception; her sole measurement of one was the little towns whither she had driven the mules to sell the fruits and the fowls for Flamma.

To have been cheated of Paris, and to find herself thus far distant from it appalled her, and made her heart sink.

But it had no power to make her hesitate in the course she took. She had no fear and no doubt: the worst thing that could have come to her had come already; the silence and the strength of absolute despair were on her.

Besides, a certain thrill of liberty was on her. For the first time in all her life she was absolutely free, with the freedom of the will and of the body both.

She was no longer captive to one place, bondslave to one tyranny; she was no longer driven with curses and commands, and yoked and harnessed every moment of her days. To her, with the blood of a tameless race in her, there was a certain force and elasticity in this deliverance from bondage, that lifted some measure of her great woe off her. She could not be absolutely wretched so long as the open sky was above her, and the smell of the fields about her, and on her face the breath of the blowing winds.

She had that love which is as the bezoar stone of fable—an amulet that makes all wounds unfelt, and death a thing to smile at in derision. Besides, there was in her veins a certain thrill of the sweetness of liberty. She was no longer captive to one place, or bound in the old bonds of servitude. She was free—with the freedom of the will and of the body.

Without some strong impulsion from without, she might never have cut herself adrift from the tyranny that had held her down from childhood; and even the one happiness she had known had been but little more than the exchange of one manner of slavery for another.

But now she was free—absolutely free; and in the calm, cool night—in the dusk and the solitude, with the smell of the fields around her, and above her the stars, she knew it and was glad,—glad even amidst the woe of loneliness and the agony of abandonment.

She sat awhile by the roadside and counted his gold by the gleam of the stars, and put it away securely in her girdle, and drank from the brook beside her, and tried to eat a little of the bread which the old boat-man had given her as her wages, with three pieces of copper money.

But the crust choked her; she felt hot with fever, and her throat was parched and full of pain.

Folle-Farine

The moon was full upon her where she sat; the red and white of her dress bore a strange look; her face was colourless, and her eyes looked but the larger and more lustrous for the black shadows beneath them, and the weary swollen droop of their lids.

She rested there, and pondered on the next step she had best take.

A woman came past her, and stopped and looked.

The moonlight was strong upon her face.

"You are a handsome wench," said the wayfarer, who was elderly and of pleasant visage; "too handsome, a vast deal, to be sitting alone like one lost. What is the matter?"

"Nothing!" she answered.

The old reserve clung to her and fenced her secret in, as the prickles of a cactus hedge may fence in the magnolia's flower of snow.

"What, then? Have you a home?"

"No."

"Eh! You must have a lover?"

Folle-Farine's lips grew whiter, and she shrank a little; but she answered, steadily:

"No."

"No! And at your age; and handsome as a ripe, red apple,—with your skin of satin, and your tangle of hair! Fie, for shame! Are the men blind? Where do you rest to-night?"

"I am going on—south."

"And mean to walk all night? Pooh! Come home with me, and sup and sleep. I live hard by, just inside the walls."

Folle-Farine opened her great eyes wide. It was the first creature who had ever offered her hospitality. It was an old woman, too; there could be nothing but kindness in the offer, she thought; and kindness was so strange to her, that it troubled her more than did cruelty.

"You are good," she said, gratefully,——"very good; but I cannot come."

"Cannot come! Why, then?"

"Because I must go on to Paris; I cannot lost an hour. Nevertheless, it is good of you."

The old woman laughed roughly.

"Oh, ho! the red apple must go to Paris. No other market grand enough! Is that it?"

"I do not know what you mean."

Folle-Farine

"But stay with me to-night. The roads are dangerous. There are vagrants and ill-livers about. There are great fogs, too, in this district; and you will meet drunken soldiers and beggars that will rob you. Come home with me. I have a pretty little place, though poor; and you shall have such fare as I give my own daughter. And maybe you will see two or three of the young nobles. They look in for a laugh and a song—all innocent: my girls are favourites. Come, it is not a stone's throw through the south gate."

"You are too good; but I cannot come. As for the road, I am not afraid. I have a good knife, and I am strong."

She spoke in all unconsciousness, in her heart thankful to this, the first human creature that had ever offered her shelter or good nature.

The woman darted one sharp look at her, venomous as an adder's bite; then bade her a short good-night, and went on her way to the gates of the town. Folle-Farine rose up and walked on, taking her own southward road.

She was ignorant of any peril that she had escaped. She did not know that the only animals which prey upon the young of their own sex and kind are women.

She was very tired; long want of sleep, anguish, and bodily fatigue made her dull, and too exhausted to keep long upon her feet. She looked about her for some place of rest; and she knew that if she did not husband her strength, it might fail her ere she reached him, and stretch her on a sick-bed in some hospital of the poor.

She passed two of three cottages standing by the roadside, with light gleaming through their shutters; but she did not knock at any one of them. She was afraid of spending her three copper coins; and she was too proud to seek food or lodging as an alms.

By-and-by when came to a little shed, standing where no house was. She looked in it, and saw it full of the last season's hay, dry and sweet-smelling, tenanted only by a cat rolled round in slumber.

She crept into it, and laid herself down and slept, the bright starry skies shining on her through the open space that served for entrance, the clatter of a little brook under the poplar trees the only sound upon the quiet air.

Footsteps went past twice or thrice, and once a waggon rolled lumbering by; but no one came thither to disturb her, and she sank into a fitful heavy sleep.

At daybreak she was again afoot, always on the broad road to the south-west.

With one of her coins she bought a loaf and a draught of milk, at a hamlet through which she went. She was surprised to find that people spoke to her without a curse or taunt, and dealt with her as with any other human being.

Insensibly with the change of treatment, and with the fresh sweet air, and with the brisk movement that bore her on her way, her heart grew lighter, and her old dauntless spirit rose again.

She would find him, she thought, as soon as ever she entered Paris; and she would watch over him, and only go near him if he needed her. And then, and then--.

But her thoughts went no further. She shut the future out from her; it appalled her. Only one thing was clear before her--that she would get him the greatness that he thirsted for, if any payment of her body or her soul, life or death, could purchase it.

Folle-Farine

A great purpose nerves the life it lives in, so that no personal terrors can assail, nor any minor woes afflict it. Hunger, thirst, fatigue, hardship, danger,—these were all in her path, and she had each in turn; but not one of them unnerved her.

To reach Paris, she felt that she would have walked through flames, or fasted forty days.

For two days and nights she went on—days cloudless, nights fine and mild; then came a day of storm—sharp hail and loud thunder. She went on through it all the same, the agony in her heart made the glare of lightning and the roar of winds no more to her than the sigh of an April breeze over a primrose bank.

She had various fortunes on her way.

A party of tramps crossing a meadow set on her, and tried to insult her; she showed them her knife, and with the blade bare against her throat, made them fall back, and scattered them.

A dirty and tattered group of gipsies, squatting in a dry ditch under a tarpaulin, hailed her, and wanted her to join with them and share their broken food. She eluded them with disgust; they were not like the gitanos of Liébana, and she took them to be beggars and thieves, as indeed, they were.

At a little wayside cabin, a girl, with a bright rosy face, spoke softly and cheerily to her, and bade her rest awhile on the bench in the porch under the vines; and brought out some white pigeons to show her; and asked her, with interest, whence she came. And she, in her fierceness and her shyness, was touched, and wondered greatly that any female thing could be thus good.

She met an old man with an organ on his back, and a monkey on his shoulder. He was old and infirm. She carried his organ for him awhile, as they went along the same road; and he was gentle and kind in return, and made the route she had to take clear to her, and told her, with a shake of his head that Paris would either be hell or heaven to such as she. And she, hearing, smiled a little, for the first time since she had left Yprès, and thought—heaven or hell, what would it matter which, so long as she found Arslàn?

Of Dante she had never heard; but the spirit of the "questi chi mai da me non piu diviso" dwells untaught in every great love.

Once, at night, a vagrant tried to rob her, having watched her count the gold and notes which she carried in her girdle. He dragged her to a lonely place, and snatched at the red sash, grasping the money with it; but she was too quick for him, and beat him off in such a fashion that he slunk away limping, and told his fellows to beware of her; for she had the spring of a cat, and the stroke of a swan's wing.

On the whole, the world seemed better to her than it had done: the men were seldom insolent, taking warning from the look in her flashing eyes and the straight carriage of her flexible frame; and the women more than once were kind.

Many peasants passed her on their market-mules, and many carriers' carts and farm-waggons went by along the sunny roads.

Sometimes their drivers called to her to get up, and gave her a lift of a league or two on their piles of grass, or straw, or amongst their crates of cackling poultry, as they made their slow way between the lines of the trees, with their horses nodding heavily under the weight of their uncouth harness.

All this while she never touched the gold that he had given her. Very little food sufficed to her: she had been hardly reared; and for the little she had she worked always, on her way.

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A load carried, a lost sheep fetched in, some wood hewn and stacked, a crying calf fed, a cabbage–patch dug or watered, these got her the simple fare which she fed on; and for lodging she was to none indebted, preferring to lie down by the side of the cows in their stalls, or under a stack against some little blossoming garden.

The people had no prejudice against her: she found few foes, when she had left the district that knew the story of Reine Flamma; they were, on the contrary, amused with her strange picture–like look, and awed with the sad brevity of her speech to them.

Sometimes it chanced to her to get no tasks of any sort to do, and at these times she went without food: touch his gold she would not.

On the road she did what good she could; she walked a needless league to carry home a child who had broken his leg in a lonely lane; she sought, in a foggy night, for the straying goat of a wretched woman; she saved an infant from the flames in a little cabin burning in the midst of the green fields: she did what came in her path to do. For her heart was half broken; and this was her way of prayer.

So, by tedious endeavour, she won her passage wearily towards Paris.

She had been nine days on the road, losing her way at times, and having often wearily to retrace her steps.

On the tenth day she came to a little town lying in a green hollow amidst woods.

It had an ancient church; the old sweet bells were ringing a last midday mass; a crumbling fortress of the Angevine kings gave it majesty and shadow; it was full of flowers and of trees, and had quaint, quiet, grey streets, hilly and shady, that made her think of the streets round about the cathedral of her mother's birthplace, away north–westward in the white sea–mists.

When she entered it, noon had just sounded from all its many clocks and chimes. The weather was hot, and she was very tired. She had not eaten any food, save some berries and green leaves, for more than forty hours. She had been refused anything to do in all places; and she had no money—except that gold of his.

There was a little tavern, vine–shaded, and bright with a late–flowering rose that hid its casements. She asked there, timidly, if there were any task she might do,—to fetch water, to sweep, to break wood, to drive or to stable a mule or a horse?

They took her to be a gipsy; they ordered her roughly to be gone.

Through the square window she could see food—a big juicy melon cut in halves, sweet yellow cakes, warm and crisp from the oven, a white chicken, cold and dressed with cresses, a jug of milk, an abundance of bread. And her hunger was very great.

Nine days of sharper privation than even that to which she had been inured in the penury of Yprès had made her cheeks hollow and her limbs fleshless; and a continual consuming heat and pain gnawed at her chest.

She sat on a bench that was free to all wayfarers, and looked at the food in the tavern–kitchen. It tempted her with the animal ravenousness begotten by long fast. She wanted to fly at it as a starved dog flies. A rosy–faced woman cut up the chicken on a china dish, singing.

Folle–Farine, outside, looked at her, and took courage from her smiling face.

"Will you give me a little work?" she murmured. "Anything—anything—so that I may get bread."

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"You are a gipsy," answered the woman, ceasing to smile. "Go to your own folk."

And she would not offer her even a plate of broken victuals.

Folle–Farine rose and walked wearily away. She could not bear the sight of the food; she felt that if she looked at it longer she would spring on it like a wolf. But to use his gold never occurred to her. She would have bitten her tongue through in famine ere she would have taken one coin of it.

As she went, being weak from long hunger and the stroke of the sun–rays, she stumbled and fell. She recovered herself quickly; but in the fall the money had shaken itself from her sash, and been scattered with a ringing sound among the stones.

The woman in the tavern–window raised a loud cry.

"Oh, hère! the wicked liar!—to beg bread while her waistband is stuffed like a turkey with chestnuts! What a rogue to try and dupe poor honest people like us! Take her to prison."

The woman cried loud; there were half–a–dozen stout serving–wenches and stable–lads about in the little street, with several boys and children. Indignant at the thought of an attempted fraud upon their charity, and amazed at the flash and the fall of the money, they rushed on her with shrieks of rage and scorn, with missiles of turf and stone, with their brooms raised aloft, or their dogs set to rage at her.

She had not time to gather up the coins and notes; she could only stand over them and defend them. Two beggar–boys made snatch at the tempting heap; she drew her knife to daunt them with the sight of it. The people shrieked at sight of the bare blade; a woman selling honeycomb and lots of honey at a bench under a lime–tree raised a cry that she had been robbed. It was not true; but a street crowd always loves a lie, and never risks spoiling, by sifting, it.

The beggar–lads and the two serving–wenches and an old virago from a cottage–door near set upon her, and scrambled together to drive her away from the gold and share it. Resolute to defend it at any peril, she set her heel down on it, and, with her back against the tree, stood firm; not striking, but with the point of the knife outward.

One of the boys, maddened to get the gold, darted forward, twisted his limbs round her, and struggled with her for its possession. In the struggle he wounded himself upon the steel. His arm bled largely; he filled the air with his shrieks; the people, furious, accused her of his murder.

Before five minutes had gone by she was seized, overpowered by numbers, cuffed, kicked, upbraided with every name of infamy, and dragged as a criminal up the little steep stony street in the blaze of the noonday sun, whilst on each side the townsfolk looked out from their doorways and their balconies, and cried out:

"What is it? Oh, hère! A brawling gipsy, who has stolen something, and has stabbed poor little Fréki, the blind man's son, because he found her out? Au violon!—au violon! What is it?"

To which the groups called back again, "Yes. A thief of a gipsy, begging alms while she had stolen gold on her. She has stabbed poor little Fréki, the blind cobbler's grandson: yes; we think he is dead."

And the people above, in horror, lifted their hands and eyes, and shouted afresh, "Au violon!—au violon!"

Meanwhile the honey–seller ran beside them, crying aloud that she had been robbed of five broad gold pieces.

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It was a little sunny country–place, very green with trees and grass, filled usually with few louder sounds than the cacklings of geese and the dripping of well–water.

But its stones were sharp and rough; its voices were shrill and fierce; its gossips were cruel and false of tongue; its justice was very small, and its credulity was measureless. A girl, bare–foot and bare–headed, with eyes of the East, and a knife in her girdle, teeth that met in their youngsters' wrists, and gold pieces that scattered like dust from her bosom,—such an one could have no possible innocence in their eyes, such an one was condemned so soon as she was looked at, when she was dragged amongst them up their hilly central way.

She had had money on her, and she had asked for food in the plea of being starved; that was fraud plain enough, even for those who were free to admit that the seller of the honey–pots had never been over–true of speech, and had never owned so much as five gold pieces ever since her first bees had sucked their first spray of heath–bells.

No one had any mercy on a creature who had money, and yet asked for work; as to her guilt, there could be no question.

She was hurried before the village tribune, and cast into the cell where all accused waited their judgement.

It was a dusky, loathsome place, dripping with damp, half underground, strongly grilled with iron, and smelling foully from the brandy and strong smoke of two drunkards who had been its occupants the previous night.

There they had left her, taking away her knife and her money.

She did not resist. It was not her nature to rebel futilely; and they had fallen on her six to one, and had bound her safely with cords ere they had dragged her away to punishment.

The little den was visible to the highway through a square low grating. Through this they came and stared, and mouthed, and mocked, and taunted, and danced before her. To bait a gipsy was fair pastime.

Everywhere, from door to door, the blind cobbler, with his little son, and the woman who sold honey told their tale,—how she had stabbed the little lad and stolen the gold that the brave bees had brought their mistress, and begged for food when she had money enough on her to buy a rich man's feast. It was a tale to enlist against her all the hardest animosities of the poor. The village rose against her in all its little homes as though she had borne fire and sword into its midst.

If the arm of the law had not guarded the entrance of her prison–cell, the women would have stoned her to death, or dragged her out to drown in the pond:—she was worse than a murderess in their sight; and one weak man, thinking to shelter her a little from their rage, quoted against her her darkest crime when he pleaded for mercy for her because she was young and was so handsome.

The long hot day of torment passed slowly by.

Outside there were cool woods, flower–filled paths, broad fields of grass, children tossing blow–balls down the wind, lovers counting the leaves of yellow–eyed autumn daisies; but within there were only foul smells, intense nausea, cruel heats, the sting of a thousand insects, the buzz of a hundred carrion–flies, muddy water, and black mouldy bread.

She held her silence. She would not let her enemies see that they hurt her.

When they day had gone down, and the people had tired of their sport and left her a little while, an old feeble man stole timidly to her, glancing round lest any should see his charity and quote it as a crime, and tendered her

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through the bars with a gentle hand a little ripe autumnal fruit upon a cool green leaf.

The kindness made the tears start to eyes too proud to weep for pain.

She took the grapes, and thanked him lovingly and thankfully; cooled her aching, burning, dust-drenched throat with their fragrant moisture.

"Hush! it is nothing," he whispered, frightenedly, glancing over his shoulder lest any should see. "But tell me--tell me--why did you say you starved when you had all that gold?"

"I did starve," she answered him.

"But why--with all that gold?"

"It was another's."

The old man stared at her, trembling and amazed.

"What--what! die of hunger and keep your hands off money in your girdle?"

A dreary smile came on her face.

"What! is that inhuman too?"

"Inhuman?" he murmured. "Oh child--oh child, tell any tale you will, save such a tale as that."

And he stole away sorrowful, because sure that for his fruit of charity she had given him back a lie.

He shambled away, afraid that his neighbours should see the little thing which he had done.

She was left alone.

It began to grow dark. She felt scorched with fever, and her head throbbed. Long hunger, intense fatigue, and all the agony of thought in which she had struggled on her way, had their reaction on her. She shivered where she sat on the damp straw which they had cast upon the stones; and strange noises sang in her ears, and strange lights glimmered and flashed before her eyes. She did not know what ailed her.

The dogs came and smelt at her, and one little early robin sang a twilight song in an elder-bush near. These were the only things that had any pity on her.

By-and-by, when it was quite night, they opened the grated door and thrust in another captive, a vagrant whom they had found drunk or delirious on the high road, and whom they locked up for the night, that on the morrow they might determine what to do with him.

He threw himself heavily forward as he was pushed in by the old soldier whose place it was to guard the miserable den.

She shrank away into the furthest corner of the den, and crouched there, breathing heavily, and staring with dull, dilated eyes.

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She thought—surely they could not mean to leave them there alone, all the night through, in the horrible darkness?

The slamming of the iron door answered her; and the old soldier, as he turned the rusty key in the lock, grumbled that the world was surely at a pretty pass, when two tramps became too coy to roost together. And he stumbled up the ladder-like stairs of the guard-house to his own little chamber; and there, smoking and drinking, and playing dominoes with a comrade, dismissed the prisoners from his recollection.

Meanwhile, the man whom he had thrust into the cell was stretched where he had fallen, drunk or insensible, and moaning heavily.

She, crouching against the wall, as though praying the stones to yield and hold her, gazed at him with horror and pity that together strove in the confusion of her dizzy brain, and made her dully wonder whether she were wicked thus to shrink in loathing from a creature in distress so like her own.

The bright moon rose on the other side of the trees beyond the grating; it fell across the figure of the vagrant whom they had locked in with her, as in the wild-beast shows of old they locked a lion with an antelope in the same cage—out of sport.

She saw the looming massive shadow of an immense form, crouched like a couching beast; she saw the fire of burning, wide-open, sullen eyes; she saw the restless, feeble gesture of two lean hands, that clutched at the barren stones with the futile action of a chained vulture clutching at his rock; she saw that the man suffered horribly, and she tried to pity him—tried not to shrink from him—tried to tell herself that he might be as guiltless as was herself. But she could not prevail; nature, instinct, youth, sex, sickness, exhaustion, all conquered her, and broke her strength. She recoiled from the unbearable loathsomeness of such association; she sprang to the grated aperture, and seized the iron in her hands, and shook it with all her might, and tore at it, and bruised her chest and arms against it, and clung to it convulsively, shriek after shriek pealing from her lips.

No one heard, or no one answered to her prayer.

A stray dog came and howled in unison; the moon sailed on behind the trees; the old soldier above slept over his toss of brandy; at the only dwelling near they were dancing at a bridal, and had no ear to hear.

The passionate outcries wailed themselves to silence on her trembling mouth; her strained hands gave way from their hold on the irons; she grew silent from sheer exhaustion, and dropped in a heap at the foot of the iron door, clinging to it, and crushed against it, and turning her face to the night without, feeling some little sense of solace in the calm, clear moon;—some little sense of comfort in the near presence of the dog.

Meanwhile the dusky prostrate form of the man had not stirred. He had not spoken, save to curse heaven and earth and every living thing. He had not ceased to glare at her with eyes that had the red light of a tiger's in their pain.

He was a man of superb stature and frame; he was worn by disease and delirium, but he had in him a wild, leonine, tawny beauty still. His clothes were of rags, and his whole look was of wretchedness; yet there was about him a certain reckless majesty and splendour still, as the scattered beams of the white moonlight broke themselves upon him.

Of a sudden he spoke aloud, with a glitter of terrible laughter on his white teeth and his flashing eyes. He was delirious, and had no consciousness of where he was.

"The fourth bull I had killed that Easter day. Look! do you see? It was a red Andalusian. He lamed three picadors, and ripped the bellies of eight horses,—a brave bull; but I was one too many for him. She was there. All the

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winter she had flouted over me and taunted me; all the winter she had cast her scorn at me—the beautiful brown thing, with her cruel eyes. But she was there when I slew the great red bull—straight above there, looking over her fan. Do you see? And when my sword went up to the hilt in his throat, and the brave blood spouted, she laughed such a little sweet laugh, and cast her yellow jessamine flower at me, down in the blood and the sand there. And that night the red bull died, the rope was thrown from the balcony! So—so! Only a summer ago; only a summer ago!" Then he laughed loud again; and, laughing, sang—

"Avez-vous vu en Barcelonne Une belle-dame, au sein bruni, Pâle comme un beau soir d'automne? C'est ma maitresse, ma lionne, La Marchesa d'Amagüi." The rich loud challenge of the love-song snapped short in two. With a groan and a curse he flung himself on the mud floor, and clutched at it with his empty hands.

"Wine!—wine!" he moaned, lying athirst there as the red bull had lain on the sands of the circus; longing for the purple draughts of his old feast-nights, as the red bull had longed for the mountain-streams, so cold and strong, of his own Andalusian birthplace.

Then he laughed again, and sang old songs of Spain, broken and marred by discord—their majestic melodies wedded strangely to many a stave of lewd riot and of amorous verse.

Then for awhile he was quiet, moaning dully, staring upward at the white face of the moon.

After a while he mocked it—the cold, chaste thing that was the meek trickster of so many mole-eyed lords.

Through the terror and the confusion of her mind, with the sonorous melody of the tongue, with the flaming darkness of his eyes, with the wild barbaric dissolute grandeur of this shattered manhood, vague memories floated, distorted and intangible, before her.

Of deep forests whose shade was cool even in midsummer and midday; of glancing torrents rushing through their beds of stone; of mountain snows flushing in sunset toll the hues of the mountain roses that grew by millions by the river-water; of wondrous nights, sultry and serene, in which women with flashing glances and bare breasts danced with their spangled anklets glittering in the rays of the moon; of roofless palaces where the Crescent still glistened amidst the colours of the walls; of marble courts where only the oleander kept pomp and the wild fig-vine held possession; of a dead nation which at midnight thronged through the tombs of its kings, and passed in shadowy hosts through the fated land which had rejected the faith and the empire of Islam; sowing as they went upon the blood-soaked soil of Spain the vengeance of the dead in pestilence, in anarchy, in barren passions, in endless riot and revolt, so that no sovereign should ever sit in peace on the ruined throne of the Moslem, and no light shine ever again upon the people whose boast it once had been on them the sun in heaven never set:—all these memories floated before her, and only served to make her fear more ghastly, her horror more unearthly.

There he lay delirious—a madman chained there at her feet, so close in the little den, that, shrink as she would against the wall, she could barely keep from the touch of his hands as they were flung forth in the air, from the scorch of his breath as he raved and cursed.

And there was no light except the fire in his eyes; except the flicker of the moonbeam through the leaves.

She spent her strength in piteous shrieks. They were the first cries that had ever broken from her lips for human aid; and they were vain. The guard above slept heavy with brandy and a dotard's dreams. The village was not aroused. What cared any of its sleepers how these outcasts fared?

She crouched in the farthest corner, when her voice had spent itself in the passion of appeal.

The night—would it ever end?

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Beside its horror, all the wretchedness and bondage of her old life seemed like peace and freedom.

Writhing in pain and frenzy, the wounded drunkard struck her—all unconscious of the blow—across her eyes, and fell, contorted and senseless, with his head upon her knees.

He had ceased to shout his amorous songs, and vaunt his lustful triumphs. His voice was hollow in his throat, and babbled with a strange sound, low and fast and inarticulate.

"In the little green wood—in the little green wood," he muttered. "Hark! do you hear the mill-water run? She looked so white and so cold; and they all called her a saint. What could a man do but kill that? Does she cry out against me? You say so? You lie. You lie—be you devil or god. You sit on a great white throne and judge us all. So they say. You can send us to hell? . . . Well, do. You shall never wring a word from her to my hurt. She thinks I killed the child? Nay—that I swear. Phratos knew, I think. But he is dead;—so they say. Ask him . . . My brown queen, who saw me kill the red bull,—are you there too? Aye. How the white jewels shine in your breast! Stoop a little, and kiss me. So! Your mouth burns; and the yellow jessamine flower—there is a snake in it. Look! You love me? —oh—ho!—what does your priest say, and your lord? Love!—so many of you swore that. But she,—she standing next to her god there,—I hurt her most, and yet she alone of you all says nothing!"

* * * * *

When, at daylight, the people unbarred the prison-door, they found the sightless face of the dead man lying full in the light of the sun: beside him the girl crouched with a senseless stare in the horror of her eyes, and on her lips a ghastly laugh.

For Folle-Farine had entered at last into her Father's kingdom.

CHAPTER II.

FOR many months she knew nothing of the flight of time. All she was conscious of were burning intolerable pain, continual thirst, and the presence as of an iron hand upon her head, weighing down the imprisoned brain. All she saw in the horrible darkness, which no ray of light ever broke, was the face of Thanatos, with the white rose pressed against his mouth, to whom endlessly she stretched her arms in vain entreaty, but who said only, with the passionless pity of his gaze, "I come in my own time, and neither tarry nor hasten for any supplication of a mortal creature."

She lived, as a reed torn up from the root may live, by the winds that waft it, by the birds that carry it, by the sands that draw its fibres down into themselves, to root afresh whether it will or no.

"The reed was worthy to die!—the reed was worthy to die!" was all that she said, again and again, lying staring with her hot distending eyes into the void as of perpetual night, which was all that she saw around her. The words were to those who heard her, however, the mere meaningless babble of madness.

When they had found her in the cell of the guardhouse, she was far beyond any reach of harm from them, or any sensibility of the worst which they might do to her. She was in a delirious stupor, which left her no more sense of place, or sound, or time than if her brain had been drugged to the agonies and ecstasies of the opium-eater.

They found her homeless, friendless, nameless; a thing accursed, destitute, unknown; as useless and as rootless as the dead Spanish vagrant lying on the stones beside her. They cast him to the public ditch; they sent her to the public sick wards, a league away; an ancient palace, whose innumerable chambers and whose vast corridors had been given to a sisterhood of mercy, and employed for nigh a century as a public hospital.

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In this prison she lay without any sense of the passing of hours and days and months.

The accusation against her fell to the ground harmless; no one pursued it: the gold was gone—somewhere, nowhere. No one knew, unless it were the bee-wife, and she held her peace.

She was borne, senseless, to the old hospice in the great, dull, saintly, historic town, and there perished from all memories as all time perished to her.

Once or twice the sister of charity who had the charge of her sought to exorcise the demon tormenting this stricken brain and burning body, by thrusting into the hands that clenched the air a leaden image or a cross of sacred wood. But those heathen hands, even in delirium, threw those emblems away always, and the captive would mutter, in a vague incoherence that froze the blood of her hearers:

"The old gods are not dead; they only wait—they only wait! I am theirs—theirs! They forget, perhaps. But I remember. I keep my faith; they must keep theirs, for shame's sake. Heaven or hell? what does it matter? Can it matter to me, so that he has his desire? And that they must give, or break faith, as men do. Persephone ate the pomegranate,—you know—and she went back to hell. So will I—if they will it. What can it matter how the reed dies?—by fire, by steel, by storm? —what matter, so that the earth hear the music? Ah, God! the reed was found worthy to die!—And I—I am too vile, too poor, too shameful even for that!"

And then her voice would rise in a passion of hysteric weeping, or sink away into the feeble wailing of the brain, mortally stricken, and yet dimly sensible of its own madness and weakness; and all through the hours she, in her unconsciousness, would lament for this—for this alone—that the gods had not deemed her worthy of the stroke of death by which, through her, a divine melody might have arisen, and saved the world.

For the fable—which had grown to hold the place of so implicit a faith to her—was in her delirium always present with her; and she had retained no sense of herself except as the bruised and trampled reed which man and the gods alike had rejected as unworthy of sacrifice.

All the late autumn and the early winter came and went; and the cloud was dark upon her mind, and the pain of the blow dealt to her by Taric's hand gnawed at her brain.

When the winter turned, the darkness in which her reason had been engulfed began to clear, little by little.

As the first small trill of the wren stirred the silence in the old elm boughs; as the first feeble gleam of the new year sunshine struggled through the matted branches of the yews; as the first frail blossom of the pale hepatica timidly peeped forth in the damp moss-grown walls without, so consciousness slowly returned to her. She was so young; the youth in her refused to be quenched, and recovered its hold upon life as did the song of the birds, the light in the skies, the corn in the seed-sown earth.

She awakened to strength, to health, to knowledge; she awoke thus blinded and confused, and capable of little save the sense of some loathsome bondage, of some irreparable loss, of some great duty which she had left undone, of some great errand to which she had been summoned, and found wanting.

She saw four close stone walls around her; she saw her wrists and her ankles bound; she saw a hole high above her head, braced with iron bars, which served to let in the few pallid streaks of daylight which alone ever found their way thither; she saw a black cross in one corner, and before it two women in black, who prayed.

She tried to rise and could not: being fettered. She tore at the rope on her wrists with her teeth like a young tigress at her chains.

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They essayed to soothe her, but in vain; they then made trial first of threats, than of coercion; neither affected her; she bit at the knotted cords with her white strong teeth, and, being unable to free herself, fell backward into a savage despair, glaring in mute impotent rage upon her keepers.

"I must go to Paris," she muttered again and again. "I must go to Paris."

So much escaped her;—but her secret she was still strong to keep buried in silence in her heart, as she had still kept it even in her madness.

Her old strength, her old patience, her old ferocity and stubbornness and habits of mute resistance had revived in her with the return of life and reason. Slowly she remembered all things,—remembered that she had been accused and hunted down as a thief and brought thither into this prison, as she deemed it, where the closeness of the walls pent her in and shut out the clouds and the stars, the water and the moonrise, the flicker of the green leaves against the gold of sunset, and all the liberty and loveliness of earth and air for which she was devoured by a continual thirst of longing, like the thirst of the caged lark for the fair heights of heaven.

So when they spoke of their god, she answered always as the lark answers when his gaolers speak to him of song;—"Set me free."

But they thought this madness no less, and kept her bound there in the little dark stone den where no sound ever reached, unless it were the wailing of a bell, and no glimpse of the sky or the trees could ever come to charm to peaceful rest her aching eyes.

At length they grew afraid of what they did. She refused all food; she turned her face to the wall; she stretched herself on her bed of straw motionless and rigid. The confinement, the absence of air, were a living death to the creature whose lungs were stifled unless they drank in the fresh cool draught of winds blowing unchecked over the widths of the fields and forests, and whose eyes ached and grew blind unless they could gaze into the depths of free-flowing water, or feed themselves in far-reaching sight upon the radiant skies.

The errant passions in her, the inborn instincts towards perpetual liberty, and the life of the desert and of the mountains which came with the blood of the Zingari, made her prison-house a torture to her such as is unknown to the house-born and hearth-fettered races.

If this wild moorbird died of self-imposed famine rather than live only to beat its cut wings against the four walls of their pent prison-house, it might turn ill for themselves; so the religious community meditated. They became afraid of their own work.

One day they said to her:

"Eat and live, and you will be set free to-morrow."

She turned for the first time and lifted her face from the straw in which she buried it, and looked them in the eyes.

"Is that true?" she asked.

"Ay," they answered her. "We swear it by the cross of our blessed Master."

"If a Christian swear it,—it must be a lie," she said, with the smile that froze their timid blood.

But she accepted the food and the drink which they brought her, and broke her fast, and slept through many hours; strengthened, as by strong wine, by that one hope of freedom beneath the wide pure skies.

Folle-Farine

She asked them on awakening what the season of the year was then. They told her it was the early spring.

"The spring," she echoed dully,—all the months were a blank to her, which had rolled by since that red autumn evening, when in the cell of the guard-house the voice of Taric had chaunted in drink and delirium the passion songs of Spain.

"Yes. It is spring," they said; and one sister, younger and gentler than the rest, reached from its place above the crucifix the bough of the golden catkins of the willow, which served them at their holy season as an emblem of the palms of Palestine.

She looked at the drooping grace of the branches, with their buds of amber, long and in silence; then with a passion of weeping she turned her face from them as from the presence of some intolerable memory.

All down the shore of the river, amongst the silver of the reeds, the willows had been in blossom when she had first looked upon the face of Arslàn.

"Stay with us," the women murmured, drawn to her by the humanity of those, the first, tears that she had ever shed in her imprisonment. "Stay with us; and it shall go hard if we cannot find a means to bring you to eternal peace."

She shook her head wearily.

"It is not peace that I seek," she murmured.

Peace?

He would care nothing for peace on earth or in heaven, she knew. What she had sought to gain for him—what she would seek still when once she should get free—was the eternal conflict of a great fame in the world of men. Since this was the only fate which in his sight had any grace or any glory in it.

They kept their faith with her. They opened the doors of her prison-house and bade her depart in peace, pagan and criminal though they deemed her.

She reeled a little dizzily as the first blaze of the full daylight fell on her. She walked out with unsteady steps into the open air where they took her, and felt it cool and fresh upon her cheek, and saw the blue sky above her.

The gates which they unbarred were those at the back of the hospital, where the country stretched around. They did not care that she should be seen by the people of the streets.

She was left alone on a road outside the great building that had been her prison-house; the road was full of light, it was straight and shadowless; there was a tall tree near her full of leaf; there was a little bird fluttering in the sand at her feet; the ground was wet, and sparkled with rain drops.

All these little things came to her like the notes of a song heard far away—far away—in another world. They were so familiar, yet so strange.

There was a little yellow flower growing in a tuft of grasses straight in front of her; a little wayside weed; a root and blossom of the field-born celandine.

She fell on her knees in the dust by it, and laughed and wept, and quivering, kissed it and blessed it that it grew there. It was the first thing of summer and of sunshine she had seen so long.

Folle-Farine

A man in the gateway saw her and shook her, and bade her get from the ground.

"You are fitter to go back again," he muttered; "you are mad, still, I think."

Like a hunted animal she stumbled to her feet and fled from him; winged by the one ghastly terror that they would claim her and chain her back again.

They had said that she was free: but what were words? They had taken her once; they might take her twice.

She ran, and ran, and ran.

The intense fear that possessed her lent her irresistible force. She coursed the earth with the swiftness of a hare. She took no heed whence she went; she only knew that she fled from the one unutterable horror of that place. She thought they were right; that she was mad.

It was a level green silent country which was round her, with little loveliness and little colour; but as she went she laughed incessantly in the delirious gladness of her liberty.

She tossed her head back to watch the flight of a single swallow; she caught a handful of green leaves and buried her face in them. She listened in a very agony of memory to the rippling moisture of a little brook. She followed with her eyes the sweeping vapours of the rain—clouds, and when a west wind rose and blew a cluster of loose apple blossoms between her eyes—she could no longer bear the passionate pain of all the long—lost sweetness, but flinging herself downward, sobbed with the ecstasy of an exile's memories.

The hell in which she had dwelt had denied them to her for so long.

"Ah God!" she thought, "I know now—one cannot be utterly wretched whilst one has still the air and the light and the winds of the sky."

And she arose, calmer, and went on her way; wondering, even in that hour, why men and women trod the daily measures of their lives with their eyes downward and their ears choked with the dust; hearkening so little to the sound of the breeze in the grasses, looking so little to the passage of the clouds against the sun.

When the first blindness and rapture of her liberty had a little passed away, and abated in violence, she stood in the midst of the green fields and the fresh woods, a strange, sad, lonely figure of absolute desolation.

Her clothes were in rags; her red girdle had been changed by weather to a dusky purple; her thick clustering hair had been cut to her throat; her radiant hues were blanched, and her immense eyes gazed woefully from beneath their heavy dreamy lids, like the eyes of an antelope whom men vainly starve in the attempt to tame.

She knew neither where to go nor what to do. She had not a coin nor a crust upon her. She could not tell where she then stood, nor where the only home that she had ever known might lie.

She had not a friend on earth and she was seventeen years old, and was beautiful and was a woman.

She stood and looked; she did not weep; she did not pray; her heart seemed frozen in her. She had the gift she had craved;—and how could she use it?

The light was obscured by the clouds, great sweet rain clouds which came trooping from the west. Woods were all round, and close against her were low brown cattle, cropping clovered grass. Away on the horizon was a vague, vast golden cloud, like a million threads of gossamer glowing in the sun.

Folle-Farine

She did not know what it was; yet it drew her eyes to it.

A herdsman came by her to the cattle. She pointed to the cloud.

"What is that light?" she asked him.

The cowherd stared and laughed.

"That light? It is only the sun shining on the domes and the spires of Paris."

"Paris!"

She echoed the name with a great sob, and crossed her hands upon her breast, and in her way thanked God.

She had had no thought that she could be thus near to it.

She asked no more, but set straight on her way thither. It looked quite close.

She had exhausted the scanty strength which she owned in her first flight; she could go but slowly; and the roads were heavy across the ploughed lands, and through the edges of the woods. She walked on and on till it grew dusk, then she asked of a woman weeding in a field how far it might be yet to Paris.

The woman told her four leagues and more.

She grew deadly cold with fear. She was weak, and she had no hope that she could reach it before dawn; and she had nothing with which to buy shelter for the night. She could see it still; a cloud, now as of fireflies, upon the purple and black of the night; and in a passionate agony of longing she once more bent her limbs and ran—thinking of him.

To her the city of the world, the city of the kings, the city of the eagles, was only of value for the sake of this one life it held.

It was useless. All the strength she possessed was already spent. The feebleness of fever still sang in her ears and trembled in her blood. She was sick and faint, and very thirsty.

She struck timidly at a little cottage door, and asked to rest the night there.

The woman glanced at her and slammed—to the door. At another and yet another she tried; but at neither had she any welcome; they muttered of the hospitals and drove her onward. Finally, tired out, she dropped down on the curled hollow of an old oak stump that stood by the wayside, and fell asleep, seeing to the last through her sinking lids that cloud of light where the great city lay.

The night was cold; the earth damp; it was far on into night; she stretched her limbs out wearily and sighed, and dreamed that Thanatos touched her with his asphodels, and whispered, "Come."

CHAPTER III.

WHEN she awoke she was no longer in the open air by the roadside, with the grey of the falling night about her, and the wet leaves for her bed. She was in a white painted chamber, sweet with many roses, hung with deep hues of violet, filled with gold and colour and sculpture and bronze, duskily beautiful and dimly lighted by a great

wood fire that glowed upon andirons of brass.

On the wall nearest her hung all alone a picture,—a picture of a girl asleep in a scarlet blaze of poppies, above her head a purple butterfly, and on her breast the Red Mouse of the Brocken.

Opposite to it beside the hearth, watching her with his small brilliant eyes, and quite motionless, sat the old man Sartorian, who had kept his faith with her, though the gods had not kept theirs.

And the picture and the reality grew confused before her, and she knew not which was herself and which her painted likeness, nor which was the little red mouse that gibbered among the red flowers, and which the little old man who sat watching her with the fire gleams bright in his eyes; and it seemed to her that she and the picture were one, and he and the mouse were one likewise; and she moaned and leaned her head on her hands and tried to think.

The heat of the chamber and the strong nourishment which they had poured down her throat when she was insensible of anything they did to her, had revived the life in her. Memory and sense returned slowly to her; what first awakened her was her one passionate desire, so intense that it became an instinct stifling every other, to go on her way to the city that had flashed in its golden glory on her sight one moment, only the next to disappear into the eternal night.

"Paris!" she muttered mechanically, as she lifted her face with a hopeless bewildered prayer.

"Tell me the way to Paris," she muttered instinctively, and she tried to rise and walk, not well knowing what she did.

The old man laughed a little silently.

"A-h-h—. Women are the only peaches that roll of their own accord from the wall to the wasp's nest."

At the sound of his voice her eyes opened wide upon him; she knew his face again.

"Where am I?" she asked him with a sharp terror in her voice.

"In my house," he said simply. "I drove by you when you lay on the roadside. I recognised you. When people dream of immortality they generally die in a ditch. You would have died of a single night out there. I sent my people for you. You did not wake. You have slept here five hours."

"Is this Rioz?" She could not comprehend, a horror seized her lest she should have strayed from Paris back into her mother's province.

"No. It is another home of mine; smaller, but choicer may be. Who has cut your hair close?"

She shuddered and turned paler with the memory of that ghastly prison-house.

"Well; I am not sure but that you are handsomer,—almost. A sculptor would like you more now,—what a head you would make for an Anteros, or an Icarus, or a Hyacinthus. Yes—you are best so. You have been ill?"

She could not answer; she only stared at him blankly, with sad, mindless, dilated eyes.

"A little gold," she muttered; "a little gold."

Folle–Farine

He looked at her awhile, then rose and went and sent his handwomen, who took her to an inner chamber, and bathed and attended her with assiduous care; she was stupefied and knew not what they did.

They served her tenderly. They bathed her tired limbs and laid her as gently as though she were some wounded royal captive upon a couch of down.

She had no force to resist. Her eyes were heavy, and her senses were obscured. The potency of the draught which they had forced through her lips, when she had been insensible, acted on her as an anodyne. She sank back unconsciously, and she slept again, all through the night and half the day that followed.

Through all the hours she was conscious at intervals of the fragrance of flowers, of the gleams of silver and gold, of the sounds of distant music, of the white calm gaze of marble fauns and dryads, who looked on her from amidst the coolness of hanging foilage. She who had never rested on any softer couch than her truss of hay or heap of bracken, dreamed that she slept on roses. The fragrance of innumerable flowers breathed all around her. A distant music came through the silence on her drowsy ear. For the first time in her life of toil and pain she knew how exquisite a pleasure mere repose can be.

At noon she awoke, crying aloud that the Red Mouse claimed her soul from Thanatos.

When her vision cleared, and her dream passed away, the music, the flowers, the colour, the coolness, were all real around her. She was lying on a couch as soft as the rose–beds of Sybaris. About her were the luxuries and the graces amidst which the rich dwell. Above her head, from a golden height, a painted Eros smiled.

The light, on to which her startled eyes opened, came to her veiled through soft, rosy hues; the blossom of flowers met her everywhere, glided lattices and precious stones, and countless things for which she knew neither the name nor use, and wondrous plants, with birds like living blossoms on the wing above them, and the marble heads of women, rising cold and pure above the dreamy shadows—all the colour, and the charm, and the silence, and the grace of the life that is rounded by wealth was around her.

She lay silent and breathless awhile, with wide open eyes, motionless from the languor of her weakness and the confusion of her thoughts, wondering dully, whether she belonged to the hosts of the living or the dead. She was in a small sleeping chamber, in a bed like the cup of a lotus; there was perfect silence round her, except for the faint far–off echo of some music; a drowsy subtle fragrance filled the air, the solemn measure of a clock's pendulum deepened the sense of stillness; for the first time in her life she learned how voluptuous a thing the enjoyment of simple rest can be. All her senses were steeped in it, lulled by it, magnetised by it; and, so far as every thought was conscious to her, she thought that this was death—death amidst the fields of asphodel, and in the eternal peace of the realm of Thanatos.

Suddenly her eyes fell on a familiar thing, a little picture close at hand, the picture of herself amidst the poppies.

She leapt from the bed, and fell before it, and clasped it in her arms, and wept over it and kissed it, because it had been the work of his hand, and prayed to the unknown gods to make her suffer all things in his stead, and to give him the desire of his soul. And the Red Mouse had no power on her, because of her great love.

She arose from that prayer with her mind clear, and her nerves strung; she remembered all that had chanced to her.

"Where are my clothes?" she muttered to the serving–women who watched beside her. "It is broad day;—I must go on;—to Paris."

Folle-Farine

They craved her to wear the costly and broided stuffs strewn about her; masterpieces of many an eastern and southern loom; but she put them all aside in derision and impatience, drawing around her with a proud loving action the folds of her own poor garments. Weather-stained, torn by bush and briar, soaked with night dew, and discoloured by the dye of many a crushed flower and bruised berry of the fields and woods, she yet would not have exchanged these poor shreds of woven flax and goats' wool against imperial roves, for poor though they were, they were the symbols of her independence and her liberty.

The women tended her gently, and pressed on her many rare and fair things, but she would not have them; she took a cup of milk, and passed out into the larger chamber.

She was troubled and bewildered, but she had no fear; for she was too innocent, too wearied, and too desperate with that deathless courage, which having borne the worst that fate can do, can know no dread.

She stood with her arms folded on her breast, drawing together the tattered folds of the tunic, gazing at the luxury, and the blended colour of the room. So softly, that she never heard his footfall, the old man entered behind her, and came to the hearth, and looked on her.

"You are better?" he asked. "Are you better, Folle-Farine."

She looked up, and met the eyes of Sartorian. They smiled again on her with the smile of the Red Mouse.

The one passion which consumed her was stronger than any fear or any other memory: she only thought—this man must know?

She sprang forward and grasped his arm with both hands, with the seizure of a tigress; her passionate eyes searched his face; her voice came hard and fast.

"What have you done?—is he living or dead?—you must know?"

His eyes still smiled:

"I gave him his golden key;—how he should use it, that was not in our bond. But, truly, I will make another bond with you any day, Folle-Farine."

She shuddered, and her hands dropped from their hold.

"You know nothing?" she murmured.

"Of your Norse-god? nay, nothing. An eagle soars too high for a man's sight to follow, you know—oftentimes."

And he laughed his little soft laugh.

The eagle often soared so high—so high—that the icy vapours of the empyrean froze them dead, and they dropped to earth a mere, bruised, helpless, useless mass:—he knew.

She stood stunned and confused: her horror of Sartorian was struggling into life through the haze in which all things of the past were still shrouded to her dulled remembrance—all things save her love.

"Rest awhile," he said, gently. "Rest; and we may—who knows?—learn something of your northern god. First; tell me of yourself. I have sought for tidings of you vainly."

Her eyes glanced round her on every side.

"Let me go," she muttered.

"Nay—a moment yet. You are not well."

"I am well."

"Indeed. Then wait a moment."

She rested where he motioned; he looked at her in smiling wonder.

She leaned on one of the cushioned couches, calm, motionless, negligent, giving no sign that she saw the chamber round her to be any other than the wooden barn or thatched cattle-sheds of the old mill-house; her feet were crossed, her limbs were folded in that exquisite repose which is inborn in races of the East; the warmth of the room, and the long hours of sleep had brought the natural bloom to her face, the natural lustre to her eyes, which earlier fatigue and long illness had banished.

He surveyed her with that smile which she had resented on the day when she had besought pity of him for Arslàn's sake.

"Do you not eat?" was all he said.

"Not here."

He laughed his low humorous laugh that displeased her so bitterly, though it was soft of tone.

"And all those silks, and stuffs, and laces—do they please you no better?"

"They are not mine."

"Pooh! do you not know yet? A female thing, as beautiful as you are, makes hers everything she looks upon?"

"That is a fine phrase."

"And an empty one you think. On my soul! no. Everything you see here is yours, if it please you."

She looked at him with dreaming perplexed eyes.

"What do you want of me?" she said, suddenly.

"Nay—why ask? All men are glad to give to women with such a face as yours."

She laughed a little; with the warmth, the rest, the wonder, the vague sense of some unknown danger, her old skill and courage rose. She knew that she had promised to be grateful always to this man; otherwise,—oh, God!—how she could have hated him, she thought!

"Why?" she answered, "why? Oh, only this: when I bought a measure of pears for Flamma in the market-place, the seller of them would sometimes pick me out a big yellow bon-chrétien, soft as butter, sweet as sugar, and offer it to me for myself. Well, when he did that, I always knew that the weight was short, or the fruit rotten. This is a wonderful pear you would give me; but is your measure false?"

Folle-Farine

He looked at her with a curious wonder and admiration; he was angered, humbled, incensed, and allured, and yet he was glad; she looked so handsome thus with the curl on her quiet lips, and her spirited head fit for a bronze cast of Atalanta.

He was an old man; he could bear to pause and rightly appreciate the charm of scorn, the spur of irony, the goad of hatred. He knew the full value of its sharp spears to the wonder-blooming aloe.

He left the subject for a happier moment, and seating himself, opened his hands to warm them by the wood fire, still watching her with that smile, which for its very indulgence, its very banter, she abhorred.

"You lost your Norse-god as I prophesied?" he asked carelessly.

He saw her whole face change as with a blow, and her body bend within itself as a young tree bends under a storm.

"He went when you gave him the gold," she said below her breath.

"Of course he went. You would have him set free," he said, with the little low laugh still in his throat. "Did I not say you must dream of nothing else if once you had him freed. You would be full of faith; and unbar your eagle's prison-house, and then, because he took wing through the open-door, you wonder still. That is not very wise, Folle-Farine."

"I do not wonder," she said, with fierce effort stifling her misery. "He had a right to do as he would: have I said any otherwise?"

"No. You are very faithful still, I see. Yet, I cannot think that you believed my prophecy, or you—a woman had never been so strong. You think I can tell you of his fate? Nay, on my soul I know nothing. Men do not speak his name. He may be dead;—you shrink? So! can it matter so much? He is dead to you. He is a great man, but he is a fool. Half his genius would give him the fame he wants with much greater swiftness than the whole ever will. The world likes talent, which serves it. It hates genius, which rules it. Men would adore his technical treatment, his pictorial magnificence, his anatomical accuracy; but they will always be in awe of his intensity of meaning, of his marvellous fertility, of his extraordinary mingling of the chilliest of idealism, and the most unsparing of sensualities,—but I talk idly. Let us talk of you; see, I chose your likeness, and he let me have it—did you dream that he would part with it so lightly?"

"Why not? He had a million things more beautiful?"

He looked at her keenly. He could measure the superb force of this unblenching and mute courage.

"In any other creature such an humility would be an hypocrisy. But it is not so in you. Why will you carry yourself as in an enemy's house? Will you not even break your fast with me? Nay, that is sullen, that is barbaric. Is there nothing that can please you? See here,—all women love these; the gipsy as well as the empress. Hold them a moment."

She took them; old oriental jewels lying loose in an agate cup on a table near; there were amongst them three great sapphires, which in their way were priceless, from their rare size and their perfect colour.

Her mouth laughed with its old scorn. She, who had lost life, soul, earth, heaven, to be consoled with the glass beads of a bauble! This man seemed to her more foolish than any creature that had ever spoken on her ear.

She looked, then laid them—indifferently—down.

"Three sparrow's eggs are as big and almost as blue, among the moss in any month of May!"

He moved them away, chagrined.

"How do you intend to live?" he asked drily.

"It will come as it comes," she answered with the fatalism and composure that ran in her eastern blood.

"What have you done up to this moment since you left my house at Rioz?"

She told him, briefly; she wanted to hide that she had suffered aught, or had been in any measure coldly dealt with, and she spoke with the old force of a happier time, seeking rather to show how well it was with her that she should thus be free, and have no law save her own will, and knew that none lived who could say to her, "Come hither," or "go there."

Almost she duped him, she was so brave. Not quite. His eyes had read the souls and senses of women for half a century; and none had ever deceived him. As he listened to her he knew well that under her desolation and her solitude her heart was broken—though not her courage.

But he accepted her words as she spoke them. "Perhaps you are wise to take your fate so lightly," he said to her. "But, do you know that it is a horrible thing to be alone and penniless and adrift, and without a home or a friend, when one is a woman and young?"

"It is worse when one is a woman, and old; but who pities it then?" she said with the curt and caustic meaning that had first allured him in her.

"And a woman is so soon old!" he added with as subtle a significance.

She shuddered a little; no female creature that is beautiful and vigorous and young can coldly brook to look straight at the doom of age; death is far less appalling, because death is uncertain, mystical, and may still have beauty.

"What do you intend to do with yourself?" he pursued.

"Intend! It is for the rich 'to intend,' the poor must take what chances."

She spoke calmly, leaning down on one of the cushioned benches by the hearth, resting her chin on her hand; her brown slender feet were crossed one over another, her eye-lids were heavy from weakness and the warmth of the room; the soft dim light played on her tenderly; he looked at her with a musing smile.

"No beautiful woman need ever be poor," he said, slowly spreading out the delicate palms of his hands to the fire; "and you are beautiful—exceedingly."

"I know!" she gave a quick gesture of her head, tired, insolent, indifferent; and a terrible darkness stole over her face; what matter how beautiful she might be, she had no beauty in her own sight, for the eyes of Arslan had dwelt on her, cold, calm, unmoved, whilst he had said, "I would love you—if I could."

"You know your value," Sartorian said drily. "Well then, why talk of poverty and of your future together? they need never be companions in this world."

Folle-Farine

She rose and stood before him in the rosy glow of the fire that bathed her limbs until they glowed like jade and porphyry.

"No beautiful woman need be poor--no--no beautiful woman need be honest, I dare say."

He smiled, holding his delicate palms to the warmth of his hearth.

"Your lover drew a grand vision of Barabbas. Well--we choose Barabbas still, just as Jerusalem chose; only now, our Barabbas is most often a woman. Why do you rise? It is a wet day, out there, and, for the spring time, cold."

"Is it?"

"And you have been ill?"

"So they say."

"You will die of cold and exposure."

"So best."

"Wait a moment. In such weather I would not let a dog stir."

"You would if the dog chose to go."

"To a master who forsook it--for a kick and a curse?"

Her face burned; she hung her head instinctively. She sank down again on the seat which she had quitted. The old horror of shame which she had felt by the water side under the orchards bent her strength under this man's unmerciful passion. She knew that he had her secret, and the haughty passion and courage of her nature writhed under his taunt of it.

"To refuse to stay is uncouth," he said to her.

"I am uncouth, no doubt."

"And it is ungrateful."

"I would not be that."

"Ungrateful! I did what you asked of me. I unloosed your Othyr of Art to spend his strength as he will, in essaying to raise a storm blast which shall have force enough to echo through the endless tunnels of the time to come."

"You gave him a handful of gold pieces for that!"

"Ah! if you thought that I should offer him the half of my possessions you were disappointed, no doubt. But you forgot that 'that' would not sell in the world, as yet, for a handful of wheat."

She touched the three sapphires.

"Are your blue stones of less worth, because I, being ignorant, esteem them no more value than three sparrows' eggs in the hedge?"

Folle-Farine

"My poor jewels! Well, stay here to-night, you need rest, shelter, and warmth; and to-morrow you shall go as poor as you came, if you wish. The world is very hard. The world is always winter—to the poor," he added, carelessly, resting his keen far-reaching eyes upon her.

Despite herself she shuddered; he recalled to her that the world was close at hand—the world in which she would be houseless, friendless, penniless, alone.

"A hard world, to those who will not worship its gods," he repeated, musingly. "And you astray in it, you poor barbarian, with your noble madness, and your blindness of faith and of passion. Do you know what it is to be famished, and have none to hear your cries?"

"Do I know?" her voice suddenly gathered strength and scorn, and rang loud on the stillness. "Do you? The empty dish, the chill stove, the frozen feet, the long nights, with the roof dripping rain, the sour berries and hard roots that mock hunger, the mud floors, with the rats fighting to get first at your bed, the bitter black months, whose saints' days are kept by new pains, and whose holy days are feasted by fresh diseases. Do I know? Do you?"

He did not answer her; he was absorbed in his study of her face; he was thinking how she would look in Paris in some theatre's spectacle of Egypt, with anklets of dull gold and a cymar of dead white, and behind her a sea of palms and a red and sullen sky.

"What a fool he must have been," he thought, as his eyes went from her to the study of her sleeping in the poppies. "What a fool, he left his lantern of Aladdin behind him."

"You remember unlovely things," he said aloud. "No, I do not know them; and I should not have supposed that you, who did, could so much have cared to know them more, or could have clung to them as the only good; as you now seem to do. You cannot love such hardships?"

"I have never known luxuries; and I do not wish to know them."

"Then you are no woman,—what is your idea of the most perfect life?"

"I do not know—to be always in the open air and to be quite free, and for ever to see the sun."

"Not a low ideal. You must await the Peruvian Paradise. Meanwhile there is a day spring that represents the sun not ill; we call it Wealth."

"Ah!" she could not deride this god, for she knew it was the greatest of them all; when the rod of riches had been lost, had not the Far-Striking King himself been brought low and bound down to a slave's drudgery?

The small, keen, elfin, satiric face bent on her did not change from its musing study, its slow vigilant smile; holding her under the subtle influence of his gaze, Sartorian began to speak,—speak as he could at choice, with accents sweet as silver, slow words persuasive as sorcery. With the terse, dainty, facile touches of a master, he placed before her that world of which she knew no more than any one of the reeds that blew by the sands of the river.

He painted to her that life of all others, which was in most vital contrast and unlikeliness to her own; the life of luxury, of indolence, of carelessness, of sovereignty, of endless pleasure, and supreme delight; he painted to her the years of a woman rich, caressed, omnipotent, beautiful, supreme, with all the world before her from which to choose her lovers, her playthings, her triumphs, her victories, her cruelties, and her seductions.

Folle–Farine

He painted the long cloudless invigorating day of such a favourite of fortune, with its hours winged by love and its laughter rhymed to music, and its wishes set to gold; the same day for the same woman, whether it were called of Rome or of Corinth, of Byzantium or of Athens, of Babylon or of Paris, and whether she herself were hailed hetaira or imperatrix. He drew such things as the skill of his words and the deep knowledge of his many years enabled him, in language which aroused her even from the absorption of her wretchedness, and stirred her dull disordered thoughts to a movement of restless discontent, and of strange wonder—Arslàn had never spoken to her thus.

He let his words dwell silently on her mind, awhile: then suddenly he asked her,

"Such lives are; do you not envy them?"

She thought—"envy them? she? what could she envy save the eyes that looked on Arslàn's face?" "What were the use?" she said aloud; "all my life I have seen that all things are for others; nothing is for me."

"Your life is but just opening. Henceforth you shall see all things for you, instead."

She flashed her eyes upon him.

"How can that be?"

"Listen to me; you are alone in the world, Folle–Farine?"

"Alone; yes."

"You have not a coin to stand a day between you and hunger?"

"Not one."

"You know of no roof that will shelter you for so much as a night?"

"Not one."

"You have just left a public place of pestilence?"

"Yes."

"And you know that everyone's hand is against you because you are nameless and bastard, and come of a proscribed people, who are aliens alike in every land?"

"I am Folle–Farine; yes."

For a moment he was silent. The simple, pathetic acceptance of the fate that made her name—merely because hers—a symbol of all things despised, and desolate, and forsaken, touched his heart and moved him to a sorrowful pity. But the pity died, and the cruelty remained alive behind it.

He bent on her the magnetic power of his bright, sardonic, meaning eyes.

"Well—be Folle–Farine still. Why not? But let Folle–Farine mean no longer a beggar, an outcast, a leper, a thing attainted, proscribed, and for ever suspected; but let it mean on the ear of every man that hears it the name of the most famous, the most imperious, the most triumphant, the most beautiful woman of her time; a woman of whom

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the world says, 'Look on her face and die—you have lived enough.'"

Her breath came and went as she listened: the blood in her face flushed and paled; she trembled violently, and her whole frame seemed to dilate and strengthen and vibrate with the electric force of that subtlest temptation.

"I!" she murmured brokenly.

"Yes, you. All that I say to you shall be: homeless, tribeless, nameless, nationless, thought you stand there now, Folle-Farine."

The wondrous promise swept her fancy for the moment on the strong current of its imagery, as a river sweeps a leaf. This empire hers?—hers?—when all mankind had driven and derided her and shunned her sight and touch, and cursed and flouted her, and barely thought her worthy to be called "thou dog!"

He looked at her and smiled, and bent towards the warmth of the fire.

"All that I say you shall be; and—the year is all winter for the poor, Folle-Farine."

The light on her face faded; a sudden apprehension tightened at her heart; on her face gathered the old fierce deadly antagonism which constant insult and attack had taught her to assume on the first instant of menace as her only buckler.

She knew not what evil threatened; but vaguely she felt that treason was close about her.

"If you do not mock me," she said slowly, "if you do not—how will you make me what you promise?"

"I will show the world to you, you to the world; your beauty will do the rest."

The darkness and the perplexed trouble deepened on her face; she rose and stood and looked at him, her teeth shut together with a quick sharp ring, her straight proud brows drew together in stormy silence; all the tigress in her was awake and rising ready to spring; yet amidst that dusky passion, that withering scorn of doubt, there was an innocent pathetic wonder, a vague desolation and disappointment, that were childlike and infinitely sad.

"This is a wondrous pear you offer me!" she said bitterly. "And so cheap?—it must be rotten somewhere."

"It is golden. Who need ask more?"

And he laughed his little low laugh in his throat.

Then, and then only, she understood him.

With a sudden unconscious instinctive action her hand sought her knife, but the girdle was empty; she sprang erect, her face on fire with a superb fury, her eyes blazing, like the eyes of a wild beast's by night, a magnificence of scorn and rage upon her quivering features.

Her voice rang clear and hard and cold as ring the blows of steel.

"I ask more,—that I should pluck it with clean hands, and eat of it with pure lips. Strange quibble for a beggar,—homeless, penniless, tribeless, nationless? So you think, no doubt. But we who are born outlawed are born free,—and do not sell our freedom. Let me go."

Folle-Farine

He watched her with a musing smile, a dreamy calm content; all this tempest of her scorn, all this bitterness of her disdain, all this whirlwind of her passion and her suffering, seemed but to beguile him more and make him surer of her beauty, of her splendour, of her strength.

"She would be a great creature to show to the world," he thought, as he drooped his head and watched her through his half-closed eyelids, as the Red Mouse watched the sleeper in the poppies. "Let you go?" he said with that slow ironic smile—"let you go? Why should I let you go—Folle-Farine?"

"Why? Why? To save your own life—if you are wise."

He laughed in his throat again.

"Ah, ah! It is never wise to threaten, Folle-Farine. I do not threaten. You are foolish; you are unreasonable; and that is the privilege of a woman. I am not angered at it. On the contrary; it adds to your charm. You are a beautiful, reckless, stubborn, half mad, half savage creature. Passion and liberty become you,—become you like your ignorance and ferocity. I would not for worlds that you should change them."

"Let me go," she cried, across his words.

"Oh fool! the winter will be hard,—and you are bare of foot,—and you have not a crust!"

"Let me go."

"Ah! Go?—to beg your way to Paris, and to creep through the cellars and the hospitals till you can see your lover's face, and to crouch a moment at his feet to hear him mutter a curse on you in payment for your pilgrimage; and then to slit your throat or his—in your despair, and lie dead in all your loveliness in the common ditch."

"Let me go, I say!"

"Or else, more like, come back to me in a week's time and say, 'I was made but now I am wise. Give me the golden pear. What matter a little speck? What is golden may be rotten; but to all lips it is sweet.'"

"Let me go!"

She stood at bay before him, pale in her scorn of rage, her right hand clenched against her breast, her eyes breathing fire, her whole attitude instinct with the tempest of contempt and loathing, which she held down thus, passive and almost wordless, because she once had promised never to be thankless to this man.

He gazed at her and smiled, and thought how beautiful that chained whirlwind of her passions looked; but he did not touch her nor even go nearer to her. There was a dangerous gleam in her eyes that daunted him. Moreover he was patient, humorous, gentle, cruel, wise—all in one; and he desired to tame and to beguile her, and to see her slowly drawn into the subtle sweetness of the powers of gold; and to enjoy the yielding of each moral weakness one by one, as the southern boy slowly pulls limb from limb, wing from wing, of the cicada.

"I will let you go—surely," he said, with his low grim laugh. "I keep no woman prisoner against her will. But think one moment longer, Folle-Farine. You will take no gift at my hands?"

"None."

"You want to go,—penniless as you are?"

"I will go so; no other way."

"You will fall ill on the road afresh."

"That does not concern you."

"You will starve."

"That is my question."

"You will have to herd with the street dogs."

"Their bite is better than your welcome."

"You will be suspected,--most likely imprisoned. You are an outcast."

"That may be."

"You will be driven to public charity."

"Not till I need a public grave."

"You will have never a glance of pity, never a look of softness, from your northern god; he has no love for you, and he is in his grave most likely. Icarus falls--always."

For the first time she quailed as though struck by a sharp blow; but her voice remained inflexible and serene.

"I can live without love or pity, as I can without home or gold. Once for all,--let me go."

"I will let you go," he said slowly, as he moved a little away. "I will let you go in seven days' time. For seven days you shall do as you please; eat, drink, be clothed, be housed, be feasted, be served, be beguiled--as the rich are. You shall taste all these things that gold gives, and which you, being ignorant, dare rashly deride and refuse. If when seven days end you still choose, you shall go, and as poor as you came. But you will not choose, for you are woman, Folle–Farine!"

Ere she knew his intent he had moved the panel and drawn it behind him, and left her alone,--shut in a trap like the birds that Claudis Flamma had netted in his orchards.

That night, when the night without was quite dark, she knelt down before the study of the poppies, and kissed it softly, and prayed to the unknown God, of whom none had taught her in anywise, yet whose light she still had found, and followed in a dim wondering imperfect fashion, as a little child lost in the twilight of some pathless wood, pursues in trembling the gleam of some great still planet looming far above her through the leaves.

When she arose from her supplication, her choice was already made.

And the Red Mouse had no power on her, because of her great love.

CHAPTER IV.

AT sunrise a great peacock trailing his imperial purple on the edge of a smooth lawn, pecked angrily at a torn

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fragment of a scarlet scarf; a scarf that had been woven in his own eastern lands, but which incensed his sight, fluttering there so idly, as it seemed, on the feathery sprays of a little low almond tree that grew by the water's edge.

The water was broad, and full of lily leaves and of rare reeds and rushes; it had been so stemmed and turned by art that it washed the basement walls and mirrored the graceful galleries and arches of the garden palace, where the birds of Hêrê dwelt.

Twenty feet above the level of the gardens, where the peacock swept in the light, there was an open casement, a narrow balcony of stone; a group of pale human faces looking out awe-stricken. A leap in the night—the night wet and moonless,—waters a fathom deep,—a bed of sand treacherous and shifting as the ways of love. What could all these be save certain death? Of death they were afraid; but they were more afraid yet of the vengeance of their flute-voiced lord.

On the wall the Red Mouse sat amongst the flowers of sleep; he could have told; he who for once had heard another prayer than the blasphemies of the Brocken.

But the Red Mouse never tells any secret to men; he has lived too long in the breast of the women whom men love.

The sun came from the east, and passed through the pale stricken faces that watched from the casement, and came straight to where the Red Mouse sat amidst the poppies.

"Have you let a female soul escape you?" said the Sun.

The Red Mouse answered:

"Love is stronger than I. When he keeps his hands pure, where he guards the door of the soul, I enter not. I sit outside and watch, and watch, and watch. But it is time lost. Love is strong; the door is barred to me."

Said the Sun,

"That is strange to hear. My sister, the Moon, has told me oftentimes that Eros is your pander—always."

"Anteros only," said the Red Mouse.

The Sun, wondering, said again:

"And yet I have heard that it is your boast that into every female soul you enter at birth, and dwell there unto death. Is it, then, not so?"

The Red Mouse answered:

"The boast is not mine, it is man's."

CHAPTER V.

IN the dark of night she had leapt to what, as she thought, would prove her grave; but the waters with human-like caprice had cast her back upon the land with scarce an effort of her own. Given back thus to life, whether she would or no, she by sheer instinct stumbled to her feet and fled as fast as she could in the wet gloomy night

Folle–Farine

through the grassy stretches of the unknown gardens and lands in which she found herself.

She was weighted with her soaked clothes as with lead, but she was made swift by terror and hatred, as though Hermes for once had had pity for anything human, and had fastened to her feet his own winged sandals.

She ran on and on, not knowing whither; only knowing that she ran from the man who had tempted her by the strength of the rod of wealth.

The rains were ceaseless, the skies had no stars, in the dense mist no lights, far or near, of city or planets, of palace or house, were seen. She did not know where she went; she only ran on away and away, anywhere, from the Red Mouse and its master.

When the daybreak grew grey in the heavens, she paused, and trembling crept into a cattle shed to rest and take breath a little. She shrank from every habitation, she quivered at every human voice; she was afraid—horribly afraid—in those clinging vapours, those damp deathly smells, those ghostly shadows of the dawn, those indistinct and unfamiliar creatures of a country strange to her.

That old man with the elf's eyes, who had tempted her, was he a god too, she wondered, since he had the rod that metes power and wealth? He might stretch his hand anywhere, she supposed, and take her.

The gentle cattle in their wooden home made way for her, and humbly welcomed her. She hid herself amongst their beds of hay, and in the warmth of their breath and their bodies. She was wet and wretched, like any half drowned dog; but the habits of her hardy life made cold and hunger and exposure almost powerless to harm her. She slept from sheer exhaustion of mind and body. The cattle could have trodden her to death, or tossed her through the open spaces of their byres, but they seemed to know, they seemed to pity; and they stirred so that they did not brush a limb of her, nor shorten a moment of her slumbers.

When she awoke the sun was high.

A herdsman, entering with the loud harsh clash of brazen pails, kicked her in the loins, and rated her furiously for daring to rest there. She arose at the kick, and went out from the place passively, not well knowing what she did.

The morning was warm and radiant; the earth and the trees were dripping with the rains of the night; the air was full of sweet odours, and of a delicious coldness. As far as she saw there was no token far or near of the gleaming cloud of the city of her dreams. She ventured to ask at a wayside cabin if she were near or far to Paris?

The woman of the cottage looked up searchingly from the seat before the porch, and for answer cried to her: "Paris! pouf–f–f! get out, you drowned rat."

She had lost for the time the mental force, and even the physical force, to resent or to persevere; she was weak with hunger and bewildered with her misery. She had only sense enough left to remember—and be thankful—that in the night that was past she had been strong.

The sun beat on her head, the road was hard, and sharp set with flint; she was full of pain, her brain throbbed with fever and reeled with weakness; a sudden horror seized her lest she might die before she had looked again on the face of Arslàn.

She saw the dusky shade of a green wood; by sheer instinct she crept into it as a stricken deer into its sanctuary.

Folle–Farine

She sat in the darkness of the trees in the coolness of the wood, and rested her head on her hands, and let the big salt tears drop one by one, as the death tears of the llama fall.

This was the young year round her; that she knew.

The winter had gone by; its many months had passed over her head whilst she was senseless to any flight of night or day; death might have taken the prey which it had once been robbed of by her; in all this weary season, which to her was as a blank, his old foes of failure and famine might have struggled for and vanquished him, she not being by; his body might lie in any plague–ditch of the blameless poor, his hand might rot fleshless and nerveless in any pit where the world cast its useless and dishonoured dead; the mould of his brain might make a feast for eyeless worms, not more stone blind that was the human race he had essayed to serve; the beauty of his face might be a thing of loathsomeness from which a toad would turn. Oh, God! would death never take her likewise? Was she an outcast even from that one tribeless and uncounted nation of the dead?

That God whom she had loved, whom she had chosen, whose eyes had been so full of pity, whose voice had murmured: "Nay, the wise know me as man's only friend":—even he, Thanatos, had turned against her and abandoned her.

Vague memories of things which she had heard in fable and tradition, of bodies accursed and condemned to wander for ever unresting and wailing of spirits, which for their curse were imprisoned in a living flesh that they could neither lose nor cast away so long as the world itself endured; creatures that the very elements had denied, and that were too vile for fire to burn, or water to drown, or steel to slay, or old age to wither, or death to touch and take in any wise. All these memories returned to her, and in her loneliness she wondered if she were such an one as these.

She did not know, indeed, that she had done any great sin; she had done none willingly, and yet all people called her vile, and they must know?

Even the old man, mocking her, had said:

"Never wrestle with Fate. He throws the strongest, soon or late. And your fate is shame; it was your birth gift, it will be your burial cloth. Can you cast it off? No. But you can make it potent as gold, and sweet as honey if you choose, Folle–Farine."

And she had not chosen; yet of any nobility in the resistance she did not dream. She had shut her heart to it by the unconscious instinct of strength, as she had shut her lips under torture, and shut her hand against gold.

She sat there in the wood, roofless, penniless, friendless, and every human creature was against her. Her temper had spoken only the bare and bleak truth. A dog stoned and chased and mad could be the only living thing on the face of the earth more wretched and more desolate than herself.

The sun of noon was bright above head in a cloudless sky, but in the little wood it was cool and shady, and had the moisture of a heavy morning dew. Millions of young leaves had uncurled themselves in the warmth. Little butterflies, some azure, some yellow, some white, danced in the light. Brown rills of water murmured under the grasses, the thrushes sang to one another through the boughs, and the lizard darted hither and thither, green as the arrowy leaves that made its shelter.

A little distance from her there was a group of joyous singers who looked at her from time to time, their laughter hushing a little, and their simple carousal under the green boughs broken by a nameless chilliness and involuntary speculation. She did not note them, her face being bowed down upon her hands, and no sound of the thrushes' song or of the human singers' voices rousing her from the stupefaction of despair which drugged her senses.

Folle-Farine

They watched her long; her attitude did not change.

One of them at length rose up and went hesitating a step or two forwards; a girl with twinkling feet, clad gaily in bright colours, though the texture of her clothes was poor.

She went and touched the crouched sad figure, softly.

"Are you in trouble?"

The figure lifted its bowed head, its dark hopeless eyes.

"It is no matter, I am only—tired."

"Are you all alone?"

"Yes."

"Come and sit with us a moment. You are in the damp and the gloom; we are so pleasant and sunny there. Come."

"You are good, but let me be."

The blue-eyed girl called to the others. They lazily rose and came.

"Heaven! she is handsome!" the men muttered to one another.

She looked straight at them all, and let them be.

"You are all alone?" they asked her again.

"Always," she answered them.

"You are going—where?"

"To Paris."

"What to do there?"

"I do not know."

"You look wet—suffering—what is the matter?"

"I was nearly drowned last night—an accident—it is nothing."

"Where have you slept?"

"In a shed: with some cattle."

"Could you get no shelter in a house?"

"I did not seek any."

Folle-Farine

"What do you do? What is your work?"

"Anything--Nothing."

"What is your name?"

"Folle-Farine."

"That means the chaff;--less than the chaff;--the dust."

"It means me."

"They were silent, only bending on her their bright curious eyes.

They saw that she was unspeakably wretched; that some great woe or shock had recently fallen on her, and given her glance that startled horror and blanched her rich skin to an ashen pallor, and frozen, as it were, the very current of the young blood in her veins.

They were silent a little space. Then whispered together.

"Come with us," they urged. "We too go to Paris. We are poor. We follow art. We will befriend you."

She was deaf to them long; being timid and wild of every human thing. But they were urgent; they were eloquent; these young girls with their bright eyes; these men who spoke of art; these wanderers who went to the great city.

In the end they pressed on her their companionship. They too were going to Paris; they spoke of perils she would run, of vouchers she would need: she wondered at their charity, but in the end walked on with them--fearing the Red Mouse.

They were mirthful gentle people, so she thought; they said they followed art; they told her she could never enter Paris nameless and alone: so she went. The chief of the little troop watched wonderingly her step, her posture, her barbaric and lustrous beauty, brilliant still even through the pallor of grief and the weariness of fatigue; of these he had never seen the like before and he knew their almost priceless value in the world, and of the working classes and street mobs of Paris.

"Listen," he said suddenly to her. "We shall play to-night at the next town. Will you take a part?"

Walking along through the glades of the wood, lost in thought, she started at his voice.

"I do not know what you mean?"

"I mean--will you share yourself with us? We will give you no words. It will be quite easy. What money we make we divide amongst us. All you shall do shall be to stand and be looked at--you are beautiful and you know it, no doubt?"

She made a weary sign of assent. Beautiful? What could it matter if she were so, or if she were not, what these men thought of it? The beauty that she owned, though so late a precious possession, a crown of glory to her, had lost all its fairness and all its wonder since it had been strengthless to bind to hers, the only heart in which she cared to rouse a throb of passion, since it had been unworthy to draw upon it with any lingering gaze of love the eyes of Arslàn.

Folle-Farine

He looked at her more closely; this was a strange creature, he thought, who being a woman and in her first youth could thus acknowledge her own loveliness with so much candour, yet so much indifference.

That afternoon they halted at a little town that stood in a dell across the fields, a small place lying close about a great church tower.

It was almost dusk when they entered it; but it was all alive with lights and shows, and trumpets and banners; it was the day of a great fair, and the merry-go-rounds were whirling, and the trades in gilded cakes and puppets of sugar were thriving fast, and the narrow streets were full of a happy and noisy peasant crowd.

As soon as the little troop entered the first street a glad cry rose.

They were well known and well liked there; the people clustered by dozens round them, the women greeting them with kisses, the children hugging the dogs, the men clamouring with invitations to eat and to drink and be merry.

They bade her watch them at their art in a rough wooden house outside the wine tavern.

She stood in the shadow and looked as they bade her, while the mimic life of their little stage began and lived its hour.

To the mind which had received its first instincts of art from the cold, lofty passionless creations of Arslàn, from the classic purity and from the divine conception of the old Hellenic ideal, the art of the comic stage could seem but poor and idle mimicry; gaudy and fragrantless as any painted rose of paper blossoming on a tinselled stem.

The crystal truthlessness, the barbaric liberty, the pure idealism of her mind and temper revolted in contempt from the visible presentment and the vari-coloured harlequinade of the comic actor's art. To her, a note of song, a gleam of light, a shadowy shape, a veiled word, were enough to unfold to her passionate fancy a world of dreams, a paradise of faith and of desire; and for this very cause she shrank away, in amazement and disgust, from this realistic mockery of mere humanity, which left nothing for the imagination to create, which spoke no other tongue than the common language of human quips and jests. It could not touch her, it could not move her; it filled her,—so far as she could bring herself to think of it at all,—with a cold and wondering contempt.

"That is your art?" she said wearily to the actors when they came to her.

"Well, is it not art; and a noble one?"

A scornful shadow swept across her face.

"It is no art. It is human always. It is never divine. There is neither heaven nor hell in it. It is all earth."

They were sharply stung.

"What has given you such thoughts as that?" they said, in their impatience and mortification.

"I have seen great things," she said simply, and turned away and went out into the darkness, and wept,—alone.

She who had knelt at the feet of Thanatos, and who had heard the songs of Pan amidst the rushes by the river, and had listened to the charmed steps of Persephone amidst the flowers of the summer;—could she honour lesser gods than these?

"They may forget—they may forsake, and he likewise, but I never," she thought.

Folle-Farine

If only she might live a little longer space to serve and suffer for them and for him still; of fate she asked nothing higher.

That night there was much money in the bag. The players pressed a share upon her; but she refused.

"Have I begged from you?" she said. "I have earned nothing."

It was with exceeding difficulty that they ended in persuading her even to share their simple supper.

She took only bread and water, and sat and watched them curiously.

The players were in high spirits; their chief ordered a stoup of bright wine, and made merry over it with gayer songs and louder laughter, and more frequent jests than even were his wont.

The men and women of the town came in and out with merry interchange of words. The youths of the little bourg chattered light amorous nonsense; the young girls smiled and chattered in answer; whilst the actors bantered them and made them a hundred love prophecies.

Now and then a dog trotted in to salute the players' poodles; now and then the quaint face of a pig looked through the legs of its master.

The door stood open; the balmy air blew in; beyond, the stars shone in a cloudless sky.

She sat without in the darkness, where no light fell amongst the thick shroud of one of the blossoming boughs of pear trees, and now and then she looked and watched their laughter and companionship, and their gay and airy buffoonery, together there within the winehouse doors.

"All fools enjoy!" she thought; with that bitter wonder, that aching disdain, that involuntary injustice, with which the strong sad patience of a great nature surveys the mindless merriment of lighter hearts and brains more easily lulled into forgetfulness and content.

They came to her and pressed on her a draught of wine, a share of the food, a handful of the honeyed cates of their simple banquet; even a portion of their silver and copper pieces with which the little leathern sack of their receipts was full,—for once,—to the mouth.

She refused all: the money she threw passionately away.

"Am I a beggar?" she said, in her wrath.

She remained without in the gloom amongst the cool blossoming branches that swayed above-head in the still night, while the carousal broke up and the peasants went on their way to their homes, singing along the dark streets, and the lights were put out in the wine-house, and the trill of the grasshopper chirped in the fields around.

"You will die of damp, roofless in the open air this moonless night," men, as they passed away, said to her in wonder.

"The leaves are roof enough for me," she answered them: and stayed there with her head resting on the roll of her sheepskin; wide-awake through the calm dark hours; for a bed within she knew that she could not pay, and she would not let any charity purchase one for her.

Folle-Farine

At daybreak when the others rose she would only take from them the crust that was absolutely needful to keep life in her. Food seemed to choke her as it passed her lips,—since how could she tell but what his lips were parched dry with hunger or were blue and cold in death?

That morning, as they started, one of the two youths who bore their travelling gear and the rude appliances of their little stage upon his shoulders from village to village when they journeyed thus—being oftentimes too poor to permit themselves any other mode of transit and of portage—fell lame and grew faint and was forced to lay down his burden by the roadside.

She raised the weight upon her back and head as she had been wont to do the weights of timber and of corn for the mill-house and bore it onward.

In vain they remonstrated with her; she would not yield, but carried the wooden framework and the folded canvasses all through the heat and weariness of the noonday.

"You would have me eat of your supper last night. I will have you accept of my payment to-day," she said, stubbornly.

For this seemed to her a labour innocent and just, and even full of honour whatever men might say: had not Helios himself been bound as a slave in Thessaly?

They journeyed far that day, along straight sunlit highways, and under the shadows of green trees. The fields were green with the young corn and the young vines; the delicate plumes of the first blossoming lilacs nodded in their footsteps; the skies were blue; the earth was fragrant.

At noonday the players halted and threw themselves down beneath a poplar tree, in a wild rose thicket, to eat their noonday meal of bread and a green cress salad.

The shelter they had chosen was full of fragrance from rain drops still wet upon the grasses, and the budding rose vines. The hedge was full of honeysuckle and tufts of cowslips; the sun was warmer; the mild-eyed cattle came and looked at them; little redstarts picked up their crumbs; from a white vine-hung cottage an old woman brought them salt and wished them a fair travel.

But her heart was sick and her feet weary, and she asked always,—"Where is Paris?"

At last they showed it her, that gleaming golden cloud upon the purple haze of the horizon.

She crossed her hands upon her beating breast, and thanked the gods that they had thus given her to behold the city of her dreams.

The chief of the mimes watched her keenly.

"You look at Paris," he said after a time. "There you may be great if you will."

"Great? I?"

She echoed the word with weary incredulity. She knew he could but mock at her.

"Aye," he made answer seriously. "Even you! Why not? There is no dynasty that endures in that golden city save only one—the sovereignty of a woman's beauty."

Folle-Farine

She started and shuddered a little; she thought that she saw the Red Mouse stir amidst the grasses.

"I want no greatness," she said slowly. "What should I do with it?"

For in her heart she thought:

"What would it serve me to be known to all the world and remembered by all the ages of men if he forget—forget quite?"

CHAPTER VI.

THAT night they halted in a little bright village of the leafy and fruitful zone of the city—one of the fragrant and joyous pleasure-places amongst the woods where the students and the young girls came for draughts of milk and plunder of primroses, and dances by the light of the spring moon, and love-words murmured as they fastened violets in each other's breasts.

The next day she entered Paris with them as one of their own people.

"You may be great here, if you choose," they said to her, and laughed.

She scarcely heard. She only knew that here it was that Arslàn had declared that fame—or death—should come to him.

The golden cloud dissolved as she drew near to it. A great city might be beautiful to others; to her it was only as its gilded cage is to a mountain bird. The wilderness of roofs, the labyrinth of streets, the endless walls of stone, the ceaseless noises of the living multitude, these were horrible to the free-born blood of her; she felt blinded, caged, pent, deafened. Its magnificence failed to daunt, its colour to charm, its pageantry to beguile her. Through the glad and gorgeous ways she went, wearily and sick of heart, for the rush of free winds and the width of free skies, as a desert-born captive, with limbs of bronze and the eyes of the lion, went fettered past the palaces of Rome in the triumphal train of Africanus or Pompeius.

The little band with which she travelled wondered what her eyes so incessantly looked for, in that perpetual intentness with which they searched every knot of faces that was gathered together as a swarm of bees clusters in the sunshine. They could not tell; they only saw that her eyes never lost that look.

"Is it the Past or the Future that you search for always?" the shrewdest of them asked her.

She shuddered a little, and made him no answer. How could she tell which it was?—whether it would be a public fame or a nameless grave that she would light on at the last?

She was a mystery to them.

She minded poverty so little. She was as content on a draught of water and a bunch of cress as others are on rarest meats and wines. She bore bodily fatigue with an Arab's endurance and indifference. She seemed to care little whether suns beat on her, or storms drenched her to the bone; whether she slept under a roof, or the boughs of a tree; whether the people hissed her for a foreign thing of fowl omen, or clamoured aloud in the streets praise of her perfect face. She cared nothing.

She was silent always, and she never smiled.

Folle-Farine

"I must keep my liberty!" she had said; and she kept it.

By night she toiled ceaselessly for her new masters; docile, patient, enduring, laborious, bearing the yoke of this labour as she had borne that of her former slavery, rather than owe a crust to alms, a coin to the gaze of a crowd. But by the day she searched the city ceaselessly and alone, wandering, wandering, always on a quest that was never ended.

For amidst the millions of faces that met her gaze, Arslàn's was not; and she was too solitary, too ignorant, and locked her secret too tenaciously in her heart, to be able to learn tidings of his name.

So the months of the spring and the summer time went by; it was very strange and wondrous to her.

The human world seemed suddenly all about her; the quiet earth, on which the cattle grazed, and the women threshed and ploughed, and the sheep browsed the thyme, and the mists swept from stream to sea, this was all gone; and in its stead there was a world of tumult, colour, noise, change, riot, roofs piled on roofs, clouds of dust yellow in the sun, walls peopled with countless heads of flowers and of women; throngs, various of hue as garden-beds of blown anemones; endless harmonies and discords always rung together from silver bells, and brazen trumpets, and the clash of arms, and the spray of waters, and the screams of anguish, and the laughs of mirth, and the shrill pipes of an endless revelry, and the hollow sighs of a woe that had no rest.

For the world of a great city, of "the world as it is man's," was all about her; and she loathed it, and sickened in it, and hid her face from it whenever she could, and dreamed, as poets dream in fever of pathless seas and tawny fields of weeds, and dim woods filled with the song of birds, and cool skies brooding over a purple moor, and all the silence and the loveliness and the freedom of "the world as it is God's."

"You are not happy?" one man said to her.

"Happy!"

She said no more; but he thought, just so had he seen a rose-crested golden-eyed bird of the great savannahs look, shut in a cage in a showman's caravan, and dying slowly, with dulled plumage and drooped head, while the street mob of a town thrust their fingers through the bars and mocked it, and called to it to chatter and be gay.

"Show your beauty once—just once amidst us on the stage, and on the morrow you can choose your riches and your jewels from the four winds of heaven as you will," the players urged on her a hundred times.

But she refused always.

Her beauty—it was given to the gods, to take or to leave, in life or death, for him.

The months went on; she searched for him always. A horrible unending vigil that never seemed nearer its end. Vainly, day by day, she searched the crowds and the solitudes, the gates of the palaces and the vaults of the cellars. She thought she saw him a thousand times; but she could never tell whether it were truth or fancy. She never met him face to face; she never heard his name. There is no desert wider, no maze more unending, than a great city.

She ran hideous peril with every moment that she lived; but by the strength and the love that dwelt together in her she escaped them. Her sad, wide, open, pathetic eyes ever searched only for his face and saw no other; her ear, ever strained to listen for one voice, was dead to every accent of persuasion or of passion.

Folle-Farine

When men tried to tell her she was beautiful, she looked them full in the eyes and laughed, a terrible dreary laugh of scorn that chilled them to the bone. When the gay groups on balconies, that glanced golden in the sun, flung sweetmeats at her, and dashed wine on the ground, and called to her for her beauty's sake to join them, she looked at them with a look that had neither envy nor repugnance in it, but only a cold mute weariness of contempt.

One day a great sculptor waylaid her, and showed her a pouch full of money and precious stones. "All that, and more, you shall have, if you will let me make a cast of your face and your body once." In answer, she showed him the edge of her hidden knife.

One day a young man, unlike to all the ragged and toil-worn crowds that alone beheld her, came in those crowded quarters of the poor, and watched her with eyes aglow like those of the youth in the old market-square about the cathedral, and waylaid her, later, in solitude, and slid in her palm a chain studded with precious stones of many colours.

"I am rich," he murmured to her. "I am a prince. I can make your name a name of power, if only you will come."

"Come whither?" she asked him.

"Come with me—only to my supper-table—for one hour; my horses wait."

She threw the chain of stones at her feet.

"I have no hunger," she said, carelessly. "Go, ask those that have to your feast."

And she gave no other phrase in answer to all the many honeyed and persuasive words with which in vain he urged her, that night and many other night, until he wearied.

One day, in the green outskirts of the city, passing by under a gilded gallery, and a wide window full of flowers, and hung with delicate draperies, there looked out the fair head of a woman, with diamonds in the ears, and a shroud of lace about it, while against the smiling scornful mouth a jewelled hand held a rose; and a woman's voice called to her, mockingly:

"Has the devil not heard you yet, that you still walk barefoot in the dust on the stones, and let the sun beat on your head? O fool! there is gold in the air, and gold in the dust, and gold in the very gutter here, for a woman!"

And the face was the face, and the voice the voice, of the gardener's wife of the old town by the sea.

She raised, to the gilded balcony above, her great sorrowful musing eyes, full of startled courage: soon she comprehended; and then her gaze gave back scorn for scorn.

"Does that brazen scroll shade you better than did the trellised vine?" she said, with her voice ascending clear in its disdain. "And are those stones in your breast any brighter than the blue was in the eyes of your child?"

The woman above cast the rose at her and laughed, and withdrew from the casement.

She set her heel on the rose, and trod its leaves down in the dust. It was a yellow rose, scentless and comely—an emblem of pleasure and wealth. She left it where it lay, and went onward.

The sweet sins, and all their rich profits, that she might take as easily as she could have taken the rose from the dust, had no power to allure her.

Folle-Farine

The gilded balcony, the velvet couch, the jewels in the ears, the purple draperies, the ease and the affluence and the joys of the sights and the senses, these to her were as powerless to move her envy, these to her seemed as idle as the blow-balls that a child's breath floated down the current of a summer breeze.

When once a human ear has heard the whispers of the gods by night steal through the reeds by the river, never again to it can there sound anything but discord and empty sound in the tinkling cymbals of brass, and the fools' bells of silver, in which the crowds in their deafness imagine the songs of the heroes and the music of the spheres.

"There are only two trades in a city," said the actors to her, with a smile as bitter as her own, "only two trades—to buy souls and to sell them. What business have you here, who do neither the one nor the other?"

There was music still in this trampled reed of the river, into which the gods had once bidden the stray winds and the wandering waters breathe their melody; but there, in the press, the buyers and the sellers only saw in it a frail thing of the sand and the stream, only made to be woven for barter, or bind together the sheaves of the roses of pleasure.

By—and—by they grew so impatient of this soul which knew its right errand so little that it would neither accept temptation itself nor deal it to others, they grew so impatient to receive that golden guerdon from passion and evil which they had foreseen as their sure wage for her when they had drawn her with them to the meshes of the city, that they betrayed her, stung and driven into treachery by the intolerable reproach of her continual strength, her continual silence.

They took a heavy price, and betrayed her to the man who had set his soul upon her beauty, to make it live naked and vile and perfect for all time in marble. She saved herself by such madness of rage, such fury of resistance, as the native tigress knows in the glare of the torches or the bonds of the cords.

She smote the sculptor with her knife; a tumult rose round; voices shouted that he was stabbed; the men who had betrayed her raised loudest the outcry. In the darkness of a narrow street, and of a night of tempest, she fled from them, and buried herself in the dense obscurity which is one of the few privileges of the outcasts.

It was very poor, this quarter where she found refuge; men and women at the lowest ebb of life gathered there together. There was not much crime; it was too poor even for that. It was all that piteous, hopeless class that is honest, and suffers and keeps silent—so silent that no one notices when death replaces life.

Here she got leave to dwell a little while in the topmost corner of a high tower, which rose so high, so high, that the roof of it seemed almost like the very country itself. It was so still there, and so fresh, and the clouds seemed so near, and the pigeons flew so close about it all day long, and at night so trustfully sought their roost there.

In a nook of it she made her home: it was very old, very desolate, very barren; yet she could bear it better than she could any lower range of dwelling.

She could see the sunrise and the sunset; she could see the rain-mists and the planets; she could look down on all the white curl of the smoke; and she could hear the bells ring with a strange peculiar sweetness striking straight to her ear across the wilderness of roofs. And then she had the pigeons: they were not much, but they were something of the old fresh country life; and now and then they brought a head of clover or a spray of grass in their beaks; and at sight of it the tears would rush into her eyes, and though it was pain, it yet a sweeter one than any pleasure that she had.

She maintained herself still without alms, buying her right to live there, and the little food that sufficed for her, by one of those offices in which the very poor contrive to employ those still poorer than themselves.

Folle-Farine

They slept so heavily, those people who the weight of twenty hours' toil, the pangs of hunger, and the chills of cold upon them, whenever they laid down, and who would so willingly have slept for ever with any night they laid their heads upon their sacks of rags. But, so long as they woke at all, they needed to wake with the first note of the sparrows in the dark. She, so long used to rise ere ever the first streaks of the day were seen, roused scores of them; and in payment they gave her the right to warm herself at their stove, a handful of their chestnuts, a fragment of their crust, a little copper piece—anything that they could afford or she would consent to take. A woman, who had been the reveilleuse of the quarter many years, had died; and they were glad of her;—"Her eyes have no seep in them," they said; and they found that she never failed.

It was a strange trade—to rise whilst yet for the world it was night, and go to and fro the dreary courts, up and down the gloom of the staircases, and in and out the silent chambers, and call all those sons and daughters of wretchedness from the only peace that their lives knew. So often she felt loath to wake them; so often she stood beside the bundle of straw on which some dreaming creature, sighing and smiling in her sleep, murmured of her home, and had not the heart rudely to shatter those mercies of the night.

It was a strange sad office, to go alone amongst all those sleepers in the stillness that came before the dawn, and move from house to house, from door to door, from bed to bed, with the one little star of her lamp lone burning.

They were all so poor, so poor, it seemed more cruel than murder only to call them from their rest to work, and keep alive in them that faculty of suffering which was all they gained from their humanity.

Her pity for them grew so great that her heart perforce softened to them also. Those strong men gaunt with famine, those white women with their starved children on their breasts, those young maidens worn blind over the needle or the potter's clay, those little children who staggered up in the dark to go to the furnace, or the wheel, or the powder-mill, or the potato-fields outside the walls,—she could neither fear them nor hate them, nor do aught save sorrow for them with a dumb, passionate, wondering grief.

She saw these people despised for no shame, wretched for no sin, suffering eternally, though guilty of no other fault than that of being in too large numbers on an earth too small for the enormous burden of its endless woe. She found that she had companions in her misery, and that she was not alone under that bitter scorn which had been poured on her. In a manner she grew to care for these human creatures, all strangers, yet whose solitude she entered, and whose rest she roused. It was a human interest, a human sympathy. It drew her from the despair that had closed around her.

And some of these in turn loved her.

Neither poverty nor wretchedness could dull the lustrous, deep-hued, flowerlike beauty that was hers by nature. As she ascended the dark stone stairs with the little candle raised above her head, and knocking low entered the place where they slept, the men and the children alike dreamed of strange shapes of paradise and things of sorcery.

"When she wakes us the children never cry," said a woman whom she always summoned an hour before dawn to rise and walk two leagues to a distant factory. It was new to her to be welcomed, it was new to see the children smile because she touched them. It lifted a little the ice that had closed about her heart.

It had become the height of the summer. The burning days and the sultry nights poured down on her bare head and blinded her, and filled her throat with the dust of the public ways, and parched her mouth with the thirst of over-driven cattle.

All the while in the hard hot glare she searched for one voice. All the while in the hard brazen din she listened for one voice.

Folle-Farine

She wandered all the day, half the night. They wondered that she woke so surely with every dawn; they did not know that seldom did she ever sleep. She sought for him always;—sought the busy crowds of the living; sought the burial grounds of the dead.

As she passed through the endless ways in the wondrous city; as she passed by the vast temples of art; as she passed by the open doors of the sacred places which the country had raised to the great memories that it treasured; it became clearer to her—this thing of his desires,—this deathless name amidst a nation, this throne on the awed homage of a world for which his life had laboured and striven, and sickened for and endlessly desired.

The great purpose, the great end, to which he had lived grew tangible and present to her; and in her heart, as she went, she said ever, "Let me only die as the reed died;—what matter,—so that only the world speak his name?"

One night she stood on the height of the leads of the tower. The pigeons had gone to roost; the bells had swung themselves into stillness; far below the changing crowds were moving ceaselessly, but to that calm altitude no sound arose from them. The stars were out, and a great silver moon bathed half the skies in its white glory. In the stones of the parapet wind-sown blossoms blew to and fro heavy with dew.

The day had been one of oppressive heat. She had toiled all through it, seeking—seeking—seeking—what she never found. She was covered with dust; parched with thirst; foot-weary; sick at heart. She looked down on the mighty maze of the city, and thought—"how long—how long?"

Suddenly a cool hand touched her, a soft voice murmured at her ear.

Turning in the gloom she faced Sartorian. A great terror held her mute and breathless there; gazing in the paralysis of horror at this frail life, which was for her the incarnation of the world, and by whose lips the world said to her,—"Come, eat and drink, and sow your garments with gems, and kiss men on the mouth whilst you slay them, and plunder and poison, and laugh and be wise. For all your gods are dead; and there is but one god now—that god is gold."

"You must be tired, surely," the old man said, with soft insistence. "You never find what you seek; you are always alone, always hungered and poor; always wretched,—Folle-Farine. Ah! you would not eat my golden pear. It was not wise."

He said so little; and yet—these slow subtle brief phrases pierced her heart with the full force of their odious meaning. She leaned against the wall, breathing hard and fast, mute, for the moment paralysed.

"You fled away from me that night. It was heroic, foolish, mad. Yet I bear no anger against it. You have not loved the old dead gods for nought. You have the temper of their times. You obey them; though they betray you and forget you,—Folle-Farine."

She gazed at him, fascinated by her very loathing of him, as the bird by the snake.

"Who told you?" she muttered.

"Who told me, that you dwell here? The sun has a million rays; so has gold a million eyes; do you not know? There is nothing you have not done that has not been known to me. But I can always wait;—Folle-Farine. You are very strong; you are very weak, of course;—you have a faith; and you follow it; and it leads you on and on, on and on, and one day it will disappear—and you will plunge after it,—and it will drown you. You seek for this man and you cannot find even his grave. You are like a woman who seeks for her lover on a battle-fields. But the world is a carnage where the vultures soon pick bare the bones of the slain, and all skeletons look alike, and are most unlovely—Folle-Farine."

Folle-Farine

"You came—to say this?" she said, through her locked teeth.

"Nay—I came to see your beauty, your ice—god tired soon; but I—. My golden pear would have been better vengeance for a slighted passion than this beggar's quarter, and these wretched rags—."

She held her misery and her shame, and her hatred alike down under enforced composure.

"There is no shame here," she said, between her teeth. "A beggar's quarters, perhaps; but there poor copper coins and these rags I earn with clean hands."

He smiled with that benignant pity, with that malign mockery, which stung her so ruthlessly.

"No shame? Oh, Folle-Farine, did I not tell you, that, live as you may, shame will always be your garment in life and in death? You—a thing beautiful, nameless, homeless, accursed, who dares to dream to be innocent likewise! The world will clothe you with shame, whether you choose it or not. But the world, as I say, will give you one choice. Take its red robe boldly from it, and weight it with gold and encrust it with jewels. Believe me, the women who wear the white garments of virtue will envy you the red robe bitterly, then."

Her arms were crossed upon her breast; her eyes gazed at him with the look he had seen in the gloom of the evening, under the orchards by the side of the rushing mill-water.

"You came—to say this?"

"Nay; I came to see your beauty, Folle-Farine. Your northern god soon tired, I say; but I—. Look yonder a moment," he pursued; and he motioned downward to where the long lines of light gleamed in the wondrous city which was stretched at their feet; and the endless murmur of its eternal sea of pleasure floated dimly to them on the soft night air. "See here, Folle-Farine: you dwell with the lowest; you are the slave of the street mobs; no eyes see you except those of the harlot, the beggar, the thief, the outcast; your wage is a crust and a copper coin; you have the fate of your namesake, the dust, to wander a little while, and then sink on the stones of the streets. Yet that you think worthy and faithful, because it is pure, alike, of alms and of vice. Oh, beautiful fool! what would your lost lover say if beholding you here, amidst the reek of the mob and the homage of thieves? He would say of you the most bitter thing that a man can say of a woman: 'She has sunk into sin, but she has been powerless to gild her sin, or make it of more profit than her innocence.' And a man has no scorn like the scorn which he feels for a woman who sells her soul—at a loss. You see?—ah! surely you see, Folle-Farine?"

She shook like a leaf where she stood, with the yellow and lustrous moonlight about her. She saw—she saw now! And she had been mad enough to dream that if she lived in honesty, and by labour that she loathed won back, with hands clean of crime as of alms, the gold which he had left as the wages of her beauty, and found him and gave it to him without a word, he would at least believe—believe so much as this, that her hunger had been famine, and her need misery, and her homelessness that of the stray dog which is kicked from even a ditch, and hunted from even a graveyard: but that through it all she had never touched one coin of that cruel and merciless gift.

"You see?" pursued the low, flute-like moaning mockery of her tormentor's voice. "You see? You have all the shame: it is your birthright; and you have nothing of the sweetness which may go with shame for a woman who has beauty. Now, look yonder. There lies the world, which when I saw you last was to you only an empty name. Now you know it—know it, at least, enough to be aware of all you have not, all you might have in it, if you took my golden pear. You must be tired, Folle-Farine,—to stand homeless under the gilded balconies; to be footsore in the summer dust amongst the rolling carriages; to stand outcast and famished before the palace gates; to see the smiles upon a million mouths, and on them all not one smile upon you; to show yourself hourly amongst a mob, that you may buy a little bread to eat, a little straw to rest on! You must be tired, Folle-Farine!"

Folle-Farine

She was silent where she stood in the moonlight, with the clouds seeming to lean and touch her, and far beneath the blaze of the myriad of lights shining through the soft darkness of the summer night.

Tired!—ah, God!—tired, indeed. But not for any cause of which he spake.

"You must be tired. Now, eat of my golden pear; and there, where the world lies yonder at our feet, no name shall be on the mouths of men as your name shall be in a day. Through the crowds you shall be borne by horses fleet as the winds; or you shall lean above them from a gilded gallery, and mock them at your fancy there on high in a cloud of flowers. Great jewels shall beam on you like planets; and the only chains that you shall wear shall be links of gold, like the chains of a priestess of old. Your mere wish shall be as a sorcerer's wand, to bring you the thing of our idlest desire. You have been despised!—what vengeance sweeter than to see men grovel to win your glance, as the swine at the feet of Circe? You have been scorned and accursed! —what retribution fuller than for women to behold in you the sweetness and magnificence of shame, and through you, envy, and fall, and worship the Evil which begot you? Has humanity been so fair a friend to you that you can hesitate to strike at its heart with such a vengeance—so symmetrical in justice, so cynical in irony? Humanity cast you out to wither at your birth,—a thing rootless, nameless, only meet for the snake and the worm. If you bear poison in your fruit, is that your fault, or the fault of the human hands that cast the chance-sown weed out on the dunghill to perish? I do not speak of passion. I use no amorous phrase. I am old and ill-favoured; and I know that, any way, you will for ever hate me. But the rage of the desert-beast is more beautiful than the meek submission of the animal timid and tame. It is the lioness in you that I care to chain; but your chains shall be of gold, Folle-Farine; and all women will envy. Name your price, set it high as you will; there is nothing that I will refuse. Nay, even I will find your lover, who loves not you; and I will let you have your fullest vengeance on him. A noble vengeance, for no other would be worthy of your strength. Living or dead, his genius shall be made known to men; and, before another summer comes, all the world shall toss aloft in triumph the name that is now nothing as the dust is;—nothing as you are, Folle-Farine!"

She heard in silence to the end.

On the height of the roof-tops all was still; the stars seemed to beam close against her sight; below was the infinite space of the darkness, in which lines of light glittered where the haunts of pleasure lay; all creatures near her slept; the wind-sown plants blew to and fro, rooted in the spaces of the stones.

As the last words died softly on the quiet of the air, in answer, she reached her hand upward, broke off a tuft of the yellow wall-blossom, and cast it out with one turn of her wrist down into the void of the darkness.

"What do I say?" she said, slowly. "What? Well, this: I could seize you, and cast you down into the dark below there, as easily as I cast that tuft of weed. And why I hold my hand I cannot tell; it would be just."

And she turned away and walked from him in the gloom, slowly, as though the deed she spake of tempted her.

CHAPTER VII.

THE poverties of the city devoured her incessantly, like wolves; the temptations of the city crouched in wait for her incessantly, like tigers. She was always hungry, always heartsick, always alone; and there was always at her ear some tempting voice, telling her that she was beautiful and was a fool.

Yet she never dreamed once of listening, of yielding, of taking any pity on herself.

Was this virtue? She never thought of it as such; it was simply instinct; the instinct of a supreme fidelity, in which all slighter and meaner passions were absorbed and slain.

Folle-Farine

Once or twice, through some lighted casement in some lamp-lit wood, where the little gay boats flashed on fairy lakes, she would coldly watch that luxury, that indolence, that rest of the senses, with a curl on her lips, where she sat or stood, in the shadow of the trees.

"To wear soft stuffs and rich colours, to have jewels in their breasts, to sleep in satin, to hear fools laugh, to have both hands full of gold, that is what women love," she thought; and laughed a little in her cold wonder, and went back to her high cage in the tower, and called the pigeons in from the rooftops at sunset, and kissed their purple throats, and broke amongst them her one dry crust, and, supperless herself, sat on the parapet and watched the round white moon rise over the shining roofs of Paris.

She was ignorant, she was friendless, she was savage, she was very wretched; but she had a supreme love in her, and she was strong.

A hundred times the Red Mouse tried to steal through the lips which hunger, his servile and unfailing minister, would surely, the Red Mouse thought, disbar and uncloset to him sooner or later.

"You will tire, and I can wait, Folle-Farine," the Red Mouse had said to her, by the tongue of the old man Sartorian; and he kept his word very patiently.

He was patient, he was wise; he believed in the power of gold, and had no faith in the strength of a woman. He knew how to wait—unseen, so that this rare bird should not perceive the net spread for it in its wildness and wariness. He did not pursue, nor too quickly incense her.

Only in the dark cheerless mists, when she rose to go amongst the world of the sleeping poor at her threshold, she would step on some gift worthy of a queen's acceptance, without date or word, gleaming there against the stone of the stairs.

When she climbed to her hole in the roof at the close of a day, all pain, all fatigue, all vain endeavour, all bootless labour to and fro the labyrinth of streets, there would be on her bare bench such fruit and flowers as Dorothea might have sent from Paradise, and curled amidst them some thin leaf that would have bought the weight of the pines and of the grapes in gold.

When in the dusk of the night she went, wearily and footsore, through the byways and over the sharp set flints of the quarters of the outcasts and the beggars, sick with the tumult and the stench and the squalor, parched with dust, worn with hunger, blind with the endless search for one face amidst the millions, going home—oh, mockery of the word!—to a bed of straw, to a cage among the roofs, to a handful of rice as a meal, to a night of loneliness and cold and misery; at such a moment now and then through the gloom a voice would steal to her, saying:

"Are you not tired yet, Folle-Farine?"

But she never paused to hear the voice, nor gave it any answer.

The mill dust; the reed by the river; the nameless, friendless, rootless thing that her fate made her, should have been so weak, and so lightly blown by every chance breeze—so the Red Mouse told her; should have asked no better ending than to be wafted up a little while upon the winds of praise, or woven with a golden braid into a crown of pleasure.

Yet she was so stubborn and would not; yet she dared deride her tempters, and defy her destiny, and be strong.

For Love was with her.

Folle-Farine

And though the Red Mouse lies often in Love's breast, and is cradled there a welcome guest, yet when Love, once in a million times, shakes off his sloth, and flings the Red Mouse with it from him, he flings with a hand of force; and the beast crouches and flees, and dares meddle with Love no more.

In one of the first weeks of the wilder weather, weather that had the purple glow of the autumnal storms and the chills of coming winter on it, she arose, as her habit was, ere the night was altogether spent, and lit her little taper, and went out upon the rounds to rouse the sleepers.

She had barely tasted food for many hours. All the means of subsistence that she had were the few coins earned from those as poor almost as herself.

Often these went in debt to her, and begged for a little time to get the piece or two of base metal that they owed her; and she forgave them such debts always, not having the heart to take the last miserable pittance from some trembling withered hand which had worked through fourscore years of toil, and found no payment but its wrinkles on its palm; not having the force to fill her own plate with crusts which could only be purchased by the hunger cries of some starveling infant, or by the barter of some little value—less cross of ivory or rosary of berries long cherished in some aching breast after all else was lost or spent.

She had barely tasted food that day, worst of all she had not even a few grains to scatter to the hungry pigeons as they had fluttered to her on the house-top in the stormy twilights as the evening fell.

She had lain awake all the night hearing the strokes of the bells sound the hours, and seeming to say to her as they beat on the silence—

"Dost thou dare to be strong, thou? a grain of dust, a reed of the river, a Nothing?"

When she rose, and drew back the iron staple that fastened her door, and went out on the crazy stairway, she struck her foot against a thing of metal. It glitter in the feeble beams from her lamp.

She took it up; it was a little precious casket, such as of old the Red Mouse lurked in, amongst the pearls, to spring out from their whiteness into the purer snow of Gretchen's breast.

With it was only one written line.

"When you are tired,—Folle-Farine?"

She was already tired, tired with the horrible thirsty weariness of the young lioness starved and cramped in a cage in a city.

An old crone sat on a niche on the wall. She thrust her lean bony face, lit with wolf's eyes through the gloom.

"Are you not tired?" she muttered in the formula taught her. "Are you not tired, Folle-Farine?"

"If I be, what of that?" she answered, and she thrust the case away to the feet of the woman, still shut, and went on with her little dim taper down round the twist of the stairs.

She knew what she did, what she put away. She had come to know, too, what share the sex of her mother takes in the bringing to the lips of their kind the golden pear that to most needs no pressing.

"If I had only your face, and your chances," had said to her that day a serving-girl, young, with sallow cheeks, and a hollow voice, and eyes of fever, who lived in a den lower down on the stair-way.

Folle-Farine

"Are you mad that you hunger here when you might hang yourself with diamonds like our Lady of Atocha?" cried a dancing-woman with sullen eyes and a yellow skin from the hither side of the mountains, who begged in the streets all day.

So, many tongues hissed to her in different fashions. It seemed to many of them impious in one like her to dare to be stronger than the gold was that assailed her, to dare to live up there among the clouds; and hunger, and thirst, and keep her silence, and strike dumb all the mouths that tried to woo her down, and shake aside all the hands that strove softly to slide their purchase-monies into hers.

For they chimed in chorus as the bells did:

"Strength in the dust—in a reed—in a Nothing?"

It was a bitter windy morning; the rain fell heavily; there were no stars out, and the air was sharp and raw. She was too used to all changes of weather to take heed of it, but her thin clothes were soaked through, and her hair was drenched as she crossed the courts and traversed the passages to reach her various employers.

The first she roused was a poor sickly woman sleeping feverishly on an old rope mat; the second an old man wrestling with nightmare as the rain poured on him through a hole in the roof, making him dream that he was drowning.

The third was a woman so old that her quarter accredited her with a century of age; she woke mumbling that it was hard at her years to have to go and pick rags for a crumb of bread.

The fourth was a little child not seven; he was an orphan, and the people who kept him sent him out to get herbs in the outlying villages to sell in the streets, and beat him if he let other children be beforehand with him. He woke sobbing; he had dreamed of his dead mother, and cried out that it was so cold, so cold.

There were scores like them at whose doors she knocked, or whose chambers she entered. The brief kind night was over, and they had to arise and work,—or die.

"Why do they not die?" she wondered; and she thought of the dear gods that she had loved, the gods of oblivion.

Truly there were no gifts like their gifts; and yet men knew their worth so little!—but thrust Hypnos back in scorn, dashing their wine-cups in his eyes; and mocked Oneiros, calling him the guest of love-sick fools and of mad poets; and against Thanatos strove always in hatred and terror as against their dreaded foe.

It was a strange melancholy dreary labour this into which she had entered.

It was all dark. The little light she bore scarcely shed its rays beyond her feet. It was all still. The winds sounded infinitely sad amongst those vaulted passages and the deep shafts of the stairways. Now and then a woman's voice in prayer or a man's in blasphemy echoed dully through the old half-ruined buildings. Otherwise an intense silence reigned there, where all save herself were sleeping.

She used to think it was a city of the dead, in which she alone was living.

And sometimes she had not the heart to waken them; when there was a smile on some wan, worn face that never knew one in its waking hours; or when some childless mother in her lonely bed in sleeping fancy drew young arms about her throat.

Folle-Farine

This morning when all her tasks were done, and all the toilers summoned to another day of pain, she retraced her steps slowly, bearing the light aloft, and with its feeble rays shed on the colourless splendour of her face, and on her luminous dilated troubled eyes that were for ever seeking what they never found.

A long vaulted passage stretched between her and the foot of the steps that led to the tower; many doors opened on it, the winds wailed through it, and the ragged clothes of the tenants blew to and fro upon the swaying cords. She traversed it, and slowly mounted her own staircase, which was spiral and narrow, with little loopholes ever and again that looked out upon the walls, and higher on the roofs, and higher yet upon the open sky. By one of these she paused and looked out wearily.

It was dark still; great low rain-clouds floated by; a little caged bird stirred with a sad note; nightly rains swept by from the westward, sweet with the smell of the distant fields.

Her heart ached for the country.

It was so still there in the dusk she knew, even in this wild autumn night, which there would be so purple with leaf shadow, so brown with embracing branches, so grey with silvery faint mists, so lily white with virgin snows. Ah, God! to reach it once again, she thought, if only to die in it.

And yet she stayed on in this, which was to her the deepest hell, stayed on because he—in life or death,—was here.

She started as a hand touched her softly, where she stood looking through the narrow space. The eyes of Sartorian smiled on her through the twilight.

"Do you shrink still?" he said, gently. "Put back your knife; look at me quietly; you will not have the casket?—very well. Your strength is folly; yet it is noble. It becomes you. I do you good for ill. I have had search made for your lover, who loves not you. I have found him."

"Living?"

She quivered from head to foot; the grey walls reeled round her; she feared, she hoped, she doubted, she believed. Was it hell? Was it heaven? She could not tell. She cared not which, so that only she could look once more upon the face of Arslàn.

"Living," he answered her, and still he smiled. "Living. Come with me, and see how he has used the liberty you gave. Come."

She staggered to her feet and rose, and held her knife close in the bosom of her dress, and with passionate eyes of hope and dread searched the face of the old man through the shadows.

"Is it the truth?" she muttered. "If you mock me—if you lie—"

"Your knife will sheathe itself in my body, I know. Nay, I have never lied to you. One cannot wear a velvet glove to tame a lioness. Come with me; fear nothing, Folle-Farine. Come with me, and see with your own eye—sight how the world of men has dealt with this your god."

"I will come."

Sartorian gazed at her in silence.

Folle-Farine

"You are a barbarian; and so you are heroic always. I would not lie to you, and here I have no need. Come; it is very near to you. A rood of stone can sever two lives, though the strength of all the world cannot unite them. Come."

She gripped the knife closer, and, with feet that stumbled as the feet of a dumb beast that goes out to its slaughter, followed him, through the dark and narrow ways. She had no fear for herself; she had no dread of treachery or peril; for herself she could be strong—always: and the point of the steel was set hard against her breast. But for him?—had the gods forgotten? had he forgot?

She was sick and cold and white with terror as she went. She dreaded the unknown thing her eyes might look upon. She dreaded the truth that she had sought to learn all through the burning months of summer, all through the horrors of the crowded city. Was it well with him, or ill? Had the gods remembered at last? Had the stubborn necks of men been bent to his feet? Was he free?—free to rise in the heights of lofty desire, and never look downward—in pity—once?

They passed in silence through many passage ways of the great stone hive of human life in which she dwelt. Once only Sartorian paused and looked back and spoke.

"If you find him in a woman's arms—lost in a sloth of passion—what then? Will you stay still, let him have greatness?"

In the gloom he saw her stagger as though struck upon the head. But she rallied and gazed at him in answer with eyes that would neither change nor shrink.

"What is that to you?" she said, in her shut teeth. "Show me the truth: as for him—he has a right to do as he will. Have I said ever otherwise?"

He led the way onward in silence.

This passion, so heroic even in its barbarism, so faithful even in its wretchedness, so pure even in its abandonment, almost appalled him—and yet on it he had no pity.

By his lips the world spoke: the world which, to a creature nameless, homeless, godless, friendless, offered only one choice—shame or death; and for such privilege of choice bade her be thankful to men and to their deity.

He led her through many vaulted ways, and up the shaft of a stone stairway in a distant side of the vast pile, which, from holding many habitants of kings and monks and scholars, had become the populous home of the most wretched travailers of a great city.

"Wait here," he said, and drew her backward into a hollow in the wall. It was nearly dark.

As she stood there in the darkness looking down through the narrow space, there came a shadow to her through the gloom—a human shadow, noiseless and voiceless. It ascended the shaft of the stairs with a silent swift tread and passed by her and went onward; as it passed, the rays of her lamp were shed on it, and her eyes at last saw the face of Arslàn.

It was pale as death; his head was sunk on his breast; his lips muttered without the sounds of words, his fair hair streamed in the wind; he moved without haste, without pause, with the pulseless haste, the bloodless quiet of a phantom.

Folle–Farine

She had heard men talk of those who being dead yet dwelt on earth and moved amidst the living. She had no thought of him in that moment save as amongst the dead. But he, dead or living, could have no horror for her; he, dead or living, ruled her as the moon the sea, and drew her after him, and formed the one law of her life.

She neither trembled nor prayed, nor wept nor laughed, nor cried aloud in her inconceivable joy. Her heart stood still, as though some hand had caught and gripped it.

She was silent in the breathless silence of an unspeakable awe; and with a step as noiseless as his own she glided in his path through the deep shaft of the stairs, upward and upward through the hushed house, through the innumerable chambers, through the dusky shadows, through the chill of the bitter dawn, through the close hive of the sleeping creatures, up and up, into the very roof itself, where it seemed to meet the low and lurid clouds, and to be lifted from the habitations and the homes of men.

A doorway was open; he passed through it; beyond it was a bare square place through which there came the feeblest rays of dawn, making the yellow oil flame that burned in it look dull and hot and garish. He passed into the chamber and stood still a moment, with his head dropped on his chest and his lips muttering sounds without meaning.

The light fell on his face; she saw that he was living. Crouched on his threshold, she watched him, her heart leaping with a hope so keen, a rapture so intense, that its very strength and purity suffocated her like some mountain air too pure and strong for human lungs to breathe.

He walked in his sleep; that sleep so strange and so terrible, which drugs the sense and yet stimulates the brain: in which the sleeper moves, acts, remembers, returns to daily habits, and resorts to daily haunts, and yet to all the world around him is deaf and blind and indifferent as the dead.

The restless brain, unstrung by too much travail and too little food, had moved the limbs unconsciously to their old haunts and habits; and in his sleep, though sightless and senseless, he seemed still to know and still to suffer. For he moved again after a moment's rest, and passed straight to the wooden tressels on which a great canvas was outstretched.

He sank down on a rough bench in front of it, and passed his hand before the picture with the fond caressing gesture with which a painter shows to another some wave of light, some grace of colour, and then sat there, stupidly, steadfastly, with his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands, and his eyes fastened on the creation before him.

It was a rugged, desolate, wind-blown chamber, set in the topmost height of the old pile, beaten on by all snows, drenched by all rains, rocked by all storms, bare, comfortless, poor to the direst stretch of poverty, close against the clouds and with the brazen bells and teeming roofs of the city close beneath.

She saw his face once more. She had dwelt by him for many weeks, and no sense of his presence had come to her, no instinct had awakened in him towards the love which clung to him with a faithfulness only as great as its humility.

She, praying always to see this man once more, and die—had been severed from him by the breadth of a stone as by an ocean's width; and he—doomed to fail always, spending his life in one endeavour, and by that one perpetually vanquished—he had had no space left to look up at a nameless creature with lithe golden limbs, about whose head the white-winged pigeons fluttered at twilight on the house-top.

His eyes had swept over her more than once; but they had had no sight for her; they were a poet's eyes that saw for ever in fancy faces more amorous and divine, limbs lovelier and more lily-like, mouths sweeter and more

persuasive in their kiss, than any they ever saw on earth.

One passion consumed him, and left him not pause, nor breath, nor pity, nor sorrow for any other thing. He rested from his work and knew that it was good; but this could not content him, for this his fellow-men denied.

There was scarcely any light, but there was enough for her to read his story by—the story of continual failure.

Yet where she hid upon the threshold her heart beat with wildest music of recovered joy: she had found him, and she had found him alone.

No woman leaned upon his breast; no soft tossed hair bathed his arms, no mouth murmured against his own. He was alone. Her only rival was that one great passion with which she had never in her humility dreamed to meet herself.

Dead he might be to all the world of men, dead in his own sight by a worse fate than any death could give: but for her he was living,—to her what mattered failure or scorn, famine or woe, defeat or despair?

She crouched upon his threshold now, and trembled, with the madness of her joy, and courted its torture. She dared not creep and touch his hand, she dared not steal and kneel a moment at his feet.

He had rejected her. He had had no need of her. He had left her with the first hour that freedom came to him. He had seen her beauty, and learned its lines and hues, and used them for his art, and let it go again, a soulless thing that gave him no delight; a thing so slight that he had thought it scarcely worth his while even to break it for an hour's sport. This was what he had deemed her; that she knew. She accepted the fate at his hands with the submission that was an integral part of the love she bore him. She had never thought of equality between herself and him; he might have beaten her, or kicked her, as a brute his dog, and she would not have resisted nor resented.

To find him, to watch him from a distance, to serve him in any humble ways she might; to give him his soul's desire, if any barter of her own soul could purchase it,—this was all she asked. She had told him that he could have no sins to her, and it had been no empty phrase.

She crouched on his threshold, not daring to breathe aloud lest he should hear her.

In the dull light of dawn and of the sickly lamp she saw the great canvas on the tressels that his eyes, without seeing it, yet stared at;—it was the great picture of the Barabbas, living its completed life in colour: beautiful, fearful, and divine, full of its majesty of godhead and its mockery of man.

She knew then how the season since they had parted had been spent with him; she knew then, without any telling her in words, how he had given up all his nights and days, all his scant store of gold, all leisure and comfort and peace, all hours of summer sunshine and of midnight cold, all laughter of glad places, and all pleasures of passion or of ease, to render perfect this one work by which he had elected to make good his fame or perish.

And she knew that he must have failed; failed always; that spending his life in one endeavour, circumstance had been stronger than he, and had baffled him perpetually. She knew that it was still in vain that he gave his peace and strength and passions, all the golden years of manhood, and all the dreams and delights of the senses; and that, although these were a treasure which once spent came back nevermore to the hands which scattered them, he had failed to purchase with them, though they were his all, this sole thing which he besought from the waywardness of fate.

"I will find a name or a grave," he had said, when they had parted: she, with the instinct of that supreme love which clung to him with a faithfulness only equalled by its humility, needed no second look upon his face to see

that no gods had answered him save the gods of oblivion;—the gods whose pity he rejected and whose divinity he denied.

For to the proud eyes of a man, looking eagle–wise at the far–off sun of a great ambition, the coming of Thanatos could seem neither as consolation nor as vengeance, but only as the crowning irony in the mockery and the futility of life.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE dawn grew into morning.

A day broke full of winds and of showers, with the dark masses of clouds tossed roughly hither and thither, and the bells of the steeples blown harshly out of time and tune, and the wet metal roofs glistening through a steam of rain.

The sleepers wakened of themselves or dreamed on as they might.

She had no memory of them.

She crouched in the gloom on his threshold, watching him.

He sank awhile into profound stupor, sitting there before his canvas, with his head dropped and his eyelids closed. Then suddenly a shudder ran through him; he awoke with a start, and shook off the lethargy which drugged him. He rose slowly to his feet, and looked at the open shutters, and saw that it was morning.

"Another day—another day!" he muttered, wearily; and he turned from the Barabbas and flung himself face forward on his bed of straw.

Towards the form on his threshold he had never looked.

She sat without and waited.

Waited—for what? She did not know. She did not dare even to steal to him and touch his hand with even such a timid caress as a beaten dog ventures to give the hand of the master who has driven it from him.

For even a beaten dog is a creature less humble and timid than a woman that loves and whose love is rejected.

He took up a palette ready set, and went to a blank space of canvas and began to cover it with shapes and shadows on the unconscious creative instinct of the surcharged brain. Faces and foliage, beasts and scrolls, the heads of gods, the folds of snakes, forms of women rising from flames and clouds, the flowers of Paradise blossoming amidst the corruption and tortures of Antenora. All were cast in confusion, wave on wave, shape on shape, horror with loveliness, air with flame, heaven with hell, in all the mad tumult of an artist's dream.

With a curse he flung his brushes from him, and cast himself face downward on his bed of straw.

The riot of fever was in his blood. Famine, sleepless nights, opiates with which he had lulled the pangs of vain desires, unnatural defiance of all passions and all joys, the pestilence rife in the crowded quarter of the poor,—all these had done their work upon him. He had breathed in the foul air of plague–stricken places, unconscious of its peril; he had starved his body, reckless of the flight of time; he had consumed his manhood in one ceaseless, ruthless, and absorbing sacrifice; and Nature, whom he had thus outraged, and thought to outrage with impunity

Folle-Farine

as mere bestial feebleness, took her vengeance on him and cast him here, and mocked him, crying:—

"A deathless name?—Oh, madman. A little breath on the mouths of men in all the ages to come?—Oh, fool! Hereafter, you cry? —oh, fool!—heaven and earth may pass away, like a scroll that is burnt into ashes, and the future you live for may never come—neither for you nor the world. What you may gain—who shall say? But all you have missed, I know. And no man shall scorn me—and pass unscathed."

There came an old lame woman by, laboriously bearing a load of firewood. She passed beside the threshold.

"You look yonder," she said, resting her eyes on the stranger crouching on the threshold. "Are you anything to that man?"

Silence only answered her.

"He has no friends," muttered the cripple. "No human being has ever come to him; and he has been here many months. He will be mad—very soon. I have seen it before. Those men do not die. Their bodies are too strong. But their brains go,—look you. And their brains go, and yet they live—to fourscore and ten many a time—shut up and manacled like wild beasts."

Folle-Farine shivered where she crouched in the shadow of the doorway; she still said nothing.

The crone mumbled on indifferent of answer, and yet pitiful, gazing into the chamber.

"I have watched him often; he is fair to look at—one is never too old to care for that. All winter, spring, and summer he has lived so hard:—so cold too and so silent—painting that strange thing yonder. He looks like a king—he lives like a beggar. The picture was his god,—see you. And no doubt he has set his soul on fame—men will. All the world is mad. One day in the spring time it was sent somewhere—that great thing yonder on the tressels,—to be seen by the world, no doubt. And whoever its fate lay with would not see any greatness in it, or else no eyes would look. It came back as it went. No doubt they knew best;—in the world. That was in the spring of the year. He has been like this ever since. Walking most nights;—starving most days;—I think. But he is always silent."

The speaker raised her pails and went slowly, muttering as she limped down each steep stair:

"There must hang a crown of stars, I suppose—somewhere—since so many of them for ever try to reach one. But all they ever get here below is a crown of straws in a madhouse."

"The woman says aright," the voice of Sartorian murmured low against her ear. She had forgotten that he was near from the first moment that her eyes had once more fed themselves upon the face of Arslàn.

"The woman says aright," he echoed softly. "This man will perish; his body may not die, but his brain will—surely. And yet for his life you would give yours?"

She looked up with a gleam of incredulous hope; she was yet so ignorant; she thought there might yet be ways by which one life could buy another's from the mercy of earth, from the pity of heaven.

"Ah!" she murmured with a swift soft trembling eagerness. "If the gods would but remember!—and take me instead. But they forget—they forget always."

He smiled.

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"Ay, truly, the gods forget. But if you would give yourself to death for him, why not do a lesser thing?—give your beauty—Folle–Farine."

A scarlet flush burnt her from head to foot. For once she mistook his meaning. She thought—how could a beauty that he who perished there had scorned, have rarity or grace in those cold eyes, or force or light enough to lure him from his grave?

The low melody of the voice in her ear flowed on.

"See you—what he lacks is only the sinew that gold gives. What he has done is great. The world rightly seeing must fear it; and fear is the highest homage the world ever gives. But he is penniless; and he has many foes; and jealousy can with so much ease thrust aside the greatness which it fears into obscurity, when that greatness is marred by the failures and the feebleness of poverty. Genius scorns the power of gold: it is wrong; gold is the war scythe on its chariot, which mows down the millions of its foes and gives free passage to the sun–coursers, with which it leaves those heavenly fields of light for the gross battle–fields of earth."

"You were to give that gold," she muttered, in her throat.

"Nay, not so. I was to set him free: to find his fame or his grave; as he might. He will soon find one, no doubt. Nay; you would make no bond with me, Folle–Farine. You scorned my golden pear. Otherwise—how great his genius is! That cruel scorn, that burning colour, that ice–like coldness! If the world could be brought to see them once aright, the world would know that no powers greater than these have been amongst it for many ages. But who shall force the world to look?—who? It is so deaf, so slow of foot, so blind, unless the film before its eyes be opened by gold."

He paused and waited.

She watched silent on the threshold there.

The cruel skill of his words cast on her all the weight of this ruin which they watched.

Her love must need be weak, her pledge to the gods must needs be but imperfectly redeemed, since she, who had bade them let her perish in his stead, recoiled from the lingering living death of any shame, if such could save him.

The sweet voice of Sartorian murmured on:

"Nay; it were easy. He has many foes. He daunts the world and scourges it. Men hate him, and thrust him into oblivion. Yet it were easy!—a few praises to the powerful, a few bribes to the base, and yonder thing once lifted up in the full light of the world, would make him great—beyond any man's dispute—for ever. I could do it, almost in a day; and he need never know. But then you are not tired,—Folle–Farine!"

She writhed from him, as the doe struck to the ground writhes from the hounds at her throat.

"Kill me!" she muttered. "Will not that serve you? Kill me—and save him!"

Sartorian smiled.

"Ah! you are but weak, after all, Folle–Farine. You would die for that man's single sake—so you say; and yet it is not him whom you love. It is yourself. If this passion of yours were great and pure, as you say, would you pause? Could you ask yourself twice if what you think your shame would not grow noble and pure beyond all honour,

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being embraced for his sake? Nay; you are weak, like all your sex. You would die, so you say. To say it is easy; but to live, that were harder. You will not sacrifice yourself—so. And yet it were greater far, Folle-Farine, to endure for his sake in silence one look of his scorn, than to brave, in visionary phrase, the thrusts of a thousand daggers, the pangs of a thousand deaths. Kill you!—vain words cost but little. But to save him by sacrifice that he shall never acknowledge; to reach a heroism which he shall ever regard as cowardice; to live and see him pass you by in cold contempt, while in your heart you shut your secret, and know that you have given him his soul's desire, and saved the genius in him from a madman's cell and from a pauper's grave—ah! that is beyond you; beyond any woman perhaps. And yet your love seemed great enough almost to reach such a height as this, I thought."

He looked at her once, then turned away.

He left in her soul the barbed sting of remorse. He had made her think her faith, her love, her strength, her sinless force, were but the cowardly fruit of cruellest self-love, that dared all things in words,—yet in action failed.

To save him by any martyrdom of her body or her soul, so she had sworn; yet now!— Suddenly she seemed base to herself, and timorous, and false.

When daybreak came fully over the roofs of the city, it found him senseless, sightless, dying in a garret: the only freedom that he had reached was the delirious liberty of the brain, which, in its madness, casts aside all bonds of time and place and memory and reason.

All the day she watched beside him, there, amidst the brazen clangour of the bells and scream of the rough winds above the roofs.

In the gloom of the place, the burning colour of the great canvas of Jerusalem glowed in a wondrous pomp and power against all the grey, cold poverty of that wretched place. And the wanton laughed with her lover on the housetop; and the thief clutched the rolling gold; and the children lapped the purple steam of wasted wine; and the throngs flocked after the thief, whom they had elected for their god; and ever and again a stray flickering ray of light flashed from the gloom of the desolate chamber, and struck upon it till it glowed like flame;—this mighty parable, whereby the choice of the people was symbolised for all time; the choice eternal, which never changes, but for ever turns from all diviner life to grovel in the dust before the Beast.

The magnificence of thought, the glory of imagination, the radiance of colour which the canvas held, served only to make more naked, more barren, more hideous the absolute desolation which reigned around. Not one grace, not one charm, not one consolation had been left to the life of the man who had sacrificed all things to the inexorable tyranny of his genius. Destitution, in its ghastliest and most bitter meaning, was alone his recompense and portion. Save a few of the tools and pigments of his art, and a little opium in a broken glass, there was nothing there to stand between him and utter famine.

When her eyes had first dwelt upon him lying senseless under the gaze of the gods, he had not been more absolutely destitute than he was now. The hard sharp outlines of his fleshless limbs, the sunken temples, the hollow cheeks, the heavy respiration which spoke each breath a pang,—all these told their story with an eloquence more cruel than lies in any words.

He had dared to scourge the world without gold in his hand wherewith to bribe it to bear his stripes; and the world had been stronger than he, and had taken its vengeance, and had cast him here powerless.

All the day through she watched beside him—watched the dull mute suffering of stupor, which was only broken by fierce unconscious words muttered in the unknown tongue of his birth country. She could give him no aid, no food, no succour; she was the slave of the poorest of the poor; she had not upon her even so much as a copper

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piece to buy a crust of bread, a stoup of wine, a little cluster of autumn fruit to cool his burning lips. She had nothing,—she, who in the world of men had dared to be strong, and to shut her lips, and to keep her hands clean, and her feet straight; she, whose soul had been closed against the Red Mouse.

If she had gone down amongst the dancing throngs, and rioted with them, and feasted with them, and lived vilely, they would have hung her breast with gems, and paved her path with gold. That she knew; and she could have saved him.

Where she kneeled beside his bed she drew his hands against her heart—timidly, lest consciousness should come to him and he should curse her and drive her thence;—and laid her lips on them, and bathed them in the scorching dew of her hot tears, and prayed him to pardon her if it had been weakness in her,—if it had been feebleness and self-pity thus to shrink from any abasement, any vileness, any martyrdom, if such could have done him service.

She did not know; she felt astray and blind, and full of guilt. It might be—so she thought—that it was thus the gods had tested her; thus they had bade her suffer shame to give him glory; thus they had tried her strength,—and found her wanting.

Herself, she was so utterly nothing in her own sight, and he was so utterly all in all; her life was a thing so undesired and so valueless, and his a thing so great and so measureless in majesty, that it seemed to her she might have erred in thrusting away infamy, since infamy would have brought with it gold to serve him.

Dignity, innocence, strength, pride—what right had she to these, what title had she to claim them—she who had been less than the dust from her birth upward?

To perish for him anyhow—that was all that she had craved in prayer of the gods. And she watched him now all through the bitter day; watched him dying of hunger, of fever, of endless desire, of continual failure,—and was helpless. More helpless even than she had been when first she had claimed back his life from Thanatos.

Seven days she watched thus by him amidst the metal clangour of the bells, amidst the wailing of the autumn winds between the roofs.

She moistened his lips with a little water: it was all he took. A few times she left him and stole down amidst the people whom she had served, and was met by a curse from most of them; for they thought that she tended some unknown fever which she might bring amidst them, so they drove her back and would hear naught of her. A few, more pitiful than the rest, flung her twice or thrice a little broken bread; she took it eagerly, and fed on it, knowing that she must keep life in her by some food, or leave him utterly alone. For him she had laid down all pride; for him she would have kissed the feet of the basest or sued to the lowest for alms.

And when the people—whose debts to her she had often forgiven, and whom she had once fancied had borne her a little love—drove her from them with harshest reviling, she answered nothing, but dropped her head and turned and crept again up the winding stairs to kneel beside his couch of straw, and wonder, in the bewildered anguish of her aching brain, if indeed evil were good,—since evil alone could save him.

Seven days went by; the chimes of the bells blown on the wild autumn winds in strange bursts of jangled sound; the ceaseless murmur of the city's crowd surging ever on the silence from the far depths below; sunrise and moonrise following one another with no change in the perishing life that she alone guarded, whilst every day the light that freshly rose upon the world found the picture of the Barabbas, and shone on the god rejected and the thief adored.

Every night during those seven days the flute-like voice of her tempter made hated music to her ear. It asked always,—

Folle-Farine

"Are you tired,—Folle-Farine?"

Her ears were always deaf; her lips were always dumb.

On the eighth night Sartorian paused a little longer by her in the gloom.

"He dies there," he said, slowly resting his tranquil musing gaze upon the bed of straw. "It is a pity. So little would save him still. A little wine, a little fruit, a little skill,—his soul's desire when his sense returns. So little—and he would live, and he would be great; and the Barabbas would scourge the secret sins of the nations, and the nations, out of very fear and very shame, would lift their voices loud and hail him prophet and seer."

Her strength was broken as she heard. She turned and flung herself in supplication at his feet.

"So little—so little; and you hold your hand!"

Sartorian smiled.

"Nay; you hold your silence, Folle-Farine."

She did not move; her upraised face spoke without words the passion of her prayer.

"Save him!—save him! So little, so you say; and the gods will not hear."

"The gods are all dead,—Folle-Farine."

"Save him! You are as a god! Save him!"

"I am but a mortal,—Folle-Farine. Can I open the gates of the tomb, or close them?"

"You can save him,—for you have gold."

He smiled still.

"Ah! you learn at last that there is but one god? You have been slow to believe,—Folle-Farine."

She clung to him; she writhed around him; she kissed with her soiless lips the base dust at his feet.

"You hold the keys of the world; you can save the life of his body; you can give him the life of his soul. You are a beast, a devil, a thing foul and unclean, and without mercy, and cruel as a lie; and therefore you are the thing that men follow, and worship, and obey. I know!—I know! You can save him if you will!"

She laughed where she was stretched upon the ground, a laugh that stayed the smile upon his mouth.

He stooped, and the sweetness of his voice was low and soft as the south wind.

"I will save him, if you say that you are tired,—Folle-Farine."

Where she was stretched face downward at his feet she shuddered, as though the folds of a snake curled round her, and stifled her, and slew her with a touch.

"I cannot!" she muttered faintly in her throat.

Folle-Farine

"Then let him die!" he said; and turned away.

Once again he smiled,—and left her.

The hours passed; she did not move; stretched there, she wrestled with her agony as the fate-pursued wrestled with their doom on the steps of the temple, while the dread Eumenides drew round them and waited—waiting in cold patience for the slow sure end.

She arose and went to Arslàn's side as a dying beast in the public roadway under a blow staggers to its feet to breathe its last.

"Let him die!" she muttered, with lips dry as the lips of the dead. "Let him die!"

Once more the choice was left to her. So men said: and the gods were dead.

An old creature, with a vulture's eyes and bony fingers, and rags that were plague-stricken with the poisons of filth and of disease, had followed and looked at her in the doorway, and kicked her where she lay.

"He owes me twenty days for the room," he muttered, while his breath scorched her throat with the fumes of drink. "A debt is a debt. To-morrow I will take the canvas; it will do to burn. You shiver?—fool! If you chose, you could fill this garret with gold this very night. But you love this man, and so you let him perish while you prate of 'shame.' Oh—ho! that is a woman!"

He went away through the blackness and the stench, muttering, as he struck his staff upon each stair:

"The picture will feed the stove; the law will give me that."

She heard and shivered, and looked at the bed of straw, and on the great canvas of the Barabbas.

Before another day had come and gone, he would lie in the common ditch of the poor, and the work of his hand would be withered, as a scroll withers in a flame.

If she tried once more? If she sought human pity, human aid? Some deliverance, some mercy,—who could say? —might yet be found, she thought. The gods were dead; but men—were they all more wanton than the snake, more cruel than the scorpion?

For the first time in seven days she left his side to go forth into the living world.

She rose and staggered for the garret, down the stairway, into the lower stories of the wilderness of wood and stone.

She traced her way blindly to the places she had known. They closed their doors in haste, and fled from her in terror.

They had heard that she had gone to tend some madman plague-stricken with some nameless fever; and those wretched lives to life clung closely, with a frantic love.

One woman she stayed, and held with timid, eager hands. Of this woman she had taken nothing all the summer long in wage for waking her tired eyes at daybreak.

"Have pity!" she muttered. "You are poor, indeed, I know; but help me. He dies there!"

Folle-Farine

The woman shook her off and shrank.

"Get you gone," she cried. "My little child will sicken if you breathe on her!"

The others said the same, some less harshly, some more harshly. Twice or thrice they added:

"You beg of us, and send the jewels back? Go and be wise. Make your harvest of gold whist you can. Reap while you may in the yellow fields with the sharp sure sickle of youth!"

Not one amongst them braved the peril of a touch of pity; not one amongst them asked the story of her woe; and when the little children ran to her their mothers plucked them back, and cried:

"Art mad? She is plague-stricken."

She went from them in silence, and left them and passed out into the open air.

In all this labyrinth of roofs, in all these human herds she yet thought, "Surely there must be some who pity?"

For even yet she was so young; and even yet she knew the world so little.

She went out into the streets.

Her brain was on fire, and her heart seemed frozen; her lips moved without sound, and unconsciously shaped the words which night and day pursued her, "A little gold—a little gold!"

So slight a thing, they said, and yet high above reach as Aldebaran, when it glistened through the storm wrack of the rain.

Why could he have not been content, as she had been, with the rush of the winds over the plains, the strife of the flood and the hurricane, the smell of the fruit-hung ways at night, the cool green shadows of the summer woods, the courses of the clouds, the rapture of the keen air blowing from the sea, the flight of a bird over the tossing poppies, the day song of the lark,—all these were life enough for her; were freedom, loveliness, companionship, and solace. Ah, God! she thought, if only these had made the world of his desires likewise. And even in her ghastlier grief her heart sickened for them in vain anguish as she went—these the pure joys of earth and air which were her only heritage.

She went out into the streets.

It was a night of wind and rain.

The lamps flickered through the watery darkness. Beggars and thieves and harlots jostled her in the narrow ways.

"It must be Hell—the hell of the Christians," she muttered, as she stood alone on the flints of the roads, in the rancid smell, in the hideous riot, in the ghastly mirth, in the choking stench, in the thick steam of the darkness, whose few dull gleams of yellow light served to show the false red on a harlot's cheek, or the bleeding wound on a crippled horse, or the reeling dance of a drunkard.

It was the hell of the Christians: in it there was no hope for her.

She moved on with slow unconscious movement of her limbs; her hair blew back, her eyes had a pitiless wonder in their vacant stare; her bloodless face had the horror in it that Greek sculptors gave to the face of those whom a

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relentless destiny pursued and hunted down; ever and again she looked back as she went, as though some nameless, shapeless, unutterable horror were behind her in her steps.

The people called her mad, and laughed and hooted her; when they had any space to think of her at all.

"A little food, a little wine, for pity's sake," she murmured; for her own needs she had never asked a crust in charity, but for his,—she would have kissed the mud from the feet of any creature who would have had thus much of mercy.

In answer they only mocked her, some struck her into the palm of her outstretched hand. Some called her by foul names; some seized her with a drunken laugh, and cursed her as she writhed from their lewd hold; some, and these often women, whispered to her of the bagnio and the brothel; some muttered against her as a thief; one, a youth, who gave her the gentlest answer that she had, murmured in her ear, "a beggar? with that face? come tarry with me to-night."

She went on through the sulphurous yellow glare, and the poisonous steam of these human styes, shuddering from the hands that grasped, the voices that wooed her, the looks that ravished her, the laughs that mocked her.

It was the hell of the Christians; it was a city at midnight; and its very stones seemed to arise and give tongue in her derision and cry, "Oh, fool, you dreamt of a sacrifice which should be honour; of a death, which should be release; of a means whereby through you the world should hear the old songs of the gods? Oh, fool! We are Christians here: and we only gather the reeds of the river to bruise them and break them, songless and dead, in the name of our Lord."

She stumbled on through the narrow ways.

After a little space they widened, and the lights multiplied, and through the rushing rains she saw the gay casements of the houses of pleasure.

On a gust of wind there came a breath of fragrance from a root of autumn blossom in a balcony. The old sweet woodland smell smote her as with a blow; the people in the street looked after her.

"She is mad," they said to one another, and went onward.

She came to a broad place, which even in that night of storm was still a blaze of fire, and seemed to her to laugh through all its marble mask, and all its million eyes of golden light. A cruel laugh which mocked and said:

"The seven chords of the lyre; who listens, who cares, who has ears to hear? But the rod of wealth all women kiss, and to its rule all men crawl; for ever. You dreamt to give him immortality?—fool! Give him gold—give him gold! We are Christians here: and we have but one God."

Under one of the burning cressets of flame there was a slab of stone on which were piled, bedded in leaves, all red and gold, with pomp of autumn, the fruit of the vine in great clear pyramids of white and purple; tossed there so idly in such profusion from the past vintage time, that a copper coin or two could buy a feast for half a score of months. Some of the clusters rotted already from their over ripeness.

She looked at them with the passionate woful eyes of a dog mad with thirst, which can see water and yet cannot reach it. She leaned towards them, she caught their delicious coldness in her burning hands, she breathed in their old familiar fragrance with quick convulsive breath.

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"He dies there!" she muttered, lifting her face to the eyes of the woman guarding her. "He dies there; would you give me a little cluster, ever such a little one, to cool his mouth, for pity's sake?"

The woman thrust her away, and raised, shrill and sharp through all the clamour of the crowd, the cry of thief.

A score of hands were stretched to seize her, only the fleetness of her feet saved her. She escaped from them, and as a hare flies to her form, so she fled to the place whence she came.

She had done all she could; she had made one effort, for his sake; and all living creatures had repulsed her. None would believe; none would pity; none would hear. Her last strength was broken, her last faint hope had failed.

In her utter wretchedness she ceased to wonder, she ceased to revolt, she accepted the fate which all men told her was her heritage and portion.

"It was I who was mad," she thought, "so mad, so vain, to dream that I might ever be chosen as the reed was chosen. If I can save him, anyhow, what matter, what matter for me?"

She went back to the place where he lay—dying, unless help came to him. She climbed the stairway, and stole through the foulness and the darkness of the winding ways, and retraced her steps, and stood upon his threshold.

She had been absent but one hour; yet already the last, most abject, most wretched penalty of death had come to him. They robbed him in his senselessness.

The night was wet. The rain dropped through the roof. The rats fought on the floor and climbed the walls. The broken lattice blew to and fro with every gust of wind.

A palsied crone, with ravenous hands; sheared the locks of his fair hair, muttering, "They will fetch a stoup of brandy; and they would take them to-morrow in the dead-house."

The old man who owned the garret crammed into a wallet such few things of metal, or of wood, or of paper, as were left in the utter poverty of the place, muttering as he gathered the poor shreds of art, "They will do to burn; they will do to burn. At sunrise I will get help and carry the great canvas down."

The rats hurried to their holes at the light; the hag let fall her shears, and fled through an opening in the wall.

The old man looked up and smiled with a ghastly leer upon her in the shadows.

"To-morrow I will have the great canvas," he said, as he passed out, bearing his wallet with him. "And the students will give me a silver bit, for certain, for that fine corpse of his. It will make good work for their knives and their moulding-clay. And he will be dead to-morrow;—dead, dead."

And he grinned in her eyes as he passed her. A shiver shook her; she said nothing; it seemed to her as though she would never speak again.

She set down her lamp, and crossed the chamber, and kneeled down beside the straw that made his bed.

She was quite calm.

She knew that the world gave her one chance—one only. She knew that men alone reigned, and that the gods were dead.

Folle-Farine

She flung herself beside him on the straw and wound her arms about him, and laid his head to rest upon her heart; one moment—he would never know.

Between them there would be for ever silence. He would never know.

Greatness would come to him, and the dominion of gold; and the work of his hands would pass amidst the treasures of the nations; and he would live and arise and say, "the desire of my heart is mine,"—and yet he would never know that one creature had so loved him that she had perished more horribly than by death to save him.

If he lived to the uttermost years of man, he would never know how, body and soul, she had passed away to destruction for his sake.

To die for him!

She laughed to think how sweet and calm such sacrifice as that had been.

Amidst the folded lilies, on the white waters, as the moon rose,—she laughed to think how she had sometimes dreamed to slay herself in such tender summer peace for him. That was how women perished when men loved, and loved enough to die with them, their lips upon each other's to the last. But she—

Death in peace; sacrifice in honour; a little memory in a human heart; a little place in a great hereafter; there were things too noble for her—so they said.

A martyrdom in shame; a life in ignominy—these were all to which she might aspire—so they said.

Upon his breast women would sink to sleep; amongst his hair their hands would wander, and on his mouth their sighs would spend themselves. Shut in the folded leaves of the unblossomed years some dreams of passion and some flower of love must lie for him—that she knew.

She loved him with that fierce and envious force which grudged the wind its privilege to breathe upon his lips, the earth its right to bear his footsteps, which was for ever jealous of the mere echo of his voice, avaricious of the mere touch of his hand. And when she gave him to the future, she gave him to other eyes, that would grow blind with passion, meeting his; to other forms, that would burn with sweetest shame beneath his gaze; to other lives, whose memories would pass with his to the great Hereafter, made immortal by his touch: all these she gave, she knew.

Almost it was stronger than her strength. Almost she yielded to the desire which burned in her to let him die,—and die there with him,—and so hold him for ever hers, and not the world's; his and none other's in the eternal unison of the grave, so that with hers his beauty should be consumed, and so that with hers his beauty should be shut from human sight, and the same corruption feed together on their hearts.

Almost she yielded; but the greatness of her love was stronger than its vileness, and its humility was more perfect than its cruelty.

It seemed to her,—mad, and bruised, and stunned with her misery,—that for a thing so worthless and loveless and despised as she to suffer the deadliest shame to save a life so great as his was, after all, a fate more noble than she could have hoped.

For her—what could it matter?—a thing baser than the dust,—whether the feet of men trampled her in scorn a little more, a little less, before she sank away into the eternal night wherein all things are equal and all things forgotten?

CHAPTER IX.

THAT night the moon found the Red Mouse, and said:

"Did I not declare aright? Over every female thing you are victorious—soon or late?"

"But the Red Mouse answered:—

"Nay, not so. For the soul still is closed against me; and the soul still is pure. But this men do not see, and women cannot know;—they are so blind."

CHAPTER X.

ERE another year had been fully born, the world spoke in homage and in wonder of two things.

The one,—a genius which had suddenly arisen in its midst, and taken vengeance for the long neglect of bitter years, and scourged the world with pitiless scorn until, before this mighty scourge which it had dared once to deride and deny, it crouched trembling; and wondered and did homage; and said in fear, "Truly this man is great, and truth is terrible."

The other,—the bodily beauty of a woman; a beauty rarely seen in open day, but only in the innermost recesses of a sensualist's palace; a creature barefooted, with chains of gold about her ankles, and loose white robes which showed each undulation of the perfect limbs, and on her breast the fires of a knot of opal; a creature in whose eyes there was one changeless look, as of some desert beast taken from the freedom of the air and cast to the darkness of some unutterable horror; a creature whose lips were for ever mute, mute as the tortured lips of Læna.

One day the man whom the nations at last had crowned, saw the woman whom it was a tyrant's pleasure to place beside him now and then, in the public ways, as a tribune of Rome placed in his chariot of triumph the vanquished splendour of some imperial thing of Asia made his slave.

Across the clear hot light of noon the eyes of Arslân fell on hers for the first time since they had looked on her amidst the pale poppies, in the moonrise, in the fields.

They smiled on her with a cold, serene, ironic scorn.

"So soon?" he murmured, and passed onward, whilst the people made way for him in homage.

He had his heart's desire. He was great. He only smiled to think—*all women are alike.*

Her body shrank, her head dropped, as though a knife were thrust into her breast.

But her lips kept their silence to the last. They were so strong, they were so mute; they did not even once cry out against him: "For thy sake!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN the springtime of the year three gods watched by the river.

The golden flowers of the willows blew in the low winds; the waters came and went; the moon rose full and cold over a silvery stream; the reeds sighed in silence.

Folle–Farine

Two winters had drifted by, and one hot drowsy summer since their creator had forsaken them, and all the white still shapes upon the walls already had been slain by the cold breath of Time. The green weeds waved in the empty casements; the chance–sown seeds of thistles and of bell–flowers were taking leaf between the square stones of the paven places; on the deserted threshold lichens and brambles climbed together; the filmy ooze of a rank vegetation stole over the loveliness of Persephone and devoured one by one the divine offspring of Zeus; about the feet of the bound sun king in Pheroe and over the calm serene mockery of Hermes' smile the grey nets of the spiders' webs had been woven to and fro, across and across, with the lacing of a million threads, as Fate weaves round the limbs and covers the eyes of mortals as they stumble blindly from their birthplace to their grave. All things, the damp and the dust, the frost and the scorch, the newts and the rats, the fret of the flooded waters, and the stealing sure inroad of the mosses that everywhere grew from the dews and the fogs, had taken and eaten, in hunger or sport, or had touched, and thieved from, then left, gangrened and ruined.

The three gods alone remained; who being the sons of eternal night, are unharmed, unaltered, by any passage of the years of earth. The only gods who never bend beneath the yoke of years; but unblenchingly behold the nations wither as uncounted leaves, and the lands and the seas change their places, and the cities and the empires pass away as a tale that is told; and the deities that are worshipped in the temples alter in name and attributes and cultus, at the wanton will of the age which begot them.

In the still cold moonlit air their shadows stood together. Hand in hand; looking outward through the white night mists. Other gods perished with the faith of each age as it changed; other gods lived by the breath of men's lips, the tears of prayer, the smoke of sacrifice. But they,—their empire was the universe.

In every young soul that leaps into the light of life rejoicing blindly, Oneiros has dominion; and he alone. In every creature that breathes, from the conqueror resting on a field of blood, to the nest bird cradled in its bed of leaves, Hypnos holds a sovereignty which nothing mortal can long resist and live. And Thanatos,—to him belong every created thing, past, present, and to come; beneath his feet all generations lie; and in the hollow of his hand he holds the worlds; though the earth be tenantless, and the heavens sunless, and the planets shrivel in their courses, and the universe be shrouded in an endless night, yet through the eternal desolation Thanatos still will reign, and through the eternal darkness, through the immeasurable solitudes, he alone will wander, and he still behold his work.

Deathless as themselves their shadows stood; and the worm and the lizard and the newt left them alone and dared not wind about their calm clear brows, and dared not steal to touch the roses at their lips, knowing that ere the birth of the worlds these were and when the worlds shall have perished these still will reign on:—the slow, sure, soundless, changeless ministers of an eternal rest, of an eternal oblivion.

A late light strayed in from the grey skies, pale as the primrose flowers that grew amongst the reeds upon the shore; and found its way to them, trembling; and shone in the far–seeing depths of their unfathomable eyes.

The eyes which spake and said:

"Sleep, dreams, and death:—we are the only gods that answer prayer."

With the faint gleam of the tender evening, there came across the threshold a human form, barefooted, bareheaded, with broken links of golden chains gleaming here and there upon her limbs, with white robes hanging heavily, soaked with dews and rains; with sweet familiar smells of night–born blossoms, of wet leaves, of budding palm–boughs, of dark seed–sown fields, and the white flower foam of orchards, shedding their fragrance from her as she moved. Her face was bloodless as the faces of the gods; her eyes had a look of blindness; her lips were close locked together; her feet stumbled often, yet her path was straight.

Folle–Farine

She had hidden by day, she had fled by night; all human creatures had scattered themselves from her in fear. She had made her way, blindly but surely through the cool air; through the shadows and the grasses; through the sighing sounds of bells; through the pastures, where the herds were grazing; through the daffodils blowing in the shallow brooks; through all the things for which her heart had been athirst so long, and which she reached—too late.

Too late for any coolness of fresh grass beneath her limbs to give them rest; too late for any twilight song of missel–thrush or merle to touch her dumb dead heart to music; too late for any kiss of clustering leaves to heal the shame that blistered on her lips and withered all their youth. And yet she loved them: loved them never yet more utterly than now when she came back to them, faithful as Persephone to the pomegranate flowers of hell.

She crossed the threshold, whilst the reeds that grew in the water by the steps bathed her feet and blew together against her limbs, sorrowing for this life so like their own, which had dreamed of the songs of the gods, and had only heard the hiss of the snakes.

She fell at the feet of Thanatos.

The bonds of silence were loosened; the lips dumb so long for love's sake found voice, and cried out:

"How long—how long? Wilt thou never take pity, and stoop and say 'Enough?' I have kept faith; I have kept silence to the end. The gods know. My life for his; my soul for his. So I said; so I have given. I would not have it otherwise. See: I am glad, I am proud, I am strong. See, I have never spoken. The gods have let me perish in his stead. Nay; I suffer nothing. What can it matter for me? Nay; I thank thee that thou hast given my vileness to be the means of his glory. He is great, he has his desire; and I—I am less than the dust. What matter? He must not know; he must never know. And one day I might be weak, or mad, and speak. Take me whilst still I am strong. A little while ago, in a space in the crowds, he saw me. 'So soon!' he said,—and smiled. And yet I live! Keep faith with me; keep faith at last. Slay me now, quickly, for pity's sake; lest once I speak!"

Thanatos, in answer, laid his hand upon her lips; and sealed them, and their secret with them, mute for evermore.

She had been faithful to the end.

To such a faith there is no recompense of man, or of the gods, save only death.

On the shores of the river the winds swept through the reeds; and, sighing amidst them, mourned, saying:

"A thing as free as we, and as fair as ye, is dead; a thing whose joys were made, like ours, from song of the birds, from sight of the sun, from sound of the waters, from smell of the fields; from the tossing spray of the white fruit blossoms, from the play of the grasses at sunrise, from all the innocent liberties of earth and air. She has perished as a trampled leaf, as a broken shell, as a rose that falls in the public ways, as a star that is cast down an autumn night. She has died as the dust dies; and none sorrow. What matter? Men are wise, and gods are just, they say."

The moon shone cold and clear. The breath of the wild thyme and the willow flowers was sweet upon the air. The leaves blew together, murmuring. The shadows of the clouds were dark upon the stream.

She lay dead at the feet of the Sons of Night.

The noisome creatures of the place stole away trembling; the nameless things begotten by loneliness and gloom glided to their holes, as though afraid; the blind newts crept into the utter darkness afar off; the cool winds alone hovered near her, and moved her hair, and touched her limbs with all the fragrance of forest and plain, of the young year and the blossoming woods, of the green garden ways and the silvery sea.

Folle-Farine

The lives of the earth, and the air, and the waters, alone mourned for this life which was gone from amidst them; free, even in base bondage; pure, though every hand had cast defilement on it; incorrupt, amidst corruption;—for love's sake.

The Red Mouse sat without, and was afraid, and said:

"To the end she hath escaped me."

CHAPTER XII.

IN the springtide of the year three reapers cut to the roots the reeds that grew by the river.

They worked at dawn; the skies were grey, the still and silvery stream flowed inward slowly; the air was filled with the dreamy scent of white fruit blossoms; in the hush of the daybreak the song of a lark thrilled the silence with music; under the sweep of the steel the reeds fell.

Resting from their labours with the rushes slain around them, they—looking idly within—saw her lying there beneath the gaze of the gods of oblivion.

The gleam of the gold on her limbs conquered their fear. They ventured in and looked on her, and timorously touched her and turned her face to the light of the coming day. Then they saw that she was dead.

"It is that evil thing of Yprès," they muttered one to another; and stood looking at one and another and at her—afraid.

They spoke in whispers; they were sore afraid; it was still twilight.

"It were a righteous act to thrust her in a grave," they murmured to each other at the last,—and paused.

"Ay, truly," they agreed, "otherwise she may break the bonds of Death and rise again and haunt us always; who can say? But the gold—"

And then they paused again.

"It were a sin," one murmured, "it were a sin to bury the pure good gold in the darkness. Even if it come from hell—"

"The priests will bless it for us," answered the other twain.

Against the darkened skies the lark was singing.

The three reapers waited a little, still afraid; then hastily, as men slaughter a thing they fear may rise against them, they stripped the white robes from her, and drew off the anklets of gold from her feet, and the chains of gold that were riven about her breast and limbs.

When they had stripped her body bare, they were stricken with a terror of the dead creature whom they had violated with their theft; and being consumed with dread lest any, as the day grew lighter, should pass by there and see what they had done, they went out in trembling haste, and together dug deep down into the wet sands, where the reeds grew, and dragged her naked body to the air, and thrust it down there, into its nameless grave, and covered it, and left it to the rising of the tide.

Folle–Farine

Then, with the gold, they hurried to their homes, leaving the reeds which they had reaped to wither in the sunrise.

The waters rose and smoothed the ruffled soil, and rippled in a sheet of silver over the shore, and effaced all traces of their work; so that no man knew this thing which they had done.

In her life as in her death she was nameless, friendless, and alone.

The reeds blew together by the river, now red in the daybreak, now white in the moonrise, and the winds sighed through them wearily, for they were songless, and the gods were dead.

The seasons came and went; the waters rose and sank; in the golden flowers of the willows the young birds made music with their wings; the soft-footed things of brake and bush stole through the leaves, and drank at the edge of the stream, and fled away over the wet grey sand: the people passed down the slow current of the tides with lily-sheaves of the flowering spring, with ruddy fruitage of the summer meads, with yellow harvest of the autumn fields, passed singing, smiting the reapen rushes as they went.

But none paused there.

For Thanatos alone knew. Thanatos who watched by day and night the slain reeds sigh, fruitless and rootless, in the empty air; Thanatos, who by the cold, sad patience of his gaze, spake, saying:

"I am the only pity of the world. And even I,—to every mortal thing I come, too early, or too late."