

THE CHUTE

By Aleister Crowley.

I. IDLENESS.

MARK LESSING was one of nature's monsters. A shy, almost effeminate boy, he had failed to please the procrustes of public school life, and had to be passed to Oxford without that coarseness, cynicism, callousness, hidden brutality and displayed perversion which is the foundation of the Oxford manner. Six years later he was still a ne'er-do-well, wasting his time and money in the Latin Quarter, and acquiring an unsavory reputation as a painter of what his fellow-artists recognized as master-pieces. At that time his father, a distinguished civil servant, whose last years had been saddened by his only son's failure to live a decent life, took his grey hairs down in sorrow to the grave. Mark's income suddenly stopped, and he had perforce to abandon Paris for London. In Paris, he said, they knew all about pictures and bought none; in London nothing, and bought some. Unfortunately, Lessing was not at all the man to paint the picture of the year at the academy. He could only paint one thing—the nude; and of this he had so extraordinary a perception, and expressed the same with such absolute simplicity, that his work was entirely beneath the notice of those who wished to be excited by the question of whether that sweet child would live or die, whether it was the sinning wife or the faithless husband that went with the title of the picture, who was accusing who of cheating, and why, whether the girl would say yes or no, which horse would win after all, and if the lion would eat the martyr or not.

He did not understand, either, how to sell his work in private. His education had not fitted him

to lackey the Johannesburg millionaire, or smirk in the drawing rooms of the "art patron." Nor had all Park Lane, with bulging manner and pocketbook, been clamoring at his door, would he have sold a picture. He objected on principle to parting with a picture at all, and as for letting it go to other than a "good home," it was unthinkable. He would almost rather have burned a work of art than see it go to America. His complete lack of all the finer feelings soured him against humanity. He hated society, preferred to smoke his pipe in a public house. His equals bored him when they did not talk art, and sickened him when they did. He could not tolerate shams of any kind. Age made him more morose than ever. He shunned all folk above the age of ten or thereabouts, with the exception of the honest old fellow with whom he worked in the evenings when it was too dark to paint; two hours of daily toil sufficing to earn enough to supply his simplicity. For the delicacy of touch which served him as a painter was also found useful by polishers of lenses. Mark Lessing could detect and correct, errors of a thousandth of an inch with his eyes shut.

When he was forty, a great calamity befell him. The old man died. It had not been, his own seeking, this paying work. Now it had ended, he would, of course, live on his own savings, and by the sale of his pictures. Of these he had a great collection, having painted about sixty a year for twenty years, and having sold or given away not more than half. However, this was fated not to worry him, for about three months later he was knocked down by a cab and taken to the hospital, where he lay unconscious for over a week, and between life and death for six weeks more.

Before anyone could discover his identity, his landlord sold his few sticks and many canvases to pay himself the rent; and as the aforesaid canvases

were distributed among poverty-stricken students to be painted over, they were not recoverable, even had Mark been able to redeem them. Being a man of spirit he would not make his case known to his friends, but bought chinks, and proceeded to decorate a pavement. The police put sudden death to that, and only his university accent saved him from a prosecution, the constable persuading himself that some nob was drawing the (haw! haw! haw! behind a glove) for a lark or a bet. So that he escaped with a few remarks, half leering and half jeering, on morality which jeopardized that constable's life—had he known it—more than many burglars. Thus baffled, the painter took to selling matches, rose by degrees to the power of purchasing paints and brushes, painted a picture and managed to sell it for a ten-pound note to the one dealer in London who would even look at his work. Restored to affluence by this stroke of luck, he was still further favored by fate, and found a job again at the lenses. He soon had a studio and began his old game of turning out three-score unsaleable pictures per annum. He became casual in the matter of lenses, was paid less, lived on mere scraps of food and kept every available shilling to pay models, and purchase materials.

“Idleness is a bitter curse” (my father used to say), “it's the mother of all ills, and there's nothing worse.” At this critical point in his downward career he came face to face with vice.

II. VICE.

It was the same year in which he entered a public school that Ailsa Roberts joined her eleven brothers and sisters at the little lost vicarage in Gloucestershire. Her father, successful enough in that capacity, had failed in every other, only stum-

bling into a benefice as a sort of last lurch before the grave. However, her early years were peaceful enough, save that her frivolity, expressed mainly by what can be called vicissitudes of the limbs, caused frowns. When she was twelve years old her father died; the family was scattered; a wealthy aunt sent her to a convent (no place for a Christian child!) and forgot about her the next day. In the convent she still tried to dance until the nuns could think of nothing but the convulsionaries of St. Medard. Exorcism proving fruitless, and punishment serving only to confirm the criminal in her crimp, she was boarded out. A Russian girl from the opera passing the garden in which she disported, recognizing genius, arranged for the girl to go to Moscow to learn the ballet. Here she met Boris Michaelovitch, who was not content to teach her only dancing. At eighteen, under the name of La Koslowskaja, she was dancing in principal parts with him; at twenty she set out to conquer Paris and London, and at twenty-four succeeded. Of strong animal spirits, and weakened moral principles—a convent and a dancing school can undermine even a clergyman's daughter—she allowed herself to amass that collection of sapphires which will be remembered by connoisseurs as the marvel of the decade. She was however, not without her troubles. For instance, she lost her complexion and several teeth. Then came a year during which she could not dance at all, and on her return to the stage the final touch which had made her had departed. She got the usual applause, and looked apparently as well as ever, but the judicious grieved.

Two years later she had already begun to sell her sapphires; and a year after that she—saw a ghost!

There is a point in the downward career of vice when it comes face to face with the idleness whose hours initiated it!

III. CRIME.

La Koslowskaja was 32, and Mark Lessing 47, when they met on the night boat from Calais. He had been over to Paris for a few weeks of happiness among his old friends, she to fulfill a not too-well-paid engagement at the Alhambra.

“My poor Boris!” cried she, as he walked across the gangway. Boris Michaelovitch had been her first man, the man she really loved, deep down where love lies, God knows where! but most surely immune from all the accidents of life. Now she saw him, as she thought, old and broken down. She became on the instant eternal youth itself, in that aspect of it which we call motherhood.

The mistake was easily explained, but the conversation continued. Ailsa was lost in memories of first love; Mark in contemplation of the body of a perfect dancer. She gladly agreed to sit for him, his simplicity charmed her; his evident poverty moved her to a great resolution. For Boris’ memory she resolved to be a mother-daughter to him. With great difficulty she got him to her flat to dine; with greater persuaded him to sell her a picture for ten pounds. He spent over an hour in persuading her to accept one as a gift.

This price of ten pounds deserves comment. Ailsa was singularly ignorant in patches, and had no idea that anything but dress, jewelry, champagne, and women could cost money. She imagined ten pounds to be a sort of fancy price for a picture. She had vaguely heard of Rembrandts bringing £20,000 in the auction room, but never connected it with any fact of life. She had once

been offered a particularly fine Conder for £50, and stamped out of the shop in a rage that anyone should dare to presume so on her inexperience.

The ice once broken, it was the dancer's practice to spend fifteen to twenty pounds a week on Lessing's pictures; and for a year or two he prospered. Greater ease and comfort, combined with complete leisure, overcame advancing age, and he painted harder and better than ever before. Unfortunately his patroness found the contrary. She made less and less, both on the stage and off; her dress cost her more every month, and her hairdresser and beauty expert ate up all her earnings. There were soon no more supplies; the rent of her flat became a burden. She moved from Mount street to Victoria street, from Victoria street to Russell Square, from Russell Square to Denbigh street. She bored lesser managers than those who had fought in law courts to secure her services; she who had frowned on dukes now smiled at stockbrokers' clerks.

Of all this Mark Lessing was totally unaware. Absorbed completely in his painting, he hardly ever stirred from his studio unless to take the air on the embankment and watch the Titan that is the heart of London's energy tower above the tide. To visit him she always made her finest toilet; she took to feeding in obscure cafés to save the money to buy his pictures. But her visits became less frequent in spite of all that she could do; and a day came when she could no longer hide her poverty, even from his unobservant eye. He flatly refused to sell her another picture, and only woman's wit won out. She burst into tears, and made a great confession. "All this time," she said, "I have been selling your pictures at a profit. It is all I have to live by."

In plain English, she lied to him. There is a period when the conjunction of vice and idleness gives birth to crime.

IV. VIRTUE.

Lady Adelaide Victorine Knowsbagge had never lacked anything, but admirers, and her just indignation against those who had any grew, equal-striding, with what cynics vilely called her age and her despair. She envied even the street walker, and devoted her life to dragging such from their already miserable existence to a world of wash tubs and sewing machines, variegated with sermons. She had lent all her wealth and influence to an agitation against a "white slave traffic" which existed only in the columns of pornographic newspapers of the basest type, weeklies whose editors had come from every goal in England to guard the morals of its people. It was principally through her eloquence and intriguing that an act was hurried through Parliament to take away the last happiness of these wretched women by imprisoning and flogging their lovers.

That she did this without self-interest of any kind goes without saying; with her the command of God and the approval of her own conscience were everything. In the career of virtue there are no crises; self-sustained by the consciousness of its own excellence it moves gloriously onwards. Virtue is its own reward.

V. PUNISHMENT.

It was one of Lady Adelaide's "censors"—the word "spy" is highly improper in this connection—who, failing to obtain money and favor from Ailsa

Roberts in return for abstinence from offensive measures, resorted to these, and got her fined £4 for accosting him. This she paid; enraged at his partial failure to revenge alike his pride and cupidity, he resolved upon a subtler plan of persecution, and followed her about for several days. He tracked her to Lessing's studio and made inquiries about the latter, resulting in a visit. When a seedy stranger of villainous appearance offered him a five-pound note for a picture, the painter was not a little taken aback; but being shy and unwilling to wound, accompanied his refusal with the remark that he did not sell his pictures, as he had private means.

"Mark the word, your worship, private means!" was the next act in the comedy, and Lessing found himself in the dock, charged with living on the immoral earnings of Ailsa.

At the trial Mr. Justice Sillimore found the opportunity of his life. Counsel for the Crown had told the whole black story by the hour. Although prisoner's father had been a servant of the English Crown, Lessing was a German name—the name, he understood, of a notorious criminal. A voice in court, "A poet!" and laughter in certain quarters, though the jury became visibly graver.

But the judge out-prosecuted the prosecutor as the sun outshines the moon.

"Prisoner at the bar," said he, when the jury, without leaving the box, returned a verdict of "guilty," "this has been a very plain and a very shocking case. So far from finding any extenuating circumstance, I can see only aggravations of the most disgusting offence—except one—known to the law. You had a worthy father, and the best of educations. You had, perhaps, at one time, talent. All this you have abused. There is a period when idleness becomes vice; you have long passed that stage. My experience finds no parallel for the bra-

zen effrontery with which you have attempted to defend yourself. Refusing the legal assistance generously offered you by the king you have so grievously offended, you have insulted this court by bringing into it the obscene daubs, fit only for the walls of Parisian brothels, which you call your work. If, indeed, you sell them—which I, thank God, cannot believe—I can only cry shame on the buyer, and it is moreover no principle of English law that a lesser crime can be brought forward as the excuse for a greater. There is a period in the career of idleness when its association with vice engenders crime; and there is a period in the career of crime when it is cut short by punishment.

“I feel it my duty to impose a penalty which, I hope, will deter other lazy rogues from following an example so loathsome and abominable to all decent men; and I therefore sentence you to eighteen months’ hard labor and forty-five strokes of the ‘Cat’.”

Amid general applause, the prisoner, who remained silent, was removed to the cells.

VI. HELL’S COUNTERSTROKE.

Mark Lessing died under the infliction of the “Cat.”

Most unfortunately, the story does not end there. It is one of the permitted malices of Satan—in the inscrutable wisdom of God—that even condign punishment, poetic justice, is frustrated; the house is swept and garnished, and seven other devils enter in.

It so happened that a Jewish picture dealer was a witness in the case following *Rex vs. Lessing*, and was in court during the trial. His attention being thus attracted to the “obscene daubs,” he thought that a success of scandal might possibly

attach to the public sale of one or two of them. He therefore approached la Koslowskaja, who sold him three for fifty pounds. She was thunderstruck at the idea of anyone wanting to pay real money for them; had not the dealer been so obviously clean and keen and Hebraic and prosperous, he could have had them for almost nothing.

The sale was widely advertised; decent people turned away disgusted. The day before the sale the dealer returned, with an offer to buy her whole collection—some three hundred pictures, mostly under the bed—but found her reading a telegram from Paris, from a man whose name she knew as one of Lessing's oldest friends, containing these words: "For God's sake, don't sell any more pictures till after auction. Will call ten o'clock." Alisa showed this to the discomfited Hebrew, who retired, objurgating electricity.

The sale was a surprise, even to him; who had wind of what would happen. Painters from Paris who had known Lessing, some of them already successful men, came over in force. Every dealer had been warned, and was there to fight for the fame of his house; everyone bid with no thought but to purchase, careless whether he ever sold again or not; and the Jew went away with what he called a consolation prize of £17,850.

Every year on the anniversary of her meeting with Mark Lessing, and every year on the anniversary of his death, Ailsa Roberts sells a picture, at prices constantly increasing

For she had built a memorial gallery to the great painter, whom she loved for his likeness to the man who had betrayed her, and after her death there will be no millionaire to filch even one more picture from the nation.