THE ORDEAL OF IDA PENDRAGON

TO I, J, AND K

I

THE RED HOUR

THERE was myrrh in the honey of the smile with which Edgar Rolles turned from the façade of the Pantheon. “Aux grandes hommes la patrie reconnaissante”—he reflected that the grateful fatherland never gives her great men anything but a tomb.

Then the full blast of it struck him. The Gargantuan jest! The solemn ass that had devised the motto; the laborious ass that had put it up there; the admiring asses that had warmed their skinny souls at the false fire of its pompous sentimentality.

Perhaps he was the first to see the joke! He rocked and reeled with laughter—to find himself caught, as he stumbled against a table, in the sturdy arms of a solidly built young woman, who—he had in her a glance—joined in Celtic harmony the robust brutality of the peasant to the decadent refinement of the latter Greek. The face of a Bacchanal, even of a satyr, perhaps; but a satyr of Raphael; the face of a madonna, perhaps; but a madonna of Rodin. Besides this, she was seductive, alluring, a Messalina rather than an Aspasia. Chienne de race! She was young, and her lips rather sneered than smiled, rather gloated than sneered. One instinctively muttered the word *cannibal*. She had a perfect and perverse enjoyment of life, a perfect and perverse contempt of life; the contempt of the philosopher, the enjoyment of the wallowing pig. Porcus e grege Epicuri.

This much Edgar Rolles smelt rather than saw; for as he turned to her, he caught her eyes. They were the eyes of an enthusiast, of a saint, of an ascetic—but of a saint who, strong in his agony through faith and hope and love, still endures the Dark Night of the Soul.

“You shall lunch with me, nice boy” (she said), “and beg my pardon for your stumble, and pay for your lunch by telling me what drives you mad with laughter at the sight of the Pantheon. Is it ‘L’homme aux trois sous’?” For so the irreverent Frenchman, mindful of his daily need, calls Rodin's ‘Le Penseur.’ ”

“Mademoiselle,” said Rolles, “I accept your kind invitation; I abandon the Church for the Tavern.” They turned into the Taverne du Pantheon, threading their way through the professors and their mistresses, a clever, incurious, domestic, fascinating crowd.

“I kiss your hands and your feet, and I will tell you the joke before lunch; so that you may repent in time if it is not amusing. In your ear, enchantress! The truth is—I am a great man.”

She saw it in a flash. “Then, my friend, I must bury you!”

“In your hair!” he cried. She had huge rolling masses of brown-bronze hair, as if a great sculptor had wished to immortalise the sea in storm.

“Anoint me first,” he added, with a low sob, suddenly clairvoyant of some vision of Christ and Magdalene.

“Need you die?” They were seated, and her hand fell on his lap. “Great men die never.”

“Nor kind words,” he retorted. “You have flattered me; tu veux me perdre.” His English had no equivalent. She gave a little shiver.

“What do you want?” he said, with the man’s alarm when he at last meets the woman he may be able to love.

“Your body and soul,” she answered solemnly; her eyes sank into his, like a dagger into the belly of a faithless Kabyle woman. “But beyond that, your secret! You know life, yet you can laugh from a mad heart!”

“It is easily said. I am going to London to-morrow. There they will make me bankrupt, because I

love my neighbour better than myself, and prosecute me for blasphemy and indecency, because I uttered a few simple truths that everybody knows."

"Why, my friend, you will be famous!" she cried. "Aux grands hommes la patrie reconnaissante!"

"Probably," said he. "Already I run to a full page in the American papers, my name intimately coupled with that of a duke's daughter whom I have never seen."

"Good, good!" she agreed—"so much for fame. But are you really great? Your laughter was better than Zarathoustra! What is your real secret? Why did you love your neighbour? Why did you speak the truth? How did you come to know anything at all well enough to be able to laugh as you laughed! Such abandonment to mirth implies a standard of seriousness unshakable."

"You are a witch," said he. "It is sorcery to know that I have a secret. But to discover it you must be an adept."

"I know this," she answered, making a secret sign.

"This," he retorted, with the mano in fica.

"If you can laugh at me," she said, "you must indeed be a great man!"

"Know," said he pompously, "that you speak to an Absolute Grand Patriarch of the Rite of Mizraim.

"A button!" she laughed back. "I was born to undo them. So I always wear laced boots."

"True enough," said Edgar Rolles. "I will take you seriously then. If you really understand the sign you gave me, you know that the mano in fica is but a caricature of the answer to it. Why are you painted and perfumed?"

"Because I am ambitious, may I not be vicious?" she rimed. "If I see anyone that seems likely to amuse me, I try and amuse him—or her," she laughed. "Is not that the Golden Rule?"

"Well," said Edgar hesitatingly, "well . . ."

"I am so abstemious, so self-restrained, that I fear the reproach of the ascetic. Love is my balancing-pole." She threw her arm round his neck, and her mouth shuddered on his in a long, deliberate, skilful kiss.

"Art?" sighed he, fallen back half fainting in his seat.

"Art concealed;" she glowed, radiant, intoxicated with her own enthusiasm.

"Yes," he agreed, "consummate art!"

"And to all arts there is but One summit!" continued the girl.

"You are a *nymphomane*," he said; "your aspiration is the lie you tell yourself."

She struck him across the face. "Devil!" she cried, so loud that even in the Taverne Pantheon folk looked up and laughed, "have I not heard that from conscience since I was sixteen? A blow is the one answer possible."

"A blow is but your male desire," he said, unmoved.

"How shall I prove my truth?" she sobbed, disquieted and angry.

"Live it down, little girl," he said kindly. "Trust me; I will prove you and justify you. Afterwards!"

"Do you think!—now—?" she began indignantly.

"I know it," said he. "In the grey light, to-morrow, we will talk."

She suddenly felt chill and afraid. "I am not ready," she said; "I am not worthy . . ."

"It is to prove you worthy," said he, "that I was sent to you."

"Well, God aid me," said the girl. She was serious and almost sobbing, her face drawn and white beneath its paint. Her emotion added piquancy to her voluptuousness, pathos to her brute appeal.

"At this moment, of all moments? How should I find you? It was one chance in a million million."

Edgar lifted the knife that lay by his side. There was a fly on the tablecloth. Adroit and salmon-swift, he cut it fairly in half. "Bad luck on the fly?" he laughed. "But I did it. Chance only means ignorance of causes."

"Then you believe in the Brothers?"

"As I revel in the kisses of your mouth," said the boy, crushing her face against his.

A rich gladness filled her eyes, moist gladness; one might say the first gush of an artesian well amid the seas of sand.

"Well," quoth she, cheerful and brisk, to let the mask fall on her blushing soul, "we have got through six dozen oysters and a devil of a lot of Burgundy. . . . I wonder if I am hungry!" She looked him between the eyes.

“Hors d'oeuvres!” said Edgar. “I have a box for the Sam Hall fight.”

“Oh do take me,” she panted. “Will he beat Joe Marie?” she added, with a touch of anxiety. “He has the weight, and the experience, and the record.”

“Fools are betting he will. My money is on the man with three years younger, six inches taller, and twelve inches longer reach to his credit. And a twenty-four times harder skull.”

“It’s his skin I love.”

“The only thing a woman ever can love.”

“And his activity.”

“Exactly. You cannot understand Being, which is Peace.”

“Don't! You are near *my* secret, now.”

“Wait till the grey hours!”

She dropped three napoleons on the plate, and disdaining to wait for the change, took Edgar's arm in hers. They hailed a fiacre.

“By the way, I don't know your name,” he began, as they clattered down the Boul’ Mich’.

“Ida Pendragon. But call me Poppy, because my lips are red, because I give sleep, and death!”

A pause. “And your name, nice boy?”

“Edgar Rolles—you may call me Monkshood.”

“What—*the* Edgar Rolles?”

“As ever is.”

“Oh, they'll hang you! They'll certainly hang you! for that last book of yours. . . . But you shall hang here first.” Her long white fingers went to her neck, like a cuttle-fish feeling for its prey. Her eyes closed: her throat worked convulsively for a moment. Rolles too leaned back, pale with excitement. He drank the fresh air. Then, like a man shot, he lifted himself and fell forward, his head in the nest of her bosom.

“Please sit up and behave sensibly, Mr Rolles!” was the next word that fell on his ears. “We are crossing the Seine. Passion may not pass the gloomy river; here stalks Vice, and the Englishman on its heels. The very coffee sent son Anglais.”

“Et les femmes,” muttered Edgar.

She slapped his hand half fiercely.

“It's Poster Art of immorality.”

“I remember going with an American girl to the Guignol once. They played a comedy one could have acted in a Sunday-school in Glasgow; but Verro-nika, as they called her, who didn't understand a word of French, said the atmosphere was one of the most awful lust. Poor girl! she had paid a lot to see Yurrup and its wickedness. I had not the heart to undeceive her.”

“You sympathised, and offered to take her away?”

“Of course.”

“And she preferred to stay?”

“Of course.”

“Here's the Cirque, anyhow.”

“We'll hope for a clean fight.”

The second round was just over as they took their seats. Sam Hall was solid and furious, looking an ounce or two overtrained; Joe Marie looked hardly human, his black skin gleaming, his arms so long as to seem almost disproportionate. He seemed apathetic; he reminded one of India rubber.

It was not till the sixth round that any warm exchanges took palace. Then Ida sat up. Joe had sent a sharp upper cut to the Englishman’s lip. She dug her nails into Rolles' hand, that lay idly on her knee. Sam Hall returned a blow on the heart that sent the negro staggering across the ring. He was after him like a flash, thinking to finish the fight; but the black countered unexpectedly hard, and the round finished in a clinch.

In the seventh round both men seemed cautious and afraid of punishment. Joe Marie, in particular, seemed half asleep. The lazy grace of his feints was admirable; he was tiring the Englishmen, and paying nothing for the advantage.

In the ninth round Sam Hall reached his eye; but he only laughed, and leapt at his opponent, rushing him to the ropes despite the extra stone and a half. In the furious exchanges both men gave and took a great deal of punishment. In a sense, it was bad boxing.

The tenth round showed Joe Marie awake at last. He led repeatedly, and thrice got home on the white man's face.

Ida was rubbing her body against Edgar's like a cat.

“He is like a black leopard,” she purred. “Is anything in the world so beautiful as that lithe black body?”

“I have seen blood in the sunlight on a bull's shoulder,” replied Rolles.

“I love to see the pure animal beat the mere brute. White men ought not to fight: they ought to think, and do lovely physical things, things gracious and of good report.”

“Ida! my Ida! Could you see your nostrils twitching! I can imagine you fighting with all their fierceness, incapable of keeping to the rules of boxing.”

“I hate you,” she said. “In everything you see——”

“Your lust of blood,” he answered gravely.

“It is true,” said Ida slowly. “There is no light of battle in your eye. You see it as a picture.”

“It is a hieroglyph.”

“But it is a fight!”

“I do not believe in fights. I only believe in beauty.”

“Oh how true, how right your are! How noble!” She hid her face in her hands and began to cry to herself. “I see! I see! That is how God must see the universe, or He could never tolerate such cruelty, such idiocy, ineptitude.”

“Exactly. Suppose now that the world is only symbol—I had rather say sacrament—suppose for example that all these stars swimming in boundless aether are but corpuscles in the blood of some toy terrier of the Creator.”

“You frighten me. I don't want to suppose.”

“Think of the eternal battles of hæmoglobin, oxyhæmoglobin, carboxyhaemoglobin in our blood. It is the same idea. Do we express sympathy for the fallen? Have we a stop the war party? On the contrary, we take good care that these murderous conflicts shall go on. So when you call the God to whom you aspire ‘The Compassionate,’ ‘The Merciful,’ pray be very careful as to exactly what you mean!”

“I am cold. I am frightened. The world has fallen away from me. Take me away. Put me into the ordeal; I have nothing more to lose.”

“In the grey hours of the morn.”

But the crowd was already on its feet, cheering. Joe Marie had fallen on his opponent, now too weak to counter or to guard, and smashed him here, there, and everywhere. It was as one-sided as a man beating a carpet. Twice he knocked him through the ropes. The first time he rose unsteadily, only to fall instantly. The second time his friends, careless of the rules, helped him to rise. A mistaken kindness; the black rushed him round the ring under a hail of pitiless blows, and with a last smashing drive flung him clean through the ropes out of the ring before the referee had time to stop the fight.

Edgar Rolles drove Ida Pendragon back to his studio in Montparnasse. All the way she clung to him, sobbing like a child. He sat very still, save to caress her hair from which the turban had fallen. “It is the victory of Essence over Form,” he mused, “of Matter over Motion. Woman is Form, and thinks Form is Being. Oh my God!” he started up. “I am a man. Suppose I, who am Being, think Being is Form! . . . I cannot even attach a meaning to the phrase! I am blinder than shorn Samson. Both must be equal, equally true, equally false, in His eyes wherein all is false and true, He being beyond them. Only the brains of a child—of The Child—can grasp it. 'Except ye become as little children, ye cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven!' I am blinder than shorn Samson! . . . Well, I'm in charge of Delilah at present, and here's the House where we don't admit Philistines! Get up, little girl!”

He lifted her gently from the fiacre and paid the driver. “Stamp!” said he, “stamp like Dr Johnson! The ground is firm.”

“E pur si muove,” murmured she, and clung (O illogical sex!) still closer to his arm.

II

THE GREY HOUR

"To resume," observed Rolles as he removed the tea-tray, "since you have done no prescribed practices (wicked little sister!) you cannot banish the body by bidding it keep silence. So it must be banished by exhaustion, and the spirit awakened by a sevenfold dose of the Elixir."

"Have you the Elixir?" she asked, rather awed.

"It is entrusted to me," he answered simply. "To this laudable end I have appointed a sufficiency of Bisque Kadosh at the Café Riche, followed by Homard Cardinal and Truffes au champagne. With a savoury of my own invention. The truffes au champagne of the Café Riche are more to be desired than all the hashish dreams of all the wicked, and than all the divine dreams of all the good. We shall walk there, and drive back. This incense shall be kindled, and this lamp left burning."

He took a strange object from a locked cabinet. It had flowered chased pipes of gold, copper and platinum, coiling about an egg of crystal. The three snakes met just above the egg, as if to bite or to kiss. Rolles filled the egg with a pale blue liquid from a Venetian flask, then pressed the heads of the serpents just a little closer together. Instantly a coruscating flame leapt between them, minute, dazzling, radiant. It continued to burn with a low hissing noise rarely interrupted by a dry crackle.

"It is well," said Rolles, "let us depart."

Ida Pendragon had not said a word. She put on her hat and followed to the door as fatalistically as the condemned man walks to the gallows. She had passed through anticipation; she was content to await what might be.

At the door she whispered, hushed in awe of the real silence of the room with its monotonous hiss, in his ear. "You have the Lamp. I almost begin to wonder if you have not the Ring!"

" 'This is a secret sign,' " he quoted, " 'and thou shalt not disclose it unto the profane.' To-night yours be the ring—the Eternal Ring, the Serpent to twine about my heart."

"Ah! could I crush it!"

He closed the door. Like a priest celebrating his first high mass he led her through Paris. Neither spoke. Only as they mounted the steps of the Cafe he took her arm and said, sharply and sternly: "Attention! From this moment I am Edgar Rolles, and you are Ida Pendragon. No more: not a thought of our real relation. Man and woman, if you will; beasts in the jungle, if you will; flowers by the wayside, if you will; but nothing more. Else you will not only fail in the ordeal, but you will be swept aside out of the Path. You were in greater danger than you knew this afternoon; you will yet pay the price."

"I understand," she said. "You devil! I love you." "And I love every inch of your white body!" They ran laughing arm in arm through the swing doors.

. . . . . .

Edgar Rolles sat curled up Hindu fashion on his bed. The sacred lamp still hissed. At his side lay Ida, her arms stretched out cruciform. She hardly breathed; there was no colour in her face. One would have said the corpse of a martyred virgin. On her white body its own purity hovered like a veil.

Edgar Roles watched the lamp, erect, attentive. It went out. Hardly a hint of grey filtered through the blackness. In his hands he held two threads. "One is black, and one is white, he mused, and only God knows which is which. So only God knows what is sin. In our darkness we who presume to declare it are liars—charlatans, groping quacks at the best. Will the sun never dawn? For us on whom the lightning of ecstasy hath flashed for a moment—'much may be seen by its light'—the light of the tempest. But the Light of the Silver Star? Oh, my Brothers (he began to speak aloud) give me wisdom as you have given me understanding! Knowledge and grace and power? These are nothing and less than nothing. Is not this a precious thing that you have given into my charge? Am not I too young among you to bear so wonderful a burden? It is the first time that I have dared so far. The Abyss! The Razor-Edge! Frail bridge

and sharp! Yet is it not a ray of the Evening Star, a ray of Venus, of the Love Supernal! . . .

"Can I tell black from white? It seems I can—and then the certainty flickers, and I doubt. I doubt. I am always doubting. Perhaps a wise man grows angry, and declares his will. 'It shall be what o'clock I say it is,' or . . . see! I lay the threads on her white breast. No doubt remains."

Then clear and loud: "Ave Soror!"

The girl, as it seemed mechanically, murmured the words "Rosae Rubeae."

"Et Aureae Crucis," he rejoined.

Then together, very slowly and distinctly: "Benedictus sit Dominus Deus Noster qui nobis dedit signum."

It seemed hardly possible that her voice joined his. The lips hardly moved; it was as if an interior voice spoke in her heart. Yet the room was suddenly filled with a pale green light—or was it rosy?—or was it golden?—or was it like the moon? That was the strange thing about it. To every name one put to it an inward voice answered: No, not that; like that, but not quite that. Luminous, spectral, cloudy, shimmering— it was all these, and something more.

He placed his hand upon the girl's forehead.

"Are you perfectly awake?"

"I am awake, frater."

"Can you give me the sign of your grade?"

"I must not move. But I am poised for diving, frater."

"The word?"

Haltingly came the answer: "Ar—ar—it—a."

"One is His beginning; one is His individuality; His permutation one. Do not forget it, little sister."

"Are you ready?"

"I am ready. Farewell—farewell for ever!"

"Farewell."

He took his signet-ring, and pressed a spring. The bezel opened and disclosed a small jewelled wheel, divided into many compartments. He pressed a second spring. The wheel began to revolve, and in the silence sang a tiny tune.

It was a faint tinkle, like a distant cow-bell, or like a chime heard far off, heard from the snow. There was an icy quality in the note.

"Where are you?"

"I—I—" she broke off.

His eyes lit with joy.

"I am in the sand; I am buried to the wast in the sand. I see nothing but sand."

His face fell again.

"What is sand?" he asked.

"Oh—just sand, you know. Leagues and leagues of sand; like a great bowl of sand."

"But what is sand?"

"Sand—oh! sand is God, I suppose." There was a patience and weariness in her voice, as of one who has suffered long and is at rest, or convalescent.

"And who are you?"

She did not answer the question. "Now I see sky," she said. "Sky is God, too, I think."

"Then do you see God?"

"Oh no! I think I am God, somehow. It is all like it was before, long ago. I was once a spider in the sand. God is a spider; the Universe is flies. I am a fly, too. . . . And now the desert is full of flies."

Rolles bit his lip; his face was drawn with pain. At that moment he looked an old man.

"Black flies," she went on. "Horrible white maggots. And now there are corpses. The maggots play about their mouths and eyes. There are three corpses that were God when they were alive. I killed Him. That was when I was a camel in the sand. Now there are only my bones."

"It may be only a veil," he muttered, not wishing her to hear. But she heard.

"It is a veil," she said. "But is there anything behind veils?"

"Look!"

"Only the sand."

“Tear it down!”

“There might be Nothing behind.”

“There is Nothing behind. It is through that that you must pass.”

“This veil is God. I am a holy nun in the trance called Rampurana. I am canonised. My name is on every banner. My face is worshipped by every nation. I am a pure virgin; all the others are soiled. Thought is worse than deed. All my thoughts are holy. I think. I think. I think. By the power of my thought I created the Word; and by the Word came the Worlds. I am the creator. I will write my law upon tablets of jade and onyx.”

Rolles bowed his head in silence.

“I am thought itself,” she went on quietly. “And all thought is I. I am knowledge. All knowledge is in three. Three hundred and thirty-three. I am half the Master. I have cut him in two.”

The adept shuddered.

“That was when I was an axe. I will not be an arrow. I will be an axe. . . .” She gave a giggle.

“I am gleeful by reason of hate.”

There was a pause.

“And I am gleeful because I am reason. . . .”

“All reason ends in two. I have cut the Master in two.”

“Can she pass through?” wondered Edgar. “Is it a fault to be identified so well with that which she beholds?”

“There are devils,” she cried. “Black, naked screaming devils. They touch, and at a touch each oozes back to his slime. This slime is Chaos.”

“Ararita!” he breathed the word upon her brow.

“Don't touch me! don't touch me!” she screamed. “I am holy! I am God! I am I!” Her face was black and distorted with sudden passion.

“It's quite different to my own experience in many ways,” thought the watcher. “Yet—is it not the essence of all ordeal, all initiation, that it should be unexpected? Otherwise, the candidate would have passed through the gate before he approached it. Which is absurd.”

The last word must have been audible.

“Absurd!” she cried. “Indeed, it is not absurd. It is all rational. It is you who are absurd.”

“Do you understand what you are saying?”

“No! No! I hate all who understand. I will bite them. I will bite their waists.” Dropping her voice suddenly: “That was when I was a mouse-trap.”

“Dear God! this is like delirium.”

“Oh! go on about God. I don't mind God. I could tell you wonderful things about what I have done to God. I was a Nonconformist preacher once: I had secret sins. They were mine! Mine! How proud I was of them! Every Sunday I used to preach against the sin that I had done most in the week. There are many butterflies in the desert; ever so many more than one would think. This proves that God is good. And then, you see, there are beetles. Beetles and beetles. And scorpions. Dear little amber beasts. There! one has stung me. It is the sacrament of hate. will sleep in a bed of scorpions and rose-leaves. Scorpions are better than thorns. Why do I wander about naked? And why do I thirst? And this torment of cold? It ought to be hot in the desert. And it isn’t. Now that proves—oh yes, my cat! you shall have milk. I will strike a rock for you. Milk and honey.”

She started up suddenly, and put her hands to her face, then threw them round his neck.

“Edgar, darling!” she cried, “your pussy has had such a dreadful dream. Come and love his girl!”

He dared not tell her that she had tried and failed, that she had come back as she set out. He flung his will into that act of mercy; his kisses ravished her into delight.

It was late morning when they woke, faint with rapture, fresh kisses blossoming on their young lips, as the sun himself lit their awakening with his love.

Only then came memory, and solemnity, and sorrow.

“I must catch the four o’clock,” he said, as he left her; “one of these addresses always finds me. Telegraph if you need me. I would come from the ends of the earth, if I must: but you know the Brothers? When you need me really I shall be at your shoulder. O my darling! my darling!” he broke out, falling to tenderness, half human and half superhuman; “how I love you! how I love you! I hate going to

England."

"Oh yes! your martyrdom! I wish I were worthy to share it."

"God! God! why must we part? It's my fool vanity that makes me want the martyrdom. And all the time I only want you."

"But you're not only Edgar Rolles."

"And when I return, be more than Ida Pendragon. Keep a stout heart, wench!"

So, with a thousand tear and kisses, they parted. She would not come to see him off; her self-command was weakened alike by her new love and by the terrible ordeal that she had undergone. Her mind remembered nothing of it—such is the merciful order of things; but her soul, beaten with rods, was sore.

So Edgar Rolles went to England to his martyrdom, with a lock of her hair in his pocket-book; and he turned martyrdom to battle, and battle to victory. Kingdoms have been won for an eyelash, before now.

III

THE BLACK HOUR

"DISGUSTING!" said Ida Pendragon. She was at the Luxembourg Gallery, regarding a too faithful portrait of an orator addressing his constituents. She spoke over her shoulder to the long negro, Joe Marie. His eyes rolled, and his hands twitched, and his thick mouth grinned. He seemed to sniff her hair. A pitiable creature—a tamed leopard. All smiles and yes! yes! to a discourse of whose purport he had no idea.

"Realism!" she went on. "We want truth, but we want beauty too. We don't want what our silly eyes call truth. We want the beauty that is seen by artists' souls. A photograph is a lie because a camera is not a God. And we would rather the truth coloured by the artist's personality than the lie that his mere eyes tell him. The women of Bougereau and Gerome are more like what the eyes tell one of life than the women of Degas and Manet. I want the truth of Being, not the truth of Form. Do you hear?" she cried, "I want truth, I want Truth."

"I want you," said Joe Marie.

"We are both in trouble, then," she smiled back. "And perhaps if we had our wish, we should both be disappointed. Now I am going home to write letters, and if you are good you shall lunch with me to-morrow."

"Then let me pay! I want to pay for your lunch."

"You shall have a great treat, Joe! I have a friend and his girl coming, too. You shall pay for all of us."

The negro beamed. "Ida Pendragon!" he spluttered. "I love you, Ida Pendragon."

"And Ida Pendragon loves her leopard. Now leave me." She glanced round. They were alone in the gallery.

"You may kiss the back of my neck, if you like."

The negro buried his head between her shoulders.

She shivered; her hair hissed under his kiss. She writhed round, and gave her mouth to his for one clinging moment. Then she pushed herself away, and he, poor troubled animal, went swiftly and sleekly from the room. At the corner he staggered. The girl saw it; her smile was like sheet lightning.

A quarter of a mile away, at that moment, Edgar Rolles was tearing the edges from a "petit bleu."

"I am paying the penalty," he read. "Lunch with me at Lavenue's at one to-morrow. Bring a girl."

"Right," said he. "But I wonder what she means." And he strolled out to the Dôme to find good-hearted Ninon, "la grande hystérique" of the Quarter, half-mad and wholly amorous, half gamine and half great lady, satiated and unsatisfied indeed, but innocent withal. La Dame de Montparno they called her; she dominated her surroundings without effort. Yet none could analyse or explain the fascination to which all surrendered. She had more friends than lovers, and no one ever told a lie about her, or let her want for anything.

She welcomed the invitation with joy. "Ida Pendragon!" she said, "Oh! I know the type. Name of a tigress . . ." and she rattled off a story of a stag-hunt at Fontainebleau in which the Cornish girl had played the principal, an incredible part.

The cafe pricked up its ears, and dissolved in laughter at the culminating impossibility.

But Edgar Rolles only frowned. "I am sorry for Ida," he said slowly. "If your story were true I should be glad; but she is only the painter with his palette mixing paints: she never gives her soul up to the canvas. Tigress? yes: but not the Bodhi-sattva who let the tigress eat him. She always wins; she cannot lose. As the proverb says: 'Lucky at play, unlucky in love—and 'God is love.' "

"Listen! he is saying the Black Mass again," cried Ninon, and springing on a table began the Dance of the Postman's Knock, just then the rage of Montparnasse before the infection spread to Paris and London. A Polish youth jumped on to the table opposite and joined her; in a minute the whole cafe was

aflame with it.

But Edgar Rolles, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and the threat of tears in his eyes, was walking back to his studio.

"If only life were folly!" he sighed. "But the silliest things we do are wisdom—somehow, somewhere——" And he let himself in.

* * * * *

The lunch in the private room at Lavenue's was secretly amusing. Joe Marie had only dog's eyes for Ida; Ninon amused herself by trying to distract him. Edgar held forth at length upon Art, passionlessly expository.

"Art," said he, "and do not imagine that Art or anything else is other than High Magic!—is a system of holy hieroglyph. The artist, the initiate, thus frames his mysteries. The rest of the world scoff, or seek to understand, or pretend to understand; some few obtain the truth. The technical ability of the artist is the lucidity of his language; it has nothing to do with the degree of his illumination. Bougereau is better technically than Manet; he explains more clearly what he sees. But what does he see? He is the priest of a false God. Form has no importance except in this sense; we must not be revolted by the extravagance of new symbolic systems. Gauguin and Matisse may live to be understood. We acquiesce in the eccentricities of Raphael."

Ida gave a little laugh of pleased scorn of him.

"My good girl, perspective is an eccentricity, a symbol; no more. How can one ever represent a three-dimensional world in two dimensions? Only by symbolism. We have acquiesced in the method of the primitives—do you think men and women are really like Fra Angelico's pictures look to the eye of the untaught? We may one day acquiesce in all the noughts and crosses of Nadelmann! It's the same everywhere. I draw a curve and a circle and a waggle up and down; and everybody who can read English is perfectly satisfied that I mean that placid ruminant, female, herbivorous, and lactiferous, to which we compare our more domesticated courtesans and our less domesticated policemen. So Being is not in Form; it is however only to be understood through Form. Hence incarnations. The Universe is only a picture in the Mind of the Father, by which He wishes to convey—what? It is our Magnum Opus to discover what He means! Hence 'the eye of faith.' Mere eyesight tells us that a plaster mould is truer to nature than the greatest masterpiece of Phidias; so does science, with her gross calipers. Sensible men prefer a good photograph of nature to a bad landscape. The photograph shows them the view of their own normal eye through the medium of an accepted symbolism; the picture shows the view of an indifferent bad soul through a medium of mud. But Corot! But Whistler! But Morrice! Corot sees a wood, and paints Pan; Bougereau sees a pretty model, and paints a pretty model. He doesn't paint Woman. Morrice paints the Venice of Byron, of our historic and voluptuous dreams; not the Venice of the Yankee and the churning steamers. Raphael found Madonna in his mistress; Rembrandt a queen of sombre passion and seduction in his wife. In one way or another we must get to God's meaning through a medium that itself is meaningless."

"Just as through dejeuner we get to the dessert!" laughed Ida, who had something more to say than her face showed. All through lunch she had allured the big black savage, until beneath her glances he was in agony. All the primitive passions fought one another in his heart. He could have killed Rolles for the very nonchalance of his small-talk. It hurt him that anyone should speak to Ida save in words of love. Equally, he could have killed him for a trace of inflection in his voice.

Edgar Rolles understood his torture, understood the suppressed intensity of Ida's purpose, though he could not guess its nature. Somehow he distrusted the event.

"Take literature!" he went on, in that even vigilant voice of his. "Take Zola with his million marshalled facts. What do they matter? Nothing. We get the truth about the Second Empire—and if Zola's facts were all false, it would not alter the truth he came to tell, poor, provincial, time-serving truth as it is."

"Take Ibsen! It is no accusation to say that Norwegians never act as his characters do; no defence to prove that Norwegians always do act so. It has nothing to do with the question. Romeo and Juliet make love in English—nobody minds! Macbeth is not obliged to say, 'Hoots! ma leddy!' every time he addresses his wife. The fool who bothers with local colour misses the sunshine. The man with the burette misses the sea. Some pious Dutchman of yore, who wanted to paint Abraham and Isaac, gave the old man a blunderbuss. Why not? You can shoot your son with a blunderbuss! I tell you it's all symbolism, all hiero-

glyphics. Take Wagner!"

"Take a cigarette," said Ida.

He shrugged his shoulders, and surrendered to the event.

"Mr Rolles," she said, "it is your advice on life that we are asking. Let us talk seriously. This dear boy (she took the negro's lips in her slim fingers and pinched them) likes me."

"I love her! I would die for her!" broke in the black, crying with pleasure and pain, utterly unable to hold himself in. He caught the table to draw himself to it, so violently that two glasses fell. "I love her! I love her! I want her."

"Hush, Joe! Well, you see, Mr Rolles, I love him too. . . ." Rolles flashed one glance at her. She would not see it.—"I love him passionately, indeed I do. Oh, I love him, I love him!"

She threw herself on the broad chest of the boxer and hid her face. His long arms wound convulsively round her. His eyes seemed to start from his head; foam gathered on his dry lips; he could not speak. The breath came through his dilated nostrils hot and fierce; one would have said a bull in the arena. She disengaged herself.

"You see, he wants to marry me. I love him! I want to be with him for ever. But—" the great fighter was limp in his chair. "It is difficult," she went on. "There are complications. My mother . . ."

Edgar Rolles detected the false note in her voice. He understood. He was angry, angry at his implication in such an affair. His teeth snapped.

"Yes?" he said, though he wanted to shout, to break the furniture.

"We cannot marry," she went on, and this time the mordant malice almost tore her silky pathos with a rending shriek. "So, Joe . . ." She turned her great eyes on him, lustrous, pleading.

"I want you!" was all he said. But his voice was like the low and terrible cry of an elephant.

"You would not make me"—she hesitated a moment— "you would not make me—impure?" Her inflection was low and tremulous; but the Caucasions understood. It was like the scream of the typhoon, ripping the sails.

Ninon broke into a high hysterical sob of utmost laughter. She had not seen such a comedy since—she had never seen such a comedy. What a dull brute that black creature was!

Edgar Rolles rose with a jerk. He did not know what was coming.

And then light dawned in the dense brain of the African.

The thousand meshes of her spider web were torn. He understood. He understood that she cared nothing, had never cared, would never have given a hair of her head for all his body and soul. Understanding was to his brain a momentary death.

Then with a silent snarl he sprang at her. She and her chair crashed backwards to the floor, and the black leopard was upon her, his teeth sunk in her throat.

Edgar Rolles was only just in time. His boot caught the murderer behind the ear—and Edgar Rolles had played football.

The beast was dead.

Edgar stooped and caught her up, blood leaping from her throat, while Ninon, shriek upon shriek rising in torment, rushed to rouse the people of the restaurant.

"Oh, my brother," gasped the girl. "Could you not understand? I wanted to die, so."

These were her last words for long.

Lavenue's was a storm of chattering and gesticulating fools. The police pushed them aside. The corpse to the mortuary; the girl to the hospital; the man to the Poste. Ninon, wringing her hands and crying and laughing, had run like a Bacchante up the Boulevard to the Dôme.

IV

THE HOUR OF GOLD

IT was easy to satisfy French justice. Ida Pendragon was compared to several early Christian martyrs whose names I have forgotten; Edgar Rolles was asked to sit for a picture of St George by Follat, the success of the year's salon. Humanitarian papers urged the law to suppress boxing and its brutalities. Texans in Paris argued and rejoiced; Parisians in Texas went with a clear conscience to such lynchings as occurred.

Ida was convalescent. She would never lose the awful scars that jagged her throat; but would her face ever lose its mysterious exaltation? When Edgar saw her, he was almost afraid to understand. Leaving her, he went through the heart of Paris to a certain house. He wished to be certain; he wished to consult a Brother of the Silver Star.

Now it is very easy to find a Brother, when you know the password. But it is not always easy to get that Brother to tell you what you want. He is almost certain to be exceedingly rude; he is extremely likely to insist on talking common sense, which is annoying when you go for exalted mysticism; and quite possibly he may just nod, and continue his labours, which is maddening when your business is of the highest importance to you, and to him, and to the Brotherhood itself, not to mention humanity—while he is occupied in playing spillikins, and further insults you by explaining that he is trying to prove that, if you only do it carefully enough, you can detach planets from the solar system without hurting it.

On this occasion, however, Rolles was fortunate enough to find the Brother whom he knew at leisure—even for him. His feet were on the mantlepiece; a long pipe was in his mouth, and he was twiddling his thumbs.

“Avé, Frater!” said he, as Rolles entered. "Also Valé. How you young brothers manage to find trouble!"

“Miss Pendragon will be out of the hospital in four days,” began Edgar in explanation.

“Lucky dog!” said the great man. “But the funny thing is that I am in trouble too.”

“Oh! I am sorry.”

“I wonder if you could help. It's this way. Sometimes I twiddle my thumbs so—we call that the plus direction: and sometimes *so*—the minus direction. Now I lost count years and years ago; and so whichever way I twiddle, I may be getting further and further from equality. Then how—I ask you!—may man attain to the Universal Equilibrium?”

“Wouldn't it be safer not to twiddle at all?” suggested Rolles meekly.

“Inglorious youth!” retorted the Brother. “Base Buddhist! So you could never equalize the count! No! My plan is—always to twiddle one way. It is an even chance that my way is right.”

“But if you should be wrong?”

“I shall be damned, I suppose.”

“And if you should succeed, and equalise the count?”

“I have no idea.”

“But——”

“Ungenerous, unsympathetic youth! I wager you have not divined my difficulty?”

“It *all* seems very difficult.”

“But my supreme, my crushing doubt?”

“I cannot guess, sir.”

“This! In your ear, my young friend. This! I cannot remember which way always to twiddle.”

Rolles drew back dazed.

“Read Nietzsche!” snapped the Brother.

“But—but—” he stammered. “Oh! this is it. Miss Pendragon comes out in four days’ time . . .”

“I wish you'd learnt twiddling,” said the Brother sadly.

“But what am I to do, sir?”

“Twiddle, you damned fool!”

“I know you always mean something . . .”

“Never. There is Nothing to mean!”

“Oh!”

“Be off, I can't be bothered with you—be off! I send you packing. Is *that* clear?”

“You have nothing to say to me?”

“What have I been saying this priceless past fourteen minutes twenty-seven seconds? Ape! Goat! Imbecile! Dullard! Poopstick! Do you think one can recover lost time? One must talk English to you—English, you hotel blotting-paper, you unabsorbent wad of pulp! English, you Englishman!”

Rolles nearly lost his temper at the final insult.

“Well, then, I send you packing. Go and pack, dolt! Pack! Trunks, portmanteaux, bags, boxes, and for the Lord's sake pack some brains! Take the girl to Jericho or Johannesburg, and get some sense, and triplets, if you can!”

“Twiddle so—Being! Twiddle *so*—Form! Balance them, cheating grocer! Nation of shopkeepers! Twiddle! Twiddle! Twiddle! Isn't the Balance in the Babe? Teach her to understand children!” The Brother paused to re-light his pipe, thrusting the bowl into the glowing carbon of the grate.

“To understand children? It is hard. But we love children, sir.”

“And what the devil is the difference between love and understanding? If you have one, you have the other. Oh, twiddle, twiddle!—You can send me one of those rotten paper knives from Jericho,” added the adept more peaceably. “With the rotten Sephardi pointing—blasphemers! And here! don't you blaspheme, young feller my lad. You've got a good woman: make the most of her.”

“A great woman, perhaps.”

“A good woman. In the next siege of Paris I hope I shall not have to boil your head; I prefer thick soup. A good woman. A sister of the Silver Star, my good goat!”

“I do not understand, master!”

“You never will, I think. O generation of vipers! O prosy princox! O coxcomb of Kafoozelum!”

“I beg your pardon, sir! You know she failed in the abyss?”

“I? You? This is intolerable. Give me mere Hafiz! Here, thickhead! she was your mistress, I suppose? Most women in Paris seem to be.”

“Sir!”

“Yes or no? Well, silence gives consent—No! she wasn't! You lie! she never gave herself but once—go and look at the mark on her throat!”

Rolles reeled back, stunned by the bludgeon truth.

“I am a Fool!”

“Not by a long chalk! Keep your end up, and you'll be a Magus in this life yet, though. In the meantime—oh, be a Devil!”

The younger man divined the infinite love and wisdom beneath the brusquerie of the Brother.

His eyes filled with tears.

“I'll win her, sir, by God!” he said enthusiastically.

“Lose yourself to her. Only so. Off now, boy! I am busy. I must twiddle—twiddle—twiddle.”

Edgar bowed and went. He could not trust himself to speak: the Love that was the whole being of the Brother melted the snow of his soul. He loved. Not Ida, not the world, not anything. It was pure love; love without object, love as love is in itself. He did not love; he was Love.

But he strode straight back to Ida Pendragon. Before she left her bed, they were married. A week later they drove through the cool swift air to the South; and there, among the vines, they learnt how—once in a century—the phœnix Passion may rise from the fire of Vice, and how in the beak of the phoenix proved by the fire is the ring of Love.

* * * * *

A year later. They were in a villa at Mustapha. The sea and sky strove enviously which should best answer the sun's question with the word blue.

But Ida Pendragon, pale and fragile as rare porcelain, twisted herself and found no peace. Edgar

bent over her, as vigilant as on the night of her first ordeal. In the shadow stood a physician; at the bedside sat a nurse, and in her arms a child.

"Brother!" she said faintly, "the number of the grade is Three, and I have given myself three times. Once to the brute, once to the man—my man! (her hand pressed his, oh! too feebly!) and now—to God!" The tears sprang to his eyes.

"It is for you," she whispered, "to understand the child."

She fell back. The physician ran forward. He knew that he had no useful purpose there: but he motioned Edgar away. Too late. Edgar had understood the Event.

He fell upon the dead girl's breast, crash! The nurse shook herself, half angrily, as a retriever shakes off water. Then she put the child into his arms.

MARTIAL NAY