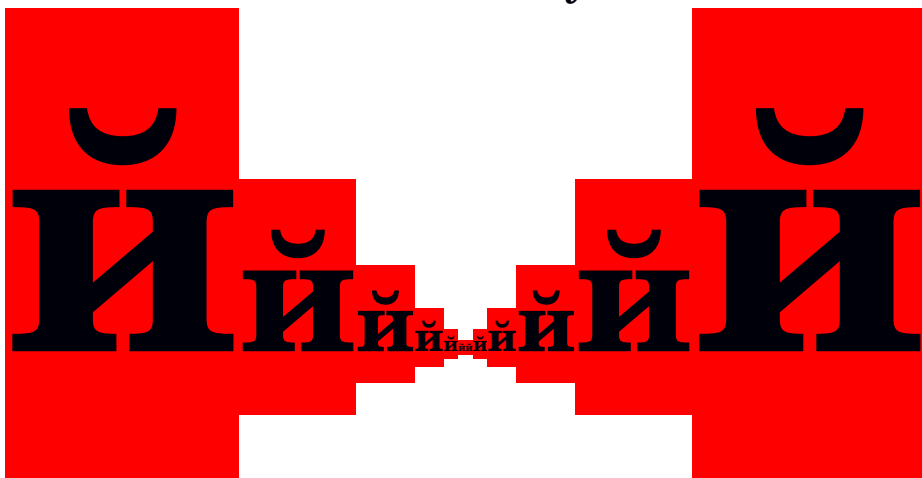


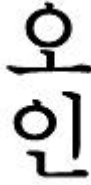
jessie and morgiana

by Alexander Grin



for

Nina
Nikolaevna
Grin



Bell & Bett
Main Street
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Ireland

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as

Джесси и Моргана

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Reason has nothing to say in the matter; and I must not let you squander any of yours. It will be enough to tell you this is an affair of the heart.

St. Ives

Robert Louis Stevenson

Chapter I

There is an age-old way of foretelling the future by way of mirrors: you look through a mirror into another mirror that is placed in front of the first so that they reflect one another, creating an infinite shining corridor filled with parallel rows of candles. The young sorceress (it is only girls who cast their fortunes in this way) looks down that corridor. What she sees there – that is what will happen to her.

One day – this was in the springtime, at half eleven at night – Miss Jessie Trengan was sitting alone in her bedroom and amusing herself with the method described above. She placed a second mirror opposite her dressing table mirror, lit two candles and stared down the glittering tunnel of the reflection.

In a month's time Jessie Trengan was to turn twenty-one years old. She was a wilful, cheerful, good-hearted girl. To describe her outward appearance is no easy matter. The innumerable literary attempts there are of that sort are the best evidence of this. No one has so far been able to make us see a woman through descriptions given in printer's ink. From time to time you may distinctly see a forehead, lips, eyes or you may guess how her hair looks behind the ear but more than this – never. The best of

descriptions only confuse. You say: 'Yes, this is how she may have been.' But your stitched together or incoherent impression is always something different entirely, if only because it was incapable of providing a precise image. The transition from that to what follows is inconsistent but necessary: Jessie had dark hair, a beautiful open face, a shapely and attractive figure. Her profile called to mind the image of a petal drawn by breath to the lower lip and from the front her face was like a ringing, happy 'hello there'. In its conception of beauty, so far as this concerned Jessie, Nature had placed light and warmth, so giving scope for the best feelings of any person looking at her. Of all with the exception of one – that was Morgiana Trengan, Jessie's sister and her legal guardian.

Sitting in front of the mirror with a mocking but contented smile Jessie suddenly felt an inhibition, followed by irritation and annoyance. This was the effect that any unexpected interference on Morgiana's part always had on her.

Having come into the room Morgiana said:

"O, Jessie! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Shouldn't you know your own face well enough by now?!"

Jessie broke off her amusing pastime but did not reply for reasons which we will immediately understand. This older sister was just as ugly and unprepossessing as the younger was pretty.

But this ugliness never aroused sympathy, for there was a cold, tart sharpness gleaming in her narrow eyes, that were always darkly scrutinising.

Amongst unattractive female faces the vast majority are softened – sometimes may even move one – through dignity, submissiveness, nobility or gaiety. It was not possible to say anything of the kind about Morgiana Trengan and her hostile face; this was a warlike ugliness that was aware of and had studied itself as painstakingly as a famous actress or courtesan will study her own features. Morgiana had close-cropped hair and her large head seemed to be covered in a dark fur. Only among criminals would you find faces that resembled her flat, high-cheekboned face with its thin lips and unhealthy turn to the mouth; her wretched eyebrows gave her hard look a shade of malevolent, helpless exertion. In anguish an observer would hope to see a smile on this unpleasant face and indeed a smile did alter it: it turned sluggish and cunning. Morgiana was tall, broad-shouldered, angular; her other qualities – heavy step, large hands covered in freckles, jug ears – made looking upon this figure an uncomfortable and bitter business. She wore dresses of an especially devised cut: all buttoned-up and stale, of dark colours, completely erasing her femininity and in general recalling some evil dream.

The father to these two sisters had died four years previously; one year before that their mother had died.

John Trengan had been a lawyer who had lived on a grand scale and left no inheritance; Jessie had received a large inheritance from an uncle, a brother to their father, while Morgiana, who was appointed her sister's guardian until her majority, received by this testament a small estate attaching to a stone-built house that was named: *Green Flute*. All the remaining capital – forty-five thousand pounds and a large town-house – now belonged to Jessie.

Seen alongside the sombre figure of her sister Jessie's silken kimono was an unbearable reminder of the contrast between them – and also of their ages: Morgiana's thirty-five and Jessie's twenty.

“You don't need to look for suitors in the stars,” Morgiana was continuing, taking enjoyment in the girl's despondency. “You'll have more of them than you could ever want.” Jessie blushed and sharply pushed away the mirror which almost fell over.

“Why are you mocking me, Mori? The maid told me that there's this way of looking into the future. I'm just having fun. Why does that vex you so much?”

“Yes, it does vex me and I always will be angry,” Morgiana answered with the frank impartiality of an outsider regarding herself. “Look at me. And now turn back to your beloved mirror. A gargoyle such as I am is bound to be irritated on seeing your face.”

“Is this my fault, Mori?” the young girl said reproachfully and she began to feel sorry for her sister. “You know, I’m so used to you that I don’t even know if you’re pretty or ugly!”

“I’m ugly. Mercilessly, outrageously ugly.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” Jessie exclaimed, despairingly looking into Morgiana’s steady eyes. “You’ve been tormenting me with scenes like this for so long now. I don’t know, I just do not know why the two of us were born so different! Believe me, I often cry when I think of you and how you suffer!”

“I do hate you,” Morgiana answered quietly as she jealously studied her sister’s excited face which the play of her emotions made only more delightful. “I love you very much, Jessie. I love the inner you. But your attire, the feast that is your face and your beautiful, well-proportioned body – those I hate more than anything. I wish that you were nothing but a voice; then also my words would be just as tender, just as sincere and natural as your childish speech.”

“It isn’t my fault,” Jessie repeated, bewildered. These uninhibited tremors from inside of Morgiana’s mind inspired fear in her. She had often been witness to them but this brutal frankness on the part of her sister was always dispiriting.

“Everything that you are saying is understandable,” Jessie went on. “I do understand it all. O, if you would only become softer! Be kind, Mori! Rise above yourself, become virile! Then your face will change too. You will be clear and your face will become clear... It may be plain but it will become loveable. I’m telling you that your face will change!” Jessie repeated with such passion that while shedding some tears she began to laugh.

“Little girl, what do you know about this?” Morgiana muttered. “You have never known my torments and you never will come to know them. They are as deformed as I am.”

“I have often thought about the mystery of birth,” Jessie said. “We were born of the very same people: our father and mother. But why have you been made to suffer while I have not?”

“I have also thought about that,” Morgiana answered after a silence. “It seems to me that there can only be one true explanation, however monstrous it is in its essence. You are no longer a child and you should know about that illustration that was hanging in our mother’s bedroom when she was pregnant with me. It was a sketch done by Garlian for his painting *The*

Prisoners of Carthage that depicts fettered galley slaves. This study showed the sketch for a male head – the head of a convict – haggard and depraved, with all the loathsome passions of his repulsive existence: a cross between a chimpanzee and an idiot. Now, pregnant women are inclined to develop unaccountable whims. Our mother ordered that this sketch be hung up facing the head of her bed and she would spend long periods of time looking at it, drawn in by that mysterious sensation which in her condition this tale of horror and sin was arousing. Afterwards she would herself laugh over this fancy and was quite unable to explain it. I was eighteen when Mamma told me about this incident; at that time her eyes filled up with tears and she stroked my cheek as she leaned over me, partly comforting, partly fearful. Later I found in some works on pathology evidence of the susceptibility of pregnant women to visual impressions. Don't you see that it was our mother who designed me herself?"

Trying not to hear what Morgiana was saying Jessie was sitting, helplessly tense and colouring, her eyes wide-open.

"Something like that it isn't possible, Mori. This is just hypochondria," she said comforting her sister. "It's one other thing that we don't understand. Can we please stop talking about this? It's so painful."

“You are right,” Morgiana said. “A being such as yourself has the right to be indignant on account of all suffering and not to allow it anywhere near her own person. I am not capable of inspiring love and that is why I am still slow in learning how to please.”

These words, spoken with indifference, without either bitterness or hope, had a violent effect upon Jessie.

“O, Mori!” she exclaimed, trying to draw her sister’s stony hand closer. “Is it love that you need? Then love me, in all simplicity. And I’ll love you with all my heart. After all, you’re my sister!”

“That’ll do,” said Morgiana, freeing her hand and frowning. “Right now I’m very far away from you and I can’t hear what you’re saying. It wasn’t for lessons in feelings that I came in. Will you not change your mind about moving to *Green Flute* for the period in which the refurbishment is going on here?”

Not saying anything Jessie looked at her sister. Although she was excited and upset there was something, akin to the barely audible steps of a person sneaking up, that suggested to her a firm and direct answer.

“No,” she said and her truthful face was in accord with this answer.

“No?”

“No, Mori, I won’t,” Jessie repeated, trying to make light of it. “*Green Flute* just has a bad effect on me. It’s so out of the way there. It’s a pity, of course. But I prefer to stay here.”

“But you aren’t intending to spend the whole summer in Liss?”

“Not at all. I might go and stay with Eve Stratton at her villa *Floral Pea*.”

“As you please,” said Morgiana who did not think it right to insist and was thinking her own thoughts. “Good night.”

“Good night, Mori,” Jessie yawned, stretching herself. She stood up. Morgiana smiled to her in parting and went off.

Chapter II

Jessie, properly Jermena Trengan, was a young lady who did not look like anything special to the exacting eye of one searching for unique talent or graceful vanity. She was for the most part immersed in her own thoughts and she would wholly give herself up to an impression if it engaged her. All thoughts were interesting to her for their newness. It was of no importance whether or not someone thought the exact same as she did on any matter. She did not worry about the impression she was making on those around her and never suspected that her simplicity in speech and in action was forcing people around her to think more fiercely than did the fascination of any girl-prodigy who was pursuing the fashionable goals laid down in the latest book by some six-month prophet. Occasionally she did suspect that she was the object of admiration – for reasons not clear to her – and, laying the cause to be in the conscience of the suspected admirer, she would smile in quite deliberate flirtation. She loved music, played badly herself but she did not at all suffer on that account. She did not make attempts at drawing, maintain the vanity of dashing off verses or have any amateurish urges of that kind at all. It was as though Nature, tiring of bringing out complicated creatures who did not know what to do

with themselves, wanted to take a break and said: 'Let her just be a girl'. For all that she was far from being a fool and on encountering the Bad her heart would revolt and feel pity precisely as did that of any representative of the female sex who has made good impulses her domain and acts upon them in accordance with the statutes. She was without artifice but it was artlessness of a kind that others only arrive at after hard and painful experience. As a metaphor, since the talk is of woman, we will provide this trite example: an expensive dress that looked as though it was bought for a price anyone would think affordable.

The following morning Jessie was in low spirits when she rose. But casting a glance at the mirror on the dressing table she could not help smiling. She was always surprised by the contraction between her reflection and her inner feelings in moments of trouble: the young girl in the mirror with her smooth shoulders and clear gaze had never, it would seem, experienced a black mood. In such moments Jessie felt herself to be estranged from her own image and would doubt how truthful it was.

Nevertheless that look in the mirror did remove the cloud from her face. The thoughts that had arisen the day before after the scene with her sister were vexing her again now as she was brushing her hair but they were not able to gain ascendancy over

her. On reaching her majority Jessie was intending to set off on a voyage to distant parts together with her friend, Eve Stratton. And on her return she would take up residence in Ungan so that she would not be meeting her sister. As yet she had not spoken to her of this but in her heart of hearts she could not forgive Morgiana for that awful weapon she would make use of during these outbursts of inner revelation. However much Jessie pitied her sister her reason refused to go through torment for the sake of something that could not be helped – just as a young tree would not consider it just that it should bear the weight of a withered trunk that has fallen against it. Another matter was that if it depended upon her to help Morgiana – and she had reflected on this more than once – Jessie would not dream of giving up her wealth and her beauty.

Hatred is the highest degree of inhumanity, where it has become a passion; happy is he who has never felt its close attention. Jessie would have burst out laughing if she were told that Morgiana really did hate her and in this hatred was close to sobbing at her sister's feet and begging for forgiveness as a respite from a labour that was beyond her strength. All other women, whether beautiful or nice-looking, aroused in Morgiana merely a bitter or malevolent emotion that could turn to criticism. But Jessie stood out as the first word in youthfulness

and tenderness. For Morgiana she was, in one single person, all of that world which had grown up alongside of her.

For Jessie's part she was sometimes seized by a gentle melancholy when, walking or travelling along the street and under the influence of some morbid conversation with her sister, she would search out in the crowd faces that were cruelly marked by Nature so that her clear and precise eye could approve of something that was in them. But it was quite seldom that Jessie would have at pondering these difficult, unhealthy matters with the fearlessness of a knight entering a land of monsters. Of their own accord her thoughts would turn towards different matters for reflection. The unnatural effort would lose its focus, the mindset of impotence would collapse and Jessie would return into her own world, feeling glad to be alive.

At breakfast Morgiana appeared looking staid, with a condescending, scornful air as if was not she but Jessie who last evening had been making suffocating declarations. The tacit, inquiring mood of the sisters passed from brief remarks into a conversation. Since the refurbishment was about to start Morgiana said that in a day or so she would take herself away to *Green Flute*, while Jessie stated that for the time being she would move into the library. The library had its own outside door. That part of the house Jessie was occupying did not require

any repairs. In almost all the other rooms defects were to be found. After the earthquake of the previous winter the moulded cornices were crumbling and the door-frames were put out. In many places the plastering had become detached, slightly tearing the wallpaper.

“I’ll be waking up in a library,” said Jessie, getting into a good humour, “casting my unlearned glances at all the academic titles. But all that scholarly emanation will seep into me. I’m sure that by autumn when you come back – you are coming, aren’t you? – I will have unaccountably become a professor. Something grand – Latin!”

So saying she cracked open an egg and put a full spoonful of its contents into her mouth. She was slowly taking out the spoon with her lips still closed when the sudden thought - ‘this chick perished before reaching its potential’ – made her laugh at the worst possible time. In that stingily-plaintive thought – if anyone were to utter it seriously – gurgled a magnificent idiocy. Through the mystery of association Jessie instantly pictured a prim personage who was presenting himself to society in full formal dress but had forgotten to put on his trousers. “Chicken is a matter of principle,” he said, worthily shaking a hairy knee... The bit of food lodged between Jessie’s white teeth stayed where it was. From head to toe she was convulsing with laughter. She

was not able either to swallow or spit out what she had in her mouth and, losing control, turning red from fear of something going down her windpipe, Jessie exploded in laughter and egg fragments directly onto the table.

“O, I’m somehow in a jolly mood!” she said with a big effort when she had recovered her breath and wiped away the tears of laughter. Morgiana was looking at her with a guarded expression. “Morgiana! You’re a teddy-bear!”

“What brought that attack on?” her sister asked her.

“When something is funny it doesn’t matter why it’s funny,” Jessie tried to explain. “It doesn’t seem funny any more now. But out of an egg...” she had to overcome another fit of merriment or she would have broken into a fresh gale of laughter, “– a chicken can emerge. That’s it, Mori. That’s what I found so funny.”

If Morgiana did not feel so keenly the full truth and the innocent charm of this silly jape it would have been better for her. Giving a timid glance at her sister Jessie straightened herself, raised an eyebrow and began looking down at her plate. Then, from a sudden forced notion for which she was herself embarrassed, Morgiana gave a loud guffaw and this belated laugh to-order made her seem repulsive.

After breakfast Morgiana rose first in order to go – as she informed Jessie – to the notary. Jessie was not interested in money. She looked upon her sister’s role in dealing with financial and notarial matters as a heroic exploit. They parted on the best of terms. Then Jessie remembered about some tickets. “Ow, ow,” she said and scolded herself.

Chapter III

The day before Jessie had firmly resolved that on this morning she would bring around to people she knew the ten tickets for a performance on behalf of aged and indigent opera musicians with which she had been charged. She had been putting this off for three days now. The day before the weather had been overcast. Calculating that on this day it would pour rain Jessie had been happy to ordain that she would put this foul day to use in making calls on the homes of the Watsons, Aperbaums, Gardings and other such impregnable fortresses where only she with her easy and carefree manner could engage in pillage without arousing that particular resentment characteristic of a self-importance that is cast in gold. But this was the very time that the bad weather had come to an end; sky and earth were radiant, resounding. Already in the early morning a shaft of the movement had reached Jessie, sounded above her hearing like a word thrown out in mid-run. But she did not feel like going around town. "Tomorrow, tomorrow, not today – that's what lazy-bones say," the girl absent-mindedly repeated, beginning to wander about the house without any aim but contentedly passing from room to room. "So today I'll rest. I'll start my homework tomorrow." The furniture was looking well-rested and

enlivened. The sun was reflecting off its varnish. Tall windows were combining the blue of the sky with the expanse of parquetry and carpet – dulled sunbeams turning into golden splendour on the floor. Jessie went around all the ground-floor rooms, even going into Trengan's study which had been left untouched since his death. There she spent a while considering his picture of *Lady Godiva*.

Along a deserted street, riding her horse at a walk, went this anguished, naked woman – so beautiful, with tears in her eyes, trying to hide her nudity beneath a cloak of long hair. The servant, who was leading her horse by its bridle, walked with his head hanging. Though the shutters of the all the windows were tightly shut there was one spectator who was looking at Lady Godiva – none other than the person looking at the picture. This seemed like a fraud to Jessie. 'How can this be,' she said, 'out of compassion and delicacy the inhabitants of that town locked their shutters and would not go out on the street while the unhappy Lady was suffering this cold, shaming punishment – and there cannot have been more than two or three thousand of these citizens – but how many observers have since that time looked at Godiva on this canvas?! And myself in their number. O, those town-dwellers had much more delicacy than we have! If you are going to depict this incident with Godiva then you have to be true to its spirit. Paint the interior of a house with its shutters

closed where in trepidation and in indignation – because they hear the slow clatter of hoofs – the town-dwellers are huddled. They are silent, frowning. By gesture one of them is saying: “Hush! Not one word about this!” But through a chink in the shutters a pale ray of light is entering the room. Now this would be Godiva.’

Thus reasoning Jessie came out of the study and saw some maids who were rolling up a carpet. “Weren’t the carpets beaten the day before yesterday?” Jessie said, “Why are they being taken out now?”

Jessie did not usually meddle in household matters but if she did, by chance, pay mind to something she was obeyed without question – even if she took it into her head to revoke an order of Morgiana’s. Jessie did not need to make any effort to that end. The maids, two young women, quickly explained that the carpets were being taken out on account of the repairs that were about to start. As they were saying this one of the maids, Gerda, instinctively looked up at the crack in the ceiling. Jessie thought back to the earthquake.

“Were the two of you already working here back then?”

“I was,” answered rosy-cheeked, stocky Ermina. “Gerda started in a week after it.”

“Yes, it’s coming back to me now,” said Jessie, smiling as she examined fair-haired Gerda. “You’re both from the north, isn’t that right? Do you get many earthquakes up there?”

The two maids exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

“Not at all,” said Eremina. “We don’t get anything like that. We’ve no sea and no mountains. To make up for that we have a winter: seven months of hard frost and snow higher than your head – pure silver!”

“How rotten!” Jessie sympathised.

“O no, don’t think that, Miss,” said Gerda. “Winter is lovely.”

“I’ve never seen snow,” Jessie explained. “but I’ve read about it and I’m thinking that spending seven months walking around with frozen water coming up to your knees is a questionable pleasure!”

All the time interrupting each other the two maids told as well as they could of their lives in winter: the well-heated house, sleigh-rides, frost, crunching snow, skating, skiing and something about ‘ears burning’.

“But that’s because you’re used to it,” Jessie objected, becoming a bit cross. “I’ll put it to you straight: would you like to head back home this very minute? When right now up there... what month

have we? April. Right now up there it's all sleighs, sitting by the fire and skis. Forget about local patriotism and look out at that garden." She motioned with her head in the direction of the windows. "If you still feeling like telling fibs after looking at that... well, good for you!"

"Course, it's vayry nice here," Ermina drawled.

"Load of flowers!" Gerda said avidly. Jessie knitted her brow:

"So is it yes or no? Join the banner of the south or back to the frozen marshes of the north?"

"Sure..." Gerda said simply. "Aren't we still young? We'll live here for a bit."

"What a sly one you are!" Jessie exclaimed. "In that case how could you ever want that your fresh face would have nothing but icy drifts to look upon for seven months of the year? What is that? What's that noise?"

The three women fell silent and listened. Through the open windows they could hear angry cries and dull, heavy slaps.

"Again!" Ermina blurted out. Jessie looked at her closely.

"So what again?!" she asked.

"The gardener and the groom," cried Gerda, breaking off to run to the window. "I was trying to calm them down yesterday too!"

It's over Malvina. Or maybe something else. Total blackguarding!"

"What? A fistfight?" Jessie enquired sternly.

"O Miss, don't say it was us!" With a gesture Jessie reassured them and made quickly for the way out, picturing as she did so the thunderclap that her arrival would represent.

When, having placed her hands behind her back, she came to a stop on the edge of the back-lane separating the barn from the stables this was the spectacle that was presented to her: Bill, the groom, jacketless and with his shirtsleeves rolled up was having at Savatier who was retreating but still showing pluck. The gardener, pale and bloody, was gauging his opponent, watching for a chance to strike with his right hand while with the left he was defending himself from the blows that were falling fast and heavily. As to Bill, his meaty face was merely flushed, if you did not count the scratches on his cheekbone. The pair were quite literally fighting like cat and dog. Savatier, becoming exhausted, was investing in this fight all the dangerous emotions of an enraged man while Bill, thoroughly enjoying himself, was accurately landing shots. By their feet lay their two trampled hats. However Savatier was to enjoy a major turn in his fortunes: Bill let his guard slip and a weighty punch from the

gardener bashed into his ear so that it was surely put ringing. The amazed Bill closed on him again.

“Stop this,” said Jessie, stepping in between them. “How dare you behave in this disgraceful manner in my home?”

The two battlers froze and looked down at the ground. The two of them were a sorry sight. Bill took up his hat and stood with his head hanging. The worried Savatier was trying to button the collar of his shirt with a trembling hand. Their hoarse, furious breathing told of anger and of embarrassment.

“We...” said Bill. “I... He... Begging your pardon.”

“What brought about this brawl?” Jessie went on in an icy tone, regarding the purple scars under Savatier’s eyes with a grimace of disgust as if someone was biting into a lemon right in front of her. “Tell me what this was about. Jealousy? An insult? Cardplay? Stop, both of you,” she ordered, seeing that the two adversaries, laying their fists upon their breasts, were intent on bringing out a string of explanations and oaths. “That probably will not mean anything to me. That is something your own consciences should reproach you with. Bad form, Bill! Low behaviour, Savatier! By the way, you seem to have had the worst of things. Is that not because Bill had right on his side? Hm? Well, if your tongues are still in working order say something now. Just don’t get all het up.”

“I swear by the love I bear for Belgium,” said Savatier, spitting out a moustache hair, “it was only boxing, just sport. But it seems I didn’t know the sort I was dealing with. Bill makes use of unlawful strokes. He...”

Bill vigorously wiped off his hands on his trousers and stepped forward in front of Savatier.

“It’s enough to say that Savatier has just sworn a false oath before you,” he began with a frankness that had the advantage of suggesting that candour and dishonesty were incompatible. “We are, of course, quarrelling and, again, I ask your pardon. There’s no such thing as quarrels without a cause... But my flakes were all fair, to that I can swear an oath on Ireland and Belgium together. It probably only seemed to him like I had four hands.”

“Fine,” said Jessie to Savatier. “What is it that you have to accuse Bill of? Show us.”

Not daring to disobey Savatier went up to Bill and placed the edge of his palm under the man’s chin.

“This is what I accuse you of: swinishly striking at the throat.” Jessie was immediately sorry that she had asked. In this gesture that Savatier made was glimpsed a calculating inhumanity and the girl’s face became sad.

“That’ll do. I understand,” she said quietly but in a commanding tone. “Now make peace. Shake hands with one another.”

It seemed as though Bill and Savatier had stopped breathing when, amazed and angered, they saw by Jessie’s face that there was no way out of a reconciliation. Contemptuously Bill held out his hand to the gardener. This latter, so as not to witness the defilement of his own grasp, turned his head away and, without looking, answered the handshake. The two hands spitefully shook one another and hurriedly parted.

Jessie was watching this with lowered eyebrows and her mouth partly open. But seeing how the gardener’s thumb dug into the groom’s palm she burst out laughing and left them. In that same moment a solution to the bother with the tickets had dawned upon her. She came back inside, paid herself for the ten tickets three times their value and gave a relieved sigh.

Chapter IV

Morgiana went off in one of the two automobiles belonging to Jessie, of which she had the almost exclusive use as her sister preferred the horses. Receiving from the notary a cheque for three thousand Morgiana converted that to ready money at the bank and set out for *Green Flute*.

Green Flute – a place which will be described in more detail at a later point – was a two-storey, stone-built house that was bought by the late Mr Trengan for romantic purposes. It was least of all Trengan’s intention to wound Morgiana by bequeathing to her this estate. But it was ever present in her mind that five years previously in this place had lived that fair-haired, highly-strung, capricious dancer, whose every whim had been indulged with a respect that was just ludicrous. Hobson – a fellow who had worked about the house as watchman, bailiff and messenger-boy – sometimes told his friends about her. “There’s the opinion,” he said, “that old Trengan was afraid of how much she loved her dancing. So, wanting to keep her just for himself, he bribed the doctors and they convinced Harriet Malcolm that she had this dangerous disease that would deform her feet if she ever went back on the stage. She believed this and fell into such a grief that she got as thin as a lath. For a whole month she didn’t go outside

her rooms and she was eating so little she was only making marks on the food with her fork. So, late one night I was walking past her window. The window was all lit so I looked in and I saw Harriet Malcolm in some kind of dress – if I caught my own daughter in it I'd give her a tanning. Everything about her was sparkling and flying about – she was dancing away all on her own and her face was so happy that I couldn't stand there watching, I started feeling bad about it for some reason.”

Besides Hobson and family, the gardener and the workers, there was a woman named Netty living here who was responsible for cleaning and keeping the house in order. As soon as Morgiana arrived and came inside Netty said to her: “This is a parcel addressed to you that came yesterday.” She handed over a small package that was stitched up in a yellow leather covering.

Morgiana took this package without any particular excitement; she just had the strange sensation that she was holding her sister's hand as it was turning cold.

Having sent Netty away she thought back to how this plan had come about and inside of her she could find nothing of a kind that would compare with the feelings first aroused by her grim decision. The first of those feelings were – uncertainty, despair and passionate, onerous delight; it was only gradually that these were remoulded into habit which became the guiding principle

and the hope of a darkened mind. This was a hatred of long standing, analysed down to its finest details; it was so sharply defined that it was like those essential things that are carefully packed into a suitcase for a long and difficult road. Only on occasion did it become keener. Morgiana was now no longer capable of being horrified by or of renouncing it because this criminal thought had become a part of herself. There is no kind of thought that a person will not become acquainted with, sooner or later, if it corresponds with his nature.

“So here is the fulfilment,” Morgiana said, thoughtfully examining the package. Taking a pair of scissors she cut open the leather; inside was a small box made of delicate wood tacked together with nails. Having inserted the scissors into a crack Morgiana pressed them against a small piece of wood that easily came away and she found a brown box wrapped in cotton wool. In that was a bottle of thick glass, of the kind used for perfumes, with a tightly fitted cork. At the butt of this bottle was a small quantity of a transparent liquid that to the eye was in no way different from ordinary water but for all that it was as dangerous as a rattlesnake, more so, in fact, as this poison, discovered two hundred years ago, did not kill immediately. Anyone who drank it down had not more than a month to live and would die not knowing of what cause they were dying. Having no taste or odour this liquid did not leave any stains and did not lose its potency

over time; true to itself, from beginning to end, it remained transparent. In vain doctors would begin to search for causes to the illness of this person who did not suspect that he had been poisoned. The one poisoned would go into a decline; inertia and apathy interchanging with exhausting revival; he would eat ever less, with no inclination, cease wanting to take exercise; he would lose interest in all occupations; the heavy sleep of the first weeks would give way to insomnia or sometimes to delirium or a loss of reason. The action of this poison was invisible – it would show itself only once, seeming more like a suggestion than like a poison – and then disappear. After that no one would ever be able to discover it – even during a post-mortem and laboratory analysis.

Such was the content of the bottle Morgiana was holding up before her in an outstretched hand. Her breathing was laboured owing to the nature of the ideas that were moving inside of her like an acrid smoke that filled the room with fabulous lines and with breathlessness. No one before had ever held in their hands a thing more simple with this awareness, that overwhelmed the mind, of its terrible qualities. Morgiana felt the glass of the bottle as keenly as if the skin had been stripped off her fingertips; a mere touch on this bottle seemed dangerous, in some unknown way having an effect upon the heart and the brain. Her thoughts flew along with the rapidity of an alien

voice, sounding independently of her and moved by the excitement, and she was simply following after them. Morgiana was thinking that this bottle was, perhaps, not very long ago filled with a perfume. Making a squeaking sound with the crystal stopper a supple female hand would have opened it and out of its captivity behind faceted-glass with a golden label an alluring fragrance would have wafted out speaking of tenderness and pleasure. Those hands would have scented of the perfume. Now there was in it a colourless death, ready to administer last rites to that charm which earlier, squeezing up its eyes, had come running to the bottle, obeying a truth common to both flowers and human hearts.

“She has everything! I have nothing,” Morgiana said, tipping the bottle so that the poison flowed towards the cork. “Even death is going to come for her in a mysteriously refined form; no one will ever arrange for me a death such as this, for the same reasons that I have – not even in their dreams. In dying Jessie will still be beautiful, maybe even more beautiful than she is now; flowers that have been cut have a more powerful scent. It’s possible that in her final minutes her mind will become clear; having seen that the end is coming she will experience feelings so delightful and delicate, the like of which will never be known to me, her secret executioner. But her death will also be the death of my hatred. I want to love you, Jessie. After you have disappeared I will love

you greatly and fervently. I will be thankful to you. I will rest. Could it be that I'm sick? No. But I've thought about it much – and I'm accustomed to it; now, Jessie, I'm stealing up behind you. Only in this way can I express my – future – love for you.”

Her hand began to tremble: the bottle knocked against the table and remained standing – a silent witness to feelings deserving of a merciful trip to the scaffold. Morgiana continued to speak, giving herself up to the insuperable need for an accomplice who did not and could not exist. But nothing, only indistinct whispering sounds were coming from her lips although it seemed to her that she was speaking clearly. Raising her head she saw in the wall-mirror a pale, unknown woman. “There I am,” said Morgiana, “I'm seeing myself. Harriet Malcolm, this house is your empty scent bottle; in place of the fragrance of your life – I have taken up residence here, colourless and gloomy like the poison; I am just as potent as it is because I live for a single thought.”

She gathered together the cotton wool, leather and the casing, burned them all in the fireplace and began to compose herself. It was a foul, abnormal calm. The image of Jessie stood before her, constricting her breathing. “Is she really beautiful?” Morgiana was wondering. “Her type is common enough. You'll even find it in the pages of fashion magazines. Salesgirls and usherettes can

also have faces like that. Almost every young girl rolls her shoulders the way Jessie does.”

Giving a start, half vaguely, half bitterly hoping, she summoned up her sister's form and began to study it, dismissing each of its attributes as haughty or banal – feeling the dim pleasure of a blind man who is running his fingertips over the face of someone unknown to him and making out its lines from touch. It was as though she had in front of her a multi-digit number which, if she added up its component parts separately, she could not bring to a sum greater than nine. Unclothed and stripped of her individuality Jessie consisted of a collection of individual parts that Morgiana did not find in any way especially striking. But that would only hold so until the material for criticism ran out. Hardly did she again see her as a whole, how from under her delicate eyelashes Jessie would flash an energetic, smiling glance, how her voice, full of the joy of living, would ring out, hardly did she recall all those ways of acting and moving that were unique to her and Morgiana had to see that Jessie was a pretty as the springtime.

Having hidden the bottle in her bag Morgiana summoned Hobson. She instructed him make the house ready for her, informing him that in no later than three days time she would be coming here to stay until the autumn. By six o'clock she had

returned to town but did not come down to dinner, pleading a headache.

Chapter V

Bored to be dining alone Jessie made a telephone call to her closest friend, Eve Stratton, and began asking her to come over. “Especially,” Jessie added, “since today is Wednesday; you know how we have people over on Wednesdays. At all events, I absolutely have to see you to have a talk. About what? About life and things in general. Morgiana is nursing a headache, sitting in her room. Yes, I’m listening... Eve, it’s not nice to talk like that, with... Well, you know. Anyway I’ll be waiting for you.”

Eve Stratton was the second daughter of Walter Hawthorne, the owner of two printing houses. Though she was only two years older than Jessie she was already married. Her husband had a posting as a military attaché in Korea. They had separated with the unspoken, dry-eyed agreement of two people who have discovered that they have no need either of each other or of married life. This amicable grass widowhood was therefore an easy matter for them.

When the very elegant Eve arrived the no less elegant Jessie greeted her with a friendly kiss and they sat down to table in the pantry.

Eve was tall and had a slim figure, a young woman of the Greek type with a discerning cast to her eyes and mouth. Her experience in life did not greatly surpass that of Jessie but she had a way of keeping that hidden, leaving the impression that she was a good observer, come early to wisdom. When she saw the third table-setting Eve asked who else Jessie was expecting.

“No one. Well, probably no one. That’s for Morgiana but she will probably already have eaten at her own house.”

“Hope so,” said Eve. Jessie was offended but contained herself.

“Eve, you keep forgetting,” she remarked quietly and sincerely, “that Mori is my sister and that it might be unpleasant for me to hear things like that.”

“She’s inviolable?”

“In the sense that you mean it, yes. Yes! And besides,” Jessie added, giving a glance at the nearby servants, “we aren’t alone. I know that you don’t like her. Can’t be helped!”

“I say what I think,” Eve returned, trying the soup and not in any way troubled by Jessie’s rebuke. “But any time I come to your house I am always resolved to be straightforward to the point of insolence. Your life...”

“Then let’s eat a bite first,” said Jessie. “I’d like to talk too but I want to eat as well. What about you?”

“I’m eating. Your food is always excellent. Drink some of this wine, Jessie. It’s a good wine. I know it because it’s the one we have, even the same year. We’ll be the same age in our wine.”

“And we’ll get oiled like two red-nosed old dowagers,” Jessie added as she sniffed her own glass.

She drank and began to listen to Eve who was recounting the news of the town in a tone of good-humoured condemnation. They had already touched upon a number of other people’s flirtations from the standpoint of- ‘and that isn’t the whole story’, they had looked into who was thinking what about themselves and the falling out between Levastor and Baster had already come under the spotlight of the assumptions regarding the meetings of those two the previous year ‘with those people and then with those’, when without their being aware of the time having passed the meal was reaching its end. The servants brought the coffee and then, wanting to combine what was pleasant with what was wholesome, for she was very fond of Jessie, Eve said: “Since we don’t need anything else could we be alone now?”

“We can look after ourselves from here,” Jessie said to the servants. “Well, Eve, I’m listening.”

“Do you still not smoke?” Eve asked, extracting a long cigarette from a platinum cigarette-case.

“I don’t. This isn’t what you wanted to say to me in confidence without the servants overhearing?”

“Well I don’t really have anything in particular to say to you. I suppose I just can’t stand extraneous people being there, even servants. You’re missing out on a lot by not smoking.”

“I love watching people smoke,” Jessie said, laying her face in her hands with her elbows resting on the tabletop. “I’ve noticed that you smoke like someone facing death – eyes wide open, chest out!”

“Thank you. I’ll take a bow.”

“No, you needn’t. Wilson smokes carefully, groaning; he’s almost sweating. He makes it look as though this is hard work. Fitzroy smokes in an interesting way. He positively plays with his mouth: he will twist it this way and that way and screw up one of his eyes. In my opinion it’s Glenar who smokes better than everyone else: he has very mild manners, they are in perfect accord with his little cigars. That suits him.”

“Do you like Glenar?”

“I did like him. Now I’m finding that to the taste he gets a bit like liquorice. Give me a cigarette, I’ll try one.”

With her lips she firmly gripped the cigarette-holder and solemnly raised the match but there was a look of doubt on her face. Having begun to smoke Jessie accidentally exhaled the smoke through her nose. She shut her eyes, sneezed and hastily lay down the cigarette on an ashtray.

“Not quite like that,” she said. “It probably requires virility.”

Eve burst out laughing.

“You need to get married. That’s what I’ve been wanting to say. Is there anything normal about your situation? Morgiana is considerably older than you. Besides, she is hiss…”

“-terical,” Jessie sourly completed. “Go on!”

“Look how solitary you are, both spiritually and physically, even though you are well-to-do and live in your own home.”

“I have thought about it,” said Jessie. “But what’s to be said about it? I don’t love anyone. Does any one love me?”

“Only about five people.”

“Let’s say a grand total of four. It’s said that marriage is a harsh business. You, for example, you’re married. Talk to me of matrimony.”

“Well... I think you know, yourself,” Eve answered, understanding that in such matters words have properties that distort the essence of phenomena, however careful and sincere these words may be.

“I know and I don’t know,” Jessie went on, thoughtfully looking at Eve. “But, listen, I’m not afraid of words. For example, what is the ‘perfect marriage’?”

“The perfect marriage,” Eve said, beginning to ache inside, “a marriage like that requires much...”

“Go down into the detail,” Jessie suggested.

Eve’s personal experience resembled a state of half-drowsiness. Reddening somewhat as Jessie waited quietly Eve went on:

“Requires much... But then my own marriage is a matter for debate and I could not hold up as an example... Much closeness in everything, similarity of taste and so on.”

“But doesn’t there have to be love as well?”

“Love? Of course.”

“So tell me about love – about married love.”

“It’s hardly possible to tell of that,” Eve declared. It was becoming ever more difficult for her to find the right tone. “You...”

yes... or no... For example: knowledge of geography and an actual voyage. Of course, there's a difference there."

"Listen," said Jessie, "being a someone's mistress and being a wife – these two things are strictly separated, are they not? Or, for example: 'concubine' and 'mistress'. Is there a resemblance there? What do you think?"

"Better if we drop this," Eve suggested cautiously. "I'm absolutely not in the right form. Probably the fine food. I'm simply not able to express myself properly."

Jessie fell silent only so as to comply the strong hint in that last sentence and she did understand Eve's embarrassment. It was somewhat communicated to herself. Otherwise Jessie would have been happy to carry on discussing such sonorous, beautiful words as 'concubine' or 'ardour'. Going off on a tangent while wondering about the 'cube' of 'concubine' she asked:

"Won't you change your box to the one next to mine at the theatre? It has become free."

"I definitely will. But still, Jessie, it's my sincere wish is to see you well settled and married."

"Not with just anyone, I hope," Jessie remarked. "If you give me any old wastrel I'll restore him in his own eyes. That's something I dream about from time to time. But that's stupid. Or is it a

good thing? Draw someone back from the brink of disaster and, little by little, steadily...

“You little fool, where were you reading that?” Eve laughed out.

“O, I don’t remember where,” Jessie acknowledged frankly, laughing herself also.

Of a sudden she ceased laughing and called out:

“Mori, you’re too late. We’ve already eaten. Come and have coffee with us!”

Morgiana was standing in the doorway, enjoying herself in scrutinising the two friends. Giving a look of good-natured condescension at Jessie she tranquilly greeted Eve, sat down at the table, took up a napkin, looked at it idly and lay it back in its place.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, Jessie. An old migraine, Eve. The coffee will see it off. I have a myriad jobs on account of the repairs and my move. On top of that the heat came early this year. I’m taking refuge in *Green Flute*, probably until the autumn.”

“What about you, Jessie?”

“I won’t go, Eve. I’m staying here.”

“You know how obstinate she is,” Morgiana said to Eve after a brief silence.

Having drunk up her coffee Morgiana regenerated the conversation that had died down. Now she was calm. Pretence came easily to her like a simple piece in the hands of an experienced maestro. She laughed, joked and related with a note of sympathy the story of the beautiful ballerina, Malcolm, who wept as she danced alone.

Chapter VI

Towards evening a group of five guests had assembled. These were: Glenar – the very same whose manner of smoking had been discussed by Eve and Jessie – a sluggish fellow of some twenty-nine years, a chap who dabbled in things and was blond; Giolatti, an Italian exile who was mixed up in some romantic business at court; a shipowner's son named Regard and his wife, a small sallow woman with large eyes, a native of the Antilles. Eve Stratton was the fifth in the group.

Due to the smallness of the company and also on account of the stuffiness indoors they were gathered out in the square-shaped corner terrace. This evening Giolatti, remembering his homeland, sang some affecting *romanzas* and a childhood grievance was gleaming in his dark eyes. Listening to the singer Jessie's face coloured and because of this Glenar listened for her words with ever an greater melancholy, unable to draw his eyes away from her form, break this enchantment that was turning him into a ridiculous figure, something he knew and on account of which he was himself most irritated. But Jessie was already accustomed to this hopelessly tense appearance he had and, while inwardly cross, outwardly she tried to seem absent in her thoughts when around him. She was quietly conversing with

Aronta, Regard's wife, while Regard himself was talking to Eve about horse-racing. In a pensive mood Morgiana had settled herself in a rocking-chair and was sadistically observing Glenar who was either jumping into the conversation at the wrong moment, continuing to look devotedly at Jessie or smoking miserably while pacing about the terrace; he would sit down, stand up and then again sit down but it was clear from his look that he would straight be getting up again. He was taken up with deciding to bring things to a head: he was suffering agonies and he was afraid that a refusal would mean that he could never again call on Jessie.

"Could we not go for a stroll around the garden?" Regard suggested and Jessie instantly agreed, for she was beginning to feel an ache in her back on account having Glenar's love spilled out all over the terrace. Everyone else fell into accord after she did.

As the night was quite dark Morgiana had the lights of the electric lamps that stood at the intersections of the walkways turned on. A half-light appeared above the trees; its rays illuminated a sleeping green that was mixed with black and gold. Immediately escaping from Glenar Jessie seized the arms of Regard and Morgiana; Eve walked with Giolatti and Glenar

approached Aronta; they all went off in different directions, having agreed to come together at the pond.

While the strollers were still not too far apart from one another Glenar could hear Regard's voice and Regard, in his turn, Aronta's honest yawns and the boring speech of the dispirited Glenar. But they went further apart and the voices fell silent. It happened that, thanks to the brisk stepping of Morgiana who was walking a little in front and resolutely guarding a silence the whole time, even though Regard more than once addressed her with that gentle civility that unconsciously marks out unhappiness, it came about that these three arrived by the pond before the others. Then, catching sight of the swans, Jessie wanted to wake up the black Australian one. Alongside of a snow-white mate it was forming a peaceful reflection on the lit-up water, hiding its head beneath a wing.

Jessie stepped onto the sloping patch of lawn and, taking up her dress, she stretched out her hand; standing right at the water's edge she began to call out to the swan: "Noël! Snugglums, Noël, Sleepyhead!" But the swan slept on and, in moving a bit closer, Jessie's foot slipped into the water. Her shoe and sock were straight away wet through; Regard caught hold of her and brought her back up. Now the swans had woken up and,

stretching their necks, they drowsily moved their wings, raising them slightly as if to shake the sleep out of them.

Despondently standing on her dry foot and with her wet foot drawn up Jessie was supporting herself on Regard's shoulder and hearing out the observation that Morgiana had to make; then she determinedly set off for the house so as to change her footwear. She went quickly and with a limp as she found it unpleasant to take a firm step with the foot that was wet. At one turning, close by a dark mulberry grove standing in a shadow of foliage, she gave a start and came to a halt: from out of bushes could be heard a strange, melancholy voice and, peering in there, she made out that person who both made her laugh and drove her distracted. Glenar was standing behind a tree, making some signs or other. He sighed and spoke her name.

"Is that you?" Jessie said, displeased. "Why are you hiding? What's in there?"

"Come in closer to me," Glenar implored. "Please, come closer and listen to what I have to say. There is one very important thing that I have to say to you." Becoming interested, Jessie shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know what this is about," she answered. "And I've no intention of joining you inside in the bushes because I've gotten

my foot wet and I'm in a hurry. Have you found something? Well bring it out here."

The spot she was standing on was partly lit, whereas Glenar was concealing himself in the shadow and would not come out. Such incomprehensible obstinacy awoke in her the terrifying thought that Glenar was attempting suicide. She felt her heart clench.

"You aren't injured?" she asked sternly.

"Injured? Yes, in a certain sense, I am wounded," Glenar replied. "I can reveal everything, I do want to. But I'm afraid of the open. Forgive me this acting so oddly all of a sudden. This is so important that it is only when I am barely able to make out your face that I can bring myself to... O, it would be better if I wrote to you! I... No, I can't do it."

Beginning to get angry, Jessie could not for all that refrain from smiling at a surmise which brought with it feelings of guilt and of fondness and which was flattering – namely that Glenar had concealed himself in this shrubbery with the aim of proposing to her. While she was pondering and making a wry face at the dampness of her stocking, Glenar declared:

"I saw how you were coming back from the pond. My first thought was to go to meet you but that isn't so easy. I knew that you would pass by here."

“So where’s Aronta?”

“I’ve probably gone mad: I abandoned her.”

“You really are an oddity,” Jessie said seriously, reddening and becoming angry with herself now. The sudden thought that, possibly, this very Glenar knew words that were the equal of great music enticed her to want to know all. “Come here,” Jessie said, breathing with difficulty. “Uncover your secrets. No need to be afraid of me. I don’t bite. Crawl on out, Glenar; Well I never thought you were such a coward.”

There is hardly another such address that could have been so disheartening as this natural remark coming from a girl in a hurry to go and dry out her foot. Glenar clenched his teeth and came out into the light. He was upset and pale. Trying to show by a smile that he was smiling at his own carry-on Glenar saw the dark, shining eyes that were looking at him in sympathy and annoyance. It was a merited, silent reproach. Glenar was suffering so much that in this moment he longer felt love, only the wish to have done with this declaration from which he could not now withdraw.

“I love you,” he said in a such a tone that it was as if he was listening to his own words and checking if he had said what he needed to say.

A silence set in. In the changed expression on Glenar's face Jessie detected a trace of vengeance for the pain endured and again she felt the dampness of her stocking.

"Well now," she said, patting Glenar on the hand that he was vaguely holding out. "You have spoken your mind and you will feel better now. There can be no question of this. But if you do really love me would you please go up to the house to the maid and tell her bring down to me here straight away green stockings and the grey shoes. And then go back to Aronta and invent some plausible pretext for your absence."

Although Glenar took his leave of Jessie in tragic fashion, strangely enough, he set off to carry out her request with a sense of relief and gratitude. He did not go to Aronta but instead drove to his club where he drank until the early hours. Even more strange was it that Jessie had diagnosed him correctly: from that evening his love, having gone through the moment of greatest suffering, wilted and, a little at a time, it disappeared.

Chapter VII

Towards twelve o'clock the guests drove off and the two sisters separated to go to bed. Glenar had not upset Jessie's equilibrium and she was even happy that she would not now be seeing him again. She really wanted to tell Morgiana about the 'proposal from the bush'. But in imagining how she would tell it she was also imagining Morgiana's attitude: 'I hope you were pleased.' For that reason she did not tell her sister anything. Though Morgiana did suspect that something had passed between Jessie and Glenar she did not drop any hints or try to find out.

Next morning Jessie woke as usual at eight o'clock and rang for Gerda to bring her water and chocolate. Each morning, still in bed, she had them bring her a small cup of hot chocolate and a glass of cold water; it might happen sometimes that she did not touch the chocolate but she always drank up that water eagerly and with pleasure. Liss water, which was obtained from underground springs, would, in strong currents, form a froth that had the whiteness of milk; long after it had settled in a glass and become transparent tiny fragments of spray would continue to leap from its surface and at the edge of the glass bubbles would fizz and burst. Jessie had woken up in a cheerful mood. When Gerda came in the young girl began to chat with her about

the dreams she had had. Still talking she looked towards the door and saw how the shine on the door-handle had dimmed; the handle turned slightly.

“I heard a voice and knew you weren’t sleeping,” Morgiana said, stopping in the doorway. She cast a glance at the tray, then came as far as the her sister’s bedside and sat down opposite her. The maid left the room.

“Who is this!? We haven’t met in a hundred years!” Jessie exclaimed. Morgiana never came into her bedroom in the morning. It was for this reason that Jessie good-naturedly expressed her surprise and she added: “Mori, drink that water. Don’t worry, they’ll bring more if I ask Gerda nicely. Down in her cellars lie the best brands of that divine beverage. Morgiana, don’t look at me as though there wasn’t a trace of intelligence in my brazen face... but are you not well?”

“Sluggishness... Jessie, make a telephone call to Fletchers and ask them to send us samples for the wallpaper.”

“Be so charitable as to walk around your sister’s bed and make the call yourself.”

“Should I? But my throat is a little sore.”

“Has the sun risen for Fletcher?” Jessie stretched herself reluctantly and reached for the telephone receiver.

She turned her back upon her sister as the telephone was on the other side of the bed on its own stand. Morgiana looked at Jessie's heavy, loose hair, at her stately shoulders and at the purity of the skin tone under the lace neck-line. She was examining her sister almost in pity. Jessie moved her hair away from her ear and placed the telephone receiver to her cheek. In the glass the water was playing, a barely visible spray forming a mist above the glass brim.

The moment had presented itself; reality became something precise like a tightrope-walk at a great height. A book and the vase with flowers were preventing Morgiana from poisoning the water without rising from her low armchair; she rose up, keeping her hand in the pocket of her buttoned-up cardigan. In there was the minute vial containing the dose measured off beforehand. In the meantime Jessie had given the number and, slightly turning her head towards her sister but not able to see her, she said: "Couldn't I make the call a bit later?"

Morgiana had not the strength to give answer. She already wanted to sit back down when Jessie inclined her head and adjusted the earpiece so as to hear better. Apparently someone was beginning to speak to her. Morgiana had a sudden inspiration: 'Act as if no one was here now but someone was just about to enter.' She took the vial, removed the plug without any

squeaking and smoothly brought the hand with the poison towards the water that was still a celebration of bubbles. From the phial fell drops that formed in the water streams the colour of glass; then everything took on its ordinary appearance except that the damp mist above the glass had disappeared.

“Wallpaper department, Fletchers?” said Jessie. “What a nuisance! Mori,” she began, of a sudden turning around but, seeing that Morgiana, who had not managed to sit back down, was standing with a feeble smile, she broke off. “Did you want to say something?” Jessie started again. “Are you going?”

Morgiana’s right hand, just then in a weakened state from the evil deed, sank into her pocket. Morgiana took her seat.

“What did Fletchers say?”

“That’s just it, the exchange put me through to the wrong number,” Jessie explained, bringing the water closer and holding the palm of her hand above the glass so as to feel the cold of the effervescence. “Now we have our drink. Sis, how come you’re so red. Don’t be cross, I’ll call. I’ll just have a little drink. What’s wrong with my potion? Just look! It has died! It was like champagne and now – sorrowfully silent.”

“It’s been standing too long, Jessie. I don’t know if drinking gassy water is good for you.”

“Indeed it is. Well, bottoms up. No, the chocolate first. No, better the water.” Jessie sat bolt upright in the bed and, taking the glass, drank almost all of it. At this Morgiana was taken by a strong fit of animation; getting up she did a couple of rounds of the room, talking about the pattern for the wallpaper, examining the ceiling for cracks and then coming to a stop at a distance, by the window, she began to talk about how nice the house would be after the repairs, how much fun Jessie would have in the autumn when the dances and parties would start. The excitement was compelling her to talk, to be listening to herself.

“We’ll receive samples, Jessie, and the two of us together will painstakingly, lovingly decide on the colour and the design for each room. They should all be different and each one consistent with its own spirit. Our late uncle often regretted that he had no time to devote to the house; as you know he was much too fond of his business affairs and of women. All last year the two of us were planning things and then didn’t do anything. Now it’s only thanks to the earthquake... I remember that morning vividly, do you? The way you jumped up on the window-sill and screamed! Everyone laughed about that a long time. ‘For a fact,’ I thought back then, ‘Nature doesn’t care; a bit stronger and it would have been catastrophic for the city.’ But Nature is forgiven. Did you ever see Harriet Malcolm?”

“I did,” Jessie answered, her mouth full of biscuit and she drank up her chocolate. “In the foyer of the *Calypso*. She was pointed out to me. She walked past all arrogant, milking her fame. *Mamma mia!* I don’t know was it one or two magpies that she just had seen!”

“Two. Her affair with Trengan caused a big stir. All the same *Green Flute* makes for a delightful refuge, just not for those who seek out disgrace and falsity.”

Jessie had been listening to this nervous speech for a few minutes now with a serious face and she was beginning to feel uneasy. Might not this verbosity on her sister’s part be the forerunner to a fit of peevish behaviour or worse again – a hysterical scene?

“So I’ll make that call again,” she said, drawing up the blanket and taking up the telephone. “Operator, the office of House Fletcher. On behalf of Morgiana Trengan. Thank you very much. She is looking for samples of the new patterns. So you only got them in yesterday? What a calamity. One moment... Morgiana, they’re offering us their designer!”

“Refuse.”

“Send on the samples,” Jessie went on. “But we have already engaged a decorator. Yes, that’s right. So where did you see me?”

Very good,” she ended with a laugh as she put down the receiver. The Fletcher who was talking to her took the risk of paying her a compliment. “So then they’ll send them. Mori, I’ll have to chase you off because I want to get dressed!”

“Just one more thing, Jessie,” said Morgiana, approaching her. “Things have been difficult between us, I know. I’m sorry, of course. It’s me and my nerves. From now on we’ll live together more easily. I really mean that.” Shame drew her lips into a semblance of a false smile and, ashamed and despising herself for her baseness in this moment, she repeated: “Really and truly. And, though it isn’t easy for me to admit to this – I’m malformed, Jessie. What I look like on the outside explains everything.”

“Well, that’s marvellous. How funny you are, Morgoose!” Jessie said hurriedly, tiring of her sister’s talk. Her face expressed how at a loss she was as well as a plea not to alarm her with any more declarations. “I can see how worn out you are by your face. Let’s have no more of that.”

Morgiana stood up with her head bowed.

“That’s all now. I’ll go from you,” she said. “I’ll probably head off today. That will make you happy, I hope?”

“Mori!” Jessie exclaimed, flushing and with tears suddenly appearing in eyes that were full of reproach. “That came kind of... blurted that out. Sorry! So the samples will be arriving.”

Morgiana nodded and left the room; on closing the door she stopped, listening with painful delight to how the shame of the pointless, hysterical lie was grating within her; she felt despicable. ‘Well, I did it, I poisoned her. That can’t be forgotten and it’s as though I’m stunned. Jessie has drunk for eternity. The poison peeked out and the water died.’

Chapter VIII

Having come out from Jessie Morgiana closed the door and, slinking, moved just three steps off so as to listen out if cries or the sound of a falling body might be heard in the event that the poison would rapidly take effect. With regard to the poison she had no guarantees apart from blind faith and the astronomical price she had paid for it. They could be swindling her in one direction or the other: by sending her African arrow poison or simply pure water. From such reflections powerful doubts assaulted her; but the thought that it might only be water was harder for her to bear than that of her sister dying immediately. Very agitated she went up to her bedroom and rushed to the window to examine the scent-bottle by the light of the sun as though she would be able to find out the truth with the naked eye. "No, this isn't water," Morgiana said, making a guess as to the essence of the liquid not by sight but by that instinct which at times induces one to make a cut into an apple that looked fresh and then to toss it away. "It isn't water but it looks the same."

Having hidden the bottle in her trunk so as to destroy it afterwards Morgiana recollected the scene in the bedroom. The evidence was gone but should a suspicion arise that Jessie had

been poisoned then this visit in connection with the fact that it was she who had turned it gloomy might be used in evidence. In her favour were her known hysteria and difficult character which she now looked upon with some relief as a reliable defence.

So little time had passed since the moment when she had stepped out from her all-unsuspecting sister that Jessie – still in her nightdress, sleepy and warm – importunately rose up before her mind's eye. 'You're never getting married,' Morgiana said. She was not able to think any further on that topic: her anxiety that Jessie might already be dead, so strong that it was equivalent to despair, forced her to rush to the bell. The maid appeared and to her question about Jessie answered that Miss was on her way to take a bath. Then, after telling the girl to have coffee brought up, Morgiana calmed down somewhat. Having drunk three cups of coffee she saw from her shaky state and from the wicked tears that had suddenly sprung up how she needed to leave today – to be far off, as though washing her hands of this by way of a significant distance. Immediately she began to make her preparations, she summoned the maid, ordered that the car be made ready and Jessie informed that in an hour's time she would be driving to *Green Flute*. 'Little by little that first strong impression will recede.' Morgiana was reasoning. 'I'm indisposed on account of a crisis of which only I am aware.'

In the meantime, having heard that her sister had made her preparations to leave, Jessie was on the point of going to her but changed her mind; she simply instructed that she be informed when Morgiana would be going out to sit into the automobile. ‘God help her,’ Jessie was thinking. ‘She really is racked with unhappiness because she is so passionately absorbed in this idea of her ugliness and the thing is I’m used to her and don’t find anything unusual in it. What’s unusual is only that we are not one bit alike. Let her go, it’ll be easier for her and for me too.’

Usually the automobile was brought round to the interior entrance, onto the avenue with the circular flower-bed; and that was how it was drawn up this time. Now Jessie received a note from Morgiana announcing her departure and repeating the invitations. ‘She doesn’t want to see me,’ said Jessie and, becoming angry, she decided she wouldn’t see off Morgiana. But as always she took pity and she went to the entrance. Trying to be cheerful and friendly Jessie met her sister on her way out in the company of servants carrying suitcases and she said: “You’re escaping? To your *Flute so Green*? Live peaceably there and do drop in on us. I’ll call on you.”

She took Morgiana’s arm and walked with her trying to keep in step.

Having given her an intent look Morgiana, to her own surprise, was not able to suppress a smile. Pretty as a flower, the young girl looked with shining eyes into her eyes, ballooned out her cheeks and gave a wink. A smile of satisfied malice made Morgiana's eyes screw up, like a knife that has pierced the hand of a child that had reached out to do something naughty; a dull trembling passed all through her body and she became distant and unfeeling; she was even able to say with the indulgent tone of the elder sister: "Let me know what you're doing; don't forget to let me know in good time if you decide to come. Take care of yourself; goodbye!"

Jessie noticed what an effort it was for her to talk naturally and let go of her sister's hand. As a way of distracting herself – having first given a kiss goodbye to Morgiana who was already settling herself in – Jessie started into her unvarying game with Slaker, the driver:

"Slaker!"

"Present!"

"Engine?"

"Present!"

"Petrol?"

“Present!” Slaker answered, already faltering; he was not quite in the best of spirits as the day before he had lost his entire stack at cardplay.

“Jack?”

“Present!”

“Rack?”

“Present!”

“Lamp?”

“The lamp is present and so is the ramp,” Slaker answered gloomily, making everybody laugh; however he could not be angry at Jessie so he added:

“You forgot to ask about the carburettor.”

“Quite right,” said Jessie, “carburettor present?”

“Present!”

“Well then, Mori,” Jessie declared, shading her eyes from the sun to look at her sister. “He has everything present and correct. So you won’t stand in need of anything. Away you go!”

The car rounded the flower-bed and went out through the gates. Through the garden railing Jessie saw how Morgiana was looking at her under the brim of her hat and this look she did not

like. 'Have it your way,' Jessie thought, paling from the sudden anger. 'She knows that I could love her fiercely. In general I can love and do want to. God, am I actually happy that she's gone off?'

Becoming gloomy Jessie straightened herself in a dignified manner, turned about and went into the house.

Chapter IX

Having seen off her sister Jessie still could not quite shake off the ugly mood. 'Is Morgiana at all normal? Wouldn't it be better for them both to go their separate ways for ever?' With this thought, not all bringing it to a conclusion, she began to walk around the house; although the preparations for the refurbishment restricted her walk, by way of compensation she looked at how they were laying down the timber and trying out the wooden moulds for modelling the cornices. Finally settling down in the library Jessie planted down her elbows between a novel and a box of chocolates, studying mental impulses as outlined by an author afflicted with the blight of Demonism. Half leafing through, half reading she said with a yawn: "Rubbish. What rubbish!" and she sat into an armchair, wrapping her arms around her knees.

"So I've grown tired of her," said Jessie, meaning her sister. Within her she felt bored and lacklustre and had no desire for anything. Meanwhile from every window a lovely day was calling on her to do something. And in answer to its noisy splendour Jessie sat silent like a bow fallen from a musician's hand.

Not wishing to become undisciplined she glanced at the clock and went off to have breakfast. But she ate little and it seemed to her as though the food was not as tasty as it usually was.

Thinking that a trip out might dispel this spiritual nausea she ordered that the carriage be harnessed and she drove out to buy some lace. She sat, bristling, biting her lip. Gloomily she scrutinised the crowds, finding in them neither amusing and visually interesting elements nor material for reflection. As she was pulling up to the shop she realised that her purchases were unnecessary; she grew angry and ordered the coachman to turn about which he did, his back conveying his amazement. Shortly after this she caught sight of Eve Stratton coming out of a small bookshop and she called to her and invited her to hop on. At first Eve was refusing with joking indignation but she had a thoughtful look at her young friend and, becoming serious, she climbed up onto the seat.

“I’m supposed to be at a particular lecture,” said Eve. “But I don’t like how you’re looking. You’re awfully pale, Jessie.”

“I can feel that I’m unwell,” Jessie responded plaintively. “But I can’t figure it out. I haven’t caught a cold, I slept well but now I keep on getting irritable.”

Eve took hold of her hand which was cool and limp.

“It might be that you have a headache?”

“I don’t have a pain in my head but I feel a weight there. A weakness... what kind? I don’t have any shake in my hands or legs. It isn’t so much a weakness as a disgust. You’d understand if you remembered that feeling you get when hearing a wrong note. *Katzenjammer*.”

“I’ll stay with you for a bit,” said Eve, having thought a little. “Even if I am late for the lecture, deep down I’ll be happy because I promised to attend without particularly wanting to. I’ll sit for a while at your house. I also have these funny turns for no known reason. If your nerves settle will we go to the Pearly Waterfall? Wellhoft is organising a picnic.”

Making a sign with her eyes in token that she would consider it Jessie said:

“I want to drink something. I really need to drink. Here’s a kiosk. Pull up right by those bottles! Young fellow, bring me some orange juice!” She drained the glass with delight and then gave the signal to drive on.

“When is your sister leaving?”

“She left today. Eve, I’ll tell you all about it somehow or other. But not today. It’s good the way that juice will splash around

inside. That's better already. My eyes are seeing better and my back is better. Now ma'am, what's this about the waterfall?"

Brightening up a little she gave herself over to a discussion of the fun of a picnic and when they drew up to the house her face was once again full of freshness and light. In a pensive mood she lay down on the divan while Eve, who was keeping an eye on her, looked through the books she had bought and chatted about them.

"Dab vinegar onto your temples," she suggested, noticing that Jessie was prodding her temple with a finger.

The young girl shook her head in refusal.

"Could you give me a mirror, please," she said and, taking the hand-mirror from Eve, she examined herself closely. The pallor was gone but her pupils were dilated and her lips parched.

In vexation laying aside the mirror Jessie began to think of the picnic. Though she was already shaken by the gale of the poison the liveliness of her imagination was not dimmed. Was it possible to dance by torchlight against a background of a spray of stars and of shadows? Jessie found all of this enticing; trying to overcome her indisposition she rang and gave orders to Ermina to bring in some wine and lemon. Hearing that her voice was stronger Eve asked:

“Feeling better?”

“If I don’t let myself go to pieces,” Jessie answered, “it’ll be all gone by evening.”

Dropping a slice of lemon into the wine she stirred it with a teaspoon and after looking at the glass with desire she began to drink in small mouthfuls, repeating as she did so:

“If you want your happiness real, you should have prunes for every meal, then in your stomach and your guts will sprout beds of forget-me-nots.”

“What? What was that?” exclaimed Eve, laughing loudly at the other girl’s commonsensical rhyme.

“Beds of forget-me-nots,” Jessie repeated, wiping her reddened lips.

Auto-suggestion and wine kept her going. After a while Eve went away, reassured now with regard to Jessie, as she had livened up and was now looking well; and Jessie went to her dressing room to decide on a dress for the picnic. Having brought out all the contents of her wardrobes she began trying on dresses. But at the very height of this activity she suddenly became so tired that the wish to go running about on the grass left her. Inertia and sorrow took hold of her. Unable to bear her resentment Jessie lowered her head into her hands, burst into tears and, stamping

with her foot, tried to calm this indignation at an unhappy day. Composing herself she became again calm and indifferent to everything, just as things had been in the morning.

An hour before dinner Elizabeth Wesson called, accompanied by two officers – Elvans and Ferguson. Jessie disliked Elizabeth Wesson, a girl of twenty-six years, on account of her tranquil hypocrisy and her appearance of always being bored. Nor did Wesson's two escorts do much to amuse Jessie. Elvans was narcissistic and Ferguson dull – a talkative fellow who had not mastered the art of conversation. Eve had dispatched Elizabeth in order to coax Jessie into travelling to the Pearly Waterfall.

Pleading her indisposition Jessie firmly refused. Delighted at this refusal Elizabeth expressed her profound regret; Ferguson and Elvans regretted in all sincerity this failure of their visit but in the presence of the wealthy Wesson, among whose admirers they were to be numbered for the sake of her riches, they stated their regret with restraint. An exchange of phrases took place by which, as it were with nails, they hammered together some artificial animation. This became more natural when they moved on to making caustic remarks. Well content that Jessie would not be at the picnic Elizabeth gently remarked:

“I'm so sorry you're not coming, my dear; you are indeed pale but in among the grass and the flowers you would look far better.”

“Why?” Jessie asked seriously. Not answering Elizabeth began to laugh meekly, giving a look at the men. Then she sighed and turning to Elvans said:

“Do you not find that Jessie, with this sweet artless way she has, would remind you of a woodland fairy?!”

“The very thing,” Jessie gloomily nodded.

“A queen among woodland fairies,” Elvans agreed courteously with the intention of giving Elizabeth a rub. He found her teasing unpleasant.

“We are in a fairy realm,” Ferguson remarked, not understanding that with these words, following on from what Elvans had said, he was assigning Elizabeth to a lower rank.

“It seems as though we will end by making a voyage into mythology,” Elizabeth sighed. “For Jessie that will be a straightforward win: there everyone is a dryad or a nymph.”

Jessie thought: ‘O, you sly, tow-haired zigzagger!’ but out loud she said:

“It’s a pity, Elsie, that I couldn’t come up with a worthwhile metaphor of my own today on account of my ‘artlessness’.”

The enemy was rocked but opened fire anew.

“O, dear Jessie, I so envy you! You have the fortune to find some kind of middle way between society and self... your own desire. If I had fewer acquaintances I would also prefer to sit at home and read something or other... Ascort’s ‘The Lonely Beauty’, for example or... In general, to read, to dream...”

Jessie thought for a moment and carelessly said:

“It is good to read. I bought an interesting book called ‘The Fatal Age’. I don’t remember who the author was.”

That blow struck solidly home. The twenty-six-year-old Elizabeth Wesson fell silent and nervously fingering her fan she suggested they go. At this most inappropriate moment Ferguson launched into a tangled description of the site selected for the picnic, wearying everyone. Elvans interrupted him to wish Jessie a speedy recovery. In taking leave of one another the two young women kissed and exchanged firm handshakes. Finally they all went away.

‘Am I really pale?’ thought Jessie, going to a mirror. ‘Yes, too pale; strange. Probably I’m pale now on account of that Elizabeth. What a viper! Going on an outing with her is a misfortune; under the guise of effusiveness she says vile things about everyone.’

At this point the telephone rang. It was a call from Eve.

“Well, did you come to terms with Elsie?” Eve asked.

“Elizabeth was here,” Jessie said. “She started needling me and I put manners on her. Sly, good-for-nothing, hook-of-a-thing. I told them all that I won’t go. Health? I’m fine; I’m just worked up. Yes, I did want to go but now I don’t. But you will go?”

“I had intended to for your sake,” Eve answered after a silence. “I’ll say I can’t go.”

“What are you doing instead?”

“I’m probably just staying at home. It would be different if you were going.”

“It’s complicated but incomprehensible. You’re a good one. Bye for the time being; we’ll talk tomorrow!”

Jessie’s appetite turned capricious. After dinner she drank a glass of milk and ate five oranges. All through the day the sound of the repairs was echoing: hammers were pounding, boards falling, doors banging. She was obliged to put up with this noise because she still had not made up her mind where to go this summer. *Green Flute* was presenting her with a poor alternative but she did not want to live there; taking up residence with acquaintances, even the nicest and most interesting was not in her nature. She had an invitation for the Regards; also from Tordull, a retired admiral, who had five daughters, all of whom

Jessie got on well with, but not to the point where she could easily live under one roof with them. On top of that Jessie was expecting a letter from Gjell-Giu, from a friend from school. If this latter did not receive a visit from relatives – who were awaited with the submissiveness of a creature doomed always to yield – then Jessie could go to Gjell-Giu.

Chapter X

When the heat had abated it became easier to breathe. Feeling tolerably well Jessie travelled out to the other side of the harbour, to the seashore, where a forest track, rising up in an incline, was leading to the sheer wall of a precipice. Here, above the spread-out sea, it was windy and very high up; but higher up again the trees were noising; down below the surf was pawing the shore; the white stripe of it would climb up and again slowly slip off the sand; there, down below the precipice, ran the low road. The carriage came to a halt at a stream where the coachman began to water the horses.

Moving away towards the precipice Jessie stepped up to the edge, all overgrown with grass, of this rocky cliff. Sitting down she took up a stone and threw it. The stone flew down and disappeared; but suddenly it made itself known, banging against the piles of shingle; from above it was possible to make out how the pebbles sprang up. Jessie wanted to cast more stones. She looked around towards the coachman who was looking in her direction. She felt awkward to be amusing herself in his presence and she went off beyond the trees. Here no one was disturbing her. Having collected many stones Jessie began to take them up one by one and, holding her arm up stiff and straight in the

female manner, she threw them overhand into the sea. A stone would go down in an arc and disappear; all that was visible after that were its bounces on the piles of what looked like peas that it was striking. With all her might Jessie flung about ten stones which made her shoulder start aching. Remembering how men throw, she began to imitate their style – hooking the stone between her index finger and thumb and in throwing bending her arm at the elbow; but owing to her lack of skill the elbow kept hitting into her side and the stone would fly out with less force. Then she began to throw as before rotating her arm at the shoulder. It pleased her that the stones became as though a part of herself, a living part, that was going down to a dizzying depth. Suddenly a gust of wind from the rear, striking the back of her head, knocked off her white hat with the satin ribbon, sending it flying directly in front of her eyes out over the precipice. Instinctively grasping the air with her hand Jessie was for one moment off-balance as she was stretching out forwards. She leaned her whole body backwards and fell down on the grass, her eyes shut in her terror. The abyss had looked into her. She lay like that clenching her fists and her teeth until her the beating of her heart had calmed down. Death had had a little joke.

Having recovered her breath Jessie first of all tucked up her feet so as to be sure they were far from the precipice, crawled away and only then did she stand up. The wind had tossed all her hair;

it was tickling her face. Having fixed her hair-do in place Jessie showed up back at the carriage without her hat.

“What a thing to happen,” she said to the coach-driver, “a big bird, must have been some kind of bird of prey, took the ribbon for a seagull, dragged the hat off me and that was the last I saw of it!”

She knew that he would immediately volunteer to look for the lost item if he knew the truth. And she did not want either the bother of that or to be arguing about it. The coach-driver quickly examined the sky and after told about a baby that an eagle had tried to carry off and had then dropped into a baking trough.

Jessie returned to the city; she had become tired and weakened. Gloomy and in a sceptical mood, Jessie wanted to see Eve whose house was almost on the way. Jessie entered the drawing room where Eve met her and told her that there were a few people there. The gathering had gone well; everyone was in a good mood and in general it was fun.

“You’re still pale,” Eve said.

“Again I’m pale?!” Jessie said uneasily. “That’s already been said to me today. Very pale?”

“Not... very. What can be wrong with you? Show me your tongue.”

“Here’s my tongue.” Jessie stuck out a clean tongue and retracted it. “Before I go in I’ll sit down. Could you give me something to drink, please?”

“Straight away. What would you like? Water with lemon? I have lemon squash.”

“Give me a lots of water with a little wine mixed in.” Eve went off and brought the drink herself. Having quenched her thirst Jessie said:

“I don’t have a pain anywhere but I feel strange – as if my body had been swapped: it can’t laugh. And inside there’s an obstacle, a board.”

“Now that Morgiana has gone off you can have a good rest,” Eve said straight out. “She’s sly and she’s wicked.”

Jessie listened to this in silence with her head hanging; then she raised up a distraught face down which a tear was sliding towards her feebly smiling mouth.

“Eve, I have rested.”

“You’ll recover and you’ll be yourself again,” Eve was saying as she came to her to lay a hand on her back. “I want you to come in and join our circle. I hope that it will become circle.”

“I lost my hat,” Jessie announced, becoming animated. “Did I not say that? The wind took it – off the precipice and into the ocean. And that’s where it’s floating now.”

“Frightful!”

“Yes, so it is.”

They entered a not-large hall in which there were five persons: Regard who had just had a look at his watch, Faring, an acquaintance of Eve’s from the Botanic museum and Garenne, the author of some philosophical sketches. Apart from the men Jessie saw Mary Brown, who worked in the office at the museum and Tizba Colbert, a young lady with a heavy face, stout and intense; she was secretary to Professor Miller.

Jessie came in screwing up her eyes after the manner of a certain woman that she had liked.

Eve introduced her to everyone except Regard who said: “Terribly sorry but I have to leave soon.”

As soon as Jessie entered she immediately became the centre of things, something that always happened and towards which she did not make any efforts. She felt this herself from a nuance in the smile of the men and from the tenor of the brief silence that set in as it were wholly by chance. Jessie was a little out-of-sorts, then she got into a good mood. She met the gaze of other women

and learned there that she was pleasant to look at. Then the general equilibrium that had been disturbed by the new event was imperceptibly restored but now already 'in the reign of Jessie'. Slightly jealous that, without even opening her mouth, this girl was established as the most important person there, Eve considered it necessary to restart the conversation with a joke.

"The poor girl came without a hat. Tell us how that happened, Jessie."

"O, very simply," Jessie answered, not without coquetry. "The wind blew and my hat flew off into the sea!" Remembering the fright she got she added: "There was one very unpleasant moment. I tried to grab it and almost went flying off the precipice myself. I started to fall but all the same I fell backwards."

"Were you badly frightened?" Mary Brown asked.

"Very much. The blood rushed to my head."

"Interesting," Tizba Colbert pronounced in the indifferent tone of an adult absent-mindedly observing childish silliness.

"Well, it looks like you narrowly escaped death!" Eve exclaimed, getting excited and, moving to sit by Jessie, took hold of her hand. "And you talk about it so matter-of-factly. I myself once almost fell under the wheels of a train. How it shot past me I

can't even imagine; maybe I shot through the train. Of course, it was instinct that saved me but afterwards you can never recollect that decisive action by which you saved yourself."

The conversation about instinct gradually moved on to animals. Jessie had taken a liking to the Faring's face which was full of humour. He began to make those listening laugh with stories of the pranks of his dog. But still she was impatiently waiting for him to come to a finish because she was again beginning to be tormented by thirst. Finally Eve did notice that Jessie was running her tongue over her lips and she nodded to her. She took her away to the sideboard and saw to it that Jessie thoroughly slaked her thirst. She suspected that it was nothing worse than malaria. Having drunk up the iced soda water the young girl composed herself. As they were returning to the company Eve said that she was expecting an artillery lieutenant named Phineas Detrey, a distant relative on her mother's side, who had recently arrived on official business. She spoke of him as being someone not too bright or interesting. In this Jessie understood that she was holding herself back from using that unseemly word 'stupid'.

On returning they found Regard was about to depart: he was saying his goodbyes. At the same time Tizba Colbert, who had taken an instant dislike to Jessie and had lost the hope of

turning the conversation onto the experiments of Professor Miller in which she was participating, also went away. As he was going out Regard met a military man he did not know in the doorway; limiting himself to a bow he completed his trip towards the way out while this officer came in for everyone to see.

Eve introduced him and, having a slow look around, he sat down. Jessie saw that he was a man of twenty-eight or so, of medium height and regular build. His dark hair was short and thick. His fresh, grey eyes fully corresponded to the taciturn expression of an ordinary, healthy, simple face in which, however, there was no trace of self-satisfaction or coarseness – the good face of an honest person. In greeting he was somewhat clumsy but he smiled – raising an upper lip that was adorned with a small moustache – openly and cheerfully in the way of one whose conscience is at ease.

Having made an observation about the weather Detrey thought that, possibly, he had interrupted an interesting conversation and he settled himself down to listen. In his undemanding readiness immediately to recede into the background there was something that would not allow the focus to move away that, on the contrary, was intensifying the attention directed towards him. That was why for a while everybody was waiting for him to start talking but he was keeping silent.

The presence of the army man, even one related to her, seemed to Eve to be an awkward impediment. As Faring was off telling Garenne about some bit of political scandal Eve, by way of an antidote to the guileless presence of Detrey, returned to a question the discussion of which she supposed would be above the head of an artillery lieutenant.

“Today you had started talking about friendship,” she said to Garenne. “But you didn’t finish. You were interested in this, Jessie. Do you remember our talks? So, Garenne, of course your cynical theory must be picked apart. Jessie and I will engage you with bayonets fixed.”

“I thought that I had made my point entirely,” Garenne answered. “Today, moments of friendship exist at table in the *refectorium*, during major bankruptcies and even between someone proposing an official toast and his subject.”

“Women become friends quite easily,” said Mary Brown. “But for men, apparently, this occurs in connection with a good meal.”

“Friends are something in particular,” Faring remarked. “Friendship is simply a trade-off, sometimes a very profitable one.”

“In a marriage a woman and a man become friends,” Eve stated. “Or if that does not happen the fault doesn’t lie with us. Jessie wants to say something.”

“What is there to say,” the girl answered. “What is wanted must exist. Since it is wanted – this passionate friendship – that means it exists somewhere. And so sometimes it is wanted!”

“You are right!” Detrey answered unexpectedly.

Everyone looked at him, expecting him to expand on these words but he, considering that his contribution was now finished, again made himself ready to listen. The silence hung heavy until Eve said to Detrey:

“Detrey, it isn’t civilised just to throw in a few words; we are waiting.” He grinned and reddened slightly. His thoughts on love/friendship were completely clear to himself but so complex that he could not express them.

“I have in mind the woman-as-friend,” he spoke his thought in words that weakly resembled his actual thought on a closeness that was imperceptible and also indissoluble. “For men this is something totally necessary.”

Jessie looked at him in amazement.

“You are mistaken,” she said gently. “I wasn’t talking about... That isn’t what I wanted to say.”

“In that case, I ask your pardon,” Detrey answered quickly. He was embarrassed.

“I wanted to say,” Jessie continued. “That true friendship does exist somewhere or other and it would be interesting to see it.”

“Of course,” Detrey said, again putting himself in the shade. In her annoyance Jessie turned to Garenne who, in a drawl, had begun to say:

“When I think of the woman-friend, not of the wife or the lover, but of the friend in the temperate sense of that word it’s the face of the *Gioconda* that invariably arises before me. It’s somewhat difficult to talk of her if you don’t have before your eyes...”

“But she is here,” said Eve. “I’ll fetch the miniature, a copy that Stratton bought in Genoa. The general opinion is that the similarity with the original is very great.”

Satisfied that the conversation had regained its former height, thereby dismissing the participation of Detrey who was properly punished on account of his crude and archaic profession, Eve went out. Garenne made some further remarks on friendship that demonstrated his opinion of it as of a beautiful abnormality. Eve brought in a small picture in a velvet frame, about the size

of a book. They all examined the celebrated pursed lips of the *Gioconda*. When it came to Detrey's turn he cast a glance at the representation and said as he was passing the miniature to Jessie:

"Yes, good likeness. I've seen this woman's picture on cigarette packs."

Eve winced and Jessie pretended that she had not heard. In fact she was delighted.

A concentrated silence set in.

"The portrait is astounding," Garenne went on. "There is an opinion that the artist intended a kind of synthesis. But nevertheless, before us is a face with a delicate yet strong, almost muscularly pronounced spirituality which cannot satisfy itself with the friendship of a woman. In these features I see a sign of equality between her and the unknown worthy husband. Harmony, help, analysis, leadership, *sang froid* and wisdom – all of these are present in this face and pose that express a reserved perfection."

He went on in the same spirit of biased improvisation demonstrating that in wishing for the woman-friend a man is searching for qualities, the notion of which arise before the face of the *Gioconda*.

Faring was in agreement with him as he did not have any opinion of his own. Mary remarked that the *Gioconda* was not very beautiful. Eve gaily and excitedly looked for an opportunity to say that ‘the *Gioconda* is not a portrait but a philosophy of life.’ At last she got to say that.

“We probably seem very boring to you, Detrey,” she added, “with our discussions of some Italian woman who died long ago?”

“On the contrary,” Detrey again took up the small picture and examined it closely. “There’s no cause for boredom in this dangerous face. The woman depicted here is dangerous.”

“Why?” Eve asked with amusement.

“It seems to me that she is capable of betrayal or poisoning.”

Garenne gave an anxious sigh; Eve was annoyed; Mary looked at Eve and Garenne; Faring, though he cared nothing for art, found Detrey’s opinion to be indecent and Jessie burst out laughing. Detrey received a silence for an answer; he understood it very well, cursed himself, lay down the picture and again composed himself to listen.

Jessie felt sorry for him and for that reason she considered it necessary to stand up for him.

“You’re right,” she said loudly, astonishing everybody with her words. “That’s exactly the impression I have. This woman reminds me of a nasty, even criminal, thought, hidden like an anonymous letter in a bouquet of poppies and henbane. Look at that sugary, feline mouth!”

“Jessie! Jessie!” Eve cried out.

“You are joking!” said Garenne.

“How could I be joking? I always say what I think in an argument.”

“Jessie has no cunning,” Eve sighed, admiring her face that had turned bright pink. “How different we all are!”

“I am very grateful to you,” said Detrey, jerkily bowing to the young girl. “Now my left flank has cover.”

“What about your right?” objected Garenne who was sitting to Detrey’s right. “I will open fire. You are simply a slanderer, though, of course, an honest one. The same goes for your fervent accomplice. You have unthinkingly united the age in which da Vinci lived, a time of cruelty and of intrigues, with the face in the portrait.

“Let’s suppose that,” Mary objected. “But what about Guido Reni’s *Beatrice*?” Jessie said:

“A man who looks at executions so that he can study convulsions could not draw a pleasing woman; he just gilded a young boy and left him as faded as a boiled fish. I don’t like this cunning fabricator of abstractions, this Vinci of yours.”

“Art is something higher than personal behaviour,” Faring remarked.

“Higher or lower makes no difference,” declared Jessie, composing herself. “I like that *Venus*. Now that is a woman. Big, gratifying, warm. If she had arms she wouldn’t be that interesting.”

“*Venus de Milo!*” said Garenne. “According to the legend the king of Milos ordered that her arms be struck off because he was having a dream in which, apparently, she was strangling him. Soothing woman!”

Jessie dissolved into laughter.

“I think it was the sculptor himself who broke them off,” said the girl through coughing and laughing. “He thought he could improve them but wasn’t able to. Eve, my head is starting to split. I’ll go home.” She touched her hair. “Look, I’d forgotten that my hat got blown off into the sea!”

“There’s something strange,” exclaimed Detrey. “You lost a hat and I found a hat. I was travelling out of Lammerick by the low road and on the crushed stone I saw a hat with a white ribbon.”

Starting up in amazement Jessie stared at Detrey with enormous eyes.

“Don’t say that it’s mine?!” she said both groaning and laughing. No less excited Detrey announced:

“I’ll show it to you this minute. I wanted to tell the story as soon as I arrived but I got distracted by the conversation. Could I really have found your hat? It’s out in the hall, wrapped up. It’s in one piece.”

He went out quickly.

“If it is yours,” said Eve, “then, Jessie, you’re that daughter of Policrates!”

“Ah, I don’t want it to be mine!” Jessie said angrily, tired from the unexpected event and, at the same time, impatiently awaiting Detrey’s return.

“Why?” Garenne asked.

“No reason. Just so.”

In that moment Detrey came in; unrolling a newspaper he revealed, to the amused perplexity of all, Jessie's actual hat. It was intact, merely a little dusty.

Though the young lady was trying hard to seem ironic in her gratitude all the same she was obliged to relate to Detrey the story with the hat. She did this biting her lips as she thought it ludicrous. Finding all that had happened very strange, Jessie burst out laughing towards the end and with her eyes sparkling she set the unexpected find on her head.

Hurriedly taking her leave of everyone Jessie left and arrived home towards eleven o'clock. On her arrival she immediately demanded some water; she had an ill, unhealthy thirst. A little rested, but still weak and troubled the girl got undressed and throwing on a peignoir she sat at the mirror to comb her hair.

"What an awful pallor," Jessie said, stooping to examine herself better. Up till this her sickly sensations had been vague but the sight of this paleness forced her to feel them more distinctly. Anxiety, despondency, a heaviness at the temples – things she had never had – were alarming Jessie with thoughts of a serious illness. At the same time, miserably, she was thinking about Detrey, the hat and the *Gioconda*. These thoughts roamed about without her will having any involvement in them; she idly took note of them, granting that various other different thoughts

might arise which she was powerless to banish. Jessie did not know that her organism was immersed in what was now for it the sole matter of importance – the battle with the poison. Unconsciously participating in this battle she was absent in her thoughts and not able to direct them. Although they were normal they were moving with a strange solemnity.

Hoping that a sleep would put an end to it Jessie lay down on the bed; restlessly turning she fell asleep with some difficulty. A few times she came awake in a state of utter drowsiness, avidly drank water and, growing weak, would lie down again, now throwing off her blanket, now tightly wrapping herself up. The dreams she had were vivid and grim.

Waking up definitively at six Jessie realised that she had fallen sick and she told the maid to get Eve Stratton on the telephone; taking hold of the telephone receiver that was brought to her in bed, Jessie asked Eve's servant to inform her mistress that she was asking her to come as soon as she got up.

Eve arrived at seven o'clock. They discussed it and decided to send for Doctor Surdregh, one of the best doctors in Liss.

Chapter XI

The incident with Jessie's hat occupied Eve's guests for at least half an hour; everyone was astonished at this rare coincidence. Detrey himself was agreeably perplexed by this happy chance; then it seemed to him that they were all having a joke at his expense. His elevated mood disappeared, the more so as his hostess was smiling but made no mention of the find. Indeed Eve Stratton – who dreamt of soirées involving passionate, heated debates saturated with intricate mental labour, after which everything would seem meaningful as in a judicial process – received instead an officer and a hat. She determinedly resolved that henceforward she would only invite those people who were constructing 'the shining city on the hill'. At her age this was, of course, a particular type of childishness that could be explained by an unsuccessful marriage. But Eve took these aspirations she had seriously and respected herself on their account. Detrey she did not respect, something that he soon came to, if not feel, at least think.

Pondering on this Detrey attributed everything to Jessie's hat but he was not able to comprehend the intricate course of female thought and that is why he concluded that, clearly, it was time to leave. He stood up. Wanting to ease herself, for she was to blame,

Eve went with him as far as the way out. Both of them were thinking about the same thing and so, wanting to wash away any romantic sketch-marks, Eve said:

“Did you like my Jessie?”

“Yes,” Detrey did not answer straight away, as he looked directly at Eve and awkwardly but openly laughed. “Yes, I liked her very much. Extremely nice and special.”

“You are eloquent,” Eve remarked, shaking her head. “But don’t imagine that I’m going to tell her about this.”

“Of course!” Detrey exclaimed, taking fright. “I hope not. Especially as you two suit one another so well.”

“Especially?”

“Eve, after three years in Pocquette, I really have forgotten not only how to talk but how to think. I can even muddle up such words as to bake, to baulk and tobacco.”

“Yes,” Eve said, seriously and not at all reproaching herself for the fabrication, “Jessie Trengan is a wonderful girl. A certain person is dragging their feet but I’m sure that she will be getting married in the autumn.”

With a laugh Detrey kissed Eve on the hand.

“Every story has an end,” he said. “Let’s hope that Jessie’s story will end happily and soon.”

“If you want to see me, use the telephone. We’ll arrange it. You weren’t bored?”

“Not at all. I was listening with great interest. In Pocquette we have a poor time of it – our lives and our work are monotonous.”

“But well proportioned like your dress uniform? My conception of military service is roughly: all line up and ‘Charge!’”

“To a certain extent,” Detrey answered, making a wry face. “Goodbye!”

They parted. Detrey was living in Lammerick, in a village inn, as he was completing some topographical assignments with regard to the environs and the river. The soldiers he had brought with him were billeted in the cottages of the local inhabitants. It was late to be returning home, especially as a wind had arisen and the stars were no longer visible.

Coming out onto the street Detrey freed his horse which was tied up near the entrance and, settling himself in the saddle, set off at walking pace, reflecting on Jessie.

‘It’s true I have never met any girls like that,’ Detrey said to himself. ‘But now I do know that they exist. She can beckon –

and you'll go far, you'll go very far – over a thousand miles. Now there is one rarity of a lovely girl!

He thought over all the female acquaintances that fate had sent his way and only in three cases did he find distant traits that somewhat resembled Jessie; of these one case was, strange to say, an old woman, the second was a girl of tender years and only the third matched Jessie in age. This was the wife of Captain Goyle, a warm-hearted but highly-strung woman who sometimes ran along the top of the table. In answer to the question as to why she needed to do this she would say: "I don't know, just in the domestic situation it feels refreshing. Try it yourself." The older woman we mentioned was, at one time, the landlady at his lodgings; she used to bring in the dinner herself; her once beautiful but now withered hand would tremble in laying down the plate and she would recite the same, never-changing, ceremonial words: "Eat up, pet." After such an address Detrey would eat up everything, however much it was, that she placed in front of him. As regards the little girl she can hardly have been three years old and he had never seen her previously. Outstripping a nanny the little girl had resolutely come towards Detrey and, wrapping itself around his legs, said in a thin, persuasive voice: "Uncle man, let's go to our house."

All the other meetings he had were either entertainment or duty. He had decided to pass the night in the city but Detrey still did not want to go to bed. He always had at his disposal a divan in one of the regimental offices; he went there, satisfied himself that his bunk was not occupied by any other pilgrim and, having chatted with the duty officer about news of the orders for the coming day he set out for the divisional club. Everyone had been issued their pay recently and for that reason the bar and the cards-hall were crowded. It was pleasant for Detrey to walk amongst the drunken groups in his own particular mood that no one knew anything about. He met people he knew, amongst them Tirnaur, with whom he had at one time served, and he sat down with him at a separate table.

“So, you still haven’t married,” said Tirnaur, a thickset fellow with cheerful eyes that were always ready to agree, as he looked at Detrey’s hands.

“No, no more than yourself..”

“I came close,” Tirnaur answered. “I don’t know if I’m sorry or not that the thing fell through.”

“What you said there is suspicious in itself,” said a lean, fair-haired officer in a pince-nez, coming up to him. “We have met,” he addressed Detrey. “It was in a courtroom. You were a witness.”

“O, yes,” said Detrey, recollecting the officer’s name. “Please, sit at our table, Bezant.”

“Yesterday I vowed that I would never again play *vint*,” Bezant informed them, sitting down. “But today I somehow forgot about this. Now, my partners didn’t know and damn me if I’ll ever again get an ace of spades in the widow!”

“I was hearing that Johnny Rockert wasn’t having much luck with the widow,” said Tirnaur.

“His luck turned a lot better. His wife helped him out by making a telephone call to say that their house was on fire.”

“But the next time won’t she have to call up an earthquake?”

“She’ll do more than that. Something you can’t say about Anna Sulfide who is losing her husband’s entire salary.”

“Everyone is good in their own way. But what are we drinking?”

“I told them to bring a bottle of rum,” Detrey informed them.

“You’re an optimist,” said Tirnaur. “I’m not so conceited and I’m sticking to champagne.”

“Whiskey and soda,” Bezant said to the orderly and then he hailed a young artillery man who, with his hands thrust into his pockets, was walking past with a concentrated air: “Do you want to sit with us for a while, Lakely?”

“All right,” said the gunner and he took a seat.

All of these men were acquainted with one another; Lakely shook hands with Detrey and was recommended to him by Bezant as the champion marksman at shooting into dovescots. After this they all began to drink.

“Let’s finish up here and go play a hand of *vint*,” Tirnaur proposed.

“Fine by me,” said Detrey.

“Wouldn’t it be better to join the baccarat?” Bezant asked.
“Listen to that racket!”

“Von Wirt is the banker over there,” Lakely informed them in passing but significantly.

“Ah!” said Bezant and they all fell silent.

“Detrey, tell us about Medaloet,” Tirnaur turned to him.
“Everyone used to foretell that he would at least come into a division. Now you never hear about him.”

“Medaloet shot himself,” said Detrey.

“That can’t be so!” exclaimed his listeners. Detrey went on:

“Medaloet was sent to Gjell-Giu to inspect the armoury workshops and in among the rubbish he found an antique pistol.

He noticed that he wasn't able to make out the engraving of the gunsmith's name. A month later he was forced to visit the doctors and they predicted that he might go blind. He smoked opium for a time; then he loaded a bullet into that pistol and did away with himself."

"I declare!" said Bezant.

The smoke of four cigars hid the faces of those conversing.

"I knew him," said Tirnaur. "Something was always preventing him from living a life. Although he did take part in six expeditions and was not once wounded. How are your totties, Lakely?"

"Same as always. And, same as always, they're waiting."

"There's a thought," said Bezant. "I see we're talking about Rosita and Mercedes. I haven't been at their place for ages."

"What do you say, Detrey, with your smile so shrewd?" Tirnaur asked.

"I think it would be better to stay with you rather than to enter into hopeless battle with the springs of an oilskin divan," said Detrey. "I've my quarters in Lammerick and I'm set up for tonight in the regimental office."

“In that case let’s make a collection,” Bezant proposed as inspiration struck him. “Though I bid for the ace of spades, all the same I’ll start first.”

He laid a golden coin on the plate; all the others did the same. An orderly was instructed to fill a basket with cheese, fruit, cans, sweets and twelve bottles; then the orderly took all that down to Bezant’s motor car and the company set off to go to the roadway among the gardens of which was to be found the house of that Rosita and Mercedes promised by Lakely. When Detrey took his seat something was restraining him from giving himself up to the carefree chatter, as if he was just now coming away from Eve Stratton. But the motor car started blasting and this feeling of inhibition disappeared.

Driving past the cavalry barracks the automobile swung to the left towards the distant lights of the outskirts and, sharply pulling the steering wheel at each turn, Bezant conveyed the crew to the top of a roadway in which, hidden by trees, stood a single-storey brick house plunged in darkness.

The car came to a halt and as soon as its noise had abated the travellers saw how from chinks in the veranda lines of light were intersecting.

“They aren’t yet in bed,” said Bezant, going onto the veranda. The window was opened and a half-dressed woman appeared in it; shielding herself with a fan she shouted:

“We’ve been living just on fried eggs for a whole week now!”

“Have you now?” said Tirnaur.

“O, it’s you Tirnaur! Rosita’s in. Rosita, you aren’t sleeping are you?”

“Tell them wait while I’m getting dressed!” came a female voice from within.

Lakely and Detrey brought in the basket and set it down in the middle of the veranda.

“A basket!” exclaimed the unseen Rosita who, for her part, saw everything perfectly. “Here there’s something to eat!”

“Well, it isn’t fried eggs,” said Tirnaur.

“Tirnaur, you’re great! Tirnaur, you’re an angel!” the women cried out and they moved away from the window. The officers settled themselves on the handrail and some chairs, listening to the bustle on the other side of the window which was of short duration; Rosita opened the door and admitted the guests.

Rosita and Mercedes were trick-riders from a circus who had become detached from their troop on account of the wavering

patronage of a certain rich person in the locality; they had lingered on and succumbed to idleness. Mercedes, about twenty-six years old, above average height, was short-tempered, dark-complexioned, black-haired; Rosita, in counterbalance to her, was quick on the uptake, obliging and had ginger hair and a modest face with thick lips that revealed an African forefather. They received their guests, wearing proper muslin dresses; Rosita's was rose-coloured, that of Mercedes sky-blue.

"So are you going to treat us to fried eggs?" Lakely asked.

"You don't expect us to do our own cooking!" Mercedes answered. "Our maid, Sally, has gone away for the whole night and we don't have any other servant. Let's eat what you've brought with you."

They straightened out the tablecloth, on which cards were lying about, and plunged their hands into the basket. Detrey sat off to one side and looked about him. Though he had already been introduced to his hostesses they still did not deem him to be worthy of notice as he was not the main personage. Tirnaur and Lakely were setting the tone.

So Detrey sat looking all about a large room that served both as sitting- and dining room; in the corner there was a passageway leading to a second room in which there were beds; a third, left from the veranda, was empty and lacking in furniture. An

upright piano was standing in the corner; there were two armchairs at the dressing table which was overloaded with jars and albums; nailed to the walls were fans and pieces of fabric; a number of fans were lying about on the upholstered divan. Behind Detrey's back a white and pink cockatoo turned about on its ring and, making a creaking sound with its beak said, with schooled expression: "Hello, old fool!"

Trying not to draw attention to himself, Detrey made use of the fact that Mercedes and Bezant had gone to bring in the automobile, for which the gates had to be opened (otherwise thieves might make off with it) and that Tirnaur and Lakely were handing Rosita bottles, and he went out through the empty room into the yard towards the kitchen. It turned out to be unlocked. Detrey gave a smile, opened the door and rooted out a candle which he immediately lit. In the corner of the kitchen stood a chest packed with straw and eggs – so Mercedes was telling the truth. Piles of eggshells lay along the walls, attracting swarms of flies.

Detrey's solo sortie was to be explained by the fact that he had grown awfully hungry, besides, he wanted to prepare a surprise for the company by serving flame-fried eggs in addition to the cheese and ham which were a bit dull one their own. Finding a string of onions Detrey peeled two of them, chopped them up and

mixed them around in a big frying pan with salt. He poured in a splash of olive oil from a wicker bottle, then cracked in near two dozen eggs; whereupon he lit the patent spirit stove and set the frying pan on top of the garland of blue flames. This entire procedure took no more than ten minutes; the scrambled eggs were already sizzling and bubbling when behind Detrey's back were intoned the profoundly thoughtful words: "Main thing is it doesn't burn." He turned and saw Bezant, Tirnaur, Lakely, Rosita and Mercedes; they were all respectfully drawn up in rank and observing the cooking.

"Mind you don't overcook them," said Tirnaur. "According to all cookbooks scrambled eggs shouldn't be frying longer than four minutes."

"If there aren't onions," Detrey contradicted.

"O, you put in onions!" said Bezant. "In that case you needn't put out any plate for me."

"God! The very thing we're sick of again!" Rosita cried out. "Well, as punishment, you can eat it all yourself!"

"Well, I'll give him a hand," said Mercedes.

"What about me?" Lakely exclaimed. "I want some scrambled eggs too!"

“Let us finish the cooking now,” announced Rosita and pushed Detrey to one side.

At last the frying pan was brought into the front room and the food divided out into plates, during which time the women were constantly leaping up, suddenly remembering things which, with the disorder of their life, were to be found in various corners; spoons and knives were located with difficulty. The mechanical corkscrew, however, was in plain sight and Lakely opened all the bottles; wine rose to heads and a drinking session and with it a discordant chatter became firmly established in the quiet house in the uninhabited street. But Detrey, though he made every effort to fit in with the tone, was neither drunk, nor was he being himself here; no one knew this but he was feeling it himself.

Having played two arias on the mandolin Detrey got up from the divan and passed over to an armchair; a thick album was lying on the low table in front of him. He had only just opened it out when Mercedes, whose interest in this man had suddenly increased, came up and, standing just behind his shoulder, said genially:

“You’re so glum! Tired after scrambled eggs! You don’t have any objections to making nice for a bit, have you?”

“Being nice... To who?” Detrey answered absent-mindedly. She was standing so close that his shoulder got warm. However, the

feeling of a mysterious gift would not leave Detrey and he was again the person he had been when he left Eve Stratton.

“Well, that’s plain, if I’m talking to you...” Mercedes did not finish talking and she moved away.

“Tirnaur was thinking about you all evening,” said Detrey and he turned over a page of the album.

“That’s me with the hairband,” Mercedes stated, panting with an irritation which made her words seem abrupt. “That’s me with the horse. That’s Rosita. She’s the one in the pantomime ‘Pikes and Carps’. Do you want some wine? No?! There’s no understanding you.”

Mercedes went away, branding her fan as if it was a sword. Detrey glanced back and saw that she had her elbows sticking out and was pouring out a full glass for herself; at the same time Rosita, sitting between Bezant and Lakely, was making them guess which hand she was holding a nut in.

Detrey, somewhat embarrassed, joined their company. Casting a look at him with vacant eyes Mercedes drank up another glass and, by force, pulled the bottle out of the hands of Tirnaur who wanted to prevent her from pouring out a third. However, the bottle was almost empty and she threw it over her shoulder. The

parrot cried out: “Let us Godam drink!” and burst into loud guffaws.

“Now she’s going to kick up a ruckus,” Tirnaur whispered to Detrey. “A constant story, unfortunately.”

Mercedes was pale and silent. They were all looking at her. Suddenly she tore the tablecloth off the table so quickly and deftly that the guests hardly got the chance to jump up – and all the bottles, glasses, the frying pan, the entire jumble of the drunken fare flew down onto the floor with a crash.

“Did you get drunk enough?” Rosita said spitefully, wiping splashes of wine from her dress. “Ooh, I hate you!”

“Get him out! Out with him!” yelled Mercedes, tearing herself out of Tirnaur’s hampering embraces. “How dare he put himself in charge of the kitchen?! He’s a scoundrel! Why was he brought here? Let him clear off and all the devils in hell along with him or I’ll cut my throat this minute!”

“I’d better go,” Detrey said to Bezant. “When I’m gone she’ll calm down.”

“Did something happen between you?” Lakely inquired.

“Absolutely not!”

In the meantime the troublemaker had been persuaded to go into the next room. In going out Detrey glanced over there and saw that Mercedes, gloomily sobbing, was smoking, sitting on a chair alongside Rosita who was reasoning with and comforting her. Apparently peace was within touching distance.

“Is that one cleared off?” Mercedes said to her friend.

“Already gone,” said Rosita. “Put on some powder and go back in. Now, this is just ridiculous!”

“Oo-oo, that good-for-nothing,” Mercedes hissed, banging her fist on her knee. Detrey winced and, having taken his leave of his friends, he went out onto the roadway. It was beginning to dawn; when half an hour later he appeared in the regimental office where he wanted to pass the night, it was morning. Mounting his horse he galloped off to Lammerick. On arriving home, feeling that he was not capable of working today, he lowered the blinds, undressed himself and instantly fell asleep.

Chapter XII

Nature will usually place a counterbalance to a person's ugliness in the feelings they themselves have; if this person denied of attractiveness has any feature at all that is good – eyes, feet, hair or voice, they often have sufficient comfort in that much. Others among them have been rewarded with unconcern or even kindness and intellect. Finally there is self-deception, convincing oneself of the possession of qualities of a different order: talent, refinement, originality, the capacity to arouse an unconscious fondness. Ugliness gives way, is softened, if such qualities are actually present; if they are not it is no rarity to encounter a melancholy forbearance towards the blindness and rudeness of people in the round.

This most complicated matter is resolved through habit, conceit and nobility irrespective of the results of the resolution. The exceptions to this are tragic and they are rare; Morgiana Trengan constituted just such an exception, knowing herself as she did without any illusions, having a precise conception of how her life would be if she had been a normal young woman and with an awareness of the corporal prison that deformed her, just as is the case with a passionate and malevolent prisoner locked away for his entire life.

Morgiana travelled out to *Green Flute* with a determination not to return until the final deterioration of Jessie's health. The inescapability of spending a few last days by the bedside of her poisoned sister did not frighten her much in the sense that she might give herself away or draw on suspicion. No one would be expecting from her either much sobbing or tumultuous grief and, with the eccentricities of her character, such natural feelings might give rise to perplexity. Restraint and sorrow – such was her undemanding role, more especially as the poisoning had for her turned Jessie into something else. For a long time now Jessie had not been her sister but an ache in the form of a young, beautiful woman. Now she was thinking of Jessie as a pain that had passed off. Many times Morgiana had killed and had buried her. The reality was not more striking than her frightful daydreams – it was simple and black, like a full-stop puncturing the page, placed at the end of a letter full of hatred. That hatred and love are akin to one another is a false opinion; its only value exists in that it makes one think. Love is love.

Morgiana was stunned and tranquil. Little by little her breathing became deeper, her movements more sure; she did not have a full consciousness of what had happened and she was not striving after it. Tired by all this agitation she began to think of how she would soon be wealthy, since following Jessie's death she was in line to receive such a sum as would make any kind of

change easy to manage. She had already considered what she would do if feelings of repentance came to torment her; in that event, she had decided that she would put herself in the hands of a hypnotist and, sparing no expense, make herself forget. The prospect of the money enlivened her; although this was not what she had in mind when she was preparing Jessie's death, however, wealth would be the natural consequence of this crime. She would be able to move away to join a different part of society, carefully to study the company of men there and to compel one of them to suffer her ugliness. Coming to a halt at the gleaming edge of this secret acuity of her mind, she thought that it made sense to buy a weak-willed, beautiful chap and, indulgently smoothing out his moustache, to listen how he would lie to her in his tone, his voice, his words, with his entire being, gradually making himself ugly within, after her manner. Morgiana cheered up a little in developing the details; then she drooped, her mood fell and she occupied herself with the inspection of her environs.

A reaction set in. With a morose, barren irony Morgiana was observing the changing landscapes. The decline brought about a physically troubling state and, confusing this with a mental anxiety, she began to look for what might be causing it. Showing all the suspiciousness that is characteristic of the criminal, she recollected how she had poured in the poison, the scene with

Jessie, the face of the maid and, however hard she tried to, she could not find a source of danger – neither in her words nor in her movements; there was only that glass that had stopped effervescing that might in the aftermath make Jessie start thinking about that strange morning visit of her sister. But the solution of that point had a psychological character; in her opinion, in the worst case, Jessie would only be able to suspect and she would say nothing.

The road went by broad turns, in among crags and wooded precipices, up a slanting incline. After a trip of an hour's duration *Green Flute* came to light – a wild and windy place, set in the middle of an encroaching forest. This latter extended from the precipice as far as the seaside crags. At last the motor car came to a halt in front of the old stone gates with an iron railing. Leaving the servants to put away the baggage, Morgiana passed through into the house, changed her clothes and summoned Hobson. In her conversation with him she did not, on this occasion, express either suspiciousness or any quibbles; silently she viewed the list of expenses, the bills, handed over the money and ordered him to report every week on what had been spent.

Everything had already been discussed, a silence had set in and the steward was collecting his papers so that he could leave but Morgiana was agonisingly, hurriedly thinking up something to

start speaking about again, in order to escape the emptiness. This void within, which always opened up suddenly, both frightened and tormented her. So she began putting questions. Hobson, a man of about forty with a fleshy, sorrowful face and a laboured expression in his old eyes, suggested taking down the stone shed which was cutting off the sun from the part of the garden on the courtyard side. Morgiana came to life and the steward soon regretted having brought up the topic of the shed; Morgiana began interminably calculating the expenses and wearied him with unnecessary debate.

He had hardly left her when that void again formed within her. It was like the vacancy of a keyhole through which is visible a locked and abandoned dwelling. Not wanting to eat she drank up her tea and then began to walk through the rooms, thoroughly examining each of them so as to find cause for dissatisfaction. However, before her coming, the maid had gone to every length so as to avoid reprimand. Thoroughly beaten carpets, shining brass on door-handles and fireguards, flowers in the dining room and bedroom – all things had come to life, awaiting her attention. Morgiana never could forget Harriet Malcolm; the memory of the woman was tormenting and constricting her. ‘That was how it was,’ said Morgiana, ‘Harriet Malcolm has come back but in a different form. Each Harriet has a hundred faces and I’m only one of them.’

This comparison, tormenting as something shameful, stirred her up so much that all the blood rushed to her brain; Morgiana leaned against the grand piano and closed her eyes. There came about such a clarity, such a flawless purity and fullness of thoughts on hatred and on tenderness that the things, simply in being around her, became audible. The pendulum of the clock, which was pointing out the silence, pushed on time with its precise and ringing contacts. Its voice recalled the regular fall of drops on a taut string. Morgiana listened and felt that in the exhausted stillness of her thoughts a recollection was sneaking up. Not yet knowing what it was, she comprehended its nature and made haste to go out, to put a stop to it by way of movement. But this opposition instantly and precisely outlined the light shaft of memory. With a sigh she dwelt on it with alarm and with repugnance. It was the memory of the fall of the drops of poison into the glass with the water. She felt again in her right hand the stress of the fear in which, quivering and hastening, she poured in the poison. It seemed to her as though the clear water was a living being and that the poison had wounded it fatally. A keen sense of pity enveloped her but this was not a pity for her sister. With a shudder she saw her own hand, curved like a beak, the silent flash of the drops – she turned pale and got up with a start. ‘Might it be from this quarter that the danger comes?’ Morgiana thought. Her thoughts took a strange turn and

she first of all decided that she would never drink from a glass. Next she hurriedly went up to the bedroom, removed the scent bottle with the poison from the small trunk and began to devise how she would destroy it without leaving a trace. She could not hide the bottle anywhere in the house without a morbid apprehension that it would come to light, however well she hid the remains and, though it was only her own confession that she had to fear, her fevered imagination was inventing such chance events which only exist as a startling exception.

While she was still thinking, dinner-time came; after locking up the bottle in a drawer of the table, Morgiana went into the dining room where she made herself eat a little and to drink the coffee. But she was still seeing that bottle. After the meal she went out across the terrace and through the garden door into the forest to the narrow, rocky fissure. She was afraid to throw the bottle into this fissure, lest she would be afterwards thinking obsessively about its secret existence. She took up a stone and, having poured out the poison on the grass, she carefully smashed the bottle to pieces and then scattered the fragments as far apart as possible. She even threw the stone on which she had crushed the glass away down and, reassured, she sat down to rest under a tree. A desire to sleep came upon her; she sank to the ground and slept two hours through. On waking up there was a moment

when she did not know where she was or what had happened with her. Recollecting herself she stood up and hurried home.

As she was walking, the evening came on. The sky was cloudy and the wind had died down; the silent forest was already harbouring patches of darkness. Passing through the gates Morgiana saw, on the steps of the outbuilding, the Hobson family: his burly, ever-frowning wife, the two boys, playing on the lower step, and Hobson himself who hurriedly got to his feet as soon as he caught sight of his employer. His wife also stood up, giving slaps to her sons to stop them of screeching; from the uncomfortable motions of these persons Morgiana guessed at their vexation to be now in service to an old maid with a wicked tongue, after that so beautiful, kind and hot-tempered dancer. With one voice all the Hobsons wished Morgiana a good evening. Deciding to replace all the domestic servants Morgiana halted, intently looked them all over, nodded and went through the entrance. Summoning Netty, the maid, Morgiana had her supper and she ordered her tea to be brought at around ten o'clock .

Since the time when Harriet Malcolm had flitted from her golden nest, on Trengan's instruction, nothing had been disturbed in the décor of her bedroom and her boudoir. He himself never entered these rooms, afraid of the torments that would cause him an apoplexy; Morgiana never went in there out of hatred. Malcolm's

things – six chests – were in what had been her bedroom. The keys to these chests, like all the keys of the house were in Morgiana's possession. According to the will, the house and all its contents belonged to her but the plan and the resolution to unlock the chests were only occurring to her now when she had accomplished something greater. She wanted to see the beautiful belongings of a beautiful woman so as to experience pain, anger and hatred. Moreover she wished to feel herself fully the mistress – of all these possessions of an other that had become hers.

Opening the door of the upstairs corner room Morgiana lit candles on the dressing table and gloomily had a look around.

This dressing table was sumptuous. Objects of crystal, gold, silver and porcelain were reflected in its mirrors. Morgiana stood to one side of the mirror so as not to see herself. Only the line of her curved shoulder and her ponderously hanging hand were visible. By the right-hand wall, on a dais that had two steps, down which hung the paws and the heads of tiger-skins, a dainty foot, sleepily reaching out of the bed would land upon the tickling warmth of the fur. The satiny white blanket, valuable lace and down, silver bed, gauze baldaquin patterned with silver flowers – all these things expressed the adoration of a woman and her caprices. The enormous mirrors with their golden frames in the

form of the figures of fauns or bacchantes were like garlands surrounding the entrances to the brilliant reflections. The silk upholstery of the walls depicted bouquets of roses scattered in a white fog in an intricate pattern.

In various places, not blocking up the centre of the room, were a number of tall travelling trunks.

Morgiana drew up a chair to one of the chests, settled down on it and selected a key. The candles made it bright around the mirror but it was half dark in the corners, so Morgiana placed them by the trunk. Throwing back the lid she saw that the trunk was solidly packed; on top lay a piece of bright silk, covering up the lingerie.

At the sight of these things, purchased with such frenzied generosity, abandoned with detestation, then again gathered together neatly by someone's indifferent hand, Morgiana began to feel a melancholy and a delight; her hands turned cold; her heart beat agitatedly and heavily. Breathing nervously she began to take out the things and lay them out upon the floor, consumed by a passion to get to know to its very bottom this forbidden world. There were so many things there, shoved in and compressed down in the trunk, that they rose up from below by themselves in accordance as the weight of what was placed on top was being removed. These were layers, too numerous to

count, of the most delicate white materials with ribbons or with lace that, if it was moved, floated about in the air as weightlessly as smoke. The luxurious, grandiosely shameless underwear glided in Morgiana's hands; in the enormous trunk she was rummaging in was a snow-white chaos. Around her, on her knees, on the folded back lid, was the whiteness of heaps of select, dazzling witnesses of sleep and of love.

Taking one chemise Morgiana squeezed it in her hand, feeling almost like she was holding nothing, and, having squeezed it even more powerfully, she dropped it onto the carpet. It fell as if it was a crumpled batiste scarf. She looked in amazement at the tiny ball. The essence and practical significance of this precious linen was overshadowed when considered alongside of its quality and price; these were expensive ornaments, rather than items of the first – or even of the third – importance. Their fascination had an effect akin to that of a melody. Her throat parched, already down on her knees in front of the trunk, Morgiana had not the strength either to stop or to gainsay herself. At last the trunk was emptied. On its bottom there remained a yellow ribbon and a pearl button.

Morgiana's legs had gone numb. Raising herself up she stood awhile, holding onto the side of the trunk. "This is mine," she said, tossing up Harriet Malcolm's fancy underclothes with her

foot and avidly examining them. An inner voice, hard like a blow from a fist into the face, was raised in objection but now she was not indignant. The song of the beautiful under-garments sounded within her frightful soul; she smiled and she broke into sobs.

As soon as the fit had passed Morgiana wiped her eyes and went on to the next trunk. It was taller than the first one and longer and inside it had a great number of compartments. Searching out the key she raised up the heavy lid and fixed it open with the propping bar and removed the sheets of newspaper held together with pins. Already more calmly than had been the case at the first trunk, she extracted ballroom dresses, items of morning and evening attire, ballet tutu's, *sorties-de-bal*, silken *tricots*, scarves, boas and spread them out on chairs with the neatness of a maid. Having begun in spite she was now filled with respect for this world that had created for woman a unity with her wardrobe. Her head was dull as though after an illness; her thinking out of kilter. She had never before held in her hands such beautiful things, things that seemed to be in love with themselves; their particular smell, in which predominated a weak scent of perfume, reminded one of lights above grand doorways and balls. From the measurements of the dresses she imagined Malcolm's figure as exactly as if she was actually looking at her medium-sized, mobile and flexible body. She returned to wakefulness alongside the third trunk, holding an opened case in her hands;

from their satiny nest a large set of pearls hung out. On her knees lay sparkling bracelets.

“So, there’s more than you can look through,” said Morgiana, compelled by tiredness to return to her usual state. “This is how a woman is loved if she is beautiful and attractive. Why am I torturing myself going through all of this? What does this Harriet Malcolm mean to me?”

She abruptly went to the mirror. From inside the well-decorated glass her misshapen features shone out. All the impressions derived from this riot among Harriet Malcolm’s things had poisoned her sick brain and supported it in this moment by a strange phenomenon. Her despair was strongly rejecting her own image... She saw how everything in the mirror had changed; it was not the reflection that had changed, the sombre form vanished and a woman wrapped in gauze and flowers, with a bejewelled diadem on her dark hair looked at her out of the mirror with a pale and delightful face. Her eyes shone, she was smiling with childish disdain...

A knock at the door interrupted what Morgiana had wanted to say to herself. She went to the door and opened it. Netty came in but stepped back out the door again, looking at her employer in dismay. Morgiana’s head was trembling, on her arm hung a kid-glove that was not tightened all the way along.

“The tea is served,” the girl said.

“Tea?” Morgiana said, not understanding.

“Yes, tea, like you ordered. It’s ten o’clock now.”

“Is tea that important?!” Morgiana said, both smiling and frowning. “There are things more important than tea, Netty. But I’m coming. I’ll drink your tea.”

Chapter XIII

When she had not received fateful news about Jessie by the second day of her return to *Green Flute* Morgiana maintained a calm and had faith in her project. But on the third day she awoke in an agonised mood. She had had ominous dreams. After breakfast Morgiana summoned Netty and said to her:

“I’ve forgotten a few things; I find that I need them so could tell the driver to go with this note to our town-house and bring back everything that’s on the list?”

Her true aim was to find out about Jessie’s condition: if she had fallen ill the driver would find out about this through conversations with the household staff. In the meantime Netty who had folded the note and put it into her pocket was slow about leaving; to Morgiana’s question whether she was in need of anything the maid said:

“Begging your pardon, Miss, I’ve been wanting to ask: will your sister be coming here too?”

“No, she won’t be coming here to stay,” Morgiana answered, irritated. “But why are you worrying about that?”

“I wasn’t... Your little sister is so nice and we were wondering... One time she was here with us, and we all remembered it long after, how she sat up on the roof and ordered us not to say a word; and you were looking for her in the garden.”

“I’m very pleased that you are all so attached to Jessie; but I’m also sorry to say that she won’t be coming to stay here. So then, send the driver to do that straight away.”

Netty bowed and went away. Now Morgiana began to carry out a plan that had occurred to her the day before while examining Harriet Malcolm’s things. Abandoned in her trunks were lingerie, dresses and jewellery worth tens of thousands; with these belongings converted to money she would be able to flee, in the event of things taking a perilous turning, without being dependant on Jessie’s money; for in that case she would not be able to touch it without being in danger of landing in prison. Morgiana went up to the room with the trunks; there from the three trunks she selected the most valuable and, taking up a sheet of paper, began to draw up an inventory. The day before she had seen only fanciness and splendour; today each item was revealing to her, with an approximate accuracy, its price.

First of all she set aside four necklaces: one of diamonds, one emeralds, one pearls and one rubies. Following this were twenty-three rings, most with diamonds but among them were also some

of sapphire, alexandrite, moonstone, tourmaline and jacinth. Bracelets with large pearls, eight brooches of rare and precious workmanship, diamond aigrettes, some very old lace fans of antiquarian value and also adorned with illustrations by Gamont and Coignet were worth no less than the diamonds. The final entry on this splendid inventory was a torn off page of a notepaper sheet on which stood one entry – the word ‘tired’.

The column of figures drawn up by Morgiana, who could not understand why that capricious woman had so carelessly tossed aside Trengan’s presents, was suggesting so considerable a sum that Morgiana reduced it by half, thinking that she had exaggerated the value of the precious items. However, even by that measure the sum was coming to eight thousand pounds and she was so agreeably stunned by her estimate that she could no longer stay in the room. In addition to this Malcolm’s remaining possessions, even sold at a third of their value, also represented a considerable sum. She decided not to talk to anyone about what she had found out and, wishing to think over how she could most profitably and quickly sell everything, she locked the valuables in one of the trunks and set off for a walk.

Behind the house a patch of thick grass was extending as far as a small group of old trees, separated from the rest of the forest by a winding slope. As the day was warm Morgiana went down into

the hollow and walked along that path, making for the lake which lay below *Green Flute*. There she intended to bathe and to sit for a while in the shade of the foliage; stepping slowly, Morgiana finally came to the decision that she would sell a portion of the things in town and then bring out jewellers to *Green Flute* so as to sell off all the rest without impediment or any unnecessary talk. From the circumstances of the matter it was quite impossible to judge whether or not Trengan knew of the contempt displayed by Harriet to his amorous extravagance. It was reliably known that after her departure he did not look either into her trunks or into her room; he was immediately taken ill and passed away shortly after that. It might be that Harriet wrote to him; she had her own maid who had left with her; only this one could have so efficiently packed up everything into trunks; because Morgiana's staff did not know what was in the trunks, nor even how many of them there were; Morgiana had taken possession of the keys immediately after the reading of the will and had not parted with them. At all events, the sale of the things cast off by Harriet could not be carried out publicly for fear that by way of gossip and whisperings after Jessie's demise, a certain kind of opinion might not come into being.

At this point Morgiana felt tranquil and, so as to shorten the way, turned off into a path that cut across a part of the forest. Shortly after this she heard some female voices. The foliage was

blocking her view; the voices sounded confident, with a shade of serenity and of laziness – the voices of girls arguing, calling out and exclaiming, more out of a need to produce sounds than by reason of any other causes. Morgiana halted with a disagreeable feeling; she did not want to return but she did not know if by continuing with this path, she would be passing by the jolly company; turning aside also did not seem to be possible as she would risk ripping her summer dress in the thicket. To those women having their laugh not too far off from her she felt disdain and aversion such as, possibly, a wild boar does at the sight of a goat. Absent-mindedly going another bit forwards, Morgiana suddenly saw the girls. Now it was too late to turn as they had also seen her.

At a few paces away from Morgiana, in between two huge stones, ran a long cleft along which her path was going. And it was here, in the shadow of these stones, that nine girls from the village that lay not far from *Green Flute* had settled themselves to take a rest. They were going bathing and angling for fish. Morgiana saw a gathering of bare legs which immediately cleared off the path and hid themselves in skirts, hardly had she appeared. She examined them all with a sidelong look and felt a vengeful ache at the sight of these dark and fair-haired creatures with their fresh, tanned faces gone foolish from the heat, sitting and reclining with the carefree elegance of youth. In the meantime

the girls, seeing that she was unsure about walking past them, suddenly fell silent, leapt up and positioned themselves on both sides of the parting; tightly squeezing their lips so as not to burst out laughing, nudging one another on the sly, they stood like that, looking straight ahead of themselves with an irrepressible spark in their eyes.

Seething with rage, Morgiana passed through this blooming formation and quickened her step so as to hide herself the sooner beyond the turning. Hardly had she gone past the stones when behind her an outburst of loud laughter rang out, spreading outwards through the wood. Morgiana came to a stop; her heart was banging painfully, heavily; she slowly breathed out and said: "Very well."

"Very well," she repeated, when the haze of anger had dispersed, but in such a tone that would make even a person of steady nerves grow thoughtful. 'In any case there's one of you shapely, cheerful people who no longer exists. She's still there at the moment but it's just the same as if she longer existed. Let's see if something of the kind doesn't yet happen somewhere to the likes of you. It isn't important it won't be you yourselves; it'll be the same kind. You're all fine and happy, will I not be happier?'

Beside herself on account of the cruelty she began to devise torments, traps, executions and taunts and applied them by

thousands. Now she could kill without a shudder a crowd — entire cities of girls. Diabolical daydreams took possession of her and visions, each more terrible than the last, succeeded one another in her terrible fancies. However this explosion of fury gradually subsided; then Morgiana saw that that this vengeful delirium had brought her deep into the woods. Noticing a meandering glade that was as suitable for walking as a path, Morgiana went along it and soon saw the water. This was a not-large cove, separated from the main lake area by cliffs that jutted out into the water. On this bank the splashing and the laughter was audible but on account of the cliffs no one could be seen. Coming closer Morgiana suddenly saw a tall, slim girl, standing up to her knees in the water, in the shade of a steep cliff. The girl was naked; standing with her back to Morgiana, she was braiding her black hair, intending to wrap it around her head.

At the sight of this unprotected figure Morgiana moved off beyond the cliff and had a look around. She felt a longing to attack a pretty enemy. Turning reckless, Morgiana picked up a sharp stone from out of the rushes and clambered along the sloping side of the cliff where, among the hollows and lumps, it was impossible to see her from the other bank; she crawled up as far as the brim and had a look down. The girl had already fixed her hair in place and was now tightening a dark blue headscarf

around her head. If Morgiana had been a puma she would have been able to spring down onto the bathing woman's shoulders. She took a good breath, held up the stone and flung it at the girl's head, then immediately flattened herself against the cliff. A terrible cry rang out then loud lamentations of fear and pain. The stone had hit not the head but her back, just below the neck. The girl began to swim hastily, crying for help. Morgiana came down from the cliff and, panting, ran into the wood, trying to get as far as possible away from the lake. It seemed to her like she was being pursued. She was mistaking the sound of her own footsteps for a pursuit. However nobody was chasing and, savagely smiling, she stopped by a big tree and looked out from behind the trunk. Her anger had passed off; she was pleased and she burst out laughing. "Anyway I landed better than you did," Morgiana said; her calm had returned; she made a detour and arrived back home at almost the same time as the automobile which had just then rolled into the yard. The driver handed her a packet; Morgiana passed it over to Netty for her to take it into the room and she asked:

"Did my sister ask you to convey anything?"

"I didn't see Miss," the driver said. "They were saying there that she was feeling unwell and that she had ordered the work on the house to be postponed."

“Since she didn’t write then it doesn’t look like it can be anything serious,” Morgiana remarked. “However I’ll have to call over if that news is confirmed by a note from her. And didn’t she get her feet wet the day before yesterday?”

Knowing now for sure that the poison was acting as it was supposed to she felt a great relief. In a calm and businesslike mood Morgiana spent the day on chores; she gave orders that the curtains in the sitting room be changed, the furniture rearranged here and there; herself she inspected the table- and bed-linen and the silver; she dropped into the pantry where, without it really being necessary, under her personal supervision, all drawers, tins and sacks were dragged out, the floors and the walls were examined and mouse-holes tightly stopped up. Having finished one job Morgiana would think up another; if she could not devise something quickly enough so as to pass immediately from one occupation to the next, she became agitated as if at some loss. Seeing nothing more, finally, that she could superintend herself, she discovered some disrepair in the stove and ordered that it be mended; she instructed that the barn be whitewashed, the glass panes of the balcony door cleaned, the pictures moved from one wall to another and then hung higher. Feeling no tiredness, she scurried about the house, speaking quickly and irritably, not listening to any objections,

asking about a multitude of things all at once, catching the servants out in contradiction and mistakes.

When dinner-time came Morgiana sat down to table and, still not dismissing Netty, she questioned her about various trifles of the housekeeping. After the meal she wanted to go with the gardener into the garden so as to discuss which flowers to select and transfer to the balcony but at this point, suddenly, the impulse driving her on ceased within her: now everything seemed to her difficult and tedious. It had already grown dark; Morgiana went from the lighted rooms into the semi-dark bedroom, sat down in the armchair and gave herself up to thoughts of the dying Jessie. However much she was deceiving herself the whole day, she was thinking only about that – consciously or unconsciously. Her unease was intensifying; the more safe her mind was making her crime out to be, the more greatly she was tortured by misgivings; however much she struggled with them, proving to herself the absence of any evidence, it seemed to her that the whole town was full of rumours and of suspicions. Possibly the driver had already heard from the servants such things as he did not dare to believe in. If that was so then a wild guessing wind had also begun to blow into *Green Flute*; this gossip would spread from house to house, from hint to hint and the more fantastical they became, the closer they would approach the truth. And what about medicine – is it really powerless to detect a case of

poisoning, even if it is with such a poison, the action of which develops little by little? Moreover, Jessie saw how Morgiana was standing by the tray. What thoughts might a young girl taken ill with a vague and complicated disease not happen upon?

She was gripped by a fear and she was no longer able to control herself. What had happened at the lake rose up sharply in her dark memory, now appearing to be an event more dangerous than a denunciation. If the victim's friends had from afar caught sight of so little as the hem of a navy sleeve, flashing from behind the rock face, they would explain the injuring of the girl as nothing other than a fit of rage on the part of Morgiana, whom they had at that time seen off with an outburst of careless guffawing. It was possible that someone or other had even witnessed this entire scene from the side; whether in the woods or between four walls it is impossible to be completely at ease that there are no witnesses. It would be enough that Morgiana be exposed on the matter of the bathing girl for reflection to lead all the way to her sister's bed. Knowing everything about herself, she feared that others knew the exact same amount about her and, in order to drive away these awful thoughts, she rang and ordered Netty to bring in the lamp. As soon as the maid brought in the lamp, an elusive motion on Netty's face made her suspicious.

“What do mean, giving me a look like that?” she said severely.

“O, good Lord!” Netty answered. “I beg your pardon, Miss. It’s just that when I brought in the light, I saw how pale you are and I thought that you might be unwell.”

“Well, no, I am healthy,” Morgiana returned with annoyance. “And my paleness can be explained by the fact that I heard a knock below my window and I got a fright. Do robberies and attacks happen in these parts?”

“They used to happen a lot before but for a long time you didn’t hear of anything like that. Till today.”

“How unpleasant! Where was this and who was burgled?”

“There was no robbery, Miss. But look what happened to a girl from Mancarn – you know the village that’s nearer the cape, going that way? Mancarn is where we get our eggs, vegetables and dairy stuff. The girl’s name is Tilly Ballmet. Her friend, Jenny Motey called to me lately to bring back a dress I had lent her for the dancing. Well anyway, Tilly was out bathing and had moved away from her friends and somebody, no one knows who, threw a stone at her from behind and so well-aimed that it cut through the skin and damaged a disk in her neck; the doctor was saying it’s possible that from now on it’ll be difficult for her to turn her head.”

“How awful!” Morgiana exclaimed. “And who is this fiend who maimed the girl?”

“No one knows anything, Miss. The young lasses didn’t see anyone by the shore.”

“What a low deed,” Morgiana repeated. “A vile and pointless crime, isn’t that so? I feel so terribly sorry for this Tilly Ballmet. She probably feels wretched, especially if she is beautiful.”

“Beautiful?! Not a sign of it! Of course, she isn’t an ugly girl but Jenny is much better looking than her. They’re saying that they saw you when you were passing along the same path; so if you noticed – that one who’s a bit taller than the others, dark, in a light blue dress – that’s her, that was Tilly.

“Well, of course, I didn’t pay attention. Hand me my reticule. It’s lying there on the table.”

When Netty brought the handbag, Morgiana opened it up and took out ten golden coins.

“Pass this money along to Tilly Ballmet,” said Morgiana to the dumbfounded Netty. “Let the unfortunate girl comfort herself with some simple purchase. I hope that she will not want to receive a further treacherous attack for the sake of another ten guineas but if that did happen, of course, I will gladly give her what I can.”

“God will bless you for your kindness!” the woman answered, accepting the money. “Sure, she’ll be delighted!”

“That’s as may be. So go and do what you were told.”

Netty went away and Morgiana, pleased with her own cunning, thought: “If these ninnies had started to have wild notions about me then the ten guineas won’t fit together with a stone in the back. Most likely they will now feel sorry that they treated the dear old maid, who was so generous and compassionate, with such impertinence.”

Meanwhile no one was suspecting her. After the tea Morgiana counted through the remaining things of Harriet Malcolm’s, made a list of them and decided that in the morning she would set off for town so as to negotiate with the jewellers.

That night she slept through peacefully but she arose jaded and gloomy as if after a difficult voyage. At the same time as she was preparing herself and getting dressed, a dangerous visitor was making her way towards her along this morning’s cheerful path.

Chapter XIV

Doctor Surdregh examined Jessie with close attention but, for all the conscientiousness of the examination, he was not able definitively to identify any kind of disease. He was not disheartened as he had known a good many severe ailments, in the aftermath quite evident, that began their destructive work in the midst of contradictory symptoms; with the most confidence he suspected malaria, the hidden forms of which are very varied. Surdregh forbade noise, fatigue, set a diet and prescribed cinchona. Jessie was complaining of weakness and of thirst; Surdregh recommended that she drink coffee cold and in small mouthfuls. The refurbishment was halted; an unusual silence reigned in the house; a nurse arrived on the scene and Eve Stratton was almost continually to be found in the house, watching out that this wilful girl would not harm herself with anything of the kind Surdregh had forbidden.

In the meantime Eve rummaged through all the medical books that she could get hold of but she was forced to abandon this occupation as, according to these books, it turned out that Jessie had, at one and the same time – cancer, tuberculosis of the bone, sepsis and anaemia. Acquaintances called on Jessie and straight away her illness became a topic of conversations in the drawing

rooms. The young lady did not know that the gossips were assigning the cause of this illness to an unhappy 'love'. But she did not have any love.

Three full days passed in this manner, in the course of which Jessie was sometimes her normal animated self, after which the weakness would invariably increase; finally, on the morning of the fourth day, she discussed with Eve whether it might be the time to let Morgiana know.

"As you wish," said Eve. "Of course, do inform her if you think it's necessary."

"Yes, I'm going to write to her," Jessie said, having thought a little. "I do think it's necessary. Up till now I was hoping that I had only eaten too much of something and this would all clear up by itself. But now look – I'm worse and Doctor Surdregh has stopped smiling, he's uncertain when he's listening to my chest. If I get seriously ill, Morgiana will be offended that she wasn't informed."

Jessie was lying in the corner room downstairs – the one with the raspberry-coloured wallpaper. From here she could look out into the garden through the very big windows. By her bed was a table where, among flowers, books, medicines and writing accessories, only she could find what it was that she wanted.

Having written a note Jessie sent it off in the care of her driver to *Green Flute*, informing her sister that she was taken ill but asking her not to worry.

After that Jessie felt a weariness and leaned back on her pillows, closing her eyes. When she opened them again her face was so serious, so full of bewilderment and vexation that Eve asked whether she was feeling some pain.

“No, Eve, I don’t have any pain,” Jessie sighed. “But, to be frank, I really am not well. Don’t say anything about that. It’s better now. There is some kind of unnameable torment and anxiety within me.”

“Tell me, do you want anything?”

“I don’t want anything. It’s all – it’s all the same. Life smells like rubber.” She took the cinchona and washed down its bitter taste with a mouthful of cold coffee.

“Could you...” said Jessie, drawing up her knees and settling herself higher on the pillows, whereby the sleeves of her nightgown rode down, displaying the noticeable thinness of her arms. “Could you give me any old magazines, please?”

“If you like, I’ll read to you.” Eve took a bundle of issues of the illustrated magazine *House and Life* from the canapé and laid them on the edge of the table near to Jessie.

“I want to look at the pictures,” said Jessie. “That won’t be burdensome for my mind.”

“Can you do that really?”

“Yes. I can. I like flicking through.”

She occupied herself with examining the illustrations while Eve rose to go away because she had arranged with her father to go to the exhibition of new inventions. When she had said goodbye, the nurse came in and announced that Detrey was on the telephone and inquiring if he could come round.

“That Detrey,” said Eve. “Will I talk with him and pass on your orders, Jessie?”

“Then say to him that he can come towards evening, when it won’t be so hot; I find it a little easier in the evenings.”

“Excellent. Of course, his visit won’t be long so that you don’t get tired.”

“Why are you so hard on that young man?”

“A foreign body, Jessie. Each and every officer reminds me of a full stop put down by a smug hand.”

“And you remind me of a comma, what with your...”

“O ta. But any passer-by can find a hat.”

“... with your silly notions,” Jessie finished her sentence. “And don’t forget as well that the doctor has told me not to get excited.”

“Wasn’t it you who started this?”

Eve turned to go but Jessie beckoned for her to come closer and, giving her a quick hug, she kissed her on the nose.

“Don’t be cross, Eve. I’m to blame.”

“Of course, it’s hard to be angry at you; however, he’s waiting. Goodbye and have a good lie-down. I won’t arrive back before three; between three and four.” Then Eve went to the telephone and said:

“Hello, Detrey. What’s the good news? This is Eve Stratton speaking.” Detrey awoke from his meditations and answered that there was no news good or bad. Then he inquired about the state of Jermena Trengan’s health.

“It’s strange, whatever it is Jessie has, and she’s poorly enough. You can pay a visit; she’s been told and she’ll be glad to see you. Between four and five; but I’m warning you she’s not to be tired and she’s forbidden sweet things.”

“I’ll do as I’m told.” Detrey briefly explained that he had found out about the girl’s illness from Hawthorne, Eve’s father, and he

added: "I paid a visit to your house an hour ago. What is it that's troubling your friend?"

"Jessie? I think that will become clear in a day or so. Probably isn't anything infectious."

Detrey said goodbye and ended the call. Very satisfied with the dry tone of the conversation through which she punished Detrey for Jessie's outburst, Eve boarded a tram and set off for the stop where Hawthorne was awaiting her. On account of a particular prejudice Eve rarely made use of her horses or her motor car.

In the meantime, having learned that the girl who had made a prisoner of him had fallen ill, Detrey came out of the coffee house in a state of worry that immediately increased his attention towards Jessie, whom he had been thinking about these many days, sometimes with a carefree amusement, sometimes in a distraction that was encouraging his imagination to see her in all sorts of places where she could not possibly be. Now she was not leaving his thoughts, causing him that ache which is known to all, with which no one will willingly part and which, sometimes without any basis, promises so much that it is attended to as if it were an oracle. It was still only eleven o'clock. So as to kill time Detrey dropped off his horse at the equine barracks and himself set off to play billiards at a certain billiard hall which he frequented reasonably often.

This game, which required one's all-exclusive attention, inventiveness and precision in striking, was his favourite game; nothing else was capable of so distracting him from the wait until four o'clock as the activity that was in prospect. So he had found his cure but, at this early hour, in the spacious billiard hall there was nobody present except for those working there and one individual, of rather unprepossessing appearance, who was playing by himself and, it would seem, was also looking for a playing partner, for he glanced towards Detrey in hope. Without hesitation Detrey said:

“Would you like to play a game with me?”

The lone player gave a passing glance towards a staff-member who immediately dipped his eyelids. Detrey did not notice this exchange of signals which signified that the invitation was proceeding from a player who did not represent any danger. He chalked his cue and with a solid stroke of the white ball he broke the full triangle of balls and set them rolling across the dark-green cloth. At the same time he was thinking: ‘Eve said that Jessie might be getting married in the autumn so that I should keep a grip on myself.’

Meanwhile Detrey's playing partner, a fellow with a stupid profile, pursed lips and quick eyes, proposed two pounds as a stake, to which Detrey agreed. The thought of Jessie, among

other attributes, possessed the attribute of making money of no importance. But he understood that this was a strong player and that made absolutely no difference to him. The game began.

His playing partner was polite even in his motions; exact, observant and unhurried, whereas Detrey, who was setting himself difficult shots, was experiencing failure. In the first and second games he had no luck: the balls he wanted to play came to a stop outside the pockets or going around the cushions set themselves up for his opponent. During this time Detrey reached the conclusion that suffering pangs over Jessie was unavoidable for any man who met her and for this reason it was better not think about her as he was not the only one who had seen her and she had made her choice.

Having paid his loss, he got down to the third game more sensibly than before: taking careful aim and avoiding risky cannon shots. In this way he succeeded in making forty points while his opponent only had thirty-nine. Seeing how well Detrey was doing, he fully deployed his art and the young lieutenant saw that he was playing against an expert. Ten minutes had not passed before the unprepossessing-looking fellow already had sixty-one and Detrey forty-nine. Two balls remained: seven and eleven, so his adversary began to chase the eleven, which, if he potted it, would put an end to the game. The eleven-ball was

near the corner by the left-corner pocket but the cue-ball was by the right-hand cushion, as far off and awkward that potting the eleven-ball presented a difficult task. It was now Detrey's shot.

Detrey aimed, struck with the cue and sent the cue-ball on its way with force. In that brief moment when one ball was hurtling towards the other it seemed to him that he had missed his stroke but the eleven-ball was sent to the left and disappeared in the pocket: the cue-ball, after knocking twice off the cushions, began to roll towards the seven-ball which was lying tightly against one of the short cushions and, after grazing it, it stopped so that the seven ball was again tight against the cushion but just by the pocket and the cue-ball was about a foot and a half away from it. It was impossible to pot the seven-ball with any kind of cushion-shot, not even off three cushions; there was only one shot – with skill and luck – where it might drop into that very pocket it was close to. But this was a cannon shot. Here Detrey, who was encouraged by the fate of the eleven-ball, got the idea to intensify the game and he said:

“Only this ball is left; whoever pots the seven wins the game. Do you want to treble the stake?”

Confident of the superiority of his game, his opponent agreed. From the position of the balls outlined, the shot would normally be successful once in ten attempts. Detrey made the shot with

such force that the balls collided twice and separated spinning like tops, the cue ball slid away but the seven, rotating in the direction of the pocket, was coming to a halt right on its brim and as the ball was still spinning, if more weakly, it tottered and fell into the net.

“A fluke!” Detrey said, smiling, to his disagreeably surprised opponent.

Thus Detrey had won back almost all his money and he carried on playing, being particularly inspired, game upon game, winning the greater part of them, to the astonishment of the staff, who alone knew that he was playing against the best player in the city, Samuel Contorgo. They were playing the eleventh game. After Contorgo had taken his shot, three double-digit balls came to rest opposite pockets, providing the temptation to pot them all one after the other and so win outright. Detrey was already diligently chalking his cue, preparing to set about the hunt after these balls when the clock on the wall weighed out four short peals. From the sudden ennui that this eternal reminder aroused, Detrey understood that there could be no more of this game. To the amazement of Contorgo he laid his cue down on the billiard table, took out three gold coins and held them out to his opponent.

“You win,” he said. “As I have to hurry away.” Contorgo understood the significance of refusing to win a game simply because the clock has struck and he did not take the money.

“I understand,” he said, in annoyance rolling the balls with his hand, “that only extraordinarily important reasons are compelling you to spurn a profitable game. I am in sympathy with you and can not profit by your awkward position.”

Thinking that Contorgo was probably able to read thoughts, Detrey rushed to the wash-basin, quickly rinsed his hands and set off for the Trengan residence where Morgiana, Eve and her father, Walter Hawthorne, were already there before him.

Chapter XV

So then, Morgiana was preparing for the drive, not suspecting that a significant event stood in wait for her. Just when she wanted to give the order to get the motor car ready Netty came in to her.

“Miss,” said the maid. “You have a caller. There’s a woman waiting who says her name is Otilie Hervaque.”

On hearing the name Hervaque, Morgiana turned away so that Netty would not notice how much of a fright this visit gave her. She felt a grave presentiment and at same time an impatience to find out as quickly as possible what was the meaning of a visit from the woman who had procured the poison. Wishing to show the servant that she was not attaching any particular importance to Otilie Hervaque’s visit, Morgiana ordered that the visitor be brought in and the driver told that he should ready the automobile.

Out of caution she waited for Hervaque in the room, cut off from the others, that had previously been Trengan’s room: as the windows of the drawing room were open she was afraid that someone might overhear.

Soon the voice of Netty was heard as she was opening the door and in front of Morgiana appeared a tall woman of about thirty, with a fresh face, not bad-looking, well-formed and calm. In her checked outfit and brown hat with white velvet flowers, Otilie Hervaque would not stand out in any way from among a thousand of other women of her type, if it were not for her cold grey eyes beneath sharply knitted eyebrows, so clear and so unmoving in an expression of frozen intensity. She had in her hand a small travelling bag.

Coming in she gave an artificial smile, whereby her eyes, so disagreeably sharp for a young woman, looked in profound silence at the rattled Morgiana.

“Hello there,” said Hervaque. “There’s just one small thing I need from you, not terribly pleasant but it can’t be avoided. May I sit down?”

Her voice was vulgar and loud.

“Naturally,” Morgiana answered.

They sat down. Otilie Hervaque took out a handkerchief, wiped her lips, looked her interlocutor up and down and noticed her pallor. This suited her purpose and that is why, well understanding that Morgiana was anxiously waiting, Hervaque decided to take her time.

“So this is your house?” she said, looking around. “You live in a very secluded spot. I hired a horse-cab and, having reached a kind of a farmstead near a bridge, I let him go and got here on foot. Now from that alone you can see what a cautious individual you are dealing with. Don’t get nervous, there’s nothing terribly wrong. O, what a one you are!”

Thus crying out, as if she was jokingly reproving her host, she caught hold of Morgiana’s hands, gripped and pushed them away in an over-familiar gesture of the free-and-easy kind.

“Oh, what a nun you are!” Hervaque repeated, shamelessly studying the face that was begin to tremble from anger. “So listen,” she was continuing, passing to a superior tone. “I am here in order that I may find out – and what it is that I want to find out you know yourself.”

“I didn’t have an opportunity yet,” said Morgiana.

“Did you not?! But you did *receive* it!”

“Of course.”

“Excellent.” Hervaque looked at her with keen consideration. “Consequently you are waiting for the right circumstances or... what is it?”

“I’m waiting...” Morgiana began but she did not finish and she made up her mind to put a stop to the interrogation. “I hope that you aren’t going to voluntarily dredge up your role in this affair – something it would be better say nothing about?”

“Don’t dodge the question,” Hervaque calmly replied. “On anything like that I am well informed. I told you at the start that this conversation would not be of the pleasant kind. You have a sister, a young lady. She has been unwell since the day before yesterday; there is a Doctor Surdreggh treating her who yesterday evening admitted to a particular person that he found your sister’s illness strange.”

“Very good,” said Morgiana who, from the inexorable tone of her visitor, was beginning to guess at the point of her coming. “I see that you have means of finding out about the fate of the victims of your craft; however you do surprise me as Jessie’s illness is a commonplace, lingering indisposition. But permit me to ask you: let us suppose that her illness is the effect of poison. How am I then to understand your persistence? As dissatisfaction with the result or... repentance?”

“I will explain,” said Hervaque quietly and intelligibly. “We have discovered that the service that was provided to you costs a much greater sum than the one you paid. The fabrication of a poison is very complicated, involving numerous experiments and demands

considerable expense; there was an interruption in the work and, so as to make back the time, we had to purchase your dose from a certain person for a large sum of money. As you are rich – at any rate your sister’s money will pass to you – we are certain that the misunderstanding will resolved.”

“I am forced to believe what you say,” Morgiana answered quietly enough. “Nevertheless, I will give such an impudent demand its proper name. It’s called *blackmail*.”

Hervaque burst out laughing.

“O, no! It’s only a calculation on your prudence. Leave off your name-calling and consider what the feeling of your sister might be on reading a letter telling of the origins of her illness.”

“The argument is persuasive but it does have a reverse side as I won’t keep silent either about those hands which sold me the little bottle.”

“Why, you’re still an utter child. I have witnesses that the phial was stolen by you out of the cabinet with the toxins after my husband had shown you the poison and told of its properties. A maid caught you coming down from a chair next to the cabinet and you explained away your strange playfulness as a wish to properly examine a painting on the glass.”

“So,” said Morgiana in a thoughtful mood, “and here again I have to believe you as I remember very well how the glass of the cabinet was covered in drawings. On the glass was depicted a Chinese heron amid watery leaves and rushes.”

“Don’t carry on like this,” Hervaque said scornfully. “You aren’t in any position for having a laugh.”

“But I’m an ‘utter child’ as you said. Speaking seriously, what am I to do? I will try to convince you that extortion is, for the moment, toothless as the poison is not intended for my sister; she is, after all, my sister. But I will willingly give you money. I will give it to you out a feeling of disgust for your actions. I will not be able to do that today. The day after tomorrow I will be in the bank and I will be obtaining a large sum for the refurbishment of our town house. And then I will make my way to your husband and I will hand over the money to him.”

“No, not to him,” Otilie Hervaque objected. “My husband doesn’t know and is not to know about this matter. I am to receive the money.”

“You are robbing me in secret from your own husband. What am I then to make of the story with the illustrated glass, if I don’t give in?”

“It is not questions like these that we will be settling between us. Moreover, I’m making it a requirement that Mr Hervaque does not find out about my visit to your house. You will be dealing solely with me.”

“As you wish,” said Morgiana. “For me your threats are the only important thing, even if you are concealing them from all your relatives.”

“Well, alright then, we’ll clear this up. So tell me, what is this large sum you have in mind.”

“You will receive twenty-five pounds,” Morgiana stated with well played naïveté, “with which, I hope, I am anticipating your expenses and your expectations.”

Hervaque looked at her intently, smiled somewhat and grew pale.

“Carry on,” said Hervaque, laughing. “I probably can’t have all the twenty-five pounds right now. Why don’t you just say: ‘This goose has come to visit me. Here, goose, take these ten pounds and give me five back in change.’?”

“Don’t speak so loudly,” Morgiana remarked coldly, “and express yourself more intelligibly. What is troubling you?”

“Do you really not know what twenty-five pounds is, you nasty, insane glove-puppet?” Hervaque shouted, losing her composure. “It’s the price of your ticket to prison!”

Morgiana stood up and gave Hervaque her travelling bag which was lying on the table.

“Get out!” she said, pointing to the door.

“You dare! You dare!” Hervaque hissed, going away towards the door. “Then bad-mouth yourself as much as you want!”

Allowing her to cross the threshold, Morgiana said:

“All right then, come back. This discussion isn’t the easiest.”

Thinking that she was taking fright, Hervaque again came into the room, saying:

“If something like that happens again, you won’t be able get me back a second time.”

“The poison was not intended for my sister,” said Morgiana, gloomily approaching Hervaque who was standing at the door. “In any case I haven’t made use of it yet. You have to understand that’s how it is, really, and now you name your price.”

What she said sounded so natural that Hervaque half-doubted if Jessie Trengan really had been poisoned; however she did not in any way betray her doubt.

“That’s a lie,” she said firmly. “You’re not going to haggle down the price with that. You can deny and demonstrate all you want but I will drop this matter only on the condition that five thousand pounds in cash money are handed over to me.”

So saying she sat down and began to rap on the table with her fingers. Morgiana’s dismayed face was for her a proof that the size of the sum was a confirmation of the threat.

“Indeed? Good,” Morgiana got up and then, mechanically, sat down again. “Forgive me, I’m not properly thinking out what I’m saying. Very badly, I meant to say. I repeat that I don’t have the money about me today; and it’s unlikely I’ll have it tomorrow either. But I will get it. Any monies that I pay out have to be accounted for. This is one of the reasons why I am asking you to reduce the figure.”

“I can’t do anything as I am myself heavily in debt,” Hervaque answered her, considering that such an answer was natural politeness due to Morgiana’s reference to circumstances. “In the meanwhile, you can give me a helping hand. My daughter is a student at an expensive boarding school; we became indebted on account of a neglected estate that no one now wants to buy and, in addition, I have to send out monthly upkeep for three of my relatives. So things are far worse for me than for you.”

“But I haven’t decided anything,” said Morgiana. “Namely, because I don’t know... Would you like to look at some things? Fortunately I’ve just thought of them... of this... I’ll fetch them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you would be patient for ten minutes. It is very possible that we will be able to come to an agreement immediately.”

She rose and Hervaque stopped her with a movement of her hand.

“Do you want to slip away? Or delay things?”

“No – hurry them up. Wait for me here.”

Leaving Hervaque feeling as if she were an angler who is in no rush to draw in the line when the float is dipping under, Morgiana passed into the bedroom and picked out a few valuables from Harriet Malcolm’s things; among these was an uncut diamond diadem and some brochantite beads to the value of two thousand pounds. Having laid these items in a small-little bronze chest Morgiana returned with a satisfied expression and placed the box in front of Hervaque saying:

“Open it, see if the stones in the settings might not be fake; if they are genuine I’ll be glad to give them to you in place of money, if we put a price on them beforehand.”

Hervaque gave her a quick glance and raised the lid of the case. The stones lit up. There, in among the dark-green brochantites, shone diamonds, rubies and pearls. Hervaque overturned the casket and spilled all the things onto the table. Lightly touching them, she thoroughly examined each thing individually, turned over the beads in her spread out fingers, squinted at the diadem and, putting everything back, she closed the lid.

“It looks like these are genuine stones,” she said, reservedly looking at the patiently waiting Morgiana. “Some of them are valuable and very good.”

“Then I think everything is fine. I brought down a portion; I have a lot more lying upstairs. That was all worn by a certain artiste on whom old Trengan ruined himself; he did in the end run her off and after his death, along with the house, the jewellery of this adventuress passed to me. It goes without saying that neither I nor my sister would ever wear them. I think that you will have there about ten thousand, is that not so?”

“No, it is not. Almost all the stones are second rate; as regards the black-green beads – they’re simply glass. All the rest isn’t that stylish so that I’m the only person who would value it at three hundred pounds; the jewellers would give two hundred or two hundred and fifty, at the very most. You were saying that there’s more?”

“There is and so much of it that, all the same, we will put together about four thousand. However, I will only give you what is now on the table. The scent bottle is untouched, the poison is all there and you can satisfy yourself as to that whenever you please.”

“Is it so you think you are going to get off with paying three hundred pounds?”

“Do you want me to show you the bottle?”

“Do show it to me, sweetie; and then I’ll show you that this bottle is full of pure water which you filled into it.”

“For that I would have had to unseal the parcel.”

“Which – the parcel? What do you mean by that?”

“I didn’t open it,” said Morgiana, sorrowfully and mockingly smiling. “Apparently, I’m suffering from a nervous disorder. When I received that packet, it got to seem as though the whole world knew about it. When I wanted to cut through the packaging I almost fainted from the agitation, as I was afraid that, if I took the bottle in my hands, I would poison myself simply by touching the glass. I could in no way overcome this oppressive fear and I came to the point where I would shudder at every unexpected sound; everywhere I was imagining people were after me. I hid the package in one place, then in another; I

was getting up nights to assure myself that it had not been stolen during my sleep and I got so tired from my own suspiciousness which was developing into a persecution complex that I buried the poison in the forest, not far from the house. You can see the parcel and satisfy yourself that not so much as the seals have been touched.”

Morgiana put up a good pretence and Otilie Hervaque believed her. She was hearing the words of a bewildered, half-crazy woman whose hands were shaking. A sharp annoyance at this failure seized her and, changing tack, she was already prepared to agree to take the proffered jewellery when Morgiana, awaiting what this silence would resolve into, took up the box and part-opened it, to all appearances without any purpose, then quietly lowered the lid. In this movement of hers there was the unnecessary – that which betrays the most skilful fakers to the investigator.

“Good,” Hervaque said firmly, deciding to get to the bottom of the truth. “This isn’t a matter of your nerves. Fetch in the parcel and I’ll unseal it myself.”

Morgiana seemed to get embarrassed.

“But I can’t do that,” Morgiana objected evasively. “I’m afraid to. I can’t shake the thought that I’m being spied on.”

“Fine,” declared Hervaque, whose doubts were becoming stronger. “In that case lead me to the place where the parcel is hidden and I’ll inspect it.”

“What for? It’s enough that I told you about this.”

“Well, in that case, I am not able to believe you. You aren’t a bad actress but I’m a sly one too. Well then... are we done?”

Hervaque stood up, her eye on the box with the gemstones, and she already wanted to ask if Morgiana would be handing over the jewellery as a down payment, when the latter reached for the bell. Coldly raising her eyebrows a little Hervaque sat back down where she had been and began to examine her nails while watching out of the corner of her eye Netty who had entered.

“Tell the driver to wait,” Morgiana said to the maid. “We’re going out for a walk but straight after it I’ll be going to town.”

‘Well, let’s play this out,’ thought Hervaque. ‘In the woods she’ll be assuring me that someone stole the packet. At that point I’ll put an end to this insolent bargaining and I’ll leave for home.’

Having proposed to Hervaque that she come out with her and stating that it was a short walk, Morgiana passed out through the gates. As they did so the women were seen by: the driver standing by his car, Hobson and his eight-year-old son. On the narrow, green path leading to the place where Morgiana had

smashed the bottle to pieces Hervaque, slightly losing confidence on account of the certainty by which Morgiana was leading her, asked:

“If you are driving to town, could I ride along and then get out at Sandy Ring (that was the name of a suburb of Liss) so as to get a tramcar? Otherwise I’ll have to walk for half an hour so as to find a horse-cab somewhere in Briequette or Nanterre.”

“Yes, you can come with me if you want,” Morgiana answered. “So then, you are sure that I am lying.”

“I am sure that you have forgotten that place where you hid the matter under discussion.”

“Not at all. We haven’t far to go now. We’ll go down here, below we only have to turn left and go ten steps.”

Now they were walking along by the boundary of the forest where, among high trees, the steep slope, overgrown with bushes was visible; it went deeper into the thicket. The path was twisting, with unexpected turnings going around a fallen trunk or a tall stone; amid the bushes it was hardly to be seen. Getting into the thicket where the cool shade of the bushes hid her from the hot morning sun, Morgiana glanced back at Hervaque who, not taking those grey, iron eyes from her, was fighting her way amongst the branches that were obstructing the path. Morgiana

pointed to a flat triangular stone that lay by the old tree on the edge of the fissure down which she had thrown the fragments of the scent bottle. The opposite edge of the fissure was lower than the first by about four metres; beyond that the ground was going down in sharp drops all the way as far as the coastal cliffs from where, when the wind was strong, the sound of the waves crashing could clearly be heard.

Now paying no more attention to Hervaque, Morgiana placed her umbrella against the tree and hooking her fingers under the bottom of the stone she began to lift it a little, gasping for breath from the effort. Having budged slightly, the stone slipped from her hands and again lay fully flat.

“It was lying on its side,” Morgiana was saying as she was trying to overcome the indifferent resistance of the heavy object. “I was able to knock it over but lifting it... That time I undermined it... Find a bough. Something to shove under it.”

Hervaque shrugged her shoulders; spotting the thick fragment of a root she took it up and, on Morgiana’s directions, she began thrusting it under the raised edge of the stone.

Morgiana straightened up and grabbed her around the neck.

Gasping in fright and in pain, Hervaque jerked away with a cry; but her feet slipped and she fell onto the stone.

“Agh, you foul thing!” Hervaque shouted. “Stop, let go! Let go, I say.”

“I am a nut-ter child,” Morgiana muttered as she tried to bang Hervaque’s head against the stone.

They collapsed, each grabbing the other about the neck and the face. Finally Morgiana, whose strength was increasing with every move she made and whose left hand did not release her victim’s neck, managed to seize hold of Hervaque’s throat more solidly than the first time. She pressed her down and began to beat the back of her head against the stone until the frantic effort showing on the upturned face became befuddled as with sleep.

Hervaque jerked herself away again, extricated herself and got onto her hands and knees just beside Morgiana who, on her knees, began hurriedly to push her off into the fissure. Able to see nothing, stunned and half-strangled, Hervaque collapsed on the edge, her arms and her head were overhanging the void. Morgiana lowered herself onto her elbow and pushed Hervaque off with furious kicks from both feet. Straight away she jumped up to see that the other had not been able to catch hold of any stones or roots.

“An utter child,” Morgiana said, holding her heart as it beat against her ribs, wheezing and aching. “The poison is here, I

wasn't lying to you; I have become poison. Now go find your cabman in Briquette or Nanterre."

After throwing the umbrella and Otilie Hervaque's travelling bag down the fissure Morgiana went to the lake and looked at herself in the water. Her face was all red spots; her hair was dishevelled, her dress was crumpled and dirtied from the stone. With some difficulty she made it presentable, then she washed her hands and freshened her face with water. She wiped it off with her handkerchief, looking into the water without thinking and there saw the savage eyes of an ugly woman. But the bay of the lake, framed by the dense bushes covered with scarlet flowers, was beautiful and the reflection in the blue mirror of that rock face, from which Morgiana had the day before cast off the stone, was illuminated with refined clarity beneath the water by the morning light of the forest.

"It's beautiful," said Morgiana, "I understand. There's a lot of the beautiful around. But it is indifferent. Beauty, your power is great! So change my face for me! Make my hands tender and white!"

A wind began to blow, the bushes began to make a sound; there was no answer or anyone listening. Hardly had Morgiana stood up, when her reflection also disappeared and in its place

appeared in the water the foliage, not in the least darkened, of a fallen maple tree.

Morgiana returned home, changed and told Netty that Hervaque had set off on foot towards the next village where she had to be that evening, in the railway station. Calculating that, whatever the situation with the search for the missing Hervaque, her husband would not turn to the police until two days had past – he absolutely would not notify them sooner than that – Morgiana lay down to have a rest. Strange as it might seem the punishment meted out to the poison-vendor was providing her with a store of firmness and self-confidence. Having had breakfast and definitively thought over the sale of Malcolm's things, Morgiana went out and sat into the automobile. The driver was just opening the car-door when Jessie's car came to a halt at the gates of the house and Morgiana received her sister's note.

The driver who had just come lingered by the garage with Netty while Morgiana, taking the valuables, drove to Oberheim's, the large jeweller's in Liss, planning on visiting Jessie after having finished her business.

The crime no longer worried or frightened her; after the scenes with Hervaque and the stone she had thrown at the naked girl, looking at Jessie and talking with her was a matter of

indifference for her; rather she felt as if she were seeing her sister for the last time – in a graphic, oppressive dream.

Chapter XVI

When Eve went away Jessie thought that she might overcome the illness if, disregarding her weakness, she began to move about with confidence. She took a breath and sat up; however, straight away she found it more difficult to breathe and the feeling of exhaustion increased. Dropping her head the girl quietly complained to herself: ‘Something bad is happening to me. I’ve forgotten what it means to be healthy. How do you recollect health?! O, health, you’re better than everything else. Return to me! Lord, make me well!’

Jessie hung her head and began to cry. Her moral sense became morbidly keener; she saw herself as being guilty of everything: for the character and the misfortunes of Morgiana, for acts of arrogance and pride. She sat there and repented; all the times when she had been dissatisfied with herself revealed themselves and ached like bruises. By a uniquely feminine path, amid this self-reproach, Jessie arrived at her light, elegant hat that Detrey had found so unexpectedly and she bitterly lamented that she had received the find so coldly, not even asking in detail how he had found it. ‘But I will ask today. In general, I have been cruel to people,’ Jessie thought, wiping her eyes, ‘and this is so heartless. Eve thinks that Detrey is stupid. But it isn’t for me to

educate or to teach him; it's my task just to be nice. When I meet him I will only say nice things and he will like me. But it looks like I'm stupider than he is... O, Jessie, how could you think anyone was stupid based on what someone else said?!

Her look settled on the water carafe which was now almost out of use as she was only allowed to drink water in exceptional cases. From this, by degrees, she remembered Morgiana's morning visit that day her sister had departed; the details of it developed one after another and she was uneasy because she was seeing Morgiana standing in front of the tray, as though in a confusion, when Jessie had turned back around from the telephone. The girl took fright at the thought which struck her like thunder, though it still had not become words. With all the force of her horror and repugnance towards the impossible, awful words of this thought, pushing away their dark pressure, like a cloth that has caught fire is pushed away, Jessie closed her eyes, blocked her ears and with a groan fell flat on the bed, frantically muttering anything that came into her head, if only that thought would not turn into words. But all her efforts were like striving to avoid an injection by pressing the palm of the hand against the point of the needle. All of her convulsing, she drew breath and, in that moment, the thought that she was trying to dispel was spoken clearly and precisely: 'I've been poisoned. Morgiana poisoned me.'

Jessie put her hands to her head and breathed a few times, trying by deep breathing to ease the beating of her heart. The shame was so oppressing her that, for a time, she was only able to groan.

“My God!” she said, quickly sitting back. “Is this me? Is the like of that in my mind?! Such lowness should make my head explode!”

She was whispering the reproach to herself, grieving and suffering, but the black thought that had breached her despairing resistance was doing its work: details of that weighty morning were coming to life and, becoming suspicious, were frightening Jessie even more. She was saying: “There is no one I can confess my vileness to, only to her; and she should know about it. I know that these are ravings, from the illness, from books; it isn’t a genuine thought. But it is demonstrating...”

In a frenzy Jessie was justifying herself but within her, like a fish in water, was Morgiana’s mysterious behaviour, and in her fear she was refusing to consider it.

‘I never suspected that I was so perverted,’ Jessie went on, ‘my poor freak, Mori, I’m glad that I sent you the note and soon I’ll see your hysterical, stormy mug.’

In that moment the blind, which was lowered on the side the sun was, stirred; the shadow of a cat, that had leapt up on the cornice, raised its tail and Jessie scared it off by clapping her palms together. ‘That was how it came and went again, that thought,’ the girl thought, marvelling at this strange fit of her consciousness, which was now returning to its normal view of things in connection with Morgiana’s character. But the excitement remained and, moving slowly, attentive to each movement, Jessie dripped out into the drinking glass a few calming drops. Having drunk them, she took advantage of the absence of the nurse, who was finishing her breakfast, and she put on a green silk dressing gown, tied the ribbons of her nightcap, thrust her feet into shoes and set off to walk around the garden; bumping into the returning nurse, Jessie became embarrassed, burst out laughing and came to a halt.

The nurse, a woman of about forty years, with an inquisitive, red face, made haste towards Jessie, stretching out her arms, as if the girl was falling, and despairingly barricaded the way.

“You got up again?” lamented the nurse. “Do you not understand how you are harming yourself that way? I beg you to lie down immediately. Moreover, they’re bringing your breakfast now.”

“Broth and rusks,” Jessie said, despondently.

“Yes. Marvellous broth; marvellous, hot, I supervised the making of it myself. Go back quickly before Doctor Surdregh arrives. It’s already twelve and he might arrive at any minute.”

“But why broth?” Jessie sighed. “I’d eat beefsteak and a whole chicken. There’s no salvation in broth. I would mentally eat a beefsteak. I don’t want to put anything down my gullet, nothing!”

“Go lie down then; you will get stronger and you will want to eat.”

“No, I won’t want to.”

“Who knows more, you or the doctor? And he ordered you to stay in bed.”

“I hope that he won’t learn that I was out in the garden for five minutes?” Jessie said, smiling ingratiatingly and she darted to one side, past the arms of the nurse that were cautiously trying to catch her. “Don’t agitate me; you know that excitement is dangerous for me. Go on, I’ll be back very quickly.”

“What was the point of bringing me here?” the woman exclaimed plaintively. “But I will say it to the doctor! I can’t just look on not caring while you destroy yourself.”

Giving her an impressive look Jessie closed up the front of the dressing gown and went towards the way out. Her heart was

beating strongly and gaily. If it were not for the dressing gown and the bonnet she would have been able to think that she was getting better. But she was having a temporary surge of energy – an occurrence that would in the aftermath be paid for with a new attack.

The humid heat of the garden warmed her face. It was midday; the tree-trunks were standing in circles of shadow; tulip-, sour orange-, chestnut- and peach trees were in flower. Smiling at the flowers and leaves, Jessie stepped into the avenue that passed along a fence of stone posts that was alternating with a decorative cast-iron railing and, passing to the flower-bed, she took a seat on the marble bench. Above the flowers, which made one greedy for their beauty, there were wasps. The birds had already fallen silent; there was only a nightingale who, quite near to Jessie but hiding in such a way that not by eye or by ear could his location be established, was leisurely speaking in pleasant sounds that brought forth an attentive smile. Sometimes his sounds were like a question that resounded serenely and delicately; or that resembled an exhortation and, although no bird was answering him, he continued, with such distinctness and so melodiously and purely, unhurriedly, to ask, urge and explain that Jessie involuntarily began to select words corresponding to his phrases and his intonation. She knew which words these were but she could not speak them, in the same way

as, feeling the essence of a name or title, we are sometimes not immediately able to direct our memory to their eluding letters, by which the soul of a word reveals itself. Jessie could not say the words; so she rose and went to the roses that were growing along the whole length of the fence. Beyond the fence ran a stepped lane. Its opposite side was also a wall of someone else's garden but it was not like Jessie's garden. That wall was high, blank and protected on top with two lines of barbed wire.

The leaves of the roses were hiding Jessie from the laneway. Intending to break off a twig with three flowers of a creamy hue, the girl heard an exclamation and peered between the branches.

On the other side of the railing stood a young woman of about twenty-four. The mild tan of her delicate face, reddened by the heat, her radiant blue eyes and dark hair – damp on her damp open forehead – beneath the broad brim of a yellow hat, finished off with a navy ribbon, won a natural sympathy in Jessie's heart. The unknown young woman was wearing a linen dress, tapered at the waist, that left the arms and neck free. With the crook of her elbow, she was pressing a paper bag with rusks to her chest and had left her hand inside the bag, having forgotten to take out a rusk. In rapture she was looking at the roses; she did not see Jessie.

“This time he bought a really tasty sort,” the woman said to herself, taking out a rusk and examining it. “Nicely baked,” Her eyes again turned to the roses. “What flowers you can have! I’d love flowers like this!”

There was in these words such plaintive wishing that Jessie hurried to the fence and, coming out into the light, said:

“Please, don’t be shy, only take those flowers that you like – as many as possible.”

The unknown girl was embarrassed and she burst out laughing, reddening in her surprise.

“I... I... I...” she began to babble, interrupting her words with an involuntary, grateful laugh, “I thought that you weren’t there and that you won’t think... I admit, it came out wrong... I said that to myself... And I never saw you! Your flowers are so nice, oh, they’re so pretty! ... When you look at them, you know, here...” with her finger she outlined the left side of her chest, “here it gets so tender... Your eyes are dazzled.”

“Then come into the garden and we’ll have a look together.”

“No, thank you: first of all I have to get home already and then... you don’t seem to be in good health.”

“I am indeed unwell!” Jessie exclaimed, distressed by the fact that it was possible to notice the illness straight away from her face, although the girl she was talking with only meant the dressing-gown and cap. “I am indeed suffering bouts of illness but I am able to walk a little ways with you. I don’t know how this has happened so quickly but I’ve taken an extraordinary liking to you. Come into the garden.”

“And it’s just the same for me,” said the woman. “Why is that?”

“You’re right; I probably look like a mangy cat. But what is ‘the same’? Are you sick too?”

“You’re offering me flowers,” the woman explained, making an effort to show a friendly face, trying to say straight away and briefly all that she was thinking, “but I wasn’t saying that on account of the flowers... I feel the same thing about you and straight away as well... just like you. So, you... I feel so sorry for you! What kind of an illness have you?”

“At the moment the doctor doesn’t know. I’m getting weaker and thinner, they examined me and didn’t find anything...” She began sadly tearing off a petal that a maggot had damaged and finished what she was saying after a short silence. “An intriguing, mysterious invalid. Do you know,” Jessie said, weakly smiling and bringing some escaping hair under her bonnet, “it may be that I’m mistaken but, as far as I’m familiar with the

mirror, it seems to me, that we two are very alike, just that we have different eyes. Yours are blue.”

“Right now, I was thinking just that very thing. Yours are dark, not black.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jermena Cronway. Don’t say you have one like that?” Jessie burst out laughing.

“Jermena Trengan,” she said, feeling a cheerful embarrassment.

“Astounding!” exclaimed both with one voice. “Well it just had to be!”

“Something like this requires that you come and visit me,” Jessie said, “and now I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I absolutely will call on you, without fail!” the ‘healthy Jessie’ said with ardour. “Today my husband and I have to go to Palm Island and have a walk there.”

“Happy you!” the ‘sick Jessie’ remarked to her. “While I... They’re ordering me just to stay lying down.”

“But you’ll be happy when you get better.”

“Yes, some day or other yet that will happen. Gather up some flowers, will you, and no arguments. Do you have a pocket knife at all?”

“I have scissors, small crooked ones,” Jessie Cronway fetched them out of a beaded handbag and held it through a gap in the railing. “And the hands?! There’s mine and there’s yours... Uh, well which is mine?”

“This is yours and this is mine; mine has gone pale and yours is more tanned.”

Working her shoulders so as to knead her back, which was aching from walking, Jessie rolled up the sleeves of her dressing gown and began to lop off roses of every colour, from pale-yellow and pink to purple and white. She cut off damask-, Chinese-, tea-, noisette-, musk-, Bourbon-, moss-, Scotch-, and still more different roses, getting excited herself, wanting to gather more and more of them. The second Jessie, her blissful face reddened with pleasure and avidity, watched how, knitting her brows, tugging at the thorny stems, the sick pallid girl used her fingers to untwist some stem or other that was a little beyond the strength of the scissors and how she, adding a new rose to the bouquet, was looking around at her, nodding with a smile that conveyed that she intended give even more roses. At the height of this activity, the nurse tracked her down. Her cry: “The doctor

has come!” prevented the second Jessie from receiving a whole garden of roses. Jessie Trengan handed her the flowers she had gathered along with the scissors and said:

“I’m glad that you came. Come again.” Claspng to her chest the armful, from which some roses were already hanging out and then falling out, the second Jessie replied:

“I certainly will come, if not tomorrow, then soon. But go back to the house quickly!” and she was the first to move away, while Jessie Trengan, serious now, walked with the nurse who was glancing at her most disapprovingly.

Surdregh was a stooping but hale old chap with laughing grey eyes and a grey beard; he had a style of talking with the sick as if they were children in whose words one looked for not precisely that which they were saying. Jessie’s disobedience provoked in him a particularly doctorly fury but, looking at the girl’s guilty face, Surdregh merely said to the nurse:

“If that happens again I will inform your association of your incompetence.”

“It isn’t her fault, I’m to blame,” said Jessie, sitting down and taking a breather.

“Allow me to determine who is to blame,” Surdregh answered coldly; then, softening, he said: “Go and lie down,” and he took

the sheet, handed him by the well-cowed nurse, on which she was noting the temperature. Written there was 36.2 – evening and 36.2 – morning. Becoming thoughtful Surdregg lay the piece of paper on the table, took out his watch and began to take the pulse. It was sluggish, even and not at all quickened. The doctor let go of Jessie’s hand and put away his watch.

“What’s wrong with me?” the girl asked anxiously.

“What do you think yourself?” Surdregg answered with a smile.

“I’m unwell but what it is... what to call such an illness.”

“Curiosity,” said Surdregg, holding his ear to her chest on the side of her heart.

“Is it permissible, in that case, to think that science... how would I put it gently ... well, that it is firing a blank with regard to your most humble servant?”

“Be quiet for a moment,” said Surdregg. He began to knead and tap on Jessie: his strong fingers put questions to her entire body but got no answer. The condition of some of her organs – the kidneys and the liver among their number – gave him pause but not so much as to confirm him in any opinion without the risk of making a mistake.

“Do you see, my dear little girl,” said Surdregh when Jessie, groaning from his heavy fingers, had wrapped herself more tightly in her dressing-gown, “science hasn’t yet said her final word with respect to you; she hasn’t said anything at all yet. You definitely do not have anything serious (in his own mind he was thinking otherwise) but in order to decide definitively how we are to get you springing around again, the day after tomorrow, if no major changes come about, I will have to consult some colleagues. Cases that are difficult to explain are encountered more frequently than is thought. But however that may be, stay in bed and rest, rest, rest. Tomorrow I’ll visit you again. Try to drink less and, in moments of weakness, take the drops I prescribed.

He stood up.

“Doctor, swear to me that I’m not dying!” Jessie begged.

“I swear it by Gog and Magog!” said Surdregh, stroking her on the head.

“Who are they?” Jessie enquired in a bass voice through her tears and unable to help breaking out crying, angered at Surdregh’s jokes. “I sup... sup... supposing I’m dying and you shoe... shoe... shouldn’t do that... Cause I’m asking a sea... serious question!...”

“And I’m seriously answering you: if you obey me, follow the diet and don’t get out of the bed, then in a week you’ll be completely healthy.”

Jessie looked at him reproachfully but was soon consoled. Surdreggh left and, having drunk her broth, the girl began to doze off.

She was woken by the arrival of Morgiana.

Chapter XVII

Morgiana visited the jeweller's and, having shown him a portion of the jewellery and carefully conducted the conversation, she had satisfied herself that her valuation of Harriet Malcolm's things was approximately correct but, in selling to the dealer, she had to reconcile herself with a loss of a third of the normal sum total.

Agreeing to receive the next day the money for what she had brought and also to hand in many other things, Morgiana was given a deposit and she went to Jessie's.

During the trip from the shop to the house her dismal concentration and resolution to look before the ending in the very face of the deadly work of her hands turned into a painful pleasure, like the patient bitterness with which a person carries a heavy load, comforted in the thought that he is panting under his own burden. There were moments when Morgiana was almost happy that she had nothing to hope for, that her habitual despair was illuminated so brightly and hopelessly. She drew up to the house with the feeling of one returning from a long voyage. Now her heart began to beat strongly and she was trying to persuade herself to be natural. She answered the servants'

greetings with a few cold words and immediately asked how Jessie was feeling. On hearing from the nurse that the girl's condition was uncertain, that she was not going out and right now was sleeping, Morgiana sent the nurse to look, see if Jessie had not woken up and went herself to sit in the drawing room where almost immediately after her Walter Hawthorne and Eve Stratton came in.

Walter Hawthorne was a tall, elderly man, of a strong physique, with a long beard and a handsome, refined face. There was a strong resemblance between himself and his daughter. Eve was animated as she entered but, seeing Morgiana, she pretended to be fatigued.

"I'm visiting her," said Eve. "Have you seen her?"

"No, I haven't seen her yet. I've only just arrived and I'm awaiting news. She's supposed to be sleeping."

"Maybe..." Hawthorne began.

In that moment the nurse came and said that Jessie had woken up. They all went up to the sick girl's door. Forming a smile, Morgiana knocked and heard a weak voice inviting them to enter.

At this, the absolute necessity of lying and pretending immediately became Morgiana's natural condition, she smoothly

opened the door, smiling from the threshold and with humorous anxiousness peered at the pinched face of the young girl.

“Come in, come in, Mori,” Jessie said. “I’m glad that you came. And it’s hard to entice you here – I had to get sick,” Jessie was addressing Hawthorne who by a gesture showed how insanely busy he always was. “Oh Eve, the doctor was here; he said that I will get better; but he still doesn’t know what it is that’s ailing me. Morgiana, are things well there at your place in the wilderness?”

“Yes, things are quiet. Well now, you did miss your jump that time. You should have changed your stocking when you got your foot wet through.”

“You’re thinking it’s on account of that?”

“There are a multitude of slight colds,” said Hawthorne, “which the doctors aren’t able to get to the bottom of all that well. I was reading about a renowned mathematician, I don’t remember who he was, but, while he could solve problems of the most complicated mathematics in his head, this man would make mistakes doing simple addition.”

Morgiana went up to the little table and looked at the label on the medicine, then she touched Jessie’s forehead and said:

“Do you have a fever?”

“I don’t have either a fever or a chill. You’re not thinking that I’m a hypochondriac?”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“The way it is,” Jessie declared, “Surdregg was promising me that, in a day’s time, he will consult some colleagues. I don’t want to talk about it any more. Eve, tell us about the exhibition!”

Morgiana was observing herself with the highest degree of exactness. She felt strange and bitter. Her hatred stood there between her and Jessie, unseen by all except Morgiana – her double with a savage and dark smile. Putrefaction of the soul formed this sad but guiding reflection, thanks to which self-control did not abandon her and – she knew this – was now no longer capable of betraying her.

Eve began her story:

“There was so, so much of everything. We weren’t able to go around all of it; but there were interesting things. Well, out on its own – a *Perpetuum Mobile*, actually two. These are sort of crackling and knocking bits of mechanism in glass boxes; however, we were told that one of them runs, all told, for four days and the second – eight. After that, there were models of aeroplanes.”

“I want to fly!” Jessie exclaimed.

“I promise to arrange a flight for you when you have gotten better,” Hawthorne began to laugh. He began to speak of flights; Hawthorne had flown three times but he had a dismissive attitude to it. It was Morgiana who unexpectedly made an objection.

“But from time to time they do crash,” said Morgiana with an artificial fervour. “The possibility of crashing acquits aeroplanes of the frivolity that you are emphasising.”

“I don’t want you to think me brutal,” Hawthorne answered, “but, in my opinion, a death of that sort is not tragic, only traumatic. It’s nothing more than the breakdown of a machine.”

“What are you saying, Papa?” Eve asked indignantly.

“I must be a monster,” Hawthorne burst out laughing.

“No, you’re no monster!” exclaimed Jessie. “Did you mean to say that falling, breaking and burning reminds you of a primus-stove overturning?”

“I think that it’s nothing more.”

“You are sometimes so insufferably cynical,” Eve remarked.

“They crash,” Morgiana began speaking quietly, “mostly young people, full of life, almost boys. Isn’t a death at twenty years of age something beautiful?”

Nobody answered her because her remark and the expression with which she said it made one think of Jessie; even Jessie did.

“So if I die then that means my death will be beautiful,” she said, upset at her own words. “No, then better let it not be beautiful... in about fifty years... in a hundred!”

“Seeing what direction the conversation was taking, Eve hurriedly asked Hawthorne:

“You bought the machine?”

“Yes. We’re talking about a machine-press,” Hawthorne explained to Jessie, “which was demonstrated at the exhibition.”

Jessie nodded, giving a sullen look at Morgiana. With a lacklustre smile in her weary eyes and on her pursed lips, Morgiana happened to meet her gaze and it seemed to her that her sister was, with her eyes, asking her about what was most secret, what was menacing. The blood drained from her heart; involuntarily widening her eyes, she looked straight at Jessie, being unable to look away; in her turn taking fright, Jessie hunched her shoulders and tucked in her head while still looking at her sister.

“What’s wrong with you, Mori?” she exclaimed, suddenly beginning to tremble. “Morgiana?”

“What’s wrong with me?” the latter asked as if in her sleep. “Rather, what’s the matter with you?!”

“I don’t know, myself,” Jessie burst out laughing. “Irritability. Such an irritability that nowhere in the world is there a more base creature than I am. When I get better, I’ll tell you.”

Morgiana’s lips started, out of her control, so that she was not immediately able to speak. Finally she took a breath, with difficulty she said: “Of course, then you will.” And she thought that her depression was noticeable. In order to put an end to the strange position, she said without losing her gloom:

“A savage incident occurred not too far from *Green Flute*. Some unknown person threw a stone at a girl who was bathing and cut her neck very badly. Now she’s going to be a cripple. I sent her a little money.”

Hawthorne had already been sitting in silence for a few minutes waiting for an opportunity to say a few cheery trifles and to take his leave. He looked at his daughter.

Eve’s sudden, resolute pallor surprised him greatly. Eve quickly wrote something in her notebook; tearing out the sheet she passed it to Morgiana with a cheerful laugh.

“Eve, what secrets do you two have there?” Jessie moaned, shaking her head on the pillow.

“We need to have a talk,” Eve said carelessly but firmly, “about the most unimportant things.” She sighed nervously, observing the slow sullen look Morgiana was raising towards her face. She had read the sheet and was holding it in her hand. “Papa, tell Jessie about the impenetrable armour plates!”

Frowning, Jessie was scrutinising her fingernails. Eve and Morgiana went out and, when the door closed behind them, they at the same time turned to one another.

“What then?” said Morgiana in a whisper, as if she had no idea.

“Listen to me: for two years now...” Eve began but, giving her a quick look, Morgiana interrupted and pointed to a door further off:

“We’ll sit in there and talk.”

It was one of those superfluous rooms that sometimes come about in a big house on account of a mistake in the design: small, with a window onto the passageway and having no kind of a purpose; it only had some incidental furniture. When the women were in the room Eve closed the door.

“Morgiana! You should be far away from your sister during this time. I am going to say more, things that are even more unpleasant for you and you can hate me as much as you want, but I have strong suspicions that your relations with your sister

are tormented, painful. She will never directly complain of this to anyone, including to me, also will she not say anything directly, however, often in her words and her tone a request to understand without any explanations can be heard. Judge for yourself how easy it is for me to say my piece to you! I don't know what the matter is and I have no right to judge – neither you nor Jessie. I only want to say that Jessie needs peace and quiet.”

Eve nervously sighed and gave Morgiana a questioning look. With indignation, she noticed how, though at first her face had altered, she was now quietly laughing, with her lips pursed and her eyes screwed up. Eve was expecting outrage, anger, perhaps insult but this unexpected laughter brought back to her the cold, ready temper in which she had stated her demand.

“There is absolutely nothing to laugh about here, I would think,” she said hotly.

Morgiana gave a cough. Her eyes, shining from the laughter, were strained like those of a person walking with a candle through the darkness.

“I wanted to know,” Morgiana said, slowly articulating the words, “what did the devil say to you when you got that apple off him?”

“Do explain,” Eve said coldly, peering at the guarded expression on Morgiana’s face.”

“A bit of silliness, my dear. Your name’s Eve and this directed me to the foolish thought that you had treated Adam to an apple.”

Eve blushed and became flustered. She wanted to leave without saying anything and had already turned but a sudden serious feeling made her put a serious question.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked. “I am not angry with you. What *is* wrong with you?”

“Do not talk to me in that tone, Eve.”

“Morgiana, if I...”

“I am speaking here – let me alone. You are worried for Jessie. I am happy to talk about her. But you are mistaken. We love one another very much and our relationship is good. Is that enough for you?”

“In a good relationship it’s hardly appropriate to talk of death in the presence of a sick person. Take care with her, Morgiana! She didn’t do anything wrong.”

“People imagine that I’m ruining her life,” Morgiana was saying, as if she had not heard Eve. “While I often took the place of a

mother for her. But, well and good, I forgive you all; you are sometimes very naive. You probably really do love her. Love is biased. But we need to go back.”

Morgiana went past Eve without saying anything else and the latter, lingering a little so that her irritation would subside, followed her. On the way she halted by the *trumeau* mirror so as to put on a cheerful face and she noticed that her smile was attractive. This helped her to maintain her smile as she came into the room; at this most appropriate time Detrey was now here, sitting a little away from Jessie’s bedside and she was holding some flowers that he had brought.

“We were discussing whether it would be good to move you to *Green Flute*,” said Eve, casting a glance at Morgiana who was entirely calm. “But I also think that it wouldn’t be as comfortable there.”

“Well, certainly,” Morgiana said, “Eve thinks it too soon.”

“Ugh, nonsense!” Jessie remarked. “You two went outside for that?! Eve, Detrey is very sweet! He’s bringing me flowers!”

“But not sweets?”

“Of course not,” said Detrey. “I was forbidden to.” Love had already had an effect on him. Even as he was coming up to the doorway, he was feeling its power from the heaviness of his feet

and from the serious agitation that was preventing him from breathing naturally. Detrey, who was not in his right senses, nevertheless, skilfully enough feigned being calm and of sound mind from the moment when he caught sight of Jessie who had grown much thinner, a fact that presented her to him not as being above in the clouds like the dawn but as someone earthbound and susceptible to pain and nevertheless unique in the entire history of humanity. The conversation had hardly begun when Eve and Morgiana arrived. The latter had no knowledge of Detrey; Jessie introduced them but made no mention of the hat.

“Well, Jessie, I’m off,” said Morgiana, approaching her sister’s bed. “It’s sure not to be anything serious; I’m seeing that everything will be fine.”

“Goodbye, Mori!” the girl answered from the heart, raising herself a little and putting her arms around Morgiana’s waist and she also made to kiss her. “When are you coming? You don’t know? See that you come and... here, bend down so that I can kiss you.”

Morgiana made a movement away but, catching herself, she quickly kissed Jessie on the corner of the mouth. Everything began to swim, rock and move away in her vision; she sat down on the edge of the bed and covered her eyes with her hand. Jessie

was alarmed but her sister, making an effort stood up and said: "Awful heat, my head is weak!"

Then she said goodbye to everyone, mildly smiling at the big eyes Eve made. Swinging her silken bag she went out, solid and grave in her grey, buttoned-up dress and her dark-blue hat which had, as its sole ornament, a flat blue bow. The door closed. Still Eve heard how she gave a cough outside the door and her heart clenched unpleasantly.

But a conversation started up; to Jessie's question, Detrey announced that in a few days his assignments would be completed, after which he was due to return to Pocquette, from where he had come.

"Excellent," Jessie said, stirring his flowers with the end of her finger. "Will you write to me?"

"Without fail!" said Detrey and, with distress, he thought that she was about to offer him her 'friendship' that is – that which young girls will forget the very next day.

Jessie was opening her mouth to bring up the hat but now she found that it was indelicate. 'He will think that it is solely to such an incident that he is indebted for the continuation of the acquaintanceship.' After that the conversation carried on in fits and starts about trifling matters. Among other things,

Hawthorne asked if a certain Stevenson, the son of an old acquaintance of his, was not serving with Detrey in one and the same regiment.

“I don’t know,” Detrey answered, “rather, I have had no time to find out. It was only two months ago that I was transferred from the 5th Customs & Excise battalion.”

“That means you were having skirmishes with smugglers?” exclaimed Jessie.

“Alas! I was only receiving reports on skirmishes. That’s a matter for the border forces.”

“I think it’s unpleasant to catch poor people, guilty solely of a wish to feed their family,” said Eve, feeling by instinct that all of Detrey’s thoughts were turned to Jessie and that Jessie, decidedly, had recognised his right to exist. “A battalion against paupers! The battle is too uneven.”

“Of course,” Detrey agreed. “We couldn’t allow crooks to slaughter a battalion.”

“We couldn’t; and moreover they might kill you,” said Jessie. “Do you know that Eve has a passion for feeling sympathy contrarily.”

“You don’t understand a thing,” Eve retorted.

“I understand everything. So tell me: are smugglers really poor people?”

“No,” said Detrey. “They make a lot of money. It’s not uncommon to meet a smuggler who is the chieftain of a whole gang. Certain of them build houses and amass funds in the bank and the others could fare as well if it weren’t for a weakness for wine and play.”

“So you see, Eve, these are your paupers!”

“All the same, I’ll take my stand by their side.”

“Is it worth your while?” asked Hawthorne. “At best, stockings will come down in price.”

Eve burst out laughing.

“Seriously,” she said, coming into a peaceable mood, “I feel sorry for these people, who are so solidly surrounded by the picturesque poetry of red kerchiefs, carbines, guitars; dangerous and harsh women, brightly dressed who are spying out in the darkness the secret boats of their lovers.”

“From a distance, that’s how it is,” Detrey agreed. “Some things are pretty from a distance. But I will make so bold as to assure you that the majority of them are just ordinary petty thieves. I want to ask you,” Detrey turned to Jessie, whereby his forehead

grew red, “whether the state of your health is a cause for any apprehension?”

His ceremonious question, spoken so unexpectedly and with such restraint, suddenly so pleased Jessie that she cheered up and began to glow. Looking with gratitude and with a warm smile in her eyes she said laughing:

“No cause, sir! No, sir! No apprehension, sir! The state of my health is of inferior quality but is remediable! I make so bold as to assure you, sir!” Looking at her everyone began to laugh.

“You do have a good effect on Jessie,” said Eve, casting a smiling glance at her father who smiled at her himself and, having glanced at his watch, he made a motion with the hat that was resting on his knees.

“He does!” said Jessie, laughing loudly and trying already to hold back her laughter. “A marvellous effect! O! I find this so funny! Please, don’t take offence,” Jessie turned to Detrey who was listening to her laughter with delight. “We two are going to be friends.”

Detrey winced and he felt sad.

‘There it is,’ he thought fearfully. ‘The word “friends” has been spoken, consequently all hope has been struck out.’

Having stopped laughing, Jessie lay back on the pillow and closed her eyes.

“Are you tired?” Eve asked.

“Tired, yes.”

Detrey stood up at the same time as Hawthorne and uneasily looked at Eve.

“She’ll go to sleep now,” Eve whispered to him and she straightened her hat.

“Goodbye,” Jessie said quietly, half-opening her eyes. “I’m going to sleep. Come any time.”

“Tomorrow you’ll have me the whole day,” Eve decided.

“Thanks. I’m already sleeping... sleeping.”

After calling the nurse and instructing her to keep a close eye on her patient Eve and her father went off; Detrey went behind them, deep in meditation.

“We’re going home,” said the young woman when they had come out on the pavement. “In your opinion how was my Jessie looking?”

“A sad change,” Detrey sighed. “She was such a... Rosy, crackling piece of coal, not scorching but hot, bright. And now...”

“Well you can spare us your unrhyming verses,” Eve remarked suspiciously.

“Indeed?” Detrey smiled. “The thing is that girls like that unintentionally stimulate words. For a fact, in the autumn a certain chap is going to be infernally happy.”

“Now, who would that be?” Eve was jokingly indignant, having forgotten about her spur-of-the-moment deception.

“It doesn’t really matter who it is,” Hawthorne smirked, “it’s by far more important that this chap is... certain.”

“Papa, has the walk cleared your head?”

“Not too bad now.”

“So what’s this about the autumn?”

Guessing that Eve had made that up, Detrey did not want to embarrass her and confined his observation to the fate of girls in general.

“Detrey, did Jessie make an impression on you?”

“She did. Why should I deny something good if it’s present within me?”

Hawthorne looked with sympathy at the young man, who was to all appearances in an upset state.”

“Goodbye,” he said, giving him a firm handshake. “We’ll be expecting you to call on us...”

They parted company. Helping his daughter onto the seat of the motor car Hawthorne asked:

“Why did you imagine that Detrey is stupid?”

“I sensed that he was stupid. Today stupider than ever.” said Eve with an obstinacy that caused her father some silent astonishment.

“Yes... Having a sister like that!” he said after a short silence.

Eve was also silent for a bit so as to allow the thoughts that caused Hawthorne’s utterance to develop fully and in order to reinforce them.

“There’s no answer,” she said pensively. “You can talk all you want but any verdicts are useless. Which is better in Morgiana’s position? Life or death? I’m avoiding the responsibility of saying anything – as if I were laying down the law.”

“It seems to me that you’re attributing to Morgiana something that doesn’t exist. Women of her type are often self-satisfied.”

“No, she isn’t. She is very intelligent and mercilessly embittered.”

“A mean or a lofty mind – that’s what’s in question here,” said Hawthorne. “Look at that unsightly *mignonette*.”

Chapter XVIII

Left alone, Detrey walked aimlessly along the street and turned, just as aimlessly, back. There was such a blinding and dazzling heat that even thoughts were exhausted. Rarely a passer-by would appear, trying to walk in the strip of shadow by the houses. His heart heavy from the intense heat and love, Detrey went towards Durban Park where, amongst agaves, a fountain was sending out spurts of falling spray. He desperately wanted some water, ice, shadow, the through-and-through damp of a cellar. All the while, it would not be more than an hour until the first breath of coolness, when the wind from the sea moderates the blazing of the day. But that remaining hour harboured serious torments. Detrey located a wine-cellar, where there were already many people crowding in and having a drink of wine with ice, and he sat at the very end of the long room, near the casks. From there he had a view of the sunny brilliance of the semicircular entrance.

He called for some wine, which was served in a glass pitcher that had a lump of ice floating in it, and he began to cool down from the hot weather. 'Whatever happens with me, I'm going to get to calling her by her first name. My God, how hard this is for me! She will recover – I know and feel this. But nothing will come of

it, can come of it. It's foolish to foster hopes. Her fate ought to be like a fragrance that is mysterious and rare. And that is how it will be but not with me. It is, on the whole, somehow strange for such girls to get married. They ought to remain unmarried for ever – no older than twenty years, so that people would suffer from just such an unbearable pain, as this that I am enduring.'

Having finished his hymn of despair and of rapture the young fellow sat for a while, looking at the glass with a gaze that was stern and inconsolable. Finally, those passionately expressed thoughts of his, having absented themselves somewhere, returned and began to speak again.

'My reason is becoming clouded,' the wretch meditated, trying impartially to study the green liana with the flaming flowers that was ensnaring him, 'always what is worst and what is best makes itself known and the person is not at all ashamed. I wish that my so happy and worthy rival was hanging by a thread above his death and I would save him, all the time regretting that he did not die, and I would listen, smiling in my torments, to words of gratitude from her. Her disagreeable sister is happier than I am because Jessie gave her a kiss. It would be good if Jessie were to fall into poverty, disaster and I would meet her, coming along the road with nowhere to go; we would marry and I

would look after her, take care of her. How I would wish to save her during a fire or a shipwreck!’

Recognising that he was inviting in a large number of miseries on account of a girl who was all-unsuspecting, Detrey cooled down somewhat, adding: ‘Yes, I have to be restrained, calm and cheerful, all at the same time; I have to sit by the camp-fire, cooling myself with a fan in a totally relaxed manner; such is the law of respect for oneself. Before it’s too late, I ought to travel away from this locality. Otherwise, I’ll die. It’s impossible to think about the thing I am thinking about. There is a voice of the mind which never deceives; I hear it. It’s saying: “Senseless”. It wasn’t for nothing that, when I took in my hands that white hat which had flown down from the heavens, I had a vague presentiment that my find had strings attached; and I already wanted to place it on the sand so that someone else would marvel at it, when suddenly the ribbon was wound around my hand by the wind. The ribbon persuaded me. Why did I yield to its prompting?’

So as to dull the pain – unavoidably acute in the beginning – of the ailment that had taken hold of Detrey he drank off his glass of cold wine in one draught and his teeth began to ache. ‘It’s comforting to get a toothache,’ thought Detrey, ‘the kind that makes you growl and hammer your fist against the wall; then,

what's in the soul passes off. However,' he continued with a flippancy that was in equal measure natural for his madness as was despair, 'why did I so suddenly decide to see everything in so black a light? I read somewhere that the proposal to "be friends" is, in some cases, extremely favourable. And, taking into account the fact that she is a well-off young woman, then this is rather selfishness and vanity than reason and than goodness. Is it then a bad thing that she is capable of giving herself more than I can give her with my salary? It is good, it is far better than if she had to be dependant. If you love, then it is necessary to endure, to resign yourself; to endure for her sake. If I decline to marry her because she is rich, she has the right to infer: "He tolerates the thought that only for money is it possible to marry me. I'm worth nothing myself." I love her; that's enough to be right and to know that I am right.'

Detrey was reasoning completely sincerely, since he was indifferent to money; it was only for Jessie that he wished he had a little more of it than he had. But he soon noticed that all of these overhasty thoughts of marriage to Jessie were making him ridiculous in his own eyes. 'Jessie, you have turned me into a heap of nervous rubbish,' he said, resolutely getting to his feet so as to change a mood that was becoming unbearable.

The intense heat was past; the streets were in shade. The innumerable gardens of Liss were fragrant with flowers; there was fresh air to breathe; but the clear sky with its high-flying swallows was promising for tomorrow the same poison of heat that today had seen. Detrey read a poster and set off for the theatre; while on the stage some inconceivable kind of fathers were reproaching their children for a betrayal of ideals and a heroine was trying to persuade the audience that she truly loved a seventy-year-old greybeard – his decision was finally formed: this very day he would inform Eve Stratton that he was travelling with the night-train for Pocquette. In actual fact he still had about two more days of work and about two days of assemblies but, by counting himself an absentee – for Jessie and Eve – by such an act, Detrey made a fresh visit to the patient impossible; he was renouncing the telephone, all relations and pangs of the heart, which on this memorable day had made him passionately and gloomily inconsolable. At the end of the performance, having totally forgotten what had been performed on stage, Detrey ran, accompanied by applause, out of the auditorium before anyone else and, shutting himself into a telephone booth, he put a call through to Eve Stratton. His sorrow was great, his despair boundless, his renunciation absolute and resolute. What would have excellently suited his current state would have been: feigned regret accompanied by a

secret yawn, an indifferent farewell, a collision of cheerless courtesies but no kind of request not to leave. In such a case Detrey would be able to talk a lot of contradictory and strange things. He was not expecting either sincere regret or any particular interest in himself and therefore he immediately pricked up his ears when Eve loudly and hurriedly said:

“O, finally! And just at the right time! I thought of you first of all. But of course you don’t live in the city... Detrey, help us: Jessie has disappeared! It’s only ten minutes since her nurse telephoned here: Jessie turned her dressing room upside-down, threw everything about, got dressed in something and went off no one knows where. Apparently, out the window onto the street, as the gates are already locked and the porter saw nothing. Detrey, it’s delirium; she’s obviously in a fever!”

“I’m listening” said Detrey, firmly pressing the receiver to his ear. His self-regarding emotion had disappeared; his consciousness was rocked but immediately righted itself and he became calm with the calm of sharp and pressing action. “I’m listening very closely; please, go on.”

“O, Detrey, don’t be so indifferent!” Eve exclaimed. “But I don’t know myself what I’m saying. But you wanted to say something to me?”

“I wanted to say... Well, it looks like I’ve forgotten it. The thing is that your news, of course, has affected me.”

“Now listen: Jessie could only go to her sister in her *Green Flute*; twenty-seven miles out of the city. The automobile is ready; I’m going there and I want you to come with me; if Jessie is delirious, I don’t know what might happen.”

“You’re right. In that case, wait ten minutes; I’ll be right with you.”

“You’re so gu-”

But Detrey had already put down the receiver. He quickly went towards the way out, in the midst of the crowd that was noisily leaving the theatre, all packed together. He outstripped them, without any stopping or pushing, making instinctive movements that were not noticed by his reason, which was occupied with something else entirely. The time of action had again made him himself; and already he was no longer someone in love but someone who loved, agreeable to hearing one hundred times any refusal you like, so long as no harm came to the girl who had to be helped.

Chapter XIX

The fissure, into which Morgiana had pushed off the half-strangled Hervaque, started from the lake and, descending, stretched to the sea at a height of two hundred metres above its surface; then, cutting through a steep slope, it ended on the coastal sands as an ordinary ravine, strewn with earth and stones. In that place, at the top of the coastal cliffs, where the scene of the two women battling was played out, the depth of the fissure reached one hundred and twenty metres, at a width of four. Looking into it from the edge of the precipice, it was impossible to make out anything below; it seemed that this narrow abyss was for ever doomed to darkness; but someone looking from within upwards saw the sky that covered it as a narrow patch. The light was penetrating the depths of the hole as something like the end of twilight; eyesight, deprived of stimulus, learned how to make out the surrounding two-walled space as it would in a cellar, by light coming through a chink. This fissure was formed by an earthquake; that is why its interior resembled a torn piece of bread, if its two halves were placed together, leaving between them the distance of an inch. The hollows of one side corresponded to the protuberances of the other. In many places, fragments of the rock face were

suspended, stuck balancing, because the narrowness of the gap or the overhang above a protuberance were not allowing them to fall. The bottom of the fissure was impassable and flooded with water. The close, damp air, having a strong smell of the rotting trunks which from time to time fell down here after the autumnal storms, irritated the breathing. There was a total and disturbing silence in this enormous cleft – the silence of an indifference which was final, dark like the growth underground of a root. Listening to it for a day, two, a week, a year it was possible to anticipate with confidence that you would never hear anything for all the time, while somewhere above the same slow work of time was rotting a tree till it, yielding to the wind, would start rolling into the depth of the cleft where, giving rise to rustling and a thump, it would lie motionless on the bottom.

At a depth of about seventy feet, over the course of decade, one of the most considerable blockages of the fissure had formed. A stone that was held up at a narrow spot, fixed by the walls of the hole, served as its foundation. Two trunks with long boughs, that from the humidity and the limy fumes had become hard as iron, had, at some time, fallen down here and lay to the sides of the stone, enlarging the platform. Leaves, brushwood, earth had accumulated on this barrier over the course of many years and formed, shaking and sown with the points of broken off boughs, a landing of about ten metres long, on which it was possible to

walk just as comfortably as on hay, intermixed with firewood. Here grew trembling, ash-coloured mushrooms, clinging on in detachments among mould that was creeping along the wall; from the edges of the platform, brushwood and moss were hanging down.

Slightly higher than this accumulation of rubbish, an uneven cornice was jutting out from the wall; still higher, at a distance of a foot from the cornice, a horizontal crack, a metre and a half high and no less than fifty metres long, was darkly visible – a sort of natural awning, in the interior of which it was impossible to see anything.

Ottilie Hervaque had fallen onto this platform and had been knocked unconscious.

As terrible as the impact of a fall from such a height had been, it had not killed her. The layer of brushwood, mixed with the humus and the springs of the boughs received Hervaque's body merely with a severe shaking, from which the entire platform was put swaying; in addition, a sharp wooden fragment had cut through her left side, ripping open the skin to her ribs.

She lay in the posture, which she had fallen and rolled into after the elastic impact: with her head thrown back, her arms outstretched, her palms turned upwards, with her legs sunk into detritus up to her knees. Her mouth was wide open, on her

cheeks a spasm was dying away, minutely and unconsciously suffering, like a ripple subsiding in the water.

She lay like that a long time, feeling nothing, neither pain nor the damp cold of the abyss, which was, little by little, revitalising the disordered circulation of her blood. Then she began to tremble, at first minutely – almost imperceptibly. Her mouth closed; her hand spread open, squeezed the fingers and unclasped them again. Hervaque began to shiver and sigh like a fish thrown out on the bank – ever more frequently and deeply, with a moan and with involuntary exertions to change her position. Finally the groan abated and and she quieted down entirely.

Hervaque opened her eyes. She still was not feeling either pain or fear. Her consciousness was silent. It seemed to her as though she were standing in some corridor or other, leaning her back against a door and in front of her was looking at a narrow, distant exit. Raising her head she saw where she was, looked around and remembered. An abrupt urge to leap up weakened her; with difficulty, cautiously, she pulled her legs out from the rubbish they were stuck in and, seeing them, she went rigid all over: they were scratched, blackened and covered in blood. Hervaque touched the nasty tear in her skin, near the rib and her hand was reddened by the blood.

Somehow or other, with fingers that were sticking together, she felt her arms and her legs; having satisfied herself that there were no breaks, Hervaque took a little heart.

She looked upwards. The height and the narrowness had her securely locked in. No Jean Valjean would be able to clamber up along these reddish-brown cliff-faces with slippery lumps jutting out from them. She looked about her one more time and winced, seeing the void behind her, where down below eternal night was waiting. Hervaque rose, swaying, onto legs that were giving way but dizziness made her sit down again. Noticing the cornice she began to crawl towards it, sometimes sinking with her arms amid the brushwood and being stopped dead by a sharp pain in her legs, when her wounds touched branches. Finally, she stepped onto the cornice and crawled out under the overhang.

Exhausted by her extreme exertions, Hervaque lay there. She was more surprised than gladdened. Her conceptions of cause and effect had been upended. The law: 'he who falls into the abyss, is lost' turned out to be open to exception. Not intending to throw herself to the bottom of the fissure for the sake of the triumph of the natural order, she regarded the obstacle which had saved her both derisively and fastidiously but she could not long dwell upon it as she did not know if she would be able to get out of this stone trap.

Morgiana Trengan's act had proved everything: if she had not poisoned her sister, then Hervaque would not now be lying with a sprained neck and blood-stained side on stone that was as cold as frozen earth.

After tearing off the bottom of her shirt, Hervaque fashioned bandages and dressed her legs as best she could; the wound in her side had swollen up and would not stop bleeding but, in any case, she had no way of bandaging it. Having put on her clothes again, she got up and got going along the lengthy hollow, often stopping so as to examine the semi-darkness, in which far and near seemed to be reversed. This hollow-overhang was uneven in all directions; in places it was necessary to go along the very edge of the precipice, often stooping, even crawling; sometimes it became spacious, high-roofed but then again there followed pits and elevations. Such was the path, about fifty metres long, that went sloping upwards and came abruptly to an end at a height of about eight metres from the upper surface; here it was already bright and green branches of bushes that were hanging down, unattainably close, revealed themselves against the blue strip of light above. Though she was beginning instinctively to hope, Hervaque was not experiencing either an anxious excitement or happy thoughts of a sudden rescue; her hope was reserved and mean – hope with a bitten lip. Again, she found her salvation unnatural, was surprised and stopped thinking about it.

Hervaque had been looking upwards, along that direction in which she was fighting along but, glancing back, she saw behind her a little bridge, made of stakes and with rope handrails, that was thrown across the abyss; it was for the use of pedestrians. This discovery completely set Hervaque's mind at rest. She had only to sit and wait until someone would appear on the little bridge, in order to cry to him for help. But it was quiet up there; from time to time birds flew past; the edge of a cloud appeared above the beginning of the bridge but it was moving so barely perceptibly that it was as if it was standing still, constrained by silence and by heat.

Hervaque gazed at the little bridge, not looking away, as if she was afraid of missing some unknown being who only had take a few quick steps all told, for the little bridge to be once again empty. She sat there feeble and gloomy; her thoughts on Morgiana were not furiously vindictive but filled with such refined and well-considered malice, like the settling of a game with a despised but dangerous opponent. Hervaque recognised the defeat and gave fair due to the great skill in pretence by which the mistress of *Green Flute* had almost destroyed her. The revenge Hervaque was planning had to strike not at the body but at the mind. She even became cheerful, having taken the decision to act in the way she was thinking.

It seemed as though the enlivening of her thoughts had stimulated an enlivening above: Hervaque saw a person who, holding onto the rope, was carefully moving his feet along the loose stakes. It was a postman with a bag; he was going for the mail and was not in any particular hurry.

“Stop! Help!” Hervaque shouted, showing herself as far as her head and shoulders from under the stone that hung over her. She held shouting without pause, though the postman had straight away heard and begun to look around, even having a look upwards. A fresh shout from the woman showed him where she was located; he caught hold of the rope and stooped, peering at the slope of the fissure where a face was showing up white. Hervaque began to wave her arm, repeating:

“Down here! I’m here! Throw me a rope!”

“How did you get in there?” the postman cried, astounded and having finally grasped that this case was calling for immediate assistance. “All right, hold on a minute,” he continued. “There’s a place I’ll run to where they’ll give me a rope.”

“Untie that! That one!” Hervaque cried out. “That one you’re hanging on to!”

“That’s right!” muttered the postman. He pulled at the rope which acted as a handrail for the bridge and untied it at both

ends. Then, dropping out of sight over on the side where Hervaque was languishing, he measured off if the length of the rope was sufficient. Hervaque suddenly saw the end of it almost lashing at her hand that was trying to capture it. In despair and fury, she thought that the fellow had not thought to make a loop but suddenly she heard from above:

“Can you see the end?”

“I can see it. Is there enough to tie a loop?” Hervaque shouted. There was no answer. For about two minutes she neither heard nor saw anything and she was terribly afraid that the rope would prove to be too short and, setting off to find help, the postman would spread the story of her adventure. She was cursing at his slowness and with hatred awaited the end of his dreary efforts. Finally, something touched her hair; the rope had again appeared before her face but now there was a big loop; it moved about, now going away to the side, now turning around near her hands and she was all the time failing to grab it.

“To the right! A bit to the right!” cried Hervaque. The noose began to crawl to the right, turning and dodging, but Hervaque, finding the right moment, caught it.

“I have it!” she announced.

“Great!” was heard from above. “Now here’s what you do: put one leg through the noose and sit in it like on horseback; with your hands hold on to the rope above your head. When you have yourself settled like that, gather your courage, climb out of the crack and hang there. Don’t be afraid of falling, I have a sound hold. I will straight away begin to drag you to the top.”

They could not see one another because of the projections above the place where Hervaque was sitting. For this reason, having pulled the noose onto herself, as she had been told to do and, feeling the rope hanging loosely, Hervaque for some time could not gather the resolve to slip from her cleft into the void. “Pull it up!” she shouted, ready to begin swaying above the abyss. The rope raised itself a little: then, judging that the shaking would decrease, Hervaque asked that the rope be drawn more tightly and, with a heart-stopping thought of the darkness down below, she slipped out from under the overhang, whirled about a couple of times; her shoulder banged itself against the cliff; she held onto the stone and halted the revolution.

“Pull! Pull!” she shouted, drawing up her legs and throwing back her head.

Right before her nose, she saw the wall of the precipice, which was going down in uneven jumps and then stopping. The rope, which was tightly pressing against a bulge on the rock, was

rubbing against it and twisting all the way around. Foot by foot, Hervaque came closer to the green of the grass on the top ledge. Finally, a sunburnt hand with bulging veins came down from above, caught hold of the rope below the rim of the crack, another hand joined it and they hauled up the frightened Hervaque, though she did help the postman by grabbing hold of the root of a tree. Holding the rope with one hand, with his other hand the postman caught Hervaque underneath the armpit and let her down on the grass.

“You thought that I had gone off?” said the postman. He was a tall fellow of about thirty with a round, muscular face. “This is what I had to do because the rope turned out to be a bit shortish.”

Collapsing from fatigue, Hervaque saw the rope he was showing her, to the upper part of which was attached the strap from his bag and to the strap, in turn, a long bough like a pole.

Hervaque raised herself and sat on a stump.

“You’re well torn up!” said the postman. “You’re bleeding all over.”

“Do you know what happened?” grinned Hervaque. “I sat down on the edge, let my legs hang down and I got a reeling in my head: I don’t remember any more than that; on coming to I saw

that by a strange whim of circumstances I had fallen on a blockage of trunks, brushwood, moss and soft litter sitting deep down there. The crack was alongside; I crawled along it, ever higher, and I came out by the little bridge.”

“A miracle!” said the postman. “You were saved by a miracle. Like my friend, the stoker on the *Philemon*. He fell into the engine compartment but another stoker was coming up from below carrying a rolled-up mattress on his head. That’s what halted my friend in his rush to get to the bottom deck. Listen, you’re all scratched and bleeding. I’ll take you to the place over there. They’ll do something for you there.”

“No, I live in town and I’ll go to town on foot,” Hervaque answered. “My legs aren’t hurt. I’m strong and no ‘miracles’ will take away my strength. Thanks for... that you pulled me up.”

The excited postman, the palms of whose hands were skinned, was waiting for the words of thanks, without realising that he was awaiting them; he became glad and turned red but the conclusion of the phrase gave the whole thing a grey tinge. Looking at the soiled and dishevelled, Hervaque he now no longer felt that natural, strong desire to help in any way he could, as at the beginning. If she had said: ‘You saved me, thank you,’ he would have been perfectly satisfied, as he was himself delighted with his own resourcefulness in the use of the pole. But

he did not hear the word 'saving'. He was quite upset, when Hervaque said she was going to make a note of his address so as to give him money.

"You have a wrong impression of me," he declared with annoyance. "Do you want me to get you a carriage?"

"No need," Hervaque answered, getting ready to go. "Half a mile from here there's a tavern where I can solve the question of a carriage on my own."

"As you wish," said the postman with restraint. His desire to help had now completely vanished. He sighed, put on his cap and set about attaching the rope along the little bridge. "I've no interest in your secrets," he added, coming to a halt. "Do you know at least how to get out onto the main road?"

"Yes, I do."

The undeservedly insulted man gave a bewildered smile and went towards the little bridge. 'Oh! You were hoping that I would make something of the miracle,' thought Hervaque, walking away and looking around herself with relief. Soon she spotted the path and along it she went out onto the main road, a considerable distance below *Green Flute*. She walked quietly, limping and bearing the pain of her aching wounds. Hervaque was greatly weakened but her sense of irony was sustaining her

and, feigning annoyance at the recollection of a caprice of the fissure that had saved her, with her wry smile she thought she would lodge higher than everything that did not depend on her dimensions.

Having waited a little, she heard a rapid sound, catching up with her and, turning, she saw an automobile, the passengers of which were a man and a woman, sitting side by side. Hervaque bent towards the ground, dropping her head into her hands. She remained in that posture until, shortly after the motor car had stopped, she felt on her shoulder a gently inquiring hand and she looked at the gentleman, who was trying to raise her up.

“Are you all right?” he asked sympathetically.

“I’m hurt, I’m not able to walk,” said Hervaque.

“Where do you live?”

“Would you please bring me into Liss, house number six, Rock Crystal street?”

“I can,” said the gentleman. He looked at the driver, who came out of his seat and helped him to bring the injured woman to the automobile where, playing her role, she sat beside the driver.

“What misfortune has befallen you?” the lady asked, sympathetically drawing her eyebrows together.

“I’m hurt...” Hervaque repeated gloomily.

A blush came out on the woman’s quiet and refined face. She turned to her companion, who shrugged his shoulders and gave the order to drive on.

“So then, my dear Mary,” he said. “the future most certainly belongs to this spa!”

“I’m so glad,” the woman said.

Then the automobile got going with the speed of the wind and no one made any more efforts to engage with Hervaque – neither with questions or with advice; she also sat silently, full of a sullen and objectless irony, which was nobody’s business.

Chapter XX

At ten o'clock in the evening Jessie, who had been sleeping the whole time since the departure of her guests, awoke agitated and all of a sudden. She sat upright, breathing with difficulty.

She was lying in the shadow. At a table some ways off the nurse had settled herself in an armchair, reading a book by the light of a lamp with a dark shade.

"I woke up," said Jessie, looking around. "Did I forget something? Where's that letter?"

Realising that she was talking while half-awake, the girl hung her head and yawned; then she was astonished, when the nurse picked up an envelope from the table and came across to her.

"There is a letter for you," the woman reported. Grasping that Jessie had been sleeping, the nurse was also amazed that she spoke of the letter which the girl had not yet seen, and she said so.

Giving her a weary look, Jessie shrugged her shoulders and, settling back on the pillow, she began to examine the envelope. The nurse lit a second lamp for Jessie. The handwriting was unfamiliar to the girl; without any particular curiosity, she

unsealed the envelope and extracted a neatly folded-up sheet. With each word of the letter, which had been printed out on a typewriter and did not have a signature, her amazement increased and, instinctively wrapping her bathrobe around her, becoming flustered from her thoughts, Jessie began to breathe deeply so as bring herself round and to overcome a weakness – which she somewhat succeeded in doing. Wanting to be on her own at once, Jessie said to the nurse, who had again moved off into her armchair:

“Would you prepare me some coffee, please. I’m very thirsty: but let it cool first.”

Suspecting nothing, the woman set out to fulfil Jessie’s request, while the girl, beginning to tremble, reread the letter: “Your sister has poisoned you. You are not sick, you have been poisoned. This poison is fatal within the space of 10-12 days. Medical care is useless, even if a doctor knows about the poisoning. For the time being there is no immediate danger but tomorrow morning you will be contacted by telephone. The antidote is known only to us; it can be provided, if you agree to pay 1,000 pounds.”

Jessie’s legs began to ache; the light darkened and a nervous nausea constricted her throat. The second reading had frightened her even more. The girl could neither believe the

letter nor dismiss it; her fright had crossed that boundary before which it is still possible to shame oneself for the loss of self-control, which is the significance of a suspicion; she was unable to hold in check feelings similar to the horror on waking up in the bright light of your house on fire. Nobody of her acquaintance would be capable of joking in such a way. Understanding nothing, knowing only that she had to hurry immediately to her sister for an explanation and reassurance – otherwise she would die before morning or go out of her mind – Jessie knelt upright in the bed and began to conceal the letter in the table, under the pillow, in a book, taking it out and moving it aimlessly till she got a hold of herself. Then with the letter in her grip, she got out of the bed and put on her shoes.

The key to her dressing room was usually to be found in the lock. Remembering this, Jessie quietly opened the door and ran to get dressed. Out of fear and haste, her movements were disjointed, unsteady and she was not aware of what she was doing all the time. Having run along the hall and a part of the corridor, Jessie turned round the corner and, with relief, saw the key in the lock: now, as always, it spoke to the honesty of the servants. Opening wide the wardrobes, Jessie threw everything that she took off the hangers onto the floor but her mind was not able quickly to manage her choice. She was looking for a suitable dress. Claspings to her bosom a bundle of clothes, Jessie cast out of it a

brown dress, did up the buttons wrong; wrapped her head in a light-blue scarf; running stealthily, she returned to her own room; she pulled on stockings, shoved her feet into some kind of shoes, grabbed money, the letter and, opening the window, jumped out onto the footpath of the lane.

If she had not been hurrying and grieving so much, her preparations would have taken considerably less time than they did in actuality. The jolt of the jump from the window knocked the wind out of her; having stood for a while by the wall of the house, her heart beating weakly and unhealthily and pressing her forehead and the palms of her hands against the wall, Jessie went out onto the pavement, arousing the attention of the few passers-by but, to her relief, nobody approached her to ask what had happened. Scarcely having paused for breath, Jessie began looking for a carriage and, not having gone half of the block, she saw a taximeter. The driver looked at the girl in the scarf with a favourable smile. Since Jessie did not smile but categorically offered ten pounds for a fast half an hour's journey, he deferentially enquired where they were to go and set about the fulfilment of his duties. Scarcely had Jessie settled down, when she began to rock and rush along; the southern wind blew round her ears; got at her mouth, into her eyes, it pressed the scarf into the girl's heated face; the midnight lights of the city ceased to glitter, giving way to the darkness of the sloping hills and Jessie

became calmer. The motion made her feel easier; the confidence of the motor car flashing through this space also infected her with confidence that soon rest would come. She thought only of the letter, of Morgiana – impotently and passionately, as someone knocks on a door, calling for help but hearing no comforting movement. Occasionally, from the green road fear would run out, seizing hold of her hands, which she had miserably muffled up in her scarf, and again flying away into the hills, like the shadow of a roadside olive tree upset by the light of the headlamps. The words “you have been poisoned” would not leave Jessie; they rushed along among the hills, quivered in her breathing; somewhere in the corner, by her foot, these words knocked and hurried; like the scarf they rubbed themselves against her face, mixed up with the wind and the darkness.

Jessie came awake; in this indescribable state it seemed to her that she had already seen Morgiana but she could not imagine what had been said by her sister nor what she had said herself. It was as though they had already parted and Jessie was on her way back to town. Once she had imagined this, Jessie was not able, by any efforts of the mind, to call up the impression that she was going out of the city. The direction had swapped around. It was only when the radiant houses of Stony Ascent twinkled and, with the motor making a new sound, the road went upwards that the actual direction took up its position in her mind. After a

few minutes going along by the precipice, which was guarded by a wall, the automobile drove out onto a level area and was directed towards the sole light of the house, which immediately disappeared behind the roof of the Hobson dwelling. 'There's light, Morgiana is still up,' Jessie thought.

The motor car rocked, came to a stop; but for a few moments the worn-out girl was still hurtling along – within herself – from the inertia of her feelings of motion. She got down, paid the money and, saying: "You can go back. I won't be going anywhere else," she rang at the gates. The dog, that had come running from the interior of the yard, was already barking. The noise at the gates, the barking and the bell woke Hobson. He opened the window, looked out and, seeing a female figure, he did not straight away recognise Jessie.

"Hobson, let me in!" the girl cried. "Is my sister at home?" In great wonder, understanding that it was Jessie who had come, Hobson rushed as fast as his legs could carry him to open. He hardly managed to get into his shoes and coat but, even in his coat, he felt the coolness of the night; he was all the more astonished at Jessie's light clothes and her unhealthy appearance. Not able to bring himself to ask any questions, he let the girl in and walked behind her to the entrance repeating:

“You can see light in the bedroom but Netty is most likely already asleep; come in quickly or you’ll catch cold; the air here is sharp.”

They went up to the entrance; then leaving Jessie alone, Hobson went around the corner of the house and knocked on the maid’s window. Behind the glass a white shadow began rushing around; soon, with a bewildered expression, Netty opened the door; welcomed by her troubled exclamations, Jessie stepped into the entrance hall.

“Is Morgiana sleeping?! Wake my sister,” said Jessie, passing into the front room, from which the staircase went upstairs.

Hobson withdrew, the maid had already put her foot on the step of the stairs, when she stepped back again – from above Morgiana, who was fully dressed, not yet having been to bed, was coming down. She had heard how the car had rumbled up and stopped; she did not know whose voice she was hearing and then, with animosity and a cowardly faintness in her heart, she recognised it as Jessie’s and everything tossed about within her, for she felt that a blow had landed; not knowing either of what nature it was nor what had happened, Morgiana’s heart stood still when, half-opening the door, she caught Jessie’s words: “wake *her*” within her house. Then only, screwing up her eyes tightly and aching taking a deep breath a couple of times so

that she subdued her desperate palpitation, did she go down ready to receive any blow.

Already on the staircase, Morgiana halted and stooped, scrutinising her sister's face. Jessie rushed towards her; not holding back her tears and laughing with fear in her eyes, she caught her sister's hands, weakly dragging her down and saying over and over again:

"I'm guilty, Mori, I'm terribly guilty; I came so that you would forgive me! I'll spend the night with you!"

"Netty, you aren't needed any more," Morgiana said to the maid. "You can go. Jessie, have you gone mad?" she asked, when the maid had closed the door behind herself.

"I have gone mad. A letter did this to me."

'Start lying,' Morgiana thought, already guessing at what was in prospect for her. "Fine, some letter. But let's go into the drawing room. You are quite ill; you have an awful appearance. Who allowed you to travel?"

"Ah, everything is fine now!" Jessie exclaimed, walking after her. "But you have to punish me! O, how I have been tormenting myself, how much I have suffered these last hours! Here's the letter, here, take it and read it and try to think, who could write something like that!"

In the average-sized room they had come into, Jessie lay down on the couch, then raised herself a little and propped up her head with her hand. Morgiana read the letter, slowly walking before her sister's gaze and she understood that Hervaque had to be alive. 'Yes, start lying,' she said to herself but, in that moment, her face refused to lie; it grew white and savage. Not in control of herself, Morgiana made a ball of the letter; becoming vacant she began to pass it from one hand to the other; finally she thrust it into the pocket of her skirt. In that moment, from her mendacious and stubborn eyes, the girl recognised the whole truth. Knowing it now, she could not believe it; she knew it and did not believe it.

"Give me back the letter!" Jessie shouted, stretching out her arm.

"Give me back the letter, Morgiana! I should die with it!"

"Why are you shouting?" Morgiana whispered threateningly.

"You would think that I'm some fiend. Ah! You didn't tear up the malicious letter in indignation; you believed it and hurried off to insult me?! This letter was written by some scoundrel; who? How would I know?!"

"Morgiana, say something immediately!"

"Don't shout. If you're sick, stay here but don't torment me. I will not allow you to shout."

“Morgiana, I demand that you sit down and start talking. Remember that I am in poor health! Speak simply, affectionately and sisterly!”

“Fine. What am I supposed to say?”

“Then give back the letter.”

“No!”

“Tell me the truth, Mori, my own flesh and blood!”

“I am the truth. I’m the truth itself in front of you!”

“Sister, you see that I’m sick; I can no longer answer for my own thoughts! Sit down, let’s talk with true feeling! Who is there, who could play such a trick?”

“Why are you play-acting? You don’t believe the letter. Tell me: do you believe it or don’t you?”

“Well, I never knew what kind of a person you were,” said Jessie.

“Don’t speak so brutally; I’m terrified of your words!”

Morgiana took the letter out of her pocket and quickly but assiduously tore it up into small shreds which she threw behind the grating of the fireplace.

“There’s my answer,” Morgiana declared. “Go upstairs and lie down. But it would be even better, if you were to leave my house immediately. I’ll give you my car.”

Jessie dully watched her movements.

“Good,” she said, getting up and moving to sit closer to her sister, directly opposite her. “I’ll find out the truth by the simplest means. Tomorrow I’ll ask the person who sent that letter to come to me, having nothing to fear. Then I’ll be told what this is about!”

“Jessie, you will not do that because it is an abomination!”

“No, it is not an abomination! For I have been poisoned, do you remember that or not? There are no diseases like this, there can’t be!”

“Don’t shout! Lower your voice!”

“Mori! Take away this horror!” Jessie exclaimed, sobbing. “Are you really my executioner?”

“Of course not,” said Morgiana and a lie dawned on her that it would be more to her benefit to be tangled in than to speak the truth. “This letter you received is a new crime.”

“That means I was, then, given something to drink?”

“It’s excruciatingly difficult for me, Jessie, but I am compelled to confess. You know that I live a very dull, restricted life. Are you listening?”

“I’m listening, speak!”

Jessie was looking at her with hope and with fear.

“I am punished for my fantasies,” Morgiana went on, getting up and pacing about the room, so as not to see the girl’s eyes. I purchased from a certain person – I can give you the name and the address, if you wish – a particular medicine that possesses, according to what he told me, the capacity to conjure up distinct, beautiful dreams. That’s what he said. I have no life, I wanted to experience dreams. It’s difficult for me to confess to this but that’s how it is.”

Jessie’s disordered mind was exhausted, trying to respond with trust to every word. Morgiana was speaking erratically: now with excessive force, now awkwardly and haltingly. But it was not this that Jessie was following; what was important for her was *what* she would say.

“Is that painful for you?” Morgiana asked, in the fog of the lie, trying to capture a likeness of the strange truth, outlines resembling the reality. “I’ll shorten my story; you have a lie down, I’ll bring you home and send for your doctor. But... what

was I saying? Yes, without your knowledge I administered a few drops to you.”

“You bought them for yourself and gave them to me!”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see what effect they had.”

“You could have found out the effect on yourself.”

“Jessie, I know how you love telling your dreams and what interesting ones you have. It isn’t always possible to make sense of such things oneself. I couldn’t have thought there was any danger for you! And now I see that I’ve fallen into the hands of criminals, who sold me something harmful in the guise of a narcotic, with the aim of then extorting money.”

“Morgiana, that can’t be. Is it so that they, whoever they might be, are going to blackmail me, the person who’s sick? Since you were supposed to drink the... this – as you say – special dream medicine. Nobody knew that you would take a notion to treat me with this stuff! And then, what’s the advantage of giving *you* poison?”

“How can I know what the gain was? You’re young, frightened; you’ll pay an exorbitant amount for an antidote; you fear a

family scandal – that might be why?! Also, like you, I’m losing track of it, I’m trying to understand. Perhaps the poison was given by mistake and afterwards the intention to benefit from this arose.”

Jessie was silent, bowing her head and with her arms laid stretched out on the table. Her eyelashes were quivering, glittering with tears.

“This happened on that morning?”

“On which morning?”

“When you came into my room to call Fletchers.” Caution betrayed Morgiana. Morgiana answered in the affirmative, when she ought to have said that she had mixed the poison into the drink the evening before.

“Do people have dreams in the daytime?” Jessie asked in a tone of sad triumph, opening her eyes and firmly wiping them. “Morgiana, you are lying! Now I can’t believe you and perhaps it’s good that you fabricated this story with the beautiful dreams. Thanks to it, on listening to you I’ve become used, if only a little, to the idea that you, my sister, are a monster! For what reason have you destroyed me?”

“Calm down, Jessie,” said Morgiana with a nervous, involuntary laugh. “I gave you this medicine in the morning, because I had

been given different instructions. In the daytime there are supposed to be waking reveries that are similar to dreams.”

“Just as beautiful as what you did? Why did you leave after giving me the poison?”

“Are you unwell, Jessie!? Let me help you to lie down.”

“Don’t lay a finger on me! Don’t touch me! I’ll lie down by myself.”

Jessie went to the divan and lay down, almost collapsed, her face the colour of mud. Her strength was leaving her and she thought that now she was dying. ‘Why, let the stricken deer go weep,’ Morgiana remembered. Her excitement and the upheaval caused by her own lie, in front of the dying girl’s face, were so keen that she continued to speak quietly and insistently:

“I didn’t do anything. Not a thing. I wanted to have dreams; Jessie, I have a right to dreams. In my sleep I was able to be no worse than anyone else: in dreams I was supposed to be well-proportioned, cheerful, beautiful. You know this torments me, Jessie; you can’t understand how distressing it is to look at those others, by whom everybody is enraptured, to whom everybody throws their flowers and sings their songs! It is painful but I should say it as I wanted to replace my life with a dream. An old toad wanted to see herself as a rose; she did something stupid.

Just a foolish thing, Jessie, nothing more. Now you know everything. You're kind and you forgive me; and, of course, you'll soon be well! I'll go, tomorrow even, and I'll get the antidote from these scoundrels or an admission of what you have been poisoned with so as to involve in this matter a doctor who can be relied on that he won't divulge your sister's regrettable mistake."

Jessie opened her eyes and in exhaustion waved her arm.

"You've said everything, thank you," she whispered out. "Well, so, my life is over. It has come to this. Who are these people that you were buying the sweet dreams from?"

Morgiana said nothing.

"Say it, my dear sister!"

"I might have the surname mixed up. It's written down in my room; I'll tell you tomorrow."

With a sudden impulse Jessie rose up and sat upright. She was suffering so much that she wanted to summon death but she was afraid of death.

"Help!" the girl shouted. "Help! I'm being murdered!" Growing savage, Morgiana stopped her mouth with her hand.

"Hell..." escaped from under her fingers.

“Do you want to cause a scandal?” Morgiana shouted in a whisper. “Do you know what could come of that? Nobody will save you then!”

“Let me go. I’m leaving,” said Jessie, pushing away her hand. “Move away, open the door. Why is this all happening to me, my God! Help us, have mercy on us!”

She stood up trying to go out but Morgiana, holding onto her sister by force, said:

“Listen, I swear to you, you will be going home immediately! But just don’t leave the room. The motor car will be here straight. I’ll go and see to it and I’ll bring you away!”

“Anyone at all but not you!”

“It will be me because I’m not to blame and you aren’t in your right mind!”

“A lie!” Jessie said, continuing to cry with her eyes open, full of hopeless despair and delirium. “A lie, Morgiana, my executioner. Everything you say about everything is a lie. If you wanted the inheritance, was it that? But let it be, where’s the motor car? I’m leaving.”

She sat down while Morgiana went out. “Have to lie,” she said, “one lie before the end; running means confessing. She’ll confirm

it for herself but she won't denounce me. I know her. She'd rather die. She'll die after this conversation. She might run out while I'm walking"

Morgiana cautiously turned the key in the door but, as quiet as this movement was, Jessie heard that the key was moved. Then it seemed to her that in the next room was sitting some dark accomplice, who was supposed to come in and finish off this dreadful thing that Morgiana had intended. Hearing by her steps that Morgiana had gone away, Jessie tried to open the door and, seeing that it was locked, she ran up to the window. Out of fear and grief her strength came back to her with that morbid frenzy that no longer brooks any obstacles. Having slid off the windowsill the girl found herself in the garden and, after running up to the wall, she climbed up a tree by way of a wheelbarrow leaning against the wall. This tree was standing not too far distant from the wall, so that stepping across from the boughs onto the top of it would not have been difficult for a healthy person. Jessie separated herself from the tree in that moment when the upper edge of the wall was underneath her armpit; having fallen onto the wall with her arms as far as her shoulders, while pushing off with her feet from the trunk of the tree, the girl crawled ever further across the crest of the wall and, losing her balance, fell down on the other side onto the dry grass.

“It’s done,” she thought, “and I’ll lie for a bit so that I can walk without falling. But no, I have to go or they’ll catch me.” She stood up reeling and, holding onto the wall, commanded herself: “Whatever you do don’t faint!” At last she succeeded in moving straight through the bushes; she was badly disoriented and thought she was going out onto the road, when in fact she was going towards the sea. “It’s a wood,” said Jessie. “But I’m not afraid. A forest isn’t as dreadful as being with my sister. She’s no sister to me; I couldn’t have a sister like that. Who is she at all?” And in the darkened reason of the girl a fairy tale that was as persuasive as the most genuine truth began to act. ‘My sister was replaced when she was small. That one was stolen and they put in this one. And that one who likes rusks and looks so like me – she’s my natural sister. Yes, that’s her and I’m going to go to her. She said that she lives here, somewhere not far off. O, I know where. I have to go through the forest and then I’ll call her.’

She went like someone blind. The overcast sky displayed the same darkness as the earth and the trunks below. Leaves were sliding along Jessie’s face, she was stumbling and stopping, trying to see somewhere or other a beam of light. But there was nothing but damp night all around her and, thanks to the dampness, which was becoming sharper the deeper she plunged into the forest, her weakness had ceased to threaten her with

falling in a faint. Jessie was shivering; her feet were bruised but the clear notion of a path, located somewhere close by that would lead her to the unknown sister was so persistent that Jessie was every minute expecting the appearance of this road – broad and full with gardens and lights.

Her diseased fantasy was full of shadows and enigmatic words, which were vaguely consoling her, at the same time the fear of dying alone, in the middle of the forest had given way to a higher feeling – a sad and disdainful courage. Her passionate, heart-rending despair passed off; although that life that she loved and was careful of had ended and in its place had begun a life that she had never known – one with a poisoned soul and a heart that has felt the worst of damnations – she was not now grieving so greatly as on listening to Morgiana’s lie. Her despair had reached the fullness of indifference. Having had her cry, she was dragging herself along with dry eyes now, her arms outstretched so as not to collide with a bough and listening whether or not shadowy figures from *Green Flute* might be pursuing her. Although the forest and the darkness were protecting her from the imaginary pursuer, Jessie did not dare shout, fearing that they would catch up with her, following her voice. She was now walking in a direction parallel to the line of the coast and she would have gone far, if it was not for the fits of dizziness during which she would stand still for a long time, holding onto trees. In

spite of the damp and the cold, she was so tormented with thirst that Jessie would lick the leaves which were covered with dew but that only gave her still more of a desire to drink.

“Could I have become lost and be going to die?” the girl said. “How awful such an end would be! I can’t walk any more, I’ve no strength. I’ll sit down and I’ll wait for the dawn.”

When she had decided thus, in the darkness in front of her the leaves lit up with fiery and black specks. With the last of her strength she ran into the light and saw a hot camp-fire by which, tottering, walked an old fellow with an unshaven, unhealthy face. A jacket was thrown across his shoulders: near the bonfire lay a hat, bread and a bottle. A second bottle stood next to a bundle, out of which a third bottle was sticking up. The old man was breaking brushwood on his knee and tossing it onto the fire.

This man was standing with his back to Jessie, bending over the brushwood. Reaching the fire the girl said:

“If you can, save me! I’m in such a bad way that I’m not able either to walk or to stand. Could I sit by your fire?”

Having heard the female voice that had so surprisingly rung out, the old man turned his head, remaining in that posture in which he had been breaking the brushwood. At last his eyes that were directed down and back noticed Jessie’s torn silk stocking. He

abandoned the brushwood, turned and ran his dirty hand through the hair that was tangled on his forehead, seeing how, trying hard to stand upright, this heavily panting, unknown girl with a face swollen from crying was shivering from cold and from tiredness.

“Do sit down,” he said pensively, examining Jessie with a sad, highly superficial interest. “Whoever you are you need to warm yourself. There’s room enough.”

He threw his jacket by the fire and pointed to it with his hand and he himself moved off to the opposite side and sat down, placing his elbows on his raised knees. Plunging his quiet face into his calloused palms, as though into a bowl, the unknown man saw that the girl had lain down, feebly lowering herself onto her elbow.

A wave of heat fell on Jessie’s shoulders and face, warming her. Opening her eyes wide, questioning but without any fear she looked at the master of this woodland fire, while that man was sitting and reflecting upon her without any kind of noticeable surprise. Troubled by his frightening appearance Jessie said:

“Please don’t be angry that I have probably prevented you from lying down to sleep. I lost my way. But in the morning if you help me to get out of this forest: I’ll do anything you want for you!”

“Excellent,” said the unknown man. “I’m not curious, pet, and I’m not greedy. The fire is burning and I will show you the way out, as long you have somewhere to go. But wouldn’t you like to eat something?”

“No. I want to drink, just to drink! Do you have any water?”

“Are you sick?”

“I’m very sick. Please, could you give me even a mouthful of water?” Seeing how avidly she was looking at the bottles, the old fellow went over to her and sat alongside of her. He did not say anything, he was just looking at the girl, trying to evaluate correctly her appearance. Finally, he felt sorry for her and through the mighty cargo of alcohol, which was so customary for him that even an experienced eye would not immediately determine the helping he had had, the old chap sensed that he was seeing a completely human being and not something halfway between actuality and imagination.

“Your eyes have a bad look and yourself you’re pale and trembling,” he said. “So, you are sick. The only thing is, little one, the water in this bottle isn’t for children. For a hundred years now they’ve been writing in books about this water that it’s bad for you and the more they write that the more we drink it. I don’t know, if you can drink it.”

“What is it?”

“Whiskey, my dear.”

“O, give me the whiskey!” Jessie begged, raising herself a little and putting her hand to her breast. “I’ve never drunk whiskey but I’ve heard that it refreshes. And I’m unwell! I’ll be warmed up after it! If only one glass!”

“It does refresh,” the old fellow grinned. “Have you had occasion to drink vodka?”

“No, never!”

“All the same I’ll risk giving you a glass. You have a fever and in that case vodka with cinchona is wholesome. I have cinchona.”

“It’s no fever,” said Jessie. “I’ve been poisoned and I’m probably going to die. Cinchona won’t help me to conquer the poison.”

“Since you’re saying that, it means you have a high fever. From that your thoughts become disturbed. I suffered from a fever myself for ten years. Take the glass. Take a good hold! And here’s the cinchona. Hold it with your other hand!”

So saying, the old fellow thrust into her palm a capsule, so worn out on account of the rags and papers of his pockets, that it more resembled a playing counter from some gambling-den than the famous medicament of the Countess Chinchón. Jessie looked at

the capsule with melancholy but, for some reason, she wanted to pay heed.

“But it’s all in vain,” said the girl, swallowing the cinchona and pressing the end of her scarf to her mouth. “Now I’ll drink, so as to heat up.”

With a firmness, though she turned red from the unaccustomed drink, which shook her both in body and mind, Jessie drained the glass so happily that she did not even choke on it.

“Indeed, you have never drunk whiskey,” said the old fellow, looking at her altered face, the eyes closed, as a spasm went across it. “Never mind, that’ll do good!”

Jessie had stopped trembling. Her tormented soul grew quiet, her body had warmed up. This special, alluring warmth of alcohol, in her grief and her fear, resembled a temporary cessation of the excruciating pains and, sighing deeply, she leaned against a stone, which was reflecting the heat of the fire around her. The camp-fire was gently floating in front of her, while the old man was now approaching, now drawing away.

“A repulsive drug!” said Jessie, having received the gift of loquacity. “But now I have no thirst. Just my head is going round. I thank you; but what is your name and who are you at all?”

The old man poured out a glass for himself and, having drunk, he pensively stroked his moustache.

“My name is Silas Schenk. I used to be an itinerant photographer. Everything I earned, I spent; I lived alone and I’ll die alone. I’m no longer fit for work; the whiskey requires that you pay the bill but the bill is large. And I have seen that life is over. Now I’m making for a certain friend in Liss; he is also sixty years of age. I’m going to live out the end of my life together with him, watching how other people live.”

“You don’t have to give up until you’re eighty!” Jessie objected. “A lot of new things can happen for twenty years! I’m convinced of that!”

“The conceit of youth!” said Schenk, throwing branches on the fire. “And where are you going?”

“I’ll be going to my sister soon,” Jessie answered, looking at the precious stones of the fire. “Her name is Jessie too. She lives on a lovely road, down there where the forest hangs above the sea. She will save me. A certain woman poisoned me.”

Jessie lay down and Schenk was looking at this girl, pondering how many girls there are who have been abandoned by their lovers. Some die, others go off their heads...

“That woman was considered to be my sister,” Jessie was saying and it seemed to her that she was lying by a blazing open fireplace. “On a beautiful road, in that house where there are blue window-panes and a golden roof, is where my sister Jessie lives. But that woman has been exposed, she confessed, herself. She was brought from the north. I’m going to go to Jessie now. But isn’t it strange, don’t you think, that we have the one name? That’s never happened anywhere else but that’s how it turned out. I recognised her straight away and she me. Morgiana has made things so that I now have an old soul. And I’m twenty all told! Yes, my strength has come back, soon I’ll be able to walk...”

Her eyes closed and Jessie’s face became blank. The dark horse of sleep was rushing her towards the horizon, beyond which there is nothing only absolute nothing. From the camp-fire a burning ember fell on her hair. Schenk pulled the piece off.

“No need to take off the scarf,” Jessie muttered vaguely. “Detrey!” she suddenly cried out, having remembered everything, she rose up and looked about wildly. “Detrey, I implore you! You were my friend, after all O, take me away from here!”

That was the final outburst. Schenk had difficulty in getting her to sit as she was trying to rise her feet, by force he made her lie down again. At first she pushed him away but here the horse of sleep flew over the precipice and Jessie lost consciousness, falling

asleep by the light of the camp-fire, in the forest, dead drunk, at a distance of no more than half a kilometre from *Green Flute*.

It was two o'clock at night.

Chapter XXI

On arriving at Eve Stratton's, Detrey found the young woman ready to set out. She was in her travelling hat, her overcoat and, while talking with Detrey, she was hurriedly thrusting various small items into her bag. Her face conveyed an unwillingness to enter into proposals and explanations, while she yet needed to get going herself, in order to speed things up. She nodded to Detrey and ran down the stairs, considerably outstripping the young officer, who caught up with her and only just had the time to open out the door of Hawthorne's racing car. They sat, one opposite the other. The motor car sped away, causing a frightful wind in Eve's face and forcing the eyes to snatch in glimpses the flash of traffic on the streets, which was rushing past around them with the rapidity of plummeting fire displays. For those ten minutes while the automobile was cutting through the city, ten policemen noted its number in their notebooks, for all motor traffic regulations had been broken, with everyone they met or whose path they crossed being forced to flee in all directions.

Noticing Detrey's approving smile, Eve said:

"My father will reckon up the fines. I hate extravagant behaviour but today it is in no way possible to act otherwise. Am I making

you uneasy with this outing? There was absolutely no one else I could ask to help, besides you. I was asking my father to come with me. In that moment you began speaking. He said to me: 'If, by chance, that's Detrey on the telephone, then ask him and leave me out of it.' He thinks that, in such alarming circumstances, you're a better fit for the situation."

Thus dismissing the suspicion of a 'change in the wind', Eve continued:

"She was not delirious. I spoke with the nurse and with Gerda. Jessie received some letter, by way of a ruse she sent away the nurse, got dressed and disappeared."

"Is it certain that she has gone to her sister? It may be that she's in the city?!"

"No, my feeling tells me, that's how it is. She's at her sister's. With the way things are between them! I should say that there's no intimacy between them. And now this girl, who is sick, breaks out at night and leaves the house! Only Jessie is capable of things like that. That's where she is but I don't understand any of it."

"Let's suppose," said Detrey, "that something bad happened there, at the sister's."

“You wouldn’t write a letter for that, because Morgiana has an automobile.”

“That’s true.”

“Now, look. What torture this is! We’re still hardly out of the city.”

The speed and the wind made it a strain for them to talk and, for that reason, the conversation ceased.

“We aren’t thinking that anything serious has happened?” Detrey asked. “What could be the meaning of this story?”

“I’m not hiding anything!” Eve shouted. “I’m afraid and I want to find her! It’s all about that letter! I’m going out of my mind!”

The fewness of Detrey’s questions and the total calm of his appearance angered her. As he had now fallen silent and was looking off to the side, Eve thought that he was probably not very thankful to her for this excursion, which was probably ruining a more agreeable plan for these late hours. She said:

“Soon now. I’m beginning to think more calmly. Jessie should be there. It’s a pity that you know her so little. If you did you’d forgive me for the fact that I’ve abducted you.”

“I know her,” said Detrey.

“You do? That was a quick...”

Detrey was silent for a time, considering his answer:

“Some people you get to know quickly,” he pensively informed his companion, who was slightly amused in her own mind. “You learn what is most important about them straight away; and then – during a whole life – you will learn small things, which set the tone for all of it taken together.”

“That means that the small items are more important?”

“Yes, probably.”

“Well, you’re contradicting yourself!”

“Perhaps,” agreed Detrey who did not like any squabbling.

“If you do know Jessie, tell me, what’s she like?”

“She’s just the person that you know her to be, over a far more sizeable stretch of time than my two meetings.”

“You’re being evasive. So what kind do I know her as?”

“Well exactly that, such a one.”

“Which kind exactly?”

“The kind that you know.”

“That means you don’t know!”

“I know perfectly well!”

“Self-assurance!”

“No, assurance.”

Unassailable on that flank, Detrey was caught by a crafty promise:

“If you tell me your opinion of Jessie, I will tell you what she has said about you!”

“And what would that be?”

“What you know about yourself.”

“However,” said Detrey, with an anxiety brought on by her promise, “first of all, you are obviously mimicking me. And secondly, I am certain and I know that there is not a finer young lady in the world than Jeremena Trengan. This is demonstrated by the way she breathes, her whole appearance and I count it a great honour to assist you in the aim of this outing.”

“Mighty words,” said Eve, fallen to thinking. “But I cheated you, Detrey. Jessie didn’t say anything.”

Detrey remained convinced that, out of pity for him, Eve was suppressing some small mockery. He did not pay any particular attention to that but he found Eve’s thoughtless inquisitiveness unpleasant. And, nevertheless – talking about Jessie, speaking her name – this was a consolation for him. A melancholy began

to gnaw at him; but they had already arrived and, for the second time this night, an automobile was stopping at the gates of *Green Flute* and announcing itself with a clarinet blast.

Hobson, lying in his bed next to his wife, was pondering aloud on the reasons for the sudden appearance of Jessie Trengan; he could not sleep.

“It isn’t our affair; quench the light for a finish,” his wife said to him. “Look, it’s striking three and I can’t get to sleep, since you’re either getting up and smoking or turning around in the bed again.”

“Stay quiet a minute, it’s like someone else has come?” said Hobson. In that moment the motor horn was heard. Hobson got up, got dressed and went to the door.

“This is something serious,” he said. “Put out the light, if you want; there’ll be no sleep for me now.”

His wife scolded him that he had drawn on all these motor cars by his holding vigil, while Hobson, gripping the key in his hand, went to the gates and unlocked the latticed door. Deadening the sound of the key, Eve cried:

“We’re searching for Jessie Trengan! Is she here?”

“She arrived three hours ago,” said Hobson, opening the door wide and with his hand holding up the raised collar of his jacket.

When he heard this, Detrey straight away became tired. Hobson’s words had the same effect as a feverishly unsealed telegram, which puts an end to the anxiety, after which, having sighed, you feel like sitting down with a laugh.

“Ugh, my head has even started spinning!” said Eve Stratton. “I’m relieved. Are they sleeping?”

Hobson went further into the yard and glanced towards the windows of the gable side. Two windows upstairs were lit.

“There’s light,” he reported. “But there’s often been light at night these last few days. Our maid, Netty, said that the mistress suffers from insomnia.”

“In any case we will go in,” Eve decided. “Will you please ask if we can be received – Eve Stratton and Phineas Detrey.

“It seems to me,” said Detrey, “that it would more agreeable for you to go in on your own. I’ll wait.”

“That might be so. But it’s cold and dark out here.”

“Would you like to sit by the fire?” said Hobson. Detrey consented. Hobson led him into the room where the children were sleeping. Now they all woke up and, raising their heads

from the makeshift beds, they studied the visitor with wide eyes. Detrey rested his hands on his hips and gave a wink. A base laugh rang out from the throng, flattered by an actor's trick. Then the steward's wife entered and invited the guest to come into the parlour. Curiosity had revived her corpulent, sleep-deprived body like a wash in cold water. Having convinced herself from Detrey's short answer to her remark about the weather (he had said: "twenty past three") that insisting further was indelicate, she went in sorrow to the children and shouted at them to go to sleep. Detrey was sitting on a chair at a table covered in oil-cloth and smoking. The hostess was struck when, on again looking in on the eating room, she heard his answer that had been delayed by about ten minutes:

"That true: it gets cool after sunset." "The husband is right, he'll be exulting that he's right. Something's happened with them," Hobson's wife thought. "This fellow doesn't even see that I'm walking here right in front of his nose.'

Meanwhile Hobson was accompanying Eve into the house and, after Netty had shut the door behind her, he returned to his anxious family while Eve, as soon as she came in, saw Morgiana who was waiting for her. She was standing at the door of the drawing-room.

“Almost four in the morning,” said Morgiana. “Netty, we don’t need you. So, my dear Eve, what’s the meaning of this rumpus?”

Eve, whose breath was taken away, went somewhat pale.

“Jessie needs to be at home,” she said with firmness. “You know that she’s sick. I want to see her so that I can take her away to town.”

“That’s what you came for?”

“That’s my only justification.”

“You don’t have anything you want to talk to me about?”

“No, Morgiana. I said it all yesterday.”

“Walk in, Eve. I have forgiven you. So Jessie has fooled you and disappeared, it that so?”

“Morgiana, bring me to Jessie. This conversation is taking an odd turn – do you understand?! Where is Jessie?!”

“Well how could I know for sure? You’re very insistent, Eve. What do you suspect – that I’m keeping her hidden?”

“I don’t know. I know that she’s here.”

“She was here, you meant to say. Yes, Jessie came here around midnight, I don’t remember exactly when. Five minutes ago I went out; when I came back she was already gone. I imagine

she's at home and sleeping peacefully, while you're here waking my servants."

"Wait, I'm frightened," Eve exclaimed. "Jessie has gone off on foot?"

"Probably driven off. But it's even more likely that she's hiding somewhere, not far off from the house so as to cause a commotion. O, I'm not of that ilk! Let her play her tricks. Let's go into the drawing room."

"Hobson said that she's here. How could she have gone off? Why has she gone? Why did she turn up here?"

"It's very unpleasant for me to see you, Eve, especially after that lecture in morals you gave out yesterday. Jessie herself can answer to all your questions and I'm telling you again, that she took advantage of my absence, escaped through the window as the door was locked. The window looks out on the garden; I made the round of the garden, making that concession to her wild imagination."

"O! I know you so little!" said Eve, stepping back before her sullen look. "If you can talk in this way now, when Jessie is God-knows-where, then I have the right to draw many conclusions. But I will find out what kind of a letter she received and from whom. You should be ashamed of yourself, Morgiana! You should

not take out your anger against me on that child! Of course, you drove her out.”

“Stop! I will not allow you to slander me!” Morgiana shouted. “It was you who put yourself between my sister and me! You are a spy, the righteous Eve Stratton! I don’t know what letter you are talking about. Jessie’s visit is very easy to explain but I will not give you the pleasure and I will not favour you with an explanation. Enough ravings; I’m going to bed and you and your general staff can set up headquarters in the drawing room and devise your sabotaging actions.”

“How could you allow a sick person to leave? Why, that’s worse than murder!”

“It makes no difference, whatever you might think,” Morgiana declared, peering at Eve and satisfying herself that she was only speaking this way on account of despair. “You should understand that my sister can’t have been so sick as all that, if she was able to come here. You people would drive a person off their head. But I demand that you, at the very least, today leave me in peace!”

“So you’re refusing to help me find Jessie?”

“Are you going this way or that way?” Morgiana asked quietly, her hand going from the drawing-room to the outside door.

Eve looked at her and rushed away into the yard. A cold feeling ran along her back when the door was slamming shut behind her – so dreadful was the face of the older sister – all in dark folds of hatred and inflamed thought, which was locked in behind the brightness of her eyes. Gasping for breath, Eve came running to Hobson and overthrew Detrey’s quiet expectation with a single push.

“Hobson, did you see Jessie leaving?” Eve exclaimed, glancing at Detrey in passing and giving him an anxious nod.

Hobson was thunderstruck and explained that he had not seen anything, had not heard anything since he had accompanied Jessie in to her sister. Hobson’s wife sat down in her amazement.

“What happened?” Detrey asked.

“A confidential matter has arisen, about which I am sure Hobson will not speak.”

“Don’t worry,” said Hobson. “The wife and me won’t cause any bothers at all.”

“As far as we’re concerned, you can rest easy,” the fat woman chimed in. “If anything is needed, we’ll do everything.”

“Jessie stole out a window into the garden and then, probably, she climbed over the wall,” said Eve, addressing Detrey. “She is

quite sick and is acting in delirium. It is essential that we find her. Of course, we cannot lose any time. What a painful business! Well, Detrey I can't go with you but, probably, Hobson will not refuse to accompany you?!"

The Hobson couple exchanged glances. Detrey equally did not understand, why Jessie's sister took the girl's disappearance so calmly but he had no time for questions.

"You know the locality?" Detrey asked Hobson.

"Yes," said he, considering the situation. "We'll take the dog. That'll be even better."

"O! If it's fit for the job, then we're halfway there!" Detrey exclaimed with relief.

"Give me a lantern," Hobson turned to his wife.

Wiping away tears of agitation, she set off to find the lantern and Hobson went out into the adjoining room, put on boots, a jumper and, opening the door, he gave a whistle. "Cook!" Hobson called quietly. A tail struck against his legs and the rapid breathing of an animal was heard. As before, Morgiana's upstairs window shone; giving it a suspicious look, Hobson fastened a chain to Cook's collar, then he led into the room a black dog with a bright, dry gaze, where he saw Detrey coming to meet him.

“Everyone is always saying that his own dog is clever and quick to understand,” said Hobson. “Well I’m saying the same. My tracker used come running from here into the city and find me there! Wait, you’ll see.”

Hobson’s wife brought in a lantern with its candle lighting and Eve, who had come out with her, laid her hand on Detrey’s shoulder. Her face was sad and Detrey understood that she had reconciled herself to his attitude to Jessie – not only for the sake of Jessie.

“I’ll do everything,” he said. “You wait here.” After that he went out with Hobson through the gates and turned left, around the wall. The light of the lantern went along the grass and the bottom of the wall, illuminating the nickle-plated chain that was being tightly pulled by the dog. They went along to that part of the fence where long branches, that had helped Jessie get out of her sister’s garden, were stretching over across it. Although Hobson was expressing regret that they had no object that belonged to Jessie and was somewhat in doubt – the behaviour of the tracker dog encouraged Detrey. Having gone through the grass with its nose, it raised its head, yelped and began to wag its tail.

“Sik, sik,” Hobson said to it, “the gates were locked, do you understand? If she jumped down here, you should know it.”

A short bark rang out. By his own means, so little known to us, the dog understood his master's anxiety. The lantern indicated a search, the chain indicated that Cook was appointed to search. But doubt arose as to whether this was trace that Hobson wanted. The trail was beginning at the wall and was distinct to the dog; having decided that future events would show, whether this was the track that was interesting the people, Cook soundly scratched himself with his rear leg and broke into a run, having lowered his nose, towards the wood.

“Don't worry,” Hobson said to Detrey, “the dog knows where to go.”

Holding on to the dog, who was in a hurry to demonstrate the triviality of the problem entrusted to him, they began to wander in the woods, thoroughly examining all the places where Cook lingered, following the erratic path of the girl, and often alarming them by briefly doubling back – for a precise verification. One time he rushed about among the bushes beneath the foliage of trees that were standing closely together, in this way he was indicating the state Jessie was in, as she made haste to escape from Morgiana.

“She got a long way,” said Detrey, “No one knows what is wrong with her and how she is feeling. Let's hope she sees the dog and

guesses that help is near. Set the dog loose! And we'll go to his barking."

"It'd be better not to do it that way," Hobson objected. "His shortcoming is that he'll track something down and then come back: to let you know. That way we'd lose time to no purpose."

Detrey wanted to debate this but he noticed a light and he began to run towards it, with his heart tightening in acute alarm. Branches lashed his face. The fire was further off than it had at first seemed; leaving Hobson far behind him, Detrey finally saw the camp-fire and Schenk, who had moved away from the fire to peer into the darkness, where he was hearing voices and barking.

"Are you looking for her?" said Schenk to the panting Detrey, pointing to the curled-up figure with the dark hair, sleeping and covered up with a jacket.

"Did she come by herself?"

"Yes, but she barely made it here."

Hobson came out into the light and Cook, having examined everything, sniffed around the sole of the girl's foot, beginning to growl with conviction, as he had proved the correctness of his action.

All three went up to the one sleeping. Her face was covered in sweat, her hands clasped to her chest.

“Who are you?” Detrey asked Schenk.

“The one who came out in the draw,” the latter answered sullenly, considering that before him he had perpetrator of this unhappiness. “I talked with her; gave her some cinchona, then vodka; she really wanted vodka, because she was shivering greatly. She talked at times, raved at times.”

“What did she say?”

“You would know that better.”

“Do you not want to say?”

“No. Then, when you have it out with her, she will repeat it all, if it wasn’t delirium.”

“You came out in the draw and that’s why you’re getting it wrong,” Detrey remarked. “You did not think what you should have thought. Do you hear?” Schenk examined Detrey thoughtfully.

“Yes, I was mistaken,” he said, somewhat enlightened.

“I thank you!” Detrey responded, sincerely shaking hands with him.

“But it may be that her ravings will explain a little of this.”

Schenk cast a glance at Hobson, correctly took stock that the elderly man had a secondary role and Detrey the main one; then, approaching Detrey, he said a few words in his ear. Detrey looked back, dismayed.

“Is it possible that it wasn’t delirium?” he said, kneeling beside Jessie and scrutinising her face. “She’ll have to be carried. I hope to be able to do this on my own.”

He removed the jacket that was covering Jessie and easily raised her up, with one arm curved beneath her knees and the other behind her shoulders. Now, as that small sleeping head was lying by his shoulder, he had an idea how long he would be able to carry Jessie for and, warmly nodding to Schenk, he began to step off, looking more at the girl’s closed eyes than keeping an eye the light of Hobson’s lantern, moving before him. He was carrying her, marvelling at how he did not at all feel the weight and fearing he had put Jessie lying uncomfortably in his arms. More than once Hobson offered him his help, saying: “Pass her over to me now or your arms’ll go dead”; Detrey would nod to him and carry on, walking quickly. Finally an acute pain in his shoulders made him shudder and he knocked against a tree.

Jessie’s eyes opened but he did not notice this. Then the eyes closed again but the arm that, up to now, had been hanging

down lay on the aching shoulder by his neck and the pain in his shoulders ceased. Wishing to assure himself that Detrey really was not overstraining himself, Hobson lit up his face with the lantern and saw that the keeper of the burden was smiling and his eyes were damp and vacant. "In that case – he'll carry her all the way," Hobson thought.

That was how they came out of the forest and entered the room, where Eve and Hobson's wife were awaiting them, quietly conversing about other matters. The thud of the gates made them jump up and they rushed to the door, where Jessie quietly but insistently climbed down from Detrey's embrace, causing the latter to doubt if she had really been unconscious all the time.

They laid her down; then she asked Eve to spend a moment alone with her. The door closed behind them and Jessie admitted everything to Eve, entreating that she quickly be taken away to town, also to summon her true sister and to say to Detrey, that she was to blame for everything but that he had been a friend to her and she would not forget this.

Chapter XXII

“What then – give myself up?” said Morgiana, having locked Jessie in and gone through into the drawing room. She sat down but could not stay sitting; she got up, began to walk about but would soon stop. “Here it is – the counter-strike! It’s Hervaque. She had the foresight to prepare a letter. But Jessie cannot leave, she will not leave, she has found me out.”

The way out of the situation, which she was thinking about in these minutes was so cruel that even her ill-wishing, shrivelled conscience faltered at its contemplation. “But I have gone to the utmost,” said Morgiana, “I won’t step back now. In hunting they finish off wounded birds. I don’t see a difference. The moment has arrived to kill her quite simply with words.”

She intended returning to her sister, quietly confessing, without repentance, to reveal all and to wish her death. That truth, which Jessie already knew, was for the present a tragic truth; it had to become ever more truthful – a truth of cold reprisal. Such a thought was like white eyes in a black face; a girl, who has hardly begun to live, would not be able to endure their gaze; unconsciousness or madness, perhaps death itself, were the only

things that could flow from Morgiana's resolution. She had thought it over and now got going to finish off her sister.

Lightly, almost gaily, the way someone comes with a greeting and carrying flowers to drive away the foul humour of an intimate, Morgiana unlocked the door. But as the door was swinging open it was not now possible for Jessie to be seen behind it; thinking that she was here Morgiana said: "Little sister! It's all true. I pecked into your heart. I did it for..."

Morgiana closed the door and ran towards the window. The garden breathed a breeze, nothing was visible in the darkness concealing Jessie but Morgiana thought that the girl was there in the garden and quietly called: "Jessie, the automobile is ready!" Again the wind puffed; the garden was silent and Morgiana came down into it from the terrace, having carefully locked the room, as if those feelings and words that she was afraid of might get out of it. She began to walk among the trees and beds, peering at the outlines of the darkness. The silence and melancholy of the night convinced her that Jessie was not in the garden but once again she walked all around the smallish garden and came to a stop by the tree, where she stumbled against the fallen wheelbarrow. "Strange that the dog didn't bark," Morgiana thought. "The wheelbarrow was standing against the wall. Jessie leapt up onto the wheelbarrow. So she's

not here. In that case I shouldn't sleep the whole night; no one knows what will happen, if she succeeds in getting into town. But maybe her strength will quit her or her mind go dark?! The night is cold; she is lightly dressed. Or maybe she is lying close-by, in the grass, beyond the wall, having lost consciousness?"

Morgiana returned, took the key and unlocked the door of the garden that went out towards the path into the bushes. Then Hobson's black dog began to hang around by her feet. Morgiana went all around *Green Flute* and the dog was searching at her feet, sometimes disappearing in the darkness; then it would return and wait but it did not once begin barking. As soon as Morgiana came to that place where Jessie had climbed over the wall, the dog poked its nose in the grass, stood still there and began to growl. "Jessie!" Morgiana called, bending towards the grass. No one answered her; she crossed that place and then began to keep an eye on what the dog would do. "Seek," she said to it and wanted to stroke it but slipping out from under her hand, the animal began to run towards the wood. It was no longer to be seen; having run a little off, it was stopping, expecting that it would draw the human into a search. Morgiana had turned back and the dog again came to her, silently asking: "Why are we not searching?" After that it disappeared and Morgiana, who now knew all, began to think over how to explain her unconcern about the flight of her sister, if the latter got lost

and died somewhere in a wild spot. Then she made up her mind to say what she did say to Eve Stratton: 'Jessie disappeared no more than five minutes ago.' And she came back in through the garden door. The maid was already sleeping. She wanted to eat; she began to eat, standing at the sideboard – cheese, bread and butter, washing down the food with white wine. Upstairs in her room Morgiana left on the light but extinguished it downstairs. Having come upstairs, she brought together everything that she thought she would take with her and she began to pack for the event of a hurried departure. Everything valuable went into a medium-sized travelling bag, which did not draw any attention. She had money and, furthermore, she could procure money from a jeweller for the valuables. Having done everything, having omitted nothing in her preparations, mentally checking the details and locking the travelling bag, Morgiana put on a warm shawl and sat, listening, by the half-open window. No more than half an hour later did Eve's intrusion occur but, however much Morgiana despised this young woman, the conversation with her embittered her less than the arrival of Detrey, as announced by Hobson; it grieved and offended her; it told her of a great love.

Having entered the bedroom again she sat down and began to doze; and she felt so unwell, troubled that she did not resist the drowsiness but she was on her guard against the sleep that was standing above her with an upraised arm and immediately

would open her eyes wide as soon as she anticipated the approach of oblivion. More than an hour passed in this manner and in the midnight silence she listened to the creak of the weather-vane above the house, investigating its iron complaints with that strange feeling, which in sleeplessness is inclined to endow objects with life.

Suddenly, she heard the steps of two persons; Netty knocked briefly and, having stood up, Morgiana stealthily went up to the door, holding her breath. With one hand she touched the key, with the other she put out the light but she did not say anything to the knock, continuing silently standing and listening, as if delay was supposed to help her. The second knock, resembling a quiet command, aroused in her a sudden anger. Clenching her teeth Morgiana quickly opened the door and saw Eve Stratton. Behind her, in tears, with a bewildered smile, stood Netty.

Eve could see the figure of the older sister, standing not too far back from the doorway, in the dark room but she could not make out her face.

“You’re back again?” asked Morgiana. “What do you want?”

“Jessie has been found,” said Eve, peering with sorrow and indignation into the darkness surrounding the murderess. “I’m bringing her away; now she is going to wrestle with the consequences of your attentions.”

“It would be better for you to go,” said Morgiana. “There’s room for you on the fire-engine, Eve.”

“Send Netty away! I don’t have much to say; then I’ll go away and leave you. I’ll leave you be but there are others who won’t leave you alone.”

“Have I to go?” said Netty, listening to the strange conversation with a dull fear.

“Yes. Is Jessie conscious?”

“She’s conscious but Netty still hasn’t gone away. Now she’s gone... So it was you, who poisoned your sister?”

Morgiana was silent. She stepped forward and Eve saw her face. Morgiana was standing, holding herself erect, with her hands behind her back. Eve had never seen such a face. She cried out.

“Here I am,” said Morgiana. “You see me. I am innocent.” Eve covered her face with her hands and broke into sobs.

“Weep, proud one,” said Morgiana. “Even for the likes of you the day of tears has come.”

“I hope,” Eve answered, with a weary gesture moving away from the ugly and agonising apparition, “that you are mentally ill. Only that could reconcile me with what happened. What you are

to do, you know; you should know. Let the courts pardon you but I can never forgive!”

Descending the staircase she heard a harsh guffaw.

“Eve! You were afraid of me!” Morgiana shouted to her, leaning over the banister. “You’re going away? You’re taking the little girl? You can both be damned!”

All the time, while she was playacting so vindictively and blackly, like the tip of a whip, lashing in the round, thoughtlessly obeying a cruel hand, her fear was still; only now did she hear its voice and somewhat come to her senses.

“So, just what will I do now?” said Morgiana. Fully certain that Eve would not spare her, she asked herself: ‘capable of dying?’ But she did not answer anything. There was no answer to this question within her. Meanwhile, the morning was approaching; and, in proportion as in her dark bedroom objects revealed themselves, the thought of death, at first forced and disagreeable, began to provide her with a kind of comfort. There was a door that would hide you from any kind of pursuit.

“How absurdly I was preparing to go into hiding!” Morgiana was reflecting, “but it would have been possible...” And since the circumstances, confirmed by herself in a moment of vindictiveness in the scene with Eve Stratton, had turned

against her, she trusted in her wish to die. The rotation of the spinning top was coming to an end. Its seeming immobility had turned into a noticeable speed and, already shuddering, losing steadiness, it was beginning to move and rock, preparing to fall. Morgiana was now like a top; thought and purpose had taken the place of strength for her, just as for the top the last hopeless rotations take the place of its stable rapidity – on the point of falling.

When eight o'clock struck her meditations were completed. She examined with interest Netty's dismal face but she did not attempt to find out from her anything relating to the happenings of the night; it was also all the same to her, what kind of guesswork was straying about the yard and what was being thought about her.

She was drinking coffee but could not eat. Everything that she saw about her on this bright, warm morning became as meaningful as a farewell for ever: the beautiful rooms, the maid's upset which was restrained by the habit of obeying; the sound of the spoon on the porcelain. 'Wicked, absurd life,' said Morgiana, 'why were you that way for me?'

Since she did not know that Eve had taken Jessie away to her own house, her final desire was to do away with herself in the town house. She was hoping that her death would rock Jessie

and, perhaps, that they would go down into the grave together. A dark pleasure was still mixing itself in with her carefully thought out despair. 'If they save you,' she was saying, turning to her sister and seeing her melancholy face, 'however contented you are afterwards with your life, all the same in your house one wall will for ever remain black; and you are never going to forget me!'

Morgiana got dressed but, being about to go out, she lingered by the travelling bag which she had packed during the night. For some reason, she did not want to abandon it on the chair where it stood, as if she still was not beyond caring, where it was located or if it would even exist after her end. She thrust it into the cupboard, which she locked; she took the key to the cupboard with her; then she got up on the window-sill and cut off the cord of the curtain, which was about two metres long; having rolled it up and packed it into her bag, she marvelled that she was doing all this for her own death. In her circumspection there was all the time a vague question. Finally, she went out into the yard, where she saw the driver, who instantly took his seat at the steering wheel on seeing her. Before bowing in greeting, he looked at her with the same blank gaze that Netty had had in bringing in the coffee. Morgiana drove away without seeing either Hobson or his wife; but it did seem to her that, at the window of the Hobson dwelling, the blind had moved. In the

middle of the yard stood the dog; it was also looking at Morgiana. 'Now I've gone away,' thought Morgiana, 'and there's nothing now to trouble your memories of Harriet Malcolm.'

Along the road she was watching the driver's hand working the black steering wheel. The hand moved with the authority and certainty of fate. It seemed to her that the driver was not that one, not the phlegmatic Slaker, and if he was to turn around, she would not know his face. 'Is it not white with black pits?' flashed into Morgiana's mind. This notion thrust itself upon her with force, causing a tremor within her and she said loudly: "Turn around!"

Slaker did not catch what she said but he turned around and gloomily nodded, thinking that the exclamation meant: 'Hurry.' The motor car redoubled its speed; and although she knew now for sure that it was Slaker driving her, his sombre nod upset her all the more.

She rode along, now fixing on, now renouncing her scheme. The night-time suggestion had disappeared; the day had begun in full bright detail, diverting and, as it were, reconciling with the very hopelessness itself. The bouts of faint-heartedness dispirited Morgiana no less than the resoluteness, forcibly put up in opposition. With her, deception went to the very last and she could no longer tell the difference.

Drawing up to the house, Morgiana did not know what awaited her – arrest or an inquiry from the doctor? Her inner composure had disappeared. Moments of not being responsible alternated with a menacing illumination. She was met by Ermina and Gerda, who had passed a night without sleep and had only recently received from Eve the news that Jessie had been found, well and good. Morgiana understood that they were talking to her of the occurrence but all she heard were exclamations, not making out words, and dully looked at the other servants who were coming into view in the distance, as though going about their work but – this she knew – studying and examining her.

“Is my sister sleeping?” said Morgiana.

Having learned that Jessie was in Hawthorne’s house, she was surprised and she breathed more freely. She wanted to send away the women so as to spend a few final minutes in this high-ceilinged hall, which maintained a feeling of dignity with its huge windows, shining with all the beauty of the morning on the chandelier and the furniture, which were reflected by the parquetry.

“Leave me,” Morgiana said quietly and, left alone, she went up to the windows. In the pier, by the cheval-glass, stood a bronze clock, with a pendulum in the form of a lyre, that slowly struck the fall of the seconds. It was five minutes before nine. Morgiana

gripped the pendulum with her hand; it moved within her hand and came to an irregular stop. Hearing light steps, she turned to see her sister, Jessie, in a lilac-coloured dress, with a jacket on top and in a white hat decorated with camomile flowers. Jessie had blue eyes.

“Who let you in?” said Morgiana, just as soon as her fright had passed.

“Everything was open,” answered the unknown girl, having paid with an audacious blush for her entry. “There was one door... and all the doors were opened. So I went; nobody stopped me and I didn’t see anyone. I’ve come to Jeremena Trengan, the girl who’s sick. I wasn’t able to come to her yesterday.”

“Do you know her?”

“We’re namesakes,” said the young woman, having ceased smiling. “My name is Jeremena Cronway. We spoke through the railing of the garden.”

“I’m the sister of your acquaintance,” said Morgiana.

“Can I see her?” asked the visitor, stepping back, in face of the persistent, almost mad gaze.

“No. She isn’t here. Go to her friend. That’s where she’s laid out, this Jessie who is so like you that it would be good for you to lie down together with her.”

“Have I made you angry?”

“You have made me laugh. Why are you looking like that? Old age will come and you will be just like me.”

“It might be that I have understood you,” said Jessie Cronway, gone pale and turning to go away, “but you are wrong. It would be better if you don’t speak to me!”

She looked back, dismayed, and she went, not immediately finding the door, first quietly, then more quickly. She was already gone but after her disappearance, it was as though there remained in the hall two blue dots, flashing in a shower of beams.

“Well, what then? I leave you to warm yourselves and make squinty eyes and myself to rot?” said Morgiana. “And you’ll shed a few short tears for me? The silence of the clock is awful. You can curse me but I’m keeping the last word for myself!”

She touched the pendulum that was beginning to sound in a leisurely fashion and passed into the room, which she had had in mind in coming here – in that room without any purpose where she had the conversation with Eve Stratton – and having taken a

seat at the corner table, she began to write in a notebook with a pencil.

“I was born unattractive, grew up ugly. My life...” Without having finished writing, she crossed out those words, in such a way that it was possible to read them; then she explained how the crime came about: “I was at a fortune-teller’s; not having a future, I probably wanted deception; that can be had for money. I became acquainted with her and, under the guise of brutal mercy for a hopelessly sick relative, I elicited something about that dark world, where it is possible to obtain poison.

“It is impossible to explain how all that happened in my mind; there is no explanation.

“Jessie grew up in my sight and I poisoned her. Not pity...”

Morgiana crossed out those two words but again they were capable of being read.

“So do not punish me,” Morgiana wrote, clearly imagining and searching after the effect of her note, “my life was my punishment!

“I never saw and never will see anything of the good. That is all for other people.” Having re-read it, Morgiana transparently crossed out everything except for the words about the fortune-teller and the words: “Jessie grew up... I poisoned her”.

Leaving the notebook to lie on the table, she went out into the hall, rang and said to Ermina:

“I’ve dropped a gold coin, look for it under the chairs.” Ermina began to go all around the hall; then, with a loathing for the risk but also with an awareness that only and solely in this way could she soften the hearts of those people she held in contempt, who were capable of thinking bitter thoughts, Morgiana got up on the chair in the spare room, next to the big Indian vase, which was standing on a high stand and fastened the cord to the hook of a picture depicting a scene of harvesting.

Having made a noose, Morgiana thrust her head into it and calculated her jump so that she would catch on the vase with her foot.

She heard how Ermina was moving aside the chairs and was therefore almost calm as to the outcome of her venture; just that the strange feeling of an operation accompanied the movement of her hands, cold as ice.

Something flashed in her mind – not light, not despair; perhaps anguish and the tedium of danger...

She lay hands on the noose at her throat with both hands and, beginning to tremble, hung down, not letting the vase out of her sight.

But not everything had been calculated. The thin cord sharply squeezed her fingers and throat. The chair that was moved aside fell over; she stretched out her hands, trying to lay hold of something and making efforts to strike the vase with her foot. But it was already too late; the toe of her boot slid along the porcelain, not having achieved its aim. Darkness and pain were destroying her with the rapidity of a sudden blow to the head. The vase began to sway but remained standing.

Ermina, having rushed to the noise, saw the hanged woman but, instead of freeing her from the noose, cutting the cord and thereby loosening the pressure, she stood as though rooted. She felt faint. When, coming to her senses and controlling herself, she broke into a run, calling for help, Morgiana no longer had need of help. The cord had finished her off, causing a heart failure; the calculation was precise but even more precise was chance, lying in wait for our intellect, like a cat at the entrance across which, in a hurry, a confidently stepping foot has stumbled.

Chapter XXIII

“Now it is possible to talk to her about it,” said Surdregh. “I think that it is better to do this now, while her susceptibility remains dulled. It’s better if she learns all of this from you, rather than on her own.”

“I’ll do as you are advising,” Eve answered. “What kind of a poison was it?”

“I don’t know. In any case, it isn’t any one of those that can be identified through laboratory analysis. But this is unsurprising, as science has still insufficiently researched into that country of dark powers, hidden in the organic world. There are many poisonous plants, fungi, insects, fish, molluscs, toads and lizards; the varieties of ptomaines are numerous; even within the human being there are poisons – in the saliva, for example. Who knows, how and where secret experiments are being carried out on the effect of substances that are dangerous to life. An expert taster, sufficiently immoral and sufficiently educated to carry out an experiment properly, could obtain results that are, in their own way, ingenious. If you only remember the poison *Aqua Tofana*. But, of course, with the condition of medicine in the Middle Ages, when palliative treatment was not aware of those means, which

support the heart, such as are in vogue today – battling with a poisoning was more difficult. And all the same, I believe,” Surdregh unexpectedly ended, “that the glass of vodka did her good!”

“Camphor,” Eve said reverentially.

“The alcohol sounded the horn,” Surdregh continued, with the pleasure of a liberal teasing a like-minded person with a heretical joke, “it roused the organism and informed it of the peril. Without doubt, the alcohol provoked a beneficial reaction, established its beginning. An old doctor will never treat such things with disregard. By the way: one other suspicious illness of a similar type has appeared and I think that from this, it will be possible to begin an investigation about the plotters. Has it been all silence from that end?!”

“When I rushed into Jessie’s house at the news of Morgiana’s suicide, someone was asking for Jessie on the telephone but on learning that she was not there, he asked for the one who was just then dead. The servant handed the receiver to me. At my words: ‘there’s been an accident, she’s died,’ the conversation ended.”

“They were afraid,” said Surdregh. Eve parted with him and went to Jessie. Jessie was sitting in the armchair, holding on her

knees a book with a scrap of paper on top of it, and was drawing something and crossing it out.

“Today the ban has been lifted,” began Eve, quietly taking away from her the paper and the pencil. “Did you have a good sleep? It’s early but it’s hot.”

Jessie looked at her indifferently. She was guessing at the meaning of the pensive crease between the eyebrows of Eve, who did not know how to begin.

The girl’s face recalled the face of someone, who has woken up from a long sleep, when the connection between the matters of the previous day and the concerns of the one that has begun have not yet been restored; having woken up neither in the past nor in the present. Jessie’s look was clear and quiet like a woodland body of water at dawn, before sunrise.

“Don’t be afraid, Eve,” the girl said. “When did Morgiana die?” Eve’s face changed and she approached her.

“Calm yourself,” she whispered. “Did anybody tell you?”

“I am calm. But you came to inform me of her death?!” Becoming worked up, Eve was silent.

“Well, look,” said Jessie with a weak smile. “She is no longer there. I came to feel that recently.”

“That day, when we found you.”

“How?”

“On a length of cord... alongside the hall. They went into the small room. That’s where it happened.”

Eve halted and, seeing that Jessie, suppressing a sigh, was looking at her in expectation, she went on:

“The doctor wasn’t able to do anything. I had to busy myself with all of that, as your maid immediately notified me. But I’m glad that I drove over there, because I came across a notebook – of course, the police must not see it. I had a word with the doctor for a few minutes.”

Then Eve told how Morgiana had ordered Ermina to search for a gold coin, how the maid came running at the crash of the falling chair and got frightened.

“And now read this,” Eve concluded, handing Jessie the notebook, opened on that very page. “Unfortunately, I did not have the right to destroy this note.”

She moved away to the window, standing with her back to Jessie. An absolute silence ensued; then the rustling of pages being turned was heard.

Understanding that Jessie had finished reading, Eve approached her with anxiety.

“We will never speak of this again,” the girl said to her. “She didn’t mean to die; that’s what I understood. But what is written here is the truth. A stranger’s truth. I am not to blame for the fact that she thought, she herself was without blame. I am not susceptible to someone else’s truth and I don’t want to pay for it. My truth is a different one. That’s all there is.”

“You don’t think, I’m going to contradict you?”

“I am contradicting her. What happened then?”

“The next day, in the early morning, my father and myself accompanied the coffin to the cemetery. There was nobody there besides us.”

“Two-faced people didn’t come,” said Jessie, smiling for the first time in the course of this conversation. “They sensed the scandal!”

“Would you like me to put out some rumours?”

“No. I’ve no liking for gossip. Although... in the sense that we have covered up?!”

“Surdregg will not betray the confidence, for certain. Everyone else sees a series of quarrels and nothing more.”

“But tomorrow I am returning home,” said Jessie, wishing to speak about something else.

“I don’t recommend that you live alone.”

“O! I’ve already written to five relatives. Most likely three will come, thus there will be someone to make a bit of noise with. Eve!” the girl added, pensively looking at her friend, “do you know that you are a very good person?”

Finding nothing to answer, Eve reddened and unintentionally muttered: “Dulled consciousness”.

“What was that?”

“Surdregh said that you have a ‘dulled consciousness’; therefore you began to ‘utter solemnly’”.

“He’s dulled, himself. Yes, if a man had such a character as yours, he’s the one who would be my husband!”

“I’ll leave as you, evidently, are in need of rest.”

When Eve had gone away, Jessie again re-read Morgiana’s final letter – and awkwardly, slowly, as though this letter was placing in her sight all of her deeds, she went up to the mirror. She sat down opposite it, without a smile, without flirtation and play, she sat down so as to see – who and *what kind* she was.

Jessie was sitting silently, having placed her elbows on the pier-table; holding her face between her palms, she was looking at herself, as you would read a book and when many minutes had elapsed, all the thoughts which can be aroused by the story we have told had been inside her dark-haired, passionate head, with their own gifts and demands. Finally, they all went away; two remained, the principal ones; one was named *Yes*, the other *No*.

And *No* said: 'Put on rags and clip your hair. Wear out your face and maim your body. Don't become either a lover or a wife; forget about laughter, that's the way others live, who are not allowed to live in full bloom!'

But *Yes* said the opposite and Jessie saw water, smoking with effervescence, resembling transparent milk.

"I am myself," Jessie pronounced, rising up as she had finished with thinking, "I myself am myself and I will be the one I am!"

She answered out loud to a knock on the door and a greatly emaciated Detrey came in to her room. He had been sleeping little these days and had much plagued Eve, who used reluctantly admit him to Jessie, when the latter was still lying in her struggle with the last shudders of the poison, which was slowly giving way to the firm *I Will* of the girl's strong organism.

"No more than five minutes," said Jessie, "I'm very tired!"

“Jessie,” ardently began Detrey, approaching her, “it has cost me great labour to resolve to speak of myself... and of you... Five minutes is not enough for me! When will you allow me to come to you? Then, in order to... perhaps, walk out right now?!”

Jessie was silent, attentively looking at this person, who was prepared to cast himself despairingly – into icy or hot water? He did not know anything, because he did not understand girls, who made the offer of ‘being friends’.

“When did this begin for you?” she asked in the tone of a doctor.

“Always! I think, that it has always been there!”

“Today is a day of mourning, Detrey, and it will be better, if we discuss a plan for our walks, as we were supposing yesterday.”

“I refuse! Can you really not see that I am in a bad way? And I still have not said anything!”

“Then leave.”

Having gone pale, Detrey looked at her intently and, slowly bowing, found the door with difficulty. Jessie walked after him and, holding back the door, which he wanted to close obediently, spoke from the threshold into the corridor to the one who was leaving, now halting in his torment:

“Do you remember, how you carried me that night?”

“Yes, and if...”

“So then, I’m more precise than you: it began from then and for whom? Guess.”

She closed the door, with that prohibiting a continuation of the conversation, and then, remaining alone, entrusted herself and her fate to a person, with whom she had just now so seriously joked.

Chapter XXIV

In November, what was known to Jessie Trengan's acquaintances about her was simply the fact that she had married a Lieutenant Detrey and was living with her husband in Pocquette, where there is not even a decent theatre.

Jessie's house stood empty; she had sold *Green Flute* to one of Harriet Malcolm's admirers, who had found the dramatic taking-up of residence in the one-time rooms of the artiste to be a fully earnest pursuit.

However, what were they expecting of her, these acquaintances, who had immediately deemed with the satisfied mien of prophets that her fate could not at all be otherwise than 'to stand on the shady side'? Apparently, their voluntary and involuntary expectations were promising her, for the future, a dazzling extravaganza. The wife of the in no way remarkable man, who had not any kind of relationship with glory and splendour, was living in the meantime, without any kind of magnificent outgoings, having a sufficient supply of devotion and love, so as to create out of an ordinary, very modest life one that was unusual and completely out of the reach of the majority. It is just in this regard that there are no means to communicate the

essence of the life of a husband and a wife in such a way, that the hearer would feel this essence.

But we have already had to be inconsistent. Since Detrey not only did not wish to resign his commission but indeed from hints at this would get into a gloomy mood, Jessie left him to live in the way that pleased him and herself began to live alone with him, a life in a house with five rooms and her only servant being Gerda. The circle of their acquaintances was simple and not burdensome. From Detrey's limited salary, with the addition of a well-thought-up lie, in view of what was secretly spent of her own money, Jessie created comfort and was sincerely staggered by her own skill. Detrey was moved by her exertions but his uneasy bachelor life had blunted his receptiveness and he rather guessed at than knew, that what Jessie had done was good.

Having completed her labours on the layout of the living quarters Jessie presented Detrey with a horse, white with chestnut mane, a thousand cigarettes of his favourite brand and a chest of rum. Detrey was in raptures for two days.

Then she brought about disorder in the dwelling, ordered Gerda not to sweep the rooms, displaced chairs, knocked over a figurine, laid tea-towels on the table and spilled water near the flowers.

“This state of chaos is probably very unpleasant for you?” Jessie said to Detrey but by evening everything will be tidied up.”

“You shouldn’t think that I’m so severe,” Detrey answered. “The chief thing that needs to be in order is that you are with me.”

It was evening when Detrey came home. Jessie met him, elegantly dressed, with a sly look, and conducted him through all the rooms.

“Gerda and I have broken all our nails,” she said, “that’s how much we cleaned and scoured. But in return there isn’t a speck of dust anywhere. Am I not a good girl?” In actual fact Jessie had put back everything, as it was in the morning.

“My dear Jessie,” answered Detrey, looking around him with ennui, “is it really necessary to weary yourself? Indeed, everything is shining and radiant but, in my opinion, you should treat things like this: allow them a few days freedom to get mixed up and mutiny and then settle accounts with them all at once, for everything.”

“Does this relate to the washing of plates?”

“Of course. You should own a hundred plates.”

“O, mysterious one, my dear, reveal to me a great secret: might it not be that men are pedants in matters of cleanliness and housekeeping?”

“Slander!” said Detrey gloomily. “We have already been the victims of this slander over the course of four millennia.”

“Fine, tell me about yourselves!”

“It will be frightful for you but I will tell it. We are living two hundred years back. You and I. In a sailing boat we put in to to the coast of Darkest Parts.”

“And Watering Streams?”

“Yes. I put together a house of logs, which I chopped down myself. And I made a hearth out of blocks of sandstone and I also caught a wild horse and cleared a plot of ground.”

“I didn’t know that you could say thirty-five words in succession.”

“Sometimes; when you hold my hand, as now.”

“But in that little shop of antiquities – I wasn’t holding your hand? I wasn’t hindering?”

“No, of course not.”

“So what was I doing?”

“I was roasting deer and partridges for you.”

“Indeed but what about me?!”

“You were sitting in the makeshift cabin, while the house was being built and you had no call to go outside in times of rain.”

“And then what?”

“We lived together. We baked potatoes on the hearth and, in the river, we angled fish. And I examined all footprints, so as to be warned of the enemy in time.”

“But now,” said Jessie, “I will tell you and you will see that I am able to hit the right note. She... hm... that is, that one who was always dry thanks to the excellent construction of the straw hut... Well, one day she was eating a salad made of cedar buds mixed together with beaver lard and her teeth began to ache.”

Detrey laughed loudly, not noticing that Jessie’s eyes were nervously glittering.

“Her teeth began to ache,” Jessie was continuing, rising and walking about the room, with her hands placed behind her back. “So they started to ache. Ai-ai-ai! How terrible! A molar and an eye-tooth together – and she needed a dentist. They tried a compress of the raw flesh of a dappled panther – it doesn’t do. She makes an awful fuss and runs about in the rain. He, of course, is reading the marks on the bark of a tree made by the

claws of grizzly but doesn't find any instructions. And suddenly...

"And suddenly?!" asked the anxious Detrey.

"The tooth let up by itself. Don't be offended by me, darling, I love you very much."

She went into the bedroom and wrote to Eve Stratton: "Would you be so kind as to write and say that you are very sick."

The reply came to her letter in the form of two separate pages. The first sheet contained a notification about a grave illness of the kidneys; in the second, which Detrey did not come to read were a row of exclamation marks finishing with the words: "It would be better, if you made up."

Then Jessie gave an eye to Detrey's underclothes, soundly covered him in kisses and, nodding from the window of the carriage, pointed with her finger to her forehead, her heart and blew away from her palm an imaginary feather. The train had already started, so that Detrey, who was troubled by these mysterious signs, stood for a long time by the deserted rails and said only: "my dear one."

He lived four days in empty rooms, together with the stroke of a wall-clock, that had become very distinct and amid barracks, in

the intense heat of the limed walls of the courtyards, through which soldiers were always passing slowly.

On the morning of fourth day, a detailed a telegram from Eve Stratton finally produced a beneficial operation, despite Eve's shrewish tone: "I am going to break my word of honour and betray your wife. Today, at two o'clock, Jessie is signing the papers on the sale of her house, she is adding to the sum all cash, she will sell her securities and is buying twenty-six tolerable pearls and also a ticket to return home. You may dissolve these pearls in the vinegar of your conceit and drink them to the health of the one unselfish being, who devotedly loves you, who obviously does not care, if she has children or not – if only it pleases her sovereign master."

Detrey's indisputably sincere, in the sense of a feeling, but unnatural selfishness became entirely clear to him. However much he dreamt of being everything for his wife, his fixed behaviour scared him. He could not wish to be remembering all his life an irremediable fault. Still red from noble shame, acrid like tobacco smoke that has gotten into the eyes, Detrey sent Gerda to the telegraph office with a telegram having this content: "Resigned commission and awaiting arrival." Detrey did not suspect that for him, with his innate abilities and

inclinations, this telegram represented a significant sacrifice. But he wanted Jessie to be at ease.

In the meantime, his wife, very pleased with the surprise she had secretly prepared for Detrey, was sitting in Eve Stratton's cabinet, awaiting the appearance of the notary and the purchaser of her house, a Dutchman, Van Gugh, the manager of a factory making gramophone records. Jessie was selling without haggling, for half the value, only to return home as quickly as possible. And she was delighted at the thought that Detrey, when he met her, would not notice the pearls on her breast; in the entire world, pearls of this kind or similar to them were numbered not above a hundred and thirty. They were locked in a steel safe in Flancon's enormous shop, awaiting her money. These pearls, about the size of a white plum, shone like the moon. They were worth, according to what Jessie said, absolutely nothing. "I'm going to name them," said Jessie to the infuriated and wearied Eve, "I'll call them 'All that is mine I carry'. But since that's too many words, I'll shorten it. I'll form a name for them from the initial letters: 'A-t-i-m-i-c'. Atimic. Almost like Sanskrit."

"Atimic, there's a telegram for you," sighed Eve, as she made to pay and handing the telegram to Jessie.

Jessie read it to herself, became deeply thoughtful, took on a different expression, brought her eyebrows together and began to stare straight at Eve.

“I’ll read out loud,” said Jessie. “Listen: ‘Resigned commission and awaiting arrival’. Eve, you might know what these words mean!”

“Well, it’s all the same to me,” answered the latter, endeavouring to be shamelessly cheerful, though she had become red and was looking fairly pathetic.

“You’re a mean swindleress!” exclaimed Jessie, not knowing whether to cry or to laugh from this surprise, that so tenderly and passionately struck her. “Who can I count on then?! Why, this is treachery!”

“You are right. I am without defence,” said Eve. “I have nothing to say. I’ll be silent.”

“O, Lord!” sighed Jessie, thrown into disarray equally by her friend’s embarrassment and also by her ham-fisted intervention. “Am I supposed to forgive you, is that it? So what did you write to him?”

“No more than is the case. You’re not sorry over the pearls?”

“Just imagine: yes!”

“That’s like you.”

“Don’t you dare talk like that!”

But a quarrel did not come about because Hawthorne, who from the very outset had been taking an active part in Jessie’s secrecies, arrived.

Having found out what had happened, he began to admonish the young woman exactly as she needed to hear it.

“It goes without saying, that I have sympathy for your husband,” Hawthorne was saying. “One has to look at him properly. In himself, he constitutes an uncommon fossil – the imprint of a shell on a piece of phosphate rock – a pure, steadfast person. He is a man of action. The smoke of his sacrifice is equal to the splendour of our unrealised pearls. He simply needs help. My old school comrade, Gracch Bateridge, is establishing a stud farm and, as you were saying that your husband knows and loves horses, well I think that, with his agreement, a position as manager of the stud will be reserved for him. With that everything will be resolved.”

“Thank you,” said Jessie. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for, old pal?”

“I don’t know.” She wiped away the tears that had come into her eyes. “I feel that I’m to blame. But maybe I’m not.”

“Certainly, you aren’t to blame for anything. But I’m hearing footsteps; here’s your buyer coming with the notary.”

The Hollander was disagreeably surprised when Jessie, scarcely had she answered to his greeting, hurriedly said:

“The house is no longer for sale. I’m not selling it. I’ve changed my mind.”

“So,” said the fat, dark-haired man, sitting down and smoothly looking around at those present over the top of a handkerchief, which was hiding his nose. Having blown his nose a little, he began to breathe loudly and cast a glance at the notary, whose animated smile had taken on an official nuance. ‘Now is the time to make a joke,’ thought van Gugh and said:

“Have we not read of the ‘heart of a beautiful woman / like a meadows’ breeze’!?”

“You must forgive me,” Jessie declared firmly, already recovering. “I was coming to terms on the sale, fully in earnest but some circumstances, very shortly before your arrival, changed my decision. What can I do?”

“The price proposed by me was, I confess, rather low.” Van Gugh began to breathe quickly. “I propose that you speak your mind, according to your wishes.”

“She is completely seriously refusing to sell the house,” Hawthorne intervened with restraint. “The house is remaining in her hands.”

The Dutchman, having turned violently and angrily red, scrutinised Hawthorne intently and unexpectedly rose. Having slightly rocked, which signified a chilly, general bow, Van Gugh and with him the notary, went out accompanied by a general silence.

“He has taken offence,” said Jessie quietly. “That really did not go off entirely nicely.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Hawthorne objected. “I assure you that that out-and-out huckster was not angry at me or at you but only at the ‘sudden circumstance’. Van Gugh is accustomed to running on smooth rails. An ‘unexpected circumstance’ is for him an indecency, a shame. But you, Jessie, he will now profoundly respect, you offered an invincible resistance and he is not used to that.”

So the Dutchman was left without a house, Jessie without a necklace and Detrey without employment.

On the evening of the next day Jessie arrived in Pocquette. The description of her meeting with her husband would not produce the impression, which would have been possible if the reader had been an eye-witness of the meeting and we will leave that opportunity untouched. Thereby is confirmed the opinion, that has become the most established in Europe that the reader is the main person in literature and the writer of secondary importance. Against such an idea no objection can be made, it aids the digestion.

In the cemetery of Liss, holding itself somewhat apart from the other graves, stand a tall marble slab, already having wild roses entwined around it, in the shade of two trees. It is guarded by a black railing with gilded iron leaves. Apart from the name 'Morgiana Trengan' there is no inscription of any kind on the slab. But this name is, at the same time, the only possible epitaph.

Shortly after Morgiana's death, a country girl presented herself at her grave. She was holding her head strangely, as if moving the head caused her pain in her neck. She laid some wild flowers by the gravestone, remembering with fervent gratitude those ten pounds, which she had received from the deceased woman as a compensation for the blow from the stone.

Well, that is all; a little or a lot? However it pleases whomever.

20th April 1928

Feodosiya.