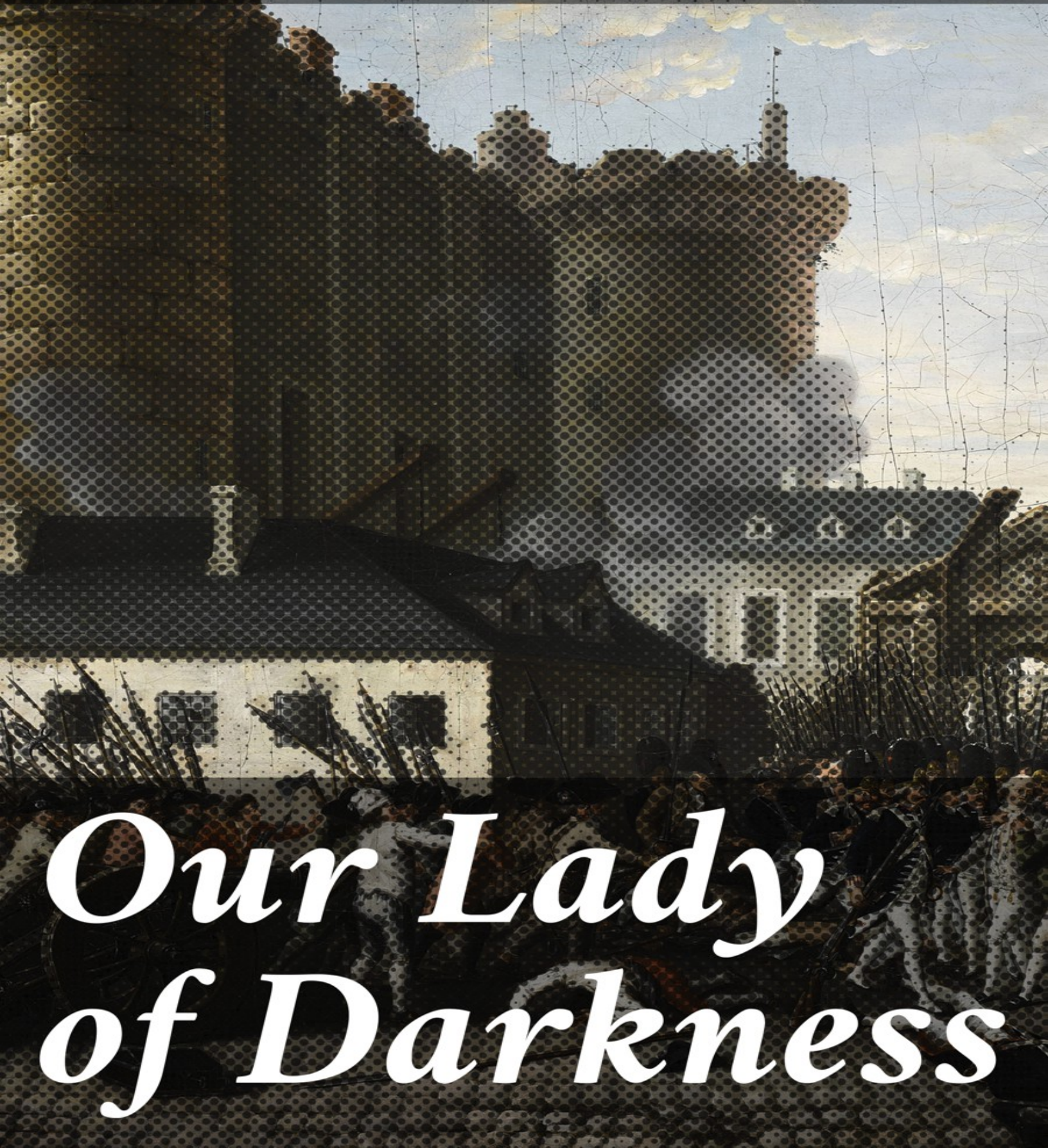


Bernard Edward Joseph
Capes



*Our Lady
of Darkness*

Bernard Edward Joseph Capes

Our Lady of Darkness



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CHAPTER I.

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From two till four o'clock on any summer afternoon during the penultimate decade of the last century, the Right Honourable Gustavus Hilary George, third Viscount Murk, Baron Brindle and Knight of the Stews, with orders of demerit innumerable—and, over his quarterings, that bar-sinister which would appear to be designed for emphasis of the fact that the word *rank* has a double meaning—might be seen (in emulation of a more notable belswagger) ogling the ladies from the verandah of his house in Cavendish Square. That this, his lordship's daily habit, was rather the expression of an ineradicable self-complacency than its own justification by results, the appearance of the withered old applejohn himself gave testimony. For here, in truth, was a very *doyen* of dandy-cocks—a last infirmity of fribbles—a macaroni with a cuticle so hardened by the paint and powder of near fourscore years as to be impervious to the shafts of ridicule. He would blow a kiss along the palm of his palsied hand, and never misdoubt the sure flight of this missive, though his unmanageable wrist should beat a tattoo on his nose the while; he would leer through quizzing-glasses of a power to exhibit in horrible accent the rheum of his eyes; he would indite musky *billets-doux*, like meteorological charts, to Dolly or Dorine, and, forgetting their direction when despatched, would simper over the quiddling replies as if they were archly amorous solicitations. Upon the truth that is stranger than fiction he had looked all his life as upon an outer barbarian, the

measure of whose originality was merely the measure of uncouthness. Nature, in fact, was a dealer of ridiculous limitations; art, a merchant of inexhaustible surprises. Vanity! he would quote one fifty instances in support of the fact that it was the spring-head of all history. Selfishness! was it not the first condition of organic existence? Make-believe! the whole world's system of government, from royalty to rags, was founded upon it. Therefore he constituted himself understudy to his great prototype of Queensberry; and therefore he could actually welcome the loss or deterioration of anything bodily and personal for the reason that it presented him with the opportunity to substitute mechanical perfection for natural deficiency. Perhaps at no period of his life had he so realised his ideal of existence as when, upon his seventy-seventh year, he found himself false—inside and out—from top to toe.

“Death,” he chuckled, “will be devilish put to it to stab me in a vital part.”

He said this to his grand-nephew, the orphaned heir-apparent to his title and moderate estates and to nothing else that he valued.

The young man was, indeed, his uncle's very antithesis—his butt, his foil, his aggravation. He, the nephew, considered no doubt that he held a brief for the other side (truth to oneself, we will call it); and he was never at great pains to disguise his contempt of a certain order of licence. Cold, dry, austere, he had yet that observant faculty that, conceiving of circumstance, may fall pregnant with either justice or inhumanity. At present, from the height of his

twenty-five years, he looked with a tolerant serenity into the arena of struggling passions.

"This is all vastly foolish," was his superior reflection. "Am I destined to make a practice of turning my thumb up or down?"

Now, on a certain day of '88, he walked into the house in Cavendish Square and joined his unvenerable elder on the balcony.

"Give me the parasol, Jepps," said he. "I will hold it over Lord Murk's head."

The man obeyed, and withdrew. The uncle turned himself about, with a little feint of protest.

"Well," he said resignedly, "your chacholote makes a pretty foil to my azure; and if you must dress like an attorney's clerk, you hev at least the unspeakable satisfaction of posing as background to a gentleman."

His glasses dangled from his neck by a broad black ribbon. He lifted them as he spoke, and conned a passing face.

"Egad!" said he, involuntarily extending his left hand as if to deprecate interruption, "what a form! What a ravishing and seductive elegance! Strake me, Ned, but if thou wert other than a bran-stuffed jackalant, I'd send thee thither to canvass for me."

He scratched his chin testily with one from several little cocked-hat notes that lay on a chair at his side. His fingers were steeped to the knuckles in gems; his cheeks, plastered with chalk and rouge, looked in texture like the dinted covering of honeycomb. Now and again he would shoot at his young relative a covert glance of extreme dislike.

“Rat thee, Ned!” he exclaimed suddenly; “thou hast a devilish face!”

“’Tis no index to my character, then, sir, I can assure you.”

“You needn’t, egad! There’s a shrewd measure of reserve in these matters. Show me a face that’s an index and I’ll show you an ass. But I’d like to learn, as a mere question of curiasity, why you persist in dressing like a cit, eating at beef ordinaries, and sleeping at some demned low tavern over against the Cock and Pye ditch?”

“Sure, sir, in this connection at least, you’ll grant me the authority of fashion?”

“Fashion! Paris fashion! Franklin fashion! But it’s not for the heir to an English viscountcy to model himself on a Yankee tallow-chandler.”

“I model myself on the principles of independence, sir.”

“Principles, quotha! Why, ’od rat me, Ned, you make me sick. Principles of independence are like other principals, I presume—clamorous for high rates of interest.”

“I think not, indeed.”

“Do you, indeed? But you’re a convert to the new religion, and rabid, of course; and a mighty pretty set of priests you’ve got to expound you your gospels.”

“Who, for an instance?”

The uncle leered round viciously. When he was moved to raise his voice, old age piped in him like winter in an empty house.

“I don’t know why I call you Ned,” he protested peevishly. “I don’t feel it, and it fits you worse than your cravat. Who, for an instance, Mr Edward Murk? Why, a defaulting

exciseman for one, a reskel by the name of Paine, that writ a pamphlet on Common Sense to prove himself devoid of it."

"According to the point of view."

"Oh, I cry you pardon, sir! I judge from a less exalted one than this patriarch of principles here."

"But Voltaire—Diderot, my lord?"

"Gads my life! And now you hev me! A school of incontinent rakes to reform the warld! And not a man of 'em, I vow, but had drained his last glass of pleasure before he set to disparaging the feast."

The nephew was silent. What, indeed, would it profit him to answer? He looked, with a passionless scrutiny, at the face so near his own. He could have thought that the old wood, the old block, had shrunk beneath its veneer, and he had an odd temptation to prod it with his finger and see if it would crackle.

"Oxford," snapped his lordship, "is the very market-garden of self-sufficiency. Thou needst a power of weeding, nephew."

"Oh, it's possible, sir; only I would clear the ground myself."

"Indeed! And how would you set about it?"

"By observing and selecting, that is all; by forming independent judgments uninfluenced by the respect of position; by assuming continence and sobriety to be the first conditions of happiness; by analysing impressions and restraining impulse; by studying what to chip away from the block out of which I intend to shape my own character, with the world for model."

"I see, I see. A smug modest programme, i' faith. I'd not have thy frog's blood, Ned, though it meant another twenty years of life to me. And so you'll do all this before you step into my shoes—and may the devil wedge them on thy feet!"

"You are bitter, sir. I think, perhaps, you misconstrue me. I'm no fanatic of prudery, but an earnest student of happiness. Were I to convince myself that yours was the highest expression of this, I would not hesitate to become your convert."

"I'd not ask thee, thou chilly put. Hadst thou been my son, 'twere different. But thou'st got thine independent jointure, and thou'lt go thy ways—over the Continent, as I understand,—not making the Grand Tour like a gentleman of position, but joggling it in diligences, faugh! or stumping on thy soles like a demned brawny pedlar. And what is to be thy equipment for the adventure?"

"A fair knowledge of French, a roll of canvas, and a case of colours."

"Cry you mercy, sir; I'd forgot you were an artist. Wilt thou paint me some naked women?"

"Ay, sir, and see no pleasant shame in it."

"Ned, Ned—give me a hope of thee!"

"Oh, sir, believe me, 'tis only when woman begins to clothe herself that indelicacy is suggested. A hat, a pair of shoes, a shoulder-strap even, would have made a jill-flirt of Godiva."

"H'mph! Looked at from my standpoint, that's the first commendable thing thou'st said. But it's a monstrous ungentlemanly occupation, Ned; and that, no doubt, is the reason that moves thee to it."

"No, sir; but the reason that a painter, more than another, has the opportunity to arrest and record for private analysis what is of its nature fugitive and perishable. His canvases, indeed, should be his text-book, his confessor, and his mentor."

"Oh, spare me, Parson! Thou shalt go cully my neighbour here with thy plaguey texts. They'll fit him like a skin glove."

"What neighbour, sir?"

"Him that sold his brush to Charlie Greville's mistress, a grim little toad—Romney by name—that my Lord Thurlow pits against Reynolds for something better than a whore's sign-painter."

"Well, sir, doubtless the man will learn to read himself in his work, and to profit by the lesson."

"Master Ned Parson, when do you go? It cannot be too soon for me."

"I may start at any moment."

"Heaven be praised! And whither?"

"Possibly by way of the Low Countries at the outset. Will your lordship give me some letters of introduction?"

"What! Your independence doesn't strake at that?"

"You greatly misapprehend me, sir. I go to seek mental, not bodily discipline; chastisement, as a forcing medium, ceases of its effect with the second age of reason."

"And that you have come to, I presume. Go to the Low Countries, i' Gad's name, and find your level there! I'll give you fifty recommendations, and trust to procure you a year's hospitality from each. Only, one word in your ear, Ned: if you bring back a prig to wife, I'll hev the two of ye poisoned, if I hang for it."

The nephew condescended to a smile of some amused toleration.

“My marriage, when it occurs,” said he, “will mark a simple period in the evolution of my character. That, it may be easily understood, might require a foil to its processes of development, as a hen swallows gravel to assist her digestion. You need feel no surprise, sir, if in the end I marry a properly wicked woman.”

“Egad! ’tis my devout hope you will, and that she’ll brain you with that demned Encyclopedia that you get all your gallimaufry about equality from. Call back Jepps, and I’ll dictate the letters.”

CHAPTER II.

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On a supremely hot noon of August, Mr Edward Murk, walking leisurely along a road pounded and compounded of small coal, came down towards the ancient city of Liége, and paused at a vantage-point to take in the prospect. This was a fair enough one to any vision, and fair in the extreme to eyes so long drilled to the interminable perspectives of Flanders—to loveless dykes, to canals like sleek ingots of glass, to stretched ribbons of highways tapering to a flat horizon—as that a tumulus would seem as sweet a thing for them to rest on as a woman’s bosom. Now his sight, reining up against hills, gave him a certain emotion of surprise, such as he might have felt if a familiar hunter had unexpectedly shied at a hedgerow.

He stood a little above the town, looking over and beyond it. In the middle-distance of his picture—pulled into the soft arms of hills that, melting to their own embrace, became mere swimming banks of mist—floated a prismatic blot of water—the vista of the Meuse—dinted like an opal with shadowy reflections, and lit with sudden sparks in dreamy places. Thence, nearer, a greystone bridge—its arches glazed, he could have thought, with mother-of-pearl windows, like a Chinese model in ivory—bestrode the river channel, seeming to dam back, against his foreground, an accumulated litter of wall and roof and gable, that choked the town reaches, and, breaking away piecemeal, stranded its jetsam all down the valley. Here and there fair steeples stood up from the litter; here and there, in his close

neighbourhood, gaunt chimney-stocks exhaled a languid smoke, like tree trunks blasted in a forest fire.

Some distance to his left a pretty lofty eminence, that broke at its summit into a fret of turret and escarpment, stood sentinel over the ages; while below this, and nearer at hand, the great block of an episcopal palace sprouted from a rocky plateau, the velvet slopes of which trailed downwards into the very hands of the city.

"The bishop and his train-bearers," thought Mr Murk. "The town holds up the skirts of the palace. That must all be changed by-and-by. But I confess I should like to record a little of the picturesqueness of life before the roller of equality is dragged over the continents."

He had out his tools then and there, and essayed to give some expression to his mood. The sun crackled in his brain; a pug of a child, in a scarlet linsey petticoat, came and sniffed beside him, offending his ears and his eyes; a dawdling cart mounting the hill lurched into his perspective and blotted out its details foot by foot. Down below, in his farther foreground, a cluster of buildings, lying under a church-tower in a bath of shadow, invited him as if to a plunge into cool waters. He glanced crossly at the obtrusive child, collected his traps, and strode down the hill.

At its foot, however, he seemed to come upon the actual furnace-floor of noon—a broad *Place* that bickered, as it were, throughout its length with iridescent embers. These were figured in crates of Russian cranberries glowing like braziers, in pomegranates bleeding fire, in burning globes of oranges, in apricots pearly-pink as balls of white-hot glass; and over all, the long looped awnings of olive and stone-

blue and cinnamon served to the emphasising of such a galaxy of hot dyes as made a core of flame in the heart of the blazing city.

The close air prickled with a multitudinous patter of voices like blisters of fat breaking on a grill. Old Burgundian houses—baked to a terra-sienna, drowsing and nodding as they took the warmth about their knees—retained and multiplied the heat like the walls of an oven. The shop windows were so many burning-glasses; the market-women fried amongst their cabbages like bubble-and-squeak; the very dogs of draught, hauling their gridirons of carts, had red-hot cinders for tongues. There seemed in the whole width of the square no shadow of which a devil could have taken solace.

Exhaling some little of the breath that remained to him in an appropriately volcanic interjection, Ned mounted the steps of the church he had looked down upon, brushed past the outstretched hand of a fly-blown beggar, and dived into the sequestered obscurity of amber-scented aisles.

Here the immediate fall of temperature took him by the throat like a shower-bath. “If I shiver,” he thought, “there is a goose walking over my grave.” So he stood still and hugged himself till his blood was accommodated to the change. Then he penetrated into the heart of the place.

He had visited many churches in the course of his travels, dispassionately, but with no irreverence. It interested him no less to note the expressions of faith than of faces. Generally, it seemed to him, religious ideals were not transmissible. There was seldom evidence that the spirit that had conceived and executed some noble monument

yet informed its own work through tradition. The builders of cathedrals wrought, it was obvious, for little clans that, through all the ages, had never learned the respect of soul. They, the latter, had stuffed their heritages with trash, because their religion must come home to them in the homely sense. They could not think but that the God of their understanding must be gratified to have His houses adorned after the fashion of the best parlour.

Now, to see a fine interior vulgarised by the introduction of barbaric images, of artificial flowers, and of pictures hung in incongruous places, offended Mr Murk as a fooling elephant in a circus offended him. He recognised and condemned the solecism in the present instance, yet at the same time was conscious of an atmosphere foreign to his accustomed experience—an atmosphere so like the faint breath of a revived paganism that he looked about him in wonder to see whence it emanated.

There could be, however, no doubt as to its source. The whole church was a grove of orange, oleander, and myrtle trees. They stood in tubs, filling the intercolumniations of the stone avenues, climbing the steps of the altar, thronging about the pulpit. The quiet air held their fragrance like smoke. They could fatten and bloom unvexed of any wind but the sweet gales blown from the organ.

And even as Ned looked, this wind rose and wooed them. Some one was at the keys, and the soft diapasons flowed forth and rolled in thunder along the roof.

The young man strolled down the nave. Music of itself held no particular charms for him. Its value here was in its subscription to other influences—to the cool perfume of

flowers, to the sense of serene isolation, to the feeling of mysticism engendered of foggy vastness traversed by the soft moted dazzle of sunbeams. Such, spanning gulfs of shadow, propping the gross mechanism of the organ itself, seemed the very fabric of which the floating harmonies were compound. There needed only a living expression of this poem of mingled scent and sound and colour, and to Ned this was vouchsafed of a sudden, in a luminous corner he came upon, where a painted statue of the Virgin standing sentry in a niche looked down upon a figure prostrate before it in devotion.

A little lamp, burning with a motionless light like a carbuncle, was laid at the Mother's feet. About her shoulders, suspended from the neighbouring walls, were a half-dozen certificates of *miracles approuvés*—decorated placards recording the processes and dates, some of them quite recent, of extraordinary recoveries. One of these related how to a Marie Cornelis was restored the sight of an eye that had been skewered by a thorn. Faith here had at least made its appeal in a sure direction. Who could forget how that other woman had worn a crown of thorns about her heart?

Now the gazer would have liked to know what manifestation of the supernatural was craved by the young girl, fair and quiet as the image itself, who knelt before the shrine. She, this *dévôte*, reverencing, with her mouth pressed to the clasped knuckles of her hands, had so much of the Madonna in her own appearance as to suggest that she might perform, rather than demand, miracles. Her eyes—Ned fancied, but could not convince himself—were closed,

as in a rapture of piety. She was very pure and colourless, apart from an accidentalism of tinted rays; for over her soft brown hair, from which a folded chaperon of white linen had slipped backwards, wings of parti-coloured light, entering through a stained window, played like butterflies. Lower down, the violet haze that slept upon her cheek gave her something of a phantasmal character; but her fingers were steeped in crimson as if they were bloody.

At her side knelt a little lad, five or six years of age, with a most wistful small face expressive of as great a humility of weariness as the girl's was of worship. He looked at the stranger with curiosity, and with the dumb appeal of the petty to the great and independent; and as he looked he lifted, one after the other, his poor chafed knees and rubbed them. His round, pale eyes were underscored for emphasis of this appeal, but without effect on Mr Murk, who had indeed no fondness for children.

Presently the girl rose. With the action the wings of light fled from her hair; her passionless face revealed itself a sunless white fruit. There was no consciousness of the observant stranger under her lowered lids.

"Viens, donc, Baptiste!" she whispered; and the little boy, gazing up at her in a breathless manner, got to his feet.

The two genuflected to the High Altar, and stole reverently from the building. Mr Murk followed immediately. He had a desire to win into the confidence of this butterfly Madonna.

Outside he saw the girl and child go down into the blazing market as into a lake of fire. Giving them fair law, he started in pursuit.

Arrived at the level, he found he had for the moment lost sight of his quarry. He strolled up and down, gathering what shade he could from the awnings. Voluble market-women, waxing tropically gross in their vegetable hotbeds, rallied him on his insensibility to their cajolery. Stolid Flemish farmers, with great pipes pendulous from their mouths, like tongues lolling and smoking with drought, winked to one another as he passed in appreciation of the rich joke that here was a foreigner.

The gentler classes, it seemed, were all in siesta. Low life, vehement, motley, and picturesque, held the square as if it were a fortress under fire.

Now, whether as a consequence or, in spite of, this gregal plebeianism, a strange unusual atmosphere, Ned fancied, was abroad in the town. He had been conscious of a similar atmosphere in other cities he had visited *en route*, and of an increase in its density in steady ratio with his march southwards. It was not to be defined. It might have been called an inflection rather than any expression, like the change of note in the respiration of a sleeper who is near waking. It only seemed to him that he moved in an element compounded of shadows—the shadow of watchfulness; the shadow of insolence; the shadow of an evil humour cursing its own century-long blindness; the shadow of a more wickedly merry humour, rallying itself upon that old desperate screwing-up of its courage to attack a boggart Blunderbore that had fallen to pieces at the first stroke; the shadow, embracing all others, of a certain Freemasonry that was deadlily exclusive in the opposite to a conventional sense.

“And this is for no dispassionate soul to resent,” thought Mr Murk, who as a child had set his feet square upon the basis of an independent impartiality, and, at the first age of reason, had pledged himself to forego impulse as being the above-proof of ardent spirits and fatal to sobriety.

“Now,” he admitted to himself, “Jacques Bonhomme is simply awaking to knowledge of the fact that he may boast a family-tree as thick-hung as his lord’s with evil fruit, and that he was not spawned of the mud because no record exists of his grandfather.”

By-and-by, strolling down a little court, he turned into a wine-shop for a draught to his dusty throat. He drank his *maçon*, mixing it with water, in a tiny room off the tap of the auberge; and, while he was drinking, the sound of a low vehement voice in the street brought him to the window.

He looked out. It was his very Madonna of the butterflies, and presented under a new aspect. Her hands were at the neck of the child; she was rating him in voluble viraginian. The poor rogue sobbed and protested; but he would not loose his grip of something of which she strove to possess herself.

“*P’tit démon!*” she gabbled—“but I will have it, I say! It is no use to weep and struggle. Give it me, Baptiste—ah! but I will!”

“No, no!” cried the boy; “it is mine—it has always been mine. Thou shalt not, Nicette!”

She so far secured the bone of contention as to enable Ned for a moment to recognise its nature. It was a silver medal—a poor devotional charm strung round the infant’s neck. The child by an adroit movement recovered

possession. She looked about her, unconscious of the observer, as if, safe from interruption, she would have dared torture and maltreatment. Then suddenly she fell to wheedling.

“*Babouin*, little *babouin*, wilt thou not make this sacrifice for thine own loving Nicette, who is so poor, so poor, little *babouin*, because of the small brother she keeps and feeds and clothes?—wilt thou not?”

“No!” cried the child again, half hysterical. “It is mine—it was blessed by the Holy Father!”

“But the guava, Baptiste! the sweet red jelly in the little box! I have eaten of it once before, and oh! Baptiste, it is like the fruit that tempted the first mother. And it so seldom comes to market, and I have not a sou; and before next wage-day all may be appropriated. Wilt thou not then, *mon poulet*, *mon p’tit poulet*?”

But the *poulet* only repeated his tearful pipe.

“Thou shalt have thy share!” pleaded the girl. “I swear it.”

“I should not,” sobbed Baptiste. “Thou wouldst eat up all my medal, and it was blessed by *le Saint Père*.”

Ned, peering forth, saw his Madonna jerk erect, her eyelids snapping.

“Give me thy hand, then,” she said, in a cold little voice. “Thou shalt walk back to Méricourt all the way, and have thy medal to supper at the end. Give me thy hand!”

The child cried out when she took it. Ned showed himself at the window.

“Nicette,” he said, with particular softness, “I will exchange thee a louis-d’or for one single little confidence of

thine.”

The girl started, looked round, and stared at the speaker in breathless consternation. A bright spot of colour, like pink light caught from an opal, waxed and waned on her cheek.

“How, monsieur?” she muttered.

Ned held out the coin.

“Here is a surfeit of guava jelly,” said he, “if thou wilt tell me what was the miracle thou cravedst of the Holy Mother yonder.”

He knew, watching her face, that she would reject the condition, and that with all suitable decorum. But he saw the pupils of her eyes dilate at sight of the gold piece.

“Monsieur, it seems,” said she, “can better afford to jest than I to accept insult”—and she hurriedly caught at her charge’s hand and drew the child away.

Mr Murk, with plentiful complacency, paid for his wine and sauntered in pursuit. At a particular fruit-stall he saw his peasant Madonna linger a moment, hesitate, and then go on her way with an up-toss of her chin. He came to a stop and considered—

“Méricourt! But I have an introduction to Monsieur de St Denys of Méricourt. How far, I wonder? This Nicette would make an admirable study to an artist. I will go to Méricourt.”

CHAPTER III.

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Facing an opulent sunset, Ned made his way some three or four miles out of Liège through scenery whose very luxuriance affected him like the qualmish aftermath of excess. It gave him a feeling of surfeit—of committal to a debauch of colour that it was no part of his temperament to indulge. If his soul had attached itself to any theory of beauty, it was to a theory of orderliness and sobriety, that took account of barbaric dyes but to set them to an accordant pattern. Its genius was of an adaptive rather than an imaginative bent. It desired to shape his world to man, not man to his world—to appropriate the accidents of nature to the uses of a wholesomely picturesque race—to emasculate the bull of violence by withdrawing from its very experience the hues of crimson and orange.

On any display of passion this young man looked with cool dislike. His instincts were primarily for the gratification of the understanding. The premeditated involutions of fancy did not engage his sympathies. The mystery of brooding distances peopled with irisated phantoms, of the hazy wanderings of the undefined, he was not greatly concerned to penetrate. Claude he would have preferred to Turner, and Nasmyth to either. Fuseli he already detested; and Blake was his very *bête noire*. Things rude, boisterous, and ugly he would wish to crush under a heel of iron, thinking to enforce the peace—rather after the fashion of his times—by breaking it. But he would raise, not level, the world to an equality—would make out of its material a very handsome

model, in which the steeples should clang and the water-wheels turn and the seasons pulsate by a mechanism common to all.

Such was his creed of eventual reconstruction of a social fabric, the downfall of which was much predicted of the *jeunesse politique* of the day; and in the meanwhile he was very willing to acknowledge himself to be in the condition of incomplete moral ossification—to be travelling, indeed, for the sake of bone and gristle, and in order to convert the misuses of other characters to the profit of his own.

Now he advanced with a certain feeling of enforced intemperance upon a prospect of superabundant beauty. The great noontide heat was become a salt memory, to be tasted only for emphasis of the bouquet of that velvety wine of air that poured from the heights. Distant hills ran along an amber sky, like the shadows of nearer ones. Far away a jagged keep surmounting a crag stood out, deep umber, from a basin in the valley brimming with blue mist. Closer at hand a marrowy white stream, sliding noiseless over the crest of a slope silhouetted against the northern vaults, seemed the very running band drawn from the heavens to keep the earth spinning. The grasshopper shrilled in the roadside tangle; comfortable doves, drowsing amongst the chestnut leaves, exchanged sleepy confidences. Sometimes the clap of a cow-bell, sometimes the hollow call of a herdsman, thrilled the prosperous calms of light as a dropped stone scatters a water image. These were the acuter accents on a tranquillity that no thought could wound.

At last, when the sun flamed upon the horizon like a burning house of the Zodiac, the traveller came through a deep wood-path upon the village he sought, and was glad to see dusk mantling its gables and blotting out the red lights of the open valley in which it lay.

If Madame van Roon, keeper of the hostel Landlust, cut her coat according to her cloth, she should have been in affluent circumstances. Daniel Lambert might have furnished her his vest, a couple of dragoons their cloaks for skirt. This, proceeding from a mighty roll of padding—a veritable stuffed bolster—that circled her unnamable waist, swayed in one piece, like a diving-bell in a current, with her every movement. Her stays, hooped with steel after the Dutch mode, would have hung slack on a kilderkin. The lobes of her fat ears stretched under the weight of a pair of positive little censers. But the finished pride of her was her cap, a wonder of stiff goffering, against the erect border of which her red face lay like a ham on a dish-paper. With so full a presence, she had only to stand in a doorway, if inclined to argument, and not so much as a minor postulate could evade her.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est doncg cette manière de moogsieur là!” she gasped at our gentleman with a choking shrillness. *“Mais où est vôgtre valetaille, vôgtre équipage?”*

She quarrelled gutturally, like an envious stepmother, with the speech of her adoption.

“I am in my own service, madame,” said Ned, in no small wonder; “and that is to own the best master a man can have.”

She slapped the three-partitioned money-pouch that hung at her middle.

“Oo, ay,” she gurgled truculently; “and a fine master of economy, I’ll be bound.”

Ned, for short argument, fished out a palmful of pieces. She admitted him grudgingly even then; but the young man was completely satisfied.

“This is excellent tonic,” he thought, “after an enervating experience. In Méricourt, it seems, there is food for study.”

He appeared to have struck a sort of Franco-Flemish neutral ground. He was put to wait in a little kitchen like a bright toy. The floor was ruddy brick, the walls were white tiles. Outside the window a shallow awning tinkled sleepily, in spasms of draught, with the stirring of innumerable small bells. The stove or range, a shining cold example of continence, seemed innocent of the least tradition of heat. On the polished dark dresser vessels of copper, of pewter, and of brass—stewpans, lidded flagons, and the narrow-necked, wood-stoppered, resonant jugs, in which it was the Dutch fashion to bring milk from the fields—shone with a demure sobriety of tone in the falling light.

But the meal, when it came, was served in the French manner and without stint. The traveller, seeing no preparations toward in the spick room he inhabited, was falling into a mood of gentle depression before his fears were dissipated. Then he ventured an inquiry of the solemn wench who brought in his tray. She almost dropped the load in her amazement.

“Holy Saints! Cook here! in the show kitchen!”

She put down, with crushing emphasis, a fresh table-napkin, a small blunt knife, a silver fork, and a silver spoon—all *à la française*. This was luxury as compared with recent experiences. Ned looked serious over the knife. He did not know that French meat stewed to the melting-point dismembers itself at a touch.

He had a very succulent salmis; and no fewer than four hot eggs, cuddled in a white clout, were served to him.

"Am I to devour them all?" he asked of the girl.

"With the help of God," she answered ambiguously, in her soft Picardian.

By-and-by madame *l'hôtesse* condescended to come and talk with him while he ate. She was veritably *chargée de cuisine*; she seemed to fill the place, width and height.

"What is your condition in your own country?" she asked, with fat asperity.

"I am grand-nephew to a monseigneur, to whose title and estates I shall succeed."

"*Vraiment!*" she clucked incredulously. "How arrives it, then, that you 'pad the hoof' like a *colporteur*?"

"I travel for discipline and for experience, madame. Wisdom is not an heirloom."

She nodded her head.

"Truly, it must be bought. I myself am a merchant of it."

"Doubtless," said Mr Murk. "Witness your politeness to one who can afford to pay for politeness."

She seemed an atom disconcerted.

"Well," she said, "there is no accounting for the vagaries of the quality. And is his meal to moogsieur's liking?"

"It is very well, indeed."

"*Tout va biend!* I was in the half mind that you would wish your meat raw *à l'anglaise*."

"That is not the English fashion."

"*Oh, pardon!* they tear it with their hands and teeth, for I know. And sometimes it is worse."

"How worse, then?"

She nodded again pregnantly.

"Vampires! They will prey on the lowly of their kind. Oh, it is infamous! My cousin, *le bon* Gaspard, saw a dish of theirs once in Barbade—*le Maure dans le bain*, they called it—a slave's head served in sauce. This will be unknown to moogsieur?"

"Unquestionably."

"It is possible. It is possible, also, that gentlemen who travel *incognito* may learn some vulgar truths. I accept your ignorance in proof of your aristocracy. Those who sit in high places look only at the stars."

"You alarm me, madame. Indeed, I remember now that in my country it is possible to procure for eating 'ladies' fingers.'"

"Oh, the barbarians! Is it not as I said?"

Ned rose.

"May I suggest to madame that I have not yet seen my bedroom?"

"*Plaît-il, doncg?* if it will give you any gratification. But there is company there at present."

The gentleman stared. Madame van Roon backed from the doorway, gave an inaudible direction, and disappeared. The solemn girl took her place.

“By permission of monsieur,” she said; and Ned followed her out of the room. She led him down one short passage straight into the *practicable* kitchen. A rather melodious sound of singing greeted him on the threshold. He stopped in considerable wonder, postponing his entrance while he listened.

“Little Lady Dormette,
Hark to my crying!
Would not you come to me
Though I were dying?
Little Lady Dormette,
Kiss my hot eyes,
Make me forget!

Little Lady Dormette,
Why have you left me?
Sure not to lie with him
That hath bereft me?
Little Lady Dormette,
Oh, do not kiss him,
Lest he forget!

Little Lady Dormette,
Thee I so grieve for;
If thou forsakest me,
What shall I live for!
Little Lady Dormette,
Crush thy heart to mine,
Make it forget!”

The voice was small, sweet, emotional, but a man's; the soft throb of a guitar accompanied it. All bespoke a certain melting effeminacy that was disagreeable to Ned. He pushed open the door however, made his salutation, and stood to take stock of his surroundings.

Here, in truth, was revealed the working heart of the model—the stokehole of that vessel of which the outer room exhibited but the polished bearings. The fat air was heavy