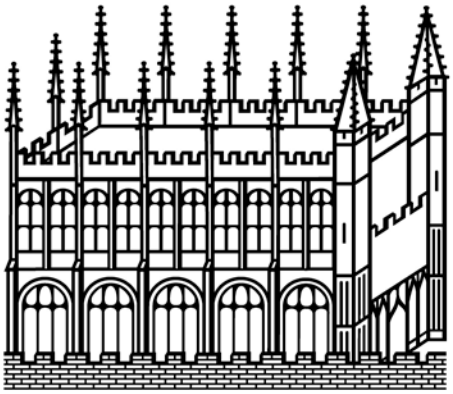

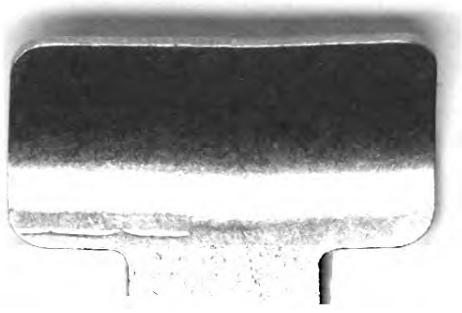

NUMBER 56

A

NUMBER 56

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

CATULLE MENDÈS

TRANSLATED BY

PHYLLIS MÉGROZ

**Published at Cobham House,
24-26 Water Lane, London, by
T. WERNER LAURIE**

First published 1928.

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY THE DUNEDIN PRESS, LTD., EDINBURGH.

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INTRODUCTION

CATULLE MENDÈS, none of whose work has hitherto been translated into English, was born at Bordeaux in 1841. In 1866, he married the famous Judith Gautier, but unfortunately the marriage was not a happy one, and was subsequently dissolved. His second wife, Madame Jeanne Catulle-Mendès, is still living, and is well-known as a writer of verse in the artistic circles of Paris. Their only son, Primis, was killed in the war, a few years after Mendès' death in 1909.

Catulle Mendès was an extremely prolific and versatile writer, as will be seen from the appended list of his works. Besides being a critic and journalist, he has a large number of plays, poems, novels and short stories to his credit. He was, moreover, one of the originators of the Parnassian School, and in 1859, he founded one of its principal organs, "La Revue Fantaisiste" (a periodical approximating in type to the Yellow Book), to which a number of well-known writers contributed.

Like most of the writers of the 1890 period, the work of Mendès is characterised by originality and style. He was essentially a poet, and one of his finest pieces of writing is "Médée", a poetic play, which has several times been given in Paris. Perhaps his one great fault was his sensual outlook on life, by which much of his work is marred, and which detracts considerably from its literary value. It is possibly on account of this that his real merit has been overlooked, and that he is not yet known in England, although translations have been made of less brilliant contemporary work.

The four short stories in the present collection have been selected as different examples of his style. The first story: "Rue des Filles-Dieu 56" is a study in criminal psychology, and is based on an actual murder trial. It is particularly interesting as affording a possible clue to Charles Dickens' "Mystery of Edwin Drood" to which so many conflicting solutions have been tentatively applied. In Mendès' story, the murderer, M. Brunois, is a perfectly innocuous individual who commits a murder under the unwonted influence of drink, and subsequently, retaining only a subconscious memory of the crime, tracks himself down step by step. Is it not a likely theory that Jasper having killed Edwin Drood under the spell of opium, also has a subconscious remembrance of his crime, and so follows the trail of a hypothetical murderer who is himself?

INTRODUCTION

The two short stories: "Un Village près de la Route," and "La Peur dans L'Isle" (which I have called "The Cough"), both betray the strong influence of Edgar Allan Poe whose cult was assiduously propagated in France by Baudelaire and Thèodore de Banville. Mendès himself acknowledges his debt to Edgar Allan Poe: ". . . nous lui devons tants de parfaits chef-d'œuvres qu'il n'est pas possible de le reprouver . . ." Both these stories are studies in the occult, and have no apparent explanation. Mendès particularly stresses the fact that these are not stories, but actual occurrences, but I have not been able to discover whether this is a mere literary artifice to underscore the atmosphere of realism, or whether there is a basis of truth. One indication that points to the incidents in the two stories having actually taken place is the mention of Villiers de l'Isle Adam as being one of the seven witnesses of the wayside village episode. De l'Isle Adam was, of course, a well-known contemporary of Mendès, and author of several literary curiosities, notably "L'Eve Future" (which might almost be termed a forerunner of "R.U.R.") and the unfinished masterpiece: "Axel".

"Luscignole," the last story in the collection, is perhaps the most significant from a literary standpoint. It is an extremely original and beautifully written fantasy, which could obviously never have been conceived by a writer who was not also a poet. It contains no trace of Mendès, the sensualist, and is a little masterpiece of sensitive imagination.

Other works by Catulle Mendès are:

Verse—Philomela (1864), Odelettes Guerrieres (1871), Contes Epiques (1870), Hesperus: Epopee Swedenborgienne (1869), Soleil de Minuit (1876), Soirs Moroses (1876).

Plays—La Part du Roi (1872), Les Meres Ennemies (1882), Les Freres D'Armes (1873), La Femme de Tabarin (1887), La Reine Fiammette (1889), Médée (1898).

Novels and Stories—Histoires D'Amour (1868), Folies Amoureuses (1877), La Vie et la mort d'un Clown (1879), Le Roi Vierge (1881), Monstres Parisiens (1882), La Demoiselle en Or (1886), Four Lire au Bain (1884), L'Homme tout Nu, La Premiere Maitresse (1887), Grande Maguet, etc., etc.

Operas—Le Capitaine Fracasse (1878), music by Pessard; Gwendoline (1886), music by Chabrier.

PHYLLIS MÉGROZ.

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I

"BRUNOIS! Brunois! For goodness' sake, Charles, don't fidget so. You keep grinding your teeth; you're all in a cold sweat. Cover yourself up. What's the matter with you? Wake up, open your eyes. You're as white as a sheet. Your throat is as swollen as if you were going to choke. It throbs and throbs. Oh, are you going to die? Wake up, Charles; do try and rouse yourself!"

His nightshirt in rags, the grey hairs bristling on his body, M. Charles Brunois drew himself from the sheets and sat upright. His clay-coloured face worked and twitched like the face of a corpse galvanised by electricity; his chest swelled as though it would burst. With his eyes shut fast, he stiffened with a constriction of all his muscles, but suddenly, with a cry that burst from him as wine gushes from a cask, he relaxed limply on the bed, his throat loosened, his arms powerless in the reaction from the seizure.

Madame Aurélie Brunois, an old woman whose grey hair straggled from her frilled night-cap, leaned over the bed, and white with fear, heedless of the chill of the floor against her bare feet, gazed at her husband in the silence of the commonplace room—the usual conglomeration of mahogany, repp, and framed lithographs —where the twinkling night-light grew dim in the dawn's greenish glow filtering in brokenly through the slats of the blind.

"Do for mercy's sake speak now that you are better," she stammered. "What is it? What's the matter? Answer me."

Without raising his lids, he muttered in a voice that oozed like a thick stream through his loose lips:

"I—I don't know."

"Did you have a nightmare?"

"Yes—perhaps. Yes, yes, I had a nightmare. I saw things. I did things, . . . things that . . ."

"What? What things?"

"Things that were——"

"That were——?"

"Unspeakable."

His forehead was beaded with drops of sweat that dripped down like tears.

"But what were these unspeakable things?"

He repeated: "Unspeakable!"

"But what? What? *What?*"

He creased his forehead in a supreme effort of con-

centration, but the frown disappeared in the failure of his attempt.

"I can't remember."

"Brunois, try—listen to me. First of all, what time did you come home? I was asleep, I didn't hear you go to bed. Tell me what time you came in."

"I don't know."

Slightly irritated, his wife said: "You don't seem to know anything."

"You're right. I don't know anything."

"Oh, rack your brains. Didn't you dine with Richond?"

"Richond?"

"Good heavens! You're mad! You don't even know Richond now, your friend Richond, your old partner. He had to go to Havre at 11.45. He came to say good-bye just as we were sitting down to dinner, and took you along to the restaurant with him."

"Oh yes, Richond . . . Yes, I dined at the restaurant with Richond."

"Aha!"

"Yes . . ."

"Yes, and didn't you eat something that disagreed with you, something that you couldn't digest?"

"I—I don't know . . ."

"Then you got drunk? You're not used to drinking. You got drunk on champagne on the top of brandy."

"No, not on champagne . . . with—yes, with brandy."

"That's it, then. And it made you ill?"

"Ill—yes, I was ill . . ."

"And where did you go after dinner?"

"Do you mean with Richond?"

"Of course."

"I didn't go anywhere with Richond."

"With whom, then?"

"I don't know."

"You must have been dead drunk then, you beast."

"Yes—dead drunk . . ."

"Out with it now. Where did you go? What did you do?"

"I—I—I—things that . . ."

He had straightened himself, he was livid, he shivered as though he were in a fever of torment, he shuddered out through his chattering teeth:

"Unspeakable things . . ."

Madame Aurélie in her fright lost her head. She had but one thought: to get a doctor. But they had no maid, a charwoman came in the morning and left at midday. To ask the concierge to fetch a doctor, she must leave her husband by himself. She hesitated, haggard with indecision, she looked at her husband's clothes lying in disorder on a chair. Instinct bade her move them and search amongst them for some clue. She lifted them, shook them; his trousers were there, and his waistcoat, but where was his coat? Now, where

was his coat? No, it wasn't there. What, could Charles have come home in his shirt-sleeves? Stupefied, she turned and confronted him.

His face the colour of lead, his hair in confusion, he was repeating monotonously through white lips:

"Unspeakable . . . unspeakable . . ."

She threw herself on the bed.

"You'll end by driving me crazy. What is it that is so unspeakable? What have you done that's so unspeakable?"

"I—I—I . . ."

His mouth dropped open in an agony of suspense.

"I did——"

A groan broke from him, and he fell back on the tumbled sheets. He uttered no further word, made no further movement. Slack, heavy, without consciousness, he lay there inert, his ghastly face lit by the green dawn, his skin no longer even wrinkling. He slept the sleep of the dead-drunk, of the dead; the only sign of life was his heavy breathing which sometimes rose to the shrill sound of a small dog being tortured, sometimes deepened to a hoarse muttering like that of a sated animal.

Madame Aurélie, her eyes starting out of her head with terror, stared at him in the livid light of morning, in whose glow the pin-point flame of the night-light wavered and grew dim.

II

A few hours' sleep restored him. Towards midday, he made a good meal in the best of tempers. Without exactly remembering what he had done after leaving the restaurant (drunk as a lord, no doubt), he could make a guess at it, theory taking the place of actual remembrance. Good God, at forty-five a man isn't absolutely played out, especially after a bottle of Chambertin. He knew that much—Richond and he had drunk Chambertin, enormously expensive and excellent in proportion. The probability of some prank induced by the Burgundy and the after-dinner talk fascinated and intrigued him, and made him wink slily: at the same time, he was slightly annoyed. If the frolic had been amusing, as he supposed, he would have liked to be able to recall it with all its details. He smiled at the thought of the 'details'. Never mind, it was amusing even to be sure of the fact that he *had* been amused, and more than once he was on the point of laughing aloud when he realised what a gay dog he must have been.

As for Madame Brunois, she soon roused herself from her sulks at the beginning of the meal to poke fun at him.

Older than her husband, whom she knew to be sincerely and deeply attached to her, she was indulgent to

him, still youngish as he was, and so hard-working that without allowing himself a day's rest or pleasure, he had sweated for twenty-five years in a wholesale hardware shop until he had saved up the yearly income on which they lived in comfort in the entresol of a house in the Rue Legendre in the Batignolles. He had certainly earned the right to amuse himself nowadays once or twice a year when occasion arose. Was she jealous? Not in the least. Never pretty, even in her youth, she had always been home-maker and companion rather than sweetheart, and she was not going to get up in the air at fifty-three years old because Brunois had committed some folly. But she had been angry with him because of the deadly terror into which he had thrown her the night his coat had disappeared. Is it possible that drink can plunge a man into such straits of forgetfulness? It must have a very bad effect on his character.

"Not at all, not at all!" cried M. Brunois in great spirits, and to a music-hall tune he hummed a song of Boileau's, the only thing he could remember of his three years' studies at Etampes University:

* If Bourdaloue, a trifle strict,
Says, "You must live like Benedict,"
States Escobar: "For health a man
Must sometimes play at Don Juan."

* Si Bourdaloue, un peu sévère
Nous dit: craignez la volupté,
Escobar, lui dit-on, mon père,
Nous la permet pour la santé!

What also worried Madame Aurélie was the fact that he simply could not remember how he had passed the evening: even so complete an intoxication could scarcely explain so equally complete a loss of memory. Ignorant as she was, she had heard of those terrible illnesses which kill all intellectual powers, and transform a strong and healthy person into a drooling, speechless and helpless idiot. She shuddered at the idea of her dearly-loved, energetic husband being pushed about by her in a bath-chair like an ancient baby.

She had thought aloud, and he burst out laughing. Oh lord, there was no danger of *that*. Of course, it *does* happen through excessive drinking, or following on violent excitement.

"Excitement?" she interrupted. "Did *you* experience any excitement?"

He could not restrain a somewhat fatuous smile.

"The point is," he said, "that for one reason or another, one may suffer from a partial amnesia"—(he had read the scientific articles in the papers, and used this technical and mysterious word to impress his wife)—"without there being any need to worry about the future."

He quoted examples.

A very curious instance had occurred in his own family. His grandfather, when quite a young man, had sailed from Havre for New York on a business journey. On the third day out the weather was frightful. "And

grandfather was so terrified that when he reached America he had entirely forgotten everything that had happened from the beginning of the storm to the hour of landing. All the same, it did not prevent his doing excellent business in New York, or living to the age of eighty-two in full possession of his senses."

Madame Aurélie tossed her head. "In full possession of his senses, indeed!"

"Certainly he was in full possession of his senses!"

"Then it's perfectly sensible to want to fire a pistol at any man who doesn't speak to you in the street? You know this isn't the first time you've quoted your grandfather to me."

M. Brunois smiled. "Yes, on certain days, my poor grandfather did get into a rage; but only when he had been annoyed. He was as gentle as a lamb—as long as nobody annoyed him. Come, Aurélie, don't you know lots of people like that—people who grow furious, and scold and sulk because they have been inadvertently irritated? I think that without going very far . . ."

She laughingly shrugged her shoulders. At heart, being no longer anxious, she was no longer vexed. She yielded after lunch to a small glass of benedictine. It cheered her. She looked with amused tolerance at her husband, who had played at being young. When he pushed his chair up to hers, dug her in the ribs and said banteringly, with almost a leer: "Come now, admit that what really worries you is that I did not wake you when

I came in," she answered " You old rascal ! " The meal finished in light-hearted chatter in the dining-room with its polished walnut reflecting the light, while the canaries whose cages hung by the open window trilled themselves hoarse in the sunny air from the garden.

When the coffee was finished and the two little glasses emptied, Madame Aurélie went about her household tasks, clearing away the dishes and scolding into activity the charwoman in the kitchen, while Monsieur Brunois, pushing an easy-chair near the window, installed himself in it, first taking from the marble mantelpiece the unfolded paper; stretching out his legs, he tore the band, and began to read in the glow of perfect comfort induced by the pleasant process of digestion in the fresh air, surrounded by the songs of his canaries and the scent exhaled by the rose-bushes.

III

" Aurélie."

" Well? "

" Aurélie, Aurélie ! "

" Well, what is it? "

" Come here."

" Whatever is the matter? What are you shouting like that for? "

She came back to the dining-room, in her blue cooking-

apron which came up to her neck, her dress turned up in front and rolled into her apron strings.

M. Brunois in great excitement brandished the paper, which quivered in the air.

"There's been another!" he said.

"Another what?"

"Another crime."

"Is that all you've got to tell me? Crimes aren't unusual in Paris."

"No—but——"

"Don't you read enough extraordinary happenings every day in the papers?"

"Yes, but this is——"

"What's unique about this one?"

"Look for yourself."

She came to him, and condescended to take the paper, in no way interested.

"Where is it?"

"Page 3, at the bottom of the second column."

"Right." She began to read aloud:

M. Brunois, leaning earnestly forward, with one hand on each arm of the chair, watched her with a steady look, moving his own lips as though he were spelling out the words his wife was uttering.

This is what she read:

"Late last night it was rumoured that there had been a murder in the Rue Poissonnière. One of our reporters was immediately on the spot, and has telephoned us to

say that at about ten o'clock the notice of the nightbours and of the, at this hour few, passers-by was attracted by cries and entreaties coming from a furnished apartment house, No. 56 Rue des Filles-Dieu. Then a window was opened on the third storey and a woman threw herself—or was thrown—out onto the pavement. When she was picked up, her face entirely disfigured and cut to pieces by the stones, she was dead. There is a possibility that it was not the fall which caused her death. On the body, which was taken into a dispensary in the Rue de Cléry, a doctor, who had been hastily summoned, found three wounds, all fairly deep. One was on the neck and two were beneath the left breast; they appear to have been inflicted by a very slender and sharp-pointed knife. The curious thing is that the identity of the victim is disputed. Although the face is mutilated by cuts and contusions, several people in the district believe the woman to be a certain Félicie Bonheur, a street-walker, also known as the Big Jewess, who did in fact often make use of a room on the third floor of the house where the crime was committed. But the manageress of the hotel—who is also the concierge—states that Félicie did not go to the hotel that evening, and that she never had a dress like that in which the dead woman was clothed. No suspicion is yet entertained as to the perpetrator or perpetrators of the crime."

"Well, what about it?" said Madame Aurélie, interrupting herself. "It's only the usual story of cruelty

and filth that's continually cropping up amongst those sort of people."

M. Brunois, less excited, was now lying back in his chair. He crossed his legs, and said, almost indifferently:

"As a matter of fact, you're right. There's nothing particularly interesting about it."

"Nothing whatever. Have you looked at the late news?"

"No."

"There's no longer even a mystery. Listen." She read:

"Latest News: The murderer has just been arrested. He is a notorious lounger in the district, where he is known by the name of 'Eudoxe le Marin'. He had gone into an estaminet about an hour after the crime and had been thrown out for making a disturbance and taken to the police-station in the Rue d'Aboukir. He was drunk at the time. When the inspector asked him if he knew Félicie Bonheur, he said: 'The Big Jewess? She's my girl, even if I did settle her score this evening.' Thus it is definitely established that the murdered woman is Félicie Bonheur, and the whole affair which at one time may have seemed mysterious, boils down to a bloody encounter between a prostitute and a pimp—the inevitable commonplace story. To-morrow morning after the usual proceedings Eudoxe le Marin will be finally committed to gaol."

"You see," said Madame Aurélie.

"O Lord, yes, a commonplace story. The paper's right. I hadn't read to the end, you know . . . But now that the murderer and the woman's identity are known . . . Besides, those sort of people don't concern us. The woman's dead, the man will be guillotined. That'll be two good-for-nothings less in the world."

"Yes, and if all the undesirables would do for each other like that . . ."

"It would be all the better for decent people."

Whereupon Madame Aurélie went back to her kitchen, and M. Brunois, feeling very self-righteous and contented, stretched himself out in the chair, and slightly holding up the paper, went on reading. Passing over the news items, he glued his eyes to the serial.

The retired hardware merchant had conceived a violent liking for romances in his leisure hours. At one time he had been passionately fond of detective stories, particularly those about Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin, in which the secret service-men watch, follow up and finally capture uncapturable criminals; it was no doubt the influence of such books that had made him notice such a mediocre crime. But the serial in the *Petit Journal* soon filled him with softer emotions. It was about a young girl, who having been stolen on the day of her birth, was later on adopted by her real mother without either of them being aware of the fact. This situation led to very touching scenes between the two women, inevitably drawn to one another though without knowing

why. M. Brunois' eyes soon filled with sympathetic tears, and little by little, soothed as much by these gentle sentiments as by the pleasant process of digestion, he let the paper fall, and dozed into a smiling sleep. His lids rose and fell monotonously over his prominent china-blue eyes—at length they closed altogether. His broad good-humoured mouth alternately opened and shut. In the corner of one of his nostrils, the hairs of a big wart added a rather ludicrous touch to his guileless expression. The breeze from the garden and the scent of the roses surrounded the honest sleeper with coolness and fragrance. His even breathing caused a wasp which was flying in and out of the window to re-double its buzzing.

IV

It was the habit of M. Charles Brunois, especially in summer, to go for a short stroll in the outlying streets before supper; he would stop very interestedly in front of the curio-shops, though he never bought anything.

That day, he went as usual. He stopped a long while outside the shops on the corner of le Rue Lepic; he gazed at the flower-painted pottery, tested the weight of the brass fire-dogs red with rust, and rang a scale on a number of steel dishes with his middle finger. He became absorbed in the contemplation of a coloured

lithograph in a small bamboo frame, which represented Mazeppa bound with cords to a maddened steed; with great earnestness he studied the rhymed inscription beneath the picture, saying in a low voice:

"But what made him go to a tavern so near the house where he had just murdered Félicie?" His eyes never strayed from the inscription as he continued: "I can understand his confessing to the crime, as he was drunk. I can let that pass, even though it's ridiculous. Apparently he could and did accuse himself, but the extraordinary thing is that his first thought was not to avoid discovery by leaving the scene of his crime, but to court it by going in to drink at an estaminet where he was known. Was he trying to establish an alibi? No—the news of the murder was already out when he went in." He had ceased staring at the picture and was now looking fixedly at a warped and broken carriage-lamp which had only one flawed and dusty pane of glass intact out of four. Slightly louder, he went on: "Really, it's not at all obvious. What do the proofs against Eudoxe le Marin amount to? His own confession, and the fact that he had relations with Félicie Bonheur, who was murdered. That's all right; but suppose that, being drunk, he spoke wildly? And suppose that it was *not* Félicie Bonheur who was murdered? After all, her identity has not been established . . ." He was mechanically fingering a number of old keys, blackened and fastened to a ring, as if he were counting them; he

muttered: "I don't care what they say. Something tells me that Eudoxe le Marin is not the murderer."

A paper-boy shouted: "Paper! Three o'clock edition! Mystery in the Rue des Filles Dieu! Who murdered Félicie Bonheur? Eudoxe le Marin discharged!"

M. Brunois, swelling with self-applause, gave a start, called the paper-boy, and buying a paper, read with feverish haste:

"What did I say? What did I say?" he exclaimed, and almost running, he hurried home. The neighbours were astonished, never having seen him exert himself so violently.

As he went into the dining-room, Madame Aurélie was putting supper on the table. M. Brunois, perspiring and out of breath, but triumphant, announced as if it were a delightful bit of news:

"Well, he didn't do it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I say he didn't do it."

"Who do what?"

"Eudoxe. Eudoxe wasn't the murderer."

"Eudoxe?"

"Eudoxe le Marin. He's innocent, here you are, read it, he's discharged. I was on the right track this time."

And he walked up and down the room in an ecstasy of delight over his sagacity, brandishing the fluttering paper in the air. Madame Aurélie, understanding at length to what he alluded, shrugged her shoulders.

"How absurd you are to get into such a state over an affair that's no concern of yours. What does it matter to you if the man's innocent or guilty?"

"What? What does it matter to me if——"

He suddenly broke off short in astonishment. Incidentally, why *was* he taking so much interest in an episode so alien and so far removed from his sphere of life? When his wife called: "Come and sit down," he sat down, rather shamefacedly, and drank his soup in silence. Yet he could not shake off his preoccupation —he had a longing to talk about the mysterious affair, and to make excuses to his wife and to himself.

"Well, we might as well talk about that as about anything else," he said. "It's the topic of the moment, everybody's wondering about it, guessing how it happened; it's amusing."

"Oh, if it amuses you!" said Madame Aurélie, helping herself to some more soup. "But you know, I don't agree with you, I'm positive that wretch was the murderer."

"Rubbish! Eudoxe hasn't had the shadow of a hand in this crime. That's been proved, definitely proved."

M. Brunois had regained all his excitement, he was re-reading the paper lying open on the table, putting into his own words the gist of the report.

"Follow me," he said. "You'll understand. The magistrate cross-examined Eudoxe this morning: 'So you admit that you assassinated your mistress, the

woman Félicie Bonheur, at about ten o'clock last night in a house of ill-fame in the Rue des Filles Dieu?' Do you know what Eudoxe did then? He laughed. He almost split his sides with laughter. He couldn't answer, he was laughing so. The magistrate frowned. 'You're committing contempt of court.' Eudoxe went on laughing. Finally he explained. He could not have killed Félicie at ten o'clock yesterday, seeing that nearly all the evening, from eight o'clock to 10.45, he had been in a crêmerie in the Rue Vieille-du-Temple, whence he had not stirred, and where a score of people had spoken to him. They only had to ask the owner and his wife and Fifi Romain and fat Adèle, la Cadenasse—anybody who was there. As to Félicie, he had seen her, yes, that night in that identical crêmerie—they had dined together, but she had left him after they had had their coffee, as the night was her busy time. It was true that she was to have rejoined him later on to go with him to Vauxhall, only she hadn't turned up. That was why, out of patience, and a trifle drunk (it's so boring to wait without drinking anything), he had gone, *after* 10.45, to the Poissonnière quarter; he had thought he might meet her at the pub in the Rue St. Foy. But he hadn't met her, and he had been chucked out because he had vented his rage on the tables and the bottles ranged on the counter. So he could not have killed Félicie since he had not even seen her since supper. They had only to send for the crêmerie crowd to establish his alibi.

"Well, what about it?" said Madame Aurélie. "What does his saying all this prove? He's telling lies, that's all. He said he was the murderer at the police-station."

"Yes, that's a serious obstacle!" cried M. Brunois, delighted that his wife should at last show some interest in the mysterious crime, and highly pleased that he could over-rule her arguments. "That's exactly what the judge said. But you'll see. Just listen to this." He put his finger on the page at the top of a column and read:

"'Yet according to your own story, you settled Félicie Bonheur's score last night!'"

"He certainly said so," said Madame Aurélie.

"He certainly said so. But that proves nothing. Here we are: 'Yes, your worship, I settled the bitch's account all right. That's to say, I gave her a thrashing because she'd been out on the loose for three days. I must tell you that I loved her, I loved Félicie. She was blood of my blood, bone of my bone, and she had to truckle under to me—I put my foot down about her going about with other men, I did, so she got a good hiding for that last escapade of hers, and I guaranteed her a better one still if she didn't come and meet me and go to Vauxhall. But kill her? Not I! Not on my life. I loved her too much for that, and whoever's done her in had better keep out of my way—you won't have to try him, I'll settle *his* hash in double quick time!'"

Although the reporter had underscored the accent of truth in Eudoxe le Marin's words, Madame Aurélie would not own herself convinced.

"Every criminal tries to clear himself by inventing some such story . . ."

"But, good heavens, there is no question here of an invented story. The magistrate called witnesses. Seven witnesses, mark you, I'm not making it up, it's printed here, seven witnesses can testify that Eudoxe was still at the crêmerie in the Rue Vieille du Temple at ten o'clock last night."

"Fine witnesses—fat Adèle, la Cadenasse, Fifi Romain —prostitutes and fly-by-nights. If you're going to believe what those people say . . ."

"What about the police then? Mustn't we believe the police?"

"Police?"

"Yes."

"Which police?"

"Those who were on duty in the Rue Vieille-du-Temple and who saw Eudoxe come out of the crêmerie a little before eleven o'clock, not earlier."

"Who said they saw him?"

"They did."

"They did?"

"Certainly. You can read their statement." He put the paper under her nose, then folding his arms and drawing himself up proudly, as though he were on a

pedestal, he shouted: "Now then, what have you to say to that?"

"That—that——"

She got up; they had finished dinner while they had been talking, and began to clear away.

"Yes, what do you say to that?"

"I say that you annoy me, and that I've something better to do than to keep thinking about such horrors."

Thereupon she turned her back on him, and knelt down to put back the sugar-basin, the decanter and the unused napkins in the sideboard cupboard.

For a minute M. Brunois gave his wife rather a sarcastic look. Really, she had never been particularly bright, and although she was a good sort, she was as obstinate as a mule. Then, thoughtfully, he began to pace up and down the room.

His puckered forehead, the fixed look of his half-shut eyes, showed the intensity of his pre-occupation.

He only roused himself from his brown study to look at the clock. It struck eight. He took up his hat.

"Now where are you off to?" demanded Madame Aurélie.

"I'm——"

"Yes, where *are* you going?"

The truth was that he wanted to go out and buy the latest editions of the evening papers—they were sure to contain fresh details of the Rue des Filles-Dieu affair.

But he lied. "Where do you suppose I'm going? I'm

going to have a game of dominoes at the Café Guerbois."

"All right, only don't be too late."

"No, no."

He went to the door with an air of indifference, without hurrying. But he was scarcely on the landing than he clutched at the banisters and went down the stairs with enormous strides.

V

For several days the enquiries instituted by M. Legrandin, the examining magistrate, led to nothing more than the probability (which was entirely lacking in significance) that the murderer, after having committed the crime, had escaped, not by the passage leading into the street (when he must have run into the excited crowd), but by the other end of a kind of yard or rather a narrow passage, whose door gave on to the Rue St. Spire, a blind alley always deserted at night.

Every day a new clue was followed, only to be abandoned on the next.

Questioned several times, but no longer as a suspect—for no further doubts were entertained of his complete innocence—Eudoxe le Marin had been unable to throw any more light on the matter. He maintained that Félicie Bonheur, vicious in her cups, but otherwise easy-going, had no enemies, but lived on good terms with

the women of the neighbourhood and their protectors. Did this argue a crime like those of the Prado and Pranzini? Had some casual stranger whom Félicie Bonheur had picked up, murdered her in order to rob her? What made this conjecture unlikely was the fact that the unfortunate woman, spent what money Eudoxe did not extort from her on drink, and was known to possess neither money nor jewellery. Never attractively clothed, always wearing the same old dresses she had worn for a year, going out as she did with her hair in curlers, there was nothing about her likely to arouse thoughts of profitable murder. The recollection of an affair somewhat similar in its details woke suspicions of some family drama; enquiries were made about Félicie's relations. The people of the quarter had never heard of any. Only Eudoxe remembered that she had a sister who was either in service or in a shop in the outskirts of Paris or the suburbs, a sister much younger than herself, extremely pretty, and absolutely or almost straight; she occasionally came of an evening to see Félicie—but he had never seen her, and all that he knew about her, which amounted to nothing, he had learned from his mistress, who had probably lied to make out that she came of decent people, or for some such reason.

The only thing that seemed certain after a week of uncertainty was the fact that the murdered woman really was Félicie Bonheur.

It will be recalled that at first this was doubtful. The

testimony of those who had first seen the victim lost much of its value from the fact that her fall onto the stones of the roadway had almost completely disfigured her; and the concierge who obstinately maintained that her tenant had not come to the hotel on the evening of the crime, and who declared that the clothing of the murdered person was unknown to her, could not explain how anyone else could have obtained access to Félicie's room, or say who could have taken the key of this particular room from the lodge.

But all doubts were put an end to by the non-appearance of Félicie Bonheur. There was no reason for her to hide, therefore she must be dead. Moreover, the concierge began to waver: yes, it was possible, she seemed to remember now, that she had gone out a little before ten o'clock, and during her absence Félicie might have taken her key and have gone up alone or accompanied into her room.

In short, the identity of the victim was sufficiently clearly established, all the more so since her underclothes, her chemise, knickers and handkerchief all bore the initials F.B. The judge ordered the body to be buried after an autopsy which revealed nothing new, and fully confirmed the statement of Dr. X. to the effect that the three wounds, all mortal, had been inflicted by a very slender and sharp-pointed knife.

M. Brunois remained in doubt as to the victim's identity much longer than any other reader of the daily

papers. To tell the truth, he had no idea why this doubt should persist. Perhaps the name "Félicie Bonheur" signifying joy and happiness struck him as curiously out of harmony with her bloody ending, perhaps that was it. Apart from that, he had to give in to the weight of evidence, and it was at a time when he had finally repudiated all uncertainty that he went to the dispatch offices of the *Figaro*.

A portrait of the victim, taken the day after the crime, was on exhibition there, together with a photograph of Félicie Bonheur taken two month earlier, and sent to the paper by Eudoxe le Marin.

It was only with difficulty—for the crowd was wedged tightly in the room—that M. Brunois managed to get near the wall. Finally he succeeded in doing so.

Over the shoulders of the curious sightseers, his eyes fell at first on the photograph submitted by Eudoxe, and even before he had read the lettering beneath it, he had recognised Félicie Bonheur. Nothing out of the way in that. This woman, no beauty, too fat, with coarse lips, her hair in curlers, wearing an old brown frock over her uncorseted figure and pendulous bosom, had been so often described in the papers; moreover, all these fly-by-nights were more or less alike.

He moved still further forward, using his elbows in his eagerness to see the other picture, that taken after the murder.

He shuddered.

It was a natural revulsion in the good man, gentle-minded and kindly, so easily stirred to emotion, at the sight of the rigid corpse, with the gash in its neck—the wounds beneath the breast were not visible, as the dress was fastened—the face so torn and blood-stained that it was literally masked by contusions. His uplifted hands shook, his mouth worked like that of a terrified monkey.

Then, suddenly, his whole aspect changed. He stiffened, his arrested eyes widened, and stretching out his arms, he said as if he were making a statement.

"It isn't she!"

As he spoke in a loud voice, he attracted the attention of several people, notably that of a mean-faced man with an untidy beard, a round hat worn at a wrong angle, and a tightly buttoned dirty overcoat.

But M. Brunois continued without noticing that he had been observed: "No, it isn't she, it isn't Félicie Bonheur, no, no, no."

At this the man in the dirty overcoat said abruptly: "Why do you say that, eh?"

M. Brunois was silent, either because he had not heard or because he could make no answer.

The man repeated: "I'm asking you why you say that isn't Félicie Bonheur?"

This time, and with an explosive suddenness, M. Brunois exclaimed: "Why, because——" He stopped.

He could not remember what he had been going to say; he thought in vain, something was reeling in his head. It was over in a minute. He looked at the people about him, smiling calmly. But he was in no hurry to reply; he himself could not conceive why he had called out so positively: "It isn't she!"

He explained it to himself when he had had a closer view of the dead woman's picture.

The decent dress, clean except where the blood and mud had stained it, the virginally banded hair, which even the death-agony had not ruffled, the modestly buttoned bodice, the little white collar, in fact, the whole appearance of the victim had nothing in common with the get-up and appearance of Félicie Bonheur in the adjacent picture, and generally contradicted the mixture of disorder, boldness and extravagance which is associated with the lowest class of prostitute.

Ingenuously, and not without considerable pride in his own powers of observance, M. Brunois detailed his reasons to his interlocutor. They convinced no one. People shrugged their shoulders. The good man was drivelling. There was certainly a difference of dress in the two photographs, but that proved nothing. That sort of woman sometimes puts on a modest air to attract men, and so far as could be judged beneath the wounds the faces were identical. The noses were the same, the eyebrows were similarly arched, the hair grew in the same way, and near the left ear, on the cheek, the same

mark on the skin was clearly visible. M. Brunois could not deny these resemblances, but tossing his head, he seemed to attach no importance to them, and suddenly, with the look of someone who has taken a resolve, he walked out rapidly, without another word.

No doubt remained to him. In spite of general opinion, it was not Félicie Bonheur who had been murdered.

Rather up in the air, he rubbed his hands and told himself he would have made a famous detective. Being only a humble citizen, he would fulfil his duty as a citizen by seeing justice done.

The inquiry could have no satisfactory result as long as it was based on a false starting-point. The murderer had not been found, because he was only being sought for among those people who had in one way or another been in touch with Félicie Bonheur. It was indispensable to discover first of all who the vicitm really was; that achieved, the arrest of the criminal must speedily follow.

He entered a café and asked for writing materials. He took the pen, but wrote only one line: "To the examining magistrate: Your Worship—"

He tried to find phrases and sentences.

To tell the truth, when he came to put it into words, his conviction no longer seemed strong enough to be shared with any one. The reasons that he had given in the dispatch office just now were not very convincing

after all, especially when opposed to such contradictory resemblances.

He did not admit himself in the wrong. He was sure that he was not in the wrong. Since he had been right in his assumption of Eudoxe's innocence, why should he be less intuitive concerning the supposed victim?

But really he had not enough proof; no, *at the moment* he really had not enough proof, and thoughtfully, he dropped the pen . . .

Someone whom he had not seen was standing on the pavement and watching him through the window of the café; it was the mean-faced man with the untidy beard and the dirty overcoat.

VI

The next day, towards nine in the morning, Madame Aurélie woke with an exclamation of surprise; her husband, standing before the wardrobe, had just buttoned his coat. He had already put on his hat—a top-hat, though it was summer. There was a solemn and ceremonial look about his dress and manner.

"What's the meaning of this? Why are you going out this morning got-up like that?"

He said that he was going to the funeral of an old merchant who was one of the domino players at the Café Guerbois.

"Are you? You didn't tell me about it last night, did you?"

No, as a matter of fact he had forgotten to mention it last night. It had only come into his mind this morning. He could not possibly get out of following the procession, and he was late already. He would have to go straight to the church. He kissed his wife, told her not to worry if he did not get back till the afternoon or a little later; there would probably be a breakfast for the mourners after the service. Then he went out. He walked with a firm step; his bearing was studied and important.

Once again M. Brunois had lied. All the Café Guerbois domino players were in excellent health. He had invented the funeral in order to avoid the mocking remarks of his wife to whom, as it chanced, he had not mentioned the mystery in the Rue des Filles-Dieu for several days. The truth was that as he had not sufficient proof to prevent a miscarriage of justice, he wanted to get hold of equally striking evidence, and inspired, no doubt, by recollections of detective stories, he was going to reconstruct the crime for himself.

He climbed into a carriage.

"Rue des Filles-Dieu."

According to formula, he must begin from the beginning, that is to say, the first step was to visit the scene and the vicinity of the crime, and draw out the nearest neighbours.

"What number?" asked the driver.

M. Brunois knew perfectly well, of course, that Félicie Bonheur had lived at No. 56 in the Rue des Filles-Dieu, but he said: "Stop at No. 20"—a subtle thought on which he congratulated himself. He might have attracted attention to himself if he had got out at the house where the crime had been committed, and it is easier to make observations when one is inconspicuous.

On the way he memorised clearly the principal points on which he must focus his enquiries, co-ordinated them in his mind, and put on one side the suppositions thrown out by the daily papers, so that no preconceived idea might break in on the distinctness of the impressions he was about to receive, or might lead him to put a false construction on the particulars he was about to gather. On the other hand, he considered his own theories to be indisputable facts. As for instance:

"A woman *who was not Félicie Bonheur* had received three knife wounds, and had been picked up dead and unrecognisable on the pavement."

Such were his facts.

To establish the victim's identity, and to discover the real murderer, *who was not Eudoxe le Marin.*

Such was his aim.

A few minutes later they had left the main boulevards, and had turned into the maze of narrow streets and blind alleys, which twist, unwind and come back to

the same point, and then wind back again between the Rue Poissonnière and the Porte St. Denis. M. Brunois betrayed no interest in this somewhat notorious district, though, stay-at-home as he was, he had had very little occasion to visit it. Without thinking them strange and unusual, he turned a contemptuous eye on the tumble-down hovels that adjoined occasional new houses, hovels that gaped open, whose filthy plaster was peeling off, whose windows, smothered in crimson curtains, swung half-open on a chain, where, between the fluttering blinds, a naked arm or a shock of red hair could be seen; he turned a contemptuous eye on the wretched little shops whose contents were ripped out in a stream of loose vegetables, rags, materials hanging up, and on the sordid drinking-places whose fronts were painted blood-red.

He should have felt at least a sensation of novelty in the face of these unaccustomed sights. But he experienced no such emotion.

He soon discovered the reason for this indifference. It was because this obscene corner of Paris appeared to him absolutely identical with what he had heard about it, especially after the sordid crime.

One thing only struck him as abnormal, and that was the daylight shining on such hideousness and vileness; at night-time everything would have seemed perfectly in keeping; no doubt this was on account of the fact that in his mind the appearance of the place (so com-

pletely identified with the crime which made it even more sinister) was inevitably associated with the thought of that night darkness in which the murder had been committed.

As they turned into the Rue des Filles-Dieu, he called: "Stop here, driver."

At his words, they halted, not in front of a door, but before a street lamp. Neither to right nor left did the houses bear either the number which he had given to the driver, or that of the house he had come to inspect.

What whim had made him stop the carriage? He did not know. Curious, this sudden instinct which had made him call "Stop!"

Behind the lamp-post, between a façade and a jutting wall, there was a rather deep recess which at night, despite the adjacent light, must be extremely dark—one of those corners in low neighbourhoods where lurk prostitutes, whose greasy hands shoot out to stop the passer-by with a stream of filthy promises.

What made M. Brunois call up this picture? Was it because he had seen some such women in some such corner . . .? When? Oh, well, often at night on his way home after a game of dominoes at the Café Guerbois.

He got out of the carriage and paid the driver.

As he was in the Rue des Filles-Dieu, he would walk to No. 56.

But once on the pavement, he stood still. This spot interested him—this shadowy angle, this meeting-place which must be so dark at night shut in between the façade and the wall.

If the murdered woman had been a street-walker, if the murderer had been some prowling drunkard out for a debauch—(A drunkard? Yes, the idea of a drunken assassin had come to him all at once because of the number of drinking-places he had seen in the vicinity) —then the two might have met in some such place, probably in this very place, since it was so close to the house where the crime had actually been committed.

Possibly, after a few brief words had been interchanged, the woman going in front, the drunken man reeling against the shuttered shop-fronts, they had gone towards the hotel . . .

Surely, surely, it might have—must have—happened thus. And M. Brunois, following his idea, which was literally taking shape before him, skirted the walls with an uncertain step as if he wished to imitate the person whom his imagination had evoked.

He stopped abruptly before a chemist's shop. Like a flash of lightning, the thought had come into his head that there had been a quarrel between the man and the woman, here, in this road, on this pavement, here, here, here in the rosy glow of the enormous jar, which was now extinguished, but which must flare at night.

This hypothesis, he told himself, was quite feasible, the shop being only a few paces from the house.

But what had suggested to him the idea of a quarrel in the road between the two people who had met? He asked himself this question, and could not at first answer it . . . He had it! Nothing simpler—it happens so often, he had seen it happen dozens of times—those disputes near the door of some wretched den between a prostitute and a passer-by on account of the money extorted, or for some other reason.

For some other reason.

He was inclined to think that in this particular case, money had not been the reason.

Perhaps the woman had refused to have anything to do with a drunken man? But that sort is not so refined as all that; perhaps she was of the class that refrains at certain hours from accosting passers-by and refuses to go with them into the dubious houses where, moreover, other women await their turn? And perhaps the drunkard, having conceived a desire for her when she had solicited him in the recess behind the street lantern, was angered by her refusal?

M. Brunois had such extraordinary faith in himself that he admitted as proved facts the wildest and most chimerical theories, which were either the result of incidents he had seen in the road, or recollections from the newspapers.

He could have sworn that the woman had not gone

into the hotel with the drunken man, that they had separated under the rays of the rosy jar.

On the other hand, he was not satisfied with the idea that she was only a decoy to lead men up to the door.

Perhaps she had a rendezvous to keep with her lover, or with a protector, jealous, according to his fashion . . .

M. Brunois could hardly restrain a cry of triumph: he remembered the statement of Eudoxe le Marin.

On the day of the crime, Eudoxe had ordered Félicie Bonheur to come and join him in the crêmerie in the Rue Vieille du Temple; the woman who had accosted the drunkard (she could have been no other than Félicie Bonheur, alias the Big Jewess) had left him in the lurch, fearing her lover's fists if she were over-late.

Thus the truth fitted in marvellously with M. Brunois' suppositions.

But the Big Jewess had not seen why someone else should not profit by her loss. She had told the met-by-chance to go to her room at No. 56, third floor, such-and-such a door—he had only to go straight up and ask no questions of the concierge, and in her room he would find someone else, much younger and prettier than herself, a friend who had come to see her, a relation of hers . . .

M. Brunois struck his forehead violently, and cried out: "Her sister!", and sure of having guessed correctly, swelled with pride.

But he soon had to confess that, correct or otherwise

—he would have betted that he was correct—this new theory was nothing to be proud of; it was not by mere reasoning that he had come to the conclusion that the Big Jewess had a sister younger and prettier than herself, since Eudoxe had spoken of this sister, still virtuous and very pretty, who was either a servant or a shop-girl in the suburbs of Paris or the provinces, and who sometimes came in the evening to see her sister. What M. Brunois had prided himself on as being the result of extraordinary intuition was, after all, only a recollection. With this slight set-back to his pride and his acuteness, he was soon reassured by the thought that among the facts he had gathered in his enquiries, there were many that he owed entirely to his personal acumen, and he eagerly followed out the line of his deductions.

So, then, after a short quarrel, followed by a reconciliation, the Big Jewess and the drunken man had separated before the chemist's shop, he to proceed to the house indicated to him, she to rejoin Eudoxe le Marin. This was what the man had done—this was what he must have done. M. Brunois increased his steps, moving faster, swaying slightly in imitation of the person he was imagining.

To be sure he was not to be pitied, that drunkard, for in place of a common street-walker, not even in her first youth, he was to find a young woman, almost virtuous (Eudoxe's statement), to sum up—a bit of fluff good enough for a king. Yet at heart, he must have been

conscious of remorse . . . What was this? Why did M. Brunois suppose that at that moment the drunkard was already conscious of remorse? Was he confusing the state of mind that must have followed the crime with that preceding it? This explanation did not satisfy him. He held to his idea that the destined murderer had here, in this very road, felt the prick of guilt—he held with strange tenacity to this idea—but at the same time, it seemed to him that the feeling of guilt must have sprung from reasons not connected with the crime.

What reasons?

Frequenters of street-women do not shrink from the idea of an episode in a dubious hotel . . . That was obvious. But what was the proof that the drunken man (he no longer called him a "drunkard") was a libertine by nature, a frequenter of low orgies? Others besides those base wretches are tempted by the scent of musk —a perfume exhaled by some woman who accosts them at some street corner. They may be perfectly respectable persons, too, middle-class men of usually decent and sober habits, who are attracted from time to time by the opportunity of idle and inexpensive pleasure. A little escapade, discreet and harmless—one takes precautions, naturally—is not at all inconceivable, especially after a meal at a restaurant with one's friends, who, either to celebrate some lucky business stroke, or to drink success to an undertaking, have ordered the best wine to be had. A meal with friends—or a single friend.

It isn't necessary to be with a crowd in order to enjoy a good meal, drink heartily and be a little light-headed in consequence—burgundy, especially, fills one's brain with moonshine—there's nothing like burgundy to put moonshine into one's brain, and when good wine puts moonshine into one's brain, a mere suggestion of woman is enough. So that probably the man who had wandered into the Poissonnière quarter on the night of the crime was a worthy citizen—some retired business man, maybe—not a profligate at all, but a little over the eight with Pommard or Chambertin; and if this were so, it was easy to see why he might have been conscience-stricken, and why he might have hesitated before this door, almost resolving to turn back. At this minute, M. Brunois halted, and leaned his shoulder against a shutter, so vividly was he living in imagination. For, no doubt, this chance libertine was a married man, and that was why he had stopped irresolute on the edge of vice.

At the idea of those bought kisses in a house of ill-fame, he had remembered his wife, not pretty, but so good, so old a friend, who was waiting for him, her head on the pillow, her eyes on the hands of the clock. And as one is very emotional when one is drunk, he had shed maudlin tears between his fingers that shook with his shaking body. Luckily, few people passed this way, and those who were about took no notice of him. Moreover, drunken tears are soon dried, and the good fellow must suddenly have burst out laughing—(M. Brunois moved

briskly away from the shutter and started to walk again) —and with burning eyes and moist lips, no longer mindful of his wife waiting in bed for him in their room furnished with mahogany and decorated with lithographs, had broken into a run—there's no sin in a little amusement sometimes—had run till he was almost out of breath towards the hotel that was quite close, towards the low wicket-gate, where M. Brunois stopped, panting, without even having seen on a window on the ground floor the figures 56 in white on a background of blue enamel.

However, it was not at all extraordinary that he should have come to a standstill there before he had seen the number. For standing opposite a scarlet-painted estaminet with intricate bar arrangements that looked like the knotted entrails of an enormous brass dragon, whose façade was decorated here and there with long mirrors which reflected the road, the gutter, the pavement and the passers-by, the doubtful and sordid-looking hotel with its small windows smothered in red cotton-cloth, its overhanging first floor, and the narrow passage door between the dirty plaster walls, had every appearance of a scene of crime. Clever M. Brunois could not be led astray.

Nevertheless, he stood thinking, in no haste to push open the wicket-gate.

As he was anxious to see the stairs that the murderer had climbed, and the room where the murder had been

committed, should he go to the concierge simply as a curious sightseer (and, indeed, that was all he was), or should he give some reason that would allow him to examine the inmates of this sinister house at his leisure and without any chatter to distract him? He decided on the second alternative. But what reasons could he give? The most likely one of all. Though it is scarcely customary to live in these dens, it is quite usual to hire a room for a few hours for other than sleeping purposes. He would simply imply that he had arranged to meet a woman here, and that as he had arrived first, he would wait for her. A little brazenness and a fatuous air being called for, he went towards the concierge's office with a leer and a jovial look, no doubt with the very manner which the person with whom he was identifying himself had assumed on the fatal evening.

" Certainly, sir, certainly," said the concierge, who was in her fifties, fat, perspiring, with a bristly grey moustache, " there is a room vacant on the entresol—the best room in the house."

Standing in the doorway of the lodge, he made no attempt to take stock of the speaker. Singularly enough, he scarcely looked at her, and though she could no doubt have furnished him with interesting details of the bloody affair which was filling his mind, the idea of questioning her did not occur to him. Was it because, in the light of his recent discoveries, he scorned to follow the usual police methods, was it that he was too

proud to use anything other than his own intuition to guide him in his investigations? The fact remained that he was not concerned with the concierge. Craning forward, his eyes widening with intentness, he eagerly surveyed the walls of the passage, the dirty brass knob of a narrow spiral staircase, and each ascending step. He was too preoccupied to answer . . . Then turning sharply round, he stretched his hand towards the small board where a number of keys with brass numbers hung from hooks; he grasped one abruptly.

"Oh no, no, Monsieur," said the concierge, "don't take No. 13. That room wouldn't do for Monsieur. It isn't nicely furnished, the bed isn't big enough, and it's on the third floor. And besides, goodness only knows, it isn't a pleasant room after that business—you know what I mean, Monsieur—after that business that was in all the papers . . ."

To tell the truth, M. Brunois was filled with a vast admiration, not unmixed with astonishment, for the instinct that had guided him in his difficult researches. It seemed that without any indication whatever—just by an extraordinary chance (there was something miraculous about it)—he had put his hand instantly and without hesitation on the key of the very room where the sister of the Big Jewess had been murdered. He was almost minded to admit that there must be some supernatural element in it (he had at one time been addicted to spiritualism); he had not remembered that those who

are gifted with superior intelligence as a means to an end are always assisted in their task by favourable circumstances—Destiny loves to be of service to genius —and M. Brunois, after so many successes, could not refrain from bridling a little.

But it was only a brief intoxication.

At bottom—he had to admit it—there had been nothing so very wonderful in his having stretched out his hand towards that key and no other. The figure 13 cut into the small brass oval had quite naturally attracted his eyes,—and the appropriateness of the unlucky number had associated itself with the horror of the crime. Hence his instinctive gesture—nothing could be more easily explained.

Meanwhile he kept the key.

"That's all right," he said, his hat tilted a little to one side at a rakish angle, "So much the better if the bed isn't big when the woman's pretty. Isn't that so, Madame? You'll see, she'll be here soon, she's very pretty. I'll take No. 13—I've set my heart on it."

And he put a ten-franc piece into the concierge's hand.

"Oh," she said, "it's just as Monsieur pleases. I was only saying that . . . If Monsieur will follow me, I'll show him the way . . . Take care, the stairs are rather dark and narrow . . ."

"I know, I know."

"Monsieur knows?"

Now, what had made him say "I know"? Well, of course, you don't expect to find stucco walls in this sort of house or plenty of sun or artificial light and a wide staircase with easily-climbed steps.

"Don't bother, Madame," he said. "I can find the room by myself. On the third floor, you said?"

"Second door in the little passage."

"To the left?"

"To the left. Exactly. Then Monsieur has been in the house before?"

He started, then stood motionless, his whole body tense, and with a glassy eye, in a voice that was addressed to nobody, he repeated slowly, vaguely and stupidly: "Been . . . in the house . . . before . . ."

But all at once, coming out of this short daze, he said gaily: "All right, all right, to the left, then. Thank you, Madame, thank you."

He had thought at first that the door must be to the left, but had soon ceased to wonder *why* he had thought so. The number of the room was 13—an uneven number, and is there not a kind of analogy in uneven numbers with any kind of incompleteness, any kind of awkwardness and clumsiness that exists on the "sinister" side? That was why, yes, that was why he had immediately guessed that the door was on that side. How well that ominous and threatening "13" fitted in. He was pleased with this subtle reasoning, taking note of it and analysing himself. He was as much interested in

his own mentality as if it were a very subtle study of character in a novel; he seemed to be reading himself.

While the concierge in her lodge was muttering "That's an eccentric gentleman, for sure", he was climbing the lower stairs on the first floor, where from a narrow, half-open bay window, a sickly twilight straggled in, overcast by a dusty steel reflector.

He suddenly felt quite dashing, like a man who has dined well and is going to visit a woman.

Ah, after a good meal, there's nothing to be compared with a little blonde girl, plump as a partridge, made for hearty caresses. The slimmer ones are amusing too. They are even more amusing, more stimulating. *She* must have been quite slender and small, with a scarcely formed breast, being so young, and practically untouched, that sister of Félicie Bonheur's, in that room upstairs, room No. 13.

What entertained M. Brunois in his investigations was the ease with which he put himself in the place of the person he was going to deliver into the hands of the law. He had thoroughly identified himself with *that other*, and had got into his skin, as the saying is, so completely that he was certain of thinking and acting just as *he* must have thought and acted. The *other one*, eh? Of course, the *other one*. And this incarnation, which had already assisted him so materially, would assist him still more effectively.

He burst out laughing, for on turning the staircase, he had narrowly escaped falling full length. It was the fatuous laugh of a drunken man who has just escaped breaking his neck. He continued climbing in the semi-darkness, slightly broken by a window on the first-floor landing, and he reeled from the banister to the wall, striving to be just like *that other* must have been. If he succeeded in getting along, he was triumphant; but alternately he was mournful because of the poor woman who was waiting at home, her wakeful eyes on the hands of the clock. But why shouldn't one have a good time? The devil knows one isn't a graven image. And still ascending, a fragment of a cabaret song came to his lips: "Oh Mat, old Mat, what are you at?" . . . He reached the second storey. "Oh Mat, old Mat . . ." he panted, took another hold of the banister: "What are you at?" And in high spirits at his song, he began his climb once more: "Oh Mat, old Mat . . ."

In a few minutes he was about to be anything but bored . . . ("What are you at?") in bed with the filly—("Oh Mat, old Mat" . . .) and he hurried on, taking the steps by twos, and he turned into the passage, and he saw the door on the left, and he opened it, and shouting coarsely: "What are you at?" he was met full on the face by the blood-red reflection of a crimson curtain!

The scarlet curtain at the solitary window stained the floor, the wall-paper, the table-cloth, the chairs, the

marble toilet-table, the basin, the bed, with the bloody scarlet of murder . . .

All bespattered with murder, M. Brunois uttered a cry. For it was enough to drive an honest, decent, peaceable married man out of his wits to find himself suddenly in this dreadful incarnadined room, which only lacked the victim bleeding from neck and breast—and yet she was not lacking, for he imagined he saw her —he *did* see her—Oh God, he would go out of his mind . . .

In a paroxysm of terror, he turned, rushed out onto the stairs, beating the air, reached the lodge, did not go through the door into the street, but impelled by he knew not what instinct, crossed the small courtyard to the narrow open passage that led to the impasse St. Spire ("Monsieur, monsieur!" screamed the concierge); heard nothing, running all the time ("You're going the wrong way, Monsieur, that's not the way!"), gained the wall, pushed open the door and fled . . .

Then it was that the old woman, very much astonished, muttered: "Well . . . well . . . could it have been . . . by any chance . . .?" And running into the road, she called a neighbour from the fruit shop. "Will you look after my place for a minute?" Then as quickly as she could, because of a suspicion that had just entered her head, she hurried to the police-station in the Rue de Cléry, while M. Brunois was stumbling wildly down the blind alley.

VII

He kept on running, running between the double line of water-casks that made the narrow alley still narrower, to the astonishment of the waiters rinsing out the wine-bottles in the backyards, and to the accompaniment of shrill laughter that issued from half-open windows, where women in pink or blue kimonos leaned out, the make-up on their faces under their red mops of hair, horribly obvious by daylight.

He went on running, lost, distraught, panting for breath, stumbling into a wall or a cart or a passer-by as he went, so unspeakable was the fear with which the sight of that horrible room had filled him, so great was his desire to put as much distance as he could, at all costs, between it and himself.

VIII

Poor unfortunate M. Brunois, so easy-going, peaceable and gentle, rather a dreamer because of his many leisure hours, rather romantic and subtle because of the detective stories he had read in comfort in the evenings —so long as the crime in the Rue des Filles-Dieu had remained unreal for him, in spite of its reality, so long as it had no more substance than the fiction of Emile

Gaboriau and M. Jules Mary, it had interested him without disturbing him;—it had amused him. It had been a distraction, affording him considerable satisfaction in his monotonous life, to play the part of one who might rise up at a given moment and say to the police and the judge: "You're all idiots! What you haven't been able to discover, I've discovered—and it isn't my profession either!" After which he would withdraw, proud and dignified, amongst gasps of stupefaction and congratulations, and he would be sought out so that he might be properly recompensed, and he would be offered posts where he might exercise for the public good and his own glory his almost-miraculous powers of intuition. To sum up, the whole affair had been a harmless way of passing the time, and had given him some interest in life; it had been a guessing game, a rebus to be solved, whose reward would no doubt be very much the same as the triumph of that Oedipus who had won the first prize in the "game and pastimes" competition, and who had received a weekly supplement.

But now he had seen the crime at close quarters; he had seen the horrible room in the red shadow of its curtains. And it was no longer a chapter in a novel, it was no longer an innocent riddle—it was actual murder, real blood, living and tangible horror that had almost touched him. And so he had fled, was still fleeing, in a terror like that of a guilty man who had been led to the scene of his crime, in an even wilder terror, perhaps, for

a man who has been a murderer must be more or less accustomed to see red on the walls and on the table-cloth, while a guileless, gently-dispositioned person like himself, so easily moved to pity, so much in dread of any form of cruelty (he would rather have died of hunger in some back yard than throttle a chicken)—for him, the sight of that room, reeking with murder, had been unspeakable. How senseless he had been to read the *Petit Journal,* how wise he would have been to have let himself be guided by his wife's advice.

He ran, he panted, he perspired, sure that he was going to be seriously ill. It had all come because he had insisted on following the trail, like a plain-clothes detective. As if murders were any concern of his. Oh God, that room, that room! He could not keep his mind from the picture of the man going in, of the man hurling himself into the onslaught, of the man raising the knife and striking . . . He was running, running, running, panting, perspiring . . .

At the end of an alley there were some muddy excavations, strewn with bits of wood, rubble and broken stones, the site of interrupted building activities; in front of an unfinished wall, a heap of sand was mounded up and hollowed out like a miniature crater caked by a plastery mass of cold lime.

Passing in front of this sand-heap, M. Brunois was tempted to take off his coat and throw it down.

What? What was this? His coat? Take it off? Throw it down . . . there? . . .

Yes, because running had made him so hot . . .

But what wouldn't Aurélie have said? She'd made enough fuss about that other coat, the one that had been lost on the night he had dined with Richond, and that he had been obliged to replace immediately with another from the shop.

He had stopped running because of the passers-by who were now more numerous and better dressed; he had emerged from the alleys and by-ways into the neighbouring quarter, which was busy and crowded, but not sordid.

But his hurried and jerky steps, as though he were keeping his impulse to run within bounds, tired him scarcely less than his erstwhile mad rush.

His chest rose and fell, like that of an actor in a melodrama, and with a fixed and haggard look, he saw that dreadful room once more, and big beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, beneath his temples, beneath his eyes . . .

He neared a wall fountain. He approached it, stretched out his open palms, washed them in the trickling water, bathed his face, and experienced that delicious coolness which cleanses . . . and calms . . .

What a curious notion that was, to be sure. Does a respectable person like himself usually wash in the open streets? Of all the extraordinary things that had hap-

pened to him, this was the most extraordinary of all. Good gracious, you don't wash at a public fountain when you're a respectable person with a decent income. That sort of thing's all right for homeless vagabonds and loafers who have spent the night on benches . . . or for blood-smeared murderers who long to wash away their guilt . . . Ah! Perhaps the Rue des Filles-Dieu murderer had washed at this very fountain? Even as he had, perhaps, thrown his coat on the heap of sand among the stony tracks of the half-built house . . .

Once more, M. Brunois could not help admiring the really overwhelming cleverness through whose medium he overtook, guessed and repeated every act of the criminal, and his pride advised him to continue an investigation which he was so obviously destined to carry to a conclusion.

But the sight of the crime-soaked room had impressed him too cruelly to allow him to continue an adventure which would, no doubt, have even worse horrors in store for him.

Besides, the fresh water had cooled him down; now he was walking with even step, not too quickly. He saw that he was in the Rue d'Aboukir, near the boulevard where he would find a cabstand.

He breathed freely and once more became self-possessed. No, no, a thousand times no! He would not lay himself out to the utmost to aid the course of justice. It was all the same to him whether they found

the murderer or whether they didn't. He had slipped back again to the gentle jog-trot of every day life. Ouf! That was over. He straightened his hair, which had become disordered in his flight, fastened up his coat, his new coat, and reached the boulevard, no different in appearance from the people strolling there, climbed into a cab, gave his address, remained pensive during the journey in a somnolent state almost devoid of thought (the usual condition after any violent emotion), reached home, and was a little confused when Madame Aurélie asked him: "Well, wasn't there a dinner for the mourners, then?"

However, remembering the excuse he had given for his early morning sortie, he soon recovered.

"No. After the burial we all went away."

And with that, he took off his best things, slipped on a dressing-gown, and sat down to the table on which the daily woman had just placed an omelette.

The chirping of the canaries, the scent of the roses, and the fragrance of the garden came through the window open to the sunlight. Oh, how good it was to be at home; he wouldn't start gadding about again after affairs that were no concern of his.

IX

Like an animal that retreats into its den, and draws into the shadow, never to venture out again, M. Brunois

withdrew into his safe and simple life, into his usual domestic self. He would desist in future from acting too knowingly, from wanting to be a Lecocq. That kind of entertainment was a little too overpowering in its emotional surprises. To every man his calling—his was to get up late, enjoy a good breakfast, have a rest, loaf away an hour, an hour and a half, on the outlying boulevards to put an edge to his appetite, to take a hand at cards with his wife, or to play dominoes with his friends of the Café Guerbois, and go to bed sharp on the stroke of ten with a "Good-night, Aurélie, sleep well", already half asleep himself.

In order to make sure that his stupid caprice should not take possession of him again, M. Brunois forbade the daily woman to bring the *Petit Journal*. Thus it happened that five or six days after he had become re-absorbed in his customary existence, he had lost all interest in the mysterious crime that had so pre-occupied him. He would not even have crossed the road to learn the name of the actual murderer, and he would soon have completely forgotten that an unfortunate woman had been killed in the Rue des Filles-Dieu. Moreover, he had never been better in health, had never rejoiced in such a hearty appetite. "Charles, Charles you're getting quite a corporation!"—thus Madame Aurélie—and with his mouth open he slept placidly and dreamlessly, as the even rhythm of his breathing showed, for twelve hours on end, the round of the clock.

One night, he suddenly sat bolt upright. In a corner of the room, as though in a hollow of the wall, the wick of the night-light spluttered redly above a rounded shadow, and died out like the flickering eye of a tormented screech-owl; and, his elbow on his knee, his chin on his wrist, his gaze towards the empty darkness and solitude, he muttered:

"The extraordinary thing is that such a crime could have been committed by a peace-loving man, a man of a gentle, decent and timorous disposition. What would be quite in accordance with a brutal, good-for-nothing used to knife-play is out of keeping with a respectable citizen. And yet—that's been proved, that's been established—the murderer *is* such a man. What could have driven him to a crime so alien to his nature, to his type? Drunk? Yes, of course he was drunk, but although drink may put queer ideas into a good fellow's head, ideas of "getting off", it doesn't put into his head a fierce desire to cut somebody's throat, to commit a bloody murder. I admit that in room 13 there must have been a quarrel between the Big Jewess's sister and the visitor, but that's no reason why he should hurl himself on her, strike her once in the throat and twice in the breast. What could have possessed him? What could have filled him with such latent rage that it only needed a spark to flare out? That's what needs explaining. Come, let me think. Somebody must surely have annoyed or crossed him in the course of the evening. I'm positive of that. But where? Who?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I've got it! I've got it! How stupid not to have thought of it earlier. He had dined at a restaurant with friends, or a friend—that's also been proved and established—on the occasion of some successful business affair, or some journey. Well, after the dessert, there's an argument. He, *that other,* had not been bad-tempered, he had only wanted his joke; but ill-timed jests and words that both stung and irritated, had worked him into a rage. Though you are the easiest-going man alive, you lose patience in the long run if you are tried too much; you can't contain yourself. Every day you meet them—the sort of people who, though they're so gentle they wouldn't harm a fly, mustn't be worked up. Grandfather was like that. Now everything's clear—the discussion became a dispute. There were angry words, insults, perhaps an interchange of blows across the plates and glasses. Possibly after that the man who had been so infuriated, dashed to his feet in a blind rage, and seized from the table a bottle, a decanter . . . or a knife . . ."

M. Brunois started.

"A knife, a knife! One of those small, very slender and sharp-pointed knives they have in restaurants . . . the very knife with which later on he wounded and killed the sister of the Big Jewess. The doctor stated that the wounds appeared to have been inflicted by a very slender, very sharp-pointed knife; and why should

the murderer, a law-abiding citizen who certainly never went out armed, have such a weapon on him if he had not taken it from the restaurant table, if he hadn't carried it away, inadvertently, no doubt, when he hurriedly left his friend. For fear that if he stayed any longer, he might strike an unlucky blow?"

Perspiring, M. Brunois felt his heart beat violently, so strongly was he affected by his vivid reconstruction of the preliminaries to the crime, so elated was he at his own perspicacity.

He controlled himself and succeeded in not moving. He mustn't wake Aurélie, asleep at his side. He went on speaking, or rather, thinking, his lips moving soundlessly.

"And after that? After he left the restaurant, what did he do? Oh, that's not very hard to guess. Soothed by the fresh air, the gay glitter of the still-lighted shops (it couldn't have been later than nine or half-past, as the crime was committed at ten o'clock), thankful, moreover, that he had done his friend no injury, he began to stroll along the streets, looking at the shop-windows and making signs to the shop-girls. He was still furious, of course,—those black rages aren't over so quickly—but his fury was now mingled with a softer emotion; it teased and tickled him, he wanted to laugh. Burgundy was the devil, ha, ha, ha,—and presently, exhilarated by the wine and the pretty grimaces of the shop-girls behind the glass windows, he left the wide, well-lit, crowded

streets, and buried himself in an obscure neighbourhood where, in the darkness and solitude and mystery, there was a chance of a likely encounter, a pleasant encounter, and so, in a corner, he finds Félicie Bonheur, and she will not go in with him because Eudoxe is waiting for her, but she shows him the hotel in Rue des Filles-Dieu, tells him the number of a room where he will find another woman, much younger and prettier than herself, and so he goes to the hotel, passing the untenanted lodge, and he climbs up the stair, and he sees 13 on the door in the passage, and with a song on his lips he goes into the room, into the room, the room!"

M. Brunois had not only thought the last words, he had spoken, almost shouted them.

"E-eh, what is it, what's the matter with you?"

Half-awake, Madame Aurélie was speaking, raising herself towards him.

"Nothing. I turned over, that's all. I woke you up; go to sleep again, my dear."

She put her head on the pillow and snored very softly.

With clenched teeth, he went on: "Yes, he went in. He went in singing, with the knife in his pocket, the knife . . . and then . . ."

He did not finish.

"Then . . . then . . ."

He had lost the thread, he felt himself unable to guess why, having once entered the room, the man should have murdered its occupant. You are drunk, you are jolly,

given him a name, a plain fact that could not be deduced from anything else . . .

But he smiled . . . After all, he wasn't a magician or a clairvoyant. He was no more than an intelligent man, clear-sighted and skilled in drawing inferences from the slightest indications. If he had thought of the name Françoise, it was simply because he had read in the papers that the clothes of the dead woman had been marked with the initials F.B. This dead woman (Bonheur, but not Félicie) must either be called Flora, Francine—or Françoise, most likely Françoise—a sober kind of name, and she wasn't a gay sort, but in a shop or in service in some middle-class household.

He continued his train of thought, his forehead between his hands, his eyes open in the blackness (for the night-light had just gone out), and revelations crowded upon him.

The drunken man struck Françoise in the neck and breast with the small pointed knife, which he drew out, reddened. She, not yet dead, approached the window, screaming, shrieking, broke the glass with her fist, screaming, screaming, pushed it open, threw herself out, while the murderer, distraught, prepared to strike again if anyone intercepted his flight, tumbled down the stairs (just as he had done the other day), did not reach the road, escaped by the narrow uncovered passage, hurled himself into the blind alley, ran, ran between the water-casks, panted, perspired, could go no further, stopped,

out of breath, saw in a ray of moonlight blood on his sleeves and his buttons, noticed at the same time at the end of an alley bits of wood, rubble and broken stones in some muddy excavations, a building-site, where a heap of sand in front of a half-finished wall was rounded up and hollowed out like a kind of miniature crater in which lime was still smoking; took off, or rather, snatched off, his bloody coat, his tell-tale coat, and threw it onto the smoking lime which would burn it, destroy it; stamped it down in blind fury with his feet . . .

M. Brunois was neither an idiot nor a fool, and he was not, on the whole, so carried away as to over-rate himself. He conceived quite rationally that if, at this peaceful hour, lying in bed beside his wife, the thought had come to him that the murderer, distracted by his deed, had passed before the building-site, had stopped by the sand-heap, had there hidden his bloody overcoat, it was because he himself had, the other day, stopped at the same spot, and had been tempted on account of the heat to take off his coat. Yes, of course, this was obviously why he had imagined all that.

But although this imagined proceeding had sprung from causes entirely unconnected with the crime, that did not imply that it was not entirely a probable proceeding in connection with the crime. Quite the reverse.

Why had he, Brunois,—after the horror of the glimpsed room—fled by the blind alley and not by the road? Was it not to avoid passing the lodge where the

hot lime—now cooled down—must have corroded, burnt up, consumed, so to speak, the cloth of the coat . . . yet possibly not entirely; there must be a few ashes, a few rags of the stuff, perhaps, a few feathery, greyish shreds; and those fragments, even if he had to dig in the lime with his fingers, he meant to find . . . if they existed. But in the day-time, there were people passing. They would see him near the sand-heap, reaching out his hands, burying his fingers in the cracks . . . they would wonder . . .

The livid light of morning shed wavering rays through the wind-shaken blinds onto the face of the clock. Four o'clock—Madame Aurélie was a sound sleeper who never woke till broad daylight. He would just have time to go to the building-site near the *impasse* St. Spire. Noiselessly, and very cautiously, he stretched one leg out of the sheets, pulled himself up, his feet on the bed-rail, groped for his clothes, found them, and, holding his breath, began to dress.

X

Soaked with rain, the abandoned building-site with its scattered stones, and its area broken here and there by shadowed pits, looked like a ruined necropolis in the silence and solitude of the livid dawn; the half-finished walls seemed to be the rigid silhouettes of time-old

ghosts who had risen from the excavations and had been petrified there by very fear of themselves; beams of wood lying full length bridged over the gaping hollows; the flight of a cat, slinking out of sight, woke the thought of some treacherous hyena, the carrion devourer of bones and flesh; and between the clustered shadows of the neighbouring houses, the whole place had an aspect of desolation and ghastly melancholy.

There was a noise of stones trampled underfoot. Stooping, with his hand over his eyes, M. Brunois appeared, a dense black apparition in the pale light. Occasionally he turned his head to see if he were being followed. What would he have replied if someone had risen up, a night-watchman of the building-site, or a police-constable, and had suddenly asked him: "What are you doing here?" But there was no one, the place was like a deserted cemetery under the waning night. The nocturnal prowler kept on walking, finding his way, knowing where he was going. He saw the heap of sand, rounded and hollowed out like a miniature crater. Over it the dreary whiteness of the plaster had flowed in a smooth stream, cracking in places. With another backward glance—no-one was following him, watching him —M. Brunois knelt down (sinking waist-high in the damp and treacherous sand), and craning his neck, he stuck his nails into the cracks of the hardened lime, and began to search for the remains of the coat. But the irregular gaps, bristling with sharp ridges that grazed

his skin, were so small that he could not insert the whole of his hand. By means of a key which he took from his pocket he was forced to scrape the edges and enlarge the crevice, till he finally succeeded in scraping away a quite considerable mass of whitish substance, beneath which his nails scratched at a crisper layer of lime.

But he found nothing, not a fragment, not a shred of stuff, absolutely nothing.

He was terribly depressed. So he had been mistaken in supposing that the murderer had buried his bloody coat here. If so, all his other theories, so patiently and logically founded on facts observed with such subtle skill, were also valueless. At this thought his depression increased. It would be horrible to realise that at every step of his minute investigations he had been at fault. What a downfall! How humiliating? No, he couldn't possibly be wrong. And in an access of rage, he tore up here, there and everywhere, now with his fists and now with the key, the mass of lime.

Something soft, light and pliable slipped between his fingers. He struck his whole hand in more deeply, and withdrew it full of a kind of greyish, powdery, flaky substance. It was the remains of the material. Yes, yes, it was the remains of the coat which had lain buried for several days. Stooping once more over the widened crack, he saw, not in the chalky pallor, but a little further to the left in the sand itself, a fragment with a button attached to it that the calcinating lime had

not been able to reach. It was indisputably a piece of the murderer's coat. He picked it up and stood on the sand-heap, swelling with triumph, and at the risk of waking the sleepers behind the neighbouring windows, he brandished his arms in the air and uttered a shout of victory.

XI

When, once more in bed beside his still sleeping wife, M. Brunois woke towards nine in the morning, his first thought was to go at once to the police-court, and to share the truly miraculous fruits of his investigations with the judge. Aha, now he really *had* proofs. The little bit of cloth, which he had put under his pillow, which he touched with his hand, was no idle fancy, but confirmed to the utmost all his theories. He swelled with pride and complacency as he thought of the magistrate's amazement, and the praise with which he would be loaded. And what about his wife who had jeered at him from the beginning? She would have to bow down to him as well, she would have to acknowledge the super-intelligence that he had displayed. He had a good mind to tell her at once . . .

On second thoughts, no. He would not at present speak to either his wife or the magistrate. Certainly his task, worthy of the highest enconiums, was nearly finished. But only *nearly* finished. He had reconstructed

all the preliminaries of the crime, he knew the smallest details of the crime, he even knew the name of the murdered woman; but he did not know the murderer.

Though he knew what sort of man he was, he did not know *who* he was, or *where* he was. To deserve admiration to the utmost, he must find that out. He would find it out.

Scarcely was he up than much to his wife's surprise, he shut himself up in the drawing-room. "What's up with him now?" she asked herself. "He's been quite all right for the last few days, now something's got hold of him again. Whatever can it be?" She peered at him through the keyhole, and saw that he was writing. As a matter of fact, he was setting out a report in which he had detailed minutely every occurrence connected with his inquiries. This took him at least two hours; when he had written the last line, he put the paper in his pocket, asked for some breakfast, bolted it at a great rate, without a word to Madame Aurélie who, astonished and alarmed, dared not say a word, but stared at him open-mouthed. After which, he went out without even saying where he was going.

He was going to the Rue des Filles-Dieu.

He was fully aware of the rash but overwhelming desire which forces criminals to revisit the scene or the vicinity of their crimes. His idea was to take up a position in some café or estaminet quite close to No. 56, where he could watch the passers-by, and he was sure

—so clear a picture had he formed of the man who must be the murderer—that if *he* dared to prowl about this spot, he was bound to recognise him.

There happened to be—he remembered—at the corner of the road opposite the hotel, a red-fronted estaminet with an imposing bar, whose intricate arrangements looked like the knotted entrails of a disembowelled brass dragon, and about whose crimson façade mirrors had been placed, reflecting the pavements, the road and the passers-by.

M. Brunois seated himself at a small round table inside the estaminet, almost at the door, ordered a glass of sherry, and waited, his eyes glued on the hotel on the opposite side of the street. Nobody could either go in or out of it without being seen by him.

The first afternoon passed without incident. The landlord of the estaminet, after some surprise at his persistent presence, no longer heeded it, thinking no doubt that his visitor was some supervisor of public morals, making notes of the women of the neighbourhood. No matter of outside interest.

For a minute M. Brunois' attention was drawn to a rather badly-dressed individual with a mean face, an untidy beard, a round hat and dirty overcoat, who passed two or three times in front of No. 56, and who directed a stealthy glance in the direction of the estaminet. This person, with his sly and sordid look, seemed not unfamiliar to M. Brunois. But he was not by any

possible chance the murderer. No, no, the murderer was quite different. A worthy citizen, rather fat, and paunchy.

No luck to-day, and the observer withdrew, rather sulkily.

But he returned the next day, and every day after that for a week. Without results. Nobody passed who resembled M. Brunois' preconceived picture of the murderer.

Towards the close of the eighth afternoon, an idea, which should have occurred sooner, came to him. If the guilty man was wandering at large about the neighbourhood, he must have had the thought of entering the estaminet so that he could sit at his ease and survey the sordid house he had stained with blood. But the presence of a stranger seated near the door was enough to make him suspicious and drive him away. M. Brunois realised that his observation post was useless, and made up his mind to look for another, further away, more secluded and less conspicuous.

He paid for his drink, got up, opened the door, crossed the road slantwise, turned back at the sound of rapid footsteps, the footsteps of someone who is running . . . and in one of the tall glasses of the crimson façade he saw the profile, the swiftly-vanishing reflection of a man . . . of a man who was—who was—the murderer!

Oh, M. Brunois was sure he could not be mistaken.

The man who had appeared and disappeared in the mirror was the murderer himself, and he hurled himself towards the estaminet where the man, after he had passed the mirror, must have entered. No, the place was empty. On the contrary, the man must certainly have turned the corner and vanished into the alley. M. Brunois dashed in that direction—the alley was deserted. Had the criminal escaped, after all? Full of anger, M. Brunois stamped his foot, bit his nails, alone in the alley, quite alone . . .

But at least he had seen the murderer, and even though his reflected face in the glass had been swiftly obliterated, his quick eye had visualised every feature, the whole aspect of the man down to the smallest detail —yes, down to the smallest detail—and hurriedly he went back, anxious to add the description of the murderer to his already minute and convincing report.

XII

On Monday, September 15th, 188-, at eleven o'clock in the morning, M. Brunois presented himself at the entrance of the Palais de Justice, was directed by a guard standing on duty near the gate, went towards the left, and climbed a wide staircase which turned at right angles.

Very dignified and haughty, M. Brunois appeared

perfectly happy. He was evidently forcing himself to maintain a serious demeanour, a moderate carriage suitable to a person who is about to carry out some exceedingly solemn mission; but his secret elation betrayed itself by his beatifically-open mouth and his sparkling eyes.

He went up, looking straight in front of him; he never noticed that a mean-faced man with an untidy beard and a dirty overcoat was following him with an expression of amazement.

He reached the great corridor where witnesses and accused are seated on wooden benches between the doors of the examining magistrates' courts, and going up to a uniformed official who was standing behind a sort of pulpit, he asked:

"Can I see M. Legrandin, the examining magistrate?"

"Have you got a summons?"

"No, here's my card." He handed it over, and added: "You can tell him I've come about that business in the Rue des Filles-Dieu." M. Brunois' manner and accent were almost regal.

"Very good, sir," said the official, and crossing the corridor, he pushed open a door, disappeared, and came back almost immediately.

M. Brunois at that moment was so convinced of his own importance that he took it quite as a matter of course to be received immediately, even though he had no appointment . . . Every door must open without

delay to the man who had come to assist justice in its course of retribution.

He went in.

He bowed with rather condescending politeness to the judge, who had risen, and to the clerk of the court, who had not moved. He did not notice that M. Legrandin's face betrayed the most profound astonishment, nor did he notice that he was not invited to sit down.

"Monsieur," said the judge, "you have come to . . . to . . .?"

"I have come," said M. Brunois, "to bring you the fullest, the most complete and conclusive details of the crime in the Rue des Filles-Dieu."

Deliberately he drew the papers from his pocket, unfolded them, and in a loud and ringing voice, with magisterial accents, he began to read his report, while M. Legrandin and the clerk exchanged stupefied glances.

The report related with minute particulars the dinner of the murderer-to-be at the restaurant with his friend, his intoxication, the dispute, the purloined knife, the stroll before the still-lit shops, the meeting with Félicie Bonheur in a dark corner, her advice to go to No. 56, Room 13, where there was a young person, her own sister, called Françoise Bonheur, the withdrawal of Félicie (if the latter had not reappeared since the crime it was obviously because, having been partly responsible, she feared to be implicated), the murderer's arrival at the house, his ascent of the staircase with a song on his

lips, his entry into the room, the resistance of Françoise Bonheur, the violent quarrel, the three wounds, one in the neck, two in the breast, the dying girl opening the window and throwing herself into the road, the flight of the murderer along the *impasse* St. Spire, the bloody overcoat hidden under the smoking lime . . .

At this juncture, M. Brunois stopped reading; he drew from his fob a fragment of cloth with a button attached to it, and said:

". . . the bloody coat, of which this is the only piece I was able to find."

And triumphantly, he looked at the magistrate and the clerk—at the spectacle of justice assisted and overcome by himself.

After a moment's silence, during which he stared the speaker out of countenance, M. Legrandin said:

"Quite so; most of the facts you have set out have already been officially confirmed . . ."

M. Brunois winced. He had not read the papers for many days; so it seemed that after having followed false trails for a considerable time, the police had finally got on the scent. It displeased him.

However, the judge added: "But many facts, which we were not aware of, and which you have given us to-day, are absolutely credible."

M. Brunois grew calmer. Come, the value of his investigations was being recognised. It was less than he had hoped, but still it was something. And he smiled.

"But have you any detailed description of the murderer himself?" asked the judge. "Do you know his name?"

M. Brunois went on smiling. "His name? Well, I must confess I don't know his name. But I have his description, as detailed, as exact as possible."

"His description?"

"Yes, your worship."

And, his whole face radiant with victory, M. Brunois recited his report; there was no need to read it, he knew it by heart:

"The murderer," he said, "is a man of 44 to 45 years of age; he is rather stout, without being obese; he dresses, not fashionably, but very neatly, in a black overcoat; he wears a top hat. He is going grey, he has very large, prominent blue eyes, and thick lips; his whole appearance suggests gentleness, kind-heartedness, a peaceful and secure existence. Distinguishing mark: near the left nostril is a mole, or rather, a wart with rather thick hairs . . ."

Abruptly the judge said: "Unhappy man, you are describing yourself!"

"Myself?"

M. Brunois would have fallen to the floor if, as he swayed, he had not struck a chair into which he sank with folded arms. He sat there, his face blank, his eyes filled with madness.

He understood, he understood.

After the judge's hideously revealing words, his mind had become like a room which, endowed with consciousness, has its dense darkness suddenly illumined by a fierce light, and sees itself in all its entirety with everything that it contains.

Everything, everything, he understood everything. *He* had committed the crime! Yes, he had done it while he was drunk, after the dinner with Richond; then he had forgotten it, absolutely forgotten it. No, not absolutely forgotten it, since, without knowing why, he had been absorbed by the crime in the Rue des Filles-Dieu. And what, during his investigations, he had taken to be discoveries due to his subtlety, was nothing more than his sub-conscious recollection of the details of his crime, the details of his flight! And finally, it was his own image in the estaminet mirror that had led him to describe the murderer.

And suddenly—while the judge, having rung, had summoned a police-sergeant, who was followed by the mean-faced detective with the untidy beard—M. Brunois broke into desperate sobbing; poor man, so gentle, so kind, so full of self-horror, he was thinking of his wife, and of the assizes, and of the verdict, and of the scaffold; and he went on sobbing and sobbing with heavy sobs, not daring to hope that a recommendation to mercy would spare him death or transportation . . .

He did, however, benefit from a recommendation to mercy, thanks to the report of the specialist who held

him to be mentally irresponsible for his actions, less on account of his intoxication on the night of the murder than because of the state of mind that subsequently led him to be his own betrayer and accuser. Thanks also to the defence by Maître Flor Delestang, an admirable defence, even though somewhat inclined to be pedantic, since the speaker several times referred to his client as the " Heautonparateroumenos."*

* Self-accuser.

FINIS

" From Dr. Elysee Beuriot's clear, concise and conclusive report, which, as has been seen, proved irresponsibility, it was evident that the accused's acquittal was no longer in doubt. M. Flor Delestang's pleading could have been dispensed with. But in that event, we should have lost a remarkable piece of oratory. Though it was rather marred in places by pedantry (carried away by his classical recollections, the defending counsel went so far as to call his client the " heautonparateroumenos " (self-accuser), his defence was one of the finest that has ever been heard.—*Extract from the Gazette des Tribunaux, Jan. 17, 188-.*

A WAYSIDE VILLAGE

A WAYSIDE VILLAGE

THE following history—note that I say *history,* and not story—I have already intended writing twenty times, and twenty times I have been prevented from carrying out my intention by the interruption of work from one cause or another, by the intervention of some more pressing inspiration, or by a dozen different reasons. Moreover, several circumstances not irrelevant to the foregoing interruptions (and of which I shall write later) have made me believe that some mysterious Will, manifesting itself in these various hindrances, is opposed to this history being made known. Obviously an absurd supposition. What Will? It could only be super-human since it operates through chance, and to believe, unless one were out of one's senses, that a Being, or Beings, of finer substance than man, could have any interest whatever in keeping secret, or only known to a few, an authenticated incident (unless for an hour a common insanity possessed eight people) is rather too ridiculous. Besides, there was nothing serious or solemn about this particular incident that could class it as a wonder

worthy of the name, and its extraordinary unreality is hardly sufficient to redeem it from mediocrity and futility . . .

But, then, why is it that every one of those eight people who on that night were gathered together, why is it that every one of them has been afraid or unable to prove to himself whether this incident were nightmare or actuality? Why did they all forbear to mention it to each other on the following day, and why do I feel after such a lapse of time (for twenty-three years have trickled away since that night) why am I *certain* that I shall disturb them profoundly, shake them to the soul by recalling to them an episode at first productive of so much merriment that it exhausted them with uncontrollable laughter? Why, if I ask them for their testimony, will they try to evade a direct answer, stammering out with a smile that they can't say yes or no—just as they would reply if some tactless person mentioned something of no particular importance but of which, nevertheless, it would be better not to speak. And why have I never succeeded in putting this episode on paper —it is no more than an episode—and why even to-day, now that I have scrawled the first few lines, do I still feel uncertain of ever coming to the end?

I shall write rapidly, not bothering about style; I shall not move from my writing-table to reach for a cigar, or stop to cast a glance at my favourite bookshelf. I shall not even read over what I have written. I am like

a traveller who hastens because he is not sure of his way . . .

I

Munich before the War.* It was about nine-o'clock, possibly a little later. But it was certainly not yet ten-o'clock. We were coming out of the theatre where Wagner's "Walkyrie" had been given for the first time. As I have said, we were a little group of eight—an already-distinguished French Composer; a judge recently initiated into Grand Opera, of which he had become an ardent devotee; a woman, a noted singer, one of the leading lights of the French School; a Hungarian Kappelmeister who was to conduct "Die Meistersinger" at Bayreuth; an Austrian dilettante, a friend of Wagner's, who had speedily become ours; the subtle and word-gifted Villiers de l'Isle Adam;† another less-known French poet; and last and least, myself. Note that we had dined before going to the theatre—that's to say, about four hours previously—so that the idea of our having been put in a state of mind to credit the incredible by a few glasses of wine can be discounted. Our only intoxication proceeded from the sublime music we had just heard. We were filled with calm, joyful, serene ecstasy. Not to lose, among noisy crowds, the exaltation born of Wagner's music, we decided not to

* The Franco-German War of 1870. † See Introduction.

go to the Café de L'Opera, adjoining the theatre, where we usually supped, and so skirted the Maximilianstrasse, wide and far-reaching, which was already silent between the lighted clamour of the cafés.

At the extreme end of the Maximilianstrasse, a broad bridge with wide arches spanned the almost-dried-up river; small, slimy pools scarcely rippled between sandy eyots, and beneath the first arch, the river was dammed up, forming a canal with a swift and glistening current. We strolled on the bridge, talking enthusiastically, and made our way towards the then unfinished statue on the further bank—of rose-coloured granite, if my memory is correct, and which had a smiling look in the moonlight.

Now on the bridge something happened. Something absurd and extraordinary. It was what might be called a comic miracle. And why, after all, should not the supernatural be occasionally comic? Why shouldn't the uncanny sometimes wish to assume a humorous aspect? Why, being laughable, should a miracle be less terrifying, less of a miracle? But man is so convinced that the super-human never loses its solemnity that he is very little in awe of what amuses him.

Yet a shiver ran down my spine because of that incident on the bridge, and it seemed to me in the light of the street-lamps that uneasy smiles twitched at the lips of my companions . . .

A gust of wind had blown away the hat—a top hat—

of the French composer who happened to be walking beside me, talking away in great good spirits. At that time he was given to spontaneous bursts of animal spirits, the mischievous glee of a schoolboy playing truant. He burst out laughing as his hat flew away, and while we too were all laughing at the small incident, he shouted: "Wait! Wait!"

He had glimpsed in an opening of the parapet a narrow flight of stone steps that led down to the practically dry river-bed.

"I'm going to fetch my hat."

He vanished, and we waited for him, already deep again in conversation.

A man who had ascended the bridge by another flight of stairs, on the further side, came up to us and holding out something round and black which we could scarcely distinguish in the semi-darkness, said *in French*:

"Gentlemen, here is the hat."

We supposed he was a lock-keeper, or something of the kind, who, having seen our friend's hat blow away, had hurried to retrieve it in the hope of some trifling tip. But no, he went away without asking for anything, having bidden us good-night. He had given the hat to me; I called to the composer who must be still scrabbling about in the mud:

"Come on up! Come along, we've got your . . ."

I never finished. Our friend had just reappeared. Seven cries of astonishment greeted him. For on his

head was his hat, which he had found, so he told us, at the foot of an arch, spotted with mud, but anyway, his own hat! And as I raised my arms in amazement, a second gust of wind blew away the other hat, the hat that I was holding in my hands, the hat that the vanished stranger had brought us;—where it went, we never discovered.

It was possible, of course,—for the mutations of chance are infinite—it was possible that two top hats had been blown simultaneously into the river-bed, and that a stranger had goodnaturedly picked up one and brought it to us while our friend was picking up the other; none the less, it must be allowed that there was something rather uncanny in this coincidence, and if its grotesquences, to which was added, perhaps, our instinctive desire not to read too much into it (since we all carry in ourselves a dread of the unexplainable) had not made us laugh hysterically, I believe that not even the most sceptical of us could have helped being strangely affected. As for myself, I have always held that this strange "miracle", explainable or otherwise, amazing, anyhow, was sent by destiny or a particular fate to pave the way for the far more extraordinary happening that was to befall us that evening; it was sent that we might be in a fit state of mind to *endure* the other incident, that was likewise laughable and childish, and yet decidedly miraculous, that incident whose reality or unreality not one of us has ever been

able, or has dared to ascertain, and about which, until now, I have found it impossible to write.

But I must write about it, I intend to write about it, and I swear that I will write the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; those who were present at the time, who saw what I saw, touched what I touched, will bear me witness . . .

II

Still shaken by rather nervous laughter, we had come to the other end of the bridge. We turned to the left, and walked along the bank of the parched river where here and there occasionally slimy pools reflected the moon. Having almost forgotten the adventure of the two hats, we were praising in ardent terms, with absolute panegyrics of enthusiasm and adoration, the incomparable masterpiece we had just heard, and with which we were still thrilling. The beautiful singer who honoured us with her company uttered in the starry silence the wildly-piercing cry of the Walkyries riding their steeds across the fiery clouds. But suddenly one of us,—it was the French composer . . .

Someone is ringing at my door. Who can it be? Oh yes, it's seven o'clock, the friends I invited to dine with me have arrived. I must stop writing and join them. Once again, it's impossible for me to continue. Why? Why? Yet I've made up my mind that I *will* continue,

that this incident must be written; I shall finish it to-morrow, or the day after, if I can . . .

III

I said that I would finish this "story". I will finish it. But not without difficulty. The gathering storm weighs on my brain. Beneath the skin of my temples where the veins are swelling, there is an insistent throbbing like a blacksmith hammering on an anvil with Cyclopean strength, and the rapid stroke of an insect's antennae. My head feels as though it must fall on the table, fall, twirl, spin, roll out of the window and bounce on the cobbles below. How delicious it would be to stretch myself out, a pillow behind my neck, my eyes half-closed to the light, my lips parted to inhale some cool scent; how pleasant it would be if I could just set down in a lazily care-free mood some tale that would neither weary you nor me. But I have sworn to carry out my design. I will tell you what happened near the road by the arid river's edge. I *will* not believe that this weight on my forehead, this fever that makes the pen in my hand tremble, this terrifying lack of concentration before the blank page which seems to lengthen out and lengthen out, are brought about by some mysterious Will, by a Will that is opposed to the coming-to-light of the incident that occurred that night. I have already stated that I

did not believe in the existence of such a Will; I still affirm it. I put it to you, what difference can it make to a super-human intelligence whether anything so futile, so little significant be related or not? Yet ordinarily at this time of day I am in the right mood for work, my head is clear, my hand steady. It is curious that precisely to-day, precisely at the moment when I am about to write the long-projected history, I am suddenly filled with weakness, while a sick headache throbs like a blacksmith's hammer-strokes beneath the skin of my temples, till I long, not to write or to think, but to sleep . . .

IV

I *will* write. I have taken every precaution not to be disturbed. The doors of my room are locked and double-locked. My man has orders not to admit anyone who may ring. There are enough cigars in the Japanese cabinet, so I shall not have to interrupt myself to fetch more. Matches? Yes, within reach, near the ink-stand. I shall write, I intend to write, I am writing . . .

How far had I got? I don't remember. Yet usually I pride myself justly on my memory which was always extremely quick and correct. If I leave a sentence unfinished one day, I have been able to complete it, without turning back, on the next. But to-day, I can't remember at all.

The instalment I wrote last week is on the piano. I kept it, and put it there close to the table. I thought I might possibly need it. I need only stretch out my hand. But I don't stretch out my hand. Just see how one yields to childishness at times. One movement would be enough. I shan't make that movement.

Why? Because I'm afraid that the *Echo de Paris* just over there may not be the number I want. It might be, possibly it might be, a back-number. What would that prove? Nothing, obviously, or at any rate, nothing much except that I have made a mistake, that I thought I saw my story when I saw nothing of the kind. Such mistakes occur every day, even when one is very much on the *qui vive,* even when one has taken every care that no mistake shall occur, as I have taken every care to-day. It would really prove nothing if some mischievous spirit ever on the alert had replaced the paper in which I wrote the first chapters of this history by quite another paper. No, decidedly, that would prove nothing . . . so I will reach out my hand, take the paper, and re-read my beginning . . . no, it's unnecessary because after all I can remember where I left off . . .

V

We had left the bridge where the episode of the two hats had so amused us. A mere coincidence after all,

this episode. *Wasn't* it only a coincidence, and no more? Every day like incidents occur which, though they at first call forth exclamations of amazement, later appear perfectly natural and normal. I am almost ashamed of having mentioned so trifling an affair. As to that, you may be sure we didn't attach to it any out-of-the-way significance. As a matter of fact, it simply struck us as humorous. So it was, of course. Just think! Two top-hats in the dry river-bed at the self-same moment! It would be even too ridiculous in a farce. But it was certainly a farcical coincidence. Our thoughts were already on other things. As regards myself, I can assure you that I was thinking of something else, that I was forcing myself to think of something else. The beautiful voice of the singer woke the echoes with the wild appeal of the Walkyries, and above the long road, above the town, and above the dim solitude of the plain the still night hovered like a great blue bird between whose spread wings, the stars glimmered.

The French composer (it is chiefly on his account that I have hesitated so long before writing this history, knowing how terribly his dreamy genius is shaken by the breath of mystery), the French composer had for some little time been walking slightly ahead of us. For a minute we lost sight of him in the gloom, and staring into the shadows, I was tempted to think that he had retraced his steps towards the town when a peal of laughter, a second peal and another and another rang

wildly in the silence. Where was our friend? What had made him laugh so loudly, so repeatedly, so continuously? We quickened our steps. At length we saw him. His hand on the rail of a decaying wooden bridge, not by the river, but on the plain which extended beyond the road, he was shaking, jerking and twisting himself in a paroxysm of mirth. His laughter, now deep, now shrill, now broken in little ripples and gusts sounded like the mad music of a distracted Paganini.

"I say, what's the matter? What's up? What can you see down there? What on earth's making you laugh like that?"

One of us (Villiers De l'Isle Adam I think) asked—I knew he was wrong to ask it, I don't know why I knew it was wrong, but I realised it instantaneously from his voice which sounded, not gay and indifferent, but strained—one of us asked:

"Can you see a *third* hat down there?"

The more I think of it, the more I feel convinced that such a question at such a moment was ill-timed . . .

But we had come up to the musician, and already all of us, like himself, were helpless with laughter. Really no sight could have been more amazing, more farcical, more absurd . . .

Just imagine . . .

Down below the road, four or five yards from the wooden bridge, under the starry sky the dim deserted

plain was dotted as far as we could see with tiny houses no bigger than dog-kennels, tiny gardens no bigger than handkerchiefs, tiny churches no bigger than twelve inches high (on the steeple of one I noticed a weather-cock considerably smaller than a sparrow), tiny stables, tiny sheds, tiny farms, tiny cottages, tiny manors, in fact a deserted, absolutely deserted village, a liliputian village, miraculous, yet real. It was so extraordinarily queer, all those miniature buildings extending as far as the eye could see in the complete solitude, that we uttered amazed exclamations, rocked and swayed with laughter till merriment finally overcame us.

But a minute later, something else happened.

The composer had caught sight of a narrow stairway of slats, much more like a ladder than a stairway, that wound downwards to the plain. He started clambering down it, we followed uproariously, still laughing spasmodically, and we tumbled through the miniature village like a band of children let loose from school. We climbed the garden-walls, jumped feet foremost over the fences, and seated ourselves on thatched and slated roofs as though they were rather low benches. The windows barely reached our knees. I collided with a church-porch, and narrowly avoided a nasty sprain. "Come along, come along, come over here and look!" we called, each wanting to show the other some new miracle of minuteness. The Austrian dilettante was staring at pig-troughs from which mice could scarcely

have fed; the magistrate had discovered a *stadthaus* from whose gateway a cuckoo could scarcely have fluttered; small as her feet were, the singer could only put one at a time in the shady walk of a park which was just large enough for the spread of a single dwarf rose-bush. Round tiny flower-beds, there were tiny circles of garlanded box. On his knees before a church, the Hungarian Kappelmeister just avoided smashing the rose-window with his watch-chain. I knocked with a slightly-elevated boot on the door of an elegant villa; the composer, doubling himself up as much as he could was whistling down the chimney of a tiny building which came up to his thigh—it was the village memorial —and running about hither and thither, frolicking and shouting, the eight of us broke the empty silence of the night with joyful peals of laughter.

We stopped laughing.

At a casement—a casement, it is true, somewhat higher than the majority of windows—a light had appeared behind a curtain, lamplight or candlelight, and a whitish shape had showed, like someone moving . . .

But laughter once more overcame us, louder and louder and wilder still—and so overpowering, so uncontrollable, so irresistible was our merriment that even now, as I sit writing quietly at my table, the very remembrance is enough to set me off, to make me hold my sides with laughter. I must walk about the room to calm myself down. I'll finish later on . . .

VI

I am sitting down once more. But I shan't finish this "story" to-day. I have stopped laughing. I'm quite collected. But the outburst has made my headache worse—it beats with hammer-strokes beneath the skin of my temples. That's why I've stopped writing. That's the only reason. Don't think I'm *afraid* to go on with this comic, farcical, childish narrative. Why *should* I be afraid? . . .

If I have stopped writing, it's not on account of what happened when I was pacing up and down the room. For something *did* happen. Nothing very much—another coincidence, a pure coincidence. You can judge for yourselves—nothing more than a coincidence.

You haven't forgotten that one of those who was with us on that night is now no longer amongst us. He is in that unknown land where everything, and the reason for everything, is known. I loved and admired him. So there was nothing very out-of-the-ordinary in my finding one of his books open on the edge of the mantel-shelf. To tell the truth, I don't remember having taken it out of my bookcase these last few days. I would have wagered that I had not touched it for a couple of months and that it was on the third shelf between Edgar Allan Poe and Jean Paul Richter. But I should have lost my bet because there it was, open. So I must have put it

there—for if not I, who else? No, there's nothing very out-of-the-ordinary in finding a certain book open on the edge of the mantelshelf, and it is not so very out-of-the-ordinary, either, that as I was pacing up and down to control my laughter, my eye should have fallen on the open page and caught a few words. No doubt these words surprised at a first glance before I had time to remember that they were part of a dialogue in one of the stories (I forget which):

"My dear man, my dear, good man, let that alone . . ."

But that's not the reason why I'm knocking off work for to-day. I haven't in the least construed those words as the advice of that friend who has left us for that country where everything is known. I'm leaving off because my headache's unbearable. That's all. I shall soon finish this "story". The day after to-morrow. Not to-morrow. To-morrow, I'm giving a poetry recital. But it will certainly be before long. Next week, yes, I will definitely finish my "story" next week.

VII

This time, I shall really come to the end. Whatever happens, I shall finish it now. To tell the truth, I hesitated just now—I was on the verge of writing some other story, something amusing and absurd which would have made you smile. In what way can it interest you

to know that on that far-away night there was a liliputian village on the plain? But the mere possibility that my fear of boring you with this little history is no more than an excuse, an artifice of my weak will to prevent me from carrying out my intention makes me continue . . . there is really very little more to tell. I shall have done in a few lines. And then I shall think no more of it. I don't know why, but I feel I shall be at peace, very much at peace—the peace that follows the completion of a dangerous undertaking—as soon as I have finished, as soon as I have got it out of my mind . . .

VIII

I have already told you how wild and uncontrollable laughter had once more overcome us in the midst of the tiny houses. We ran madly about between the buildings, straddled the roofs, and clambered over the walls. But at that casement a little higher than the rest a light reappeared behind the curtain, lamplight or candlelight, and for the second time a whitish form showed, like some being moving very slowly . . .

Mouth agape, eyes wide, feet rooted to the ground, I stared at this light as though I had suddenly turned to stone. As a heard no more laughter, no more sound of any kind near me, my companions must have been staring likewise, as thunderstruck, as petrified as myself.

And the being (what Being? Something resembling a nightcap outlined the pallor of a vaguely-delineated face), disappeared, came back, disappeared, came back again; no doubt, with an upheld lamp, he was pacing to and fro in the house. But reappearing for the third time, he stood motionless as though he had seen us, and as though he also were watching intently. I now heard sounds near me, but not the sound of laughter. I heard the noise of painful breathing, harsh, constricted as though it were being literally torn from agonised lungs mingled with the shrill wailing crescendo of someone in fear, someone in deadly fear, someone who is about to die of fear . . . oh, so fear had locked my companions also in its grip, my companions towards whom I dared not turn my head, to whom I dared not utter a word. So they also too were in the stranglehold of a heretofore-inexperienced terror; they too, were stiff and cold, frozen to icy images.

The living Thing, the Being who stood behind the milky curtains of the casement was motionless for a long while. Then, with a slow movement that brought the lamp within closer range, he pushed open the window, and an arm with a luminous hand, an arm from which hung a ghastly rag was stretched towards us with a sweeping gesture as though it were warning us off . . .

How was it that, hurling ourselves simultaneously towards the narrow slatted stairway, pushing and jostling one another, we were so soon able to regain the

road by the river-bank? In less than a few minutes, we reached the decaying wooden bridge; and with rapid steps the eight of us made towards the town. We did not speak. We avoided each other's eyes. What horror haunted my companions? Were they still in the throes of terror? Did they press onwards without wasting time in idle words or glances, because their one thought was to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the plain where the little village was spread out, the little village where a ghostly hand had thrown open a curtained casement? Speaking for myself, my forehead drenched with sweat, shaking spasmodically with a nervous tremor, I longed with every fibre of my being to reach the town, the town with its big houses, lighted, tenanted, substantial, the dwelling-place of the normal.

Having crossed the bridge—the bridge where the incident of the two hats had so much amused us—we turned into the Maximilianstrasse. I was beginning to be myself once more. I walked less rapidly, and breathed more easily. You can imagine that once calmed down and collected I was far from believing that there was anything really supernatural in the existence (actual or illusory) of that little wayside village inhabited by only one solitary being. Obviously there must be some natural explanation for it which anyone could give us. My companions were evidently possessed by the same thought. They had slowed

down at the same moment as myself. They exchanged looks and smiles, and I guessed it would not be long before they began to speak of the thing that having at first made us laugh immoderately, ended in terror. It was without any obvious confusion and in almost ironical tones (the tone in which one "gets back" so to speak, on the unusual which has made a fool of one) that the Austrian dilettante hazarded: "It was very queer . . . but you know we were all a little besides ourselves with music, and possibly . . ." To tell the truth, the suggestion that eight people had been the victims of a common hallucination found very little favour. We all agreed that we really *had* seen, really *had* touched the tiny houses, the tiny churches and the tiny farms. The amusing village *did* exist. Therefore it must exist *naturally*. The practical-minded magistrate put forth the theory that perhaps some animal-breeder ("Of infinitesimal animals, then", objected Villiers de L'Isle Adam) had in a spirit of caprice constructed miniature buildings made to represent human habitations to house his stock. There was something feasible in this, some possibility of truth that satisfied, or seemed to satisfy, two or three of us. But the French composer tossed his head. "That's not the explanation," he said, "I've solved the puzzle. This curious village must be one of Louis of Bavaria's freaks. In spite of his very reasonable and commendable love of opera, he was a bit crack-brained, and must have had this liliputian hamlet

constructed just as he might have ordered the erection of a colossal brobdingnagian city to amaze his eyes."

A sigh of satisfaction escaped us all.

The French composer had guessed it. Here was a clear explanation of everything. After all, there was nothing fantastic in our adventure. The being who had appeared at that casement somewhat higher and wider than the rest must have been some keeper of the village whom we had disturbed by our laughter, and who had warned us away. It was absurd that we hadn't immediately jumped to the simple and plausible truth. We had no doubt left . . . not a single doubt . . . even though it was rather surprising that we should have been in Munich for over a month without having been told of such an extraordinary fantasy of the King's . . . But of course it was all quite clear, and going into the Café de L'Opéra where we usually supped, we made sure that the first person we questioned would answer in such a way as to confirm the French composer's theory in full.

We were never more mistaken in our lives. As soon as we started questioning a Bavarian musician whom we knew slightly, and who was sitting at an adjacent table, he looked at us with an angry expression as though he thought that we were mad, or that we were making game of him. I insisted, I pictured as best I could the things we had seen, I told him how we had laughed, admitted our terror . . . The musician got up, and ordered the waiter to take his glass to a table at the

other end of the room. "He didn't understand you," said the Kappelmeister. "You speak German so badly, and he hardly knows any French." At this moment, Ottilia, the pretty waitress, rather inclined to familiarity with strangers, brought the plates and napkins for our supper. Usually she understood us with perfect complacency, and somehow or other, managed to mangle our language into meaning. I asked her if she knew the little wayside village which had probably been built by the King. She spluttered with laughter, kept on giggling, and all that we could get from her was "Oh lord, oh lord, what funny folk you Frenchies are!" Other tentative questions met with similar answers. Nobody know whether the King had built a liliputian village out of caprice, nobody seemed to know about this village so near to the town. Only one old man, first alto at the Theatre Royal, a gentle creature with soft eyes generally held to be a confirmed drunkard, accorded us any appearance of attention. For a minute we thought he was going to produce an explanation, but with a melting look, he wagged his head, and murmuring: "Ah, children, children!" he hurried out of the restaurant as though we had alarmed him. At that, we ceased our inquiries, and lowernig our eyes to our plates, isolated, nervous, and restless in the noise of the room, watched, it seemed, by hostile glances, we finished our meal in silence.

. . . . . .

Of course, the obvious thing was to have gone back next day in broad daylight, to see whether the tiny houses were there or not there—prove them real or illusory, and supposing that they *did* exist, question any passer-by about them, speak to the "being" who had ordered us away from the casement.

We ought to have done that.

But we didn't.

Not one of us did this simple little thing, not one of us crossed the bridge and followed that road. Why? I don't know. I can honestly say that I don't know. Were my companions hindered by more urgent matters, were they haunted by some apprehension of how the thing that had been so strange and terrifying by night might seem by daylight? However that might be, they all left Munich without going back along the path we had taken after the first performance of the "Walkyries". As for myself, it was certainly not fear, no, it was certainly not fear (what fear could I have felt?) that prevented my taking such a leisurely walk. But on the next day I had to write a criticism of Wagner's opera which took up all my time. The next few days were devoted to social affairs, and then an unexpected telegram recalled me immediately to France. It's true that ten years later I was in Munich again, and I ought then to have gone towards that plain where we had seen the liliputian village. I can even say that a desire to know more about this extraordinary reality or illusion

had been one of the motives that had brought me to the Bavarian capital. But I had no time to satisfy my curiosity, no time at all. I don't know what the reason was, I've forgotten it, I'm not even sure that I knew it ten years ago. When you are travelling, everything seems such a confusion of hurried arrivals and departures. Only one thing is certain, and that is that I have never discovered, never shall discover, I believe, the explanation of that little wayside village . . .

THE COUGH

THE COUGH

FROM a literary point of view, the unexplainable is taboo. I am perfectly well aware of the fact that no writer has any business to concern himself with supernatural circumstances unless at some point in his narrative he is able to produce an explanation which must be plausible, even if it is fantastic. (Theodore de Banville maintained that such an explanation should be forthcoming in the first few lines, a point on which he differed from Charles Baudelaire.) So much the better, however, if the explanation is a material one. The weird, yet never phantasmagoric, tales of Edgar Allan Poe succeed precisely because of the skill with which he reduces disconcertingly abnormal circumstances to an every-day level. Although there is rather too great an analogy between this process and the old-fashioned guessing-games, we have had so many masterpieces from his pen that we have no right to criticise his methods. But, to sum up, readers would be quite justified in accusing an author of childish mystification and a wretched kind of ingenuity if, after having caught and rivetted their attention, after having excited their interest by an

accumulation of miraculous happenings, he suddenly refused to divulge the secret, and left them guessing.

Similar reproaches have already been levelled at me because of my previous story: "A Wayside Village", and I should richly deserve them had I written it simply as an exercise in literature, and not, as I repeatedly warned my readers, as the plain facts of an incident to which there were seven witnesses besides myself; an incident, as I affirmed, that would not, and indeed could not, be denied by any of those seven witnesses, as it was in every particular undeniable and true. It would have been perfectly simple for me to invent some whimsical conclusion, some logical ending to fit that bizarre and burlesque episode of a journey, for the habit of imagining things, far from making the mind sterile, only increases its inventive and creative faculties. But out of regard for the truth, out of regard for the fear I experienced at the time, I would not make this concession. For this reason, I have refrained from rereading my strictly-truthful narrative, lest I might be tempted to make artistic, but fallacious, emendations. You must have noticed several flaws, which, so I am told, are not usual in my work. My hope was that a few awkward phrases here and there might be taken as additional proofs of my sincerity.

And yet you were unconvinced. Have you never sensed behind some inexplicable event, that may be either grotesque or awe-inspiring, the brooding intent of

a vague and invisible circle of beings (are they beings?) forever watchful of humanity, always eager to manifest themselves, but just as anxious for concealment when the prying impetuousness of our reason is about to catch them unawares and drag them into the broad daylight of verification. I myself have often experienced an ever-closer contact (which was never an actual presence), to which I re-acted with either discomfort or anticipation according to whether my soul were swayed by terror or hope of the unknown, and I retain remembrances of shuddering emotions, pleasurable or the reverse, which could never have been the outcome of any human approach . . .

At the time of this particular episode, I was just twenty-one, and my heart was broken. I had had an abortive love-affair. Nothing is harder to bear than this, yet in after-years, when their passions are extinct, a great many men are apt to laugh at their former troubles, and to doubt their very existence. Such men are like a person with an amputated limb who denies the pain it caused him before its amputation. But the heart of a poet lives on as long as his dream endures, and he must eternally bewail his ancient wrongs.

Thus it chanced that at that time my greensickness drove me to forgo my ambition and desires, and to seclude myself from my fellow-men. My one wish was to bury myself in some wilderness like the wilderness within me. This wilderness I found, not far from Paris,

in a slip of an island locked between the scarcely-diverging forks of a river. Jostled among crowds, it is impossible to realise how close at hand complete solitude may be found—a few hours' walk and one is utterly alone. This island, which was to be my refuge, was too small for any village to be built on it, too bleak—a mere sterile rock—to be cultivated, too unattractive—barren of trees and grass—for a tea-garden to be set up with swings and skittles. As soon as the ferry had gone back, I found myself really alone. I discovered a ramshackle platelayer's hut where I could sleep. I had brought along provisions in tin boxes, a few bottles of wine, and several packets of tobacco, quite sufficient for the period of retreat I intended to make in this deserted spot, in whose silence and solitude I might perhaps find peace.

What would be the use of my writing all this if it were not true? What good would it do me to invent such a commonplace story of a betrayed lover turned misanthropist and mysoginist? Those of you who have known me for years will certainly remember the morbid obstinacy which kept me away from my friends and my dearest pursuits for a whole month. I am putting down things as they were without any pretence to literature, and every detail of the story is true, even that which appears absolutely incredible, that which woke me in the middle of the twelfth night . . .

. . . . . .

Once alone, I was not conscious of boredom, or of a longing for crowds. I hardly looked towards the banks of the river whose scarcely-diverging streams locked the island; I never had the slightest desire to hail the ferryman and scull to the neighbouring village where the boatmen sang on Sundays. I was quite content to be on my island, communing with my grief, questioning it and answering it; we were excellent company, my grief and I. I would walk for a long while across the sand or shingle, or sit idly on a rock overhanging the water. Far from longing for colour and sound, I congratulated myself that here were neither birds nor flowers. The nights were specially welcome to me because of the absolute stillness—the river flowed so languidly, the wind hardly stirred the leaves of the sparse trees, the sky was so overweighted with voiceless shadows—yes, I loved the nights because of the unbroken infinite quiet. And in the centre of the deserted island, which was like a ghostless graveyard, I lay in the hut on my bed of dried grasses, my bed that, built up of wooden planks, almost looked like a coffin . . .

How soundly I slept. Tired out with my long walks, weighed down with my sorrowful thoughts, I would throw myself on my bed, and sleep long and dreamlessly. Eleven nights I slept till dawn without stirring. But towards the middle of the twelfth night, I woke . . .

I woke with a start. I sat up straining my eyes in the gloom, my heart thudding. What had wakened me

so abruptly? I did not know. It was useless to ask myself: "Why have I wakened so abruptly?" I did not know. At length I vaguely remembered a noise whose sudden sound must have disturbed me. But what sort of noise? I did not know. Oh, well, I must have had nightmare. I lay down again, to bury myself deeply in the delicious nirvana of sleep.

But I started up. I had suddenly remembered what had shattered my rest.

It was the sound of a cough. Someone, I was convinced, had coughed in the night, breaking the empty silence of the island.

But obviously that was impossible.

Wasn't I alone, absolutely alone in the still night, in the complete solitude of the island?

Yet I certainly *had* heard a cough.

I smiled.

Probably I myself had coughed in my sleep. I must have caught cold that evening on the river-bank. It was my own cough that had so disturbed me.

I smiled again, and this time sank into oblivion. How delicious it was to wake at sunrise, how delicious was the morning with its welcome solitude, how delicious had been my night's rest. But towards the middle of the thirteenth night, I once more started into wakefulness on my bed of grass, like a soldier waking to the bugle-call, and petrified, terror-stricken, a shiver running down my spine, I heard someone coughing, coughing,

coughing . . . Could I still be dreaming? No, I knew I was *not* dreaming, knew I was *not* asleep. Was I out of my senses? No, I was quite normal. Then who was it I heard coughing? There was no-one on the island, and as so faint a sound could hardly reach me from the villages or the road along the river, what could this cough be, from whom did it proceed? I felt myself grow colder, while an icy tremor shook me, and icy sweat trickled down my forehead. For the cough was appalling. Sometimes it shrilled out like childish whooping-cough; it broke out at irregular intervals in fits and starts, and jagged across the night like a finger-nail scratching on glass; sometimes it was the hoarse cough of asthmatic senility wheezing and thickening to a glug-glug-glug. It was so distinct that it must come from quite near, terribly near. Someone was coughing in the hut, yes in the hut itself, and yet there was a strange, mysterious quality in the sound that made it seem far-off and distant. For one dreadful moment I thought it proceeded *from under me,* that I must be lying on someone, child or greybeard, who had been oppressed by my weight to this frenzy of coughing. Next, shuddering and perspiring, I imagined that some way off a little boy must be agonising in the convulsions of croup, or a centenarian be emitting his death-rattle. I jumped from my bed, and went out into the darkness. I had a suspicion that during the evening some old vagabond with one of those unfortunate little creatures

who are forced to beg had, unknown to me, landed on the island, and that both of them, chilled and wretched, were now coughing one after the other, and then simultaneously at the foot of some tree. But I could see no-one. The shadows were unpeopled. Moreover, as soon as I quitted the hut, the coughing had ceased. I went back and lay down and listened . . . nothing, not another sound, it was all over . . . silence . . . Worn out with terror, I fell asleep . . .

. . . . . .

But every night, the coughing, the paroxysm of coughing, the persistent, terrifying, lacerating spasm of coughing began again, sometimes shrill like a child's cough, sometimes hoarse like an old man's, and always it sounded strangely close and, as strangely, distant. I listened for hours on end, fear-stricken, dripping with icy sweat. Occasionally it stopped. I breathed freely. Could it be that at last the child or the greyboard who had coughed was dead? But soon, with an even more terrifying effect after the pause, the rattling clamour shattered the night afresh, shattered the night, my shuddering self, my whole being, till I, too, choked in terror obsessed by that agonised coughing. Oh, you can realise that when daylight freed me from torment, and I was normal again, I tried to explain to myself that hateful nocturnal sound. But there was nothing—nothing to explain it. There was no sea-eagle with its horrible, sobbing laughter on the island, no cavity from

which the wind could issue with a hollow roar, no fissure in the rock where the water might eddy and wail in gusts . . . the nearest village was too distant for the sound of a living being's cough to reach my ears . . . And yet, every night at the same hour, the cough, the indescribable cough splintered the silence of the solitary island . . .

LUSCIGNOLE

LUSCIGNOLE

BOOK ONE

I

LOOKING back to the earliest years of my childhood, I can see in a rain-swept, cloudy country, a town beneath a leaden sky that looks as though it were drenched in tears, endless, empty streets without turnings, and right in the centre, conspicuous by its height, a very old Cathedral with an immense round dome, topped by a slender cross about which the ravelled white mist hangs like the shreds of a martyr's robe.

All day long, the town is silent and deserted; occasionally, there is the clank of an officer's sword along the cobbles, or a sound of laughter issuing from the half-open door of some tavern; more frequently in the new quarter of the town where tall chimneys smear and thicken the fog with coal-dust, there is a rattle of machinery that shakes the walls, and shrill piercing whistles that tear the air. Then once more, silence and

solitude—it seems almost as if the ghost of nothingness dwelt behind the vacant windows of the houses. But a little before nightfall, after a rumbling echo of closing doors, long processions of women in groups of three proceed down the streets towards their homes. They are factory-hands. Tall, emaciated and bloodless, they are dressed in tattered rags, wear straw hats knotted under their chins with string, and fold about their flat breasts faded brown or yellow woollen shawls that hang in frayed ends down to their out-at-heel men's shoes which clatter unwieldily at every step they take. Each like to each, and all like Misery herself, along they go, without speech or laughter, without any signs of animation, moving with the regular steps of a regiment of soldiers, passive and resigned at last to endless work, resigned even to despair itself. At intervals, one of the women falls out of the ranks, and without a word to her companions, turns into a street, recedes and vanishes; the gap is immediately filled by the first woman in the row behind, whose place is similarly taken—the whole procession marches on with mechanical regimental precision. As they approach the poor quarter, more and more drop out, but the lessened line continues to advance in triple rows in the deepening dusk. There are only a few lines left, but they still forge on, decreasing at every step. At last, there are only three women, two women, one woman left; she walks steadily on between the beetling houses till little by little her straw hat and her

faded woollen shawl are swallowed up in the gloom.

There is something melancholy in the Cathedral itself with its look of having outlasted time—the imperial melancholy of the Past beset by the cares and griefs of the Present—it looms like the reproach of that ancient faith which smug satisfaction and maddened misery have denied.

Even the believers scarcely enter it—their weak faith totters before the gigantic bronze gateway which the claw of a legendary Lucifer split asunder; too overpowering an atmosphere emanates from the high altars with their magnificent columns, from the pulpit with its spiral stairs, and from the windows that shower forth a mosaic of chrysoprase and ruby. The humble worshippers, decent middle-class men and women, civil servants, or small tradespeople who have come to say their unemotional little prayers and utter their trivial confessions, are ill at ease before the defaced marble seat where the great Emperor sat, before the stone that covers his dust, before the memorial scabbards of so many warrior-bishops, and before the iron grille (that seems bloodstained rather than rusted) of that terrible reliquary with its innumerable whitening bones of those martyrs who confessed God in ecstasies of pain. They prefer to go to the small new church which is so very much like their own pretty little houses that they enter it quite unmoved, as pleasantly as though they were

paying a neighbourly call; there they kneel down under a blue ceiling sprinkled with golden stars (just the sort of ceiling they would have for themselves if they were rich enough to build chateaux) on mahogany praying-stools very much like their own dining-room chairs; and Jehovah is only our Father, and wears such a benign expression, such an indulgent smile, such an ingenuous beard in the big picture over the high altar—it was painted by an artist who is a friend of a friend—that really, if it were not for the flowing blue draperies and the armed archangel, he might easily be taken to be one's grandparent, a most worthy old gentleman who never scolded, and always had a pocketful of sweets and toys for the little ones.

Thus it comes about that the great Cathedral in the middle of the gloomy town is, for the most part, empty. The gates are occasionally unlocked by the beadle or the sacristan for the few and far between visitors, artists or sightseers, and as soon as they are gone, the Cathedral withdraws itself again from the world without. For within its walls, it holds that spirit which filled it in those far-off days when processions knelt beneath the crosiers of bishops and the sceptres of kings, that spirit which magnified it with majesty and awe. The silence is murmurous with unheard voices, the shadows are peopled with insubstantial incarnations—the imperial Past blossoms again in the nothingness. The Cathedral is full of nothingness—with its cold stones over which the

reflections from the windows dance a ghostly arabesque; with its winding stairs that spiral to the belfry, or descend to the day-forgotten crypt whose white pillars look like upright winding-sheets; with its icy marble altars haunted by kneeling presences of penitents long ages dead; with its corridors defaced by the tread of many feet, its tombs from which rise the phantoms of survival, and its choir whence surged innumerable canticles that echo can nevermore repeat. The Cathedral is full of nothingness, but in this nothingness, ten centuries of majesty and faith are eternally enshrined. Whoever enters it falls back with fear, though there is no cause for fear. But who can say that in the night when unreality appears real the ancient dead do not live again, or that the pillars, like upright winding-sheets, shrouded ghosts or resurrected souls, do not climb the stairs from the crypt? Who can say whether the man who once stood watch on the dais does not descend, as was his wont, to light the tapers, who can say whether the Emperor, spirit or flesh, caparisoned in armour, does not raise the marble slab of his tomb, and shake the stones with the clangour of his kneeling, while the martyrs whose scattered bones have come together break through the iron grille, and slip silently between the columns in a shining procession, bleeding from their ecstatic wounds, and fulfilling their ancient rites in the terror-stark Cathedral.

But at the time of the story I am about to tell you,

the old Cathedral had an inmate, a little girl to befriend it. She was a slip of a child, nine years old, bubbling over with laughter, very slight and delicately-made, the niece of the beadle. She had been christened Marthe, but the parish priest re-named her Luscignole* because she whistled and trilled like the nightingales.

II

As soon as she could walk, Luscignole's little feet stumbled over the stone on which the name of that Emperor who was King of Rome, is graven, and one of her earliest games was to clamber up a column and dip one finger in the holy water to suck it greedily—it had such a delicious salty taste.

Her mother was the sister of Alas Schemp the beadle, and the widow of a seller of holy images. She had scarcely eked out a living hiring out chairs and selling candles in this Cathedral of no worshippers, and when she died in destitution, everything went on much as usual for the child with the exception of her rare scoldings and rarer kisses. She slept, as before, in one of the three rooms that had been allotted to Alas Schemp on the first floor of the Tower, and continued to wander, after school hours, in the solitude of the ancient building. Probably at first she would have preferred playing about

* Italian: uscignolo = nightingale.

the streets with a crowd of other children, but her uncle insisted on her coming back as soon as possible so that if any chance strangers visited the Cathedral, she might summon him at once either from the room in the tower where he passed most of the day among his nightingales (being bound-up with bird-lore), or else from the neighbouring tavern where he spent the remainder of his time fuddling himself with ale and schiedam. Thus it came about that gradually the little girl grew resigned and contented in her isolation between those ancient walls.

But as she grew, she did not become sober like the Holy Angels who dream with blank unseeing eyes, a finger to their lips, or silent like the motionless, rigid figures on the tombs; her childish fancy was care-free among those melancholy forms, in that atmosphere of death and decay.

The Cathedral could not age her, but she renewed its youth. Darting about and uttering cries like little explosions of sound, she was the clamorous and conquering radiance of the shadowy silence; and the echo that had grown hoarse with muttered prayers and remembrances of the *Dies Irae,* attempted to give back her laughter, succeeding with yet a suggestion of huskiness in its tones. She played in the most forbidding corners, throwing mocking glances at the memorial icons; one day, after a funeral, she chanced upon a long garland of roses on the tomb of a rich banker, a converted Jew, who had conceived the fantasy of having the last rites

celebrated in the Carlovingian basilica—and turning it into a skipping rope, she skipped about from the still-vibrating organ to the scarcely-extinguished tapers.

But she could amuse herself just as well even when the outside world did not break in on the Cathedral with a funeral train.

She had invented games in which the solemn old statues of marble and brass were made to join her. Running hither and thither, never stopping in one place, she played at shuttlecock with a Madonna whose motionless hand, uplifted like a battledore, sent back the feathered cork. If a ray of light struck through the window onto the brazen St. Synesius upright between the third and fourth Stations of the Cross, she pretended (not without cheating slightly, for she slily craned her neck), that the sun would gild her nose before alighting like a wayward butterfly on the venerable nose of the Saint. To the Cherubim with their puffed-out cheeks and their bodiless estate hidden by their fluffy golden wings, who leaned out of the stone bas-reliefs, she called: "We'll play at hide-and-seek, shall we?" and she ran and hid herself—first looking carefully to see that no-one was watching—behind the sarcophagus of Augustus, or behind a panel of the tryptich on which the 11,000 Virgins were depicted, or behind the great christening-font with its design of the Seven Foolish Virgins weeping over their guttered lamps, and she cried: "Come and find me!" waited, laughed, and called

again : " Come and find me ! ", and because no-one found her, she ran back to the Cherubim and made an exultant face at them, half-believing, perhaps, that they really had followed her, and having failed to find her, had gone sulkily back to their places.

She hoisted herself onto the pedestals of mounted cavaliers, hoisted herself still higher, and tried to peer between their half-raised visors. " Oh, how ugly you are ! " she would cry, inhaling their dust-laden breath.

She longed to play with the Holy Babes in the arms of the Madonnas, but she dared not ask them, being more awe-stricken by them than by the Cherubim (who, after all, are only the winged children of Heaven), and fearing the reproachful glances of the Mary Mothers.

She grew angry with the zig-zagging rays that darted across the tiles of the sanctuary, between the fluting of the columns and over the gilded flowers of the candelabras because , to spite her, they refused to be caught. On one occasion, having glimpsed a nest that some swallows had made in the outer porch on the neck of a headless angel, she fetched it down, carried it off with the baby birds piping shrilly, and laid it near the high altar in the convulsed jaws of the Dragon cast down by the Angel ; it was a source of great amusement to her during the day to watch the parent swallows fly through the bronze gate which she had left ajar, and bring back food to their nestlings in the Dragon's throat.

But she had real little playmates of her own in the Cathedral. These playmates were the mice who lived in the charnel-house.

They were quite small, and greyish-white like the martyrs' bones; they peeped slily and uneasily between the trellised bars, and drew hurriedly back at the slightest sound.

When Luscignole first caught sight of them, she thought she would go and warn her uncle, for it wouldn't do at all to let mice run about among the sacred relics —only think if the skull of Saint Catulla, or the tibia of St. Hersilian should be nibbled to dust by those impious little teeth. But then, if she told, the mice would come to grief, traps would be set for them, and cats would be shut up in the charnel-house. They were such darlings, too, with their mischievous pink eyes, and their quivering pink muzzles. The little girl decided at last on a plan that would safeguard the relics and spare the mice. She would buy some cakes with the sous she occasionally rifled from her uncle's pockets—she was too artless to think it stealing—and these she would crumble up near the grille of the sanctuary; the clever little mice were sure to prefer fresh cake-crumbs to tibias and ankle-bones so long decayed that they could not be particularly appetising. Her plan was successful. The mice ventured between the bars to nibble at the dainties and enjoy the delicate repast; they showed their gratitude by becoming friendly with the giver. They lost their terror,

and let her come near them and stroke them, and at length they would jump on her hands as she knelt among them, laughing and distributing crumbs, run the length of her arm to her shoulders, till on both sides such a friendship grew up that, when no-one came to disturb and startle the little girl and the mice, Luscignole never strayed about the Cathedral, never played at hide-and-seek with the golden Cherubim, never smiled mischievously at the statues unless the scampering feet of twenty little grey mice pattered behind her.

She had, however, other amusements, more befitting her nine years. The imperial relics that lay in the Emperor's shrine, and which were adored by pilgrims from every part of the world for three days in every seven years, consisted of more than a few whitened bones. In a much smaller shrine, a mystic chamber whose key was hidden by Luscignole, there was a fragment of Jesu's crib, a splinter of cedarwood planed by Joseph the Carpenter in far-off days; there was a nail of the Cross; a thorn still reddened by a drop of Divine Blood; and most precious of all, a pale shred of the Blessed Virgin's shift, fastened to the wall. Full of holy awe in spite of the bad example which her little friends, the mice, had set her, Luscignole would linger among these sacred things in the tower-chamber forbidden to all, whose darkness seemed to deepen with the faint emanation of age-old fragrance like the incense wafted from some invisible censer. It worried her to

see that the shift which had once lightly touched the Blessed Virgin was in such ill-repair, yellowed and worn to holes; that it had been cut out and stitched such countless time ago was no excuse for such a falling-to-pieces. Thus it befell that one night, Alas Schemp who had been searching and shouting for Luscignole in the Cathedral for over an hour, came upon her at length cross-legged on the floor absorbed in darning the shift of the Virgin Mary by the light of the first star.

Yet it would be exaggeration to say that Luscignole spent all her time before and after school in the Cathedral; very often, more and more often as she grew older, she went into the belfry to be among Alas Schemp's nightingales; in their company, she even forgot the little grey mice of the charnel-house.

III

Alas Schemp's nightingales were one of the wonders of the town. There were forty of them in cages hanging from the walls of a room in the tower. Silent by day, they sang with wild sweetness by night, and their song which ran unbroken to an end, was amazing in its crystal clarity. It became a cherished custom of the townspeople who had lingered in grave talk over their foaming tankards to go to the Cathedral Close—before going back to their homes where their wives and daughters

were already abed—and listen to Alas Schemp's nightingales, who, one after the other, or two by two, filled the night with their pure music. With their hands clasped on their stomachs, the stout beer-drinkers stood in a silent listening circle, nodding their heads in approval.

For the rearing-up of singing-birds was held in great honour in the town where this story took place, and it was not only the cobbler cross-legged in his attic, or the girls of the garrets who enjoyed the trilling of caged birds—the most dignified citizens spent their leisure hours breeding larks, finches and warblers; His Worship, the Criminal Prosecutor, was as proud of having obtained the first prize for the sweet cooing of his doves in the recent local competition as he was of his excellent rhetoric—(they certainly had cooed remarkably well); His Reverence, the Professor of Theology, was justly vain of his red-breasted finches for having outsung in the warbling contest four angry canaries who had died of the humiliation; and the Professor of Antiquity could think of nothing but his robins.

But as for nightingales, none could compare with those of Alas Schemp.

The beadle was not an attractive personality. He had a puny dwarf's body topped with a huge round head that sprouted neckless from his shoulders as though an explosion of anger had hurled it there, and he looked less like a man than one of those gnomes, hop-brewers or

vat-trundlers, that are painted on tavern frescoes; he had red-rimmed slits of eyes under bushy eyebrows, and a hideous mouth—the upper lip was snarling and retracted like a hyena's, the lower pendulous and slobbering like a gorilla's. His body, overbalanced by the weight of his head, swayed from side to side as he moved on feet that pattered like a dog's paws.

Moreover, he was a confirmed and redoubtable drunkard.

Having emptied twelve glasses of schiedam on top of twelve tankards of ale, he would wantonly crash his weight on the drinkers who were sitting opposite him, and whose indignant glances he resented, and would foam and contort himself in epileptic furies between the overturned tables and stools. A few extra glasses of schiedam invariably drove him to excesses. He would tear out of the tavern like an escaping animal, and dash along the roads, falling, picking himself up, striking the walls with his fists, striking the doors with his forehead until a blow from some jutting-out stone or the corner of a shutter smashed his head and tumbled his pigmy frame unconscious into the gutter.

Then he would get up apparently sober. Nobody would have believed him drunk. As a matter of fact, his fall had made him even worse. The more calm he appeared, the more dangerous he was. He would walk straight on without the slightest idea of where he was going, and would coolly perpetrate the most appalling

outrages. He saw, as it were, with unseeing eyes. If he chanced upon a cat furtively crossing the road towards some cellar, he would eye it askance with a sly and subtle look, and when the wretched creature ventured out, he would reach heavily towards it with the movement of a trap about to spring, and with a laugh that gritted through his teeth, he would seize it coolly and methodically and strangle it with one hand, looking back to see that no-one was observing him. Then taking out his pocket-knife, he would skin it with the leisurely skill of a taxidermist, sating himself with the sight of the poor little despoiled corpse. It was even said that one rainy night he had been surprised on his knees cutting up a gutter-rat which he had proceeded to eat, picking out each piece like a fastidious diner selecting the tit-bits of a chicken, occasionally breaking off from his hideous meal to crane his head forward into the street-lamp's glimmer to watch and listen, just like a monkey who is afraid of being caught, and who peers about, holding in one slender paw a half-eaten something.

The rumours about Alas Schemp were certainly exaggerated, but it was at all events true that he was a drunkard who grew violent in his cups. Whatever he was, he would certainly have been treated with contempt, and would probably have lost his post of beadle, on which his living and that of his niece depended, if he had not been forgiven a great deal on account of his nightingales. There was justification for this over-

looking of his faults, for the art of making nightingales sing requires innate genius.

IV

Nightingales are wild and timid birds.

Needless to say, I am not talking of those nightingales that are caged as nestlings, and soon grow tame, never having known the freedom of the woodland. Such birds will never learn to sing with that ecstasy that makes echo itself faint with delight under the moon. They have not been taught by all those generations of nightingales who sang away their very hearts in a rapture of passion on the forest boughs. They will never be anything more than agreeable warblers like the finch and the garrulous tom-tit—they can never be the living lyrics of the forest soaring on wings of flame.

I am talking of the nightingale taken captive in his prime, taken in springtime from the young green woodland.

Such a bird, whose voice can evoke infinite skies and moonlit spaces in the clamour of the town, such a bird, once caught, refuses to sing, refuses to be tamed, refuses to live. He droops in the darkest corner of his prison, huddled in the green cloth with which the snarer strives to deceive him with a semblance of his lost leaves; he does not fly into a rage of despair, does not dash his

ruffled wings against the bars, does not attempt to wound himself on the steel edges as would a common sparrow whose over-violent grief is soon over. The dark and mysterious forest-dweller, in whose breast is such a divine conflict of love and pain, isolates himself in his despair, and will not peck at the most succulent food; he stoically refuses to live in slavery, and if some hen-bird is put in his cage, even that very mate for whose loss he is dying in an ecstasy of grief, he would kill her with his sharp beak rather than create an illusion of the free forest in his prison, or, less violent in his misery, would draw away from her, nobler than the lion, whose bird-brother he is; for the lion resigns himself to slavery, and will even mate behind the iron bars, but the nightingale will never beget winged serfs.

No-one who is not adept in bird-lore (as is the writer of this story), can imagine how much skill and cunning, how much art and patient love are needed to make a nightingale endure captivity, and to teach him to live and sing in his prison. Most of all, one must love them, for only a wealth of love can prevail upon them to accept life; it was only because he loved them so devotedly that Alas Schemp was able to sun himself in the pride of those forty nightingales, as silver-voiced as their woodland brothers, singing in his tower-room.

He did love them devotedly.

The vile and wretched creature, as stunted in mind

as in body, half-crazed when he was sober, a wild beast when he was drunk, expended all the emotion of which he was capable on his birds; his dull intelligence thought out delicious tit-bits to pacify them when he cleaned out their cages, refilled their drinking-cups with fresh water, and ground up their maize-meal food for them.

And from the first far-away note, the harbinger of the song, that note at whose sound expectant silence fills the forest, Alas Schemp was shaken into ecstasy. He listened motionless, thrilled with that ardour which the devout Christian feels when the sacred wafer is put between his lips. As the notes rose and rippled like the plash of water, trilled and rang out in a wild frenzy of music as though the very spirit of man was succumbing to the unbearable weight of mortal joy, he almost swooned, a light froth of foam on his lips; the earthy creature became transfused with light, the unhearing ears were filled with music, and this blind reacher-out towards unattainable things became like a hideous transported dwarf dragging himself from his ***niebelheim*** towards Siegfried's celestial bird. Not even the sodden intoxication of his cups, not even his liquor-begotten brutalities could dull him to the mystic joy of the Winged Word. A few hours after one of his drink-enflamed orgies that had shocked the tavern-drinkers, one or two of whom had narrowly escaped being strangled by him, he might have been seen in his tower-room, crouched on a low chair, weeping childishly

because the last lovely notes of his nightingales had just died away in the pale light of dawn.

V

Loving them to such a pitch, Alas Schemp was devoured with jealousy. It enraged him to think that while he listened to them at night, other people, grouped about the Cathedral Square, were listening also. For a long while, with the instinct of a miser who guards his treasure-chest, he had forbidden even Luscignole to enter the room where the forty cages swung.

But eager curiosity had drawn the little girl to visit the captives whose song sounded so distantly through the twilight of the Cathedral, and mingled with the shadowy rays that stole through the windows. By dint of infinite patience, by coaxing her uncle with a pipe, by saying to him: "They're wicked to say you broke your head open yesterday on the cobblestones when there's nothing the matter with you," by dint of childish caresses, she at length received permission to go among the birds.

She was now ten years old—she had forgotten the mice, she was beginning to neglect the bronze St. Synesius, and the Virgin whose uplifted hand had played at shuttlecock; some instinct, some hope of being given love for love, bade her love the nightingales.

She was happy in the narrow square white-walled room where the cages hung at regular intervals. They looked like little wooden cells with fine steel bars, and a curtain of green silk drawn across the middle of the room filled it with mysterious shadow. Luscignole was not tall enough to see into the cages, even if she climbed onto a chair or onto the table. But standing in a corner that was as dark as the semi-darkness of their prisons, she felt the presence of the birds, knew that they were there, and trembled at the slightest noise of a tiny claw skipping from one twig to another, or the rustle of shaken feathers; and when sometimes, even though it was daylight, they ventured a quiver of sound so slight that they could scarcely hear it themselves, a pale note presaging their rapturous night-song, she was so happy that she laughed softly to herself.

On those nights when Alas Schemp lingered at the tavern, she rose from her narrow bed, in her shift, barefooted on the stones, and went as close as she could to the singers—and she shivered with strange indescribable delight, she was almost in tears. Once she actually sobbed because one of the birds after the wild outburst of his song had grown silent so suddenly that she thought he must have died. Stretching out her arms she cried: "Oh, sing again, please, please sing again. You can't be dead, oh, sing, and tell me that you aren't dead." And shuddering, she would have slipped on the cold stones if the clear notes had not at that moment rung

out from the cage, blossoming into song in the night.

But child-like in mind as in years, she was not always stirred to these ecstasies. Sometimes she could not keep from laughter because one of the nightingales sang over-sadly.

Soon, however, she grew less babyish. The atmosphere of the austere Cathedral began to shroud her. She loved the nightingales because she bore in her heart the dreaminess and loneliness of the Cathedral as they bore in their thudding hearts the illimitable woodland spaces.

There was even a physical likeness between her and the nightingales.

One day, when by clutching on to the iron window-bars and standing on tiptoe on the ledge, she managed to see one of the birds standing dreamily on one foot, aloof, and with a dull, fixed, strange, almost terrible look in his eyes, she was shaken by surprise, so like did the winged prisoner appear to herself.

She ran towards a looking-glass.

It was true, they *were* alike. Her hair was like their wild little wings, her tiny pouting mouth was pushed forward almost like a beak, and though her eyes were less dull and glazed than theirs, they, too, were round, and stared steadily into space—she had never thought her eyes were like that when she played with the pink-eyed mice.

She grew to think she was big sister to the nightingales, and through this fancy, her love for them increased. She no longer went to them simply for amusement, it was her happy task, her lovely wish to watch over them and protect them; she imagined she was a grown-up being in charge of all the little captive souls, and more than once, she wondered whether she should not open the cage-doors and the windows that the nightingales might fly forth to their free forests. But fear of her uncle withheld her, so brutal in his cups that he would have killed her had she given the birds their freedom. She gave herself up to caring for them and safeguarding them, till Alas Schemp, softened by the tenderness she showed them, instructed her in the art of bird-lore—she was an apt pupil, and studied with a gravity rather unimaginable in a little girl not naturally so sedate. Wherever she was, whatever she was doing, even if she were in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek with the cherubim, she would break off at once if she thought any danger might be threatening her darling birds, and she would dart towards the tower ready to attempt every danger, and run every risk. That was how it chanced that although she was deadly afraid of cats (perhaps on account of her erstwhile friendship with the mice), and although a shiver of revulsion ran through her at even a glimpse of the treacherous creatures whose claws are always ready to strike, Alas Schemp surprised her one evening standing rigid before

the tower-room door, wild and beside herself, brandishing an old stool at a miserable-looking gutter-cat, a hideous animal with famished eyes who was about to spring at her.

A little later, the thought struck her that she also should be able to sing like the nightingales since she was so like them. Oh, why, being their sister, could she not sing as they sang? That she could not at present sing like them was somehow incredible, something that could not last.

She tried to utter their lovely nocturnes.

She listened to them for hours in her uncle's absence, not simply for the delight of listening, but to discover the secret of their song. Pouting her lips, swelling her throat with little tremors, she shaped unuttered notes.

Why did she not utter those notes? Was it because she feared that her voice might be too unlike that voice which she dreamed of possessing? Was it because it would have been unbearable if the nightingales had grown silent, angered at the audacious imitation? It was not until she was far away from them in the loneliness of the Cathedral, and not even then before she had hesitated trembling, that she at length ventured to sing a little, in an undertone, ready to break off if she realised that her desire was unattainable. But once she had made the attempt, she was not utterly downcast. She could not as yet compass that wonderful first note whose sound is like the wing-beat of an angel, whose

long-drawn-out quiver fills the night with dark enchantment, but her trilling was not too despairingly different from theirs.

It seemed to the little girl that day by day she sang better, and she grew at length very near to loving the sound of her own song. One night, grown less diffident, she dared to sing to the nightingales themselves. Standing close to them, she poured out music from her soul's depths, and trilled with all the strength of which she was capable; she gushed out a frenzy of falling closes, and the birds did not grow silent, they answered her, and took up her song. She was filled with unspeakable joy. She had really, really mastered the music of the nightingales, and she was their sister in all things now, even her voice was theirs.

Someone struck her a violent blow across the back.

Alas Schemp had just entered in a blind rage. What was the brat about to imagine she would ever be able to sing like his divine birds? Really, it was pitiful, such brazen conceit was something to be proud of, for sure. Furiously he struck at her, and snarled with laughter when she broke into a storm of weeping. Not that she minded being beaten, she was used to that, but she sobbed to herself that Alas Schemp was right, that he knew better than she, and that she would never be able to sing, like the nightingales, never—unless a miracle happened.

Such a miracle did happen.

VI

One day as she was going into the tower-room, she started back in terror at the sight of Alas Schemp leaning against the wall with a livid face, his eyes fixed in a glassy stare.

"What is it, what's the matter, Uncle?"

"Look," he said. "Look."

In his open palm lay the body of a bird. The best beloved of all the nightingales was dead. The beadle had just come upon him as he opened the cage to put in fresh food, lying on the sand-strewn floor, lifeless, his feathers draggled and dull. Other nightingales had died at other times but they had been lightly forgotten. They could easily be replaced when springtime came. But this nightingale could never be replaced. He was the glory and perfection of the tower-room aviary. He was supreme and like to no other, grown old in slavery, but keeping the kingly state of the free wild untouched, singing like an exiled Dante, singing like a captive Tasso. His voice rose above the rest to the wedge of night-sky between the houses till it created an illusion of moonlit solitudes and illimitable spaces.

The child caught her uncle's hand, she kissed the poor little body despairingly, and her tears dripped on its wings.

Alas Schemp retreated sobbing—no doubt he was

making for the tavern to drown his grief in the wild fury of schiedam.

But the little girl had made up her mind that the nightingale should be buried with fitting obsequies. Near the stone that covered the dust of the great Emperor, she remembered that the paving had cracked beneath the weight of footsteps, and that it shook every time it was trodden on.

She went down to the Cathedral, lifted up the piece of stone, and with her fingers she made a little grave in the brittle cement.

The body of the bird lay close beside her.

She took it up, laid it in the grave, and slid back the stone. The Emperor and the Nightingale slept side by side. She went to the Madonna's altar, and brought back a bunch of flowers which she strewed over the sepulchre. She went to the holy-water stoop, dipped one of her fingers in the holy water, and sprinkled it on the sepulchre. Then, kneeling down, she sobbed, for there was no solemn music to celebrate the last rites; she sobbed, and so sweet, so wild, so cadenced was her sobbing that now her voice was indeed the voice of the nightingales. The soul of the dead nightingale sang in the breast of Luscignole.

BOOK TWO

I

Now they were both happy, Luscignole and Alas Schemp, she because of her nightingale-notes, he to hear those nightingale-notes of hers. He was in such haste to reach the tower-room to listen to her and the birds that he scarcely gave himself time to grow drink-sodden; he would rush up the stairs, so slightly intoxicated that he only occasionally missed his footing. There was something magical to him in the sound of the little girl's voice. She spun out silver chains of sound, and uttered long-drawn-out cadences that filled him with joy and pain. Although he was not soft-hearted by nature, Alas Schemp could not refrain from loving the little girl who gave him such delight, and stroking the soft strands of her tossed hair, he grew to love her as he had loved that dead king of nightingales, dead and buried under the stone side by side with the Great Emperor.

Others listened to the child-singer as well as he.

On summer nights after the taverns had closed, the

bird-lovers seldom failed to gather in the Cathedral Close, and their delight was mingled with wonder, for they knew that the sweetest nightingale was dead, and could not guess that his place had been filled by Luscignole. They could not help thinking how amazing and perverse it was that this contemptible creature, nothing but a beadle, repulsive and a confirmed drunkard, should possess such birds, while professors, judges, rich townsfolk, people of decent standing had to content themselves with screaming finches and chattering warblers. Their one-time admiration was clouded with envy, and as is usually the way, jealousy gave rise to black suspicions and ugly designs.

Some time ago, there had been a rumour in the town that Alas Schemp, in order to tame his captives to such a pitch, had had recourse to illegal practices, perhaps, even to witchcraft. Nobody actually went to the length of affirming that the beadle had dealings with some Daemon whose special providence was the tempting of bird-fowlers, but even those who did not believe in either God or the Devil were ready with sly insinuations anent those ancient legends concerning breeders of cormorants, sparrow-hawks and swans who had sold their souls in exchange for the mystic secrets of their art.

The great ornithologists of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and La Haye would have been greatly amused by such rumours. They would easily have guessed by what

means (nefarious but not supernatural) Alas Schemp achieved his ends, and induced his birds to utter such pure and liquid notes.

But the ignorant citizens were not sufficiently skilled or far-seeing. When it was solemnly maintained that Alas Schemp had dealings with the Devil they believed it. Such superstitions were more common in the town than our enlightened minds can grasp; in spite of the factory chimneys whose shrill whistles tore the air, in spite of the wan factory-hands in whose breasts were the demons of hunger and destitution, it still clings to the superstitions of the past. The story of that dead Empress who kept beneath her tongue the wondrous pearl brought by the serpent is still remembered there and people still recall the legend of the basketful of sea-sand which Satan bore on his shoulders till the insinuations of an old woman caused him to drop his load which formed a new hill in the countryside. Such a town still sunk in mediæval dreams was ready to accept the unlikely, even the incredible; the detractors of Alas Schemp would easily have succeeded in their aim had their idea been to drag some scandal to light that should bring down the wrath of the Cathedral Clerics on the beadle, and thus deliver them from the misshapen dwarf and his nightingales.

The beadle, however, continued to fare between the tavern and the tower, alternately intoxicated with music, sleep and schiedam, paying no heed to the plots

and counterplots which grew more deadly hour by hour.

One day the aged beggar woman (who persisted, despite the rare visitors, in standing before the brazen gate split by the satanic claw, holding in one hand a pewter cup that served as a begging-bowl with a copper piece chinking in it) beckoned to Luscignole and whispered to her:

"Truly a little maid like you, so good and so saintly, always poking about in the Cathedral too, oughtn't to go on living with a monster who's in league with the Devil."

"Who are you talking about, please?" said Luscignole.

"About Alas Schemp, the beadle."

"But he's my uncle, good mother—is it he who's in league with the Devil?"

"Everyone in the town knows that. What I can't make out is that when you've climbed the stairs you haven't caught sight of his tail-end disappearing, or smelt a whiff of sulphur . . ."

The little girl burst out laughing, but the old hag went on:

"Laughing won't do you any good. What's true's true. You can ask anyone if it isn't gospel that Alas Schemp has agreed to give his soul to Satan before ten years are up in exchange for the secrets that make his birds sing better in their cages than the wild birds in the woodlands. Besides, you've only got to spy on him when he's alone with his nightingales. You'll soon see

that he doesn't treat them as other bird-fowlers do, and as for me, I wouldn't be at all surprised if his nightingales weren't really nightingales, but ugly imps from the pit . . ."

Luscignole went away thoughtfully. It was certainly queer that such lovely sounds re-echoed from the cages of Alas Schemp, it was strange that she herself sang with the voice of the deep forests. Perhaps it *was* compassed by some spell. Her small soul was haunted by the ghosts of fear, as were the far-off pillars, the font, and the marble tombs of the Cathedral. Though she had hidden herself at times in the Emperor's sarcophagus, or behind the pillars of the crypt, she could not always keep out a terrifying thought that some white form, a phantom perhaps, might glide forth between the graves. Her mother had often told her how, long ago, the devil had lent vast sums to an order of poverty-stricken Carmelites who had not sufficient funds to finish building the Cathedral—perhaps he sometimes materialised in the holy place where, thanks to the cunning of a monk, he had been repaid for his loan with the heart of a she-wolf instead of a Christian soul.

Luscignole's uncle had often terrified her with his drunken furies, when ferocious grimaces altered his whole aspect; besides, she knew that he had been seen at night in the streets eating the raw flesh of gutter-rats. But at the time being he frightened her far more in a different way. She began to imagine that the hands

and garments of Alas Schemp were impregnated with a singular smell—the reek of soot and sulphur . . .

At length, one night, she had a dream (or was it a tiny ghost with shadowy wings that came to her?) of the nightingale she had buried in the cleft stone at the Emperor's side.

He spoke, or rather, he sang, saying in stammered cadences—for dead birds murmur so inaudibly—disquieting things: "That Alas Schemp boded no good to his nightingales, that he loved them, but with an evil love, and that she who was so tender-hearted, would do well never, never to be cruel to those singing captives whose sister she was . . ." He grew silent, he faded . . .

She woke trembling, her hands pressed to her forehead, and for many days she brooded over this dream that had come to her . . .

II

From that time forth, she began to spy on Alas Schemp.

It chanced most frequently that, having closed the tower-room door behind him, and having seated himself on a low chair near the cages, he paid no notice to a light sound that he took to be the movement of a nightingale from one twig to another, or the rustle of wings. But occasionally when the child fell clumsily

against the wainscotting, he got to his feet in a fury, as though he had been surprised at some evil action, and hurling himself towards Luscignole, he threatened her with his fist, or actually beat the poor little sobbing creature. The only way in which she could avert the battery of blows was to utter her nightingale-notes; instantly transported, he spared the bird-child when he would unhesitatingly have beaten the girl-child to death.

But neither threats nor blows could turn her from her purpose. Whatever might come of it, she would follow the half-understood council of the nightingale-ghost.

What was it that she hoped to discover? She scarcely knew, though she was so anxious, and yet so afraid, to make the possible discovery. Oh, suppose that one day she should suddenly chance to see, as she peeped in at the door, the phosphorescent glow, the ghastly red and black of some hideous shape, horned and cloven-footed, stooping over Alas Schemp as he refilled the food-vessels, and whispering to him with hardly-moving lips the ingredients of an infernal potion that would madden the nightingale-souls to a frenzy of song! Oh, suppose she should chance to see Alas Schemp, sodden with schiedam to such a pitch that he dared confront demoniac presences, listening to the words of some kobold or hobgoblin which held a soundless flute to its lips, and drew music from the birds by the dumb ripples of its fingers!

Shivers shook her from head to foot at such thoughts; as though she too were a bird, she seemed to feel a quiver of terrified feathers over her whole body.

But she could not discover anything really untoward in the aspect of the beadle, or in his methods of procedure; he drank abominably, as he had always done, was more or less brutal in his manner towards her, and only melted, with a rapturous ecstasy in his red eyes, when, to please him, she mingled her voice with the nightingales.

It was useless to have made a spy-hole in the door with a gimlet when, even though she remained unseen, she could discover nothing.

She began to think that the old beggar-woman was crazed, and did not know what she was saying; and that tiny birds who sleep side by side with Emperors do not really rise from their graves to give advice to little girls who trill and warble, as they, living, trilled and warbled . . .

But at last she did come to see something queer about Alas Schemp. It was the beginning of April. Even in this grey town where mists mingled with the factory smoke, there were fugitive glimpses of sunlight; breezes redolent of far-off meadows blew across the sky, and even frolicked with the lacklustre tresses of the factory-hands whose straw hats appeared less drooping; the bindweed that climbed towards the windows of the tower showed tiny green shoots, that were pale promises of

flowers. A swallow uttered its piping cry in the jaws of a gargoyle—and this heralding cry of a winged creature marked the change in Alas Schemp.

Far from sleeping the whole morning as was his invariable custom, he now rose early. From the next room, Luscignole could hear the sound of his feet on the bare tiles; she also rose as quickly as she could, and peeped through the spy-hole. She saw a strange sight, not terrifying in itself, but terrifying because of the fear that was in her. The bird-fowler stooping down was bending wire to a semi-circle; he joined two ends together, and tied the four ends very tightly with another piece of wire. Next, having knotted a piece of cord to the window-fastening, he threaded in and out about a short spindle a shuttle of silken threads; they stretched out when he moved his little finger—and meshes formed, a net began to grow . . .

At the same time, Luscignole saw on the table rounded steel tubes that looked like sheaths, some fifteen or twenty inches long.

What were all these things for? She had a kind of presentiment of what use was to be made of them, and yet she could not explain clearly to herself . . .

Then she noticed that two or three times he shook the earthenware jars where the flour-mites were kept, that he picked up handfuls of bran, and stared at them intently. He grinned with delight when a big black fly crawled up his thumb. Luscignole knew how the flour-

mites are metamorphosed, and the fly did not surprise her. But what made Alas Schemp so gleeful? She stole away swiftly, for he was coming towards the door.

Next morning, she was even more puzzled. When she peered through the spy-hole, her uncle was not to be seen. She ran to the next room where he slept; it was empty and the bed was in disorder. Alas Schemp was not in the tower, nor was he in the Cathedral where she sought him for over an hour. Such an infraction of his usual routine was absolutely unprecedented.

His manner when he did return was peculiar to a degree.

Towards midday, Luscignole who was keeping watch in a corner of the great bronze gateway, saw Alas Schemp appear breathlessly, hatless, twigs in his hair and grass in his beard, his pockets bulging mysteriously, his coat bulging out over his chest as though it were concealing something; and although he could hardly be drunk at this time of day, he looked as though he had come red-handed from some sinister deed, his face was ghastly and contorted like that of a murderer who has been wounded during the struggle to the death.

He went hurriedly through the postern-gate, took the winding stairs three at a time with such haste that at every other minute he crashed his head against the wall, pushed open the tower-room door, and slammed it violently behind him.

A key clicked in the lock.

When Luscignole reached the landing, she found the door closed, and when she put her eye to the spy-hole she was taken aback to see nothing but darkness; by chance, or purposely, some cloth or curtain obscured the daylight. All that she could make out was continual comings and goings in the room, the sound of cages being moved. She heard the trickling sound of water being poured out, and the little terrified cry of a bird who has dashed against something and hurt itself.

She returned to the Cathedral, weary of her useless watch.

What had happened? What had her uncle been doing away from home that morning? What was he doing now in the tower-room? She decided to be patient. In a few hours she would know everything. After supper, Alas Schemp would go as usual to the tavern, and she could go into the room, the key of which he invariably left behind.

She was doomed to be disappointed.

After the meal, when the twilight filtered wanly through the windows, the beadle did not leave the tower; hurriedly wiping his mouth, he went back to the aviary-room where he once more shut himself in, and Luscignole, who had followed him, bruised her head against the slammed door.

So she would never discover anything. She could not

tell what was going on, even though she had been urged to the revelation by the nightingale-ghost. Instinctively she lowered her eyes to the spy-hole, and caught a ray of evening light. The cloth or curtain must have been shaken down by the crash of the closing door. She stared through the narrow opening. She so longed to find out what was happening that she was no longer afraid. She must know the truth, however horrible that truth might be.

In the shadowy gloom, she saw Alas Schemp go from one wall to another, and stop by the table as though he were placing something on it.

Oh what would she do if the night grew altogether dark before that which was about to be done was done?

But there was the sound of a match being struck; there was a glimmer of light about Alas Schemp who stood with his back to the door, a kind of aureole surrounding him. She supposed that he was going to light a lamp that he had put on the table. No, he turned slightly round, the match had gone out and his face was in shadow; it was only a few minutes later that a light, a peculiar light, certainly not that of a lamp, quivered on his face, his neck, his body and his hands with a rosy reflection. Luscignole could not mistake whence it came—charcoal was beginning to glow in the furnace in which she, the little housewife, used to heat the irons. Why had Alas Schemp lit the furnace? By the flame

that streamed from it, she distinguished three or four of the steel sheaths she had seen that morning lying on the table. She could not guess for what purpose they were intended, yet she sensed that they were tools for some horrible design; she made out long pipe-stems without bowls, and by the side of these lay long, shining, slender, sharp-pointed instruments rather like knitting-needles. The growing light of the brazier threw a sinister scarlet on these objects, and on the face of Alas Schemp who leaned forward evilly.

At a movement he made—at that moment he looked more like a devil than a creature of flesh and blood—the heart of Luscignole contracted with agony.

Stretching out one of his hands, Alas Schemp poised one of the fine needles delicately between two fingers, and holding it by one end, he struck the other into the heart of the glowing embers.

Oh, why was he doing that?

She trembled, tried to control her trembling, fearing that she might betray her presence by some movement of her shaken body against the panels of the door.

She kept quite still.

Two or three times, he lifted out the needle whose point was already red, put it back in the flame once more, and waited. He drew it out again—now it was no longer red, it was white-hot. Then holding the needle between the thumb and first finger of his right hand, he took in the other one of the long white pipe-

stems that had no bowl, and thus armed—armed, yes, but against whom?—with the nail of his ring-finger he raised the hole-pierced cover of one of the steel tubes.

Out of it appeared the small, wild, ruffled head, the round eyes of a nightingale.

Luscignole thought she was about to die of terror. Why was that bird, that darling bird whose sister she was, held captive there? What was going to be done to him? She foresaw, she grasped that something unspeakable was about to happen. She wanted to scream, yet dared not, she could not even avert her panic-stricken gaze.

Constricted in one of the round and narrow tubes in which recently-snared and untamed birds are kept so that they shall not break their wings or tear out their plumage, the nightingale remained motionless, his head held fast between his shrugged wings. Only his eyes were alive—haggard, deep, wild, forest-sick eyes that would never again see the dark mysterious woodland. The eyes of the captive singers, she remembered, did not hold such black lightnings—they would have looked dead eyes beside such eyes as those. Ah, in those eyes the grief of exile burned; refusal of slavery and defiance of the endless night of captivity smouldered in their depths.

Meanwhile Alas Schemp was . . .

"No! No!" she screamed.

But her scream died unuttered in her constricted throat.

Alas Schemp had heard nothing. His face incarnadined by the fire, he went about his task.

Very carefully and unerringly, he put the steel tube over one eye of the nightingale. With the tender circumspection of a mother who smoothes aside the crib hangings to kiss her baby without waking him, he blew aside the smoke of the furnace, and now with a light and skilful touch, he insinuated the white-hot needle through the hole towards the eye.

She screamed, she screamed.

Perhaps she only thought she screamed, or perhaps, wholly intent on his horrible task, the inquisitional dwarf was deaf to sound. He calmly achieved his end, while, she, terror-stricken, in a fury of despair, clenched her nails into the door as a bird's claws grip the tree-bark, and stared on in sick horror.

The point reached the eye—she imagined she heard a slight crackling sound—the feathers bristled on the proud head of the victim whose whole body shook so violently that two or three times the heavy steel tube shivered with the shock.

Then, as the needle and pipe-stem were thrown aside, Luscignole saw a small round eye in which no longer shone the forest-longing, an eye that was vacant, dead, where nevermore the star-begotten dream would be reflected. Leisurely Alas Schemp put back the needle

in the brazier as it had grown cool. Two or three times he withdrew it from the flame to see if it were red, to see if it were white; he waited patiently.

The child behind the door went mad.

One day, playing in the apse, she had heard a dean say to one of the archdeacons that the Cathedral had been threatened by the roughs of the town; the factory-hands, men and women, misery-stricken wretches grown weary of the apparent deafness of God, sick of the miserliness of the rich, and the cruelty of the capitalists, had often plotted to set fire to the Cathedral, the ancient symbol of everlasting slavery. The half-understood, long-forgotten words of the dean suddenly sprang into her mind. She forgot the games of hide-and-seek she had played with the cherubim, she forgot the Madonna with the battledore hand who had played with her and blessed her; she was glad now that the little mice had nibbled the charnel-house bones, and almost sorry that she had darned the shift of the Blessed Virgin; she longed to see the Cathedral, where such horrors could take place, crash down in flames. Had she been able, she would have set it ablaze herself.

Now she knew why it was that Alas Schemp was hated, now she knew why the old beggar-woman by the bronze gateway had warned her that she was living with a creature who was in league with the devil. Oh, if it had been no more than that. But Alas Schemp was a thousand times viler than if he had but sold his soul

in exchange for the mysterious secrets of bird-lore. He could not even be satisfied with the cruel delight of caging nightingales; he took them and blinded them, enclosing them forever in solitary darkness that they might no more be agonised by the remembrance of their native woodlands, gilded by the sun, silvered by the moon, and that, forgetting, they might sing more beautifully, more wildly-sweet.

Now she knew why the nightingale buried side by side with the great Emperor had appeared to her. Poor little winged ghost who, living, had suffered the torture that other nightingales must undergo, he had come to beseech her to spare them the unending night that hung beneath his seared eyelids.

And as she thought of all this, it seemed to her that being a bird-child, a day would come when she too must suffer torment, and that a white-hot needle would be set against her eyes until she, too, could see no more . . .

What could she do? How could she struggle against the will of Alas Schemp? As she hesitated in agony, the torturer skilfully inserted the re-heated needle through the tube towards the nightingale's remaining eye . . .

This time, she uttered a cry of horror and fury that re-echoed in the silence of the Cathedral, and stumbling down the stairs, pushing open doors, throwing out her arms with wild gestures, she fled . . .

III

She ran through the night-silent streets. She did not know where she was going, where she would go. She ran on and on.

For a minute she thought of taking refuge in the Cathedral, of seeking sanctuary in the cavernous crypts, of begging protection from the holy angels who had been her friends for so long; she thought of praying for the safety of her nightingales from the sacred pity that must still infuse the shift she had darned, the shift that had once lain so softly on the sweet breast of Mary. And, perhaps, by the granite slab that lay over the Emperor's bones, the nightingale-ghost would arise, shrouded in a minute, wan shroud pierced by a skeleton wing, and would whisper to her what she must do.

But she was afraid of venturing within reach of Alas Schemp.

Wherever she might hide in the Cathedral, that face incarnadined by the spluttering fire, that red-hot, white-hot needle-point would find her out, nor would the dark shadows of the crypt, the protection of the holy images avail to keep away that dreaded approach, the touch of a hand on her shoulder, the touch of the searer of eyes.

She ran on and on. No-one was about. The windows were blank, dead as the eyes of blinded birds. The

night's sorrow was intensified by the scattered stars in its blue haze. Why did those stars shine when those eyes in which they were once reflected were forever unseeing? What could the people, asleep behind the calm walls, be dreaming of that they did not rise, go forth in arms against the Cathedral, and rain curses and blows on the foul executioner of the fragile singers? O Jesu! they had all been blinded, some, long months back, others this very night. Now Luscignole knew everything. She thought of those eyes so fixed and glazed in the depths of the cages, and in her despair she reproached herself. Had not she herself known joy of Alas Schemp's crime? Was it not because he was a fiend that she had had so much delight of the bird-songs, and was it not because of that delight that she had longed to sing as they sang? It was to his black desecration that she owed her nightingale-voice, her nightingale-voice of which she was so proud.

She ran on and on, throwing her arms out wildly as though to ward off pursuit. Her tangled locks whose silver-gold was mingled with the silver-gold of starlight shone like a pale track in the night-dark streets. Her tresses were like the trail of a minute comet which is seen swiftly cutting the sky in the far distance. She went through the soundless, deserted town, through the gloomy outskirts, seeing from far the red glare of factories and furnaces, and magnified by her terror, they seemed to become a hundred Alas Schemps looming

gigantic before gigantic braziers, heating red-hot irons in enormous glowing ovens to burn out the eyes of gigantic nightingales. Her horror redoubled, she ran faster on and on towards the unknown, towards the darkness lit by more numerous stars—for there are more stars over the meadows than above the town from whose watchful silhouettes they shrink affrighted. Panting, and swaying unsteadily, she ran on and on. She climbed a slope—it was that very hillside that had been formed of the devil's sea-sand load—felt she could go no farther, yet still climbed on, till she slipped and fell tumbling down the other slope, in utter exhaustion, yet ready to struggle to her feet again if the threat of Alas Schemp and his red-hot needles confronted her. But there was nothing to be seen—she was on the outskirts of a wood where scattered violets gleamed in the pale moonlight.

Utterly alone, utterly hopeless, what did the desperate little fugitive thing do?

She sang.

Just as the wildest nightingales sometimes sing on the very day of their capture, their first despair bordering so closely on hope that they utter their most enchanting notes (so soon to die away in silence, never to re-echo again till they are overcome and blinded), so did she, the bird-child, sing, and her song was so sorrow-laden, so ecstatically a nightingale-song that all the nightingales of the wood awoke, and leaving the care of their

nests to their dumb mates, filled the wood with wild music.

Broken with agony and joy, she ceased at last, when they, too, ceased. A rosy streak of dawn lit the sky as she closed her eyes in sleep among the ferns that made her a nesting-place.

When she awoke, the wood was delicious—but she remembered it. She remembered having come here with her mother when she was still a baby. It was a coppice where the townsfolk pic-nicked on Sundays, and they had come to gather flowers, for Luscignole's mother had tried to earn a few additional liards to make up for the tapers she could not sell. And in spite of the rosy light of dawn on the shivering grasses, in spite of the shreds of mist, like gauzy veils, that the fairy-dancers had left behind them on the ground, in spite of the chirping of thrushes and the faint humming of dragonflies, in spite of the cool green light that filtered through the leaves, Luscignole wept because she was still so near the town.

She thought that she had put herself forever beyond the reach of Alas Schemp, but her fragile strength had taken her so short a distance in her night of flight. What could she do now? Whither could she go? She was filled with unspeakable terror at the thought of the beggar-infested highways. Wherever she fled, she would be taken. It would simply be said that, child-like, she had wanted to play all night long in the woods—and so everything would be at an end. She would be led back

to the tower where birds were blinded. It was daylight, and the nightingales sang no more; their silence made her even more despairing.

Suddenly in the distance there sounded a gay little chime of bells as if Oberon and all his train of elves were drawing near.

But it was no fantastic elf that appeared—instead, she saw a horse hung about with bells, a very old piebald horse, lean, dusty, lame and panting, almost at the end of its tether, and yet somehow, in spite of everything, it had a lively air as it loomed into the innocent gaiety of the morning.

Behind the horse, at a bend in the winding road, came a vehicle on wheels, a caravan, or something similar, four planks to the right, four planks to the left, four planks for flooring, covered over tentwise, beneath which canopy issued oaths, laughter, and a whole jumble of domestic noises, and from whence sleepy little heads peered out.

Luscignole stood astonished.

She was most surprised at one of the small heads—its floury face overhung by a wig from which a tuft of tow stuck out in a comical manner.

"Clown!" suddenly grunted a voice with the hoarse accents of the inveterate drunkard. "Clown, tell Polyphemus to stop."

"Clown" was the floury little face with the tow wig; "Polyphemus" was the horse. Straddling the ancient

nag, "Clown" whispered in its ear, and Polyphemus answered with a nod of his head.

The caravan stopped.

Out of it came: first of all, a very fat man in a purple robe embroidered with golden storks—he jumped out very quickly without touching the step; next, a very old young lady, not at all pretty, with the paint peeling off her cheek-bones, who looked rather like an aged dragon-fly with her hectic colour and her crackling and rumpled green gauze; next, a very lanky, supple and emaciated person who looked like an enormous water-snake in his parti-coloured, tightly-fitting blue and yellow; after him came three wolves, or rather, very fierce dogs, and lastly and very leisurely, a huge white bear with a wagging head. The bear, however, proceeded to remove his head, and disclosing a sunburnt cheeky little face remarked: "The best thing about this here bearskin is that it keeps you warm at this time of day." Now out tumbled three little girls gaily dressed in spangles. As for Clown, he went on talking to Polyphemus. Having straddled himself across the horse's neck, he was obliged to maintain his balance by alternately clutching first at one ear and then the other.

The fat man in the purple robe embroidered with golden storks, who was evidently the leader, snorted:

"What an accursed night! Nobody's worse to sleep with than Cunégonde—she's not satisfied until her legs are half across the waggon."

Cunégonde was the elderly dragonfly—she answered fretfully:

"You can't stretch yourself out anyhow. Japhet was nearly on top of me."

"Oh, go on with you," said Japhet who was the White Bear, "I suppose it would have been all one to you if I'd been strangled by the Human Serpent who's at his tricks even when he's asleep."

The Human Serpent, the lanky, supple individual in the snaky motley, put in:

"Blame it on the dogs. They really think they *are* wolves, and I suppose that it was because they thought I was a real serpent that they bit me in the calf."

"You think too much of yourself," said the elderly dragonfly acidly.

But it was generally agreed that the bad night had been caused by the dogs; the dogs, however, took no notice, let themselves be scolded, and hardly growled.

"Come, let's see to our breakfast," interrupted the fat man.

"Yes, what about breakfast?"

They were unanimous on that question, except Clown (child or dwarf), who stopped muttering into Polyphemus's left ear.

"Breakfast? What are we going to breakfast off, I should like to know?"

"There's plenty of food!" screamed the Dragonfly in a fright.

"There *was* plenty of food. We ate it all up in the night, me and the kids, and the dogs."

There was an angry uproar. But Clown was exaggerating. Half a loaf of brown bread was discovered in the wagon, besides the remains of a stew, and a basket of ripe blackberries they had bought out of kindness the day before from a little girl in the village. A few minutes later, all these people, this little band of strolling players making for the neighbouring fair, were seated before the greensward cloth of the glade, and were greedily devouring the fragments, amid general laughter, with no desire for better food; the wolfish-looking dogs, squatting on the violets, gaped with hunger, waiting for the scraps, while Polyphemus, now that the wagon was lightened of its load, contentedly munched the flower-sprinkled grass to which still clung the shredded mists that the fairy dancers had left.

Hidden behind the trunk of a larch-tree, Luscignole watched these strange beings, half-fearful, till her astonishment gradually overcame her alarm. She guessed they must be mountebanks eating their breakfast on the ground after a night's jolting in the caravan, and she was sure they could not be wicked because they were laughing and joking. Serious-minded people might sneer at them, but she knew that *they* would not put out the eyes of helpless birds. What gave her still more confidence in them was the presence of the three bespangled little girls, whom she thought lovely; even

the wolves did not look cruel. She grew bolder and bolder, and at length, going right up to them, she dropped them a pretty curtsey.

"Good-morning," said Luscignole.

"Wherever have *you* sprung from?" cried the Clown in good-natured surprise.

Being a dwarf, he thought of himself as a giant, and liked to exercise a kind of indulgent protection.

She took courage because the dogs had not growled, and were looking at her without anger.

"I came out of the wood," she said.

"And where did you come from before that?"

"From the Cathedral."

To the players accustomed to any and every resting-place, there seemed nothing out-of-the-way in that, and they did not question her further. But Japhet, the ruddy-faced urchin in the bearskin asked her:

"What do you want, kid?"

"I want to come away with you, and be a player like you."

"That's not so simple," said the fat man in the purple, stork-embroidered robe. "We don't need anyone, for a start. It's a sure fact that the Human Serpent'll pass out in two or three months unless drinking fattens him up a bit, but until he does, we don't want anybody. Besides, you're not half long enough, and not nearly supple enough to imitate boa-constrictors sliding between chair-rails."

"And besides, we don't pick up brats on the road," said the Dragonfly whose years had soured her. "The chit's a thief, for all we know."

Clown said:

"There's no such thing as a thief. Rich folk pretend there are thieves to save themselves from giving money to them who've never had none. Look here, two people go to court—one man's barefooted, the other's a millionaire. The millionaire says: "That chap there's taken my watch." The barefooted man gets sentenced. That's that. But it's all wrong."

"Yes, it's all wrong," said Japhet.

"What's wrong about it?" demanded Cunégonde.

"It's wrong because if millionaires have watches, it is only because six thousand years ago they stole them from barefoot folks."

"Stole them? Where?"

"In the Earthly Paradise."

"Rubbish!" said the Dragonfly. "But all the same, we can't carry off children without knowing something about them . . . or later on, we shall be accused of stealing child—— . . ."

"If kids get stolen, it's the folk that let them stray on the roads who are to blame," said Clown.

"And besides we don't even know what such children can do in the way of work," she went on.

"That's true," said the leader. "What can you do, eh, my lovely?"

"Me?" asked Luscignole timidly.

"Yes, you, to be sure."

"I don't know," she said.

"Come, come, so you don't even know what you can do?"

"No."

"But you want to come along of us?"

"Yes."

"Look here, can you dance on the tight-rope?"

"No."

"Can you swing on the trapezes?"

"No."

"Can you ride bareback on a galloping horse?"

"No."

"Can you eat burning tow, swallow swords, or throw knives at a board without touching anybody standing alongside?"

"Oh, no, no, no, I can't do any of those things."

"Well, then, what do you think we can do with you?"

"I don't know," said Luscignole, hanging her head.

"The best thing she can do," said the Dragonfly, "is to go along home, if she's got a home to go to. There's enough of us to feed without picking up all the brats we meet. Bah! she isn't even pretty."

"She must wait till she's as old as you to be pretty," said Clown shrieking with laughter. "When she's turned fifty, she'll be pretty all right, eh?"

But Luscignole had gone slowly away, and they

finished their meal. Then they stretched themselves drowsily on the greensward that was no longer cloth, but coverlet. How pleasant they thought it to lie there in the morning cool, among real trees, under real sky—eagerly they inhaled the pure air after the sweating atmosphere of oil-lamps and the dust of the highways. Sated with food, they sank deeper and deeper into the soft grass—worn out, the bespangled little girls lay sleeping, their heads pillowed on the haunches of the dogs.

But suddenly Japhet exclaimed:

"What's that?"

"What is it?" asked the fat man in purple with a start.

"I don't know for sure," said Japhet. "It's mighty strange, though. Nightingales don't usually sing after daybreak, and I never heard a nightingale sing as this one does . . . listen, listen."

Even the sleepiest and weariest of them listened. For beneath the branches echoed the loveliest song they had ever heard; from the first note, silence itself grew expectant, and in silver cadences the wild lost rapture of sound died away in softest closes.

"Oh, how beautifully that bird sings!" said Cunégonde, for even she was charmed.

Luscignole came from between the trees. She drew close, and said:

"I was that bird."

"You shall come with us," said the fat man in the purple robe embroidered with golden storks.

And they led her away. Clown, dwarf or child, whispered in the left ear of Polyphemus: "Ah, now that we have so sweet a singer, you will soon be eating new-mown hay from mangers of beaten silver."

IV

Probably there is no older town in the world than that to which the mountebanks brought Luscignole for the annual fair which is held there for two weeks in April.

Scattered over the vine-grown hillside between two crumbling ruins, one an altar to Bacchus, the other a temple of Minerva, it straggles down the slope with its cracked and ancient houses, its fragmentary towers towards the wide peaceful river's placid waters. From afar, it resembles a great herd of wild black horned rams suddenly petrified to stone. It is not very big, yet it is too big for its few inhabitants who, when they venture forth (which is seldom as though they almost fear that the tottering chimneys may fall and crush them), move so softly in the eternal twilight of the leaning houses that they look like wandering ghosts in a ghostly city. Everything is muted in this town. The barking of a dog is an almost-forgotten sound, as is the

cry of a child from behind the vacant windows. Only the wind wails mournfully and vaguely between the houses. No clock strikes the hour. Apart from the pendulum that tick-tacks in a tall black case in the dining-room of the Hotel de La Poste, no other clock sounds in the empty silence. But at night-time, watchmen whom the occasional travellers hear but do not see, watchmen who may be no more than the uneasy shades of those long dead once more walking their accustomed way, cry the hours in an ancient tongue, a harsh, croaking language that no-one any longer understands.

Even by day, the town is dark. Even in the clear summer hours, it remains withdrawn and shadowed by the immemorial sadness of the low-hanging clouds.

But there comes a time when suddenly, as though the black, petrified herd on the hillside had begun to frolic and gambol, the town awakes, stirs with life, and comes out of its dreams. A hundred clocks strike the hour, carrillons of bells peal forth, cabarets and theatres are opened, the streets resound with footsteps, song and laughter, while at night rockets light up the altar to Bacchus and the Temple of Minerva, putting the terrified clouds to flight. With languid surprise, the slow monotonous river mingles its ripple with the sounds of idle merriment, and strains of music and the patter of dancing feet chime with its sliding waves where once the Lorelei sang.

This awakening is the Annual Fair.

In one respect, the Fair is world-famous, and for this reason it is the envy of the Fairs of Leipsic, Dresden and Nijni-Novgorod, Sirinagor and Neuilly, famous though these are.

For it is to this Fair that all the animal-tamers in the world come to buy wild beasts. Nobody knows why it should be held here rather than elsewhere. It has no facilities for transport which such a Fair would seem to demand. No railway stops here, nothing comes this way but tumbledown old coaches which have been knocked about so much that they are beyond repair. But nevertheless, hither come from the shining darkness of India, from the black undergrowth of the Congo and the steaming marshes of Florida (where coralline serpents with triple tongues seek for venom in the poisoned hearts of orchids), wild beasts that bite and tear, and tangled coils of snakes who lazily dream that they are still wound about their native bamboo stems that bend beneath their soft weight.

All the beasts that arrive at the town on long flat boats, that look like rafts, are freshly captured. It is amazing to realise that here are lions who but a month ago were drinking from their sandy streams, tigers who have been so short a space behind their hated bars that they still dream of crushing them between their strong white teeth. All these beasts, devourers of raw flesh, who have only occasionally tasted human blood, the

monkeys (for there are stupid, chattering monkeys among the ferocious crew) and the parrots who have not yet troubled to learn the speech of man, fill the night with clamour, with howls and long-drawn-out roars that echo and re-echo.

There is something rather terrible about this Fair, all this distracted battering at iron bars, all these smoking jaws with the licking pink tongues—it seems as though it is the longing and hunger for jungle and desert, the fury of desecrated forests that burns in the bloodshot eyes of the wild creatures that are being put up for sale. But all this goes unheeded, and mountebanks take advantage of the Fair to which people flock from all directions.

That April when Luscignole had been taken by the strolling players, the Fair was especially brilliant. The distractions it offered were remembered and spoken of with wonder many years later. There were circuses whose wide canvases bellied in the wind, where might be seen stalwart chargers, with satin saddles trimmed with silver and gold, who caracoled beneath the feet of star-sprinkled, gauze-clad bare-back riders; there was a giant who was so enormous that when his incredibly long-legged trousers were hung from a post they made a huge double shadow that reached from one side of the road to another, right up to the top-floor of a very tall house; there was a dwarf who was so tiny that his minute dwelling-place of painted wood with

twenty multi-coloured windows (through which he would occasionally put his head, or peer through the skylight) would not have been large enough for a family of squirrels; a fanfare of trumpets announced the Wonderful Fat Lady whose leg in a pink cotton stocking was made to quiver and display her prodigious calf; monkeys and dogs performed a play in which a baboon was condemned to death for being a refractory recruit, and who, as he fell before the firing-squad, held in his paw a half-nibbled lump of sugar; jugglers with agile fingers darted grapes from one cup to another till they appeared and disappeared as though they were being patted by a cat's paw; a tight-rope dancer lightly balanced on the wire, teased a swinging macaw with the point of her slipper amid a blare of trombones; Wild Men devoured live rabbits, and Wild Women performed brazen *danses du ventre*; Wrestlers threw challenging gauntlets to blue-smocked butcher-lads; and crazy music burst from the three dance-tents which exhaled odours of breath and perspiration. The shooting-galleries cracked sharply, the swings swayed wildly or died down in slowing semi-circles, while by night, the laughter of hyenas, the howling of jackals, the miaowling of panthers and the roaring of lions upright before the bars of their cages rose on the air thick with the reek of oil-cressets and the sulphury fumes of fireworks.

But no sooner had the tent—four stakes dug into

the ground and a strip of grey canvas—been erected, where the Fat Man in purple with golden storks was exhibiting the elderly Dragonfly, Japhet, the Bear-Man, the Clown, child or dwarf (an unrivalled merrymaker) and the three bespangled little girls riding on the wolf-dogs; no sooner had it been thrown open to the public than the takings of the other side-shows began to fall away—even menagerie-owners who had come to buy orang-outangs, elephants, or kingly tigers left the auction for the little tent which was full to overflowing night and day.

The centre of all this attraction was—Luscignole.

For never had such a singer as she been heard.

There had been singers from distant countries, singers from America and Spain in theatres and café-chantants, some of whom had accompanied themselves on the xylophone, others of whom had warbled to the cooing of flutes; there had come girls in white dresses who gave a fair imitation of bird-notes by swelling out one cheek, and putting a finger on one nostril. But even with their eyes shut, the crowd knew that here was not one of those counterfeits who make use of tiny whistles of gold or silver hidden between teeth and lip, or who whistle through a pierced apricot-stone riddled neatly through.

Luscignole was really a nightingale. Even the dullest and most insensitive thrilled with delicious sadness at the sound of her voice. They almost thought she must

have a bird concealed beneath the hem of her gown—for how could they know that she was possessed by the soul of that nightingale who slept in the Cathedral side by side with the great Emperor?

So great was her success that the proprietor of another travelling-show, whose booth and seats were almost as elegantly furnished as those of a real theatre, offered large sums of money to secure Luscignole for his troupe.

"5000 florins!"

"Are you trying to make game of me?" asked the fat man in purple with the golden storks.

"6000."

"Pooh!"

"7000."

"Bah!"

"8000."

"Pish!"

"Well, what the devil do you want, then?"

"I want—I want to keep Luscignole."

Nevertheless, as life grew unbearable in the caravan because of the Dragonfly's furies of jealousy, and as Japhet the Bear, the Human Serpent and Clown were united in anger at their common humiliation; as even the three little girls and the dogs growling with spite all vented their ill-nature on Luscignole, the leader of the troupe became less obdurate, and finally consented to part with his star for 10,000 florins, quite a considerable little sum. So Luscignole was told that after the Fair

she would have to go with the proprietor of the rival show. Go away? At first the thought saddened her because she had grown accustomed at that hour of the morning when she was not singing to visit the wild beasts in their cages.

Fragile and delicate as she was, she was strangely drawn to the huge creatures; there was a queer kind of friendship (that spirit of kinship that links all wild creatures) between the nightingale-child and the caged beasts. When there was no-one about, she sang for love of them, and no longer muttering, they lay down, their heads between their paws, and stared at her with eyes that held fathomless dreams of deserts and night-loneliness.

But she realised that in any case after the Fair she would have had to bid farewell to the animals, scattered and sold, and it mattered to her little what master she followed. She was even glad of the change since it would take her still further from Alas Schemp; she would be happy as long as they let her sing, and as long as she was always going farther and yet farther from the fiend who burned out the eyes of birds.

And soon fame, true fame, came to her.

After she had delighted the villagers and the humble townsfolk, she captivated the big thriving cities where dwell dukes and princes. Certain of success, the proprietor of the travelling-show had ventured among genuine lovers of music. The relative grandeur of his

tent had become ostentatious. A famous painter had painted gold-framed canvases that represented a hundred humiliated nightingales falling defeated from their branches at Luscignole's feet, while further on, green, yellow and scarlet-plumed ambassadors, some of whom resembled gay macaws, and others birds of paradise, were depicted bowing down before the little girl, for they had come to ask her hand in marriage with the King of Birdland, the Lyre Bird, whose portrait was borne by four blackbirds with tilted beaks looking like four little negro pages. Early in the morning, heralds on horseback, marvellously bedizened, sounded a fanfare of trumpets to announce the next performance, and to proclaim the wonder of Luscignole. In the evenings, the crowd, which consisted, not of poor folk, but of rich and stately ladies and gentlemen, trampled on Persian carpets between hangings of ruby velvet. The walls glittered with satin, gold and sparkling spangles which even outshone the shimmer of precious stones; the ceiling was a silken sky starred with diamond rays, and the seats of the boxes, stalls, and even the pit were richly brocaded.

But what was to be seen on the stage? The curtain went up on a leafy glade, and disclosed Luscignole standing there quite alone; as soon as the audience caught sight of her, they were filled with pleasurable anticipation.

The slender little thing was decked out in a feathered

dress—her smooth locks were the wings of a nightingale, and had it been less coralline, her pouted mouth would have been a nightingale's beak; every movement she made was like the first faltering attempt at flight.

When she began to sing, everyone fell silent.

Her voice had grown in beauty since she had left the Cathedral. She had over-stepped the limits of the nightingales who sing away their hearts in the mystic forests. At first she began to chirp very softly like a newly-hatched baby bird in its nest—it was scarcely audible, the pale promise of what was to follow. It was more like the gentle touch of leaf on leaf than the voice of a fledgeling. But soon the notes grew clearer, like those of a young nightingale who ventures timidly from bough to bough, but whose nest is still a cradle. Listening to the song of the parent-bird who trills sad cadences on the branch, he tries to imitate the long ripples and shakes and raptures, but he only succeeds in chattering falteringly like the blackcaps. He has not yet come to full maturity, he must wait till Autumn, when he will fly over the sea to distant lands and bring back, when springtime comes, the luminous darkness of far-away skies, the echoing silence of ruined temples, and all the unknown secrets of virgin forests . . . Then at last, singing by the side of the brooding hen-bird, his song is uplifted and semi-divine. And Luscignole became this ethereal voice; from her tiny parted mouth, as she fluttered her arms just as the nightingale flutters

his wings, issued long-drawn-out, wildly-sweet notes in which all light and darkness intermingled, till at length she swayed and drooped as if her very life were ebbing from her . . . Sometimes the body of a nightingale slain by the ecstasy of his own song is found in the woods; it seemed that so must Luscignole's heart fail beneath the rapturous burden of her singing; her eyes grew wide and glazed, she struggled for breath . . .

But after the last sobbing cadence, she suddenly smiled, and the audience in a fever of enthusiasm clapped and shouted and pelted her with flowers.

Her fame grew until it spread to the court of Germany. One gala day when the opening of a World Exhibition was being celebrated at the Palace, the Queen Empress summoned Luscignole in company with distinguished singers from Paris and Munich. It was an overwhelming honour for the little girl, who, after all, was only a strolling-player. The strange thing was that hardly any thanks beyond those courtesy demanded were given to Mallinger, Niemann, Madame Krauss, or even to Shnorr, the inimitable Tristan—all the praise was for Luscignole. When she uttered her nightingale-notes, the song of Tristan to the sun-cry of awaking Brunhilde was forgotten; the stormy wave of applause was for the Bird-Child alone.

Next day, the Empress Mother sent Luscignole a cedarwood casket filled with so many dolls and puppets that twenty toyshops might have been stocked with them;

besides these, it contained an army of leaden soldiers made in Nuremberg, for this very Christian Empress was also somewhat of an Amazon. The Grand Duke of Weimar sent an ambassador to the little girl, who, saluting her as one salutes royalty, presented her with the most delicious sweetmeats that could be made; they were contained in twenty different bonbonnières, the least precious of which was a marvel of carved tortoise-shell and embossed gold. A few days later, the Princess of Wales on her return to England sent Luscignole a silver-gilt box full of grapes that had ripened in the royal conservatories. A great many more presents were showered down on her, playthings, sweets, necklaces, bracelets and rings, for the courtiers followed the example of their superiors towards the little girl who had uttered her nightingale-song in the Cathedral, and in oil-lit booths.

Thus honoured, was she happy? Yes, she was happy. It was so amazing a turn of fortune's wheel for such an obscure little thing whose mother had hired out chairs and sold tapers to eke out a living. Besides, it was pleasant to be praised, it was pleasant to play with gilded dolls, and eat delicious sweets, it was pleasant to deck herself out with trinkets when she had earned these delights, earned them herself with her singing.

Nevertheless she was not completely happy.

She was such a little girl that she was rather over-awed by all these people, by the applause of the kings

and queens who praised her. She remembered the silent Cathedral, the sarcophagus of Augustus where she had hidden from the cherubim of the bas-reliefs, she remembered the games of shuttlecock with the Virgin whose uplifted hand blessed her play, she remembered all her childhood in the friendliness of the calm stillness, and remembering, she was very often shy among so much admiration and enthusiasm—she could almost have regretted those nights when she sang for Alas Schemp in the aviary-room had she not thought of that hideous white-hot needle spearing through the pale pipe-stem towards the eyes of the nightingale.

Half bird that she was, she was restless in theatres and reception-rooms, ill-at-ease within constricting walls. She should be living in free forests where the free wind sighs among the boughs. She ought never to have begged the players to take her with them; she could have escaped Alas Schemp by her own endeavours, and growing used to drinking only clear water from the pools, and eating the golden flies or flying ants, she would have become a real nightingale!

And now a strange desire was born in her—she longed to live in a cage.

How strange was her desire, since she was sister to those wild winged birds, strange, and yet natural, for in her breast she bore the soul of a bird who had long grown resigned to captivity. At night, before sleep overtook her, as she lay wearied out with the acclama-

tions of the town and the plaudits of the court, the thought of a green shade where she might be both free and captive haunted her persistently.

She longed to live in a cage that swung from a bough.

Yet in a sense her fame amused her. She was a bird, but she was a little girl, too, and little girls do not always dislike admiration. She promised of her own accord to go to Petrograd the following spring, for the Tzar had told Prince Fedro Schemyl that he wished for her presence; but what delighted her most of all was that a young prince, the King of Thuringia, held in great renown at that time because of his love for music, had expressed a longing to hear her.

V

Although he hardly ever concerned himself with matters of state, and at those hours when he should have been closeted with his ministers, he was scattering crumbs to the swans floating on the lake in the residency garden; although he never troubled himself in the slightest as to his people's welfare, being only occasionally disturbed by waking dreams—for he rarely slept—of famines that laid waste the countryside and filled the streets with starving citizens, no king was ever so beloved. Yet for the momentary pleasure of building a new palace, or to obtain a proper setting for one of

Hans Hammer's operas, he would calmly have robbed the public treasury of sums intended for the fortification of towns and the upkeep of the army; his brutality to his retinue was well-known, as was his savagery to his friends and his ingratitude to his parents. He never pardoned the slightest lack of respect, and he was so cruel that with his own hands he would flay living mice to feed his sparrow-hawks. And yet no king was ever more beloved.

It was because of his beauty. In the silver panoply he wore when he reviewed his regiment, mounted on a white horse whose mane was crinkled like flakes of snow, he was as beautiful as some young Duke Theseus in an ideal Athens.

There is one infallible instinct in the heart of the people; obscurely they believe that beauty is the supreme justification for all weakness and all sin.

There was another reason that made all the women of Thuringia adore Frederick; the most handsome of men, a power among the powers, no princess or archduchess would have refused to be the bride of such a King; following the true fairy-tale tradition, ambassadors with magnificent retinues arrived at Nunnenberg carrying golden caskets in which were portraits of young princesses; but instead of waiting on his throne to receive these embassies, he fled to the mountains where his old foster-mother dwelt, and shared her brown bread dipped in milk. He fell in love with no-one, he had never had

so much as a passing tenderness for one of the maids-of-honour, or an idle fancy for one of those lovely ladies that the devil sends to kings that their painted mouths may bring about the downfall of nations and the despair of peoples. No love had ever touched him. But never having loved, not being in love at the moment, he was ripe and ready for love. Every woman in the kingdom hoped that one day she might be the chosen bride, the elected mistress, and if it were likely—thus ran the thoughts of the maids-of-honour—that one day he should be attracted by some eligible heiress, it was possible—thus ran the thoughts of the marriageable young misses—that wandering incognito through the streets of his capital as was his wont, he might fall in love with some young person busily feather-stitching at her casement, and it was not improbable—thus ran the thoughts of the shepherdesses and goose-girls—that the following Spring, when he paid a visit to his foster-mother on the mountain, he might grow enamoured of some wild, uncouth country lass, and bear her off to his palace in Nunnenberg to be queen or favourite!

So all these impressionable young women turned tenderly and distractedly towards the King, just as Clytie, of old, turned towards ardent Apollo.

One day, they were filled with despair. A whisper was abroad that during his stay in the capital of a far country, Frederick had lost his heart to the Empress; what added weight to this rumour was the fact that on

his return he had caused a shrine of pink marble to be set up in one of his gardens, and lingered there in prayer for two hours every night. To what angel or saint was this shrine dedicated? It was dedicated neither to angel nor saint. On the embroidered altar-cloth between the golden chalices and the candlesticks from which tapers branched like starry flowers, there lay a crystal casket; in it was a half-opened white rose kept fresh by some strange miracle of art or science, the embalmed spirit of a flower, the very rose that the Empress of that far country had one day given him from the breast of her gown.

So the King was evidently in love and would nevermore have eyes for his faithful subjects.

But after a few months, the lover, grown careless, came no more to pray at the shrine; the tapers were no longer lighted, the chalices grew tarnished; ivy overhung the wan marble, and weeds spread their tangled tendrils in such barricading greenery across the door that it could no longer open. Neglected in its dusty sarcophagus the mummy-flower faded and withered.

The court ladies rejoiced with hope renewed, the young maidens and the peasant-girls took fresh heart. The King dreamed on, untouched as yet, in the splendour of his palace, and the fairyland of the mountains.

On the day that Luscignole was sent for, she was led without delay into a very strange garden.

" Mademoiselle," said a young boy in armour who was

one of the King's squires, "you cannot see the King, but he sees you, and can hear you. Sing to him, if you please."

With these words, he withdrew.

Dumbfounded, Luscignole gazed about her.

The garden seemed endless with wide vistas of sky between the leafy aisles—yet she could hardly breathe there, no wind stirred. She seemed by magic to have become the one living figure in a painted landscape, and living, she felt herself in the power of inanimate things —the height, the spaciousness, constricted her within prison-walls. Luscignole, bird-child that she was, poising delicately on a swaying bough, did not consciously know this, but instinctively she sensed it, and in this vast garden which was yet like an airless chamber, she panted a little . . .

The very light was not like daylight. Above the treetops, above the magnolias and cedars, she saw a fiery globe of light that was the sun; yet its rays were unfamiliar to her and shone strangely.

She began to be afraid. Backing away, she stumbled from the branches, thought she must fall, balanced herself with thrown-out arms, and caught at unyielding boughs. The leaves that her fingers encountered did not seem to be leaves. She turned and touched them again, and looking more closely saw that they were cut out of shimmering green silk . . . A song sounded suddenly. She raised her head and saw a reed-warbler hopping

from twig to twig and trilling passionately. She grew reassured,—it was like meeting a friend in an alien country—and she ran towards the warbler as she would have run towards a comrade . . . but she stopped. The flying trilling creature was not a living feathered bird, it was a mechanical contrivance such as toy-merchants display on their shelves, and that throb with song only when a key sets the springs in motion. When Luscignole drew near, the false warbler disappeared behind a tall flower that collapsed suddenly with the click of a mouse-trap.

Luscignole was utterely distracted. She had only one thought—escape. She darted down one of the long alleys that were like leafy archways. But she did not go far, for suddenly she struck her head against a blue-painted wall which was the sky-vista . . .

She broke into laughter. Now she understood. She had been taken into a garden that was like one of those painted scences before which she had been wont to sing. She would show them that she had not long been deceived. Had she not been told that the King could both see and hear her? He must be hidden, she thought, behind some flowery screen, as people are hidden in the depths of theatre-boxes. She must be worthy of her laurels. She wound her arm about a tree-trunk, slid her feet on the sand that was not sand but a fine powder of stones, and smoothing down her locks that were like nightingale wings, the bird-child began to sing. She

sang most sweetly, not with the dream-filled infinite wonder of the forest-singers, but with all her conscious art to please that unseen listener who loved music. But she could not be artificial for long, and now she became the lyric spirit of youth, the voice of woodland and cage, she sang for joy, and her voice sounded ever fresh and strange in her own ears.

As her notes faded out in clear rapture and delight, a voice that both entreated and commanded said close at her ear:

"Oh, sing again, sing again."

It must be the King who was speaking, the fairy-tale King, the Prince Charming hidden behind the trickery of some tree, or behind some corner of the sky that was nothing but a bluish mirror.

She sang again, more sweetly, more rapturously still, until breath failed her, breath and strength and heart to sing more—in exquisite sadness, she ceased.

But the voice of the invisible King said more urgently, more beseechingly:

"Oh, sing again, sing again."

She stood up, overcoming her weakness, and sang again, more sorrowfully, more mystically till her voice poured out a very passion of music and she fell exhausted on the grass that was made of mingled threads of green and gold.

She lay there a long while, exalted and agonised by the outpouring of her whole being.

A word broke the sad enchantment which must presently be forgotten with its too-great weight of joy.

" Mademoiselle."

She struggled to her feet, shook the feathers of her mimic plumage with a birdlike movement, brushed her eyes like a child awaking from sleep, and turning round, saw, clad in the dazzling white of silver and snow, a being more handsome than any Prince Charming of fairyland.

In the first moment of delight, she did not think it could be the King, even had she remembered that there are kings on earth; she thought she had wakened in some world where angels love to listen to nightingales and thank them for their songs. She only knew that she was happy beyond belief at the sight of that shining figure that had appeared to her.

She said nothing, she only stared in a kind of enchanted awe. She saw eyes that were coloured like the sky-vistas in which a thousand stars had concentrated their light, she saw a necklace of glittering stars that dazzled her. She stretched out her arms with an involuntary gesture as though joy had overcome her.

The voice repeated:

" Mademoiselle."

" Sir," she stammered, breaking the spell.

" *Sire,*" he corrected her.

She hung her head. It was the King. She was still enthralled, but a little of the glamour faded—he was the king whom she had hoped had been more than a King.

Calmly Frederick said:

"They were right. You sing exquisitely."

She curtseyed low.

"Do you like following the strolling-players from town to town?"

"No, Sire."

"Would you like to stay here near me, and to sing for me alone?"

"Oh, how happy I should be!" she said, and ventured to raise her head. They looked at each other. In each other's eyes, the soul of each was mirrored, and both were equally pure, equally sad, equally childlike, and equally cruel—for even in nightingales there is a strain of cruelty. The bird-child and the king could not turn away their eyes from one another, as though they saw themselves reflected each in each.

At length with a start he said:

"Stay here in this garden till I send for you."

"Yes, Sire," she said, and lifting and lowering a canopy of roses, he disappeared from sight. He disappeared, just as the mechanical bird had disappeared behind the flower that had collapsed with the click of a mouse-trap.

When he was gone, her ecstasy faded. She seated

herself in the silken grass beside a cedar-tree, and, troubled, she wondered:

"What is going to happen to me? Shall I be a princess, or will the King make me sing in Hans Hammer's operas of which he speaks so much?"

She waited.

The young squire reappeared, and bowing with deep respect, he said: "Mademoiselle, I pray you to follow me."

She nodded her head, and he led the way, pushing aside the boughs of the strange garden. Now she found herself in a room with gilded columns that upheld a ceiling painted with mythological scenes. At a sign from her guide, she passed between a double line of bedizened courtiers out of the door, climbed a narrow stair that wound upward like the stairs of the Cathedral, and entered another vast room full of antique furnishings such as she had never seen; the squire having withdrawn, three old dames with white hair beneath long black veils, whose sombre trailing garments made them look like cross-grained sisters of some very severe and ancient nunnery, rose from the ancient chairs, and bowing three times said in one breath:

"Mademoiselle, this will be your apartment until such time as the dwelling to which his Majesty destines you has been prepared."

VI

She grew weary in the severe apartment.

When night fell, the three ancient dames laid her to sleep in a great ebony fourpost bed with golden hangings into which were woven pictures of kings at the head of their red-coated musketeers, kings receiving kneeling ambassadors, and further on, by the banks of a river whose waters were being swum by a regiment, there was a king on horseback—a very handsome king, too, no doubt, though he was pompous and wore such a huge curled wig that it looked as though it were made of sun-rays that had been put in curlers overnight. Luscignole contrasted him in her mind with the young Frederick in his silver-white, snow-white, lily-white tunic, with his eyes heavenly-blue beneath his yellow fringe.

In the mornings, the ancient dames—for she saw no-one else—like melancholy guardian-sisters of a child novice, brought her frothing chocolate and twenty different dainties, but sweet tooth though she was, she tasted them indifferently with sighs of weariness that would have melted a heart of stone—but the ancient dames never unbent.

The days passed heavily. For Luscignole was not allowed to go to the windows curtained with heavy brocades through which the daylight scarcely shone, and

through which the clamour of the city never made itself heard.

Her one distraction was to go into a long narrow gallery lit from the ceiling that adjoined her room, where she could gaze at the pictured women that hung on the walls. Some had doll-faces, the pink and white of powder and cosmetics over-accented by the paint; some had pale regal faces beneath black coronals of hair, while there were others clad in strange finery, women of all lands, Russians with pearly breasts, and white-bosomed Circassians insolently flaunting their white flesh above their splendid silken draperies; there were negresses whose breasts, to use the brutal *mot juste* of a poet,* were like the two round halves of a cannon-ball; there were wantons, their mouths scarlet from recent kisses, who had danced at the Porcherons, and supped at La Rapée; there were favourites of the last century, powdered and perfumed and exquisite, holding a rose between two fingers; and there were Queens of long ago, Doves from Greece, or Serpents from the Nile, the first flax-fair, the last dark as burnt gold.

For a few hours, Luscignole amused herself with these portraits. There were forty of them, and she elicited from the three old nuns that they were a collection of the world's most fair women made by Frederick I, the poet-king, that wild and extravagant lover who was grandfather of the present Frederick.

* Baudelaire.

But she soon grew weary—beautiful though they were, and intriguing as were their varied draperies—having no other company than these, and had she not been upheld by the hope of the dwelling which was being made ready for her, she would have pined in the solitary apartment.

How long, how long this destiny of hers was delayed. Had the King forgotten her? Had some other nightingale-child who sang better than she been brought to him? She questioned her guardians vainly, for they either replied: "Wait!" or: "His Majesty will make all ready in his own time." But she seemed to have been waiting for uncounted time, and one night as they were undressing her beside the great four-posted ebony bed, she made up her mind that if nothing happened on the morrow, she would no longer endure it, she would tell them that she could stay no longer, that she must go to the Fairs with the strolling players, or escape to the forests full of bird-songs.

Now that night after the three old dames had left her, having first offered her in a crystal cup encrusted with rubies a rosy wine that would, they assured her, induce sound slumber, she lay utterly relaxed, her eyes so heavily weighed down that she could not even think . . soon she slept deeply . . .

But asleep as she was, she still had a glimmering of consciousness. Things were happening about her, real or unreal, that she vaguely distinguished through mists of sleep.

She thought that she was lifted from her bed, and dressed in strange garments such as she had never worn.

Then she was taken up, taken out of the room. By whom? By confused shapes with gold at their wrists, by richly-attired phantoms. They handled her gently, they touched her tenderly and lightly. Yet she was borne away with incredible swiftness.

They seemed to descend staircases whose shadows were broken here and there by flaring torches, they seemed to descend many flights of stairs; she could not stir hand or foot, but she felt herself being moved, she saw the ruddy glare in the darkness—and then she was conscious of a soft coolness on her cheeks that soothed her in her sleep. It was like the first breath of dawn in a black night.

Next she thought she was being laid softly in some coach or chariot; she heard horses neigh, she heard the clic-clac of whips and the swearing of postilions. But she was sure it was all a dream, and she told herself she would remember it so that she might tell it to herself when she woke. There was the grinding sound of horses' hoofs on the gravel. With a jerk that Luscignole thought must be her own involuntary movement, the chariot dashed forward so swiftly that in the bewilderment of her dream it seemed like an arrow-flight bearing away the archer.

Stars like golden moths danced past the chariot-

windows, and streamed into the darkness like lurid gleams in thunderous clouds.

Now, as she lay without stirring where she had been laid, as though she were in a coffin, she heard a prolonged, deep murmuring. Perhaps they were going through a forest, or along the sea-shore. How she wished she could see clearly. But vainly she tried to raise her heavy lids, only to sink once more in deeper shadow, deeper darkness. She lay just as though she were dead.

Long after, how long she never knew, a rosy streak of dawn shone on her shuttered lids, as lightly as though the finger of a daybreak fairy had touched them so imperceptibly that she scarcely felt it; to her amazement, she was no longer in the ancient chamber with its sombre tapestries.

Then what she had imagined to be a dream, was no dream.

She rubbed her eyes, leaned on her elbows, and gazed about her, wonder-stricken, but not fearful.

She was lying, not on a bed, but on a wide bough, slung crossways above the ground. All about her was the cool freshness of a dew-spangled glade, above her was the shadowy blue of the dawning sky. Something trembled against her cheek—it was a branch, a real branch—the soft breath of the gently wind-stirred woodland assailed her deliciously.

She did not move. She did not know where she was,

but she was content to be there. She felt that joy which an exile feels when he awakes after many years in his own land, in his own longed-for house. She felt that she was at home, and like a fevered patient drinking long cold draughts of water, she inhaled deep breaths of the woodland, the sky and the silence where the last notes of the nightingales were dying away.

Little by little, day dawned.

Little by little, Luscignole saw shapes grow sharper and more definite. As the sky lit up, the grassy floor of the glade was streaked with rose and gold. Above her, below her, to right and left of her, there was sky and grass and forest. She stared suddenly at herself. She saw that she was clad in wild dark feathers, and as the sun broke triumphantly through the dimness, she saw that she was a nightingale in a great cage, a cage with spaced-out bars, hanging from two boughs of a giant oak in the very heart of the forest.

BOOK THREE

I

She was in a cage—in a cage in the heart of the forest. All about her breathed the wild charm of the sun-drenched woodland, from all sides rose the fresh scent of grass, the chirping of nestlings, and the subdued murmurings of distant streams. At last she was surrounded by the cool whispering trees and the unbroken solitude.

The cage was very big. Through the bars which were made of young bark-stripped ash-trees, the fragrance and the incense of the forest-world was wafted in to her, and with her heart full of joy, Luscignole understood that by some magic her double dream had come true: she was a caged nightingale, and yet a nightingale of the woodland.

Several days slipped by. As she grew accustomed to it, the solitude seemed even sweeter; sweeter still were

the sun-rays and the clear moonlight. Yet she did not sing; she did not reply to the nightingales that complained at night in the mysterious darkness, she did not even answer the nightingale that sang on a bough of her own oak-tree.

Where did she sleep? She slept on the wide bough that had been hollowed out like a raft; animal pelts had been strewed there to keep her from cold.

What did she eat? She ate dainties that were put there to tempt a little girl while she slept, dainties that would also have pleased a hungry little bird.

Every morning when she opened her eyes, she could see that the cage had been tidied, the bars had been dusted, and fresh water had been poured into the porcelain cups. She was being thought of, she was being cherished—she was happy because they treated her like a newly-captive nightingale.

How did she spend the hours? Sitting on one of the crossbars that was deepest in shadow, she watched the greenflies buzz past, amused herself with the frolics of the flying ants, pricked up her ears when the leaves rustled, and trembled when she heard the tread of a woodcutter in the glade; sometimes she stayed in a corner of her beloved cage, balancing on one foot, with her feathers ruffled about her, and stared fixedly before her with round eyes wide-open—she could not imagine anyone being happier than she.

But what of the King?

The third day after her captivity in the delicious solitude, at that hour of night when stars spear through the treetops like darts from a quivering silver bow, she heard the steps of someone drawing near, and guessing that it was the King, she, the King's Nightingale, began to sing.

Never had she sung so sweetly. For now all the forest music, the rhythm of moonbeams gliding from bough to bough, the harmonies of the infinite silence were in her voice. The mysterious soul of night and the wildwood sounded in her liquid notes, and the nightingales themselves fell silent, listening . . .

Then she in her turn grew silent, for a quivering of leaves and a crackling of twigs told her that the King was going away. It was for him alone that she sang.

It was for him alone that she sang every night when a sound of footsteps presaged his coming—she sang until the undergrowth rustled beneath his retreating steps. How sweet it seemed to her to sing to such a worshipper of music. She was even glad that he remained invisible, for unconsciously she preferred to remember him as he had first appeared to her than to see him again. Luscignole in her forest would not have changed destinies with the happiest person on earth.

But one night, asleep on the hollowed bough, she started into sudden wakefulness. Why? She could not have said. Her plumage ruffled up with fear, and she felt the instinctive terror of a bird who senses the

sparrowhawk's downward destructive swoop though unable to see his planing wings.

Branches rustled and swayed as though they were being pushed roughly aside. Was the King coming back? He did not tread so heavily, with such a furtive step—the sounds that drew nearer and nearer to Luscignole, who listened, dismayed and distracted, were like the movement of some evil-doer, man or beast, cautious and sly. Who could be coming? Was it someone who intended to work her ill? Instinctively she felt that never had she been in more deadly danger. She dared not look between the bars of her cage to see who might be drawing near. There was the thud of a fall as though the comer had missed his footing and stumbled on the grass. Then nothing more. The only sound that broke the silence was th plaint of the nightingale who sang in Luscignole's oak. And for this bird, her neighbour (they had grown to know and love each other through interchange of song), she was as fearful as for herself. For she knew that the dumb, invisible enemy was still there—he was watching motionless, waiting ambushed, no doubt for daybreak, to carry out some evil design. The wind seemed to her laden with a heavy menace.

Sick with fear she could not close her eyes. The nightingale in the tree was shaken with the same dread, for though he had stopped singing, he was not asleep. Luscignole distinctly heard him hopping restlessly from

twig to twig like a bird threatened by the forked tongue of a coiled snake.

Hours trickled away. There was a quiver of rosy light on the smooth leaves, and gradually the first glow of dawn shivered over the forest. Mists hung in the windless air, rising from the grassy hollows where the transient silver of streams flashed, and from the dewy glade—the forest was still in shadow, the trunks of the oaks and beeches were like dark columns, and with its leafy canopy, it was like a great Cathedral dimmed by a blue haze of incense.

As the mists grew insubstantial, and light transfused the gloom, Luscignole took courage, and looked down to see if she could distinguish in the underbrush the shape whose threatening watchfulness she knew. She tried to persuade herself that it was only some harmless animal who had been prowling about in the night, and from whom there was nothing to fear. But climbing from the bough, and pressing her face close to the bars of the cage, she saw suddenly through the now gauzy and diaphanous mist a dark form, the body of a man lying face downward in the grass at the foot of the tree.

For a long while he lay inert. But slowly he raised an arm, and with long hairy fingers began to pull out tufts of grass—he uprooted a whole patch, and left a square of brown wet earth.

Luscignole lifted her head—she had heard a rustle

of wings. The nightingale in her tree was stirring restlessly, watching and wondering, and she saw that he twisted his head among the leaves, and gazed obliquely at the man. She trembled. She knew how curious nightingales are, and, skilled in bird-lore, she knew also how fowlers take advantage of this very curiosity to decoy them into traps. The unknown watcher by night must be an expert bird-snarer, and no doubt he was now making ready an ambush into which the nightingale of the oak would fall.

She longed to make some stir, and terrify the bird into flight. But he had grown accustomed to the movements she made in her cage, was used to her little skipping steps and to her laughter, and whatever she might do would have no effect on him. She grew more and more uneasy. The noise of retreating footsteps among the twigs and ferns redoubled her alarm.

She had not been mistaken. The man was no longer there; but pegged out on the newly-turned square of earth was a wide-spread net and a needle on whose point a baited worm wriggled and twisted.

Nightingales are as greedy as they are curious. If the bird who was watching caught sight of the tempting morsel, he would fly down from the tree, and seize the worm in his beak—and the net would fall on him, he would flutter his wings in vain in its meshes as the hunter approached from his hiding-place behind some tree-trunk to snatch his prisoner.

At this very moment, the nightingale flew from the tree, hopping from twig to twig with hesitating little skips, his head alert as though he were about to spread his wings—but he did not take flight, he went closer and closer to danger. Oh, now he was on the grass, going nearer and ever nearer—he preened himself, and still seemed half-inclined to spread his wings, but at last, uneasy and yet determined, suspicious, and yet starving, he was so close to the net that one movement of his craned-out beak would have been enough to make the net fall.

No words could tell Luscignole's terror and pity for the bird that was about to doom itself to captivity; to captivity and to another Alas Schemp who would burn out its eyes that it might sing more sweetly . . .

An idea came to her. She began to sing, but interwoven in her song was the faint warning cry known to birds as a signal of deadly danger. The nightingale heard and understood, and with a sudden sweep of wings soared swiftly away into the maze of leaves overhead to the safe aisles of the forest. Luscignole had never felt such joy—she had saved her woodland brother, and he would live freely, he would sing in the springtime to delight his little mate; she was so happy that she renewed her passionate nightingale-song.

But her joy was of short duration.

The fowler, returning, gazed upward towards the cage that until that moment he had not glimpsed among the

crowding oakleaves, and Luscignole, panic-stricken, saw the face of Alas Schemp, saw that he had seen and recognised her.

It was natural that he should be spying out nightingales in the spring-green woods, since it was his delight to capture them and burn out their eyes. No doubt there was an empty cage in the tower that he longed to fill, and therefore he had come with his nets, and his steel tubes that did not even leave the choice of death to the prisoners.

Meanwhile he was eyeing her greedily.

His small fiery eyes glittered with triumph; he stood taut as though about to spring on her and bear her away.

Luscignole in her terror began to dart wildly like a fear-crazed bird from corner to corner of her cage; she tore her plumage on the crossbars, grazed her lips on the bars. But Alas Schemp with a sinister grin clutched a tree-trunk and began to climb slowly towards her. One of his hands shot through the openings of the cage. He was lifting the latch, the door was swinging back, he would have her for his own, the searer of eyes would take her away . . . She began to scream, she shrieked desperately for help, and she stammered the name of the King. But Alas Schemp flung himself into the cage, and grasped the vainly-resisting child.

"Let me go!"

"Come with me."

"Go away, go away!"
"Come with me, I say."
"You dare not take me."
"Will you come along?"
"I am the King's Nightingale . . ."
"Come this minute, I tell you."

And hugging her against him, silencing her outcry with a hand smeared across her mouth, he held her under one arm as though she had been a doll—she was even lighter, being a bird,—then, gripping the edge of the cage with the other hand, he let himself drop to the ground, and bore Luscignole away through the forest.

II

Just beyond the frontier, at the foot of the mountain, there is an inn beside a small round lake that looks quite blue among a dark ring of fir-trees. It can scarcely be called an inn, for people rarely stay there. Thievish beggars, lean tramps and guilty prowlers escaping from Thuringian territory halt there for a breathing-space. Any chance traveller who does stay in the lonely tavern is liable to be wakened at night by a dull rumble over the stones and a confusion of hoarse cries and whispers. If he opens the window and looks out, he may distinguish in the darkness a gigantic body wrapped in

sacking that is being dragged along on ropes by four or five men—the burden is the carcass of a stag killed by poachers in the neighbouring forest, and which they will presently dismember in the inn-cellar and sell at the market.

A few tables of worn stone on pedestals of unstripped oak are scattered about the low paved room with its raftered ceiling frowning down on the charcoal-smeared walls.

After having come through the forest, it was on a bench by one of these tables that Alas Schemp finally settled himself. As though he were laying down a load, he set Luscignole beside him on the hard wood. Dead or senseless, she did not stir. He also sat motionless, leaning heavily on his elbows, burying his face between his hands in silence. Only the hoarse mutter of his breathing broke the empty stillness of the room.

But when the hairy-lipped serving-wench who looked like a cavalryman in woman's clothes had placed pewter vessels and an over-running tankard of foaming ale, together with a bottle of schiedam, on the table, he struck the stone with his fist, and turning to Luscignole, he said: "Come along, now, drink, will you?"

She shuddered, and slightly raised her head without opening her eyes. She was wan as dead jasmine-blossom; about her pouted lips that were like a bird's beak, there was a smear of blood where she had struck herself against the bars, and the draggled feathers of

her plumage gave her the look of a small, despairing bird.

"Come, now, drink," he went on.

"No," she sighed out.

"But I say you shall drink."

He spoke so brutally that she shrank as though from blows. She started away instinctively, and raised her lids; she uttered a thin cry, so terrifying did he look. Repulsive as he had always been, he was now horror incarnate, so heavily did his huge, hairy head weigh on his flabby wrinkled neck, while his frothing lips and his small ferocious eyes made him look like a maddened beast. He was dressed in sordid rags through whose rents his bones protruded like gnarled stumps.

He understood that he was terrifying the little girl. A fury of rage shook him. Savagely he took up the schiedam and poured nearly a quarter of the bottle into his tankard of beer—for now he mixed the two to intoxicate himself quicker—and drank avidly, his throat swelling with gurgles. Then laughing hideously, he muttered:

"Now you can see what I've come down to since you left me, you wretched little brat."

He drank again, and spat out among hiccoughs:

"Oh, Jesus, what a dog's life. First of all, the Cathedral was burnt down——"

"The Cathedral!" Luscignole cried out.

"Lord only knows how it came about. You can

understand sheds and houses catching alight—there's wood and furniture and stuff enough to kindle *them*. But a Cathedral built of stone—no other timber in it than the deacons' stalls—what could a fire feed on there, eh? They said it was set afire by the factory-hands who threw cartridges and bombs under the benches in the nave and below the stairs. But that doesn't explain how marble and granite came to burn like straw. They burnt all night long. When I came out of the tavern, the people were all shouting with amazement and fear, and scarlet tongues were licking the gargoyles, flames exploded the windows which melted and ran in streams of colour. The dome crashed in with a thunderclap that shook the ground, and the bronze gate glowed as red as though it had all hell blazing behind it."

"Oh, God, Oh, God," said Luscignole sobbing.

For she thought of the gentle Virgin with her uplifted battledore hand; she thought of the bas-relief Cherubim who had been her playmates, and above all, she thought of the nightingale buried at the Emperor's side whose tiny bones must have been crushed by the mass of falling masonry. Oh, poor, tiny skeleton.

With tears in her voice she said: "But the tower? Was the tower burnt down, too?"

"The tower burned like everything else. Red flames spat from the windows."

"But . . . the nightingales . . ."

"I rushed up the stairs. But at the first bend the

flames sizzled my hair, scorched my skin and forced me back. I stared up at the aviary-room window. I couldn't see any flames, but the windows were red-hot."

"The nightingales! The nightingales!" sobbed Luscignole.

"The glass splintered. I saw the nightingales beating their wings in the streaming smoke and sparks. They must have escaped from their charred cages."

"Then they flew away? They're not dead?"

Alas Schemp turned away his head, and in a dull voice went on:

"Yes, they're dead. They struggled to get away from the flames, but they couldn't tell which way to fly; they hung quivering, fluttered a little way, came back, and vanished in the devouring smoke . . . Next day, among the ashes and cinders, I found their charred and blackened bones . . ."

Luscignole, her eyes hard and dry with anger, shrieked out:

"They couldn't tell which way to fly because they were blind, because you had burned out their eyes with your needles, devil, devil, devil!"

The drunkard shed maudlin tears.

"That was why they could not escape, that was why . . ."

But when he had swallowed another few mouthfuls of schiedam, his rage abruptly returned.

"There was no Cathedral left standing, so there was

no need of a beadle. They wouldn't even let me sleep among the ashes. They'd been jealous of my nightingales, so now they revenged themselves finely—nobody offered me so much as a bed in a barn, or a shakedown in a cellar, nobody offered me alms, not even a mouldy crust of bread. They even threatened to accuse me along with the factory-hands if I didn't clear out of town. . . . Idiots! I might have burnt down the Cathedral, but would I have burned down the tower with my nightingales, my nightingales who sang so sweetly and were all my happiness? They drove me away. Hell's fury! those were days and nights . . . nobody would take pity on me because I'm hideous, because I'm deformed, because I dribble, and because I don't smell sweet . . . nobody would hire me as a serving-man, or a dish-washer or a farm-hand; they wouldn't even let me turn the spit in the kitchen. I went barefooted, and I tore my feet on the stones and cobbles; I had no hat, and the brambles snatched at my hair. I was starving and wretched, I had to set to begging. I used to sit on the steps of some church or under some doorway holding out my hand all day long, doubled up to make myself look even more hump-back; dribbling and drooling so that they should think me epileptic. Folks are sorry for anything that horrifies them. But I hardly got a sou. At night I only had enough for a few pots of beer and a half-bottle of schiedam. Jesus! I was as accursed as if I'd been a hound of hell. That's how I've been living, that's how

I shall go on living. Sometimes, I have a snatch of happiness. That's when I go snaring nightingales in the wood with a net I've made. But when I do capture a bird, what good does it do me? I have to let it go because I haven't a cage, and even if I had a cage, what wall should I hang it to?"

With a look of hatred at Luscignole, he gritted through his clenched teeth:

"But I shan't sleep alone any more in the mud and stones at the bottom of ditches. . . . Did you think your way of life was going to last forever? People get to know of things, you brat; people pick up newspapers in the gutters, and read the news. You had a gay time at the fairs and at court; you slept softly, didn't you; you ate delicious tit-bits, and if you'd wanted to, you could have drunk twenty bottles of schiedam every night. You were the King's Nightingale, weren't you? . . . They said he even preferred you to Hans Hammer himself. Hell's thunder, you brat, you treated yourself a little too well while your old uncle was suffering torments—he was like a stone crushed to powder by a hundred wheels. But that's all done with—you shan't lie soft while I lie hard. I came on you by chance while I was snaring nightingales—a queer idea of your King's, that, to shut you up in a cage!—and I took you off. I'm your only kin, you don't belong to no one but me, I can please myself what I do with you. Princes and Emperors can't stop me from being your uncle. Besides, we're no longer in your

king's kingdom, we're across the frontier. I'm master. Now you'll be put through it, I can tell you. I shan't go begging any longer. I'll sit on church steps and under doorways with folded arms. You'll do the hand-stretching—or I'll——"

The masculine serving-wench with the bearded lip who looked like a cavalryman in woman's clothing came back into the room.

"Twenty kreutzers," she said.

"Twenty kicks in your belly!" shouted Alas Schemp staggering up and striking out with his splay feet.

He fetched her such a blow (for the dwarf when he was drunk had enormous strength) that falling backwards, the servant wench measured her length on the tiles.

"Let's get out of here," said Alas Schemp to Luscignole.

And dragging her along with him he made off.

III

They begged their way through country and town, asking for bread at farmhouse doors, asking for pence beneath the windows of big houses. They might have slept nearly every night in one of those hovels where for a few sous the destitute can find shelter—for she looked so wan and anguished that they would have given

her a roof for pity—but the scanty alms that were put into Luscignole's hand were spent by him on drink. He scarcely ate, drink served him as food. She gnawed some crust thrown out into the gutter. She grew emaciated. It was painful to see her. The feathers of her plumage had fallen out like those of a moulting bird, but unlike them, they had not grown again. She had only a poor little shift of clinging woollen stuff which was soon in rags, and through the rents, the framework of her bones was visible. Poor little thing, she was so delicate and fragile. Her cheeks were colourless, her lips were pallid, but saddest of all were her bare feet scarred by brambles, torn by the cobblestones—had they not been slippered with dust, they would have looked raw and bleeding.

Her heart within her was sick with despair. She had been a darling of kings and queens, she had been clad in fine, gold-embroidered garments, she had been given toys that a baby princess might have envied. She had been the nightingale-child of the youngest and most handsome king of all. And now, homeless, starving, she wandered in rags in company with a repulsive and brutal deformity.

Yet on the whole Alas Schemp did not treat her too unspeakably. He threatened her with words, but he seldom beat her, and then only when he was dead-drunk. He even ceased from beating her at all after some time, and Luscignole could not but notice that he showed her

occasional kindness. Thus, if they lay in some barn, he would untruss a bundle of hay that she might lie more softly, and if the road were sharp with stones he would carry her a short way. If they were passing through a coppice, he would point out to her the boughs that were most heavily laden with nuts, the bushes that were most densely hung with blackberries. One day, after having left her for a few minutes in a busy street, he came back and offered her cakes which most probably he had stolen from some baker, but stolen or not, he offered them to her. She ate them gratefully, and eagerly, being a little greedy, like the nightingales.

As the days passed, he became less and less brutal, he grew gentle, almost affectionate. Had he not been so evil, had she not remembered the white-hot needles sliding through the pipe-stems, she might almost in the end have grown to love the poor unsightly creature.

But as he softened to her, he began to brood. The sinister light in his eyes gave place to melancholy. Sometimes, as though he were suffering from some incurable grief that drink could not alleviate, he would replace his untouched glass on the table. He seemed distraught, and fixing his eyes on space, he would sit sunk in silence like some sick animal. Once he sobbed distractedly between his interlocked fingers as though he were weeping for the death of a beloved. Thus, Luscignole was scarcely surprised when one day, as they stood among the litter of a building-yard, he took her in his

arms and pressed her to his heart with hiccoughing sighs and tears, as if he had been a mother embracing a long-lost child.

IV

It was a lovely summer night, the sky was sown with scintillating stars; holding her closer still, he said very softly in her ear, so softly that she could scarcely hear him:

"I entreat you, I entreat you."

What was he entreating of her? Moved in spite of herself by the sadness of his voice, she asked him:

"What do you want? What is it that you want?"

He repeated:

"I entreat you, I entreat you." And fell silent. The emptiness of night was all about them. The windows were vacant, the town slept, and the calm sky smiled down upon them. Why did he not explain? Why did he not formulate his desire? It was almost as if both were afraid, he of putting his wish into words, she of hearing it, once it had been spoken. They sat so still that they seemed to be asleep, each at the other's side.

He turned a little away from Luscignole, and said in a very low voice:

"Listen. I am dying of grief. I'm dying of grief. I can't live without hearing them. I can't go on living without them. I can go without food and drink, it's all

one to me that I'm dressed in filthy rags. But not to have my nightingales—that's what's gnawing at my vitals, that's what's killing me. It's strange—I'm a drunkard, I'm loathsome, rotten . . . but rotten as I am, rotten as I've always been, they filled me, heart and body and soul, with rapture. Nobody will ever know how I loved them. Their songs were sweeter to me than the choiring angels to the damned who have climbed from the pit to the gates of paradise. Their voices made light and beauty blossom within me. When their song was ended, I thought I must die of joy. And now that's all over. I shall never have any more nightingales. The flames burned the nightingales in the tower. I shall never rear any others. It's ended, it's ended, and I shall be wretched, wretched, wretched . . ."

Listening to him, Luscignole softened, for she, too, had loved the nightingales of the tower.

Then even more beseechingly Alas Schemp said:

" But you, little one, you sing as beautifully as they sang. Perhaps you sing even more sweetly. Oh, I beseech you, I entreat you, you're so gentle, and I'm so wretched . . . I have been cruel to you. I've forced you to beg, I've beaten you, but that's all over. I will beg for you, and instead of beating you, I will adore you. Save me from death, sing to me, Luscignole."

He had scarcely finished before she rose to her feet shaken by such a passion of fury as she had never known.

"Sing to you? Sing to *you*? Never, never, never," she screamed.

V

He dared no longer entreat her. From the little girl's look and manner, he knew it was useless. Should he force her to sing by violence, by redoubled blows, by refusing her scraps to eat while she grew thinner and thinner? He turned it over in his evil mind. But he realised that brutality would be idle, for he remembered how the nightingales had remained dumb for long months in the corners of their cages. He was right. The child who had sung for the Prince Charming of that far-off fairyland would not yield the joy of her enchanted notes to the torturer of her winged brothers. He was being punished for his crimes by being deprived of the delight he had had of them. Her thoughts were confused, for she was still but a child of twelve summers; only one thing was certain—she would never sing, never, for Alas Schemp.

For some time, they had lived less wretchedly. They no longer went from village to village, from town to town, but had taken up their abode in a hamlet near a famous grotto of stalagmites and stalactites where tourists were plentiful. Standing before the door of a hovel they had rented in return for a percentage of their takings, they received abundant alms, he on account of

his deformity, she because of her frail and pitiful looks, and when everyone had gone, he drank himself blind at the tavern, while Luscignole, biting at an apple which was her supper, went into the tumbledown two-roomed hut with its glassless windows, and hole-pierced roof through which streamed the acrid smoke of the log-fire.

When he reeled home from the tavern, Alas Schemp flung himself on a heap of dried grass in the larger of the two rooms to sleep off the effects of ale and schiedam. In the much smaller room, Luscignole also slept on a bed of grass, but hers was fresh and fragrant, for she changed it every day as though it had been bed-linen, and scattered flowers among it whose scent she breathed in as she slept.

She grew so used to his staggering, hiccoughing, vomiting returns that they no longer roused her; sleep was the one refuge of her sad little heart, and she slept sweetly with dreams for playthings. She dreamed herself back in the Cathedral among the saints and cherubim; she climbed into the tower and saw the filmed eyes of nightingales in their cages; then she dreamed of her lost glory, of empresses and queens, and of the King—once again she was swaying in the cage that hung from the oak-tree boughs . . .

But one night her dreams were full of terror. Through sleep she sensed the evil presence grovelling on the grass bed, that evil presence that had so terrified her when she was the bird-child of the forest. And now she heard,

or thought she heard, a sound very different to the rustle of parted leaves. It was a thin fluting noise which pierced her sleeping ear. A memory of that sound which once before had wakened her to anguished, desperate fear haunted her, but when or where she had heard it she could not recall . . . she no longer knew whether she was awake or asleep . . . the illusion of her drowsy awakening made her believe that she was still dreaming what was, in fact, actuality. Then fear seized her brutally by the throat with a strangling clutch. She was thinking of things unspeakable, she saw them before her eyes. But what things? They were so appalling that she must, at all costs, escape them . . . she tried to clamber up from her bed of grasses. But she could not move. She found that she was bound as closely as though she were in a tightly-coiled winding-sheet, or in mummy-wrappings, and involuntarily she thought of the nightingales constricted beyond movement in the narrow steel tubes . . . she was corded. She had been tied on her bed of grasses with ropes pegged to the ground, and fastened to the walls . . . Wide awake now, she opened her eyes fearfully.

Ponderous, knock-kneed, misshapen, the hobgoblin was stooping in semi-shadow over a small table where there was a stain of light that smeared the shadows with the reek of blood.

Luscignole screamed, for she remembered, now she remembered the glowing brazier, the needles, the pale

pipe-stems . . . she screamed, she could not stir, she screamed, she screamed. Her voice was muffled by a pad of cotton-wool inserted in her mouth, and speechless, motionless, she stared at Alas Schemp.

He put first one needle and then another into the brazier, drew them out, saw that they were only red-hot, put them back till they whitened—he was busily industrious like a methodical executioner.

But there was no cage, no bird in the hut. Why was he making one needle, two needles white-hot? Why was she tied to the bed so that she could not stir hand or foot? Why was she gagged? She widened her eyes, and watched with increasing terror . . . Oh, Jesus, it could not be possible that . . .

He turned towards her. He leered at her with drooling mouth. His eyes glittered so redly in the red glow of the brazier that they looked like bleeding wounds that had sight. He drew near her, bending forward, craning his neck, in one hand a white-hot needle, in the other a pipe-stem. Oh, if she could only scream, if she could only scream . . . but there was a gag in her mouth . . .

With an almost tender smile, Alas Schemp stooped over her, and put the cool pipe-stem against her quivering eyelid . . .

VI

Travellers who stay in the town where the Cathedral was burnt invariably visit the remains. They are quite celebrated, and recommended by all the best Baedekers. An iron grille prevents ingress to the still-standing walls and the crumbling stones. The crack made by Satan's claw in the bronze gateway has been so enlarged by the flames that through it, above the piled-up ruins, wide vistas of sky are visible. But the travellers do not linger among these mournful sights, they perfunctorily thank the guide who conducts parties round the relics of the Cathedral, and as they file away, they nearly all give alms to a hideous drooling hunchback for whom a pale little girl with filmed and vacant eyes asks for charity. She is blind—she has a white cataract. She can see nothing, nothing, nothing. She begs. Those dead eyes in that wan child-face are pitiful beyond words.

Alas Schemp and Luscignole have returned to that city where the nightingale tower once stood silhouetted against the sky. They sit all day on a bench by the railings. They are the Cathedral's official beggars, and it is not until night falls and the advent of a traveller is unlikely that they return to the wretched den where for some time they have been living. Before he enters, Alas Schemp stops at some tavern. He sits down, she

stands motionless while he drinks. She seems to see everything through the nothingness of her eyes. When Alas Schemp is drunk, they go away. He can scarcely walk, he reels and staggers, but she upholds him and guides him on the well-known path, the blind leading the spiritually-blind. Hapless creatures, he to be so soul-cankered, she to be so tormented. Yet they are not so wretched as might be supposed. In the hovel, Alas Schemp tumbles grovelling on the boards but he does not sleep, for Luscignole, near the window, lit by a moon-gleam that comes from afar, from the forest, the forest-solitudes, suddenly breaks into her nightingale-song. She sings most sweetly, both to charm the drunkard, and for her own delight. When she had sight, she never sang so passionately, and so mystically. She is lifted to ecstasy by her own song, and she no longer agonises in the torture she has undergone, no longer grieves for the skies, the trees, the unseen woodlands. Unconsciously she has bowed down to that implacable decree which exacts suffering and shadow and loneliness in exchange for the perfect flowering of unearthly beauty.

THE END