

THE DREAM CIRCEAN

I

AU "LAPIN AGILE"

PERCHED at the junction of two of the steepest little streets in Montmartre shines the "Lapin Agile," a tiny window filled with gleaming bottles, thrilled through by the light behind, a little terrace with tables, chairs, and shrubs, and two dark doors.

Roderic Mason came striding up the steepness of the Rue St. Vincent, his pipe gripped hard in his jaw; for the hill is too abrupt for lounging. On the terrace he stretched himself, twirled round half a dozen times like a dervish, pocketed his pipe, and went stooping through the open doorway.

Grand old Frédéric was there, in his vast corduroys and sou'-wester hat, a 'cello in his hand.

His trim grey beard was a shade whiter than when Roderic had last patronised the "Lapin," five years before; but the kindly, gay, triumphant eyes were nowise dimmed by time. He knew Roderic at a glance, and gave his left hand carelessly, as if he had been gone but yesterday. Time ambles easily for the owner of such an eyrie, his life content with wine and song and simple happiness.

It is in such as Frédéric that the hope of the world lies. You could not bribe Frédéric with a motor-car to grind in an office and help to strive and enslave his fellows. The bloated, short-of-breath, bedizened magnates of commerce and finance are not life, but a disease. The monster hotel is not hospitality, but imprisonment. Civilisation is a madness; and while there are men like Frédéric there is a hope that it will pass. Woe to the earth when Bumble and Rockefeller and their victims are the sole economic types of man!

Roderic sat down on his favourite bench against the wall, and took stock of things.

How well he remembered the immense Christ at the end of the room, a figure conceived by a giant of old time, one might have thought, and now covered with a dry, green lichenous rot, so that the limbs were swollen and distorted. It gave an incredibly strong impression of loathsome disease, entirely overpowering the intention of picturing inflicted pain.

Roderic, who, far from being a good man, was actually a Freethinker, thought it a grimly apt symbol of the religion of our day.

On His right stood a plaster Muse, with a lyre, the effect being decidedly improved by some one who had affixed a comic mask with a grinning mouth and a long pink nose; on His left a stone plaque of Lakshmi, the Hindu Venus, a really very fine piece of work, clean and dignified, in a way the one sanity in the room, except an exquisite pencil sketch of a child, done with all the delicacy and strength of Whistler. The rest of the decoration was a delicious mixture of the grotesque and the obscene. Sketches, pastels, cuts, cartoons, oils, all the media of art, had been exhausted in a noble attempt to flagellate impurity—impurity of thought, line, colour, all we symbolise by womanhood.

Hence the grotesque obscenity in nowise suggested Jewry; but gave a wholesome reaction of life and youth against artificiality and money-lust.

As it chanced, there was nobody of importance in the "Lapin." Frédéric, with his hearty voice and his virile roll, more of a dance than a walk, easily dominated the company.

Yet there was at least one really remarkable figure in the pleasant gloom of the little cabaret.

A man sat there, timid, pathetic, one would say a man often rebuffed. He was nigh seventy years of age, maybe; he looked older. For him time had not moved at all, apparently; for he wore the dress of a beau of the Second Empire.

Exquisitely, too, he wore it. Sitting back in his dark corner, the figure would have gained had it been suddenly transplanted to the glare of a State ball and the steps of a throne.

Merrily Frédéric trolled out an easy, simple song with perfect art—how different from the laborious

inefficiency of the Opera!—and came over to Roderic to see that his coffee was to his liking.

"Changes, Frédéric!" he said, a little sadly. "Where is Madeleine la Vache?"

"At Lourcine."

"Mimi l'Engeuleuse?"

"At Clamart."

"The Scotch Count, who always spoke like a hanging judge?"

"Went to Scotland—he could get no more whisky here on credit."

"His wife?"

"Poor girl! poor girl!"

"Ah! it was bound to happen. And Bubu Tire-Cravat?"

Frédéric brought the edge of his hand down smartly on the table, with a laugh.

"He had made so many widows, it was only fair he should marry one!" commented the Englishman.

"And Pea-shooter Charley?"

"Don't know. I think he is in prison in England."

"Well, well; it saddens. 'Where are the snows of yesteryear?' I must have an absinthe; I feel old."

"You are half my years," answered Frédéric. "But come! If yesteryear be past, it is this year now. And all these distinguished persons who are gone, together are not worth one silver shoe-buckle of yonder——" Frédéric nodded towards the old beau.

"True, I never knew him; yet he looks as if he had sat there since Sedan. Who is he?"

"We do not know his name, monsieur," said Frédéric softly, a little awed; "but I think he was a duke, a prince—I cannot say what. He is more than that—he is unique. He is—*le Revenant de la Rue des Quatre Vents!*"

"The Ghost of the Street of the Four Winds?" Roderic was immensely taken by the title; a thousand fantastic bases for the sobriquet jumped into his brain. Was the Rue des Quatre Vents haunted by a ghost in his image? There are no ghosts in practical Paris. But of all the ideas which came to him, not one was half so strange as the simple and natural story which he was later to hear.

"Come," said Frédéric, "I will present you to him."

"Monseigneur," he said, as Roderic stood before him, ready to make his little bow, "let me present Monsieur Mason, an Englishman."

The old fellow took little notice. Said Frédéric in his ear: "Monsieur lives on the boulevard St. Germain, and loves to paint the streets."

The old man rose with alacrity, smiled, bowed, was enchanted to meet one of the gallant allies whose courage had—he spoke glibly of the Alma, Inkerman, Sebastopol.

The little comedy had not been lost on Roderic. Wondering, he sat down beside the old nobleman.

What spell had Frédéric wrought of so potent a complexion?

"Sir," he said, "the gallantry of the French troops at the Malakoff was beyond all praise; it will live for ever in history."

To another he might have spoken of the entente cordiale; to this man he dared not.

Had not his brain perhaps stopped in the sixties?

Had the catastrophe of '70 broken his heart?

Roderic must walk warily.

But the conversation did not take the expected turn. The old gentleman elegantly, wittily, almost gaily, chattered of art, of music, of the changed appearance of Paris. Here, at any rate, he was *au courant des affaires*.

Yet as Roderic, puzzled and pleased, finished his absinthe he said more seriously than he had yet spoken: "I hear that monsieur is a great painter" (Roderic modestly waved aside the adjective), "has painted many pictures of Paris. Indeed, as I think of it, I seem to remember a large picture of St. Suplice at the Salon of eight years ago—no, seven years ago."

Roderic stared in surprise. How should any one—such a man, of all men—remember his daub, a thing himself had long forgotten? The oldster read his thought. "There was one corner of that picture which interested me deeply, deeply," he said. "I called to see you; you had gone—none knew where. I am indeed glad to have met you at last. Perhaps you would be good enough to show me your pictures—you have other pictures of Paris? I am interested in Paris—in Paris itself—in the stones and bricks of it.

Might I—if you have nothing better to do—come to your studio now, and see them?”

“I’m afraid the light—” began Roderic. It was now ten o’clock.

“That is nothing,” returned the other. “I have my own criteria of excellence. A match-glimmer serves me.”

There was only one explanation of all this. The man must be an architect, perhaps ruined in the mad speculations of the Empire, so well described by Zola in “La Curée.”

“At your service, sir,” he said, and rose. The old fellow was surely eccentric; but equally he was not dangerous. He was rich, or he would not be wearing a diamond worth every penny of two thousand pounds, as Roderic, no bad judge, made out. There might be profit, and there would assuredly be pleasure.

They waved, the one an airy, the other a courteous, good-night to grand old Frédéric, and went out.

The old man was nimble as a kitten; he had all the suppleness of youth; and together they ran rapidly down to the boulevard, where, hailing a fiacre, they jumped in and clattered down towards the Seine.

Roderic sat well back in the carriage, a little lost in thought. But the old man sat upright, and peered eagerly about him. Once he stopped the cab suddenly at a house with a low railing in front of it, well set back from the street, jumped out, examined it minutely, and then, with a sigh and a shake of the head, came back, a little wearier, a little older.

They crossed the Seine, rattled up the Rue Bonaparte, and stopped at the door of Roderic’s studio.

II

LA RUE DES QUATRE VENTS

“Ah, well,” said the old man, as he concluded his examination of the pictures, “what I seek is not here. If it will not weary you, I will tell you a story. Perhaps, although you have not painted it, you have seen it. Perhaps—bah! I am seventy years of age, and a fool to the end.

“Listen, my young friend! I was not always seventy years of age, and that of which I have to tell you happened when I was twenty-two.

“In those days I was very rich, and very happy. I had never loved; I cared for nobody. My parents were both dead long since. A year of freedom from the control of my good old guardian, the Duc de Castelnaudry (God rest his soul!), had left me yet taintless as a flower. I had that chivalrous devotion to woman which perhaps never really existed at any time save for rare individuals.

“Such a one is ripe for adventure, and since, as your great poet has said, ‘Circumstance bows before those who never miss a chance,’ it was perhaps only a matter of time before I met with one.

“Indeed (I will tell you, for it will help you to understand my story), I once found myself in an extremely absurd position through my fantastic trust in the impeccability of woman.

“It was rather late one night, and I was walking home through a deserted street, when two brutal-looking ruffians came towards me, between them a young and beautiful girl, her face flushed with shame, and screaming with pain; for the savages had each firm hold of one arm, and were forcing her at a rapid pace—to what vile den?

“My fist in the face of one and my foot in the stomach of the other! They sprawled in the road, and, disdaining them, I turned my back and offered my arm to the girl. She, in an excess of gratitude, flung her arms round my neck and began to kiss me furiously—the first kiss I had ever had from a woman, mind you! Maybe I would not have been altogether displeased, but that she stank so foully of brandy that—my gorge rises at the memory. The ruffians, more surprised than hurt, began laughing, but kept well away. I tried to induce the girl to come home; in the end she lost her temper, and fell to belabouring me with her fists. I was not strong enough or experienced enough to contend with a madwoman, and I could not allow myself to strike her. She beat me sore. . . .

“I can remember the scene now as if it were yesterday: the bewildered boy, the screaming, swearing, kicking, scratching woman, the two ‘savages’ (honest *bourgeois* enough!) reeling against the houses, crying with laughter, too weak with laughter to stand straight.

“By-and-by they took pity, came forward, and released me from my unpleasant situation.

“But the shame of me, as I slunk away down the streets! I would not go home that night at all,

ashamed to face my own servants.

"I told myself, in the end, that this was a rare accident; but for all that there must have remained a slight stain upon the mirror of perfect chivalry. In the old days when they taught logic in the schools one learnt how delicate a flower was a 'universal affirmative.'

"It was some uneventful months after this 'tragedy of the ideal' that I was again walking home very late. I had been to the Jardin des Plantes in the afternoon, and, dining in that quarter, had stayed lingering on the bridge watching the Seine. The moon dropped down behind the houses—with a start I realised that I must go home. There was some danger, you understand, of footpads. Nothing, however, occurred until—I always preferred to walk through the narrow streets; there is romance in narrow streets!—I found myself in the Rue des Quatre Vents; not a stone's-throw from this house, as you know.

"I had been thinking of my previous misadventure, and, with the folly of youth, had been indulging in a reverie of the kind that begins 'If only.' If only she had been a princess ravished by a wicked ogre. If only . . . If only . . .

"On the south side of the Rue des Quatre Vents is a house standing well back from the street, with a railing in front of it—a common type, is it not? But what riveted my attention upon it was that while the front of the house was otherwise entirely dark, from a window on the first floor streamed a blaze of light. The window was wide open to the street; voices came from it.

"The first an old, harsh, menacing voice, with all the sting of hate in it; nay, the sting of something devilish, worse than hate. A corrupt enjoyment of its malice informed it. And the words it spoke were too infamous for me to repeat. They are scarred upon my brain. Addressed to the vilest harridan that scours the gutter for her carrion prey, they would have yet been inhuman, impossible; to the voice that answered . . . !

"It was a voice like the tinkling of a fairy bell. Whoever spoke was little more than a child; and her answer had the purity and strength of an angel. That even the foul monster who addressed her could support it, unblasted, was matter for astonishment.

"Now the older voice broke into filthy insult, a very frenzy of malice.

"I heard—O God!—the swish of a whip, and the sound of it falling upon flesh.

"There was silence awhile, save for the hideous laughter of the invisible horror inside.

"At last a piteous little moan.

"My blood sang shrill within me. Out of myself, I sprang at the railings, and was over them in a second. Rapidly, and quite unobserved (for the scene was strenuous within), I climbed up the grating of the lower windows, and, reaching up to the edge of the balcony, swung myself up to and over it.

"As I stopped to fetch breath, as yet unperceived, I took in the scene, and was staggered at its strangeness.

"The room, though exquisitely decorated, was entirely bare of furniture, unless one could dignify by that name a heap of dirty straw in one corner, by which stood a flattish wooden bowl, half full of what looked like a crust of bread mashed into pulp with water.

"Half turned away from me stood the owner of the harsh voice and soul abominable. It was a woman of perhaps sixty years of age, the head of an angel—so regular were the features, so silver-white the hair—set upon the deformed body of a dwarf. Hairy hands and twisted arms, a hunched back and bandy legs; in the gnarled right hand a terrible whip, the carved jade handle blossoming into a rose of fine cords, shining with silver—sharp, three-cornered chips of silver! The whole dripped black with blood. Upon the angel face stood a sneer, a snarl, a malediction. The effect upon one's sense of something beyond the ordinary was, too, heightened by her costume; for though the summer was at its height she was clad from head to foot in ermine, starred, more heavily than is usual, with the little black tails in the form of *fleurs-de-lis*.

"In extreme contrast to this monster was a young girl crouching upon the floor. At first sight one would have hardly suspected a human form at all, for from her head flowed down on all sides a torrent of exquisite blonde gold, that completely hid her. Only two little hands looked out, clasped, pleading for mercy, and a fairy child-face, looking up—in vain—to that black heart of hatred. Even as I gazed the woman hissed out so frightful a menace that my blood ran chill. The child shrank back into herself. The other raised her whip. I leapt into the room. The old hag spat one infamous word at me, turned on me with the whip.

"This time I was under no illusions about the sanctity of womanhood. With a single blow I felled her to the ground. My signet-ring cut her lip, and the blood trickled over her cheek. I laughed. But the child never moved—it would seem she hardly comprehended.

"I turned, bowed. 'I could not bear to hear your cries,' I said—rather obviously, one may admit. 'I came—'adding under my breath, 'I saw, I conquered.' 'Who is that?' I added sternly, pointing to the prostrate hag.

" 'Ah, sir' (she began to cry), 'it is my mother.' The horror of it was tenfold multiplied. 'She—she——' The child blushed, stammered, stopped.

" 'I heard, mademoiselle,' I cried indignantly.

" 'I am here' (she sobbed) 'for a month, starved, whipped—oh! By day the window barred with iron; by night, open, the more to mock my helplessness!' Then, with a sudden cry, her little pink hand darting out and showing a faultless arm: 'Look! look! she is on you.'

"The mother had drawn herself away with infinite stealth, regained her feet, and, a thin stiletto in her hand, was crouched to spring. Indeed, as she leapt I was hard put to it to avoid the lunge; the dagger-edge grazed my arm as I stepped aside.

"I turned. She was on me, flinging me aside with the force of her rush as if I had been a straw. The snarl of her was like a wolf.

"This time she cut me deep. Again a whirl, a rush. I altered my tactics; I ran in to meet her. Hampered as she was by her furs, I was now quicker than she. I struck her dagger arm so strongly that the blade flew into the air, and fell quivering on the floor, the heavy hilt driving the thin blade deep into the polished wood. Even so I had her by the waist, catching her arm, and with one heave of my back I tossed her into the air, careless where she might fall.

"As luck would have it, she struck the balcony rail, broke it, and fell upon the pavement of the court. There was a crash, but no cry, no groan. I went to the balcony. She lay still, as the living do not lie, and her white hair was blackening, lapped by a congealing stream.

"I withdrew into the room. Since I have learnt that any death brings with it a strange sense of relief. There is a certain finality. *La comédie est jouée*—and one turns with new life to the next business.

"The golden child had never stirred. But now she crouched lower, and fell to soft, sweet crying.

" 'Your mother is dead,' I said abruptly. 'May I offer you the guardianship of my godmother, the Duchess of Castelnaudary? Come, mademoiselle, let us go.'

" 'I thank you, sir,' she answered, still sobbing; 'but Jean is awake and at the door. Jean is fierce and lean as an old wolf.'

"I pulled the dagger from the floor. 'I am fierce and lithe as a young lion!' I said. 'Let the old wolf beware!'

" 'But I cannot, sir, I cannot. I . . . ' Her confusion became acute.

" 'I dare not move, sir—I—I—my mother has taken away all my clothes.'

"I marvelled. In her palace of gold hair nobody could have guessed it. But now I blushed, and lively. The dilemma was absurd.

" 'I have it,' said I. 'I will climb down and bring up the ermine.'

"She shuddered at the idea. Her dead mother's furs!

" 'It must be,' I said firmly.

" 'Go, brave knight!'—a delicate smile lit up her face—'I trust myself to you.'

"I bent on my right knee to her. 'I take you,' I said, 'to be my lady, to fight in your cause, to honour and love you for ever.'

"She put out her right hand—oh, the delicate beauty of it! I kissed it. 'My knight,' she said, 'Jean is below; he may hear you; you go perhaps to your death—kiss me!'

"With a sob I caught her once full in my arms, and our mouths met. I closed my eyes in trance; my muscles failed; I sank, my forehead to the ground before her.

"When I opened my eyes again she too was praying. Softly, without a word, I stepped to the window, took the dagger in my teeth, dropped from the edge, landed lightly beside the corpse. She was quite dead, the skull broken in, the teeth exposed in a last snarl. She lay on her back; I opened the coat, turned her over. The gruesome task was nearly finished when the door of the house opened, and an old man, his face scarred, one lip cut half away in some old brawl, so that he grinned horribly and askew,

rushed out at me, a rapier in his hand. My stiletto, though long beyond the ordinary, was useless against a tool of such superior reach.

"A last wrench gave me the ermine cloak, an invaluable parry. Could I entangle his sword, he was at my mercy. He saw it, and fenced warily. Indeed, I had the upper hand throughout. Threatening to throw the cloak, catch his sword, blind him, rush in with my dagger—he gave back and back in a circle round the courtyard.

"No sound came from the room above. Probably we three were alone. The fight was not to be prolonged for ever; the weight of the fur would tire me soon, counterbalance the advantage of age. Then, almost before I knew what had happened, we were fighting in the street. I would not cry for help; one was more likely to rouse a bandit than a guardian of the peace. And, besides, who could say how the law stood?

"I had certainly killed a lady; I was doing my best, with the aid of her stolen cloak, to kill a servant of the house; I contemplated an abduction. Best kill him silently, and be gone.

"But when and how had Jean pulled open the iron gates and retreated into the street?

"It mattered little, though certainly it left an uneasy sense of bewilderment; what mattered was that here we were fighting in semi-darkness—the dawn was not fairly lifted—for life and death.

" 'Ten thousand crowns, Monsieur Jean,' I cried, 'and my service!'—I gave him my style—'I see you can be a faithful servant.'

" 'Faithful to death!' he retorted, and I was sorry to have to kill him.

"We fenced grimly on.

" 'But,' I urged, 'your mistress is dead. Your duty is to her child, and I am her child's—'

"He looked up from my eyes. 'An Omen!' he cried, pointing to the great statue of St. Michael trampling Satan, for we had come fighting to the Place St. Michel. 'Darkness yields to light; I am your servant, sir.' He dropped on one knee, and tendered the hilt of his sword.

"But as I put out my hand to take it (guarded against attack, I boast me, but not against the extraordinary trick which followed) he suddenly snatched at the ermine, which lay loosely on my left arm, and, leaving me with sword and dagger, fled with a shriek of laughter across the Place St. Michel, and, flinging the furs over the bridge, himself plunged into the Seine and swam strongly for the other bank.

"There was no object in pursuing him; I would recover the furs, and return triumphant. Alas! they had sunk; they were now whirled far away by the swift river. Where should I get a cloak?

"How stupid of me! The old woman had plenty of other clothes beneath her furs; I would take them.

"And I set myself gaily to run back to the house.

III

"Whether by excitement I took the wrong turning, or whether—but you will hear!—in short, I do not clearly understand even now why I did not at once find the road. But at least I did fail to find it, discovered, as I supposed, my error, corrected it, failed once more. . . . In the end I got flustered—so much hung on my speedy return!—I fluttered hither and thither like a wild pigeon whose mate has been shot. I stopped short, pulled myself together. Let me think it out! Where am I now? I was under the shadow (the dawn just lit its edge) of the mighty shoulder of St. Sulpice. 'More haste, less speed!' I said to myself. 'I will walk deliberately down to the boulevard, turn east, and so I cannot possibly miss the Carrefour de l'Odeon—out of which, as I knew of old, the Rue des Quatre Vents leads. Indeed, I remembered the carrefour from that night. I had passed through it. I remembered hesitating as to which turning to take. For, as you know, the carrefour is a triangle, one road leading from the apex, four (with two minor variations just off the carrefour) from the base.

"Following this plan, I came, sure enough, in three minutes or so into the Rue des Quatre Vents. It is not a long street, as you know, and I thought that I remembered perfectly that the house faced the tiny Rue St. Grégoire, which leads back to the Boulevard St. Germain. Indeed, it was down that obscure alley that Jean and I had gone in our fight. I remembered how I had expected to meet somebody on issuing into the boulevard; and then . . . I must have been very busy fighting: I could not remember anything at all of the fight between that issue and the place of Jean's feint and flight.

"Well, here I was: the house should have been in front of me—and it was not. I walked up and down

the street; there was no house of the kind, no railings. No residential house. Yet I could not believe myself mistaken. I pinched myself; I was awake. Further, the pinching demonstrated the existence of a sword and dagger in my hands. I was bleeding, too; my left arm twice grazed. I took out my watch; four o'clock. Since I left the bridge—ah! when had I left the bridge? I could not tell—yes, I could. At moonset. The moon was nine days old.

"No; everything was real. I examined the sword and the stiletto. Silver-gilt; blades of exquisite fineness; the cipher of a princely house of France shone in tiny diamonds upon the pommels.

"The thought sent new courage and determination thrilling through me. I had saved a princess from shame and torture; I loved her! She loved me, for I had saved her—ah! but I had not yet saved her. That was to do.

"But how to act? I had plenty of time. Jean would not return to the house, in all probability. But the markets were stirring; the weapons and my blood would arouse curiosity. Well, how to act?

"The positive certitude that I had had about the name of the street was my bane. Had I doubted I could have more easily carried out the systematic search that I proposed. But as it was my organized patrol of the quarter was not scientific; I was biased. I came back again and again to the street and searched it, as if the house might have been hidden in the gutter or vanished and reappeared by magic; as if my previous search might (by some incredible chance) have been imperfect, through relaxed attention. So one may watch a conjuror, observing every movement perfectly, except the one flash which does the trick.

"The search, too, could not be long; so I reflected as disappointment sobered me. One cannot go far from the Carrefour de l'Odéon in any direction without striking some unmistakable object. The two boulevards, the schools, the Odéon itself, St. Sulpice—one could not be far off. Yet—could I possibly have mistaken the Odéon for the Luxembourg?

"Could I . . . ? . . . ? A host of conjectures chased each other through my brain, bewildering it, leading the will to falter, the steps to halt.

"Beneath, keener anguish than the thrust of a poisoned rapier, stabbed me this poignant pang: my love awaits me, waits for me to save her, to fly with her . . .

"Where was she?

"It was broad day; I cleansed myself of the marks of battle, sat down and broke my fast, my sane mind steadily forcing itself to a sober plan of action, beating manfully down the scream of its despair. All day I searched the streets. Passing an antiquary, I showed him my weapons. He readily supplied their history; but—there was none of that family alive, nor had been since the great Revolution. Their goods? The four winds of heaven might know. At those words 'the four winds' I rushed out of the shop, as if stung by an adder.

"I drove home, set all my servants hunting for railed houses. They were to report to me in the Rue des Quatre Vents. Any house not accounted for, any that might conceal a mystery, these I would see myself.

"All labour lost! My servants tried. I distrusted their energy: I set myself obstinately to scour Paris.

"There is a rule of mathematics which enables one to traverse completely any labyrinth. I applied this to the city. I walked in every road of it, marking the streets at each corner as I passed with my private seal. Each railed house I investigated separately and thoroughly. By virtue of my position I was welcome everywhere. But every night I paced the Rue des Quatre Vents, waiting . . .

"Awaiting what? Well, in the end, perhaps death. The children gibed at me; passers-by shunned me.

"'*Le Revenant*,' they whispered, '*de la Rue des Quatre Vents*.'

"I had forgot to tell you one thing which most steadfastly confirmed me in the search. Two days after the adventure I passed, hot on the quest, by the Morgue. Two women came out. 'Not pretty, the fish!' said one. 'He with the scarred lip—'

"I heard no more, ran in. There on the slab, grinning yet in death, was Jean. His swim had ended him. Faithful to death!

"I watched long. I offered a huge sum for his identification. The authorities even became suspicious: why was I so anxious? How could I say? He was the servant of . . .

"I did not know my sweet child's name!

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"So, while a living man, I made myself a ghost.

IV

"It may have been one day some ten years later," continued the old nobleman, "when as I paced uselessly the Street of the Four Winds I was confronted by a stern, grey figure, short, stout, and bearded, but of an indescribably majesty and force.

"He laid his hand unhesitatingly upon my shoulder. 'Unhappy man!' he cried, 'thou art sacrificing thy life to a phantom. "Look not," quoth Zoroaster, "upon the Visible Image of the Soul of Nature, for Her name is Fatality." What thou hast seen—I know not what it is, save that it is as a dog-faced demon that seduceth thy soul from the sacred Mysteries; the Mysteries of Life and Duty.'

" 'Let me tell my story!' I replied, 'and you shall judge— for, whoever you may be, I feel your power and truth.'

" 'I am Eliphaz Levi Zahed—men call me the Abbé Constant,' returned the other.

" 'The great magician?'

" 'The enemy of the great magician.'

"We went together to my house. I had begun to suspect some trick of Hell. The malice of that devilish old woman, it might be, had not slept, even at her death. She had hidden the house beneath a magic veil? Or had her death itself in some strange way operated to—to what? Even conjecture paled.

"But magic somewhere there must be, and Eliphaz Levi was the most famous adept in Paris at the time.

"I told my story, just as I have told it to you, but with strong passion.

" 'There is an illusion, master!' I ended. 'Put forth the Power and destroy it!'

" 'Were I to destroy the illusion,' returned the magus, 'thinkest thou to see a virgin with gold hair? Nay, but the Eternal Virgin, and a Gold that is not gold.'

" 'Is nothing to be done?'

" 'Nothing!' he replied, with a strange light in his eyes. 'Yet, in order to be able to do nothing, thou must first accomplish everything.

" 'One day,' he smiled, seeing my bewilderment, 'thou wilt be angry with the fool who proffers such a platitude.'

"I asked him to accept me as a pupil.

" 'I require pay,' he answered, 'and an oath.'

" 'Speak; I am rich.'

" 'Every Good Friday,' said the adept, 'take thirty silver crowns and offer them to the Hospital for the Insane.'

" 'It shall be done,' I said.

" 'Swear, then,' he went on, 'swear, then, here to me'—he rose, terrible and menacing—'by Him that sitteth upon the Holy Throne and liveth and reigneth for ever and ever, that never again, neither to save life, nor to retain honour, wilt thou set foot in the Street of the Four Winds; so long as life shall last.'

"Even as he bade me, I rose with lifted hand and swore.

"As I did so there resounded in the room ten sharp knocks, as of ivory on wood, in a certain peculiar cadence.

"This was but the first of a very large number of interviews. I sought, indeed, steadfastly to learn from him the occult wisdom of which he was a master; but, though he supplied me with all conceivable channels of knowledge—books, manuscripts, papyri—yet all these were lifeless; the currents of living water flowed not through them. Should one say that the master withheld initiation, or that the pupil failed to obtain it?

"But at least time abated the monomania—for I know now that my whole adventure was but a very vivid dream, an insanity of adolescence. At this moment I would not like to say at what point exactly in the story fact and dream touch; I have still the sword and dagger. Is it possible that in a trance I actually went through some other series of adventures than that I am conscious of? May not Jean have been a thief, whom I dispossessed of his booty? Had I done this unconsciously it would account for both the weapons and the scene in the Morgue. . . . But I cannot say.

"So, too, I learnt from the master that all this veil of life is but a shadow of a vast reality beyond, perceptible only to those who have earned eyes to see withal.

"These eyes I could not earn; a faith in the master sustained me. I began to understand, too, a little about the human brain; of what it is capable. Of Heaven—and of Hell!

"Life passed, vigorous and pleasant; the only memory that haunted me was the compulsion of my oath that never would I again set foot in the Rue des Quatre Vents.

"Life passed, and for the master ended. 'The Veil of the Temple is but a Spider's web!' he said, three days before he died. I followed Eliphaz Levi Zahed to the grave.

"I could not follow him beyond.

"For the next year I applied myself with renewed vigour to the study of the many manuscripts which he had left me. No result could I obtain; I slackened. Followed the folly of my life: I rationalised.

"Thus: one day, leaning over the Pont St. Michel, I let the whole strange story flow back through my brain. I remembered my agony; my present calm astonished me. I thought of Levi, of my oath. 'He did not mean for all my life,' I thought; 'he meant until I could contemplate the affair without passion. Is not fear failure? I will walk through just once, to show my mastery.' In five minutes—with just one inward qualm—again I was treading the well-worn flags of that ensorcelled road.

"Instantly—instantly!—the old delusion had me by the throat. I had broken my oath; I was paying the penalty.

"Crazier than ever, I again sought throughout changed Paris for my dream-love; I shall seek her till I die. If I seem calmer, it is but that age has robbed me of the force of passion. In vain you tell me, laughing, that if she ever lived, she is long since dead; or at least is an old woman, the blonde gold faded, the child-face wrinkled, the body bowed and lax. I laugh at you—at you—for a blaspheming ass. Your folly is too wild to anger me!"

"I did not laugh," said Roderic gravely.

"Well," said the old man, rising, "I fear I have wearied you . . . I thank you for your patience . . . I know I am a mad old fellow. But, if you should happen—you know. Please communicate. Here is my card. I must go now. I am expected elsewhere. I am expected."

MARTIAL NAY.