# The Sacrificial Altar

Gertrude Atherton

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LOUIS BAC drifted like a gray shadow through the gray streets of San Francisco. Even the French colony, one of the most homogeneous units of the city, knew little more of him than the community at large. He was the son of one famous restaurateur and the grandson of another; he had been sent to a Lycee in Paris at the age of twelve, graduated from the University of Paris at twenty−two, and returned to San Francisco upon the death of his father a year later. The French colony were surprised that he did not go back to Paris after selling the restaurant — his energetic mother had pre−deceased her husband — but buried himself in the old Bac home behind the eucalyptus−trees on the steepest hillside of the city; otherwise his return and himself attracted no attention whatever until he flung his hat into the international arena.

Both his father, Henri Bac II., and his shrewd mother, Antoinette, had been agreed upon giving their studious ascetic little son a true American's chance to rise in the world, and, acting on the advice of their chief patron and the leader of the French colony, M. Cesar Dupont, who offered his escort, had sent the boy to the Coll ge Louis le Grand. They never saw their only child again; but although Louis had been reticent of speech, he proved a very prodigal with his pen. As the years passed it became evident — the entire French colony read these letters — that his goal was belles−lettres and that he was practising on his family. Finally, after many mutations his style became so formal and precise that M. Dupont became alarmed and, during his next visit to Paris, invited the young man to breakfast.

Louis by this time was eighteen, of medium height, as thin as all overworked, underfed, underoxygenated Lycee boys, with large gray eyes that were rarely raised, a long pale face, a long thin nose, a small thin−lipped mouth. The brow was abnormally large, the rest of the head rather small. It was not an attractive personality, M. Dupont reflected — he had not seen Louis for several years — but the boy carried something uncommon in his head−piece, or he, Cesar Dupont, fashionable merchant and bon viveur, had studied the craniums of a thousand San Francisco geniuses in vain.

He had taken his guest to the Restaurant de la Tour d'Argent, and while the duck's frame was being crushed he asked, abruptly:

"Have you given a thought to your future career, Louis? Of course you know you will not be obliged to drudge, but to be a professor of French literature is not without its eclat, and, I fancy, more in your line than commerce."

Louis's lip curled. "I have no more intention of being a professor than of being a merchant," he said in his cold, precise voice. "I shall write."

"Ah!" M. Dupont drew a sigh of relief. He had feared the boy would be forbiddingly reticent. "I hoped as much from your letters. Your refinement of mind and style are remarkable for a man of your years. Shall you write plays?"

A faint color had invaded the youth's cheeks under this considered flattery, and when he lifted his deeply set gray eyes to M. Dupont's it was almost with the frankness of man to man. But he was intensely shy, and although more at his ease with this handsome, genial patron of his family, he made his confidences without warmth.

"No. I shall write the novel. The dramatic form does not appeal to me."

"Ah! Yes. I am not surprised. Your style is certainly more narrative — descriptive. But to be a novelist, my son, you must have seen a great deal of life. You must know the great world — unless — perhaps — you contemplate writing romance?"

Again the delicate lip opposite curled, and Louis almost choked over his morsel of duck. "Romance? No, Monsieur. I am a realist by temperament and mental habit. Nor do I need the great world. Only one thing interests me — crime."

"Crime? Mon Dieu!" The amiable merchant almost choked in his turn, although he savored his duck more

slowly than his Lycee guest. "Crime! But you are too young, my son, to be interested in anything so grim. Life is to enjoy. And how can you enjoy with your mind like a morgue?"

"We are not all made to enjoy in the same fashion. I enjoy intensely reading through old volumes of criminal records and trials — my master in psychology has kindly arranged that I shall have access to them. And I read with the greatest interest the details of current criminology. I shall never care for society, for I am too timid and dislike women. But I love the lonely grandeur of nature, and music, and great books and pictures. Have no fear, Monsieur, my mind is not polluted. It is purely scientific, this interest; the psychology of crime happens to appeal to my peculiar gifts."

"But — that is it — your gifts are literary — but yes! I do not like the idea of wasting them on that lamentable subdivision of human society which one ignores save when held up by a footpad. With but few exceptions it has appealed only to the inferior order of writing talent. Even in France the masters do not condescend. With them crime is an incident, not a motif."

"Has it occurred to you, Monsieur, that without the pioneers — "

"Oh yes, perhaps — but you — "

"I am young and unknown? Of what author has that not at least once been said? I purpose to write novels — not mere stories — in which character and life shall be revealed in the light of the boldest and the subtlest crimes — murder preferably — and executed in a form and style above cavil — I hope! Oh, I hope! Moreover, I shall write my books in two languages — I have taken special courses in English. In that, too, I shall be unique."

"Be careful of that style of yours, my son. It is growing a little too academic, and I, a Frenchman, say that! It would do for the essay, and win the praise of the expiring generation of critics, and the younger but non−creative formalists, but I infer you wish to be read by the public. You would also make money as well as achieve fame. Is it not?"

Quite so. My father wishes that I live until I am thirty in California and vote — I, mon Dieu! But I shall follow his wishes. Then I shall buy a ch‰teau here in France, for our ch‰teaux are incomparable in beauty. Fame, but yes. It would make my nostrils quiver. But all that is as nothing to the joy of writing. Then my soul almost sings. I am almost happy, but not quite."

He paused and his brow darkened. He raised his eyes and stared past his anxious host, far into some invisible plane of tormentingly elusive dreams. M. Dupont wisely remained silent, and Louis resumed, abruptly: "When I shall write as spontaneously as the spring bubbles or the ice melts, when my brain hardly knows what my pen is doing, when I experience that terrific uprush that would drown the more conscious parts of the intellect were it not for the perfect mastery of technique — that is it, monsieur! I am still an infant with my tools. Do not permit my style to cause you anxiety. It is merely in one stage of experiment. I shall not write a line for publication until I am four−and−twenty. I shall send forth my first professional novel on the third of October — my birthday — 1900. Meanwhile, I enter the university this year, and take the course in literature. At twenty−two I shall graduate and take my Ph.D. Then I shall serve for a year as a reporter on a London newspaper. So shall I obtain perfect freedom with the English language and that first−hand contact with life which I realize is of a certain necessity. But after that no more of the world. I hate it — realities. I wish to live in my mind, my imagination; to spend every hour when I do not exercise for my nerves or sleep to refresh my faculty, in writing, writing — that one day shall be creating."

Louis carried out his programme to the letter, and published, in 1900 — some five years before the terrific episode which it is my melancholy privilege to chronicle — the first of those novels of crime that commanded the sedate attention of the intellectual world. Entombed as it were in the old house under the creaking eucalyptus−trees, with a padlock on his gate, he had rewritten it six times from the original draft — which, according to his method, contained nothing but the stark outline of the plot, every detail of which was thought out during long hours of exterior immobility. Three successive sets of servants, mistaking this accomplishment in petrifaction for a form of insanity which might at any moment express itself in violence, left abruptly. Finally, old Madame Dupont established in the kitchen wing an elderly Frenchman and his wife who had once presided over a hotel for artists, and thereafter Louis had peace and enforced nutrition.

It was during the long months of re−writing, of developing his characters by a subtle secondary method of his own, of profound analysis, and a phrasing which drew heavily on the adjectival vocabulary of the critics later on, that he really enjoyed himself. The last revision was devoted exclusively to the study and improvement of every

sentence in the long book; and indeed there is no doubt that these months, from skeleton to trousseau, were, with one tremendous exception, the happiest period of this unhappy creator's life.

This book in its cold intellectual remoteness appealed as little to Louis when he read it in print as it did to the public, and he set himself grimly to work to pour red blood into the veins of his characters and give his next book the rhythm of life as well as of style. Once more he was hailed by the intellectuals, but fell short of popular recognition, which, belonging himself to the intellectual democracy, he estimated far above the few who win their little fame by writing about the creators in art, or even above the artist himself. He was determined to enthrall, to create the perfect illusion. He scorned to be a cult, and when he saw himself alluded to as a "high−brow−lit" he wept. But above all he passionately wished for that intoxication in creation in which consciousness of self was obliterated, the power, as he expressed it, to write one book charged with the magnetism of a burning soul. He always felt, despite his love of his work, as cold and deliberate as a mathematician. And yet he spun his complicated plots with the utmost facility. There was no more doubt of his talent, in the minds of those who wrote essays of him in the reviews, than of his psychological insight and his impeccable style.

Poor Louis! Spurred on by his anxious and experienced friend, M. Cesar Dupont, he made a meticulous attempt to adore a little French milliner; but the young artist, who would have been a monk in the Middle Ages and left to his monastery a precious heritage of illuminated manuscripts, returned within the month to his art (with abject apologies), set his teeth, and dissected the whole affair for his next book; presenting Celeste, the pivot of a demoniacal crime, in all the phases, common or uncommon, to a woman of her type. This novel, which he estimated as his worst, achieved to his disgust a certain measure of popularity, and the reporters hammered at his gate. San Francisco, which after its first mild interest, had forgotten him, awoke to a sense of its own importance, and besieged M. Dupont, whose acquaintance extended far beyond the French colony, for introductions. But Louis would have none of them. He went on writing his novels, taking his walks at midnight, never leaving the house otherwise unless to visit a bookstore or sit in the back of a box at the play, and literally knew no one in the city of his birth but old Madame Dupont, her son, and his two old servants, Philippe and Seraphine. It was after his seventh novel, when he felt himself growing stale, taking less pleasure in the mere act of writing, and losing his hold on his good friends, the intellectuals, that he took his trouble, as was his habit, to M. Cesar.

They dined in the old Dupont mansion on Nob Hill, built, like the humbler home of the Bacs, in the city's youth, and alone, as Madame was in bed with an influenza. M. Cesar as a rule entertained at his club, and had a luxurious suite for bachelor purposes in a select apartment−like house kept by a compatriot, but, like a dutiful son, he made a pretense of sharing his mother's evening meal at six o'clock, no matter where he might be dining at eight.

For an hour after dinner Louis paced up and down the library and unburdened himself while M. Cesar smoked in the depths of a chair. This confidence, which included rage at his own limitations, disgust with the critics who encouraged such miserable failures as he, and invective against fate for planting the fiction imp in what should have been a purely scientific mind and then withholding the power to electrify his talent with genius, was made about every seven months, and M. Cesar always listened with deep concern and sympathy. He loved Louis, who was sweet of nature and the most inoffensive of egoists, but was beginning to regard him as hopeless. To−night, however, he was admitting a ray of hope.

"Celeste was a failure," he said, abruptly. "It is no use for you to try that sort of thing again. But live you must. I have given up a dinner at the club to a distinguished guest from abroad to tell you that I insist you give yourself one more chance."

"What is that?" Louis was alert and suspicious at once.

"Do you remember Berthe?"

"Berthe — your niece at Neuilly?"

"Ah — you do, although you would go to my brother's house so seldom."

"He had grown daughters of whom I was afraid, for their cruel instincts were excited by my shyness. But Berthe was a little thing then, very pretty, very sympathetic. I romped with her in the garden sometimes."

"Just so. Berthe is now twenty, very handsome, very vivacious — a great admirer of M. Louis Bac, celebrated novelist."

The young Frenchman stared at the elderly Frenchman. "Do you wish that I should marry her?"

"For your sake. For hers — to marry a genius whose vampire mistress is his art — ah, well, it is the fate of

woman to be sacrificed when they do not sacrifice us. And Berthe's would be no mean destiny. I feel convinced that she alone could make you fall madly in love — "

"I shall never see her again. I have lost my old longing for Paris. What difference where a failure exists and plods? Besides, I dreamed once of returning to Paris a master, not a mere formalist who had won the approval of antiquarians."

"You shall meet her here."

"Here?"

"She arrives to−morrow."

"You have planned this, then, deliberately?"

"It is only a dream promising to come true. Not until now has my brother relented and given his consent to Berthe's taking the long journey. But friends were coming It is fate, my son. Try to fall in love with her — but madly! I, who have loved many times, assure you that the intoxication which tempts lesser men to rhyme should stimulate your great gift to its final expression."

"But marry!" Louis was quite cold. "A wife in my house! Oh no, M. Cesar; I should hate it and her."

"Not if you loved her. And Berthe has subtlety and variety."

"And is far too good for me. I should make a detestable husband."

"Let her make the husband."

Once more Louis turned cold. "You desire that I shall meet her, talk to her, cultivate her? Oh, God!"

"I mean that you shall go to my tailor to−morrow. My mother will introduce Berthe to the Colony on Friday night. Its most distinguished members will be present — bankers, journalists, merchants, professional men of all sorts; young people will come in for a dance after the dinner of twenty−four. You may run away from the dance, but at the dinner you will sit beside Berthe."

This time Louis was petrified. "But no! No!"

M. Cesar rose and laid his hand solemnly on his young friend's shoulder. "For your art, my son, for your divine gift. For both you would lay down your life. Is it not? Another year of this unnatural existence and you will go sterile. And what substitute for you in the long years ahead? Your mind needs a powerful stimulant and at once. The cup approaches your lip. Will you drink or will you turn it upside down?"

"I'll drink if I can," said Louis, through his set teeth, "for what you say is true. But I'd rather drink hemlock."

Louis sat at his bedroom window, for the moon was high and the night was clear. The city that so often was shrouded to its cobblestones in fog, its muffled ghostly silence broken only by his creaking eucalyptus−trees, lay below him in all its bleak gray outlines. But he was not looking at the city, although sensible for the first time of the vast composite presence under the ugly roofs; nor even at the high−flung beauty of Twin Peaks; he stared instead at the cross on Calvary, that gaunt hill that rises above the cemeteries of Lone Mountain. The cross stood out black and austere save when a fog wraith from the sea drifted across it. The emblem of the cross was in tune with his mood to−night, for he felt neither romantic nor imaginative, but pervaded with fear and melancholy. The faith in which he had been bred as a child had long since passed, and to him the cross was merely the symbol of crucifixion.

His eye dropped from the cross to the dark mass of the Catholic cemetery where his parents slept. If his writing faculty should desert him, as M. Cesar had ruthlessly predicted, no power in either world should condemn him to life. He would go out to Lone Mountain, shut himself in the family vault, lie down on the stones, and either drink poison or cut his wrists. This morbid vision had appealed to him before, but never so insidiously as to−night: never before had his spirits remained so persistently at zero as during the past week; never before had their melancholy been darkened by fear, rent by panic.

In spite of his shyness and dislike of women, not only had he nerved himself to the ordeal of meeting Berthe Dupont, but worked himself up to a real desire to fall in love with her, to experience that tremendous emotion from inception to crescendo and liberate the deep creative torrents of his genius. Not for a moment did he hope that she would marry him. On the contrary, what he particularly desired was that she should play with him, enthrall him, transform him into a sentimental ass and a caldron of passion, then flout him, condemn him to the fiendish tortures of the unsatisfied lover.

Six months at his desk of carefully nursed passion and torments, and then, immortal fame!

Louis, who was very honest and as little conceited as an author may be, had for some time believed, with his

critics and M. Cesar, that he would come into the full fruition of his gifts only after some great, possibly terrific, adventure of the soul had banished forever that curious lethargy that possessed the unexplored tracts of his genius.

Therefore had poor Louis gone to the tailor of his inexorable mentor, and crawled up the hill on Friday night, his heart hammering, his knees trembling, but his teeth set and his whole being a desperate hope. He was willing to go to the stake. Through his consciousness the outlines of another plot, subtle, intricate, vital, hinting at characters who were personalities, but uncommonly misty and slow to cohere, were wandering. Ordinarily his plots were as sharply outlined as a winter tree against a frosty sky. But now! He must tear up his soul by the roots and fill his veins with fire or this new conception would dribble forth in an image so commonplace that he would take it out to Lone Mountain and immure it with himself.

The Dupont house was perched high above the cut that had made a rough hillside into a bland street for the wealthy. The last automobile was rolling away as Louis reached the long flight of covered outer stairs that led up from the street to the house. He walked even more slowly up that tunnel on end, hoping the company would be in the dining−room when he arrived and he could slink into his seat unnoticed.

The old butler, Jean−Marie, almost shoved him into the drawing−room, and for a moment his terrors retreated before a wave of artistic pleasure never before experienced in the house of Dupont. The heavy old mahogany furniture, the bow−windows, even the clumsy old candelabra were completely obliterated by a thousand American Beauty roses. It was a bower of surpassing richness and distinction for a group of women as handsome and exquisitely dressed as Louis had ever seen in the foyer of the opera−house in Paris.

The moment old Madame Dupont, magnificent in brocade and a new wig, espied him, she led the way to the dining−room, before M. Cesar could introduce him to the eager Colony. This relieved Louis almost to the pitch of elation, and he even exchanged a few words with his partner after they were seated at the long table — covered with Madame's historic silver and crystal — the while he covertly examined the young lady on his left. Mademoiselle Berthe had been taken in by the host and was chatting animatedly with M. Jules Constant, a young banker, who sat opposite.

Louis observed with delight that she was more than pretty, and realized that M. Cesar had with purpose restrained his enthusiasm. Certainly it gave Louis a distinct throb of satisfaction to discover for himself that the young girl was beautiful and of no common type. She might be as practical as most Frenchwomen, but she looked romantic, passionate, mysterious. The heavy lids of her large brown eyes gave them depths and smoldering fires. Her soft brown hair, dark but full of light, was dressed close to her small proud head. She had a haughty little nose and a red babyish mouth filled with bright, even teeth. Her complexion was olive and claret; her tall form round, flexible, carried with pride and grace. The contrasts in that seductive face were affecting her inflammable vis−ˆ−vis profoundly.

It was only when dinner was half over that Louis realized with a shock which turned him as pale as his rival, M. Constant, that he felt neither jealousy nor any other of the master passions. He had talked alternately with Mademoiselle Berthe and the shy damsel on his right, and he found the one as interesting as the other. He appreciated that the young lady destined for him was intelligent, and emanated a warm magnetism; moreover, she had both coquetry and indubitable sincerity. Every man at the table was craning his neck, and M. Constant looked ready to fight twelve duels.

And he, Louis Bac, felt nothing! . . .

Staring at Calvary, his mind drifted over the events of the past week. He had seen Mademoiselle Berthe every day. On two separate occasions he had talked with her alone in the Dupont library. He had liked and admired her increasingly. He found her full of surprises, subtleties; it seemed to him that just such a young woman had been roaming the dim corridors of his brain, impatiently awaiting his call; and as a wife she would be incomparable.

But he did not want a wife. He wanted a grande passion. And he developed not a symptom. He felt not the least desire to impropriate her. Of course there was but one explanation. He was incapable of those profound and racking passions experienced once at least by ordinary men. He was nothing but an intellect with a rotten spot where fiction generated instead of those abnormal impulses that made of men so inflicted social outlaws. Otherwise, he should be quite mad over Berthe Dupont. Her beauty and charm were attracting attention far beyond the French colony. It was Berthe for him or no one. And alas! it was to be neither Berthe nor any one. . . .

The moon flooded the sleeping city as the clocks struck one. Out of that vast composite below, its imagination liberated in dreams, a daring idea sprang, flew upward, darted into Louis's relaxed brain. Its point wedged,

quivered like an arrow. Louis himself quivered, but with fright. Of love and woman he had no personal knowledge save for his brief and shallow episode with Celeste, but of both he had the accumulated knowledge of the masters and the insight of genius.

It was night — a beautiful, romantic night. Berthe was beautiful, seductive at all times; what must she not be in the abandon of sleep? If he could steal to her chamber, gaze upon her unconscious loveliness, was it not categorical that he should be overwhelmed like any ordinary man? To defy her scorn for a few poignant moments, then rush forth repulsed and quite mad, to weep upon his floor until dawn! He stared at the boards of his ascetic chamber with fascinated eyes; . . . to writhe there, to beat the floor with his fists, to weep like a good Frenchman. . . . And he knew that she had gone to bed early to−night, worn out with much gaiety.

He ran lightly down the stairs and let himself out of the house as silently, although his servants slept far in the rear. Even at the top of the hill not a policeman nor a chance pedestrian was in sight. San Francisco, he knew, had a roaring night life, but at this hour the domestic quarters were as silent as a necropolis.

Nor did he meet any one as he walked rapidly along Taylor Street past the dwellings of the rich to the old−fashioned row of houses perched high above the "cut." As he was within a foot of the Dupont mansion he heard a taxicab in his wake, and darted within the sheltering walls of the covered stair. The cab came to a halt before the house opposite; a man with a black bag jumped out, and was immediately admitted.

A doctor, of course; but Louis, to his surprise, discovered that he was experiencing something like a thrill. If seen, he certainly would be handed over to the police. It was, therefore, a moment of real danger, and he almost laughed aloud as he discovered himself enjoying it. Many times he had described, with the most searching analysis, that sensation of fear during moments of imminent detection — even that subtle thrill along the nerves — but he was in search of an emotion that should shake his passions loose, and he ran lightly up the stairs, dismissing even the agreeable idea that he was also to experience the sensation of being his own housebreaker, so to speak. When he reached the upper terrace he took off his shoes and carried them to a little pagoda behind the house; it was possible that he would have to make a hasty exit by way of Jones Street. Before leaving his shelter he looked out warily; but the neighboring houses were black, and behind the windows of the Dupont library was a row of tall eucalyptus−trees planted as a windbreak. It was by one of the library windows that Louis purposed to enter, for he knew that its catch was broken; Jean−Marie's memory was old and intermittent.

He raised the window without difficulty and stepped into the room. It was impenetrably dark and full of furniture. On a pedestal was a vase that had belonged to Napoleon, wired and fastened down as an assurance against earthquake. But Louis knew every detail of that room; he crept down its length without encountering a chair, and opened the door.

In the hall a dim light burned. He listened intently, still with a humorous sense that he felt as like a burglar as any he had ever created. But he experienced no impulse to steal and complete the chain of his sensations. His brain, which registered impressions automatically, was quite normal.

He stole up the stair. Not a step creaked. The upper hall also was dimly lit. He knew that Madame had given the jeune fille the room next to hers, but the connecting door was sure to be closed, for the old lady was a light sleeper and minimized disturbance.

There lay the danger. If Madame heard the slightest sound she would ring the bell connecting with the servants' rooms in the mansard. He tiptoed to her door. She was snoring gently. He walked as softly to a door some ten feet down the hall and turned the knob. It yielded, and he entered the room where Berthe Dupont slept. The young lady was friendly to modern hygiene and the window stood wide open. The radiant moonlight streamed in. Louis, his heart thumping, but his head cool and his hands quiet, walked over to the bed. Berthe lay with her arms tossed outward, her head thrown back, as if consciously drawing attention to the classic outlines under the firm flesh. Her magnificent dark hair streamed over the pillow.

It should have been an entrancing picture, but for some reason it was not. In a moment Louis, with his inexorable eye for detail, realized the peccancy. The young lady's classic face was slightly swollen from sleep, and pallid; her lips were puffed, and blew out, albeit noiselessly, as the regular breath exhaled.

Nevertheless, it was Berthe, and she slept. This was her bedroom, her maiden bower, inviolate by man. She was at his mercy. Why, then, did he not feel that intoxication of the senses, that unreckoning fury of the male, that would have favored any young blood of the French colony? He did not. He merely gazed resentfully at that diminished beauty. His artistic soul curled up. Far from feeling the sensations of the inexorable lover, his mind

turned black with anger both at her and at himself. He hated her unreasonably for disappointing him, for failing to melt the ice in his blood. Well, he had seen the last of her. To−morrow he would shut himself up once more and by a supreme effort of will compel his brain to yield up its skulking treasures.

He turned to leave the room, then shrugged his shoulders and approached the bed, this time more stealthily. Why not give her a fright? That would be something to the credit side of this fiasco, which, he reflected with disgust, involved an insult to the best of his friends. He would make her believe she was being murdered, then get out while she was still too terrified and breathless to cry for help.

His first idea was to press his hands about her throat and choke her gently, not even enough to leave a mark, but quite sufficient to make her kick and writhe with terror. But in that case she would see him — he had not even worn his hat. He picked up a pillow she had tossed to the floor and pressed it against her face. She made a sudden downward movement, gurgling. He pressed more firmly, his eye measuring the distance to the door. But the gurgle affected him oddly. He desired to stop it.

Suddenly he knew that she was awake. She not only attempted to leap upward, but her strong hands clutched the pillow frantically. He had not thought of her arms, of those strong, shapely hands he had admired. With a quick catlike leap he was on her chest, his knees hard against her lungs; he caught her hands in one of his, pressing his other arm along that portion of the pillow that covered her nose and mouth. The blood was running swiftly through his veins. His head was light and full of pleasant noises. Suddenly he realized that the tense, strong young body of the girl was relaxing, and he felt a joy so fierce, so profound, so complete, that he could have shouted aloud a welcome to his liberated soul and passions as they tore through those ice barriers at last and found their transports in this sublime act of taking life.

For Louis had forgotten his original intention merely to terrify. The literary cultures in his brain had suddenly become personal and imperative. He was as ruthless as man ever is when supreme desire and opportunity coincide, whether the lust be for woman or the enemy on the battle−field. He meant to kill Berthe Dupont and gratify the clamoring male within him to the full. This was his moment. He was no assassin by natural inclination, and but for this providential set of conditions would have gone to his grave a little bourgeois, a literary machine with as frail a hold on his talents as a singer on a voice that had never been placed.

The body lay limp and flabby at last. He was about to remove the pillow, but his artistic soul uncurled itself and made indignant protest. He lifted the clammy hand and felt the pulse. It was still. So was the heart to which he laid his ear briefly.

Although there was still that ecstatic riot in his veins, his brain was by no means confused, and prompted his subsequent acts as coherently as if he were at his desk, pen in hand. He listened at Madame's door. She still slept rhythmically. He opened the drawers of the bureau and chiffonnier and strewed the contents about the room. In a compartment of the desk he found a loose pile of gold and notes. He pocketed the gold, leaving the drawer open. He found Berthe's jewel−box in another drawer, wrenched a few diamonds from their setting and threw a brooch out of the window.

As he was about to leave he felt a sudden and different impulse toward Madame's door. But he was above all things an artist. Why repeat a great experience with possibly failing ardors? And in satiety lay the terrible danger of finding himself at his desk driving a pen heavy with reaction that should be tipped with fire.

He returned through the silent house and out of it as noiselessly as he had come. In the pagoda he tied his shoes properly lest the dragging laces impede his progress or attract attention.

HE GAZED RESENTFULLY AT THAT DIMINISHED BEAUTY

And then he heard some one coming stealthily up the stair from the street. A policeman, of course! In an instant he had darted through the tradesman's entrance in the back fence, down a narrow alley, and was peering out into Jones Street. It was deserted.

The fog had rushed in from the Pacific. He encountered no one on his return home. The windows of his own house were still black. He stealthily replaced the chain insisted upon by his servants, then lit the gas in his library and almost flew to his desk. Eight hours later he was still there, and his old servants, weeping and shaking, gave up trying to make him listen. During the next three months, indeed, he might have been isolated on the highest peak of the Sierras.

Louis, after the twenty−four hours of deep recuperative sleep that always followed the finish of a book, awoke

to a familiar chorus: the creaking of his eucalyptus−trees, the fog−horn of Sausalito, the measured drip of the fog on his old−fashioned window−panes. But he returned to his personal life with something more than the usual reaction after a long period in the world of imagination; his depression was so great that the divine happiness of the past five months was blotted from his memory.

Then, not slowly, but with frightful abruptness, he understood. It was not that he had forgotten the act of smothering Berthe Dupont while writing under its inspiration, but that realities, himself, were for the time non−existent. Now, in the deep depression of his nerve centers following that long orgy of creation, he felt as if he were falling down through an abyss of horror without hope and without end. And while he experienced no regret for his act, since it had given the world a masterpiece, nor any that he never should see the beautiful girl again, he was filled with an emotional pity for her that surprised himself. But then he was an artist, and he owed her so much!

A moment later and he nearly shrieked aloud. There was a heavy tread on the stair. It was portentously slow and deliberate. . . . Why had he not been suspected before this? . . . Had M. Cesar used his influence? . . . He, too, was an artist in his way. . . . He cowered under the bedclothes. . . . The door opened. He heard the rattle of dishes. Seraphine never allowed him to sleep more than twenty−four hours without nourishment.

As he sat up in bed he smiled wanly upon his devoted servitor and smoothed his hair. "Good morning, ma vieille. Or is it afternoon? It is good to return to that rational condition which enables me to appreciate your excellent cooking."

Seraphine's gnarled old face grinned. "Ah, Monsieur, it is good to see you no worse. But you are very pale and thin, alas! Although how, then, in the name of all the saints, should you not be?"

Louis poured out the coffee with a steady hand. "Don't run away," he commanded. "Tell me the news. How is M. Cesar? And Madame Dupont? And the charming Mademoiselle Berthe? Name of a name! but I have not remembered their existence since the day I began my book."

"Oh, Monsieur! But O God!" She was about to squeeze a tear from her aged ducts and rock her body, when the gossip in her lively old mind gave a sniff of disdain and quenched the attempt at retrospective grief. "I — I — stupid old woman that I am — I had forgotten that you knew nothing — "

"Knew nothing?" Louis set down his cup. "Nothing has happened to M. Cesar? Tell me at once!"

"Oh, not M. Cesar, >gr‰ce ˆ Dieu! But Mademoiselle! Oh, Monsieur! Quelle horreur!"

"Did she die, that charming young lady? She seemed a marvel of health." Louis loosened the soft collar of his night−gown, but his tones merely betrayed a proper concern.

"Dieu! Dieu! If that were all! She was assassinated, that beautiful young girl, just from Paris, and of an innocence, an excellence, a respectability! And by a miserable villain who had seen her take money from the bank that day and got in by the window that old fool of a Jean−Marie had dared to neglect. And with a pillow!" The voluble details convinced Louis that suspicion had not brushed him in passing.

"And the assassin?" he demanded when Seraphine paused for breath. "Whom do they suspect?"

"Suspect? But they caught him red−handed, the foul fiend. For that we thank the good God."

"Caught him! Do you mean as he was in the act of smothering poor Mademoiselle Berthe?"

"But no, Monsieur. He already had made his way down the stairs and out of the house, enfin! But a policeman was in the garden waiting for him. He had been told by some one who had seen the wretch sneak up the covered way. But not too soon, alas! The assassin denied all, of a certainty. He vowed he had been so terrified at the sight of the young lady murdered in her bed that he ran away at once. But, oh! of a great certainty, no one believed him. No, not one!"

"But it well could have been. Remember that I have written stories to prove the criminal folly of condemning on circumstantial evidence alone."

"Ah, yes, Monsieur, that is all very well in stories. But you see this was life, and the man was caught by a real policeman."

"When is the man to be tried?"

"Tried? The man has been tried and hanged, Monsieur."

"What!"

"But yes, Monsieur. Sometimes a murderer is hanged in San Francisco, and this was a miserable, a tramp, with no money or friends to make delay — gr‰ce ˆ Dieu! But you are white as death, Monsieur. Who am I to tell

you this horrible story when you have just come back from the dead, as it were — "

"It is true that I am overcome. But arrange my bath. I will dress and go to M. Cesar. Oh, my God!"

"But yes, Monsieur."

For a few moments Louis hoped he was dead, that his ice−cold body was yielding up his agonized spirit. He made a desperate effort to rouse the sleeping artist and summon him to the rescue, but without avail; the man was left alone to face the fact that he was a murderer who had taken not one life, but two. And of the two he regretted the friendless burglar the more poignantly.

The fundamental moral questions had never held debate in his highly specialized brain. He had been brought up respectably and had led so impersonal a life that he had obeyed the laws of society automatically. But in this hour of awful revelation, while the artist in him slept the sleep of the dead, he was merely the son of a long line of excellent bourgeois ancestors and could have spat upon himself as a pariah dog.

But in time he got up, bathed, dressed. He even paid his customary visit to the barber. Then he turned his steps toward M. Cesar.

Madame Dupont had gone to Santa Barbara to recuperate after the severe shock to her nerves. M. Cesar, unless dining out, would be at his club. It was eight o'clock.

"Mr. Dupont," he was told, was in the dining−room. Louis gave orders not to disturb him, and was shown into the library. A bright fire burned. He was very cold. He sank limply into a deep chair beside it and dropped his chin on his chest. His mind was too dull for thought, but fully made up.

He was roused by a firm grip on his shoulder, and started up to meet his old friend's tired but kindly eyes.

"But how is this?" cried M. Dupont, in genuine surprise. "It cannot be that you have finished the great work in three months? I did not expect to see you for another two. But of a certainty you write with more and more facility — "

"I wish to see you alone. I have something horrible to say."

"Come up−stairs. My chambers are being done over and I am staying here." M. Dupont, who had given the young author a keen, appraising glance, spoke soothingly and drew a trembling arm through his own. "Mon Dieu, Louis, but you are thin! How long do you fancy you can keep this up? I feared for your gifts. Now I fear for something more precious still. You look on the verge of collapse."

"It does not matter. Take me quickly to your room."

M. Dupont, who never hurried, and always carried his portly form with a certain stateliness, led Louis out of the library and up one flight of the broad staircase to his temporary quarters. Already, Louis automatically noted, his club bedroom had the intimate and sybaritic look of his famous apartment. He had brought to it silver and crystal for his bureau and little buffet, framed photographs of beautiful women, a Meissonier, and several easy−chairs.

He pushed Louis into the deepest of the chairs, poured out a stiff whisky−and−soda, and stood over his guest until the glass was empty. Then he lighted his second after−dinner cigar and settled himself with the first sensation of anticipatory humor he had felt for many weeks. Louis always interested him and not infrequently amused him, with no effort on the part of that most unhumorous mind.

Louis lay back in his chair for a moment, responding to the glow of the spirits. He was still very cold.

"Now, my son, what is it? You may or may not have heard of the terrible tragedy that has devastated my home, but that can wait — "

"Oh no, Monsieur, it is not to wait! It is of that I have come to speak."

"But, of course, old Seraphine would have told you the moment you would listen. It is like you to come at once, although God knows I should have been grateful for your sympathy during that terrible time — "

"Oh, Monsieur! I cannot stand it!" Louis sprang to his feet and strode about the room. "It is something more awful still that I have come to tell you. How am I to do it? You, who have always been so kind! My only friend! My God, what a return! But of that I never thought. I was obsessed. It was an inhibition."

"Dear Louis! Come to the point. Are you quoting from your new book — "

"M. Cesar, you do not know what you are dodging! I will try to put my confession in a few words. It was I — I — Louis Bac, who — who — killed Mademoiselle Berthe. There! It is said!"

"My poor boy!" M. Dupont rose and poured out another whiskey−and−soda. "Drink this and I will put you to bed in a room close by — drunk, hein! for the first time in your life."

But Louis shook his head. Then he turned upon his friend eyes so beseeching and so abject that the ready tears rose to the eyes of the elderly Frenchman.

"When did Seraphine tell you this dreadful thing?"

"An hour or two ago."

"Just after you had awakened from your long sleep?"

Louis nodded.

"No wonder your insatiable faculty immediately began on another! God knows it is not a subject for jest, but I cannot lose you, too. You will go to bed now — "

"Oh, Monsieur, you must believe me! I tell you I smothered Mademoiselle Berthe with a pillow — "

"Tut! tut! That was all in the papers. I can see old Seraphine's ghoulish delight in recreating that grisly scene. And she told you, of course, that the drawers were open, the contents strewn about — "

"No; or if she did I have forgotten. God! how the moonlight streamed in!"

He flung off M. Cesar's hand, and almost ran about the room while his uneasy host felt of his biceps.

"Will you not believe me?" shrieked Louis.

"Perhaps, dear boy, when you have slept on it — "

"Oh, don't talk as if you thought me insane. If you refuse to believe me I shall go from here and give myself up. I intend to do that anyhow, but I wished to confess to you first. That was your right."

"Do you know what would happen if you went to a police station and denounced yourself? You would first be laughed at and then, if you persisted, sent to a lunatic asylum. It is well you came to me first. Why, the murderer has been hanged. The state would refuse to reopen the case — "

"Surely not!"

"Surely yes."

"Then it is between you and me?"

"And a doctor if you do not go to bed at once."

"Oh, but you must believe in me!" Another memory flashed into his stimulated mind, and he confronted M. Cesar with an air of triumph. "The man denied it, did he not? He said he went into the house to steal and found Berthe murdered, and fled. Is it not so?"

"Naturally."

"Now attend. How do you account for the fact that they found nothing on him — neither the missing gold nor the diamonds wrenched from the bracelet?"

"He had an accomplice, of course. He stood under the window while the man, after he murdered Berthe, dropped the loot out of the window. A brooch was found on the grass. The rear gate was open."

"Ah no, Monsieur. I flung that brooch out of the window. I have that gold, those diamonds in my desk at home. Come with me."

For a moment M. Cesar turned gray and the shoulders that had supported a musket so gallantly in 1870 sagged as if old age had suddenly made its perch there. But he shook himself angrily erect. Did he not know Louis and his delusions? Was the poor boy ever actually on the mortal plane? Had not he himself, twice summoned by Seraphine, poured scalding coffee down his throat? Undoubtedly he had loved Berthe and been inspired at last, for during the first hours of his own grief and horror he had dared to intrude upon the high priest at his altar, and met the unseeing eyes of a genius in ecstasy. No wonder he was nearly mad with grief now.

There was nothing but to humor him. Once more he took his arm, and led him out into the street. Slowly the two men climbed the hills through the fog, for one, though gallant, was no longer young, and the other, although tragically young, was very weak. When they reached the foot of the steep incline which led up to the old Bac mansion M. Dupont cunningly would have passed on, but Louis swung about peremptorily, and the philosophical old boulevardier, who cared for no further argument or confiscation of his precious evening hours, shrugged his shoulders and followed his erratic young friend up and into the house.

The economical Seraphine never left a light burning in the hall. Louis struck a match and led the way into the old double parlors he used as his study, and lit a gas−jet. M. Cesar sat down on one of the horsehair chairs and opened his cigar−case.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried. "What a way to live in this amiable world. Fireless, dank, chairs stuffed with rocks. No wonder you look as if you had been in cold−storage."

"Oh, do not trouble yourself to light a cigar, Monsieur. It will go out, I assure you."

He pulled open a drawer of his desk and pointed to a pile of loose gold and half a dozen diamonds of fair size.

"My God!"

M. Cesar experienced an awful feeling of disintegration. The cigar fell from his relaxed hand and he sagged as far back in the chair as its uncompromising back would permit. He stared at the contents of the drawer throughout a long moment while he shivered with the impression that the waters of death were rising in that bleak and horribly silent room. But at the end of those sixty indelible seconds he sat very erect and the angry color rushed to his face.

"No!" he exclaimed. "That is not evidence. I am quite unconvinced. I have not the least idea how much gold Berthe had in her desk, and one gold−piece is like another. I am a judge of diamonds, for I, alas! have bought many; but diamonds of the same size and water are as hard to identify. Those, no doubt, were your mother's."

"My mother had no diamonds. And what do you suppose I do with diamonds in my desk?"

"Properties, no doubt. How do I know that you have not in another drawer burglars' kits and tools, and all the other instruments of destruction with which your characters celebrate themselves? Those diamonds were larger than any poor Berthe possessed."

"They may have looked small in the heavy art nouveau setting. I noticed the bracelet the night of the dinner."

"I never saw it until I saw it in ruins. Let me see those stones." Louis gathered them up and poured them into M. Cesar's steady hand. The old Frenchman felt of them, held them up to the light, flung them back contemptuously into the drawer. "Paste! I thought as much. For why should you buy real diamonds? As for Berthe — what few stones the poor child had were genuine. She could neither afford stones of that size nor would she condescend to wear paste."

"Do you mean to say you will not believe me?" Louis looked sharply at M. Cesar.

It was quite natural that this amiable gentleman should not choose to believe he had blindly nourished a viper. And not, perhaps, motivated by pride and affection alone. He was kind and charitable and a keen man of business, but pleasure was his god. No man had extracted more juice from the sweet apple of life than he, tasted less of its ashes. It was quite in keeping that he should refuse to have his pleasant pastures sown with horrors a second time.

M. Dupont rose. "I shall send you a sleeping−powder from the chemist's. To−morrow you will take the eleven−thirty train for Santa Barbara, spend a month in my mother's charming home at Montecito, and forget that you are a poor genius subject to plots at the wrong time. That, or a sanatorium. Do you comprehend, my friend?"

Louis turned away with a hopeless gesture. "Oh, very well. Have your own way."

"And you will be ready when I call for you at ten minutes past eleven?"

"If I am awake."

"I shall go out the back way and tell Seraphine to awaken you. Now I must leave you, as I have kept a very charming person waiting too long already."

"Good night, Monsieur. I can tell Seraphine myself."

"Very well. I trust you to do so." Louis accompanied his guest with extreme courtesy to the door. On the threshold M. Cesar paused and looked back into the dark house with a shudder. "Ciel, but it is a tomb! I cannot take you with me this evening, but you can go to the club and sleep there."

"Many thanks, Monsieur, but this house is not a tomb to me. It is my home."

"True. A thousand pardons. Au revoir, mon fils."

It was two o'clock in the morning when Louis laid down his pen. He had confessed in minute detail to the killing of Berthe Dupont, entering into an elaborate and brilliant analysis of the primary causes, the successive phases of a more extended psychological process than he had realized at the time, the final impulse, and, as far as possible, the pathological condition of his brain during the act and the minor acts that followed. He added that while he found it impossible to feel remorse in the common sense, as through this abominable crime he had achieved the passionate ambition and desire of his life and a period of indescribable joy, he felt that as a member of society, however indifferent, it was now his duty to make atonement. As M. Dupont had convinced him that his story would not be believed, that, in fact, the authorities would incarcerate him in a lunatic asylum if he persisted in declaring his guilt, he had determined to act for himself.

He made his confession, he further added, not to clear the name of the poor derelict who had paid the penalty for a crime of which he was innocent, but in the interest of science, which would welcome this voluntary

revelation of creative psychology. He believed that other serious writers of fiction, those illustrious men who had written to him with a spontaneous sense of brotherhood, would understand and exonerate. He had cast his soul and his body on the altar of art, and no man had ever done more.

He had written the confession in French and English. He addressed one manuscript to the leading morning newspaper of San Francisco, the other to the literary critic of a great journal in Paris. Then he took a large key from a drawer of his desk and left the house. He dropped the two packages in a mail−box at the foot of the hill, and waited long and wearily for a car. They were infrequent at this hour, but he felt too tired to walk to the outskirts of the city. The night was chill and the fog was dense, but when the car finally came along he took a seat on the front of the dummy, for he dreaded the lights within, of meeting some one, perhaps, who would recognize and speak to him.

When he reached the end of the line he was shivering, and involuntarily he pulled his coat−collar about his ears and thrust his hands into his pockets as he walked rapidly up the hill to the Catholic cemetery.

He knew all the cemeteries on Lone Mountain well, for he often walked there, reading the names on the shafts and mausoleums and reconstructing the history of early San Francisco, of which the dust below had been so fiery an impulse. Henri Bac I. had built a mausoleum here, too, for he felt that as a pioneer he should have a permanent resting−place among the dead who had made history. He had, indeed, been a member of the two great Vigilance Committees, had played his part on more than one occasion as an active citizen who could do somewhat more for the swaddling city than teach its adventurous spirits how to distinguish between stomach and palate.

Louis, who had always been a dutiful son, had come out here every Sunday in all weathers and placed a wreath on the little altar in the dim interior of the vault, knelt automatically for a moment beneath the shelves behind which his parents were sealed.

He unlocked the heavy door; then, as it swung slowly inward, he turned and glanced down over the sleeping city he had loved in his own impersonal fashion. The fog moved like the tides of the sea whose boom came faintly to him. Here and there a shaft from an arc−light shone faintly through, but for the most part San Francisco was the black depths of a ghostly inland sea.

Above him the night was clear. The cross on Calvary stood out like ebony against the glittering sky, a gay and spangled sky as if all the great planets and all the little courtesan stars up there were ready for a night of carnival and laughing at gloomy old Earth.

For a moment Louis hesitated. He was a Catholic by training, and to certain crimes the Church is merciless. But he reasoned that he no more had the right to call himself a Catholic than to persist as a mortal. He went into the vault and swung the heavy door behind him. It clanged faintly, but there was no one to hear.