

Hellebars

PROLOGUE.

It was a hill in Sussex during the early spring of 1907, at dawn. A group of actors stood on the crest with Hellebore, while the others strolled down to a path which crossed the valley. On the right of the hill was the road leading back to London, and waiting there at this moment were the four hackney carriages belonging to the company. The coachmen were gathered round the first carriage polishing wine-glasses and putting them on a large silver tray.

Hellebore was wearing a black overcoat too big for him, and at his side, holding onto his trousers, stood a child of about ten years. They were both looking down into the valley, a few feet from the other actors. Hellebore had thrown part of his overcoat across the boy's shoulders.

The first morning wind was beginning to blow.

Hellebore spoke to the child, glancing down at him:

"You were asleep, Edgar. We had to carry you down to the cab."

"Jeanne promised to wake me up, but she didn't, the bitch. Did you see her?" the child asked, pouting.

"No, I only saw the Irish girl. Jeanne was still

asleep. How is she?"

"Oh, all right."

"How are things at Monty Brane's?"

The child became instantly excited and gripped Hellebore's trousers harder as he spoke, his eyes wide:

"Two of the ponies got something wrong with them," he said. "They both went down together, and they had to be shot."

Hellebore nodded, and they watched the valley below in silence. They stood close together, dreaming, while the actors behind them talked and stamped their feet. At the back of the hill was darkness, and before them was light, increasing now.

"Have you been watching Jeanne lately?" Hellebore asked the child.

"Yes, but I don't like trapeze work. She wants me to try, but I don't like the work."

"Well, they can't make you do it if you don't want to."

"Oh, Jeanne told me to tell you that people still talk about the Fins," ^{said} Edgar ~~told him~~ sleepily.

"Do they? I should never have thought so."

"What was the Fins?"

"Your mother and I used to do a turn together. Did you try those stunts I showed you?"

"Yes, and I did them on my own."

"I'll come down and see you at it one day. I'll take you by surprise," Hellebore said.

"Are you going to take me away this summer?"

"Well, the show comes off in the first week of June, - I'll write to Jeanne about it. Don't sweat on it."

The child was silent for a moment, then added:

"I heard Jeanne say to Monty you're a rich man. Is it true?"

"Yes, I'm richer than those two rolled together. What were you doing listening?"

"I was next door. I heard them."

"Don't call Jeanne a bitch, either."

Hellebore put his arm round the child's shoulder and turned to a young actress standing near him.

"Hear what he called Jeanne?" he asked her.

"Oh, I expect he hears worse than that."

"Down at Monty Brane's, you mean?"

"Yes."

Hellebore nodded:

"They have to grow up early down there."

"Has he started properly yet?" the actress asked.

"No, not till he's turned fourteen. Then he'll be like his dad."

An actor came up from behind Hellebore and whispered to him:

"Well, you can keep your dawns, Jack."

Hellebore turned with a look of surprise, and laughed.

"You'll pull through," he said. "There's some brandy coming."

The coachmen brought the silver tray and glasses

to a stile at the foot of the hill, and when he saw them Hellebore walked down with the others. When the company was together again he filled the glasses with brandy and took the tray from one person to another.

While the carriages were being turned round they stood drinking in silence, watching the dawn come up. Hellebore bent down and gave Edgar a sip from his glass.

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On the evening of Good Friday, 1920, Hellebore was due to meet Albert Lorraine in the foyer of the Hôtel de la Reine in the Rue de Rivoli. The foyer was a long hall with wicker chairs and palms on either side, and at the end there was a wide staircase leading up to the apartments. Albert Lorraine stood waiting at the foot of the staircase in his evening clothes. He glanced at his watch, then touched his hair lightly with the tips of his fingers. He was between fifty and sixty years old, a small, plump man with a very pale face. He had tiny, delicate eyes and lips nervously pursed.

He walked back and glanced in at the lounge, where there were already thirty or forty people, most of them standing and talking together. A clock on the foyer-wall chimed half-past seven.

Hellebore turned the corner of the first landing and waved to Lorraine. They smiled at each other. When he reached the foot of the staircase they shook hands in silence, looking into each other's eyes. Lorraine took Hellebore's arm as they went towards the lounge, and asked him:

"Did the journey pass quickly?"

Hellebore was shy, gazing down at the carpet of the hall.

"Yes, I enjoyed it, Albert," he answered.

Lorraine put his hand on his shoulder and walked

alower:

"There are fifty people coming tonight."

"Fifty? Do I know any of them?"

"You know Bernard Charpentier, and Eliza Manning, Francine Berger, Jean and Pierre Duloi-Bordeau."

"Is Eiselheim here?"

Lorraine shook his head and told him that Eiselheim had stayed at the theatre.

"We've interrupted rehearsals, you see," he said.

Hellebore stopped.

"What, for me?"

"Yes. We wanted to give you a good welcome, Jack."

"Have you seen Eliza?"

"Yes. She's inside waiting for you."

Hellebore glanced into the lounge and instantly took hold of Lorraine's arm. He drew him back from the door, out of sight, into the hall again.

"Is all this for me?" he asked.

Lorraine nodded with a nervous smile, blinking as he looked into Hellebore's eyes.

"But I don't know these people," Hellebore whispered to him.

"I'll keep most of them away from you. I do promise that. We'll have the introductions after dinner."

They went into the lounge side by side and most of the guests turned to look at them.

~~They went into the lounge side by side and most of the guests turned to look at them.~~

Hellebore was more at ease now. He clasped Lorraine's hand firmly under his arm and walked among the guests smiling and bowing, peering at one or two of them closely every now and then, as if he had caught ~~near~~ ^{Sight of} an old face.

"Can you see Eliza?" Lorraine asked him.

But just then a young woman came from behind Hellebore and said quietly in his ear: "I'm here, Jack." She had pushed through the press of people at the entrance. She was a well-built young woman, a little taller than both Lorraine and Hellebore, and across her right cheek there was a dark scar. Hellebore turned at once.

"Eliza!"

They hugged each other, laughing. She looked deep into his eyes as she spoke to him:

"I've been so nervous waiting for you."

Hellebore took her hand proudly and turned to Lorraine.

"Let's find somewhere quiet, - just the three of us," he said.

They walked to a corner of the lounge ~~across~~ and sat down, a little apart from the other guests. It was a kind of alcove with rose-patterned wall-paper, a little raised above the level of the salon, from which they could see all the other guests. Lorraine sat leaning forward on the arms of his chair, biting his lip, glancing about him, tapping his foot on the carpet, as

if there were something he must tell Hellebore which he could not bring himself to tell.

"I heard you kept cattle in the War, Jack," he said.

"I only had a couple of Ayrshires."

"Well, I want to hear about all that. Have you decided what it's to be after the Theatre de la Fete?"

"Yes. Madrid, - the Circo Allegria."

Hellebore turned to Eliza.

"What about Eiselheim?" he asked. "Where will he be going?"

"Belgium again, I think," she replied, watching him with a smile. "He went down well there. I shall see more of you now that you're working again, shan't I? Did you really not go on a stage once?"

"I gave three private performances, that's all. And one of those was at my own place."

Eliza touched the back of his hand with her finger-tips, ignoring all those who stood near the alcove glancing up at them between the palms.

"Why, Jack?" she asked. "Nobody here knows why you did it."

"Instinct. I took a cab round London and I could see it wasn't the place for me. It was empty. All the old-timers were gone. There were a lot of new faces backstage, and they were faces I didn't like. Something went out of me. The parties weren't the same. Those people didn't need a clown."

"He did keep his hand in, though," said Lorraine,

seeming to wake up suddenly. "Did you hear about the gymnasium?"

Eliza told him that she had been hearing about this from Bernard Charpentier the previous evening, but

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Lorraine simply turned to Hellebore and said to him, as if only this had been on his mind: "I told Benedict a dress rehearsal at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Is that convenient?"

"Yes, provided I have the stage in the morning."

"I shall call for you here soon after ten o'clock, then."

Lorraine winked at Eliza.

"Has he changed?" he asked her, nodding his head towards Hellebore.

"I don't think so, Albert. The eyebrows are a little fairer, and he isn't quite so slim." She kept her eyes on Hellebore as she spoke. "What about me, Jack?"

"No, you haven't changed, my dear. Are you going to have lunch with me tomorrow in the Crimson Tower? Does it still exist?"

"I had it lengthened," Lorraine told him. "It now has a magnificent balcony of its own, and the walls are panelled with mirrors, Jack. I shall take you round the theatre tomorrow morning."

"All right, then," Eliza said, "we'll lunch together in the Crimson Tower."

"And ask Helen," Hellebore murmured. "Is she here tonight?"

Eliza told him that Helen was at the theatre with Heinrich Eiselheim. She said this a little bitterly, and she had frowned at the mention of Helen's name. She

waited a few moments, her eyes avoiding Hellebore, than added:

"They do annoy me."

"Why, are they together too much?" Hellebore asked her.

"They spend all day together, but he never says a word to her. They just look at each other. She adores him, you know. And I think he's jealous of you."

"You shouldn't tell Jack these things, Eliza," Lorraine put in quietly. "I don't know what you can have against Eiselheim. What have you got against him?"

Eliza half smiled as she spoke.

"His silence, his composure..." she answered. "Sometimes he makes me feel quite frightened. Sometimes I turn round, and there he is watching me. His eyes are so clear!"

Hellebore laughed.

"He hasn't come here tonight," she went on, "because he is jealous of you, Jack." Lorraine tried to speak, but she cut him short. "Of course he is! And Helen must always follow his whims. Sometimes I'd like to bang their heads together."

"Don't listen to her, Jack," Lorraine said. "Eiselheim is at rehearsal."

Eliza waved her hand in front of him angrily.

"Oh, the rehearsal isn't important!" she cried. "We only finished at Brussels three days ago. He could

easily have come, Jack. So could Helen."

A waiter brought each of them an aperitif. He first of all spread a cloth over the dark oaken table, then put down the slim glasses. Lorraine and Eliza raised their glasses to Hellebore, and they drank. Hellebore smacked his lips and looked at the palms just to one side of the alcove, then at the finely-worked ceiling.

"This is different from the old place in the Rue de Tournon," he said. "They'll miss me there."

Lorraine answered him nervously, tapping his foot on the carpet again:

"I thought it was better to have you near the theatre."

"You know why, don't you?" Hellebore asked Eliza.

"No, tell me."

"He likes to keep an eye on his first turns. There's a clause in my contract about my leaving the hotel after midnight, too. He couldn't keep his eye on me in the Rue de Tournon."

"What's the clause, then?"

"You tell her, Albert," Hellebore said.

Lorraine spoke unwillingly, glancing at neither of them, as if he were the victim of a joke:

"It simply says that if Jack leaves his hotel after midnight during rehearsal time he is guilty of a breach of contract, except in the case of war, fire, pestilence, robbery, earthquake, assault or kidnap.

But Jack isn't the only one who has it in his contract."

Eliza smiled at Hellebore.

"You're his prisoner, dear," she said.

Hellebore hid a yawn with his hand:

"A willing one tonight."

"Did the journey tire you out?" she asked him.

"No. I sat on deck and enjoyed myself. It was sunny all the way over."

"Have you spoken to Bernard yet?"

He shook his head and followed the direction of her gaze.

"Where?"

"Look. He has just come in."

She pointed to a tall man, not older than forty, who was standing by the entrance to the lounge talking and laughing. He wore a heavy black cloak with a ~~black~~^{gold} clasp and ~~chain~~ at the neck, and he was just throwing it back on his shoulders. He carried yellow gloves, which he constantly struck ^{against} the palm of his other hand, and in his buttonhole was a white carnation. He stooped a little as he talked, frowning and gesticulating, then threw his head back with a laugh. He seemed to dominate those round him, and to expect their eager attention. He was slim, his face had many lines, and his gaze never dwelt on a thing for very long. He constantly looked about him as he talked, but seemed to see nothing. This was Bernard Charpentier.

"I've asked him to manage the press tonight,"

Lorraine said. "We shall be leaving the press until after dinner."

Hellebore glanced at him with a frown.

"Leaving what?" he asked. "What are you springing on me?"

Lorraine stroked his chin.

"Well, I thought they'd like to hear a few words from you. After all, no one in Paris has seen you for five years."

He turned to look at Charpentier, and added:

"Naturally, the newspapers are interested."

"Ah, the newspapers..." Hellebore nodded ironically. "What do they want to know?"

But Lorraine was occupied with something else. He took no notice of Hellebore's question and got up.

"Will you excuse me if I go and have a word with Bernard?" he asked. Then he seemed to remember. "What do they want to know? Perhaps you'd better talk to Bernard about that over dinner, Jack. I've put him next to you at table. Will you excuse me, then?"

He left them, and Hellebore watched him walk between the guests towards the door, where Charpentier was still standing.

"What's he up to?" he asked Eliza, his eyes narrowed.

"Well, you have a big reputation now, dear," she replied. "People haven't seen you on the stage for

nearly five years. He wants you to meet the journalists afterwards and talk to them."

"Well, I'm not a paper doll."

He was still watching Lorraine.

Eliza laughed and squeezed his hand:

"Perhaps you are to Albert, my dear. He has sunk six hundred thousand francs in this show. He told me this afternoon he'd never spent more on a show in his life."

"I doubt that." Hellebore glanced at her.

"I was very surprised to see that note waiting for me, you know, telling me to wear my dinner jacket and be punctual. I thought we were going to have a nice little supper-party on the stage or in my dressing-room, like we used to. Does he expect me to enjoy this?"

"What about us, then? We haven't had a bite to eat since two o'clock this afternoon."

"Why not?"

He was looking at her hair, which was smooth and short, and at her cheeks, flushed healthily now with the heat of the room. He smiled proudly as she answered him.

"We came straight from rehearsals," she said.

"Albert insisted. He promised us a little snack as soon as we got there, but nothing came of it. He said he must have at least five people from the theatre here, - so there are Frandine, the Duloi-Bordeau's, myself and Charpentier."

She picked up his glass and offered it to him, catching his smile. He took a sip and she laid it down.

Then she got up and came to the chair next to him.

"You haven't asked about the Virgin," she said.

"No, I was looking round for her a minute ago."

"Even now she doesn't look a day older than seventeen. She was a nurse in the War. She was in one of the hospitals very near the front line, and she had to deal with all sorts of horrible cases, - so Albert was telling me. And when she was offered leave she wouldn't take it. She refused leave twice."

"Yes, she's a calm girl, very calm," Hellbore murmured. "Has she still got that lovely fair hair down to her shoulders? She hasn't cut it?"

"No, dear. You'll see her at dinner."

She took his hand again.

"I heard about your son," she whispered, leaning towards him. "Where was he killed?"

"Flanders somewhere. I don't know exactly."

Eliza sighed.

"We came down from Brussels by car," she said, "and all along the road there were those ruined villages. They were all white and quiet. We never saw people in them."

They sat in silence for some time. The talk in the room was louder now, and they were more alone.

"Did you notice my scar when you came in?" she asked him.

"No, of course not. It doesn't make any difference to your face."

There was a movement close to them, and they both look up as Lorraine returned to his seat. He coughed and smoothed down his waistcoat, watching Hellebore anxiously.

"What's the matter?" Hellebore asked him.

Lorraine did not ~~answer~~ answer immediately.

"I was thinking, Jack," he said. "There's still time enough to postpone, - if you really want to." He flushed slightly, as if he had at last spoken his mind. His tone became more intimate. "I have everything ready in case you want to do the wise thing and rehearse for another week. You know what I feel about it from my letters."

"I know just when I need a long rehearsal, and at present a day's enough for me."

Lorraine frowned and shifted in his chair angrily.

"Of course, this leaves me a little worried," he said.

"When weren't you worried over a First night?" Hellebore asked him very quietly.

"I sent you twenty-four cables inside ten days, Jack, but you seem set against all advice. In 1911 you let me revise the whole of your turn, but you've changed since then." He leaned forward. "You see, Jack, business has been none too good since the Armistice, and I have sunk more into this show of yours than I like to think

about. My restoration costs since 1918 have actually trebled the fund I set aside for repairs and délapidations. During the War, Jack, my theatres went to wrack and ruin. Now without you I can't recoup that loss. Naturally, I'm unwilling to take unnecessary risks. Of course, Jack, like all business men I tend to minimise my profits and make much of a loss. But business isn't an easy game, and I don't want to throw away our chances for the sake of a few more rehearsals."

"What do you think I've been doing in England?" Hellebore asked him.

"But I wasn't there to see you, Jack, and from my point of view over here that show of ours is going to be under-rehearsed. It's not a risk I enjoy taking, and the more I think about it the more terrible it seems. Whom can I consult about your rehearsals in England? No one. Four years is time enough to lose all your abilities, Jack. In that time you could forget how to act, you could run to fat, you could lose enthusiasm, you could forget what it feels like to stand in front of two thousand people every man, woman and child of whom look on you as the greatest clown in the world."

Eliza looked sideways at Hellebore, protectively.

"Don't be depressing, Albert," she said. "You're silly to talk like that."

Lorraine continued to watch Hellebore.

"I want him to do the wise thing," he said.

"And I wonder whether an English manager would take the

risk I'm taking."

Hellebore still did not move.

"Shall I go back and find out?" he asked.

"You're annoying him, Albert," Eliza said.

But Lorraine took no notice of her:

"In the War, Jack, people used to be asking about you all the time. Bernard kept you alive in this country, and without that column of his people would never have gone on asking, Where is Hellebore?"

"Don't take any notice," Eliza told Hellebore.

"He had no sleep last night."

Lorraine shook his head and with tight lips murmured: "No, I'm very worried about it."

He gazed at the floor with a frown, then suddenly, as if light had broken from the sky, he looked up at Hellebore and smiled.

"I promise not to worry over dinner." He felt in one of his pockets. "I wanted to give you something for luck, Jack. Did I bring it?"

"Yes," Eliza told him. "I saw you put it in your pocket. It's only beads, Jack."

Hellebore smiled.

"Ah, you still carry your beads, do you?" he asked.

"Now don't refuse them, Jack," Lorraine said, "because I must be humoured in these things, as Bernard will tell you."

He took from one of his pockets a rosary with

black beads and a silver-plated crucifix. He handed it to Hellebore, who twirled it round his fingers, examining it.

"What about that one with rubies Eliza told me about in one of her letters?" Hellebore asked him with a wink at Eliza.

Lorraine glanced away slyly and replied: "I still have that. It is precious, of course."

He leaned back in his chair, as if he had performed an important office, and added:

"Now take it to the theatre tomorrow. There, that makes me feel better. Do I look tired?"

"A little pale, Albert," Eliza told him.

"Do you still suffer at nights?" Hellebore asked. Lorraine nodded.

"Nowadays I keep a little samovar in my bedroom," he said, "and when I know there's no hope of sleep I drink tea. I usually know by three or four o'clock." He sighed. "Leaving the bedroom at dawn is like walking out of a tomb. Sometimes I have gone without sleep for three or four nights together, Jack."

"You worry too much," Hellebore said. "You ought to see a doctor."

"But I don't believe in doctors." Lorraine looked down. "And the older I grow the more I think about death."

"You've a long way to go yet," Eliza said.

"Whenever I see a young girl, I imagine to myself what she'll be like in fifty years' time. I can't sit in

this lounge without thinking what it will be like tomorrow morning when everybody has gone. Sometimes I'm afraid to go to sleep, you know. Perhaps that is why I don't sleep at nights. Perhaps I'm afraid I shall die in my sleep. Well, sleep is a kind of death, isn't it?"

Lorraine raised his glass to Hellebore and smiled, as the tall doors leading into the dining-room ~~opened~~ were folded back, revealing a brilliantly lit table and a row of liveried servants on either side. The guests began to put down their glasses on the occasional tables, waiting for Lorraine and Hellebore to lead the way.

On the mantel in Hellebore's drawing room stood a slim damask vase with a handle on each side. He took Lorraine's rosary from his pocket and laid it over the neck of this vase, so that it was supported by the two handles. A large and hot log-fire burned in the hearth.

These were his apartments in the Hotel de la Reine. The time was fifteen minutes before midnight, and he had not long ago said good-night to the departing guests downstairs. The room was quiet, and his footsteps made no sound over the carpet. Across the wide windows were drawn long, deep-red velveteen curtains, and little could be heard from the street below save the occasional passing of a hackney-carriage.

Hellebore was not a tall man. He only gave the impression of largeness. He had very thick, light-brown eyebrows, a straight nose and a firm chin which he pushed forward when he was angry or rebellious. One noticed his long ears and their lobes; he sometimes pulled them with his thumb and forefinger when he was perplexed, gazing down. He was light on his feet, and he moved easily and slowly, as if he were always comfortable.

He sat down and for some time gazed into the fire, then he began to doze. His head fell very slowly to the back of the chair, his mouth opened and his right hand became limp on his knee. He breathed deeply, as though

exhausted.

A church-bell near the hotel struck midnight, and he woke up with a sharp snore and stared about him. Then he went to the bedroom and undressed in the dark. He fell asleep instantly.

At ten minutes past midnight there was a knock on his drawing room door, then silence again. The door opened and closed. Someone took two or three steps into the room, and the lights went up. A male voice called out softly: "Mr. Finstanley." It was an Englishman's voice, precise and educated. Hellebore opened his eyes.

"Who is that?" he called out.

The visitor was confused. It could be told from his tone:

"I'd no idea you'd be in bed."

"Who is it?"

"My name is Henry Sangson."

Hellebore cursed. He went to the bedroom door and opened it. He stood on the threshold in his pyjamas, his hair tumbled, frowning and peering into the lighted drawing room.

Henry Sangson stood before the log-fire, with his hands behind his back. He was a slim young man with dark hair, smaller perhaps than Hellebore. He had a sharp, pale face, and long hands. He had the appearance of a young priest with a very serious, even awed, sense of his vocation.

"I'm sorry," Hellebore murmured. "We haven't

met before."

He did not trouble to button his pyjama-jacket over his chest. At first the young man did not reply, then he spoke, nervously:

"My name is Sangson. I knew your son, - Eggar."

Hellebore walked further into the room, staring at him.

"We were in the army together," the young man added.

Hellebore shook hands with him absently, and for some time they watched each other without speaking.

"I was told you kept late hours," Sangson said, lowering his eyes. "Otherwise I should never have come."

"Were you with him when he was killed?"

"Yes."

Hellebore nodded, then yawned: "You must give me time to wake up."

Sangson remained standing in the same position, with his hands behind his back, as if nervousness prevented him from moving. He watched Hellebore breathlessly. Suddenly he said, his voice full of anxiety:

"Let me see you tomorrow!"

But Hellebore shook his head:

"Now that I'm up you may as well stay a few minutes. Who told you I kept late hours, - Edgar?"

"Yes."

"You are about his age, I expect."

"A little older."

Hellebore indicated a chair by the fire, and they sat down.

"I have nothing to offer you here," Hellebore said. "And I can't ring for anyone, because that might worry my manager. I'm a prisoner here, young man. I'm insured down to my finger-tips. Did Edgar tell you that?"

Sangson continued to watch him thoughtfully.

"Yes," he answered. "He was always talking about you."

"How did you come by the name of this hotel? But perhaps you were at the dinner-party downstairs?"

"No, I wasn't. Mademoiselle Berger told me."

"You know her?" Hellebore asked.

"A little."

"She was there tonight, - one of my guests."

"She told me when you'd be arriving in Paris and when your dinner-party was likely to end. I promised Edgar that I'd visit you."

"He asked you?"

"Yes."

Hellebore was ill at ease. He rubbed the side of his nose, watching the young man with narrowed eyes.

"Was that his dying wish?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" Sangson replied with a smile. "But I felt under a special obligation to him because we were intimate friends, and because when he asked me to come

and see you he asked me in a specially serious way."

"Why?"

"I don't know why."

They both gazed into the fire. The church-bell nearby struck half-past the hour.

"He worshipped you," Sangson murmured.

"Did he?"

"It was a kind of religious worship. The thought of you consoled him. He never connected you with the War. Among your theatres and circuses you were holy and immaculate. As for himself, he thought he was exactly the kind who ought to suffer it. So there was a kind of mercy in it for him,- " He looked up at Hellebore. " - the mercy that it wasn't being inflicted on you. If you had put on a uniform and gone out to Flanders he would have lost faith, because the only thought that made it bearable to him was the thought that there was something in the universe unconnected with war, - namely, you."

Sangson spoke clearly and without hesitation, sitting on the edge of his chair. It was as if he had been in the room a long time, whereas Hellebore was still tired, and troubled by this visit.

Sangson looked about the room.

"I feel like a child who has just come into a palace," he said. "And like a child I don't really believe you exist. After a time Edgar and I ceased to think of you in the flesh. You have a beautiful room

here."

"I hadn't really noticed," Hellebore replied in a quiet voice.

"It's the kind of room I expected you to have. Edgar told me about the extraordinary houses you used to buy in Enland, He told me you decorated them fabulously, then got tired in a few weeks and sold out."

"Oh, these are stories people pick up. I wasn't used to money, that's true. But don't believe all those stories."

"He used to tell me about your retinue of doctors, secretaries, gymnasts and masseurs in the old days. He used to tell me about your little daily rituals: massage at ten o'clock in the morning, a ride in the afternoon, a coffee-party before each performance. He told me about the banquets in your honour, your crowds at the stagedoors, your magnificent clothes, your opening of charity bazaars, your statements to the press, your signature under the forewords of books, the gymnasium you built in Wiltshire during the War which could be turned into a little theatre with a seating capacity of a hundred. There were so many things, and I've forgotten most of them. I never expected to know you in the flesh, and now, with you in front of me, I can't bring the two together in my mind - you and Hellebore. He told me about your tours from country to country, and how half the world never realised what nationality you were. The French claimed you as French,

the Hungarians claimed you as Hungarian. He told me about the royal processions of hansom carriages you used to take out of London to see the dawn come up, and the brandy you served from a tray just before the return journey." He looked into Hellebore's eyes with an expression of awe. "When you came into this room from your bedroom just now it was rather like seeing God for the first time."

Hellebore stared back at him in a puzzled way.

"Was it?" he asked.

"A porter downstairs at the door has instructions to keep out visitors. A banquet is given in your honour. Legends fly about that you keep late hours and perform every evening on two or three hour's sleep. A special hush falls over people at the Théâtre de la Fête when your name is mentioned."

"What people?"

"I'm thinking of Francine Berger," Sangson replied. "She is a lady-in-waiting of the court. A kind of sacredness surrounds you. That's how Edgar and I used to think of you. We felt we had a special claim on your attentions because he was your son and I was your son's best friend. We seemed to possess you. We could carry you like a feather in our caps, and sometimes you made us feel immune to danger."

Hellebore glanced down.

"I'm glad," he said.

"He was always proud when people told him he was

like you. And sometimes he annoyed me by appearing to have a secret too good even for me. The secret was you. It annoyed me to think that you were more his possession than mine, being his father. But I used to console myself with the thought that after all he was very unlike you: he had none of the clown in him. We used to talk about you in the dug-outs, and between bombardments, and when it was cold and raining, and when we were going up for an attack, and when a patrol had turned out badly."

The young man paused and then spoke awkwardly, shifting in his chair:

"When he was killed the world he had made up for both of us - out of you - fell to pieces, and I was left in its ruins. You see, he should never have been allowed to come back to the front after he was wounded the first time."

Hellebore's eyes were half-closed. He was not looking at the young man.

"Wounded? Was he wounded?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Sangson. "In the spring of 1916. Didn't you know?"

Hellebore's answer was hardly audible.

"No, I didn't know that," he mumbled.

"But you must have known."

Hellebore seemed to become a little impatient.

"No, I tell you I didn't," he said.

"But the authorities must have notified you."

Hellebore shook his head again:

"I never heard a word about it."

"But he was sent back to England," Sangson went on, "and he was in an English hospital for two months. It was a hospital in Herefordshire. He came back to my company the following year."

"Well, I was never told about that," Hellebore said quietly, sunk into his chair.

"The War Office must surely have notified you."

Sangson was fixing him with his dark eyes.

Hellebore shrugged his shoulders, and shivered a little. He got up, rubbing his hands together, and went to his bedroom. There he put on a dressing-gown of white towelling and a pair of bedroom slippers. Several times he yawned. He walked back to the fire without looking at the young man and warmed his hands. He then went to one of the windows. He pulled the curtain aside and looked out, leaning against the wall with one foot crossed over the other. He looked down at the lamps of the wide, empty street. It was now utterly silent outside.

"When was he wounded, did you say?" he asked, without turning.

"Early in 1916."

"Well, it's possible they notified me, I suppose. I moved about a lot in 1916. The letter was probably passed on from place to place, and then lost. I didn't have a settled address in 1916, you see. It's possible they notified me and I never got the letter. Was it a

bad wound?"

Neither did Sangson turn when he spoke. He remained staring into the fire, neat and erect.

"It was a ~~shrapnel~~ wound in the thigh from a heavy German shell," he said. "I thought it must get him his discharge from the army, because of the damage to his thigh-bone. But it healed and within six months he was fit again."

Hellebore looked up quickly at the roofs opposite:

"I might have been able to see him, then."

"Being an officer - " Sangson stopped. "You knew he was an officer?"

Hellebore made a little gasp, and lowered his head as he answered: "No, I didn't realise."

"Being an officer he knew what was expected of him, so he went back to the line in 1917, and a few weeks after that he was killed. Had his nerve not been broken when he was wounded he would never have been killed, I'm sure of that. He was killed in one of the fiercest battles of the War. He could no longer bear to hear men scream. He was always on the point of running away, he was always panic-stricken, though his face looked determined enough. A terrified man in battle is like a vulnerable child. Normally he sees his own death in advance." Sangson turned at last to look at Hellebore. "The knowledge gives him a grey, condemned, mute,

beseeking look about the eyes."

Neither of them spoke for a few moments.

"The authorities should have seen at the end of 1916 that his nerve was going," Sangson said. "But there..."

He shrugged his shoulders, and again there was silence.

"He wrote you a letter, I think, at the ~~an~~ end of 1915 or in January, 1916. It was to tell you he had joined the army and was embarking for France."

"Yes, I remember that one letter," Hellebore replied.

"He thought you might disapprove of it, and he wrote the letter to find out."

Hellebore was puzzled by this.

"Disapprove of what?" he asked.

"Disapprove of his having joined the army and volunteered for the western front."

"Who was I to disapprove?"

"He had such a deep respect for you," Sangson said. "He was anxious to know what you thought. He was anxious to have your good will."

"Oh, he had that."

"He tried to imagine your face as you read the letter. One minute he thought you'd disapprove and refuse to answer. Another minute he thought you'd be proud of him and that your answer had gone astray.

Another minute you were preparing a surprise for him, a father's surprise."

"Did I not reply, then?" Hellebore asked.

"No. I think he put it down to the bad postal arrangements. They were bad at the time. It was a pity. You could have helped him, you see. You could have prevented his death."

"How?"

"He wrote you many letters, you see, and you answered none of them. He should never have been allowed to go back to France. His nerve had gone. It was quite easy to see that from his letters. He knew it himself. He wrote you two letters from hospital and asked you to do your best for him, in just so many words."

"But I only remember that one letter," Hellebore said. "Perhaps the others never reached me. I only remember the first one, at the beginning of 1916. And how could I help a soldier?"

"You could have used your influence to keep him in England. Your influence must have been very great on certain people. In those letters he told you his nerve had gone and that if he went into the line again he'd certainly walk into trouble. He told you that nightmares woke him at night, that he seemed to hear men screaming. He wanted the company of gentle people, so that he could learn how to be at his ease again. Yet he lacked the courage to tell the army that. It was up

to you. He depended on you."

Hellebore's head was still bent forward.

"What influence had I got, - a clown?" he asked.

"Everyone knew your name." Sangson was instantly ready with his reply. "You must have had powerful friends. You could have insisted like a father on his staying in England. He expected your fatherly interest and felt quite confident of it even when he was dying."

"What could I have done?"

"The thing to do was to go straight down to the hospital and find out how long he'd be there, then make representations to the War Office, then visit all your most influential friends in London to press your claim privately. Oh, it was often done successfully. I've heard of many instances where mothers and fathers were able to do this service of mercy for their children simply by speaking to the right people at the right time. He had done quite enough in the War. People would have known that. When he was wounded in 1916 he was one of only twelve or fifteen survivors. That was out of a battalion."

Hellebore turned nervously from the window.

"You must understand, young man," he said, "1916 was one of the busiest years of my life. There were contracts to terminate, managers to see, - I had thousands of jobs to do and I was never in the same place for more than a fortnight." He left the window suddenly and began pacing the room, frowning. "My secretary dealt with most of the correspondence. And you must understand that

every year I had many, many begging letters from people -" His voice became weaker, as if he had begun to realise the lameness of what he was saying. " - begging for money, for release from gaol, for rescue from cruel husbands..."

He stopped and stared at Sangson, then walked in silence to his chair, appalled at himself. He sat down and leaned back wearily, stretching out his legs.

"Did you come here tonight to show me how much I'm to blame?" he asked.

"No, Mr Finstanley," Sangson replied politely.

"I had the letter about his death when I was alone in the country at the end of 1917. That was one of my quieter years. I thought about his death. I wrote to Jeanne straight away."

Sangson had also leaned back in his chair, as if he were tired now: "I remember he wrote your name as his next-of-kin in his army book," he murmured. "He gave your address, not his mother's."

"Well, she brought him up. I only took him for holidays and taught him a few stunts."

"Really, I suppose," Sangson said, "he invented you. You were one of his dreams, and very necessary to him. You were necessary to both of us, to bring some warmth into our bodies. We talked about you as if you belonged to us. You helped us to deny that everything we saw and heard and touched had death in it, that every man was dead or dying, that the meaning of everything in our world was death.

You helped us to deny the truth. You helped us not to die too soon." He leaned forward, and for the first time he gesticulated. "I curse the day when my eyes were opened to that empty, forlorn world where your son died. When he died he was cold, wet to the skin, speechless and blind, and he couldn't move. I remember the rain pouring down his face. He was sitting up. It was dark. All he could do was to sit and wait for death. I wish I could put that memory out. It was one thing to know and live in a dead and ruined world, but, my God, to fall into it, to become part of it as he did, to have the universe turn its back on you, to be without any foothold in a huge desert of emptiness..."

"Are you blaming me for that?" Hellebore asked him.

Sangson's lips were pursed as he answered:

"You could have spared him that."

"But I had my own life," Hellebore said quietly.

"I was only twenty-two when he was born, and I separated from his mother five years after that. So Monty Brane was really his father. I'm not making excuses." He paused, watching Sangson, as if to judge the effect of his words. "I used to give him treats, and - another thing - I never put my hand round his mouth like Monty Brane did now and again. The boy used to hear a lot of gaudy stories about me down at Monty Brane's, and he grew up proud of the name. But I never brought him up."

"You were his father."

"All I'm saying is, I had a life of my own. My father trained me up as an acrobat and tightrope walker, but I had to fight to be the kind of clown I am today. You don't learn that sort of thing in the circus, I can tell you. On the stage you have to know how to use your face. In the ring it doesn't matter. All I'm saying is, I'm made of flesh and blood. It took me years of practice to build up my turn. A lot of people used to worship me like Edgar did. That's quite natural. I was mobbed once. But you can't lay a whole war at my feet. You and I lived in two different worlds. I knew nothing about yours. Thousands of men were killed in the War, but you can't lay their deaths at my feet."

"I would never try to," the young man said.

Hellebore smiled uneasily: "You sounded as though you were."

Sangson's reply was without any warmth: "All I said was that a word from you could have prevented Edgar's death. That was all."

"But I hardly had a private life at all. Sometimes I never had a moment to myself for six months on end. Thousands of people used to write me letters. I had to travel up and down the country every week. When I wasn't travelling I was practising, and when I wasn't practising I was on the stage performing."

"Then you'd become a kind of statue," Sangson told him.

"Listen to me, young man, you could take all my carpets and my managers and my earnings and my cronies and my clothes and my cabs and my hotel suites and my foreign contracts and my masseurs, you could take them

away

away and drop them in the sea if you liked, but I'd go out in the street and I'd do a turn and I'd get an audience somehow. That's because I've got the spunk of a clown. I'm a clown down to the nails on my feet." He pushed himself forward in his chair, tapping his own chest, his face flushed with anger. "What do you think I am, some pot-bellied pie-can with a million of money? IT's people like you who make me a statue, people like you and Edgar. What about all those stories he told you, about rides in the Park and royal processions? They're not true, I tell you, they're not true."

Sangson glanced at him diffidently and they sat in silence. Hellebore was breathing heavily, stirred now. But suddenly he laid his hands down on the arm-rests of his chair, smiled at the young man and got up. Only one small log was burning in the hearth, and there was a chill in the room.

"Let's go out, young man," he said briskly, rubbing his hands together. "Let's find somewhere warm. I'm wide-awake and I'm hungry. You know Paris. Take me somewhere."

Sangson was astonished by this.

"But surely you must sleep now," he said, staring up at Hellebore from his chair.

Hellebore turned and walked towards his bedroom, where the light was still burning.

"Come and talk to me while I change."

Sangson followed him into the bedroom, and

Hellebore took his evening clothes out of the wardrobe. He was smiling and excited, moving about the room quickly, from chest-of-drawers to wardrobe.

"I haven't done this," he said, "I haven't gone out at this hour of the morning for the best part of five years."

He began changing while Sangson stood at the door, watching him.

"Are you always thinking about the War?" Hellebore asked him.

"Yes."

"It seems to have got into your blood."

"Yes, I suppose I belong to the War," Sangson replied, his sharp eyes lowered. "I feel I shall never be able to tear myself away from it. It won't let me live properly. Before it happened I felt I belonged to a few friends and a small town in Somerset, but now I don't belong to anything, - except to War. When you fight in a war you root yourself like a plant into another world, - a world of murder. Whereas once you helped people into chairs and smiled at them, now you set mines for them to fall on, and you run your bayonet through them. And these are things you can't forget. I ought to have been killed, like Edgar. That would have been logical."

Hellebore drew his chair nearer the mirror to tie his bow.

"Go about the world," he said, "as if you didn't have a past, it can be done." He turned from the mirror

to face Sangson. "What's your work?"

"I work in a jeweller's shop."

Hellebore continued to look up at him, his eyebrows raised:

"In a shop? An educated young fellow like yourself?" he asked.

Sangson nodded in a resigned way.

"~~E~~actly," he said. "The work has no meaning for me."

"Why do it, then? Are you free to leave it? Could you leave Paris if you wanted to?"

"Yes."

Sangson was like a pale child at the door, answering Hellebore's questions. His hands were in his pockets, and he stared down at the carpet.

"Well, then, why don't you?" Hellebore asked him.

"I'm well looked after here. I've nothing to go away to."

"And suppose there had never been a war, - what would you have done?"

"I had work as a solicitor's clerk when I was fifteen, and I would have saved money from that and used it to take a teachers' certificate when I was nineteen."

Hellebore frowned at him, unable to believe this.

"And here you are," he said, "selling jewels in a Paris shop."

"I refused to go back to England because my childhood was finished. In the War I met a man called

Celida. We became friends, and he invited me to his house here in Paris. Then he offered me a job in one of his shops. He is a rich man, and his wife is devoted to me. He has a large house, and servants."

But Hellebore was still puzzled.

"How is it you can do work that bores you?" he asked.

"Oh, I think while I'm doing it."

Hellebore got up to put his jacket and overcoat on, and as he did so he came near to Sangson. He looked into his pale face warmly, examining it for many seconds in silence. All this time the young man did not lift his eyes from the floor.

"War took away all your hope," Hellebore told him. "But we've got to get used to death."

Sangson shook his head.

"I never did," he said, "and I never will."

"But mustn't you try and forget these things?"

"Have you ever seen a dead man?" Sangson asked.

Hellebore started at him and shook his head.

"You came upon him suddenly," Sangson went on. "There he was, blind and mute, exactly as trees are. You sometimes felt him watching you. A moment before, perhaps, you heard his voice, but now you were alone. He was still there, yet you were alone. That's the petrifying thing that happens when you come across a dead man: you become alone in a universe of mute, eternal

things. And you can't get used to that. No man can get used to that."

Hellebore buttoned his overcoat, then took up his hat and cane from the dressing-table. Sangson watched him while he pulled on his white gloves. Suddenly the young man spoke again, but this time with his eyes full on Hellebore.

"I've been an evil visitation to-night," he said.

Hellebore walked into the drawing room. As he ~~xxxxx~~ passed Sangson he pinched his cheek lightly with his gloved hand.

"But suppose you had never come? I should have gone on living like an orchid on other people's dresses."

He glanced at the dying ashes in the fireplace. One of the curtains moved with a slight chill wind.

"I shall move tomorrow," Hellebore murmured. "This room feels like an undertaker's." He turned back to Sangson sharply. "Well, I'm ready to make a night of it. Where shall it be?"

"I know a place called Les Anges," Sangson replied. "It's the only place I can recommend after midnight."

"Is it far?"

"No. It's in the Rue St. Honoré."

Hellebore noticed the rosary hanging over the arms of the vase. He went to the mantel and took it down, then returned to the bedroom. He opened the wardrobe door and slipped the beads into a pocket of ^{next} the tweed suit which he would be wearing the ~~following~~

next/

day. Sangson remained standing quite still at the door leading out into the narrow hall. Hellebore went across to a small table between the windows and took a rose from the bowl. He put it in his button-hole and smiled at the young man.

"One for you?" he asked.

He looked at Sangson in silence, waiting for the answer, smiling.

But Sangson only replied:

"You see, when I say you helped to kill Edgar I really mean you helped to kill me."

They arrived at Les Anges, a casino at the fashionable end of the Rue St. Honoré, soon after half-past one. It was the morning of Easter Saturday. The entrance hall of Les Anges had high columns on either side and tapestries which were neglected and dusty, and at the top of a wide stone staircase was the corridor leading into the club-rooms themselves. The lustres in this entrance hall were not alight, and only a bare arc-lamp shone down onto the staircase from the third landing, giving the great hall a blue, ghostly appearance.

They had walked through the streets without saying a word to each other. Sangson had simply

indicated the tall entrance to Les Anges with a nod of his head, and Hellebore had fallen back a little to let him lead the way. The moment they had reached the top of the staircase a faint noise from the rooms could be heard, the faint thumping of an orchestra in a quick waltz, and the clattering of dishes.

The impression made by these rooms was quite different from that of the ghostly entrance hall downstairs. Sangson pushed open the door and at once the coloured lights and the sound of the fast, loud waltz burst forth upon them. The ceiling was made of frosted glass with robed figures engraved across it, and, being illuminated from behind, this glass had the appearance of being a huge, solid block of light. In the walls there were arched niches each containing small plaster casts of classical sculpture illuminated by violet, blue and yellow lights.

Some people in fancy dress were throwing long paper streamers over the heads of the dancers in the ballroom. One after another the streamers flew across the room, falling onto the shoulders of the dancers, then gradually floating down until they were split and trodden underfoot. The throwers laughed loudly, and one of them clapped his hands at a waiter nearby and imitated a man thirstily drinking.

The dining tables were arranged in long tiers above the ballroom, separately. Hellebore and Sangson

went to a table at the very back of the room, on the highest tier, almost under a minstrel's gallery.

Sangson leaned back in his chair with a smile.

"This is what happens," he said, "when a manufacturer from Lyons decides to buy a club. He thought he was going to get a fashionable clientele, but all he got were people much like himself."

"What are you doing here, then, as a member?" Hellebore asked him this quietly, with his eyes averted, watching the ballroom below. "There aren't any young people here. It's a club for middle-aged people. None of these people have ever been young. You can see that by the look on their faces."

"The Italians I share house with brought me here."

The waltz ended, and two or three couples ascended from the ballroom to the dining room. The clothes of the women were a little behind the prevailing fashions.

"By the way," Sangson said, "I shall have to introduce you to my benefactors. They're here."

"To who?" Hellebore asked absently.

"To the Italian couple I told you about this evening: the Celida's, the people I share house with. I saw them as I came in."

Sangson seemed to be excited now that he had

come into the casino. His dark eyes had become sharper and glanced about more quickly. He was still pale, and there was sweat on his clean-shaven upper lip. He had unbuttoned his evening jacket, so that he gave a slightly less neat and prim appearance than before.

A new dance began, and Hellebore watched a man and woman from the table nearest him go down to the second tier of the dining room, then into the ballroom. The streamers were now all in fragments on the dance-floor and their rattling could be heard from the dining room as the couples swept them forward with their feet. A waiter brought two glasses of Italian Vermouth to their table, then laid the cutlery for a meal.

"They only seem to do the old dances," Hellebore said. "I've been waiting for the one-step."

"No, they don't play ragtime here. The band does Sir Roger de Coverley and the Lancers if you ask them. You have to put in a request with one of the waiters."

"But do these French people know how to dance Sir Roger de Coverley and the Lancers?" Hellebore asked, a little disagreeably.

"Some do. Do you prefer the new dances, then?"

"No, I like the old tunes. But I'd give anything to see young people dancing round that floor and enjoying themselves. I like the one-step because

young people do it."

"Look," Sangson said, leaning forward and putting his hand on Hellebore's sleeve, "there they are. My Italian friends."

Hellebore turned and watched them go down the staircase and, after pausing for a moment at the edge of the floor, take up the dance. The woman was dressed in a fine gown, with a purple rose at her waist. She was sure and erect, while her husband was perhaps a little smaller, a slim, dapper man with a pale face and hair grey at the edges. He moved deftly, even arrogantly.

Sangson told him that he and Giordano had met in Belgium in 1916, and had become friends. Then they had met a second time in the last few months of the War, and Giordano had invited him to Paris. The Celida's had a large house in the Rue du Bois de Boulogne.

"She's a fine-looking young woman," Hellebore said, watching the couple.

"They're not a happy couple." Sangson glanced at him quickly, almost suspiciously. "They both want a child, and he can't give her one."

"Can't?"

"No. He'll never be able to."

"Did he have an accident in the War, then?"

Sangson shook his head shyly, playing with his knife on the table-cloth.

Giordano Celida had been to the doctors, and

his sterility had been proved. They had offered him no hope of ever being able to produce children. No doubt there were explanations, but none could be given.

Maria was a robust woman from the country, the daughter of a farmer in Tuscany. Her hands were those of a peasant woman. Only in her face was there an extraordinary delicacy. She had black eyes, refined and pure, and their expression was distant, like that of a dreamer. Perhaps her nose was her most delicate feature, and as for her mouth, it was full of a wilful determination. People watched her when she moved, soothing their eyes, as it were, on her calm frame.

Every day she yearned for her child, and in a few years she would be too old. Her body cried out for a child, the more so because she felt she might never have one. The idea of his being sterile horrified Giordano. For many years he had made no mention of this horror: he only carried it in his eyes, behind the urbane neatness.

Giordano would be willing to let her sleep with another man, simply to get the child. Sangson told Hellebore this in a whisper.

"Well, then, there's the solution," Hellebore answered quietly. "Why doesn't she go and sleep with someone else?"

"It's so difficult for them..." Sangson turned and watched them again in the ballroom below. "She has her religion, and sleeping with someone else is a mortal

sin."

Hellebore shrugged: "It depends how badly she needs the child."

"She doesn't wish to hurt Giordano. She insists they choose a father together."

Perhaps the couple had waited too long. She had dreamed about it too much. She had often described the child, - its ideal hair, the colour of its eyes, the fact that it would take after Giordano, whoever the father might be. They had talked it over too much. Giordano had known that he was sterile for five years. All this time they had waited, presumably for the right father.

"It's a very misefable business, believe me," Sangson said with a sigh. "The more they wait for the right man the less likely are they to find him."

Suddenly Hellebore asked him: "What about yourself? You could have slept with her. You aren't sterile. You're decent looking."

Sangson stared at him in confusion. He was astonished by the question. He could not at first reply. Then he spoke:

"It would seem like incest, I suppose. I live in the same house, and ever since I came to Paris Maria has treated me like a son." He smiled. "Perhaps I sometimes look to them like a frightened child, as I do to you. When I came to Paris I needed a little nursing.

No: perhaps they'll never be able to choose. She may be incapable of being unfaithful to him, and he of allowing it. I often wonder whether they are too devoted to each other."

A waiter brought champagne and an ice-box to the side of their table. Hellebore nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said. "It's a miserable business."

The dance ended. Most of the couples went to the velvet seats at the side of the ballroom, and three or four waiters clad in white hurried down from the dining room to take their orders. As Maria Celidax returned to her table she looked up towards the minstrel's gallery and noticed Sangson. She waved her hand, then pointed him out to her husband, who bowed and smiled.

"They seem out of place here," Hellebore said, watching them.

"Yes, they look as though they are thinking something out between themselves. Yet they're rich shopkeepers like all the other people here."

The waiter drew their champagne from the ice and turned away from the table. He crouched with the bottle between his knees and pulled out the cork.

Hellebore yawned.

~~"Parixinxnexplane"~~

"You'd be surprised what illegal business goes on between some of these people," Sangson added, looking at some of the guests sitting nearby. "Giordano has

done a bit of smuggling in his time across the Italian border. Most of them deserve a prison sentence."

"I can well believe it."

"Paris is no place for Maria. She doesn't try to dance elegantly like the other women here."

They ate their dinner slowly. Sangson asked Hellebore's opinion about every dish, and, after closely examining the list, he called for a wine which he said would exactly match the food. He leaned over the table, touching the plates when they came, judging everything that the waiter brought and sending back to the kitchen the dishes of which he disapproved. When the crêpes Suzette were being prepared behind them, he went and stood by the waiter until the brandy had been lit.

When they had taken coffee he got up. He was just about to leave the table when a waiter came with cognac. He drank it standing, in one gulp. Hellebore watched him, then did the same. They put their glasses back on the table simultaneously, and as they did so they glanced at each other and laughed.

He went down to the second tier and spoke to the Celida's. They turned and looked up with surprise at Hellebore. Giordano Celida peered at him and smiled as Sangson talked to them. Then he nodded and rose, and all three of them came up the narrow gangway towards Hellebore's table. Hellebore was still laughing a little to himself. He got up and pushed his chair back noisily.

then went a little way to meet them, his hand outstretched.

Giordano nodded to Hellebore genially as he sat down:

"We have a box for tomorrow night, Monsieur," he said.

Hellebore made a little bow in his seat and murmured, "I'm delighted."

Maria spoke to her husband with a smile, touching his shoulder lightly: "Tonight, my dear."

"Of course!" he cried. He neatly pulled back his sleeve and glanced at his watch. "In eighteen hours time."

"Don't remind me," Hellebore answered as they laughed politely.

Giordano turned and beckoned to one of the waiters who was standing on the lower tier. He did so with his chin up, not looking at the waiter, like one accustomed to servants.

"I saw one of your performances in Italy," he told Hellebore.

"Wherewould that have been?"

"Ah, of course, you don't remember it. It was a long time ago, eleven years ago, in Rimini."

"But I do remember." Hellebore turned to Sangson. "That was my first continental tour," he told him.

A waiter stood at Giordano's side, bowing respect-

fully. Giordano laid his hand on Hellebore's arm.

"Now we shall celebrate this honour. Because you understand it is an honour meeting you here. I always thought you were a little... a little magical. But here you are in the flesh. So - " He took a wine-list from the waiter. His charm was perfect, and every gesture schooled. " - we shall celebrate." He glanced at Hellebore. "You like champagne?" Hellebore nodded, watching him. "I see you have been drinking it already. But Sangson is an amateur in these matters."

He then selected a vintage, and the waiter hurried away. Hellebore asked him whether he had always lived in Paris, and Giordano told him that they had left Italy in 1904.

"What made you want to leave?"

Giordano moved closer to him, appearing to reflect deeply on this question.

"There wasn't a big enough living to be had," he said. "Both of us love our country, but - " He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. " - it was a question of bread and butter, you understand. My idea was to go to America. I had just enough money. We were both young. Maria was just turned twenty-one. But there! Maria - well, you know what women are!"

All this time she had been watching Hellebore, ~~with~~ following her husband's words with a smile.

"I hated the thought of going to America," she

said.

"It was all I could do to get her here, from Tuscany. But now we have a very fashionable little business. One of our clients is a gentleman called Albert Lorraine who - " He made Hellebore a little bow. " - I believe is known to you."

"Of course, of course."

Giordano was flattered: "He often visits us. Yes, I saw you perform in Rimini eleven years ago. I remember your name outside the theatre: ELLEBORO. But I never thought I would ever come face to face with you." He turned to Sangson. "You called at Mr. Finstanley's hotel, then?"

The waiter poured the champagne, and Giordano raised his glass: "A health, then. In honour of Hellebore, wishing him success tomorrow night - " He corrected himself with a smile as Maria and Sangson raised their glasses. " - tonight."

The polka came to an end and there was the sound of applause from the ballroom. It was very hot now in the rooms. Most people had moved away from the dining tables, and some had gone up to the minstrel's gallery, to get a better view of the dancing floor below. Maria and Giordano turned to look. The couples who had been dancing continued to applaud the orchestra, laughing and crying out.

Maria clapped her hands together excitedly: "They

want it again!"

Giordano leaned towards Hellebore, hiding his mouth from her with his hand as he spoke: "She tires me out dancing."

Silence fell in the ballroom, and then the crowd sighed. The conductor raised his baton under a yellow spotlight from the minstrel's gallery, and the orchestra struck up into a second polka. Many more couples than before went onto the floor, and the light stamping of their feet could sometimes be heard above the orchestra.

Giordano laid his hand on Hellebore's arm: "Dance with my wife. Please. Show her how you dance."

Maria overheard this remark, and flushed ~~slightly~~ when she saw Hellebore rise from his chair politely.

His presence seemed to strike her dumb. Her eyes were particularly beautiful when he bowed to her. Together they went down to the crowded ballroom, and Giordano and Sangson watched them as they took up the dance.

"What made you call on him?" Giordano asked. He did not look at the young man.

"It was a sudden decision. I don't know why."

They said nothing for some time. Then Giordano asked suddenly:

"Was it Maria's idea that you should go and see him?"

"Maria's? Of course not. What are you thinking of?"

Giordano looked away uncomfortably.

"Does he know about her?"

"Know what?" Sangson asked him.

"I mean, what did you tell him about her?"

Sangson glanced at him quickly, then understood.

"Oh, I said we were friends, - no more."

"But you talked about Edgar mostly?"

Sangson nodded sadly, as if there had just been a betrayal.: "He seemed to have forgotten Edgar."

"Well, three years is time enough to forget. I expect you made him feel a little miserable. But Maria thinks it must be a relief to you... You needed to talk these things over, though I sometimes wonder whether it was wise to go back over the past like that." He sipped his champagne, gazing at Hellebore and Maria as they danced. "That's how I like to see a man dance, with his shoulders firm and straight. Look, he's as light as a feather. She looks well, carrying him in her cap." He glanced at Sangson, but the latter's head was bowed. "He's shorter than I would have thought. He looks taller on the stage, - at least as I remember him, though that was eleven years ago. Perhaps it's due to the floppy clothes he wears on the stage. He doesn't look sad now, does he?"

Hellebore was laughing as he danced, and at every fourth beat he hopped particularly high. He moved more swiftly than most of the others, whirling Maria lightly between the couples, in and out, along the edge

of the floor and into the middle again, his head high, his cheeks very flushed, with Maria lost and seeming to dream in his arms as she floated along.

"This is the first time he has left England since the War broke out," Sangson murmured.

"Then I expect he means to enjoy himself."

As soon as the dance came to an end Hellebore and Maria returned to the table, laughing and breathless. Her shyness had gone.

"Hadn't we better go back," she asked Giordano, "if only for a few minutes?"

"Not yet, my dear. We'll have a little more champagne, then go." He spoke to Hellebore. "We have three or four friends at the lower table. We mustn't neglect them entirely."

He took the bottle of champagne and filled Maria's glass, then offered it to Hellebore, who shook his head.

"I'm merry enough, thank you."

Giordano chuckled and held the bottle up to the light, squinting at it. It was a quarter full.

"Come," he said, "you must have another glass. We must finish the bottle before we go back to our own table. Yes? Of course!"

He filled Hellebore's glass. Then they all touched glasses and drank.

"The next dance ought to be for Henry," Giordano whispered to Maria. "He looks so out of it sitting there."

He beckoned to one of the waiters and ordered more champagne. But Maria wanted to stop him.

"Mr. Finstanley has already refused it, Giordano," she said.

"Oh, mere politeness!" he shouted. "Do you want to be off home, then?"

"No, my dear." She shook her head quickly. "Let's make a night of it!"

Giordano was triumphant.

"Shall we then?" he asked Hellebore and Sangson.

"We can all go back to the house together," Maria said, "for an early breakfast at dawn."

"Does that suit you?" Giordano asked Hellebore.

"You are both very kind."

The orchestra began a slow waltz, and Maria got up. She touched Sangson's hair lightly, putting it back from his forehead, and together they went down into the ballroom. A waiter brought the second bottle of champagne, and Giordano moved to a chair at Hellebore's side. He filled their glasses, tipping a little onto the table-cloth.

"Has he made you feel sad?" he asked.

Hellebore shrugged, staring down at the table: "He has suffered too much, I think."

Giordano did not reply to this. They touched glasses and drank, then he filled them again. He glanced at Hellebore quickly and said: "I hate Sangson being in my house."

Hellebore looked at him in astonishment, his eyes wide open: "Why?"

"He is too secretive a person. You never hear a sound from his room. He is so quiet in everything he does."

"He's a child," Hellebore murmured, embarrassed by Giordano's words.

"I no longer believe that. He is always trying to get Maria alone, for instance, though he says she is only a kind of mother to him. Also I am certain he has a lover somewhere, but not a lover in the proper sense. I mean I'm sure he doesn't love her, only uses her as a kind of prostitute. I have heard various things."

He gazed down at Sangson in the ballroom, not troubling to hide his feelings in front of Hellebore. He took up the latter's glass and put it against his lips, making him drink; and for the third time he filled the glasses, a little unsteadily, but still with rare breeding:

"I happen to know he visits her two or three times a week, to relieve himself, if you will excuse the expression. Of course, I would never tell Maria any of this. It would kill her dream of him, as the son she might have had. If it weren't for her, I would have asked him to leave my house long ago." He leaned back, with his arm on Hellebore's shoulder, sighing. "How I reproach myself for having offered him a job here and a place in my family. Young men like these belong to dug-outs,

not to families. But there, he is polite, he is well-educated, he is useful to me in my export work. He is my only employee whom I dare send to dinner with a business agent from another country." He frowned.

"But he belongs nowhere. He refuses to make roots for himself. He behaves like a paralysed man. He must depend all the time on other people. Otherwise he would have a home of his own by now, and a beautiful wife, and children." He looked Hellebore in the eyes. "And I have to bear this blood-sucker in my house. Sometimes I am even afraid of him. I am afraid that he will bring ruin into my home. He's a wrecker."

"Well, his own life has been wrecked, perhaps," Hellebore said ~~WAAAA~~ in a low voice.

"Oh, I know what he has suffered, Mr. Finstanley. I have been his friend. But I happen to know one thing: he liked the War. Such a young man is born for murder."

"You hated it, yourself?"

Giordano smiled rather sadly: "All the War meant for me was my separation from Maria. We were too much in love with each other, perhaps. I used to yearn to be with her until I was almost mad. I was in the Franch army for three years. I lost weight. I had skin-trouble. I caught malaria, and one thing after another. I'm not a fighter. War isn't for people like myself. War is for young men with nothing to lose. What had this young

fellow got to lose?"

Hellebore nodded slowly, then glanced up at Giordano: "Did you meet my son?"

"No, my friend."

Maria and Sangson returned to the table before the dance ended, and Giordano got up: "Now we really must go back to our table. For a few minutes, - would you mind?"

"Not at all." Hellebore added, looking at Maria: "But we must have another dance or two before dawn," and Maria laughed shyly.

Giordano pointed to the bottle of champagne:

"It is there for you to drink."

The Celida's went down to their table, where their guests were waiting for them, and sat with their backs towards the minstrel's gallery.

Sangson bit his lip and said to Hellebore with an effort: "I'm sorry I used those words about your killing me."

"The fact is you said it." Hellebore then added: "Litshe to me, Sangson. You went out to Flanders because you wanted to. I didn't ask you to go. And in your place I'd never have gone. I'd never have joined up. My work comes first with me, and it always has done. I wouldn't have cared if Jerry had won the War and then burnt my theatre down, my work would still come first.

You'd never have caught me taking the trip to Flanders. If Edgar wanted to go out and risk his life, that was his business. I didn't ask either of you to go, and I don't owe you any thanks for winning the War."

"We weren't fighting for you or anyone else." Sangson answered him coldly, holding aloof. "We weren't even fighting for our country."

"You went out to cut fine figures, though."

"Well, that could be true."

"If he'd come to me and asked me what to do, I should have said, do what you want to do - if you do that you'll only have yourself to blame." Sangson began to turn away, but Hellebore put his hand firmly on his cheek and made him face him again. He fixed him with his eyes, sternly. "When I was fourteen years old, Sangson, I wanted to be a clown and get a first turn, and I became a clown and I got a first turn. I'm the sort that gets what he wants. You've only got to look at my chin, - it belongs to a man who gets what he wants." Hellebore laid his hands on the table palms downwards. "And the same with my hands. I never came along and asked people like you to live my life for me, and I'm not going to live yours for you. Every man's free to do what he can in this world."

He lifted his glass and drank the champagne in one gulp. He had begun to talk less distinctly.

"You let the War House push you about, and

you've only yourself to blame. If you didn't like the War you ought to have been a conchy. It's no good being a conchy afterwards."

"It wasn't against my conscience to kill Hermans. I volunteered to do it. I wanted to do it."

"Why?"

Sangson's reply was bitter: "Perhaps to see men die and hear them scream. I only volunteered when I knew what kind of war it was, when I heard about the explosives and the casualty-rate. I couldn't bear that there should be so much suffering and me not there. I wanted to suffer."

Hellebore shook his head in wonder. It was clear that the drink was affecting him.

"I can't understand it," he said. "What made you want to suffer? I can't understand it. Why go and throw away your life? - a decent young man like you?"

"Oh, well, I would have had to go anyway."

"But I can't understand it. Here you are working in Paris in a jeweller's shop when you could go back to England tomorrow if you wanted to and live a life of your own."

"No, the War killed my faith in -, well, it simply killed my faith." He paused, as if he had said too much, but he decided to go on. "It taught me that at any minute the worst can happen. That's an extraordinary discovery. It killed my sense of having a future."

After the War the world became a cold and desolate place. I needed protecting against that. And my work at the jeweller's does protect me. It's so simple. It needs no thought whatsoever."

Hellebore stared at him, swaying: "How does it protect you?"

"It gives my life a fixed order. I go to the shop soon after nine in the morning, I call on Signor Celida for lunch at half-past noon, and then I return home for a bath and aperitifs soon after five o'clock in the evening. I daren't live otherwise. I couldn't bear freedom."

"The War's turned you into a child. Yes, you've got the look of a frightened child sometimes. What do you think about at your work, then?"

"Oh, I daydream."

"But don't you ever want to do something else?"

"Yes, I do, very often. But as far as ambition goes I'm like a man who worships the dawn and always sleeps through it."

It was as if Sangson had rehearsed these words. He allowed himself no remark which might seem natural. He drank with Hellebore, but not for a moment did he lose grip. He sat in his chair solemnly, like one whose confession had just been written down and signed.

But Hellebore was beginning to tap his feet under the table in time with the orchestra, to smile at

nothing, to whistle and hum, to swing his shoulders slightly as if he were dancing.

Suddenly Sangson called out for some cognac. The waiter came to the table and asked whether he wanted glasses. He replied coldly: "Une bouteille."

Hellebore laughed: "We're mixing this a bit, aren't we? I'm beginning to feel among friends. In the old days we used to take hansom cabs round the West End after the show. We used to talk and sing in each other's bedrooms until the dawn came through. We used to have supper on the stage with our make-up on. We used to play tricks on each other during the show."

He looked down at the second tier, where the Celida's were sitting. It happened that at this moment they were pointing Hellebore out to their guests.

"I like your friends," he said.

"Soon the word will be round that Hellebore the clown is here," Sangson replied. "And they are sure to ask you for a little turn. They have that kind of vulgarity."

"Lorraine wanted something dignified. He wanted it described in all the newspapers. But your friends are easy to get on with."

Their bottle of cognac came, and Sangson filled two liqueur glasses. Hellebore took his immediately and put it back.

"Come to the Crimson Tower tomorrow at four,"

he said. "It'll help to get you through the day."

"The Crimson Tower?"

"Ask at the box office. Tell you what: I came from England with only a day to spare. I want to go straight into dress rehearsal. I don't want to break the spell."

Sangson had begun to watch him, for Hellebore was really talking to himself, with his head bowed.

"Lorraine's putting six hundred thousand francs into this job. I haven't been near a professional stage for five years. That was the War, thank you. He's one of the richest men in France, but he'll never miss church. He worries too much. He wants a woman behind him, though I should think a woman would find him a little too fussy. He likes his two baths every day, and his fingernails are always just so. I've never seen a crease in his suit. He's frightened of being ill, and I don't have to tell you he never is ill."

Sangson nodded. He had hardly listened, though his eyes had remained fixed on Hellebore. It was as if he had become a more resolute person, perhaps because of the drink. For suddenly, with a very determined look, he leaned forward and whispered to Hellebore: "Drink. Drink."

Hellebore looked at him in drunk surprise for a moment, then obeyed him with a smile, as if he ^{himself} had made the suggestion. He poured his cognac into the champagne

and drank. The moment he put down the liqueur glass Sangson filled it again.

It did not take long for the other guests in the club to discover that Hellebore was among them. Word had travelled down to the ballroom from the Celidas' table, and even the conductor of the orchestra had been told. Some minutes later a waiter came to the highest tier with a message from the manager. He asked whether it would be possible for Hellebore to give them a little impromptu performance, or at least a speech, to celebrate the honour of his first visit to the club. Sangson smiled at Hellebore when the waiter had given his message, and said, so that the waiter could hear: "Just as I told you. These people are capable of anything. Nothing is too vulgar for them. In what other Paris casino would they ask a celebrity to do such a thing?"

"It's because I'm a clown. A clown is supposed to belong to everybody."

Hellebore's words were run together. Sangson told the waiter that Mr. Finstanley wished to rest, having had a Channel-crossing that day. He said this coldly, making it sound like a rebuke, and the waiter bowed before leaving the table.

"Well," Hellebore murmured, "I might oblige them yet."

"Perhaps a bit more to drink will give you the

necessary courage," Sangson said, filling his glass again.

The dancers in the ballroom constantly turned to watch Hellebore. Newcomers were quickly told the news, and some of them came and stood near the minstrel's gallery in their outdoor clothes, staring at him quite openly. Sangson seemed troubled by their gazes, but Hellebore simply shifted his chair a little so that his back was turned towards them, and went on talking, drumming his fingers on the table.

"Eliza's got a scar down one side of her face which I think makes her look all the prettier. She gets sawn in half. Eiselheim does the sawing. You ought to see her among the tigers. She was twenty at the time. The lovely sleepy one turned on her. It knocked the whip out of her hand and caught her on the right cheek. Now every day that sleepy tiger sees her come into the cage. Does it so much as stir? They're like lovers. He was born in captivity, and they're always more dangerous. The wildness comes out of them, and they suddenly turn."

He raised his head and looked at Sangson with clear eyes. The latter was caught off his guard.

"What did you tell me to drink for?"

Sangson blinked quickly and murmured: "Why shouldn't we enjoy ourselves?"

"I don't need two managers. Lorraine by himself

is a hand-full." He laughed and it was impossible to tell whether he had been joking. His hair was dishevelled, and his cheeks were very flushed, as he lolled back in his chair gazing at the wall, away from the other guests. "My dad took to drink. That finished him. He tried his luck at the stagedoors selling songs at a dollar a number. Those were the days when the circus used to ride through your town in a long procession. The band used to go in front, then the horses and ponies and elephants all spruced up. There used to be big golden tableaux on the carts with the trapeze girls on top, and you could see the lions in their cages. The clowns used to walk alongside. They used to fool about and give sweets to the kids. The circus my father was in went round the same circuit for thirty years, up to Leeds and back again."

Three or four waiters went across the ballroom gathering up the paper streamers. The plush seats on either side were now crowded with people waiting for the next dance, and the dining room was empty save for Sangson and Hellebore. When the dance-floor was clear of streamers the orchestra struck up into another polka, and Hellebore clapped his hands, roaring with laughter. He watched the dance closely, tapping his feet.

He took the bottle of cognac and filled his own glass, keeping his free hand cupped over Sangason's.

"In my honour," he said, then drank and gasped.

"For old times."

He reeled in his chair and gripped the table firmly with both hands. His face had changed. He smiled loosely as he spoke:

"I did murder Edgar."

Sangson started forward:

"Are you drunk?" he whispered. "Your eyes are very bloodshot."

Hellebore answered him vehemently:

"I murdered him."

He stared at Sangson for a moment, then took his hands from the table and leaned back. He had half pulled the white cloth to the floor in doing this.

"I'm drunk," he said quietly. "I'm not used to all this. I never touch it. Very careful about that."

"Do you feel sick?"

"No."

"Do you feel you might fall?"

"I feel dizzy, and I'm going to oblige them."

Sangson looked down at the second tier where the Celida's were sitting. They had now been joined by their guests, and one of them was watching Hellebore.

"You must sit still," Sangson told him. "You must talk as little as possible."

Hellebore frowned and stared at the table. He swayed a little and tried to look at Sangson, lowering

his head and blinking a great deal, then widening his eyes fiercely.

"Why?" he asked.

"People are watching you." He spoke to Hellebore slowly and distinctly. "You must go to the lavatory and smarten yourself up. You've spilt champagne down your shirt-front, and your hair needs combing."

"That's it. Everywhere I go people treat me like a statue. It was you gave me the booze. But you still want the statue." Then he added: "You look like a school-teacher."

He got up, pushing his chair back with a clatter, though he could hardly stand. The orchestra had just finished playing, and everybody was returning to the plush seats. Sangson at once jumped up to stop him. He went and laid his hand on his arm, but the moment Hellebore felt it he turned and pushed him away with all his strength. Sangson fell back against another table with a shocked gasp, upsetting a decanter of water and almost tearing the cloth from the table in his effort to prevent himself falling. Hellebore was standing with his face towards the ballroom, panting, his eyes furious.

"I'll give you lavatory," he murmured.

Sangson was also angry now. Everybody in the ballroom had turned and was watching him, having heard the decanter fall. He came to Hellebore's side and :

"What are you up to?"

Hellebore did not look at him. He merely said, swaying as he stood there: "I'll pay your lot out for those five years."

Before Sangson could stop him he was on his way down to the lower tier, slipping and stumbling as he went, his eyes furious, and his head high, in defiance. The Celida's and their guests drew back their chairs when he approached them, wondering anxiously what he would do. Most of the people in the ballroom were watching him in silence, as he swayed and frowned over the Celida's. Two of the women at the table, friends of Giordano, smiled nervously, as if wishing to placate him and make his visit seem ordinary.

Giordano got up and put his hand on Hellebore's arm, like a father, but the latter shook him off. He pointed to Maria, who was meekly sitting in her chair, probably terrified. No one was speaking in the ballroom.

"You will dance?" Hellebore asked. His question was like a threat.

She looked at Giordano, who hesitated. Then he smiled and nodded, as if he had known Hellebore a long time. He had decided to be polite.

"Give Mr. Finstanley this dance, my dear," he said.

He went to Maria's chair and pulled it out as she got up. She went to Hellebore's side, casting a nervous

glance behind her, and took his arm before they walked together down into the ballroom. All eyes were upon them. The conductor had his baton raised, waiting for them to reach the floor. Hellebore was still frowning and murmuring to himself. He swayed on the staircase, and Maria gripped his arm ~~to~~ firmly.

He was aware that the silence was for him, and that the conductor had been waiting. He took his time. His eyebrows were raised, a little imperiously, as he led Maria with slow steps to the centre of the floor, and the other dancers, silent and watchful, drew back to let him pass. She avoided their eyes. She was hushed and tremulous. Hellebore took her left hand delicately in his, as if she were a princess, and put his arm round her waist. He gave the conductor the briefest of glances, and for an instant the baton remained still. Then it fell, and the orchestra struck up into a quick waltz.

He danced more quickly and boldly than the rest, and the orchestra quickened its rhythm to keep time with him. He whirled and whirled Maria round on the tips of his toes, his eyes wild and lost, the sweat pouring down his flushed face, flinging himself into the dance with a kind of callous vehemence, sparing himself nothing. Maria was helpless in his arms, trying to keep pace with him. The rose had fallen from her waist, and had already been trodden underfoot. Her hair was out of place, and several times she almost slipped. But he did not glance down at

her, to catch her appealing look. For he was really dancing alone.

He stared ahead of him, his mouth open, transfixed into the circular dance, as if he could never stop, and seeming to dance faster and faster. His hands rested on Maria, rather than held her. At any moment she could have slipped out of his grasp. Yet he did not so much as brush lightly against any of the other dancers. He whirled in and out of the other couples, and they would turn with astonishment as he ^{passed} passed them.

But suddenly his hands ceased to hold her. At last he was alone. She stood in the centre of the floor, abandoned and on the point of weeping. He was lost in the dance, and the conductor decided to prolong the tune when he saw what had happened. It was a triumph for him. Hellebore was taking long, sure strides between the other couples, whirling round with his arms exactly as they had been before when they had held Maria. Only his face was different now. For it bore an expression of pain, like a terrible grin, with the sweat saturating his brow and cheeks, and his black jacket flying open. The conductor was prolonging this martyrdom, delighted at the solo performance. He conducted with his back to the orchestra, working his shoulders up and down vigorously, his white, bald head shining in the spotlights from the minstrel's gallery.

Maria walked quickly to the side of the floor,

her head bowed and a handkerchief up to her mouth, and there Giordano drew her solemnly to one of the plush seats. They sat there in silence, waiting for the dance to end. They watched Hellebore's frantic dance with pity and fear.

At last the final chord was played, and the conductor lowered his baton with a proud smile. He came down from the rostrum with his hand outstretched. For a few seconds Hellebore continued to dance, until the silence began to dawn on him and he stood staring up at the ceiling, his arms hanging at his side, in a strange paroxysm of trembling. Gradually he came back to life, seeming bewildered at the sight of the other dancers, who clamoured round him clapping their hands. Everybody made way for the conductor, who put his arms round Hellebore's neck and kissed him on both cheeks.

Hellebore did not know whether he should bow or not. He was not sure whether these were his enemies or friends. He looked from one to another of the hard faces, and at the small, inquisitive eyes. He lifted an imaginary hat quickly from his head, then clapped it back on again and did a mock bow. They laughed, pushing forward, the ones at the back jumping up and craning their necks to see him.

Then he seemed to grow tired. He looked about him again, seeking somebody. He pushed his way roughly

through the crowd, cursing them in a low voice. He went to the side of the floor, and there Giordano led him to where Maria was sitting. Hellebore fell back into his seat with a sigh, understanding nothing, and very tired.

When most of the couples had returned to their seats and the waiters had come down into the ballroom to take their orders, something unexpected happened. The conductor had been consulting with the rest of the orchestra in a whisper. He kept glancing back at Hellebore, who was totally unaware of him. He then raised himself and lifted his baton. When he lowered it - no one was paying any attention to him - the orchestra entered a slow, melancholy, ~~slow~~ forlorn tune, and people began to turn their heads. The music filled the domed ballroom with its lonely, sad phrases, and Hellebore's eyes grew wider. Slowly he turned his head. The effect of this music upon him was extraordinary. His mouth fell open, and a drowsy wonder seemed to take hold of him as he listened to the phrases which night after night for so many years had preceded his entrance as the white pierrot. The ~~maning~~ conductor was a cunning man. He watched Hellebore with the eyes of a servant, divining the speechless pain which might perhaps be taking hold of this clown.

It was clear that they expected something of him. The refreshments were forgotten. Everybody knew this tune.

They all looked across at him, some of them clapping, the bolder ones beckoning him to rise. He did get up, and it was clear that he had little control over his limbs. He seemed to be faintly aware that an audience had come into being, and that it required something of him. It appeared that he might make a speech, and everybody stopped talking. He had his hands on the papers of his jacket, in a speech-making attitude, but when he opened his mouth, trying to keep his dignity as he swayed about in front of Maria and Giordano, nothing came forth. He stood there paralysed, with all eyes upon him, the only man in the long ballroom who was standing.

The conductor saw his predicament and ~~jumped~~ came down to rescue him. He walked across the floor with a smile and took his arm. He led him up to the platform, and there was instantly a burst of applause, because it was now clear that the ~~big~~ ^{modest} clown was about to begin some kind of performance. Hellebore walked slower than the conductor, plodded rather, his shoulders bowed, as if he were being dragged along. But this only appeared to the audience as his unwillingness to show off. When he reached the stage, in the centre of the spotlights from the minstrel's gallery, their applause grew louder, then died, as they waited for his act to begin. Only someone standing very close to him would have been able to see his stare, like that of a drugged man, and the trembling of his

lips.

He went straight to the piano. For a moment as he stood there with his back to the audience, his shoulders bowed and his hair ^{on} tussled, leaning over the pianist, he looked like a beggar who had come foot-sore into this expensive place. The pianist at once jumped out of his seat and made way for him. But Hellebore did not sit down, nor did he play any notes. He was looking for something, in the gloom outside the spotlights. He bent down and peered under the keyboard. He was about to ask the conductor a question, but then went on with his search, this time feeling with his hands behind the thick, round leg. There was not a sound in the hall.

He searched about in such a rapt, absorbed way that it was possible to see a humorous intention behind it. And accordingly a few people began to laugh. Others smiled, peering forward into the shadows at the edge of the spotlights, waiting for this bowed figure with the black jacket and the crumpled trousers to bring the little act to its climax.

But he became impatient. Only the pianist could see his face, which was close to tears. Suddenly, without any warning, Hellebore hit the highest keys of the piano violently with his fist and cried out at the top of his voice: "Where's the lever? Where's the lever?" The conductor turned to the audience and shrugged his shoulders, roaring with laughter. The hall was almost in uproar.

They were all asking each other questions and laughing, wondering what could have happened. The next thing they saw on the stage was Hellebore puffing wildly at a cigar which he had seized from one of the guests nearby. He blew the smoke out as if he were trying to form a cloud in front of himself, and, though his expression was ~~an~~ frantic and panic-stricken, far from that of a performing clown, at a distance it was possible to see a grotesque figure trying to raise a few laughs.

Once a sufficient cloud of blue smoke had been created, he ~~then~~ pulled off his black tie, then began to take off his jacket. But he was in such a hurry to throw off all this clothes that he only pulled the jacket half off, down to the elbows, before he began heaving at his trousers. Some of the men in the audience jumped to their feet. At the sight of Hellebore bent slightly forward and savagely tugging at his belt, a tall woman with a red, chapped face at the side of the hall began screaming with hysterical laughter, so that the whole of her body shook in a series of helpless spasms. Two members of the orchestra obeyed the conductor's glance. They went up to Hellebore and shouted something at him, then, when he appeared not to hear them, they seized his arms and pulled them away from his trousers. Sangson was standing at the top of the stairs leading into the dining-room, looking down, quite still.

The Celida's had noticed Sangson. They got up and returned to the dining-room, avoiding people's eyes, and hurrying along.

Hellebore did not seem to understand the shocked laughter. It was clear to anyone standing close to him that he could hardly see his spectators, for he blinked and peered about with a frown, as if he were trying to make out an object a great distance from him. Probably he could only hear their voices, - the laughter and, here and there, the salacious, half-muffled cries of encouragement.

But he must have seen Maria leave the ballroom, for he at once stumbled forward from the piano and, in trying to gain the other end of the hall, fell straight down from the platform to the floor, with his hands stretched out before him. Everyone now knew that he was drunk. The noise, certainly the laughter, became different. It was now a kind of shocked clamour, as people left their seats and came onto the floor to get a better view of him. Hellebore still had his eyes fixed on the end of the hall. He jumped awkwardly to his feet, covered with the white French chalk from the floor and broken streamers of every colour, and lurched forward between the closing ranks, his hands held out before him like one walking in his sleep. At the top of his voice, with the tears pouring down his face, he called out: "Maria! Maria!"

Maria had disappeared from sight at the top of the

staircase. She and Giordano, led by Sangson, had gone to a table from which it was impossible to see down into the ballroom.

The crowd was now determined to get a performance from him of some kind, however grotesque. They clustered round him, encouraging him with "Bis! Bis!" and "Bravo!" One of them, a small, corpulent man, cleared a way and laid down in front of Hellebore a long blue streamer. Then, roaring with laughter, he held his arms out sideways and began tip-toeing ridiculously along it as if he were walking the tight-rope. Hellebore stood there reeling and seemed at last to understand what was required of him, for he began to do the same thing at the other end of the streamer, peering down with a frown as he lurched and stumbled along it, with the tears still wet on his face. The laughter was not good-natured. But Hellebore stayed on his tight-rope, jostled and pushed by the crowd. He nodded and smiled absurdly, as if he were proud of their laughter.

Some of the men exchanged scornful glances with their wives, and close to Hellebore, perhaps within earshot, someone murmured: "Bête homme..." But most of them, though quite aware that he was drunk, were enjoying his grotesque antics, in which there was no humour or dignity at all.

The conductor was biting his lip nervously, for he realised that matters were now out of his control.

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

He turned and struck up the band into a loud rag-time tune, calling out to everybody below to take their places for another dance. But no one took any notice of him, for Hellebore was now dancing alone, stamping his feet on the floor, with his arms held ~~high~~ above ~~him~~ his head. He was waggling his hips in the oriental fashion, as two of the men in the crowd tied long streamers round his neck and waist, trussing him up like a corpse as he lifted his knees and jiggled about on the same spot.

But suddenly he wanted to go. He stopped and looked about him. He was in the very centre of the crowd. He looked from one face to the other, and panic seemed to ^{over}come him. He put his head down and pushed furiously at the shirt-fronts of the men nearest him, though it would have been easy enough for him simply to walk away. By doing what he did he made it necessary for them to defend themselves, and they did this by clinging to him, to prevent him heaving about with his arms and legs. He pushed himself forward, and the men involved - four or five of them - moved as one body with him, towards the staircase. The orchestra stopped instantly, and the conductor jumped down from the rostrum. One or two of the women screamed, and there was no longer any laughter. The conductor could not believe his eyes. There was an expression of utter horror on his face. Most of the other guests began leaving the ballroom. A hush had fallen over them, a hush of shame perhaps, as they realised that things had gone too far.

It was as if Hellebore had suddenly realised that the crowd had been mocking him: for one moment he had been dancing in the oriental fashion, and the next he had been punching at the chests of the men nearest him.

He managed at last to break away. But instead of running up the staircase he went back to the empty stage where the instruments lay. He must have intended to do damage there, in a sudden mood of spitefulness. He tried to jump up onto the platform, but one of the waiters quickly pulled him down and drew him roughly away. The crowd gasped when they saw a waiter handling Hellebore the clown in this way.

The proprietor came. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a thin, greased moustache twirled like a sergeant-major's at the edges. He pushed his way through the crowd at the top of the staircase, but before he went down into the ballroom he looked about him and called out for Sangson. The crowd made way for the latter, who left his table and walked, quite calmly and slowly, between them to the ballroom. He looked down at Hellebore's slumped body without astonishment. He only seemed to detest being on show in this way, with a silent crowd of guests behind him.

~~The manager approached Hellebore:~~

~~"Qu'est-ce qu'il y a, Monsieur?"~~

Hellebore was standing limply between two waiters, with his head bowed, covered from head to foot with white chalk, while from his neck and waist hung numberless streamers in shreds. He was quiet now. The waiters who were on either side of him holding his arms shifted in an embarrassed way, for this was a most unusual charge.

It was possible that one of the other guests had struck him, in the face, perhaps, or the stomach, for he almost hung, deathly pale, in their arms.

The manager approached him:

"Qu'est-ce qu'il y a là, Monsieur?"

Hellebore raised his head and looked at him with half-closed, bloodshot eyes. He pointed dumbly to Sangson, who was on his way down the stairs. The ballroom was empty now save for the little group round him.

The manager turned to Sangson and asked him in broken English: "You are a friend, I believe?"

"Yes. I am sorry for what has happened."

The manager then spoke in a low voice, so that Hellebore should not hear: "Get him out of here."

"He is not my responsibility."

"Very well. I shall get him out myself."

The manager whispered something to the waiters, and they half-carried Hellebore up to the dining-room. As he passed Sangson's pale, erect figure, Hellebore

~~asked:~~
~~asked:~~

"What have you done to me? They've been laughing at me. It's you behind it."

And he repeated to the manager as he passed him:

"It's him, that young man."

The crowd made way for him and stood in utter silence as he was led like a criminal to the second tier of the dining-room, then through the door leading out into the vast entrance hall.

When she saw this Maria ran across to Sangson:

"Won't you help him?"

He did not look at her, nor did he answer her. He simply looked straight ahead.

"Won't you get the car for him?" she asked.

He smiled bitterly: "So you have chosen him, as I thought. Well, if you have chosen him, minister to him like a wife. Order the car yourself. Tell one of the waiters." Suddenly he regretted this and looked down at her pitifully. He took her hand. "I'm sorry for saying that, Maria."

"You have changed." Then she asked: "What will they do with him?"

He looked away: "Oh, they'll find him a car. They'll send him back to the hotel. You must understand, Maria: he's in a dangerous mood. We could do nothing with him. He blames me for all this."

"And you are not to blame? He was your guest here."

"Then you have certainly chosen him."

"I don't know what you mean," she replied, looking down quickly.

He led her back to their table. It was empty.

"Has Giordano gone, then?" he asked.

She gave him a glance full of contempt, and said quietly: "No. He's with the manager, making it up with him, - and probably greasing his palm."

He had seen her contempt.

"Maria, please walk with me." All his arrogance had disappeared. "Only for a few minutes, - until Giordano has finished. Please, Maria, - just to clear the air. We're confused."

"I'm not."

"Will you come?"

He got up.

"If you come," he said, "I shall be able to explain myself. I can't bear that you should hate me like this."

"No, I'll wait here. You go, and we'll wait for you here."

"All right, then!"

He sighed and began walking away. The moment she saw his expression, however, she came running from the table and took him by the sleeve, gazing into his eyes:

"No, I'll come," she said, "if it's a very short walk, and if you really want me to."

"I do."

He drew the wrap round her shoulders, and together they left the room.

There were low, dark clouds over the streets of Paris, and the lamps were still alight. One side of the sky was clearer, where the dawn was coming, and a chill wind was beginning to blow. The streets were deserted and quiet, apart from a hansom cab here and there.

Sangson and Maria were walking slowly down the Rue St. Honoré towards the Place Vendôme, arm in arm.

"You've chosen him to give you a child, haven't you?"

His face seemed very pale in the half-darkness, and his eyes very piercing and black. She frowned and passed her hand over her brow wearily.

"I don't know," she murmured, shaking her head.
"I don't know."

"Did you mention anything of the kind to him?"

"These things can't be done in cold blood, Henry."

She turned her face away, trying to escape. "We only danced together. He's a stranger. We hardly said a word to each other."

"The blood wasn't cold when you danced, - so why should it be at any other time? Speaking is unnecessary. There's a communion of the flesh." He added breathlessly, not daring to look at her: "And I suppose you'll ask him about it tomorrow? Or perhaps Giordano will."

"You aren't being fair to yourself, Henry. You're a better person than this."

"As soon as I told you he was coming to Paris you started asking questions about him." He smiled. "Well, he's a famous man, so it'll be a kind of immaculate conception, which is what you're after." He paused, and asked quietly: "But don't you see how disgraceful he is?"

"He may have been upset by your visit. I'm sure he was."

"You are only finding excuses for him." He stared down at the pavement. "This is the man we dreamed about. This is the great Hellebore. He's nothing but a booze-soaked murderer."

She took her arm away from his at once, and walked alone.

"You've never talked like this before," she said. "You've always been so gentle. But something horrible

has come into you tonight."

"Did you enjoy the spectacle, then? You don't think he disgraced himself?"

"It was only a mood. He was wonderful before you gave him all that drink."

"I gave him -?"

"Well, before he had all that drink."

"But don't you see that these are only the tantrums of a quite worthless celebrity?" he cried. "They think they can stampede their way through other people's lives. They think they're exempt from criticism. Their minds go soggy because they're always with cronies." He lifted his chin defiantly. "Well, I believe that the poor shall inherit the earth."

Maria spoke quietly, unaffected by what he was saying: "You should never have gone to see him. You should never have mentioned his son." She looked ahead of her, at the distant lights of the square, between the trees. "What you did tonight may affect the whole of his career."

"Perhaps, then, I wouldn't mind being the instrument of his destruction." He spoke with extraordinary clarity, in a low voice. He was a like a priest who had overcome his scepticism and really believed at last.

"My God, he murdered my best friend. Do you know -?"

He turned to Maria. "I think I enjoyed his degradation tonight, - every moment of it."

She took no notice of this remark, and he went on: "But you have faith in him. You refuse to see the real Hellebore." He frowned, in a sudden spiteful mood. "You've chosen him because he has a famous name, - the cheapest possible reason. You chose him immediately you saw him in the flesh. In fact, you were astounded to find that he's got flesh at all!"

She half stopped, in tears at last.

"That isn't true!" she cried. She watched him for a moment. "Why are you so angry with me?"

He gripped her arm frantically and made her stop altogether in the silent street.

"Are you going to ask him to give you the child, - tell me Maria!"

He put his face very close to hers, his eyes desperately staring at her in the growing light. She hid from him, bowing her head.

"I can't answer you," she said. "I haven't thought about it."

"Well, why have you waited all this time? You've been waiting five years, and soon you'll be too old. Why don't you let me do it, Maria? Let me give you a child, Maria!"

He took her by the shoulders and tried to pull her further towards him. He put his arms round her, under her breasts, and hugged her to him, crying into her shoulders. They swayed helplessly together on the

pavement.

"Henry! Henry! What's the matter? For God's sake tell me!"

His head bent forward, sobbing and screaming, his hoarse voice echoing in the silent, empty street, he cried out:

"I could do it! I could do it!"

Hellebore turned into the Champs Elysées and went to the middle of the huge, deserted avenue. He carried his top hat, and his black overcoat was open. He lifted his feet high, as if there were steps to mount in front of him. He stood still, swaying a little, with a frown.

He reeled, then ran forward in a helpless, headlong rush, trying to stop himself falling. His top hat slipped out of his hand onto the road and rolled over on its brim. He bent down and moved towards it, his arm stretched out. He fell forward onto his knees and crawled to the hat. He put it on the back of his head and slowly lifted himself up. He began walking towards the Arc de Triomphe along the middle of the avenue, lurching from side to side.

As he walked he closed his eyes and smiled, and

began ^{to} ~~sing~~ at the top of his voice:

Bon soir, old thing, cheerio, chin-chin,

Na-poo, toodleoo, goodbye-ee!

II

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The curtains were still drawn in Hellebore's bedroom, and he lay asleep on his bed. He was still fully dressed, and his overcoat was torn from the shoulder down to the middle of his back. He lay on his stomach, breathing very deeply, and near his head, at the side of the pillow, was his top hat with dust on the brim and a crack the whole length of its crown. The eiderdown had fallen to the floor, and it was crumpled, as if he had trodden on it before getting onto the bed.

Albert Lorraine opened the door of the drawing room and looked about him in the half darkness. He wore a dark morning suit with a carnation in his button-hole. He stood with his hand on the door and drew back a little, afraid of what he might find. There was no one in the corridor behind him. He called out "Jack!" softly, then went across to the bedroom. He pushed the door open and gasped with surprise when he caught sight of Hellebore in the darkness. He quickly pulled the curtains back and sat down on the bed at Hellebore's side. He seemed suddenly very tired. The clouds outside were low and grey.

He bent forward to have a better look at Hellebore's face. He noticed the torn overcoat and

gazed at it with horror. He then went into the bathroom and returned with a tumbler of water. He began gently flicking the water into Hellebore's eyes, and after a few moments Hellebore started up and stared about him, almost knocking the tumbler out of his hand.

Lorraine spoke to him softly:

"Shall I call the nurse?" he asked.

Hellebore shook his head and closed his eyes again.

"Our own, I mean," Lorraine added.

"No, Albert."

Lorraine gave him a towel for his face, drenching a corner of it in what was left of the water. He pulled up the eiderdown from the floor and put it round Hellebore's shoulders.

"The hall porter rang me last night and told me you'd left the hotel," he said. "You look very ill, Jack."

Hellebore lay back on his pillow with a frown and put his hand to his head.

"Did the porter see me?" he asked.

"Yes, he saw you go out."

"No," Hellebore replied irritably, "Did he see me come back?"

"No. You must have been very drunk. Look at your overcoat."

He lifted a piece of the torn overcoat which lay under Hellebore's shoulder.

Hellebore peered up at him and said, "Look at you, with your flower. You look like a tallyman's ink-bottle."

"Well, I had this morning planned. But now we shall have to postpone."

"Have you any tablets for my head?"

"I want to see you in a bath, Jack, then we must go to the theatre. Postponements are complicated. There is a great deal to be done. Conferences have got to be called, and contracts prolonged, and a new show has got to be rehearsed at short notice."

"Help me down, then," Hellebore murmured.

He put one foot over the side of the bed, then the other. He sat for a moment on the edge with his head in his hands.

"A postponement of two weeks would be fair," Lorraine said, watching him carefully. "Let me help you to the bathroom."

Hellebore put his arm round his shoulder and together they went to the bathroom.

"Now you must tell me what happened."

Hellebore sat huddled at the side of the bath, and Lorraine ran the hot water.

"A young fellow called," Hellebore replied.

"I was just hopping into bed. His name was Sangson. Have you heard about him? He's a friend of my son's." He glanced up at Lorraine drowsily. "Do I look drunk?"

"Your eyes are very bloodshot, and you look paler than I've ever seen you. I ought to call a nurse, I really ought to."

"No, I shall be all right."

Lorraine looked down at him, his lips trembling:

"Where did you go to?"

"Where what?"

"Where were you off to when the porter saw you?"

"A place called Les Anges in the Rue St. Honoré."

"I know it," Lorraine said. "Business people go there. Is your young friend in commerce, then?"

"No, he's a jeweller's assistant."

"Shall I help you in?"

Hellebore shook his head and began taking off his clothes. He remained sitting while he pulled off his torn overcoat and then his evening jacket. The sweat had dried in great crinkly patches over his shirt. When he was naked he took a jar of bath-salts down from one of the shelves and poured them into the water clumsily, almost emptying the jar. Lorraine took it from him and carefully rescrewed the top. The green crystals floated under the surface of the water like a cloud, melting, and a warm scent gradually filled the room. Hellebore stayed leaning on the side of the bath for a moment with his eyes closed, then he got into the water.

"I met an Italian jeweller and his wife. Giordano and Maria were their names. I forget their surnames."

Lorraine still watched him closely.

"How long have you known this young man?" he asked.

Hellebore took a sponge and pressed some water over his forehead.

"Is there a towel handy?"

[Lorraine ...

Lorraine put a towel into his outstretched hand.

"How long have you known him?" he asked again.

"I told you," Hellebore said. "I saw him for the first time last night. I've never seen him before in my life."

Lorraine seemed disturbed by this.

"But you said he was a friend of your son's."

"So he was. They were soldiers together."

"But I thought you meant he was a friend of the family."

"What family?" Hellebore asked.

Lorraine hesitated, then shrugged.

"A friend of Jeanne's, perhaps," he said. "But why did he come last night?"

"I don't know. He talked about the War. That's all I remember. He's a good talker."

Lorraine watched him in silence as he washed. After a few minutes Hellebore lay back in the bath, exhausted. He closed his eyes.

"It's lovely here, Albert."

Lorraine glanced at his watch.

"You ought to jump out now," he said. "It's past ten, and we were due there at nine."

"Jump. Listen to that."

Hellebore sat up, put his hands on the bottom of the bath knuckles downwards and heaved himself up to a kneeling position. Lorraine laid the bath-mat across

the floor and went to stand in the doorway. Hellebore drew one of the chairs nearer the bath. With one hand he clung to the rim of the bath and with the other he held the chair. He lifted himself up, but as he did so the chair slipped back, he lost his grip and fell downwards, hitting his chin on the side of the bath. The water splashed across the room, and there was a booming noise from the bath as he struck it. Instantly Lorraine ran forward and took him by the arm. Hellebore clung to his shoulder and gradually pulled himself out of the bath. As he did so he drenched Lorraine's jacket.

"Oh, my goodness, look."

Lorraine stared at his wet sleeve irritably. He went into Hellebore's bedroom and with a look of distaste took the jacket off. He wiped the hot water pipes carefully with a handkerchief, then laid the jacket over them, smoothing out all the creases.

Hellebore dried himself and came into the bedroom to dress. Lorraine turned to him suddenly.

"Where do they all live?" he asked.

"Who?"

"This young man and these jewellery people."

Hellebore shook his head and mumbled, "I've no idea." But Lorraine still fixed him with his eyes.

"Isn't that an odd hour to call?" he asked.

"He happened to hear about your dinner-party -"
Lorraine cut him short:

"Who from?"

"Oh, these things get around Paris."

"How is it the hall porter failed to see him come in?"

"Perhaps he did see him," Hellebore replied.

"No, he didn't. He has instructions to 'phone me if you receive strange visitors."

Behind the dress circle of the Théâtre de la Fête a door led into a wide lounge with mirror-panelled walls. It was customary for the artistes to use this room during rehearsals, and among them it was known as the Crimson Tower, because its balustrade skirted an immense dome of stained glass over the foyer. Lorraine and Hellebore sat drinking coffee by one of the windows. They had waited at the Hotel de la Reine for Lorraine's jacket to dry, and a little before eleven o'clock they had come to the theatre by swift car. All the way Lorraine had sat in the corner of the back seat watching Hellebore, but the latter had not turned his head, only hummed, then seemed to fall asleep. Lorraine had joggled his arm angrily when the car drew up outside the stage-door in the narrow alley-way.

He had run up the carpeted stairs from the

foyer and ordered black coffee. Then he had helped Hellebore to one of the chairs by the window.

"When am I seeing Benedict?" Hellebore asked.

"Seeing Benedict for what?"

"For the rehearsal."

Lorraine stared at him.

"Well?" Hellebore asked.

"Which rehearsal?"

"The rehearsal this morning, - what's the matter with you? The rehearsal for tonight's performance."

Lorraine spoke quietly and deliberately:

"But I am postponing, Jack. I told you I was postponing. I thought we agreed. I am postponing."

"You are not."

"I thought all our difficulties were over, and that for once we had agreed with each other. Why must you open the question up again?"

"Because tonight is first night, and we are not postponing."

"Look at you, Jack, with your head in your hands - you won't be fit for a first night before the end of next week. I have everything ready for a postponement. You heard me tell you I was postponing at the hotel and you said not a word. Why open the question up again?"

"I felt ill. Now I feel better."

"You look, if anything, worse."

"That won't show under powder and a wig," Hellebore said.

"It will show in your movements. I won't have you falling off the wire simply to gratify your pride. I shall call a conference at half-past eleven, and there'll be no performance tonight.* I have made up my mind."

"You are going to turn a couple of thousand people away from the door tonight."

"Oh yes, and more if you wish." He looked at Hellebore defiantly. "But I won't have you throwing away your career, and also my money. I shall call a conference at half-past eleven, and meanwhile I shall show you round the new wing. You have all the time in the world. I am the one who'll be busy today. Sit here and rest for half-an-hour if you wish. Or let me take you round the new wing. Do whichever you want."

Hellebore yawned and rubbed his eyes.

"I shall see Benedict," he said.

"We shall all see Benedict at half~~past~~ eleven. Shall I show you round the new wing?"

"Show me my dressing room," Hellebore answered. "That's all I want to see. I want to see my paints and costumes and the Virgin; and I want to be left alone with them. Call a conference if you like, Albert, call a dozen, but we won't postpone."

"I have made my mind up."

"And I have made up mine."

They left the lounge and walked along a carpeted gallery under the glass dome, then down the foyer staircase

to one of the entrance doors of the auditorium. A corridor went from the back of the pit along the whole length of the theatre to the dressing rooms, passing underneath the stage.

Outside the dressing room Lorraine took Hellebore's arm and drew him back.

"Look," he said. "I just want you to see that."

Hellebore looked up and above the frame of the door saw in gilt and flourished letters the words: Le Salon Hellebore.

"Was that your idea?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What are you going to do now, scrub it out?"

"No, that won't be necessary."

"You'd better scrub it out," he said, turning to face him. Lorraine looked away:

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you don't think I am worthy of it."

"Oh, you'll be worthy of it and more in a week, provided you are sensible," Lorraine said quietly.

"Get a man to scrub it out, then. Shall we go in?"

Lorraine opened the wide double doors and they went in. It was a long room, its ceiling high and carved: much more a drawing room than a dressing room. Two wall-length windows faced the door, and between them stood Hellebore's dressing-table. On the left, ~~was a table~~

there was a wide couch which could serve as a bed, and beyond it a curtain drawn to conceal one corner of the room. On the right there was a tapestried screen and beyond this wardrobe furniture, a sewing table and a wicker chair. There were ink portraits of the two Grimaldi's on the walls.

"All this is new," Hellebore said. "Was it your idea again?"

"No, this time Charpentier helped me in the design." Lorraine was frowning. "We spent many hours together over it."

"When I was last here I had a room fifteen by ten; this is a change from that. It must have cost you money."

Hellebore watched him cunningly as he said this, and Lorraine murmured with exaggerated casualness: "Oh, money..."

Hellebore walked towards his dressing-table but then stopped in the middle of the room and stared before him.

"Albert," he said. "I want to be sick."

"You what?"

"I want to be sick."

"There's a sink, then, quickly!"

Lorraine ran to the corner of the room on the left of Hellebore's dressing-table and pulled back the curtain; behind it was a wash-basin and a mirror.

Hellebore went to it, his hand over his mouth. Lorraine turned away as he vomited thickly into the basin. He retched three or four times, then turned both taps on. He leaned over the basin with his eyes closed, gasping, and Lorraine supported his brow with the palm of his hand.

"Look," Lorraine said, "that's only for a quick wash. I'll show you the bathroom and lavatory."

He led Hellebore to the opposite side of the room and showed him a door behind the screen and wardrobe furniture.

"I expect you could use it," he added.

But Hellebore shook his head and turned back into the room again.

"May I use the telephone on your table?" Lorraine asked him.

Hellebore coughed and blew his nose.

"I didn't know I had one," he replied hoarsely.

"I want to call the conference. You'll be well enough by that time, no doubt."

"Go to hell with your conferences. Help me to get better."

"Lie down on the couch, Jack. Don't talk. Lie back." Hellebore went to the couch and lowered himself slowly down. "Put your head back, that's right. My God, you look washed out. I'll call the Virgin up."

Hellebore raised himself suddenly and spoke as if it were a terrible effort to him:

"No, leave her alone. I want to get rid of this burning in my throat."

Lorraine took a white handkerchief from one of the drawers in the dressing-table, sprinkled Eau de Cologne over it and brought it to him; he laid it across his brow, and Hellebore closed his eyes.

"I'm sick to death of all this," he said. His voice was barely audible. "I want to go away. I'm sick of the job."

"Well, exactly, so would anyone in the world, and that's why I decided to postpone."

"I want to go away for good. To hell with your postponements."

Lorraine pursed his lips:

"I simply don't understand you," he answered.

"I'd like to break all these walls down, all these thick walls. I'd like to set fire to them and go away for good."

"Would you include this room, Jack?"

"Yes; oh, I'd include this room, I'd start with it. I'd smash the mirrors first -"

"The ones over the dressing-table?" Lorraine asked with distaste.

"Yes."

"Well, that would be quite a good beginning, they are worth quite a little fortune in themselves. What else?"

"Oh, I'd set a match to the curtains. That

screen -"

"I thought you'd go for that screen." Lorraine smiled bitterly. "The tapestry is one of the rarest things in this theatre."

"Burn it, burn it. I'm sick to death of it all. You can't keep me walled up in this place. I've finished with everything, and I'M glad I've finished."

"I don't understand that," Lorraine replied. "Whoever wants to keep you walled up? That's the talk of a sick man."

"I'm glad, then," ~~she said.~~

"Glad about what?"

"Well, it's all over. I've been sick down the sink, and that's the end of Hellebore."

"Why should that be the end of Hellebore?" Lorraine asked, arranging the things on the dressing-table with a smile.

"Why, why... Hellebore was only a dead carcass, anyway, so good riddance."

"Listen to me, Jack. You are a sick man, and you hardly know what you are saying. I shall postpone the show for a week, and then you'll have your first night, and the best one of your career."

Hellebore opened his eyes and looked across at him fiercely.

"Do you think I don't mean what I say?" he asked.

"You mean it, my dear fellow, but tomorrow you

will mean something different. Meanwhile I shall call a conference and postpone the show."

"Shall I tell you what we'll do? We'll cancel the show, we'll tear the contract up - this morning. I said I've finished with everything."

"What?" Lorraine cried.

Hellebore raised himself and leane^d forward on his elbow, watching him.

"There," he said quietly, "that's what I mean. And that's what I say."

Lorraine turned away, chastened.

"No, no," he murmured, shaking his head.

"I am finished, I am not fit to go on a stage again. That's the bare truth of the matter. Your instincts were right last night; I'm not fit to go on a stage again. So let me go away. I've finished with Hellebore. Bring the contract here and we'll tear it up, go on."

Lorraine was awed and pale:

"This is a different tune, Jack."

"I tell you, Hellebore is finished, so see him decently buried."

"What have these people been doing to you?" Lorraine asked him with compassion.

"What people?"

"These jewellers and this young man of yours."

Hellebore sneered at him, his head down on the

cushions again:

"Oh, I'm old enough to look after myself. Didn't I cancel the contract out of my own free will last night?"

"How?" Lorraine asked.

"I walked out of the hotel after midnight and there wasn't a war or revolution on. That was a breach of contract, wasn't it?"

Lorraine shrugged his shoulders and pouted glumly:

"These are very serious words, Jack," he said.

"The whole world's changed. I can't find a footing again."

"I shall postpone the show for a week, and I'll leave you to think the rest over. It can't be true. Your words mean the end of a career, and I won't allow it."

"They are true."

"My poor, dear fellow," Lorraine murmured, "what a sight you are, lying there. I could never have predicted it. What I said last night was due to bad nerves - "

"Bah - !"

"It was due to bad nerves."

{ Suddenly

Suddenly Hellebore leaned forward again and groped in his pocket for something.

"Here, take this bloody souvenir away," he said.

He drew Lorraine's rosary from the pocket of his tweed jacket and threw it violently at Lorraine's feet. It clattered against the leg of the dressing-table near which Lorraine was still standing.

At first Lorraine said nothing. He simply stood and watched Hellebore. His lips were drawn tight together. Then he spoke:

"I've seen them behave like this before."

"Them? Them? What do you mean, them?"

"The celebrities like yourself. It's a form of hysteria that comes with middle-age. You are forty-five, aren't you?"

"My name is Jack Finstanley. Aren't I more to you than them?"

"You appal me."

Lorraine, pale and trembling, bent down and picked up his rosary from the floor. He then walked to the door without glancing at the couch. Having opened the door, he turned, and said deliberately:

"Very well, I shall cancel the contract."

He left the room and Hellebore lay back on the couch again with a long sigh.

Lorraine went swiftly to his own office. This was on the floor above the dressing rooms. One of its doors communicated with a wooden gallery running across

the stage high above it in the flies; its windows overlooked a small park which adjoined the theatre at the rear wall, behind the stage.

He slammed the door and went straight to his desk, his lips pressed together and his eyes narrowed. There was mist between the trees outside, and everything was still. Bernard Charpentier got up from one of the armchairs by the window. He had been sitting in the shadow with his dark cloak wrapped across him, and Lorraine started when he saw him.

Charpentier bowed, immensely taller than Lorraine.

"The entire theatre has been ringing you for the last hour," he said. "You look troubled."

"I have just come from Jack. Something very nasty has been going on."

"Where is he, then?"

"Where is Jack Finstanley?" Lorraine looked out of the window bitterly. "I'll tell you where Jack Finstanley is. He is lying on his backside in his dressing room; his face is green and he has been behaving like a madman."

"No."

"He has been most dreadfully sick. Some young adventurer came up to his room at midnight and the worst happened: they filled him with drink and sent him back at five in the morning."

"Who?"

"I have my suspicions, but no more. Listen to me, Bernard: I shall need your help, because I think this will be our busiest day since the Armistice."

"Why?"

"Listen to me, Bernard: I am going to run an entirely new show. I am cancelling tonight's performance. And I am ~~going~~ tearing up Jack's contract."

Charpentier roared with laughter.

"Oh, Albert, come, come!" he cried.

But Lorraine continued staring out of the window, pale, his lips pursed.

"I am going to tear up his contract," he repeated quietly. "All that will take time."

"You can't tear up a contract signed by Hellebore. Any manager who tears up a contract signed by Hellebore is a fool or a madman: which are you?"

"But, Bernard, I have just come from his dressing room. For the last five minutes I have been listening to him telling me that he is finished for good, that he wants to leave Paris and that he would like to burn his dressing room and then the entire theatre down; and I know when Jack is in earnest."

"He got drunk, I suppose?"

"Drunk? I found him lying on his bed with all his clothes on, and ~~the~~ the shoulder of his jacket torn. He had two hours' sleep. And you know what Jack is like if he doesn't get his sleep."

Charpentier shrugged and sat down again, drawing

his cloak about him like a blanket. He stretched out his legs and yawned.

"It doesn't sound like the end of the theatrical world to me," he said.

"His eyes are bloodshot. His hair's all over the place. His face is swollen, there's a bruise the size of your finger on his chin, his hands are trembling. If that is the Jack Finstanley I knew yesterday and the Jack Finstanley I signed up a month ago then I have nothing more to say: but it isn't. He could no more play Hellebore tonight than you or I could. And he realises that. He sees it very clearly. He said it very slowly and plainly to me, I am finished, he said, Hellebore is finished. And he asked me to give him a decent burial by tearing the contract up."

But Charpentier still shook his head.

"Get him down onto the stage," he replied, "and see how he shapes; postpone the show until next week -"

"No, I can't have dealings with the fellow. I have other shows waiting to see the light of day."

"It may be that he's only trying out your loyalty, Albert." He watched Lorraine slyly. "And it may be that after a little rest he'll be himself again."

"And it may be that he is, as he himself says, finished."

"Well, it would be most amusing if you tore up his contract and he then recovered and fell straight into

the arms of another manager. It would be most amusing to see him sign up with another manager."

"Oh, that can't be helped."

Charpentier chuckled:

"Still, it would be amusing," he said.

Lorraine pulled the curtain further back and looked down at the park in silence. After some time he turned and looked at Charpentier, his eyes clear now.

"Would you back him with your last franc in his present state?" he asked quietly.

Charpentier nodded.

"You see, Albert," he said, "if you intend to destroy Jack you won't do it by tearing his contract up."

"Why should I want to destroy him?"

"If you refuse to sign him up you are obliged to destroy him, or at least to try. How can you afford to let him strike bargains with other managers in France? You must know that quite half of all business enterprise consists in thwarting other people's. You can't destroy him by tearing his contract up. But you can destroy him by letting him go on the stage tonight and deserve his cat-calls. In that case he will be his own enemy; he will destroy himself. And that is the best you can hope for: that he will destroy himself. In that case not another manager between here and Tokyo would touch him. And should he recover: suppose this first night were his best? Who would be the gainer then?"

Lorraine shook his head:

"I can't forget those bloodshot eyes."

"Send him a message that Benedict is waiting for him on the stage."

"No," Lorraine answered, "I must think about it."

"Well, the time is already twenty-six minutes past eleven."

"And I already feel worn out."

Francine Berger, dressed in a white surgical Zyrall, knocked on the door of Hellebore's dressing room and walked in. She drew back the moment she saw him. One of his arms hung down at the side of the couch, his eyes were closed and his mouth open; across his chin was a dark blue bruise. She closed the door and went to him; she knelt and listened to his breathing. Then she pulled him by both armpits further onto the couch so that he would lie more securely. He gasped and shook his head limply as she moved him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You are in your dressing room."

"I know. What's the matter with you, I mean? What do you want to move me for?"

"I thought you looked uncomfortable," she replied in a soft voice. "When I came in I thought there had been a tragedy. I thought someone had killed you. May I get something to cool your head? You look so ill."

She went to the wash-basin and made up a strip of

wet flannel.

"Tell me what happened," she said.

"I think somebody must have hit me last night, but I'm not sure what happened. I was as tight as a fiddler's bitch. I was sick a little while ago, so I feel better than I did."

"What about the bruise on your chin? You must have had an accident."

"I hit it on the side of the bath this morning. This is an unlucky day."

"Oh, don't say that. Remember tonight."

She laid the strip of cold wet flannel across his brow.

"I have been waiting in my room since ten o'clock," she told him. "Everyone was looking for Lorraine. Has he seen you?"

Hellebore sighed as she pressed the flannel against his brow, and smiled.

"Oh, yes, we've seen each other," he said. "We've certainly seen each other."

"I cannot remember you drunk at the hotel last night."

"No. Someone called on me shortly ~~after~~ before midnight. We went out together."

"This was a friend of yours, I suppose?"

She took from one of her pockets a bottle of smelling salts and held it under his nose.

"No, a stranger," he said.

"What was his name?"

"Sangson."

She became quite still and stared at him in silence. Her hand with the smelling salts had moved away from his nose, and she now rested it against his shoulder, quite lost. Then she remembered herself, replaced the salts in the pocket of her overall and got up from the couch. She had long, blonde hair to her shoulders, and a slim, delicate face.

"What are we to do, then?" she asked. "It is so odd, you lying there at this time. You are usually up on the stage by now."

"I shall be going up soon. I want you to leave me here to rest a little. Just leave me a little and I shall give you a ring when I'm ready."

"Shall I draw the curtains?" she asked. "Will that help?"

He nodded, and she said: "You must not get drunk on important occasions."

She took the wet flannel from his forehead and wrung it out in the basin. She then drew the curtains across both windows and left the room.

Hellebore slept again, then stirred and looked about him. The room was in half darkness. There was not a sound from the stage or the other dressing rooms.

He pushed himself lower down on the couch so

that his head would lie at the same level as his body. He lay absolutely straight, with his arms firmly at his side: he began breathing deeply and regularly, expanding his chest to the utmost each time. He continued this exercise for some minutes. Then he turned to a position at right angles with the length of the couch, so that only his trunk lay across it, while the calves of his legs on one side and his head on the other were unsupported. He raised his arms and drew them in a circle over his head so that they touched the floor under him palm downwards; then gradually he began lowering his head and shoulders to bring them nearer the floor. At the same time he strained upwards with his hips and thighs. He trembled, he began to sweat, but gradually his legs came up. When they were clear of the couch he swung himself up into a vertical hand-stand. But the instant he was there, balanced on his head and the palms of his hands, a pain seemed to strike his middle, and he flung his legs down to find a sitting position. As his right leg descended it caught the side of his dressing-table, and a glass jar fell and smashed on the floor.

He went to the dressing-table and sat down before the mirrors. He leaned close to the mirrors in the half darkness and peered hard into them. He dabbed rose-water on his temples and along his upper lip. He widened first one eye and then the other by holding back the lids. He took a pair of nail scissors from the table and carefully cut the hairs in his nose, drawing his upper lip down over

his teeth. He rubbed cold cream into the bruise on his chin, and combed his hair. He then went behind the screen; from the chest of drawers he took a silk blouse, a pair of cloth trousers secured with elastic at the ankle, and a pair of slippers.

He changed into these and left the room.

Eliza Manning entered Lorraine's office just as Charpentier was getting up to go. She stopped half way across the room and looked from one to the other.

"Hullo, what's the matter with everyone," she asked. "Benedict has been down on the stage for the last hour."

"Albert will tell you everything," Charpentier answered. "I'm off to see Jack."

He left the room, and Eliza Manning went across to Lorraine and kissed him lightly on the forehead. He was sitting now at his desk, close to the window.

"Well, what's the matter?" she asked him. "You look nervous again."

He looked away from her:

"Oh, Jack's been playing the fool. But I refuse to talk about it now. Sit down."

He indicated a chair next to his own.

"We had a little disagreement," he said, "and I want to forget about it. I promised to see you at ten o' clock, my treasure, and I wasn't here. That was due to Jack. I am sorry. Let me kiss your hand."

He drew her hand across the arm of his chair, smiled at her sadly and gently kissed it.

"You looked pert and handsome last night," he said. "I would have Eiselhiem on permanent contract if I could, just to keep you in Paris... Did I disgust you by talking about death?"

"You must never worry about what I think."

"Do I disgust you?"

"No, my dear."

He looked at her for a few moments, then sighed.

"You understand my faith in ^{Father} Michelon, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You don't think it's laughable?"

"NO, Albert."

"Well, I wrote to him about that very question of death some weeks ago. Would you like to see what he wrote back? I've never shown you one of his letters. Would you like to see it?"

He opened one of the drawers in his desk and took from it a sheaf of papers secured by a clip onto an oblong piece of three-ply wood. All these papers were numbered, beginning with number one at the top. On the wooden board itself there was a subject-index. He pushed back the sheaf of papers and ran his fingers down this index until he found under the letter D the word Death, No. 57. He turned to No. 57 of the papers and withdrew it from the sheaf. He handed it to Eliza.

"How careful you are with your things," she said quietly. "Fancy keeping an index."

"Is that foolish?"

"No, it's clever."

She read the letter while Lorraine looked over her shoulder:

"How miserable a life everlasting on earth would be. Death is not your melancholic thoughts about it. It is not drab, empty, dark, loathsome. It is peace. It is the door by which you go out. Try to cast away these memories of funerals: they have to do only with the living death, with the hell that is inside us now, not with the real death, that is everlasting peace. Every melancholic thought you have is a temptation from the devil, and you must treat it as such. Do not pity yourself. Be heartless to yourself, and in this you will be heartless to the devil. Self-pity is a pleasure indulged most by melancholic people: it is their sin and shame, and it is no more forgivable than the most heinous crime.

In Jesus Christ,

Father Michelon."

Hellebore entered the pit by a door at the side of the stalls. Grey dust sheets covered all the seats. The curtain was up and there were noises of hammering and shouting in the wings. Only a dim blue light came from the stage. Subdued red stars were alight in the domed

ceiling of the auditorium, twenty or thirty in number, and from the centre of this dome hung a huge silver chandelier. In the pit itself, where Hellebore stood, the air was hot, but now and then a swift cold wind blew down from the wings. There were only cables, ropes, ladders and chairs on the stage, and no backcloth, so that the dark brick wall behind it was visible.

Someone in the wings shouted "Voilà!" and two powerful arc-lamps were switched on. Hellebore turned away, for the moment blinded. He watched Benedict Amurrat walk across the stage, then he went up the centre gangway to the back of the pit. He pushed open one of the doors marked SORTIE and peeped into the wide carpeted foyer. Someone passed across the entrance doors: he quickly took his hand away and returned to the stage. He stood behind the conductor's rostrum and waited. The arc-lamps were switched down and the auditorium was once more in darkness.

Eiselheim / Heinrich Eiselheim
~~xxxx~~ came into the foyer from the street. He wore a black overcoat with a fur collar. He was a tall, slim man, with a dark moustache and watchful eyes. He had caught sight of Hellebore, only for an instant, and had immediately stopped. He stood still in the foyer, listening. There was the sound of slipped feet from the auditorium, and they seemed to be coming nearer. He walked swiftly behind one of the pillars and waited. But the footsteps died away. He walked out into the

foyer again, listened, then went into the street and round the side of the theatre to the stagedoor.

Francine Berger returned to Hellebore's dressing room and after glancing at the couch pulled the curtains back. She immediately caught sight of the smashed glass and powder at the foot of his dressing-table. She paused over it with a frown, then went to the couch and tidied the cover. She stood listening for a moment: then she went to the door, opened it, took the key from the outside, closed the door again and locked it. She went straight to the dressing-table and sat down before his mirrors. She pulled out all the drawers of this table one by one, and she scrutinised closely every article and scrap of paper within them.

She replaced the things with a sigh and opened the door again. She then went behind the screen and began laying out Hellebore's costumes one by one.

Hellebore put one hand on the conductor's rostrum to support himself and closed his eyes. Suddenly there was the sound of a woman's voice close to him:

"...death soon enough!"

He started back.

"Eliza!"

"It's Jack!"

Lorraine's voice, behind her in the darkness, called out: "Jack?"

"What on earth are you standing here for?"

Eliza asked him.

They could just make each other out in the darkness.

"Ah, so you got my message," Lorraine said. "We've just come down from the office."

"What message?" Hellebore asked.

"To say that Benedict was waiting on the stage for you. Bernard went down to tell you."

"No, I never had it."

"Then you got into tights - ?" Lorraine peered at him, leaning forward. "Those are tights, aren't they?"

"Yes, I'm in tights."

"Well, I've never known such behaviour. First you will never go on the stage again and then you jump into a pair of tights."

"Wait and see," Hellebore told him. "Perhaps I am finished."

"What were you doing, - trying me out?"

"No, I only spoke my mind."

"But you have changed it now," Lorraine said sharply.

"No, I haven't."

"Why are you in tights, then?"

"Out of habit."

Lorraine scoffed at him:

"Habit..."

"What has been the trouble, Jack?" Eliza asked.

"Albert won't tell me."

"Oh, I was drunk last night."

"What, in the lounge during the party?"

"No, afterwards."

"Well, that isn't a crime, Albert, is it?"

"Ah, wait until you see his face," Lorraine told her. "That is. He went off with a bunch of ne'er-do-wells. They released him at five o'clock this morning."

"Released..." Hellebore murmured.

"Stop biting at each other," Eliza said.

"Take him for a walk, Eliza," Hellebore answered. "Make him say his beads."

Just as Francine Berger laid Hellebore's sequin suit across the table Charpentier came into the room. He glanced at the couch. She turned and asked him whether he was looking for Hellebore.

"Yes," he replied, "and the bird appears to have flown."

"He must have gone up to the stage, but God knows what he has been doing with himself."

"Have you seen him, then?"

"Yes, and he needs looking after. He is really ill."

Charpentier put his hands in his pockets and said casually:

"Oh, he was only a little drunk last night."

"I came back just now and found one of his powder jars on the floor."

"Broken, you mean? How?"

"Perhaps he fell against the table. That corner smells of vomit. What chance will he stand this evening?"

"Only he himself knows."

Francine went behind the screen to her sewing table, and Charpentier peeped round the corner.

"Ah, so these are the legendary accoutrements!" He went nearer the table where Hellebore's costumes lay. "Let me touch them. May I?"

"By all means."

Charpentier lifted up a pierrot's dress with awe.

"It is like touching ancient parchments," he said. "I can already see them as museum exhibits. I remember these pom-poms and neck-frill,- what will he use this pierrot's dress for, Francine?"

"He always used it for his entrance, but I don't know what he means to do with it tonight."

"Yes, I remember those sudden entrances in white."

"Onto an empty stage."

"Yes," he said.

Francine came to his side at the table.

"Haven't you seen his stuff before?" she asked him.

"From the pit, yes, but never backstage, to touch with my own fingers. When does he wear this sequin jacket? Remind me."

"I don't think he used it for his last two shows

in Paris, but before then he did his trapeze work in it."

"It used to make those flashes, - of course. And the big shoes, - I remember them well." He picked up one of them. "It must be two feet long?"

"At least. All that part - " She pointed to the toe. " - is very lightly made, so that it can flap up and down. It makes a smacking noise when he walks."

"And where are the removable tails?"

"Here, look."

She brought out the tails of a morning jacket from under the sequin suit, then the jacket itself - like a Spanish jacket - onto which the tails clipped.

"Yes, yes, I remember that clearly," Charpentier murmured with a smile. "I remember him tumbling over and over."

"Feel for the little water-tank. Can you feel it?"

She handed him a pair of black trousers, and he felt in the right hand pocket.

"Yes, I can feel it. Those are his tears? And I can remember the outside check suit. He used it for the shooting parties. But no gun. No gun this year?"

"No. Perhaps he won't use it this season."

"And why the bowler-hat and this horse-whip?"

He lifted up first a tiny bowler-hat, no more than six inches wide, and then a long horse-whip of the type used in circuses.

"I have never seen them before," Francine told him. "But there they were, among his other costumes. It is

something new, I dare say."

"But I know what these are for. Don't you?"

He took from a deep box on the table two or three white china eggs.

Francine nodded: "So does Eiselheim, I fear."

"Yes, there may be a little trouble about that. Where are the kerchiefs, the top hat and the other incriminating articles?"

"In the cupboard. I dare not put them out on the table lest Eiselheim or Helen should come in."

Charpentier smiled.

"Eliza would love the idea, of course," he said.

"Oh, Eliza, - she is disloyal."

"Do you think so?" He put the china eggs back slowly and thoughtfully, then he went towards the door. He looked at her. "Your English is remarkably fluent now. Where did you learn it?"

She turned her back on him.

"That is my secret."

"You are a relentless woman... Adieu."

The chorus of fifteen girls filed onto the stage, and Jaques, the dancing master, was behind them. He trotted nimbly down-stage and stood with his back to the footlights: he was a small man, quick and loud-voiced. He made a peremptory signal with his hand, and his girls moved quickly into line before him. He told them in French, pronouncing his words slowly and clearly, to keep their heads up, their backs straight and their eyes level.

He told them to keep their eyes fixed on the lowest part visible to them of the dress circle, and to smile within as well as without, not mechanically.

Lorraine was standing with Eliza by one of the arc-lamps in the wings, while Hellebore was still behind the conductor's rostrum and visible from the stage. Jacques continually glanced obsequiously to his right, at Lorraine, then to his rear, at Hellebore; as he talked he made secret little signs to his chorus - his eyebrows raised urgently - so that they should impress this special audience.

The dance began and Jacques clapped his hands to the rhythm of the piano. He went among the girls as they danced; he pressed one girl's head further down as she bent forward, and lifted higher another girl's leg as she danced on one foot. Continually throughout the dance he cried out, to the rhythm of the music: "Heads up, backs straight, eyes level"; if a girl glanced down at the floor or the footlights, he ran forward and scolded her.

During the dance Benedict Amurrat came onto the stage, peering down into the pit, saw Hellebore and then descended. Hellebore walked along the gangway to meet him and they shook hands.

When the dance was over stagehands began constructing the cage for Eiselheim's tigers. The four walls were bolted together and a passage-way about two feet high was laid down in the wings for the tigers to come in by.

Eiselheim watched Eliza from the other side of

the stage, then walked behind the chorus to where she stood with Lorraine. As he passed her he turned to speak, after the briefest smile at Lorraine.

"Do you happen to know where Helen is?" he asked

[her.

her.

She answered him rudely, "Don't you? Surely you know?" and he immediately drew back in surprise; he looked at her appalled for a moment, then smiled.

"No. I am afraid I do not."

He bowed slightly to them both and left the stage. Lorraine put his arm in Eliza's and drew her closer to him.

"Now, Eliza, now..."

"Now what?"

She tried to break free from him.

"You are so rude to him, my dear."

"I can't hear a thing with this piano!"

He leaned over and spoke in her ear: "Why are you so rude to Eiselheim? He hasn't the right nature to deal with your rudeness. Why do you do it?"

"Well, why do you quarrel with Jack?"

He looked into her eyes with a smile: "Yes, I suppose we all have our reasons."

"What has been the trouble between you? I still want to know, and I shall worry you until you tell me."

"There are always disagreements in the first week, Eliza. They are a form of first night nerves. They help to brace one up - "

"Tell me the truth." She fixed her eyes on him and put her face close to his. "Have you been talking to him about postponement again this morning?"

"Not yet," Lorraine replied uncomfortably.

"Have you?"

"We talked about cancelling his contract, you see."

He said this quickly, as if it would not be noticed. She stared at him:

"Cancelling? You have both gone mad."

"But he is no fit state to give a performance today or tomorrow even. You saw his face yourself, didn't you, when the lights came on again?"

"Then I can't understand why the rehearsals are going on. Look at the time, it's already gone twelve. You should be at work now if you want to postpone."

Lorraine looked about him, biting his lip:

"We shall have to see how he goes this morning."

"By the time you have discussed that it will be too late to do anything." She shook Lorraine's arm.

"What do you intend to do?"

But Lorraine was passive: "I don't know," he said, "I simply don't know." He kissed her lightly on the temple. "I must leave you now."

He went to the very back of the stage and climbed the steep wooden stairs which led to his gallery in the flies; he leaned over the rail of the gallery and waved to Eliza far below, then he turned and went into his office. He was about to go to his desk when he heard someone knock on the door which communicated with the corridor in the new wing. He opened it and saw Jean Duloi-Bordeau .

He did not invite him into the office but walked out into the corridor and closed the door behind him. Duloi-Bordeau was a short, muscular man with plump cheeks, a broken nose and the eyes of a child.

"I tried to see you alone all day yesterday," he told Lorraine politely, coming closer to him. "The troupe's tired, Albert, and we would like to know whether you could drop us out of the next show, when Jack goes to Spain. It will only be for a fortnight, and we should be fresher for it."

Lorraine smiled and patted Duloi-Bordeau's shoulder.

"The season will be finished in a couple of months," he said.

"But we must have a rest. We are tired."

"Listen, my dear fellow, I am not your family doctor, I am your manager. If you want to be somebody in the theatre you must be prepared to fight out your problems alone. I am alone, Jack is alone, Eiselheim is alone, you are alone, - and the Théâtre de la Fête would collapse in a ruin tomorrow if we all tried to lean on each other's shoulders. If you want to drop out of the contract, come and tell me so, but that will be your last chance to sign up with me, or indeed with any manager of my standing in France or England. I told you at the beginning - didn't I? - how horrible success can be."

"My sister is a sick woman." Tears began to

appear in Duloi-Bordeau's eyes. "She has to go on every night with that chest of hers..."

Lorraine shrugged gently:

"I am in love with a young lady, Jean, and that young lady refuses to take me as a husband. What are you going to do about that? What could you do about that? And the audience doesn't care one way or the other."

He gazed into the other man's eyes, then went back into his office and closed the door, while Duloi-Bordeau remained standing in the corridor, helpless.

Eiselheim was already waiting inside the cage while a stagehand in the wings raised the grill to admit his first tiger. He was dressed in riding boots and a black jersey, and once the grill was up he jumped forward and cracked his whip. The tigers paused at the entrance and cast up at him a slow, drowsy glance before they trotted to their boxes, avoiding his whip. As soon as they were all inside he became fierce and threatening, prowling among them with bent back, his chin thrust forward, striking at their faces and paws whenever they tried to shift out of place. He made them bow to him, jump through hoops, snap at his hand as he passed, run between his legs, leap one by one over his head, fight with each other, lie down and take his neck between their paws, and follow each other from box to box in a continual octagon. Everything was done with a

quick savagery, so that the beasts should not be still for an instant.

Eliza stood in the wings outside, leaning against the cage-wall, and she was watching every movement Eiselheim made, perhaps with awe. Especially his eyes had changed, sunk deep into his brow. The beasts moved about cowed and resentful in his presence. Suddenly, just as he struck one of them in the mouth with the stiff part of his whip, he turned and quite by accident looked her in the eyes. At once she drew back from the cage-wall, frightened by him.

She went out of the pass-door and hurried along towards the new wing, her head bowed. Not far from Hellebore's dressing room Charpentier turned the corner and almost bumped into her. She started, disturbed in her thoughts, and he apologised. He touched her light dress and asked with a smile: "Have you seen Jack, my dear?"

"Yes, and he looks dreadful. His face has swollen in all the wrong places."

"I've just come from his dressing room. He fell onto his table and smashed a glass jar while the Virgin was away."

"Has she been nursing him, then?"

"She has been trying," he said, "but he evades her."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Exactly."

"The first thing Albert talked about in the office this morning was Michelon." She looked round and spoke in a lower voice. "He showed me one of his letters on death. Did you know that Albert keeps all those letters clipped together onto a board, with a neat index of all the subjects?"

"No, he rarely mentions Michelon to me."

"I was astonished; it showed me another side of his character altogether."

"What Albert will never confess to Michelon," Charpentier said with a chuckle, "is that he finds doing good tedious, and evil both exciting and lucrative."

Eiselheim's rehearsal was brief. When he had seen the last tiger back behind the grill again, he mounted the wooden staircase to Lorraine's office, brushing the dust and straw from his breeches as he went.

While the cage was being dismantled two sceneshifters wheeled in from the wings a ramshackle grand piano with the varnish marked and flaking, the legs cracked and bound up with ropes and rags, the lid split into several parts so that when ~~xxxxx~~ lifted it hung over the strings like a number of planks insecurely tied together, and the keys yellow with age.

Hellebore bent down to look at a metal lever hidden at the side of the key-board. He stood clear

of the piano and, with his arm stretched out, pulled this lever smartly down. At once the keyboard lid fell with a crash to the floor, and he nodded to the sceneshifters. They now brought a small box from the wings with a wire attached to it. This they inserted under the keyboard, then drew the wire back to a detonator mechanism in the wings. Hellebore stood close to the piano, waiting. An electrician pressed the detonator button and instantly there was a loud report and a cloud of white smoke burst from the keyboard and enveloped both Hellebore and the piano, rolling and turning across the stage. Hidden now

[...from the auditorium

from the auditorium, he went through several actions in mime: he went through the actions of taking off his shoes, his trousers and his jacket, then of receiving from a stage-hand in the wings another set of clothes, then of tugging something from his right temple, - all in the course of a few seconds. Now he reeled and stumbled across the stage through the smoke cloud until he was once more in view from the dark stalls.

Eiselheim went to one of the windows in Lorraine's office and gazed down at the park, quite still.

"Are you sure?" Lorraine asked him.

"Quite sure. There are very seldom misunderstandings between us. She has a headstrong nature, but I accept it."

Lorraine watched the other man carefully before he spoke:

"I was thinking, you see, of asking her to take some permanent work in this theatre."

Eiselheim turned from the window.

"Yes," he said, "but she isn't unhappy with me. You must allow for her temperament: suddenly she will turn on someone, - then it is all over. Believe me. I have known her for many years."

"Well, she did talk last night as if she were a little discontented."

"But do you think it is safe to judge any woman

by her words?" Eiselheim asked him.

"She is usually sincere with me."

"Try, then. Ask her to take some permanent work here. But I don't think she will hear of it."

Lorraine looked up at him sharply.

"Would you be willing to let her go if she did agree?" he asked.

"Yes, certainly. But I know she won't hear of it." Eiselheim lowered his gaze. "Of course, I do understand your concern for Eliza. I am not trying to interfere with that."

"Of course not."

Hellebore walked slowly towards the trapeze, rubbing his hands on his thighs. It had stopped short of the floor and level with his waist. He now poised himself and made a leap forward onto the trapeze so that he lay across the bar, his head towards the pit, as if he had fallen there. When he seemed secure Amurrat waved his hand at the operator, and the trapeze began moving swiftly up towards the flies with Hellebore lying across it.

But suddenly he was no longer firm. He yelled out and the trapeze stopped just in time, nine feet above the boards, to prevent him falling from it head first. The trapeze returned to the stage and he jumped off, perspiring and shivering. Amurrat came and patted him on the shoulder. The operator in the flies shouted down: "Qu'y a-t-ll?"

"That would have been a nice fall," Hellebore said. Amurrat asked him to try it again, but he shook his head and turned away angrily.

Eiselheim asked Lorraine a question in a lower, secretive voice:

"How is Mr. Finstanley this morning?"

The window rattled, then all was quiet again. Lorraine looked away quickly and blinked, with Eiselheim's dark, narrow eyes upon him.

"We must give him time to find his feet again, you know," he said.

"I hear he has been unsteady this morning. I thought that was unusual."

There was a knock on the door and they both started. Charpentier came in.

"Jack has been rehearsing for the last half-hour," he told them. He bowed to Eiselheim. "Good morning, Heinrich."

Eiselheim did not smile. He simply returned the bow with pursed lips and murmured, "Good morning, Mr. Charpentier."

Lorraine got up from his chair behind the desk, watching Eiselheim.

"We'll go down together, then," he told Charpentier, "and have a look at him"

The conductor played several dances on the piano and during each of them Hellebore danced a few steps so that they should be able to determine the speed at which

the music should be taken. The conductor marked his score according to Hellebore's instructions.

Eiselheim left Lorraine and Charpentier in the corridor, not wishing to re-visit the stage. The other two found Amurrat with an electrician in the wings, and together they descended to the first row of the stalls. Hellebore was leaning over the conductor's shoulder to look at the score.

Lorraine sat next to Amurrat and asked him:
"What are the chances of a fiasco tonight?"

"Well, all I can say is that the show apart from Jack is thoroughly coordinated and rehearsed. Its success now rests with one man, and that man is Jack. I admit this worries me a little. I know my tasks, the stage manager knows his, the conductor knows his, and so do the electricians and the stagehands. The chorus dances better than it has ever done before: Eiselheim is in fine fettle; the Duloi-Bordeau's have rehearsed until now they can barely stand up. But for Hellebore I cannot vouch; I can only vouch for my own faith in him and my quite private expectations. Such men defy prediction."

"Has he been on the wire yet?"

"Yes, it was the first thing he did this morning."

"Was he steady?"

"Yes. But he did slip on the trapeze, just a few minutes ago." Amurrat leaned forward to look at Charpentier and address a question to him: "Bernard, what

is the matter with our manager this morning?"

"First night nerves, my dear chap. He hears your words, but not your meaning."

A voice in the wings called out for Amurrat and he returned to the stage. Lorraine and Charpentier walked slowly up to the centre gangway to the back of the auditorium.

"There you are, look at that," Charpentier whispered to him as they turned their eyes towards the stage. "He's still a showman."

Hellebore performed a number of very fast cartwheels, flinging his body over with an immense force.

"When they reach that age - " Lorraine broke off and gasped. "Now you look at that!"

On the rebound from his last cartwheel Hellebore

[slipped ... P. 141.]

slipped backwards: he managed to right himself, but not without pulling one of his calf-muscles painfully. He limped to the armchair in the wings and sat down.

Lorraine put his hand over his eyes and bowed his head: "This is an exact repetition of my most fearful dream, even to the point of the strange intruder in the dead of night. Even I was not superstitious enough to believe that my worst fears could materialise in such close detail. In future I shall pay more attention to those foolish fears of mine; apparently there is less folly in them than you or I or anybody else thought."

Charpentier put his hand on his shoulder:

"But I am afraid that if you begin taking note of your fears and premonitions, Albert, you will never float another show or take another business risk as long as you live, and you will end a pauper."

At noon each day during rehearsals the Crimson Tower became a dining room for the artistes and members of the orchestra: the armchairs and cocktail-tables were moved back to the walls, and round mahogany tables and stiff-backed chairs were brought in.

Hellebore, Eliza and Helen Eugenie sat near one of the windows, talking after their lunch. Hellebore was dressed in a light country-tweed suit. Helen Eugenie, ^{Fiselheim} ~~Nick~~'s second stage assistant, was taller and older than Eliza; she was sombre, her hands were long. She was dressed in black, with a black lace collar high at her neck.

The clouds were still low, but now and again there was a sharp ray of sunlight from between them which lit up the lounge suddenly and then died quickly down.

Helen was speaking to Eliza: "You haven't said a kind word to him since we arrived in Paris, and goodness knows what you've been saying behind his back. If he makes you so unhappy why don't you leave him and find other work?"

Stet Eliza was quiet, leaning back in her chair.
~~Eliza was quiet, leaning back in her chair.~~

"What other work?" ^{she asked,}
~~she asked.~~

Helen answered her like an elder sister, rather mockingly: "Oh, my dear girl, Lorraine would surely find something for you."

Eliza sneered.

"Yes," she said, "with certain conditions attached."

"Still, it might make you see Heinrich in a better light. Never has he once done you any unkindness. Never once has he even snapped at you..."

"No." Eliza looked across the table at her bitterly. "He never talks, that's why. It's the silence I can't bear."

Helen twisted her glass in her hand, smiling: "Well, I should try noisier work if I were you, and then perhaps you'd call his silence peace of mind, and run back to it like a naughty child. I suppose you have noticed that he never answers your rudeness."

"Yes, but I wish he would answer me just once." Eliza became angry and spoke quickly. "I wish he'd smack my face or call me a slovenly little bitch. Imagine Heinrich calling me a slovenly little bitch, Jack!"

Hellebore took no notice, but continued staring down at the table shyly.

"I dare say you could find cruel and foul-mouthed employers enough," Helen told her. "There are plenty of them in our profession. Why don't you go out and look for one?"

"Because I am lazy and stupid. I want a husband and I want children. There is nothing Heinrich can do

about that, but you'd think that if he were as holy as you say he is he would try to give me a little comfort. A little comfort, I don't know what, but a holy man would know, - so you would think, wouldn't you?" She turned to Hellebore again. "Yes, Jack, she called him holy the other day. She worships him."

Hellebore glanced up at Helen, embarrassed, and asked her: "Do you think I ought to have a word with him about Eliza? She isn't happy - "

Eliza cut him short, looking into his eyes fiercely: "Yes, tell him I've been in love with you for the last ten years; what could his holiness do about that?"

Perhaps Helen was a little panic-stricken by what Hellebore had just said. She shook her head gravely at him: "I know exactly how he would be if you tried to talk to him, - like a caught animal. You could as well ask one of our tigers to speak."

Eliza watched her cynically: "But in any case he hates Jack."

"Oh, Eliza..." Helen shook her head sadly. "You say these rash things, but do you think whether they are true or not?"

"I know that's true. I can use my own eyes." She spoke to Hellebore. "They both hate you. If she could put an end to your career tomorrow she'd do it, for Heinrich's sake. She'd lay the whole world waste for Heinrich's sake. Everything she does is for Heinrich -"

"No, Eliza, no!" cried Helen. She was near tears.

"She goes everywhere with that horrible set smile of hers; it means she's thinking about Heinrich. Dear Heinrich -"

Hellebore was suddenly disgusted: "Oh, shut up, for Christ's sake. What the hell's it got to do with me?"

He stared at them as they sat in silence, ashamed now. Then he asked: "Wine?"

He held the wine bottle diagonally before Helen, and she shook her head. He held it before Eliza, and she merely averted her eyes without uttering a word. He filled his own glass and laid the bottle down again meditatively.

Helen turned to him and said quietly: "Forgive her. She is only acting out her little melodrama."

Hellebore shook his head frowning: "No, she isn't acting anything. I think she is fond of him, Helen." He shrugged. "But there, he never addresses a word to her."

"That's his nature, which God gave him," Helen replied.

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

"The two of you have aged her in the last five years. I can see that, having been away for five years. She's so touchy now."

"You say the 'two of you' as if Heinrich and I were in a conspiracy together."

Eliza replied to Helen in a quiet voice, but with

her eyes lovingly on Hellebore: "You are. I'm sure you do horrible things together, like putting spells on people. You told me yourself you believed in his spells."

Helen bowed her head devoutly: "I believe in a certain power he has to change natural events. I believe some very rare and extraordinary ~~human~~ beings have that power."

"Yes, and if you could do it by spells you'd murder Jack in his bed. It always hurts him to think of Jack's position in the theatre."

"Why does he accept a contract in one of Jack's most important shows?" Helen asked.

"Beacsue Jack fascinates him. I can feel him watching Jack all the time, trying to discover his secret."

"Isn't it possible that he admires Jack, and watches him with awe?"

Eliza scoffed at her: "Don't degrade yourself, Helen!" she cried. "Watch him with awe! Why, whenever I mention Jack in his company he jumps out of hisshoes."

"It isn't possible that you are jealous of me for having so much of his attention, is it?"

Eliza looked at her for a moment, as if in doubt, then replied: "I'm even tired of talking about him. You can give me some wine now, Jack."

Hellebore filled her glass and winked at her: she took a sip of the wine, looked pained, as if the taste displeased her, then set her glass down again.

"I don't know why I drink this yellow piss,"

she said. "I loved Campeachy Bay last year because they had all those beautiful fruit drinks. You can keep your vintage wine."

Helen continued to fix her with her eyes, coldly: "You can't forgive Heinrich his strangeness, can you? You want everyone to be hail-fellow-well-met."

Eliza answered her with bitter gaiety: "Yes, I do!"

"He knows you as a mother knows the fruit of her own womb. You hate his strangeness, but he has always been strange." Helen was coolly determined to vindicate Eiselheim. "I have seen him talking to birds in the Piazza Cataluna in Barcelona, with all the Spaniards staring at him. He can speak to birds, you know, and make them understand. All his childhood he spent among superstitious women, and from them he learned his silence, his separateness and his dark powers." She paused, watching the effect of

{ her words... 153

her words. "And shall I tell you how old he is, - this ~~evil~~ spiteful young man ^{of yours?} He is fifty-four years old, Eliza."

Both Hellebore and Eliza looked up at her with surprise when she told them this. She nodded: "Yes, he was born just after the outbreak of the Austro-Prussian War. But there, he doesn't need my defence. He is so sufficient to himself, and he was probably no less so when he was four years' old."

Lorraine wiped the sweat from his upper lip with a handkerchief and pulled one of his windows down. For a few minutes he stood still by the window and watched three children playing in the park below, then he returned with a sigh to his desk. He rubbed his right ear and shifted in his chair. There was not a sound in the office. He put his hand on the telephone receiver but immediately withdrew it.

He took a memorandum book from the edge of his desk and began writing: "You said that everything in the world was my responsibility so long as I thought about it, and that the more I think about ^{it} the more I am responsible for. I must have this clear. When I am face to face with you I feel empty. I want the strength to say what is in my mind, or rather the strength to bring back to my mind the thoughts which your presence frightened away. I have a lot to tell you about pride. You said that a man can also sin by failing to do good. What did I fail to do? What am I failing to do now?"

He went to the window and looked out again. The three children were no longer visible. The telephone bell rang and he disregarded it. He returned to his desk and wrote the following words: "If only I could be granted a moment of innocence."

Francine Berger's private room was on the ground floor of the new wing, behind the stage and at the very back of the theatre. Its one window gave out onto the park, the same area of park that could be seen, two floors above, from the windows of Albert Lorraine's office. It was a very small room, and an elm-tree immediately outside the window made it dark at all times of the day.

Most of the furniture had clearly been stage properties at one time. Under the window there was a violet divan with satin-covered cushions, and against the wall near the door there was a dressing-table with an ebony-inlaid top. In the middle of the room, on a fragment of rich Persian carpet, stood a light crimson pouf. Nailed onto the wall were trinkets, gold-framed medallions bearing the portraits of past actors and actresses, cuttings from old newspapers, a silver-plated crucifix, visiting cards with signatures on them, and, over the dressing-table, a long polished cutlass with a blue ribbon and tassel at its handle. In the hearth there was a gas-fire, and at this moment it was alight.

Francine Berger lay naked on the divan, and in the armchair next to the gas-fire, facing the window and

the divan, sat Henry Sangson, ~~also naked~~

She had her head turned towards the window and was gazing up sadly at the ~~in~~ elm-tree outside.

"You killed people when you were a soldier," she murmured, "and now you're ashamed of it. That's why you are always talking about murder, because you yourself are a murderer."

Both their bodies were white, untouched by the sun. Sangson nodded, his sharp eyes fixed on the gas-fire: "Yes, perhaps you are right."

He leaned forward to warm himself. For a few moments neither spoke.

"What made you go and see him?" she asked quietly.

"Edgar Finstanley asked me to. And I wanted to on my own account."

She frowned: "But why?"

"Well, I told you long ago how important he was to both of us. We lived among the dead, and death seemed the most either of us could look forward to. We lived among dead things, everything we touched was dead, every noise denoted the nearness of death. In our world the worst always happened. We were young. I still am young." He spoke bitterly. "Naturally, I wanted to see Hellebore. I needed to see him. I wanted to get back a little warmth into my fingers."

"But you made him ill. Did that make you feel warmer? This morning he was sick, and this evening

he'll be unfit to go on the stage. If he makes a mess of it you'll be to blame." Suddenly she leaned forward on her elbows, frowning at him. "What made you call on him so late at night? What made you take him along to that club?"

Sangson lowered his eyes: "You told me he kept late hours, and I expected to find him with his guests."

She lay back angrily: "Well, he needs protecting against people like you. I don't know how he can possibly get through his act tonight; I've never seen him look so ill. You're a fine one to talk about murder."

Her cheeks were a little flushed as she spoke. Sangson was silent. Then he seemed to realise something and looked across at her with clear eyes.

"You feel warmer towards him than you do towards me," he said, with the slightest smile. "I can see that."

~~She~~ She lost patience: ~~and picked at the blanket~~
~~as she spoke.~~ "But you're thinking about yourself all the time! You called on him to get back a little warmth into your fingers, - into your fingers. And now you are wanting more warmth out of me."

"No, I didn't mean that. I think you are right to feel more warmly towards him. I wasn't asking for pity." He smiled. "If you think I was, you aren't a good judge of men."

She watched him, and the frown left her face.

"But you were wrong go there are midnight and upset him, my dear." She spoke to him now ~~in a~~

~~and~~ gently ~~and~~ "You make the mistake of talking too plainly to people. You don't realise how all this miserable talk about murder and death and emptiness may affect some of them. You shouldn't have called on him at midnight, ~~and you shouldn't have called on him at midnight,~~ and you shouldn't have talked to him about his own son." She shook her head in a puzzled way. "I don't know, - you seem to go along like a blind man. You behave sometimes as if you were soft in the head. Even now you don't seem to realise what you did last night: you don't seem to realise that Jack may make a mess of everything tonight just because of you. You don't seem to realise you may have murdered a great career."

"Perhaps I don't think I have murdered a great career," he murmured.

"We shall see tonight. Look at you, - even now you don't seem to be grasping what I say."

He shrugged, and she told him coldly: "If you were a self-sufficient person you would never have called on him and upset him like that. You only did it because you can't stand on your own feet. You have to suck other people to death in order to live. You aren't self-sufficient, not as Jack must have been when he was your age."

back / Sangson leaned ~~back~~ resigned and calm.

"Oh, come," he said, "you're only trying to

be cruel."

"Your job is jewel-cutting, but you aren't interested in it as other men are interested in their work. You aren't capable of leading your own life: that's why you called on Jack last night. During the War you killed people like every other soldier, but now you ~~xxxxxx~~ won't forget it, and you won't let other people forget it." She became angry again. "Why couldn't you have gone off to war and done your job like everybody else, and then come back without all this fuss and bother?"

He did not take his eyes from the floor.

"Don't the others make any fuss?" he asked quietly.

"No."

"The fools don't, I agree."

"Well, where does your wisdom get you? No further than a jeweller's shop." She looked at the elm-tree outside again, wearily. "Suppose there had never been a war? What would have happened to you?"

"I think I would have taken up a teacher's certificate and taught in a country school. I would have married no doubt. And I would have joined an archaeological society. But the point is I shouldn't have watched myself living, as I do now. The War taught me to do that."

"You haven't found your proper friends, - that's all you mean," she replied. "You are with the wrong people. The Celida's aren't your kind, nor am I, really."

"But where are the right people? Nowhere."

"Exactly. You aren't self-sufficient."

There was a blanket at her side, and she now drew ~~it~~ ^{it} over her legs and hips. Sangson watched her do this, and asked: "Are you the wrong person for me, then?"

~~She turned her head away violently, pouting.~~

"Well, you don't love me." ~~She turned her head away violently, pouting.~~ "You only need me sometimes. You've just made love to me, but we don't know each other any better for it. You're alone all the time, even when you make love to me."

"But so are you in a different way."

"Well, I've told you before!" she cried fiercely. "You must treat me like a cripple. You must try to give me the sympathy you'd give to a cripple. But all your talk won't make me enjoy it more."

He stared at her across the dark room: "But you do believe that making love is horrible."

"I've never said that."

She turned her head away violently, pouting.

"And you are right," he said. "It is horrible. It is sex. The word itself is horrible. It is sharp, merciless, brief, metallic. Secare is the Latin for divide or cut. That's where the word sex comes from. But love, Francine, is from lubet, - 'it pleases'. The love is disappearing from our world, Francine, and instead of men and women there are everywhere creatures alone with their own flesh, dying for lack of blood and warmth,

cut off from each other. In sex we are only two persons fumbling with each other like monsters. I hate and despise sex. It is a twentieth century invention, like the shrapnel bullet. An act of sex is an act of murder. It is two people joined together in a conspiracy of murder."

Francine gazed up at the ceiling, spent.

"Have we just committed an act of murder, then?" she asked quietly. "Is everything in the world murder?"

"We are too secretive about each other, Francine. We must let other people see us together. Even Giordano and Maria don't know about us. I ought to feel free in this theatre. We musn't hide away as if it were a crime we were committing."

"But suppose there really is no love between us? Suppose we really never can please each other?"

He looked at her defiantly: "Well, in future, when people ask me whether I know you I shall say, yes, I'm her lover. I shall force myself into the open."

"But you will still be alone." She shook her head sadly. "I don't think we shall ever be able to break through to each other."

"We can try," he answered eagerly. "The will is there."

"But you're secretive about everything you're really interested in. You asked me all those questions about where Jack was going to stay and when he would be arriving in Paris, but you never said you might call on

him. And I don't expect I should ever have known about last night if he hadn't told me himself."

"I had nothing in mind when I asked you those questions."

"I don't believe it," she told him. "You must have played with the idea of visiting Jack, because Edgar asked you to do so. No, we shall never be lovers in the true sense."

She lay staring up at the ceiling in silence.

"I told Maria last night," he said, "that I'd enjoyed every moment of his degradation at the club. But even now I don't know whether that's true, whether what I felt was pity or a kind of triumph. I know I did him damage, Francine. I am stupid to deny it." He looked across at her with frank eyes, and for a moment seemed a much younger man. "I don't know what is happening to me. It's as if I am suddenly turning against all I have ever loved and still do love, turning against my own life, really. I don't understand it, yet I can't prevent it. Something is being forced on me, from the outside. And all I can do in my guilt, Francine, is to invoke the mercy of God."

He got up and went to the window. He stood at the end of her divan. He looked across the lawn of the park.

"Be careful!" she cried. "Someone might see

you."

He drew back a little from the window and stood by the curtain, among the shadows.

"You must try to understand what I tell you," he said. "War was a kind of religious experience for me; it is holy for me. I went out to Flanders to suffer, not to kill people. I went to die rather than to kill. War was a crucifixion for me. I went out to be crucified." He looked down at her. "And somehow - I can't tell you why - I expected to suffer my crucifixion without dying. And that was my horrible error, to believe that I was inviolate. How did I expect to survive? How did I expect to be nailed to the cross and have my side pierced and yet survive? How did I expect to survive just the ~~in~~ exposure and the loss of blood? But of course I

{ had to die ...

had to die. And now I can no longer feel the life in my fingers, as I am always telling you. So you mustn't begrudge me my little midnight adventure."

~~Max~~^{Eiselheim} walked swiftly across the stage towards the wings. Only a part of a battery of lights in the flies was switched on, so that the light was weak. Just as he reached the centre of the stage he seemed to hear something and stopped. He turned and peered at some flats close to the rear wall of the stage, where at present the light was weakest.

Standing by these flats in the darkness were Hellebore and Eliza Manning. ~~Max~~^{Eiselheim} stepped back in his astonishment. They were talking to each other, but what they said was made inaudible from the front of the stage by the heavy flats behind them. Hellebore nodded to her, then put his arm on her shoulder and kissed her brow gently. She smiled and seemed from the distance to look deep into his eyes. Hellebore went towards the staircase leading up to Lorraine's office, and Eliza turned towards the wings on the right hand side.

~~Max~~^{Eiselheim} walked into the darkness and leaned against the proscenium arch. He closed his eyes and sighed. It was as if he had suffered some shock, for he breathed heavily and his head was bowed. He was petrified by what he had seen.

Lorraine put down his pen and switched on the desk-lamp. Outside, the clouds were dark and low, and a violent wind was now blowing across the park. He

sealed an envelope and wrote the words "Father Michelin" on it. Nothing could be heard from the stage below.

There was a knock on the door, and Hellebore came in from the stage-gallery. Lorraine looked up, then rose with a smile and went towards him.

"I just wanted to see how you were," Hellebore said.

Lorraine nodded and took his arm, then led him to one of the chairs by the desk in silence. He glanced out of the window.

"I had to put the light on," he murmured. "Were you caught in the storm?"

"No, I was in the Crimson Tower."

Lorraine sat down and put the envelope in one of the top drawers of his desk. He sighed, then looked at Hellebore with a tired smile: "I was frightened this morning. You looked very ill, Jack. I thought that was the end of tonight's show."

"Yes, I was still shaking like a leaf during rehearsals. But I had a good lay-down afterwards, and I feel steady enough now. Have you anything to drink here? I'm parched."

He sat in his armchair with his legs stretched out and his head back. He undid the top two buttons of his trousers and patted his stomach with a comfortable sigh. Lorraine got up, taking a key from his waistcoat pocket: "By all means. What shall I give you?"

"Anything as long as it isn't cognac."

Lorraine smiled, watching him: "Will water do?"

"I prefer it."

Lorraine unlocked a corner cupboard behind his desk and took out a tumbler. He bent down and looked along the bottom shelf, then brought out an earthenware flagon, which he put down on the desk. He broke its seal with a heavy paper-knife and drew out the cork. Hellebore watched him closely. ~~He then turned~~

"Is that water?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What's it doing in there, then?"

Lorraine was still smiling calmly.

"It's Lourdes water," he replied.

"What, - a kind of spa water?"

"No, no, - holy water." He glanced down shyly.

"I wanted God to be on your side tonight."

Hellebore nodded playfully: "Well, I hope it does me good."

Lorraine filled ^{the} ~~a~~ tumbler and handed it to him carefully: "It comes from the holy spring at Lourdes."

He then looked out of the window at the park while Hellebore drank. It was now in half-darkness; raindrops were flying against the window-panes, and occasionally the window rattled. The elm-trees close to the theatre wall were no longer visible.

"Where did you eat?" he asked without turning.

"In the Crimson Tower, with Helen and Eliza."

"Eliza's still in love with you."

"She'd like me to marry her, but I don't think it amounts to more than that, though it did before the War."

Lorraine answered him quietly, with perfect assurance: "Oh, yes, it amounts to very much more than that."

The wind suddenly dropped and for a moment not a sound could be heard. It gradually started up again and the rain grew heavier.

Lorraine yawned: "This is the time of day when I feel a sleepless night most. And I usually feel sad at this time of day. I prefer the evenings. I find them exciting."

They smiled at each other. Hellebore got up, buttoned his trousers and went towards the door.

"Thank you for the holy water. I'm going down to change. I told Benedict Amurrat two-fifteen."

"Slip in at three for our little conference with Bernard, Jack. I shall be down at the stage in a few minutes. I'm very anxious to see this new stuff of yours."

"I think it will please you."

Hellebore left the office and returned to his own dressing room. From the stage there was the sound of hammering and shouting.

On his dressing-table, pinned to the white cover, there was a letter addressed to "Monsieur Finstanley (Hellebore), Theatre de la Fete." He switched on the mirror-lights and read it.

"Please come without fail to Les Anges this evening at seven o'clock. I shall keep you only for a very few minutes. I should be happier if Sangson were not told about this. Forgive the scribble.

Maria Celida."

He screwed the letter up and walked towards the hearth. He was about to throw it onto the flames, but he stopped and opened it out again. He looked at it closely

[a second ...

a second time, then bent down and set light to it.

The stage was now brightly lit, and stagehands were hurriedly clearing ladders, cables and flats from the back. The garlanded staircase was brought in well upstage, and a section of the stage was raised to a height of ten or fifteen feet to make a first landing. A plain light blue curtain was then lowered in front of this structure, concealing it from the stalls and leaving the front part of the stage empty.

Three sceneshifters wheeled in the ramshackle piano, and simultaneously side-curtains were lowered to conceal the wings. A trapeze was lowered from the flies so that it hung half-way between the boards and the top of the proscenium arch, and a chest of drawers was placed on the right near the footlights. The tiny bowler-hat descended from the flies, and a sceneshifter guided it towards the top of the chest of drawers, where it remained. Meanwhile the steel wire was drawn taut between the stays, which were off-stage. A white skipping-rope was laid on the piano, and two chairs were placed near the back-drop curtain.

Two arc-lamps were switched on from each side, and the front curtain was swiftly lowered and raised again.

Hellebore left his dressing room and went up to the stage. He wore his white pierrot's costume with the pom-pom buttons, but no wig or make-up. Benedict Amurrat was standing in the wings, and Hellebore went to his side. He glanced across the stage at the light blue curtain.

"Where's my own backdrop?" he asked.

"You'll see it tonight, Jack. This one came from the old stage. I believe you used it in 1912."

Hellebore nodded and walked on to the stage. He somersaulted to the centre, just as the last sceneshifters were going into the wings. He stood on the tips of his toes for a moment, then cartwheeled rapidly towards the footlights. He seemed out of breath when he rose. He threw himself onto his hands and hand-walked from one side of the stage to the other, his legs curled over so that the soles of his feet were parallel with the floor.

The orchestra began taking their places and tuning up, and a faint light was turned on at the conductor's rostrum. Two electricians brought on a fresh smoke-box and fixed it to the piano.

Louis Comte, the stage manager, a tall, fair, big-limbed man, went over to Hellebore, who was standing upstage with his hands on his hips, breathing heavily.

"Albert Lorraine would like to see you down in the stalls."

"Is he there now?" Hellebore asked him.

"He was on his way there when I saw him," Comte replied.

"We ought to be away by now. The orchestra was late. What's the time?"

"Nineteen minutes past two."

"Yes, well I was down here by two-fifteen."

Hellebore went between the footlights and the proscenium arch to the wooden steps leading down to the

stalls. The dust-covers had now been removed, and Lorraine was sitting in the front row, alone. He called to Hellebore as he came down, and the latter sat at his side.

"Is the storm over?" Hellebore asked.

"The wind has dropped, but it's still raining." Lorraine glanced at Hellebore's white dress and touched one of the pom-pom buttons on his chest. "I like seeing you in that costume again. But your breathing is still none too good."

The conductor climbed to the rostrum and sat down. The curtain was lowered, and now only the footlights remained to illuminate the stalls where Lorraine and Hellebore sat. For a few moments Hellebore did not speak. But at last he said in a low voice:

"My arms ache, my legs ache, every step I take on that stage I have to think about. I can't get my breath properly. I was never like this before the War. And I'm not an old man."

Lorraine had started. He watched Hellebore alertly in the shadows.

"What's the trouble, Jack?" he asked. "I thought you were back in the old style thirty minutes ago."

"I am sick of the work."

"But I can't postpone or cancel now, Jack."

Lorraine spoke in a shocked, breathless voice. "The

conductor tapped the music-stand lightly with his baton, and the orchestra ceased tuning up. "Are you seeing that young man this afternoon?"

Hellebore paused, then said: "At four o'clock, in the Crimson Tower." He put his hand over his brow, frowning. "Is that what we arranged. I can't think."

"Has he brought you all this misery? Is it him?"

The orchestra struck up into a quick waltz.

Lorraine moved closer to Hellebore, shouting above the music: "I've never seen you like this before,

[Jack!

Jack!"

Hellebore sat low in his seat, staring at his outstretched legs. He did not speak until the music was over and the auditorium once more silent.

"I should have answered my son's ~~sex~~ letters. He wrote me letters during the War, and to me they were much like all the other begging letters I got. It was in my hands to save his life."

"How?" Lorraine asked him sceptically.

"These things happen to bits of kids because of people like me, I suppose."

"What things?"

"Oh, war, war... He turned my room into an undertaker's with all his talk about war. He blamed me."

"But what could you have done?" Lorraine was puzzled. "What were these letters you should have answered? What was it you did wrong to your son?"

"It's too long a story, Albert."

"But what does this young man complain about?" He watched Hellebore suspiciously in the shadows. "I want you to tell me, Jack, - what was he after? Why did he call you up so late? Why did he take you to a club and introduce you to the Italian couple? Tell me what you think his motives were, because it's him who has got under your skin. I've never seen you worry like this before. Until now I never thought you had a conscience for anything outside your work."

"He just wanted to see me, and cheer himself

up a bit. He's finished. The War finished him. He's a boy without a future. He really didn't survive the War at all." He looked at Lorraine for the first time. "I want to help him. I could take him on tour, you know, like my own son."

The orchestra began its second tune, - a loud military two-step.

Hellebore shouted above the music: "I wish to God I could go back to that hotel now and forget this dress-rehearsal! I don't want other people watching me."

Lorraine stared at him: "Don't see anything more of these people, Jack."

"I shall see Sangson at four o'clock this afternoon," Hellebore replied bitterly, "and this evening I shall see the Italian woman at Les Anges."

"Not just before the performance?"

"Yes, at seven o'clock."

Lorraine touched Hellebore's white sleeve and asked helplessly: "What are they up to, - these people? What are they up to?"

Benedict Amurrat pulled back the heavy curtain at the side of the stage and peered down into the dark stalls. The moment he saw Amurrat's head Hellebore got up.

"We're ten minutes late starting," he said.

He left Lorraine and returned to the stage. The music ended, and Lorraine remained sitting in the stalls, staring before him. Just as the curtain began to rise

~~he jumped up and~~

he jumped up and walked to a small door at the side of the stage.

~~He walked along a narrow corridor, then as usual
 he took a step and the wings of the theatre were
 behind him. He had a momentary glimpse of the~~

~~back of the stage. He had a momentary glimpse of the~~ Just
 as he reached the gallery outside his ^{office} door there was a
 smart explosion from the stage below and he turned nervous-
 ly and looked down. A cloud of white smoke issued from
 the grand piano, and he watched it move slowly from right
 to left of the stage. He looked at the taut steel wire
 and the hanging trapeze, then he entered the office.

He took up the telephone and asked for Bernard Charpentier. When he had been found Lorraine told him: "Bernard, postpone our little conference until four o'clock... Well, a number of things... Four o'clock, then."

The sky was no longer dark, though it was still raining. He leaned across his desk and switched off the lamp, then picked the telephone up again.

"Get me Monsieur Jean Duloi-Bordeau... His dressing room, I think." There was a pause. "Hullo, Jean. Listen to me. I want you to come up to the office immediately... It is Albert Lorraine... And, Jean, I want you to bring your brother. But you must both come immediately."

He walked across to the gallery-door, then out onto the gallery. As he opened the door a bass-drum sounded out from the stage below, then a clown's yell of

dismay. He looked down. Hellebore had just fallen onto his back near the chest of drawers, and one of the drawers was open. His white pierrot's costume was in rags, and his vest and combinations were now visible. Lorraine leaned on the gallery-bannisters, gazing at a battery of lights above the stage at the top of the proscenium arch, his lips pursed. He remained there until, a few minutes later, there was a knock on the other door of his office. He went quickly back and closed the gallery-door, then admitted Jean and Pierre Duloi-Bordeau.

Jean wore a dark suit with a high starched collar of the kind no longer in vogue, while Pierre was in tights and blouse. Pierre Duloi-Bordeau was taller and thinner than his brother; he moved about awkwardly, and in deference to the others he took a chair near the window, a little apart from them.

Lorraine spoke very quietly, with his eyes on the desk: "A young man is going to visit Jack this afternoon whom I suspect of trying to blackmail him. Have you noticed anything wrong with Jack today?"

"No," replied Jean, a little startled.

"Did you watch this morning's rehearsal?"

Jean thought slowly, with effort: "Yes. I saw Jack rehearse. I thought he was a bit slow off the mark, but I'd no idea he was in trouble."

"He was a sick man," Lorraine told him. "He

vomited in his dressing room, and I don't think he had more than a couple of hours' sleep last night. I found him on his bed with his jacket torn: that was after nine this morning."

"What had happened?"

"A young man called on him at midnight. They left the hotel together and went to a casino in the Faubourg St. Honore. They were joined by an Italian couple. Jack came back to his hotel at five o'clock this morning, and he was very drunk and ill. And these people have dispirited him. Somehow they have broken his will." He glanced up at Jean. "He's sick at heart. He lost a son during the War, - I believe it all has something to do with that. Somehow these people have played on his compassion. I've no grounds for saying they intend blackmail; I simply don't know what they are up to. All I can tell you is that today Jack is a miserable, listless, sick man, whereas last night, before these people came on the scene, he was happy enough. You talked to him last night at the hotel, didn't you?"

"Yes. He was his old self."

"Exactly."

Lorraine leaned back in his chair, still gazing at his desk: "In any case, whether they are up to mischief or not, we mustn't take risks. I am determined to stop that young man visiting Jack this afternoon. I simply cannot afford to take a risk." He glanced at Pierre,

then at Jean. "I want your help, you understand. I want you to prevent that young man entering this theatre. All I can tell you is that he's an Englishman. He has arranged to see Jack in this theatre at four o'clock this afternoon. One of you must wait for him ~~in~~ the foyer, the other at the stage door. You must tell him that Jack's dress rehearsal has been cancelled and that he wishes to see the young man at his hotel. You will have my car, but not the chauffeur. You must then offer to drive him down to Jack's hotel. Drop him there and tell him to await Jack in the lounge. But he must be kept away from this theatre. Of course, it's possible that this is a harmless young man. It's possible that Jack wanted a night out last night and took more than was good for him. But I'm not prepared to take a risk: and if the young man offers you violence run him to the nearest police station and call me up immediately. Perhaps he did after all soldier with Jack's son, as he claims to do: but I'm not prepared to take any risk."

His lips were trembling, and he wiped the sweat away from his face. There was silence, and then Pierre spoke to him shyly: "I was watching Jack this morning from the wings, and he slipped once. But he seemed all right in himself."

"We've got to be careful precisely because this immense show - it's the most important one in my career, perhaps in yours -" Lorraine raised his eyebrows, and

Jean Dulois-Bordeau nodded gravely. " - depends on Jack being able to give his mind to his work. Now I don't want you to talk to anyone else about this."

He picked up the telephone.

"Get me the stage... Hullo, I want Monsieur Amurrat and Monsieur Comte to visit me in my office immediately. Deliver that message, please... Monsieur Lorraine... Hullo... Yes... I'm not the slightest concerned about the dress rehearsal. I wish to see Benedict and Louis at once. I shall keep them for as little time as possible. Tell them that."

He replaced the receiver and once more turned to Jean and Pierre.

"We are protecting Jack, you see, against people who want to break his will." He got up. "Very well, I shall call you up again at half-past three." He walked towards the door, and Jean and Pierre rose. "Please stay in your dressing room until I call you again."

He held the door open for them, and they walked past him into the corridor. Jean seemed a little startled still, and in the corridor he turned, waiting for Lorraine to say something more. But Lorraine only nodded and smiled at him, then closed the door silently behind them.

He returned to the desk and took from one of his drawers the file containing Father Michelon's letters. He pushed back the sheaf of letters and looked at the subject-index. He turned to the fifth letter.

"You ask for innocence. But that is a very tall demand for a man over forty. It is an even taller demand for a business-man over forty. And how much taller a demand is it for a business-man over forty in the theatre!"

I shall come and see you.

Father Michelon."

He laid the file down and went to the window. He gazed out across the park for a moment, through the thick rain. Then he returned to the desk and took from a drawer the letter he had not long before addressed to Father Michelon. He sat down and drew the waste-paper basket nearer to him, then tore the letter up into tiny fragments.

There was a knock on the gallery-door, and Lorraine pushed the basket away from him. Louis Comte entered the room, and then Amurrat.

"You wanted us?" Amurrat asked him.

Lorraine nodded.

"With the dress rehearsal on?"

Lorraine got up: "Yes. The matter's urgent, you see."

He went across to the gallery-door, which Amurrat had left ajar, and closed it tight. The orchestra could be heard from the stage below playing slow, melancholy music. He returned to his desk and put the file containing Father Michelon's letters back into one of the drawers. Comte and Amurrat watched him in silence.

~~is~~ ^{this} downstairs?"

"No," Comte replied. "Everyone knows he was on the loose, of course."

Lorraine waited for them to be silent, then went on: "I want you to arrange an alternative programme which can be used at a moment's notice. But arrange it as quietly as you can: I don't want to discourge Jack, and he'd never forgive me if he got word of it." He lowered his eyes. "All the others need be told is that the time of his performance may be altered and that they must be ready to play out of schedule. I shall see Nidok myself later this afternoon, since he would be the mainstay of any alternative programme." He paused and touched the edge of his desk. "I don't see why Jack, Bernard or the Virgin should get to hear of this." He spoke quicker.

~~"But I don't want to tell them anything at all."~~
 "My business rivals in Paris - and all over Europe - have a lot to gain if the show fails tonight. And I have many, many rivals. ~~I don't want to tell them anything at all.~~
~~I don't want to tell them anything at all.~~
~~I don't want to tell them anything at all.~~
~~I don't want to tell them anything at all.~~
~~I don't want to tell them anything at all.~~
 I haven't always been on top of the market and I haven't always been able to outbid ^{them.} ~~my rivals.~~ The show tonight is the biggest I've ever attempted, and I'm not prepared to take unnecessary risks. If the show goes down we all go down."

"But an alternative programme wouldn't save the show," Amurrat said quietly. "It means nothing without Jack."

"Yes, Benedict, but the least we can do is to save our faces, and an alternative programme would help us to do that." He got up. "I won't keep you any longer because of the rehearsal. This will mean a very busy two hours before the curtain goes up, I'm afraid."

Amurrat walked thoughtfully to the gallery-door, then turned.

"I hope you're wrong, Albert," he said. "I've put a lot of blood into this show."

Lorraine nodded and patted him on the shoulder. They all went out into the gallery.

"I want you to visit me again at half-past four," he said.

"Me as well?" asked Comte.

Lorraine watched them descend the staircase towards the stage: "Yes, both of you."

The orchestra was playing a bold and loud march. Lorraine looked down at the stage. Hellebore was now performing on the steel wire. He sprang higher and higher to the tune of the music, then rolled head over heels in the air and returned feet first to the wire; sprang higher and higher again, and rolled head over heels a second time. He now wore only his vest and combinations.

Lorraine returned to the office and closed the gallery-door. He sat behind his desk for several minutes,

his eyes closed. The music ceased, and there was a noise from outside the gallery-door of ropse and pullies moving in the flies.

Hellebore jumped clear of the grand piano, which the stagehands were wheeling offstage, and ran towards the pass-door. He was dressed in his sequin costume, with white stockings to his knee, and his face and hair were saturated with sweat. He went straight to his dressing room and began undressing behind the screen. A moment later Francine Berger entered, carrying his giant's shoes, his spotted cravat, his yellow shirt and his outsize tweed suit. While Hellebore took a bath she laid out his costumes side by side for the evening performance.

The orchestra was still rehearsing, but the stage was once more bare, lit only by one arc-lamp in the wings. None of the sceneshifters remained.

At ten minutes past four Hellebore left his dressing room and went up to the Crimson Tower, ~~where he found a woman~~
~~who was sitting on a sofa~~. He was now in ordinary clothes. The Crimson Tower was empty and once more furnished as the circle lounge. He walked across to one of the French windows, opened it and stepped down onto ^a ~~the~~ balcony, ~~where he found a woman~~. It was no longer raining, and the sky was thick with white

cloud. He went to the edge of the balcony and looked down into the street. A hansom-cab and two motor-cars were standing outside the theatre doors, but there were no pedestrians near them.

He went down to the foyer, which was empty and dark: none of the lustres were yet alight. He walked slowly down the wide carpeted staircase to the box office and knocked twice on the side-door. There was no reply. He knocked again, waited for a moment, then went to the glass doors leading out into the street. He tried them one by one, and found the last one open. He walked out onto the pavement, frowning and very pale. He looked up and down the street, which was a little less deserted than before. The hansom-cab and motor cars were still there. He waited until a number of people had passed ~~him~~ by him, then he went back inside. He walked down the steps to the door leading into the pit. The front curtain was now down, and only a few of the footlights were on. The orchestra had departed, and nothing could be heard throughout the auditorium. The light of the street had blinded him.

Francine turned and looked at him anxiously when he came into the dressing room. He sighed and went to the divan, where he lay down. She walked across to him and looked down at him, then wiped the sweat from his nose and brow with a handkerchief.

"You're still ill, aren't you?" she asked.

He closed his eyes: "I can't keep steady on my feet. It's no good, I'll never be able to do it tonight."

She sat down at his side: "But what's the matter? Tell me what's the matter!"

"I'll come a cropper tonight; you see."


He opened his eyes drowsily and looked at her, then touched her chin with his hand.

"Now you keep quiet about that, Judy," he murmured.

The telephone bell rang, and she answered it.

When she had put the receiver down again she told Hellebore, "Albert Lorraine asks you to go up immediately. You are twenty minutes late."

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. She brought over a small cloth saturated with Eau de Cologne and rubbed it over his brow and neck, then he got up and went to the



dressing-table. He gazed at his face in the mirror, first at his drowsy, bloodshot eyes, then at his mouth. He raised his eyebrows and moved his mouth a little, so as to make his expression appear less gloomy. He was still pale. He went to the door and opened it. Then he stopped.

"Did anyone call while I was away just now?"

Francine kept her face averted.

"No," she replied.

"And there wasn't a 'phone message?"

"No."

"How does the time stand?"

Francine looked at the alarm clock on the chest of drawers behind the screen: "Twenty-five minutes past four." Hellebore nodded sadly and left the room.

He walked up to Lorraine's office and went in without knocking. Bernard Charpentier sat behind the desk, and Lorraine himself was standing nervously by the window. Charpentier held an empty glass in his right hand.

"Come in, Jack Pudding," he said. "We are twenty-five minutes late, and I'm just off."

He gazed at Hellebore with a smile, his eyes half closed.

Lorraine turned to look at Hellebore: "He's been at it since four o'clock, Jack."

"What, this time of the aftrenoon?" Hellebore asked, sitting down.

"Yes," Charpentier replied, getting up and pulling his cloak round his shoulders, "hell in the belly, heaven in the head, - my eternal bifurcation, Jack."

He swayed a little, then put his empty glass on Lorraine's desk.

"My headlines violate, Jack. They are a public indecency.‡ You look ill." He took a deep breath, and became more thoughtful. "Well, you are now a French institution, like the Bourse. The War has institutionalised you. Men have died in the thick of battle with your name on their lips. As for the survivors, or rather those who have managed to keep out of the mental homes, - some of them will be coming tonight. It'll be a charming audience, a post-war audience, that is to say, an audience suffering from chronic neurasthenia. And my job is to encourage them." He sat down, facing Hellebore. "The point I want to know is, how far can I go?"

"How far do you want to go?" Hellebore asked him in a low voice.

"I want to tell a few lies. I want to make a lot out of your son, - the young man who was killed in the War. This will help the nearasthenia cases. They like to think that other people have also made fools of themselves."

"Keep him out of it. Consider anything between

1914 and now ^{as} dead."

"Oh, dear!" Charpentier cried. "Then you reduce me to my worst prose style: 'It is not without significance that Hellebore has chosen Paris as the scene of his return to public life. He knows with what warmth he was always, ever since he left the circus in 1901, received in Paris. He remembers how, on one occasion in 1911, he received twelve curtains from a first night audience. And he ^mremembers the welcome accorded him at the opening of the new Cirque Blanc at Versailles.' It's just as much a lie. Because you don't remember." He smiled, staring down at the floor, musing to himself. "I would so love to abandon the three unities and tell a lie, a good, wholesome lie, white or black. For a lie is timeless and spaceless. It is a most luscious nothing. You are different from the Duloi-Bordeau's, Jack. They love a lie about themselves. That is because they are boring. But you tie me down to place, time and situation. Very well, then, all I can do is to be a good physician."

"A what?"

"My job now is to heal. I must heal the relations between yourself and this church-cat sitting at the desk." Both Lorraine and Hellebore seemed used to Charpentier's mild ridicule, for they both smiled ^{and} ~~occasionally~~ glanced ^{ed} at each other. "I shall invent a promise. I shall recall the time when Albert Lorraine promised the theatrical

world that one day Hellebore would return to a better stage, a new Théâtre de la Fête, and I shall tell how he kept that promise. I shall talk about an old friendship. Is that allowed?"

The others nodded.

"You know the kind of thing," Charpentier went on. "The fabulous gift waiting in the hotel suite: 'For the only clown', signed 'Lorry'. The talking over ~~and~~ dying fires until the early hours. The unforeseen difficulty: blackmail? an old lover? But after some dirty speculation on my part, a clean demouement. By the way - " He leaned forward, peering at his file on the edge of Lorraine's desk. " - am I right in saying that your run here is a send-off for a long continental tour across Spain, Germany and perhaps Scandinavia, and that you ~~may~~ hope to come back here at the end of the tour for a longer run?"

Hellebore half smiled: "The first lot's right. But Albert hopes the second lot, not me."

"Albert asked me before you came into this room to work in some reference to his alterations, - just to show he loves you. In fact, of course, he undertook them because the theatre was falling down, and because receipts would be doubled as a result of them. But the point is that the stage could now take a circus. There is a lot more flying space, the stage is twice as

deep now, and the traps are the best I've seen.
What about a full-blown circus next year?"

Hellebore turned his head away, frowning:
"I've finished with the circus. It never brought me any good. A tent's the place for a circus, not the stage." He looked at Lorraine: "What's the idea?"

"Just that: an idea," Lorraine replied. "But we'll kill it if you won't come in."

"Yes, kill itxx." Hellebore shook his head.
"A circus..."

Charpentier got up: "I must rush. You were late coming up, Jack."

He went towards the door, buckling the gold clasp at his neck.

"You're quite certain, Jack," he asked, "that we leave your son out of this?" Hellebore did not reply, but ~~gave him a hard look~~ ^{simply looked at him,} and Charpentier ~~nodded sadly~~ ^{with mock solemnity.}

"I had such a lot of shameless lies to tell. They'll be told in time, of course, - by other journalists."

~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ He turned to Lorraine. "I don't like Eiselheim, Albert. But I suppose I shall have to mention those packed houses at Brussels. I don't like these thin, silent men. They walk about like my conscience. They shame the infidel in me, - perhaps that's it."

"Well," Lorraine answered, "it could do with shaming."

"I shall be there tonight in the second row of the stalls as usual, Jack, your acolyte. Thank you

for the flames of hell, Albert." He thought for a moment at the door, frowning. "I feel excited: a good sign."

He then bowed to each of them in turn.

"Yes, indeed," Lorraine said. He held the empty, green bottle up to the light of the window.

"My brandy bottle will never forget your visit."

When Charpentier had gone, he glanced hesitantly at Hellebore. There was no sound from the stage below. Hellebore seemed about to leave the room, but lingered. He looked into Lorraine's eyes: "I'm glad we agreed with each other in the end. You've been good to me, I think. I won't let you down."

Lorraine looked at him wretchedly, his head bowed.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked. "I'll take you back to the hotel in my car. I'll call in at the dressing room before I leave. Shall I send the nurse up to your rooms this evening?"

Hellebore was silent for a moment, then he went close to him and said in a low voice:

"He didn't come."

Lorraine squinted guiltily, watching the park below.

"Who?"

"Sangson. I must see him again, - what shall I do, Albert?"

"Tell me, Jack: what makes you want to see him

so badly?"

Hellebore spoke eagerly: "I feel sorry for him, - that's the trouble."

"Yes. We're all at our weakest in our moments of compassion."

"Sometimes a look came into his eyes as if he thought I was going to be cruel to him." He saw Lorraine smile. "I should have made a few sacrifices for Edgar, - at the right time."

"Why not make a sacrifice of your whole career, - now? It looks to me as if that's what your young friend wants."

Hellebore shook his head, as if this were too absurd to think about.

"After a life like yours, Jack, failure is going to be a very bitter thing. You could never survive it." He gazed at Hellebore for a moment ^{with knowing eyes.} ~~under his eyebrows.~~

"He was afraid to come. He smelt a rat. I have had experience of such people."

Hellebore looked at him sleepily: "When all is said and done I did murder Edgar. You've never had a son. You're too selfish. You're too fussy to have a child of your own. You don't understand the young. You make them feel awkward, you make them go silent and shy. I've noticed it. All you think about is your business. You sit on your money like an old black beetle."

"What a comfort your conversation is," Lorraine murmured with a bitter smile.

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The dining room of Les Anges was empty and all the tables were laid for dinner. There were no lights apart from those which illuminated the plaster statues in the niches.

Hellebore opened the door quietly. He stood still, growing accustomed to the darkness. He walked to the table on the higher tier where Sangson and he had sat the previous evening. He walked slowly, tapping his cane against the table-legs like a blind man. He laid his hat and cane down on the table and opened his overcoat, then walked back to the steps which led into the ballroom. He peered down into the deserted ballroom, listening. He snapped his fingers and coughed, to make noise. There was silence again, and nothing stirred among the tables.

A few minutes later Maria came in and looked about her in the shadows. Hellebore immediately went towards her. He took her arm and slowly guided her up to the table on the second tier.

Near the minstrel's gallery she put her hand on his and looked into his eyes: "I haven't kept you waiting?"

"Not at all."

He pulled a chair out for her and they sat down.

"We looked for you everywhere this morning," she

said quietly.

"Who did?"

"Henry and I. We walked up to the Place Vendome, and then we went back to the club."

Hellebore bowed his head: "I don't remember leaving the club."

She was peering at him in the darkness.

"Is that a bruise on your chin?" she asked.

He nodded: "I fell on the side of the bath. I just slipped."

"It hasn't swollen, luckily."

Hellebore gazed down into the dark ballroom.

He asked ~~whether~~ she knew where Sangson was, and she told him that he had come into the house an hour before, but that they had not seen each other.

"I arranged to see him this afternoon," he said.

"He didn't come, and I thought perhaps you knew why."

"No, he went straight to his room."

They sat without speaking for some time.

"He is sometimes strange like that," she murmured.

Hellebore looked up at her. His face was very pale.

"He knows all about you, doesn't he?"

This startled her: "Did he tell you anything about me, then?"

"He told me you wanted a child." He glanced down at the table. ~~What he said was that he had seen her~~

Is that true?"

She made a little gasp and answered, "Yes."

"And you've come here to ask me to give you a child?"

She lowered her eyes and nodded: "But he had no right to tell you anything."

"Well, he has saved you a lot of embarrassment. Asking me yourself would have taken some doing." He spoke to her warmly, leaning forward across the table. "I shall give you your baby, Maria, because I loved you last night dancing round that floor."

She seemed to sob, and put her hands to her eyes: "Thank God, then!"

"But not in cold blood, only because we like each other. I want it to be natural. It mustn't be too soon. Dancing with you made me feel I'd known you a long time. Dancing always does that. But try and forget you asked me. Let it happen naturally."

"We must see each other very often. You must be a kind of husband to me. Giordanow will go away."

"Where was he last night?" Hellebore asked her.

"He went home."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Will he mind?"

"He needs a child as much as I do, and we've waited so long."

"But why have you waited all this time, - a fine

beautiful woman like you?"

"I wanted to wait until I chose someone spontaneously," she replied. "I don't want anybody's child, you see. I want a certain kind of child. And I think you can give me that."

Hellebore was fascinated by this: "What made you choose me, then?"

"Well, I simply chose you as soon as I saw you."

"Why?"

"Everybody knows who Hellebore is. I only had to see you in the flesh."

"Does Giordano agree?"

"Yes. He knew I had made up my mind before I told him." She smiled. "He was cleverer than he normally is in these things."

"And you never thought of Sangson as a father?"

She shook her head shyly: "He is so young. He is like my own son. I love his company of course."

"You are together a lot, I suppose."

"Yes, we see each other every day. He is so different from Giordano's friends. He notices everything. He's so quiet."

"And a wonderful talker," Hellebore said.

"He has been my refuge against all those commercial people since the War." She sighed. "Well, I feel happier."

She glanced at the clock in the wall on her left, but it was too dark to read the time.

"Shouldn't we be walking towards the theatre?" she asked. "I've sent the car away." She watched him for a moment. "You seem so calm, sitting there. Are you always like this before you go on?"

"I was sick this morning and I nearly fell off the trapeze. I'm tired." He put his hand to his brow. "I'm not calm. I'm tired. Think of all those people watching me tonight."

He stared at her with a frown. She got up slowly and went to his side.

"You'll feel better in your dressing room," she told him. "Don't forget your stick."

Francine Berger opened the door of Hellebore's dressing room and went across to his table. She began arranging his cream-pots, brushes, rouge-sticks, powder-puffs and scissors. Beside them she put a large napkin and an alarm clock.

Some minutes before eight o'clock Hellebore came in. He smiled at her, and she helped him off with his overcoat. He went behind the screen and took off his jacket, then he washed his face and hands. He sat down

at the dressing-table and, with the napkin tucked round his neck, began creaming his face. There was a new fire in the hearth, crackling.

The telephone bell rang, and Francine picked up the receiver: "Yes, he has just this minute arrived. He appears to be. I shall ask him." She put her hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Hellebore. "It's Albert Lorraine. He wishes to know if you'd like the nurse to come in and see you."

Hellebore answered her impatiently, still rubbing his cheeks: "No."

She spoke into the mouthpiece again: "He says, no, but thank you. He is making up at the moment. Very well."

When she had finished Hellebore asked: "What else did he have to say?"

"He asked what time it was when you arrived and whether you seemed well."

"He's ~~been~~ been a proper fidget-arse today. He has done nothing but worry."

"Well, do you wonder at it?" she asked. "You were drunk last night and this morning you were too ill to move. It would make any manager in Europe worry: especially when you always used to be so good and reliable."

The foyer was empty and dimly lit. Two of the entrance doors were suddenly pushed open, and Jean and Pierre Duloi-Bordeau ran in breathlessly from the street.

They ran down the centre gangway of the stalls and made for the dressing rooms. At the conductor's rostrum Jean suddenly stopped and turned about: he called to Pierre to go on, then he returned to the foyer. He walked across to the box office and knocked on the side-door.

Lorraine turned the key in the office door and went back to his desk. He sat down beside Eliza, his own chair touching her's at the arm. She was dressed for the street in a black cloche hat and a simple coat with a collar of black fur. Nothing could be heard from the corridor outside or from the stage.

Lorraine put his hand on her arm without turning his head. He spoke almost in a whisper: "You aren't contented with Eiselheim. You won't be young eternally. You are thirty-four, my dear, and you want children. You do want children, you need them. I'm so unbearably sad when you're away from me. I love just to be with you, simply to touch your arm like this. I wish I could be worthy of you. I wish I was better-lōoking. I wish I was cloverer with my tongue." He now spoke eagerly: "But you see, my dear Eliza, you'd change me. If you took me you'd give me a new life and will, whereas now I am helpless, I feel old, and I am always sad nowadays, and it seems to me I have no future, nothing new or warm for me between now and my death. You have the power to

give me a future. Without you I'm so miserable, I enjoy nothing, except thinking about you. I yearn for you, Eliza, hour after hour, waking and sleeping, day after day. All my dreams are about you. I dream of you lying in your bed and the dawn coming across the room. But if you refuse me what you really do is to condemn me to death, and I shall go through the rest of my life like a corpse; I shall be alone, a bachelor ministering to himself. I want to offer everything I have, for you to destroy if you wish."

He clasped her arm tighter, but still he did not glance towards her: "Help me, Eliza. I'm so deeply in love with you."

All the time she had been staring sadly down at the desk.

"I can't bear you to talk like that," she said. "What good can it do? Suppose I married you: you'd hate me after a time, for having done it out of kindness. I'm not one of those who sleeps with a man out of pity, either. The number of times I've heard a woman say that: 'I only did it out of pity'!" She threw her head up in contempt. "Mine's a cheap sex. But you're not getting me through pity."

"Do you pity me? I don't want your pity."

"Well, then, you shouldn't talk like that."

"But how do you know marriage would be wrong

for us? You might grow to love me, or does that sound absurd to you?"

"Not absurd," she replied. "I don't think it's possible."

"Perhaps a child would bring us love. You can't tell unless you take the plunge."

"I can tell. You must trust the woman to know."

He glanced at her: "Your mind is made up, isn't it?"

"Yes."

He sighed wearily: "So I need never ask you again."

"No, my dear."

He was in hopeless gloom: "I thought you would have agreed. I truly thought this time you'd agree. Of course, you are in love with Jack still."

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["That

"That was a dream I had ten years ago. Now and again it comes back. I can't forget him, that's true, but I have been without him so long that I take it for granted and I no longer worry him. The trouble he had with me was exactly the trouble I am having with you. He wanted to help me and couldn't, he loved me as a friend. So I do know what it is like to be you at this moment, and it's a torment for me knowing that I'm the cause of it and can do nothing about it."

She bent her head forward and sobbed, then with long, helpless cries she began to weep. Lorraine moved his hand down to hers and murmured: "Eliza, Eliza," his eyes averted from her and narrowed to prevent tears.

Francine took a light wicker chair from behind the screen and sat by the dressing-table, facing Hellebore. In her hand was a small appointment book.

"About tomorrow," she said. "When will you see the masseur?"

He looked at himself in the mirror frowning.

"I won't," he replied.

She was surprised: "He is expecting to come."

"I don't need -" He indicated the book in her hand impatiently. " - all that."

"But you usually have the masseur."

"Not tomorrow, though, or the next day."

"Very well." She glanced at her book again.

"Also the doctor usually called on the second morning."

"I don't need a doctor. Cancel him."

Francine laid the book down on her knee and looked at him with a frown: "There are thirty appointments for you in this book. Are you going to cancel every one of them? What is the matter with you?"

Hellebore continued to powder his face.

"When I'm off the stage my time is my own," he said.

"It did not use to be."

"I won't have a retinue of masseurs and doctors. They make me feel dead, they make me feel a prisoner."

She closed her book and smiled: "Very well. That will surprise some people."

"Yes, a few people are going to catch a cold over that."

"I thought a full appointment book made you feel proud."

"It used to, sweetheart. But that was before the War."

Francine went behind the screen and Hellebore began painting in his immense red lips.

"Listen to me, Francine," he said. "I shan't want to use this room again. This is the last time I dress in it."

She came to the edge of the screen and looked at him in silence for a moment: "Why is that?"

He leaned back from the mirror, studying his lips:

"I don't feel at home here; I don't feel myself. It gives me nasty feelings." He hunched his shoulders up as if he were cold. "That sort of feeling. So you must tell Lorraine about my little fancy and then you must find me another dressing room before tomorrow night's performance. Otherwise I'll dress in the corridor."

"But this is such a beautiful room."

"Yes, it's like a mortuary."

"Lorraine will be ^hurgt."

"It will teach him not to build me a mortuary and call it ~~the~~ Le Salon Hellebore."

She peered at him: "You have changed, you know."

"I've had too much of it." He touched up his lips. "I built myself a gymnasium during the War, in the gardens of my house. I think I'll burn it down when I go back; that would give me pleasure, you know. I even had Japanese cherry trees planted along the sides of the path leading down from the house. And at night there were fairy lights hanging from them. Fairy lights..."

"Do you regret it now?" she asked him.

"I no longer need it, so I say to hell with it. I told Lorraine this morning I'd like to burn this room down and I'd begin with the curtains."

"They are the loveliest things in the room."

"I'm going to travel from now on and I shall go on travelling until I wear myself out. But I'm not going

to be stuffed alive by Lorraine or anybody else."

She told him that his secretary had arrived from England that very afternoon. "What about her?" she asked.

"I don't need her, sweetheart. What's the use of a secretary when there are no appointments to keep and no letters to write?"

Someone knocked on the door of Lorraine's office, but neither he nor Eliza moved.

"Who is it?" Lorraine called out.

A voice from the corridor answered: "Duloi-Bordeau." Lorraine turned to Eliza and shrugged. There was still the trace of tears on her cheeks.

"I must go," she said, rising. "We can't sit here for ever. I'll go down by the other door."

Lorraine looked ill and distraught, and he rose heavily from his chair without a word. He accompanied her to the door which led onto the wooden gallery. Just before she went out she leaned towards him and offered him her cheek to be kissed. But he shook his head with a sad smile and drew back a little, then took her hand in a formal handshake.

He leaned on the gallery-bannisters and gazed down at the stage. The curtain was down, and only a battery of dim russet lights was switched on at this moment. He returned to the room and admitted Duloi-Bordeau.

For several moments he stood by his desk without speaking. Duloi-Bordeau was just about to tell his news, but he stopped, hesitating to break this silence, which seemed so sacred for the other man. At last he said: "Well, Albert, we saw him." He waited, and then,

as Lorraine made no reply, added humbly: "I've only ten minutes to dress in, you see."

Lorraine watched him, his lips pursed: "Yes, tell me about it as quickly as you can. Where is he?"

Duloi-Bordeau spoke earnestly: "We let him go, Albert."

"Why did you do that?"

Lorraine's eyes were suddenly sharp as he asked this question.

"Well, if appearances are anything to go by he was an honest young man. We asked him all the questions, and we told him to keep clear of the theatre tonight. We told him he was suspected of this and that, but we didn't say who suspected him. And what more could be done? We couldn't lay hands on a polite and educated young man like that."

"When you told him about my suspicions was he alarmed?"

"No, he said it was ridiculous, and he laughed. Then he said he could understand our point of view very well."

"Ours? Who are we?"

"Mine and Pierre's. You told me not to mention your name."

"Was he well dressed?" Lorraine asked him.

"Most respectably. He took us to his house near the Bois de Boulogne for an aperitif."

"Does he own a house?"

"No, he shares house with Italian people called Celida."

Lorraine gazed wistfully out of the window, at the fluttering elm-leaves dimly lit by the ~~lights of his desk.~~ ^{lamp over his} ~~room.~~ Behind them was utter darkness.

"Oh, yes," he sighed, "the jewellery people."

"We couldn't lay hands on a young English gentleman, could we? Where would that have ended?"

Lorraine suddenly became anxious: "But I don't feel safe. Suppose he came to the theatre tonight and caused trouble?"

"We know what he looks like. And we know that a box has been reserved in the name of Celida for tonight."

"Ah, you found that out, did you?"

Duloi-Bordeau looked up at him with pride: "Yes, I looked in at the box-office on my way up."

"It might have been better to hold him..."

"But that would have been a criminal offence."

Lorraine bit his lip: "Even so."

"No, there would have been hell to pay for that," Duloi-Bordeau said.

"He must know someone in this theatre."

"Oh, he does."

Lorraine looked at him swiftly. Instantly his tiredness was gone: "Who?"

"Mademoiselle Berger. They're lovers."

"Who told you that?"

"He did."

"Lovers!"

Lorraine stared before him. But then he shrugged: "Well, he told you that himself so perhaps it's all above board. That's the feeling you had in his presence, was it not? that he was above board?"

"If appearances are anything to go by, yes."

"You'd better go down and change, then. On your way tell the attendants at the stagedoor not to admit any personal visitors for Mr. Finstanley."

"I think you worry too much," Duloi-Bordeau said in a low voice, as if he were overstepping the mark.

"Goodbye."

Just as he left the room Lorraine picked up the telephone receiver.

Jaques clapped his hands and ushered the girls of the dancing chorus onto the stage. A powerful battery of yellow lights in the flies was switched on, then two plain arc-lamps in the wings. The girls formed two lines in front of him, then, following his example, they began taking up one dancing posture after another without piano accompaniment. They were dressed in blouses and short frilled skirts of black lace, with black stockings. On their right legs, just above their knee-caps, there was a single silver garter two or three inches in width.

Some yards behind one of the arc-lamps in the wings, Nidok, in a yellow, black-edged dressing-gown, handed a stagehand his two doves. The attendant held them over a basket; they fluttered down into it, and he closed

the lid. At that moment a call-boy ran down from the wooden staircase and handed ^{Eiselheim} ~~Nick~~ a message. ^{Eiselheim} ~~Nick~~ read it, spoke a few words to the stagehand and went behind the back-drop to the wooden staircase. He went up to Lorraine's office.

Lorraine was sitting behind his desk, huddled up, resigned and silent. ^{Eiselheim} ~~Nick~~ came across the room and shook his hand, but he barely moved.

"They found Sangson," he said, "and it appears - I only say it appears - as if we made a mistake."

"So you didn't ~~retain~~ him?" ^{Eiselheim} ~~Nick~~ asked.

"No, they let him go."

"Wisely, I think. But why did we make a mistake?"

"It appears he behaved like any English gentleman."

^{Eiselheim} ~~Nick~~ smiled: "But they are sometimes the worst criminals, you know."

Lorraine peered up at him: "You aren't convinced, then?"

"Convinced by what? You haven't told me anything. You haven't told me, for instance, why he called on Finstanley at such an odd hour last night."

"No, I forgot to ask Duloi-Bordeau about that."

"I've no doubt he convinced Duloi-Bordeau, thought."

^{Eiselheim's} ~~Nick~~'s tone was ironical, and this seemed to bring back all Lorraine's anxiety.

"I wonder if there is going to be any trouble?"

Lorraine asked. "I wish to God I knew what these people were up to. I've sent down a description of Sangson to the attendants at the stagedoor. But perhaps we ought to have held him, criminal offence or no criminal offence." He sighed and shifted in his chair. "Something is going to happen. It doesn't matter what Duloi-Bordeau says. I can feel it. ~~It's about to happen. It's about to happen.~~

~~Something is going to happen tonight.~~ This is the worst first night I have ever known in my life. There is something in the air, ~~It's about to happen.~~ I tell you, Eiselheim, I'm terrified of tonight." He glanced at the door, then he leaned forward and spoke in a lower voice. "Jack's going to get the bird."

^{Eiselheim}
~~Jack~~ turned away abruptly: "We can't tell that before he goes on the stage."

"No." Lorraine smiled, remembering something. "All I have are my premonitions." He spoke with sudden remorse. "Why in the name of God am I letting him go on tonight at all? He's a sick man. I told him this morning I was postponing the performance, - I had everything ready: what has happened between this morning and now to alter my plans? Why is he going on? I can't tell you. It's so obvious that he shouldn't be going on. What has happened during the day to alter my plans? I can't remember, Eiselheim. These last few hours have gone past like a sleep." He fixed ^{Eiselheim} ~~Jack~~ with his eyes. "Can I stop him now? Such things have been done before."

"How can you turn away two thousand people? No,

if Finstanley is about to end his career, let him do it in good style. Let everybody see it, let everybody know it for certain, - that Hellebore is finished once and for all. Then there'll be no ~~further~~ question of further contracts. There'll be no more worrying on future first nights. Take him off the programme tonight, and tomorrow you'll be blaming yourself for having done it: you will feel that after all he may have done, well if you'd let him go on. I believe in letting a man go to his ruin if that's what he wishes to do."

Eiselheim's lips were pursed as he spoke, and he gazed at Lorraine with clear, knowing eyes.

Francine, standing behind Hellebore at the dressing-table, fitted a wig carefully over his head. It was a wig with ample ginger tufts at each side and a white bald patch between. As she pressed the edges down the telephone bell rang. She leaned forward over Hellebore, keeping one hand securely on his wig, while she took up the receiver. She held a brief conversation, then replaced the receiver slowly and looked at Hellebore through the dressing-table mirror.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Lorraine wants me to go up and see him at once."

"At once?" Hellebore asked brusquely. He was pouting. "No, you're needed here. What's he up to?"

"He said he wouldn't keep me from you more than a few minutes, and it's urgent."

"Run along, then."

She took off her smock and tidied her hair in his mirror, then left the room. He pressed at the wig in the nape of his neck and got up. He went behind the screen and took off his shirt. He sat down to undo his shoes, then held his white pierrot's costume with the pom-pom buttons up to the light.

There was a knock on the door and someone came into the room. Lorraine's voice called out, "Jack?" behind him. Hellebore recognised the voice, but did not turn.

"Hullo," he said. "She's on the way up. She left just this minute."

"Who?"

"The Virgin."

"Oh, yes, but I thought I'd slip down and tell you the news."

"You sound miserable." Hellebore slipped the costume over his head, "What news is this?"

"The Virgin and your young friend Sangson are lovers, Jack."

Hellebore stopped, surprised by this: "How do you know?"

"Birds. It makes it all the more suspicious to my mind."

Lorraine paused. He looked down at the powder puff, rouge-stick and large ebony comb on Hellebore's table. "I have never trusted that girl." He walked back to the door without glancing behind the screen at

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Hellebore, in helpless misery. "I shall sack her."

Hellebore answered him in a quiet voice: "Don't you sack that girl, Albert."

On his way back to the office Lorraine buttoned up his jacket, re-arranged the carnation in his button-hole and smoothed back his hair. When he reached his office-door he paused and drew himself up a little, then went in.

Francine Berger was already there, sitting between his desk and the window.

"Good evening," she murmured.

He spoke to her tersely, going straight to his desk: "You happen to be a close friend of a young man called Sangson. Do you mind telling me why he called on Jack Finstanley last night?" Francine stared at him as he sat down, her mouth a little open. She seemed about to reply, but said nothing. "You do know, don't you, that he called on Jack Finstanley last night at the hotel, and that Jack Finstanley was ill this morning - and perhaps unfit to perform tonight - because of that visit?"

He spoke and looked as if he were suffering pain. He gazed not into her eyes but above her head at the wall behind her.

She answered him in an awed whisper: "I knew he went to the hotel, But I don't know why he went."

"What was the point of visiting him at midnight?"

She was bewildered: "I don't know."

"And why talk to him about his son? Why make him feel that he had murdered his own son? Wasn't there a better time for all that?"

"I knew nothing about his visit until this afternoon."

"But presumably his intention was to break the man's heart, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," she replied coldly, her anger rising. "I suppose he wanted to tell the truth, - what he thought was the truth. But that's only my guess, and my guess is no better than your's in this matter."

"And by what right does one man tell another man the truth, by what right? Let him keep it to himself."

"Sangson is a friend of mine, but I'm not responsible for what my friends do."

Lorraine was sweating. His eyes were burning into her's. "But in a way, you see, you are responsible. For instance, you told your friend where Jack Finstanley's hotel was, and you told him what hours he kept, and you told him when he would be arriving in Paris."

"I didn't think he's use what I told him."

"No, I'm not suggesting you did think. But I'm suggesting you think now, and tell me by what right and with what intention this young man decided to put his nose into the affairs of this theatre."

"I know nothing about his intentions."

"What had Jack Finstanley done to deserve that talk about murder? He never harmed anyone during the War."

"Sangson and Jack are grown men," she replied. "They can look after themselves. You talk about them as if they were children in need of protection."

"Mes, well, it strikes me that your young friend is a child and that other people like Jack Finstanley do need protecting against him. Like a child he doesn't know when to hold the truth inside him as a secret, and when to tell it. Like a child running to father he runs to Finstanley with the news of his guilt. Had he been a religious child - as I was a religious child - he would have gone to confession, and that would have been the end of it. Instead, he used Finstanley as his priest, - with consequences which I have to mend as best I can. And who was he to judge another? A priest would have told him to cleanse himself before he set about trying to cleanse other people."

She shrugged: "Oh, I don't understand it..."

"But I want you to understand this: that I dislike the idea of any of my employees introducing meddlers - dangerous meddlers - to my best artistes. I have been thinking of asking you to leave this theatre for that reason."

She stared at him, shocked by these words: "I've nowhere else to go. My parents are dead."

"Then it's all the more important that you understand me: I won't have my artistes interfered with. As ~~xxxxxxx~~

you know, I'm rather a suspicious man, I have to be; and I feel your young friends is up to something, though it isn't likely you'd tell me exactly what it is he's up to." He spoke with sudden anger. "Enormous fortunes depend on these artistes of mine, enormous fortunes and the careers of hundreds upon hundreds of people, and I won't have these - these boys coming forward and imputing crimes to men with a thousand times their distinction. That's all I have to say."

Francine rose, looked at him with curiosity for a moment, then left the room. He stared after her, pale and furious, and said between his teeth: "Des gosses, alors..."

The foyer and the wide balustrade behind the dress circle were now crowded. Silver and crimson lights, designed like five-pointed stars, shone from out of the glass dome above the foyer. The noise of cars and hansom cabs in the street could be heard whenever the entrance doors were opened.

Giordano and Maria Celida arrived ten minutes or so before the curtain was due to go up. They followed the attendant to the end of a long carpeted corridor, ~~where~~ ~~she~~ ~~was~~ ~~waiting~~ ~~for~~ ~~them~~ ~~and~~ ~~there~~ ~~they~~ ~~were~~ admitted to a box at the very edge of the stage. She was dressed in a long shining silk gown, silvery grey, and across her black hair, drawn tightly back ^{into} ~~as~~ a chignon, she wore a tiara of diamonds and pearls. Giordano slipped a few coins into the attendant's hand, then

followed his wife nervously to a seat. Maria Celida gazed without embarrassment at the stalls, which were now half full with people, but Giordano averted his eyes and coughed into his hand awkwardly. She watched a group of people take their seats below in the pit, and then she spoke to her husband without looking at him:

"You are beginning to stoop when you walk, Giordano. I noticed it this evening for the first time." Suddenly she turned and faced him. "You are going to take it badly, aren't you?"

He lowered his eyes: "No, my dear. And even if I do, it's my choice, I shall have to go through with it."

She was watching his mouth.

"Yes," she said, "but it doesn't make me feel any more comfortable. I would far rather you went away - " She glanced at him vehemently. " - right away for a week, or a month, so that you could put your mind to other things."

"Well, I am going away."

"Yes, but you aren't anxious to go away. You want to stay with me till the last moment." She spoke with warm pity for him. "My poor Giordano, it doesn't do you any good to brood."

"I shan't brood once I am out of Paris."

"Are you really going?"

"Of course I'm going. I told you I was going. I have booked my seat on the train. Don't you believe me?"

She shrugged: "Oh, I thought you might find it too hard to leave me."

"Well, I've booked, as I say. The train leaves soon after eleven o'clock. I shall find it unpleasant, but I shall go."

"You look ill, my dear." She laid her hand on his. "Think of the child. Don't think of Hellebore."

Giordano withdrew his hand and nodded politely. She continued to watch him: "Why do you torment yourself by coming here at all? There was no need. We shall see each other when you come back to Paris. We shall have a lovely holiday and we'll go everywhere together from morning to night. An hour or two makes no difference. Why do you want to come here and torment yourself with the sight of him?"

"How do you know I shall be tormenting myself?"

She answered him in a low voice: "I think you will be."

"Yes, I suppose so." He sighed. "But I decided to go about everything as usual. I didn't tell anyone at the shop I'd be leaving. That's a job for you tomorrow."

"You are coming to the party in his dressing room, then?"

"Yes. But I shall leave you there and go to the station alone."

~~She looked at him and said: "I think you will be."~~
~~She looked at him and said: "I think you will be."~~

She grasped his hand again: "If you want me to I'll leave this theatre now and we'll pack our things and go away from Paris and forget all about Hellebore and adopt a little child from an orphanage."

"No," he replied. "I want the child to be your child."

He pushed her hands away lightly, as if to discourage her gesticulations. He turned half away from her in his chair and looked at the audience below, calmer now.

"You get yourself a child," he murmured. "I'll look after myself."

"You won't blame me for anything?"

"No, of course not."

They gazed in silence at the members of the orchestra who were taking their places.

"Who'll be at the party?" he asked.

"Oh, theatre people."

"I've no right to ask fidelity of you, - at any time. I've taught myself to think that, ever since I married you. You're not obliged to be faithful to me because I'm not really your husband."

"Yes, you are." She spoke in a low voice.
"My religion says you are."

Giordano glanced up at the gallery and then at the chandelier over the auditorium.

"I shall worry about one thing while I'm away," he said.

"What?"

"Suppose you no longer want me once you have slept with him?"

"That's impossible," she replied bitterly.

"Why?"

"I don't know why."

"I'll tell you why it's possible: because a woman with any life in her at all feels a strong tie to the man who last takes her to bed, - especially to the man who gives her a child." He glanced at her cunningly.
"What do you think?"

"I shall be doing it for the child, - and nothing else."

"But the child will be a tie. You'll see the father whenever you look at it."

She leaned back in her chair with a sigh: "Very well, then, we'll leave Paris together and we'll forget

about him. This was your plan as well as mine, remember."

"No, we must go through with it. I only wanted to know what you think."

"Well, I think you are talking nonsense."

She took a programme from a chair next to her and broke its paper seal. She opened it and laid it in front of her.

"You seem to forget my religion," she added.

"My religion wouldn't allow me to forsake you, it wouldn't allow me to stay with him, even if he wanted me to."

"Yes, but it's small comfort knowing you'd only come back to me out of a sense of duty towards God, or something." ^{His quick glance was sly.} ~~He said, "I'll see you again."~~ "Won't you be coming back to me out of a sense of love?"

She looked at him in surprise, then turned to look at the curtain again.

"I want you to believe in me, Giordano. Otherwise everything is finished, isn't it?"

Bernard Charpentier took off his cloak in the foyer and handed it to one of the attendants. He went up to the balustrade behind the dress circle and leaned over the parapet. He gazed down at the groups of people in the foyer and watched the doors open and close. Young women in magnificent evening gowns came in on the arms of men, and meanwhile, outside, cars and carriages were being dismissed.

Hellebore was dressed in his white pierrot's costume, and his feet were bare. His nose was now painted red; he had large red lips and thick semicircular eyebrows, and the rest of his face was chalk-white.

He went to the mirror and pressed a tiny contraption under his costume at his left thigh: he watched the ginger hair on his wig stand up on end, quiver, then fall back into place again. He did this twice more, watching his hair intently through the mirror.

He picked up his tweed suit from the table behind the screen, then his sequin costume, then his outside shoes, then his morning suit with the detachable tails: he peered closely at each of these articles in turn.

"What about the tear in the sequin?" he asked.

Francine came from the dressing-table and took the sequing costume. She showed him a place under the left sleeve which had been perfectly repaired.

Hellebore smiled: "How clever you are."

"Shall I do the neck-frill?"

He nodded and sat down. She took a needle and white thread from a small mahogany work box behind him and began sewing up a little tear at the back of his goffered neck-frill.

"He upset you, didn't he?" Hellebore asked quietly.

She tossed the hair out of her eyes: "He frightened me. I have nowhere else to go. He knows

that. He knows he can frighten me."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't allow it. I could employ you myself."

"But still, it makes me feel unsafe. I thought he liked me."

~~Her eyes were lowered to the~~ ^{She was} ~~frill,~~ bent over the frill, sewing quickly and delicately.

"He'll come round to you again. But you must give him time. Time is all he needs." Hellebore bit his lower lip and glanced sideways, avoiding her eyes in the mirror. "By the way, he said you were Sangson's lover: is that true?"

"Yes, but it must have been his own guess."

She did not seem in the least troubled by the question.

"I don't want to interfere with you," Hellebore told her. "I only asked out of curiosity. Are you going to marry him?"

He asked this quickly, running it into his other sentence, and it caught her off her guard. She replied without thinking, rushing over her words: "We've never spoken to each other about it." But then she paused, with a frown. "No, we shall never marry. We are drawn to each other, but against our wishes perhaps. We are never really intimate together, we are too strange to each other. We just explore each other."

"Would you like to marry, - yourself?"

"No, I don't think so. I think I am happy alone. I have my work here, and I don't feel I need children."

"Are you sure?"

She flushed slightly: "Yes, quite sure."

Hellebore asked her how she had got to know Sangson, and she told him that she had met him during the War. Sangson had come to her casualty station.

"Was he wounded, then?"

"No, his nerve had broken. I remember when he came in he was shivering and staring like a man with acute frost-bite. In peace-time we should never have got to know each other: we are too different. But soon after he came the War ended and there was very little work for the nurses, so we talked to each other and then travelled to Paris together."

"Why did his nerve break?" Hellebore asked her.

She seemed unwilling to answer. But at last she replied: "He put it down to your son's death."

She cut the white thread and put back her thimble and needle in the work-box. She had finished, and Hellebore took from the table a pair of white socks and a pair of white slippers with a pom-pom on each.

"He brought home Edgar's death to me last night," Hellebore murmured. "His words frightened me. He made me feel like a murderer. Well, I told Lorraine this evening: I am a murderer, I did kill my son."

Until Sangson spoke to me last night I hardly realised I had a son." He turned suddenly to look at her.

"Do you think he's a clever young man?"

She smiled when she saw Hellebore's expression, like that of a child. "Yes, I think he's clever. Why do you ask?"

He answered her thoughtfully: "I ask because I think an ^{un}educated man - as I am uneducated - can sometimes have the wool pulled over his eyes. I have to be careful, you see; I meet so many educated people."

Eiselheim glanced through a peep-hole in the curtain at the audience and watched Bernard Charpentier take his place in the second row of the stalls. He smiled ironically and murmured to himself:

"Voilà Monsieur Gobe-mouches!"

He touched Helen Eugenie's arm and pointed Charpentier out to her; she smiled, then mimicked Charpentier's frown, drawing herself up imperiously.

A red light above the switch-boards went on and off, and the orchestra struck up into a quick waltz. Two stage-hands began sweeping the stage, and as they passed behind them Eiselheim and Helen walked slowly back into the wings. Four flats descended onto the stage, two of either side, and were pushed into position. A backdrop curtain coloured plain yellow was then lowered from the flies. Several sceneshifters stood waiting for

it, then steadied it as it approached the boards. Two cables were drawn out of sight, and a step-ladder was taken back-stage. Louis Comte, standing under the switchboard, ordered the stage to be cleared.

Hellebore heard the orchestra strike up. He started: " 'Blige me, what's the time?"

Francine pointed to the alarm clock on his table, and he saw that the time was fifteen minutes past eight.

"That band gave me a turn. I thought it was earlier."

She asked him how he felt now, and he half rose from his chair to lay his hand on her cheek: "Feel that."

She drew back: "But they're so cold!"

"Well, I can feel nothing."

"And it's so hot in here."

"Lorraine and Charpentier designed this room," he said. "But they forgot a simple thing like a clock. They could have had one fixed onto this table of mine. That would have been just the idea. I had a clock with green hands in my old room, - d'you remember? I used to have a round table covered with signed photographs and old programmes pasted on the wall, if you remember. What happened to those things, - do you happen to know?"

"I think they were burned when the old dressing rooms were demolished. But perhaps they are downstairs

among the old junk."

For a moment the stage was empty. Jaques entered from the right hand side. He turned and impatiently clapped his hands to hurry his chorus girls forward from the wings. They came on laughing and talking, passing Jaques without looking in his direction. They took up their places in two rows, and Jaques went among them tidying their frilled skirts. He then walked into the wings and nodded to Benedict Amurrat. The girls waited, patting their hair and talking to each other.

The orchestra ended its waltz. The chandelier in the auditorium faded out and the footlights were switched on. The audience stirred, and those who had been standing in the gangways took their seats. The wall lights, then the smaller single lights in the roof, faded out.

Louis Comte looked at his watch and turned to the electrician at his side. A long battery of red lights in the flies were switched on, so that the backdrop curtain instantly turned from yellow to a deep orange. Two arc-lamps shone from the wings. The electrician pressed a switch at his side and the orchestra struck up into a quick ragtime tune. The red light above the switchboard went on and off three times. The chorus girls stood ready, their hands lifted high. Jaques went forward from the wings and raised his hand. The moment he lowered it they joined arms and began the first dance, with smiles on their faces.

The curtain slowly rose and the chorus girls were dancing in two rows, their frilled skirts rising and falling as they kicked out their legs.

Jean and Pierre Duloi-Bordeau hurried down to the wings in their black dressing-gowns. The rest of their acrobatic troupe - two women and a young boy - came close behind them. They talked loudly to each other as they hurried along the stone corridor.

The dance ended a few minutes afterwards and the curtain dropped rapidly to the boards. During the applause the orchestra struck up into a military march.

Jaques ushered the girls off the stage, smiling and patting their shoulders as they passed. The yellow backdrop curtain rose swiftly up into the flies: the ladders, cables and chains behind it were cleared away. Again the stage was swept. Two trapezes were lowered to the level of the stage, and a ladder, a jumping box, a steel see-saw and a tall structure with cross-bars and platforms for the acrobatic tableaux were brought on. A long mat was unrolled and a white backdrop, much further back than the previous one, was lowered.

The Duloi-Bordeau acrobatic troupe handed their black dressing-gowns to the attendants and ran together onto the stage. They cartwheeled, somersaulted and hand-walked along the mat, while the two women went straight to the trapeze and were lifted, seated on the cross-bars, to places just short of the proscenium arch.

The red light above the switchboard went on and off three times. Jean, Pierre and the boy stood ready on the mat, the women on their trapezes, smiling. The orchestra struck up again, and the curtain rose.

Hellebore put on his white slippers.

"He promised to be in the Crimson Tower at four o'clock this afternoon," he told Francine quietly. "But he didn't come."

"You invited him?"

"Yes, at the club last night."

"He said nothing to me about it. Perhaps he knew I would have forbidden it."

Hellebore glanced up at her sharply.

"Why?"

"Well, I thought he upset you last night. And he might have done the same again just before your performance. You can't deny that he did upset you."

"Oh, yes, he upset me." He spoke eagerly. "But I wanted another talk with him, Francine. I had a lot to tell him. He's a fine talker, you know. When did you last see him?"

She hesitated: "This afternoon. He left my room about half-past two or three."

"Where did he go?"

"To Signor Celida's shop in the Concorde." She gazed at him calmly. "Why are you so anxious about it?"

"Oh, he's just the sort of young man who gets

himself into harm."

"But what sort of harm?"

"Well, an accident or - I don't know exactly what -. He has a frightened look sometimes, don't you think so?" Hellebore was puzzled. "I feel responsible for him, more than I ever did for Edgar. He needs someone to look after him. Do you take enough care of him?"

She began needlessly rearranging his costumes. She spoke bitterly: "He has enough care taken of him. He has me, and Signora Celida, and now you."

"Is he in the audience tonight?"

She ~~shook~~ her head, and he murmured, "Good."

"Why good?"

But he did not answer.

"You're calm now," she said, looking at him, "like you used to be before the War."

"That's because I know I'm going to make a mess of it. Another talk with Sangson tonight might have made me feel better. It was my fault Edgar died, you see! I wish I could go back into the past. I'm alone, Francine. There's nobody to help me. Things were different before the War. I could depend on other people. I trusted Lorraine. Everybody laughed more, they weren't so selfish and suspicious." He turned from the dressing-table and stared at Francine. "Everybody's waiting for me to do something wrong. They're all watching me. That's what

it feels like. I've got no real friends."

"You've only been in Paris a few hours, so how can you tell?"

A muffled sound of applause came from the auditorium.

"Listen to that," she said. "They aren't unfriendly. It's a good house tonight."

"Well, if I get the bird I shan't try again. Once is enough for me."

There was a hushed roll of drums as Pierre Duloi-Bordeau put his hands on the soles of Jean's feet, leaned forward and then jumped swiftly up into a hand-stand. Jean was lying underneath him on his back, with his knees fully bent over his chest. When Pierre was quite steady the boy came forward with a short steel ladder. At its base were shoe-like attachments. Carrying the ladder, he put his right foot on one of Jean's knees and climbed slowly onto Pierre's shoulders. He then lifted the ladder so that Pierre could fit his feet into the shoes. When it was balanced at a slight angle he climbed further up until he had his foot on the first rung. The drum-roll ceased. There was silence, and the group remained quite still. Jean called out, "Allez!" and the boy began very slowly to climb the ladder. He reached the top-rung and gripped it with both hands. There was another cry from Jean, and the boy raised himself slowly into a hand-stand. The bass-drum sounded out and amid the applause the orchestra

started up again.

The trapaze-girls swung to the floor by means of ropes. The boy came down from the ladder, and Jean and Pierre jumped to their feet. The troupe bowed low and the curtain fell.

Hellebore sat before his mirror again and put the finishing touches to his face.

There was a knock on the door and Lorraine entered the room, neater than before and in evening clothes. His lips were pursed and white with nervousness. Francine came from behind the screen, then immediately withdrew when she saw who it was. Hellebore had lowered his head and glanced through the mirror behind him. He laughed.

"Look at this, Francine!" he called out. "A call-boy in tails!"

Francine went to the fireplace at the opposite end of the room, and as she passed him Lorraine turned away, deliberately showing her his back. He asked Hellebore how he felt now.

Hellebore was powdering his forehead where the wig was fixed: "Better than you do, I dare say."

Lorraine sat down on the divan and sighed, while Francine put fresh logs on the fire.

A muted bell in the wall behind the screen rang three times, and Francine went hurriedly to the door and held it open for Hellebore. As she did so an immense roar of applause sounded down the corridor from the

wings above. Hellebore had a last look at his face, then rose.

A call-boy ran down from the stage to the dressing room and was just about to call out to Hellebore when Lorraine got up from the divan and, without looking directly at him, waved to him to go away. The boy stood still in the corridor for a moment, daunted and frightened, then ran back to the stage.

Hellebore left the dressing room followed by both Lorraine and Francine. The bell behind the screen rang again as they reached the stone steps leading to the pass-door. Hellebore walked slowly, his eyes on the ground: Lorraine seemed in pain, and there were large beads of sweat all over his brow. As Francine pushed open the pass-door a great hot breath of air rushed out to them from the wings.

The orchestra was playing again, and sceneshifters were running noisily to and fro, across the stage. One of the two trapezes used by the acrobatic troupe had been raised out of sight and the other moved a little more to the centre. The mat was rolled up, and the steel see-saw, the ladders and the jumping-box were quickly taken off into the wings. When the stage was clear the garlanded staircase for Hellebore's turn was brought on and a section of the stage raised above it to form a balustrade. Hellebore's backdrop was slowly lowered in front of it.

This backdrop curtain was black, and diagonally

across it, from corner to corner, there was a huge Christmas rose with dark green mottled leaves and a very deep red bloom.

As Hellebore came into the wings the stagehands and electricians drew back to make way for him. They watched him as he walked towards the switchboard and stood there alone. Benedict Amurrat ran from the other side of the stage and shook hands with him. Hellebore smiled at him calmly, then looked about him, at the stagehands in the wings, then at the stage, as if the scene-changing^s deeply interested him. He stood quite still and spoke to no one.

The ramshackle piano was now wheeled on, and the wire was made taut between its stays on either side. Two stagehands brought on a chest-of-drawers, and the tiny bowler-hat was lowered from the flies.

The red light above the switchboard shone three times, and the orchestra played the final chords of its waltz. The last sceneshifters ran off the stage, and a great battery of lights up above was switched on, then the two arc-lamps on either side. The audience grew quiet, and the red light above the switchboard shone once more.

The stage was now empty and Amurrat turned with a smile to Hellebore. Throughout the auditorium there was utter silence, and the curtain slowly rose.

Hellebore continued to gaze at the stage, lost

and half-smiling. A few seconds passed, and he remained there. Amurrat ran to his side and said in an urgent whisper: "The tabs are up, Jack."

Hellebore turned and stared at him sternly, as if he were trying to recognise his face. Then he nodded a little drowsily and went to the edge of one of the flats at the side of the stage. He carefully put his hand round its edge so that his fingers would be visible to the audience. Then he leaned forward and peered round the flat at the auditorium, so that now the fingers of his right hand, and the whole of his head, were visible. There was a long sighing noise from the audience. He started, his ginger hair rose and fell quickly, and in an instant he withdrew his head and hand. Laughter went across the auditorium, from the stalls to the gallery, and died away.

Hellebore walked slowly onto the stage in his white pierrot's costume. The audience clapped this entrance, but he did not look in their direction. As silence fell again he began strolling about the stage, staring casually at its furniture, - first at the piano, then up at the trapeze and the taut wire, then at the huge Christmas rose across the backdrop curtain, then at the chest-of-drawers and the bowler-hat. He stared at them inquisitively, but he seemed afraid to touch anything. The audience was watching him very closely.

He went towards the piano and bent down to have

a look at its legs. But in the act of doing this he seemed to become aware of the audience for the first time. He slowly raised himself up again and cast a quick side-glance at them. Then he turned his face in their direction, his jaw fell, his hair again rose and fell; he became rigid with panic and looked wildly behind him. He was just about to flee towards the black curtain when he seemed to grow calm again: he came towards the footlights with his former casual walk, staring down into the pit. Just short of the footlights he seemed to reel, and a light laugh came from the auditorium. He stood quite still, and the theatre was again in utter silence. For many seconds he did nothing, then seemed about to topple forward into the scorching footlights, but held himself back in time. The audience was not certain what he meant by this and continued to watch him closely, waiting for the laugh.

He stood still again, legs astride, looking down into the pit. He peered into it as if he were trying to make out the faces. Then he seemed to shudder. There was the sound of whispering in the wings. Someone backstage shouted. Hellebore turned quickly to the left. The moment he did so he lost his balance. He began toppling forward. Suddenly his eyes closed and tears poured down his face. He collapsed onto his left shoulder, then turned over onto his back. The audience was just about to laugh when the curtain fell rapidly and the orchestra struck up into loud, gay music.

The bottom of the curtain struck the boards with a heavy thump only a few inches from Hellebore's head. Stagehands and electricians ran onto the stage. Two of them lifted Hellebore clear of the drop-curtain, and Amurrat shouted for a stretcher. Hellebore was not unconscious. He leaned forward on his right elbow, weeping and shuddering. Amurrat tried to lift his head to look at his eyes, but he pushed him away. A stretcher was brought, and one of the men clasped him under the arm-pits. At this moment Hellebore opened his eyes again and, looking down, saw one of the hands at the side of his chest. He watched it with an expression of terror. Then he looked up at the man's face.

"There's blood on your fingers," he said ~~as he was laid on the stretcher.~~ as he was laid on the stretcher.

The man he had spoken to let go of his shoulders. He stared down at his own hand, then at Hellebore suspiciously.

"It's all right," Louis Comte told him, "he's delirious."

The stagehands were about to carry him backstage when Lorraine ran in from the wings. He was in his shirt-sleeves. His arm-pits and the greater part of his sleeves were drenched with sweat. He pushed the stagehands aside and went to the stretcher. Hellebore lay there with his eyes closed, breathing heavily. His powder was smudged, and there were red marks across his forehead. There were

also stains on his neck-frill, and one of the pom-pom buttons on his costume was missing.

"What happened?" Lorraine cried, frowning at Amurrat.

"Nobody knows! He isn't hurt!"

Lorraine turned to one of the stagehands: "Call the nurse!" And to Comte he said, "Get on with the other programme."

Comte ran into the wings, and once more the sceneshifters began clearing the stage. The stretcher was laid down behind one of the flats on the left-hand side. Lorraine walked over to the stretcher-bearers, shouting to them as he came:

"No, no! Take him straight down to the dressing room."

But at this moment the nurse came onto the stage. She bent down and put smelling salts under Hellebore's nose, and laid a cold towel across his forehead. He was still sobbing and shuddering a little as he lay on the stretcher.

The trapeze was drawn out of sight, and the stage was almost clear. The chorus girls crowded together behind a flat on the other side of the stage, waiting to go on, and a few yards in front of Hellebore the stagehands were dismantling the steel-wire.

The cold towel revived Hellebore, and he suddenly started forward in the nurses arms. Amurrat bent down to him immediately.

"What happened, Jack?"

The backdrop curtain with the Christmas rose left the stage and ascended slowly into the flies, and behind it Hellebore's garlanded staircase was being dismantled. He looked aghast at the rising backdrop, then at the chorus-girls and his stripped staircase.

He spoke to Amurrat in horrified astonishment: "Stop them doing that. Stop those girls coming on."

But the ramshackle piano ~~and the staircase~~ ^{was} now out of sight, and he watched the backdrop come to rest in the flies high above them. The staircase, now dismantled, was ^{being} pushed back behind one of the flats.

"It's the other programme," Amurrat told him. "We mustn't waste time, Jack."

Hellebore's chin was thrust forward, and he stared wildly at Amurrat. He pushed the nurse's arm away roughly and jumped up.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You just fell down."

He had his fists clenched, as if he would fight the other man. But he simply murmured: "Get my stuff on the stage again."

Lorraine came forward from behind the stretcher and took Hellebore's arm. Hellebore looked from one to the other: "Who's running another programme?"

"You're ill, Jack," Lorraine said. "Look at you." He was hardly able to speak. "I knew you'd do

this."

"I'm not ill." He shook his head violently. "I don't know what happened, I don't know what happened!" He grasped the lapel of Lorraine's waistcoat. "Stop them."

"No, I'm powerless to do that now."

"Stop them."

Lorraine shook his head mutely. Hellebore watched his steel wire go loose and fall to the ground, then ~~with a wild cry~~ he strode across to the other side of the stage and shouted something to Jaques in English. Jaques drew back in fear, not understanding the English. His chorus-girls were waiting together behind him, and the yellow backdrop for their turn was just about to be lowered. Hellebore pushed at Jaques wildly, and Jaques fell ~~forward~~ against one of the flats with a shrill cry.

"Allee, allee!" Hellebore shouted to the girls. He stretched out his arms and pushed against them, so that they moved back as a crowd. They screamed and shouted to Amurrat, and some of them fled through the pass-door. Lorraine and Amurrat ran up behind him and pulled him back. Most of the sceneshifters were now standing still watching the group.

"I'm going on again," Hellebore told them.

"You've made that impossible, Jack," replied Lorraine.

"Listen to me. I'm not leaving this stage

tonight until I've done my turn. You can run another programme if you like, but I'm not leaving this stage. I'll go out in front of that curtain and do my turn in the pit, if you like." He shouted to Comte, who was now standing in the wings: "Call the Virgin!"

He turned and faced the stage. He looked at the sceneshifters who were at the top of the garlanded staircase and shouted up at them, tapping his own chest: "Hellebore! Hellebore!" Then he pointed to the chorus girls near the pass-door and cried: "Non la danse!"

Amurrat glanced at Lorraine hesitantly:

"Are you going to let him try?" he asked.

The sceneshifters watched ~~him~~ Lorraine, waiting for a decision. The sweat was still pouring from his brow. He looked sad and troubled, rather than angry. At last he nodded. Some of the sceneshifters groaned with annoyance, and Lorraine walked back into the wings with Amurrat, shaking his head sadly: "We're finished, Benedict. I knew he'd do this."

"Suppose it goes wrong again?"

"Oh, it will go wrong." He no longer seemed interested. "But I'm going to let everybody see for themselves he's finished. I don't care what it costs me now, but no one is going to tell me after this that I stopped him going on. If he wants to ruin himself in front of two thousand people, let him. Not a manager in Europe is going to touch him after this. That was

Eiselheim's advice to me this morning: let everybody see for themselves he's finished. And it's going to cost me six hundred thousand francs."

Francine ran through the pass-door carrying rouge, a powder-puff, a brush and a mirror. Once more Hellebore's backdrop was lowered to the stage and the stays for his steel wire erected. A stagehand brought him a chair and placed it near the switchboard. He sat down and smiled, watching his scenery return. Francine quickly powdered and rouged his face again, too nervous to speak. She painted in his thick eyebrows and rubbed white powder into the stains on his neck-frill.

Lorraine left Amurrat and walked behind the scenery up the stairs leading to his office. He climbed slowly, in resigned despair. He stood still on the gallery for a moment, panting heavily after his climb, then he went into the office and slammed the door. He sat down at his desk. He wiped his brow and closed his eyes.

Hellebore's scene was once more in place. The last stagehands ran off the stage, and the music came to an end as the red light shone three times. Hellebore stood behind one of the flats as before. The theatre was in silence again, after the melancholy tune, and slowly the curtain rose.

Hellebore entered from the right and walked drowsily across the stage without looking at the audience.

He strolled to the piano and deftly played a little tune with his right hand. Suddenly the lid fell smartly down on his fingers and he gave a terrified jump in the air. There was loud laughter, as if with relief. He ran to the centre of the stage sucking his fingers. Then he uttered a long, wild yell of pain. He stopped, and seemed surprised at his own voice. He yelled again, experimentally, and again listened to his own voice. Then he began to weep. The tears poured down onto his pierrot's costume. They ^{grew} grew, until they were two thin sprays of water from the corner of his eyes. He stood still for a moment, and again there was utter silence throughout the theatre.

Suddenly he ran back to the piano, flung the lid up, and began playing furiously, jumping up and down as he played. Then there was a deafening explosion, the piano-playing ceased, and neither he nor the piano could be seen for a great cloud of white smoke.

This cloud went slowly upwards, and after a few seconds he became visible at its edge, reeling and stumbling, his pierrot's costume in rags. One tuft of ginger hair hung down over his right ear, his slippers with the pom-pom buttons were missing, and beneath the rags of his dress, a red and yellow striped vest and yellow pants were now visible. Slowly he recovered his balance, and the smoke cleared away.

He glanced malevolently at the piano, then caught

sight of the chest-of-drawers on the right hand side. Its top drawer was slightly open. He went towards it self-righteously and pushed the top drawer home, but at once the lower drawer came out. He stared down at it, and his one tuft of ginger hair rose and fell. He bent down, pushed the lower drawer home, and this time the second drawer struck him a blow on the head and he somersaulted backwards. He jumped up again and stood looking at the chest from a distance. He went towards it, kicked the middle drawer home with his foot and then ran wildly to the other side of the stage. There, behind the piano, he turned and looked back. All the drawers were now shut.

He walked back again. He smiled, and pointed to the tiny bowler-hat. He took it and tried it on. He grinned shyly at the audience, then huddled up his shoulders and giggled. An idea struck him. He laid the hat down again and ran over to the piano. He opened the main lid and brought out a huge hand-mirror two or three feet in length. This he took over to the chest-of-drawers. He put the bowler hat on again, leaned against the top drawer and simpered in front of the mirror. Suddenly the top drawer came out and struck him smartly on the shoulder. He yelled out with pain and fell straight on his back. The huge hand-mirror toppled to the ground as the bass-drum sounded out. He lay rigid for some time, then slowly, daunted and frightened, he got up. He

looked about disconsolately for his hat and found it immediately in front of the lower drawer. He went to the side of the chest, with his back to the audience, and kicked the hat towards the back of the stage. Then he walked round behind the chest. Just as he was about to pick the hat up, it moved a little further towards the centre of the stage. He stared at it, his head on one side. Again he bent down, and again it moved away. He pondered, chin in hand. Then he walked round to the other side of the hat and again bent down. This time it came towards him, he chuckled and gathered it like a hen into his hands. He put it back on his head and began strutting about the stage. But as he walked towards the footlights it rose into the air slowly and remained stationary three or four feet above his head. He continued to strut about, unaware of this. He walked round the chest-of-drawers and struck it vehemently with his foot as he passed. The more the audience laughed, the prouder he became. He bowed. He walked to the back of the stage, studied the Christmas rose on the backdrop, then returned to the footlights. As he came down the stage he caught sight of the bowler-hat in mid-air. He stopped short and again his one tuft of ginger hair rose and fell. Slowly he raised his hand to his head and found nothing there. He gazed bitterly at the hanging hat, then made an absurd effort to reach it by standing on his toes. He stamped his foot impatiently

and turned his back on the audience. He walked away from the footlights, sighing deeply.

As he did so he caught sight of the steel wire. He stopped and gazed upwards. He turned to the audience again with a smile. He came to the footlights again. He pointed to himself, then to the steel wire, his eyebrows raised. He walked to one side of the proscenium arch and began taking off his torn costume fragment by fragment. He folded each piece and carefully laid it down in front of the footlights, and at last he stood in his striped vest and long yellow pants. He went into the wings, and silence gradually fell on the theatre again.

The orchestra began playing quietly. Hellebore appeared on the wire at the right of the stage. He stepped forward, lost his footing, almost fell and ran back to his little platform with a loud cry. He stepped onto the wire again, and this time he ran precipitately to the middle. He jumped in the air and turned about, his feet turned slightly outwards. He jumped higher and higher in the air as the wire bounced up and down, and the orchestra took up his rhythm. He somersaulted forwards in the air, holding his knees. When he had reached a sufficient height he took two forward somersaults in the air above the wire. He jumped with reckless confidence, crying out at the top of his voice, his arms stretched sideways. Sometimes he landed on his feet, sometimes he landed at a sitting position. He moved his limbs in

the air with a wonderful swiftness and ease. He took a backward somersault in the air, pretended to miss his footing on the wire and seemed about to fall straight down to the stage. The orchestra stopped playing instantly, there was a crash on the bass-drum, and Hellebore hung by his left arm on the wire, his confidence gone, tears pouring ~~down~~ from his eyes, yelling out mournfully, his legs kicking wildly in space. He tried several times to reach the wire with his right foot, but failed. He hung there by both hands, and at last he managed by swinging his body upwards to grip it between his feet. He pulled himself up, lay along the wire on his stomach, steadied himself, then lost his balance again and twisted round underneath it. Again he dangled in ^aspace. But this time he looked down and saw that he had no more than three feet or so to drop. He jumped lightly down and ~~stared~~ stared sulkily at the audience as they applauded him. He walked to the footlights and lifted his chin defiantly. He had lost his self-assurance. With sudden revengeful fury he threw himself over into a forward somersault. He threw himself onto his hands, then back onto his feet again, so that he seemed momentarily to bend like a rubber dummy. He hand-walked round the stage, taking long, ^{id}rapid strides, and jumped to his feet with the orchestra's final chords. He bowed proudly, showing himself off. Quietly confident again, his lips pursed, he began putting on his pierrôt's dress. He put on his left sleeve, then

space/

strides/

one of his trouser legs, He dressed himself with dignity, caring for every little torn fragment. A spotlight rested on him at the side of the stage as he delicately fingered his dress.

With grotesque dignity he walked back across the stage. As he came towards it the tiny ~~bolwer~~ ^{bolwer}-hat - which had remained in the air - fell a little lower and came to rest immediately in front of his head. He stopped and stared at it. He stepped to the right, but it moved with him. He ran a few paces, and it was still there. He looked into the auditorium and smiled shrewdly. The curtain fell.

When it rose again the piano and the chest-of-drawers were no longer on the stage. There was now a card-table near the footlights, and on it were a top hat, a small beer barrel, a saw, a wand and an immense pack of cards.

Hellebore entered dressed in evening clothes that were stained and many sizes too big for him. He had a starched front, and there was a red flower dangling from his button-hole. He walked briskly to the table. He coughed into his hand. He picked up the immense pack of cards and began shuffling them with astonishing swiftness, throwing them up with one hand and catching them with the other. He put them together again and ran his thumb along the top of the pack, so that they made a loud smacking noise. He showed the Queen of Hearts

to the audience and then leaned it against the beer barrel with its blank side showing. He brought the rest of the pack to the footlights and ~~annoy~~ solemnly bent down. He crouched over the pack, raised himself, stretched out his arms, and the pack was gone. He turned round and walked back to the table. As he did so the cards fell loudly one after another from the tail of his jacket onto the floor. He stared down at them with horror, petrified in his tracks. He unhooked the tails of his jacket and began inspecting the pocket inside them for holes. Then he shrugged and threw them with the cards into the wings. He returned to the table a little glumly. An idea occurred to him, and he smiled. He picked up the card which was leaning against the barrel and showed it to the audience. It had changed to the King of Spades. He nodded persuasively as he showed it to them, and giggled.

He struck a match and lit a scrap of paper. He put this lighted paper into a small box and wrapped it round with a silk kerchief. He touched it lightly with his wand. He was about to untie the kerchief, fingering it gingerly, when thick smoke began to pour out of it. He hopped about, hollering and throwing the box from one hand to ~~another~~ the other, then he ran to the side of the stage and threw it into the wings. He hastened back to the middle sucking his fingers. He bowed austerely.

He opened a small lid in the barrel and pulled out one coloured silk after another. He turned on the tap, and nothing came forth. He held up his finger shrewdly to the audience and took his wand from the table. He tapped the barrel twice with this wand. He turned the tap on again, and this time a red liquid flowed out. He took a large tumbler from one of his bulging pockets and held it for a moment under the tap. He raised it against the light and stared at it. He took a sip and immediately, with a contorted face, spat it out. He looked at the tumbler defiantly but took another sip. This time he nodded with a smile and swallowed the liquid.

He drew an egg from his left sleeve, held it up before him between his fingertips and then placed it on the table. He drew another from his right sleeve. Nonchalantly he drew a number of eggs from his hair, his pocket and the seat of his trousers.

He hiccupped. The hiccupped threw him forward a little, and another egg rolled out from under one of his trouser-legs. He stood still, gazing down at the egg with horror. He tried to smile at the audience. He waited, seeming to listen apprehensively, and there was silence. Again he hiccupped, and this time three or four eggs fell noisily from his collar, the cuff of his sleeve and one of his pockets. He remained standing in the same position, with a troubled, pleading look. Again he waited, and again there was silence. He had

his head bent sideways, listening. The moments passed and the hiccough did not come. He sighed with relief and smiled graciously. He returned to the table and drew himself up. But just as he was about to pick up his wand he hiccoughed again, and this time a huge spotted ostrich egg rolled quietly out of his trouser leg and came to rest a few feet from him.

He first looked defiant, then wept. He walked furiously to the centre of the stage. Then he turned suddenly. He went back to the table and began throwing his properties into the wings with an immense clatter. He pushed the barrel onto the floor, rolled it into the wings and then sent the table after it. He dusted his hands off and strolled to the other side of the stage. He whistled crudely, his hands in his pockets. As he strolled about, bored and pondering, the lights began to fade, and in a few moments the stage was in utter darkness. His whistling gradually became less forthright, then ceased altogether.

The orchestra began softly playing a polka, and slowly the lights came on. He was standing in the same position as before, but the stage had now been transformed. There were now tall pillars on either side, and where the black curtain with the Christmas rose had been there was now the wall of a large ballroom, with gilt tables and chairs. He stared all about him, turning round on his heels like a wondering child.

Invisible guests came to being on the stage, and he moved respectfully among them. He rearranged the red flower in his button-hole and tried to smooth down the tufts of ginger hair with the tips of his fingers. He wiped the toes of his shoes surreptitiously on his trouser-legs as he walked, smiling to someone whenever he did so. He listened to a group of people gossiping, then he himself joined in. He gabbled silently, his head thrust forward, his lips moving with an extraordinary rapidity, his eyes darting this way and that. He found a partner, smiled to her and bowed. They began dancing together, and he became portly and solemn. He took rigid little jumps up and down in the polka, holding her hands high. A waltz followed, and this he danced alone. The music ~~seemed~~ seemed to draw his limbs into movement, swooning and dying away, then lighting up again. He moved with wonderful sureness, delivered helplessly into the music. He danced the Lancers, taking long, soft strides round and round the stage, narrowly avoiding the other guests.

The orchestra stopped suddenly in the middle of a chord, and he was struck still. He looked about him, the spell broken. The guests seemed to draw away. He became panic-stricken at the thought of their leaving him. He ran to the side of the stage to block their exit. He snapped his fingers at them, blew kisses at them, clapped his hands and pointed with pathetic gaiety onto

the stage. But the orchestra remained silent. The pillars on either side rose slowly back into the flies. The ballroom wall gave place to the black curtain again, and the gilt chairs and tables sank underneath the stage by traps. Forlorn and sad, he walked back to the footlights.

He took an invisible apple from his pocket and polished it on his sleeve. He took one bite, chewed it, then ate the whole apple with fierce voracity, twirling it round and round in his fingers.

He put his hand in his pockets again and walked to the middle of the stage, staring at the floor. There was silence. He whistled a snatch of one of the tunes to which he had danced. He danced a few steps and smiled to himself. He sighed nostalgically, and there were two or three very quick spurts of water from his eyes.

From somewhere behind him came the sound of soft idyll music, full of bird-notes. He stopped and listened. He turned and as he did so the backdrop curtain rose into the air. Behind it was a sunlit balustrade with a narrow flight of stairs leading up to it. There were three arches in the Gothic style, and these were covered with wild climbing roses and other blossoms in profusion. Above the three arches were written the words: "Le Berceau de Verdure Enchante." The branches of a willow-tree hung down onto the balustrade, behind the arches.

He walked slowly up the staircase, gazing at everything with his mouth open. At the top he began

smelling the blossoms. He smelt them like a giraffe, long-necked, slender and inquisitive. He stood on tip-toe to smell a particularly full flower. The idyll music ceased. He smelt the flower, then wanted to pull it down. He grasped hold of it, then pulled. A flood of water instantly poured down all over him. He yelled out. It became a continuous down-pour. He tried to struggle back down the staircase but became entangled in the branches of the willow-tree. At last, drenched to the skin, he threw himself out of one of the arches, and in doing this he brought down with him to the stage all the wild climbing roses. He stood weeping and yelling among them, and the curtain fell.

There was a great roar of applause. Hellebore changed quickly into his sequin costume at the side of the stage. The trapeze was lowered, and he sat on the cross-bar. He was lifted up into the flies, and the curtain rose again. There was a pause during which the stage was empty, then Hellebore came down from the flies on the trapeze in his sparkling sequin suit. The applause grew louder, and he waved his hand.

Lorraine opened his eyes and started in his chair when he heard the noise from below. He picked up the telephone:

"Get me the stage... What the hell's that?...
No!"

He put the receiver back and stared before him.

He got up and went to the gallery-door, and as he opened it the applause grew louder. He looked down at the stage. The curtain was at that moment up, and the stage was empty. Then Hellebore came cartwheeling from the wings in his sequin suit. He jumped to his feet just short of the footlights and bowed. The curtain came down again and Hellebore strolled to the side of the stage. He dabbed his neck with a handkerchief. Amurrat ran forward and shook him by the hand.

Lorraine went back to his desk and put his jacket on. Then he went down to the stage by the wooden staircase.

Hellebore took off his wig and slipped between the folds of the curtain which two attendants were holding back for him. The applause grew into a huge roar as he appeared under the yellow spotlight in his sparkling sequin dress. He bowed low with the wig in his right hand.

Behind the curtain sceneshifters were putting up the cage for Eiselheim's act. Its walls were about ten feet high, with spikes at the top curving inwards. Heinrich Eiselheim stood at the side in evening clothes and a top hat. He stood very still, watching the sceneshifters at work. Behind him stood Eliza and Helen in long Chinese tea-gowns and sandals, their hair shining with oil and gathered at the back into buns. Their eyes were painted to give the appearance of being narrow and slanted.

When the walls were up they were connected with a wire corridor in the wings along which the tigers would

come. Eiselheim's table was taken into the cage, then his other properties, - a black chest, a number of coloured silk kerchiefs, two top hats, a large dice, a wand decorated with tinsel, a tiny barrel with a golden tap, a saw, a pack of cards, two chairs, a number of hoops and an imitation bass-drum.

After the eighth curtain Hellebore took his last bow. The yellow spotlight went out and the orchestra played again.

Eiselheim, Eliza and Helen went into the cage, and the door was locked behind them. At a signal from Eiselheim two sceneshifters raised the grating over the wire corridor by means of a chain, and others ^{stand} standing in in the wings goaded the animals along with their pikes. The first tiger stopped two or three feet from the entrance and yawned. It looked about sleepily, then stared at the stage. It growled at an attendant's pike, then walked slowly forward, its teeth a little bared. Eliza waited at the entrance with a trainer's whip. Eiselheim called to the tiger and showed it a stool, while Eliza trailed her whip along the floor towards the stool, coaxing it. The tiger stopped again. It stared first at Eiselheim, then at her. It walked past her whip and leapt softly onto the box, turning to growl at her as she went towards the entrance again.

When all five tigers were on their boxes the sceneshifters lowered the grating again, and the red light

came on. Eiselheim stood behind his table, with Eliza and Helen on either side. Behind them the tigers waited on their boxes, watchful and drowsy. The curtain rose.

Lorraine shook hands with Hellebore fervently. He gazed into his eyes, nodding all the time, but saying nothing. He put his arm round his shoulder, and together they went towards the pass-door between an avenue of jostling people, all of whom were trying to congratulate Hellebore or present him with flowers.

The dressing room door was open. Waiting inside were Bernard Charpentier, Francine Berger and Jean and Pierre Duloi-Bordeau. On the right as Hellebore came in there was now a great bank of roses shaped like a horse shoe and as high as a man, with the letter H in white roses against a red background. He pointed to it with astonishment as he came in, and laughed. The men shook hands with him, and Francine, with tears in her eyes, came forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Lorraine took Charpentier aside just by the door and said to him in a low voice: "Take care of him, Bernard. I must slip upstairs for a minute or two."

Charpentier nodded, and Lorraine quietly left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Where's he off to?" Hellebore asked.

Charpentier shrugged his shoulders and smiled with a little wink.

Lorraine returned to his office. He sat down

and lowered his head to the desk, his eyes closed.

Eiselheim was watching Eliza closely as he took out one of the sides of the bass-drum and held it aloft. For a moment it seemed that he might have forgotten the audience, so closely did he stare into her eyes. She whispered to him urgently: "Heinrich!" and his mouth fell open a little as he turned back, dazed, towards the audience again. There was a distinct pause in the act, and the audience was quick, after Hellebore's performance, to perceive it. Eliza bent down and curled herself up inside the drum, and still he could not take his eyes from her. Then he put the side of the drum back into place, so that she could no longer be seen. His lips were drawn tight together, and he was frowning painfully, as if, no matter how he tried, he could not become master of the stage again. Helen was unaware of this.

He rolled the drum slowly from one side of the stage to the other, then he touched it with his wand several times. He again removed one of the sides, and Helen removed the other. The drum was now empty. He lifted up the drum-girdle and showed it to the audience. He held it over one of the tigers for ~~xxxxxxx~~ the beast to leap through, but at such an angle that it struck its head against the wood and almost tumbled to the floor. Helen gasped, and seemed suddenly to realise

the situation.

She took control and beckoned one of the animals down from its box. She followed it with a smile, trying to make amends for Eiselheim, as it prowled to and fro across the stage, smelling for Eliza. She followed it to a black chest, where it stopped and growled, rubbing the silver lock with its paw. She pulled open the lid, and Eliza stepped out. Eiselheim was standing quite motionless on the other side of the stage, dangerously near to the tiger who had hurt its head.

Charpentier lay on the divan with his head against the cushions, while the others sat round the fire. Francine's hair was now brushed straight down to her shoulders, and she was dressed in a white silk evening gown. She sat on the floor close to Hellebore, leaning against his armchair.

[The dressing table ...

The dressing table had been cleared of Hellebore's paints and creams, and was covered from end to end with some fifty or sixty champagne glasses.

"Well, what did you think was up, then?" Hellebore asked Charpentier.

"I was puzzled, Jack, like everybody else. All your reeling about looked to me part of the act. So did your collapse. I was just going to burst out laughing and the curtain fell. It was like having the door closed in one's face."

"Did the lights go up?"

"Oh, yes."

Hellebore shook his head, staring into the fire: "I can't understand it. I went on that stage with real first night nerves, but the minute I got near the piano I felt all right. I was just steaming up nicely, then my legs went weak. No, first of all something seemed to get hold of me in the belly, then I felt my legs go. I tried to stand still, but I panicked." The room was still and silent. "Everything went black for a few minutes. When I saw that curtain come down I could have wept."

"You did weep, so Louis told me," Charpentier said. "And you told a stagehand that he had blood on his fingers." He laughed. "I should like to have seen his face."

Hellebore smiled in a tired fashion: "Now I looked down at that hand and I could have sworn there was

blood all over the fingers."

"It will make a lovely story in tomorrow morning's edition."

A hushed sigh of surprise came from the auditorium. Charpentier yawned, and Jean Duloi-Bordeau looked up at Francine.

"What was so dangerous about your friend Henry Sangson?" he asked her.

Jean's question took them by surprise. Francine started and glanced at Hellebore, who was lying back in his armchair, gazing at Jean through half-closed eyes. There was silence until he asked Jean what he knew about Sangson.

"We met him in the foyer this afternoon," Jean replied.

"Why?"

"Lorraine told us to. He wanted him kept away from you this afternoon."

Hellebore was astonished. He looked from Francine to Jean: "Where is he now, then?"

"Oh, we didn't do him any harm."

Charpentier raised his head and asked Hellebore: "Is this the young man who called on you last night? The friend of Francine's?"

Hellebore nodded and turned to Jean again: "What was Lorraine's idea?"

"He thought Sangson might be a blackmailer."

He asked us to protect you against him, as of course we said yes right away." He paused, then asked: "Was he right?"

Hellebore shook his head.

"Are you certain about that?" Charpentier asked. He chuckled: "Perhaps Lorraine was right."

"But he was such a polite young man," Jean said, "and he told us he knew Francine."

Charpentier raised his eyebrows ironically: "What is friendship with Francine a passport to?"

Hellebore put his hand over his brow: "I can't decide about that young man. If I could remember something about last night it would be better." He looked at Jean again: "What happened in the foyer, then?"

"We told him your rehearsal had been cancelled and would he wait for you at the hotel. So we took him along to your hotel."

"And there was I running all over this theatre trying to find him."

"We're sorry, Jack."

There was silence for some time. Then Francine said bitterly: "Lorraine threatened to throw me out for encouraging intruders."

"Oh, you mustn't take that to heart," Charpentier told her. "You ought to know him by now, Francine. Nothing can be done about his little nightmares. Only afterwards does he realise the truth, and then he suffers

the most terrible remorse." He gazed up at the ceiling. "And it's possible, Jack, that without this nightmare of his about your young friend we wouldn't be sitting here now waiting for your guests to come in and toast your health. Perhaps your young friend was up to some mischief. Perhaps his intentions were a little - " He raised his head and looked firmly at Francine, who at once turned away her head. " - sinister."

"I liked the boy's face," Hellebore murmured.

"Do you know," Charpentier added, " I believe Lorraine has suddenly become an old man, quite suddenly, in the last few days! He needs our sympathy."

Hellebore laughed: "Yes, we'll have an appeal fund. My friends are my friends, and I won't have him or anybody else interfering with them. First he runs a second programme, then he sets Jean and Pierre on a visitor of mine. One of these days he'll get himself into bad trouble. He'll end in the law-courts, as sure as I'm sitting here. I know a thing or two about Lorraine that might interest the police. I met him before you did, Bernard, and I'll give you a word of advice: when he looks old and sad, watch out for yourself, he's up to something."

"I won't deny that." Charpentier looked at Francine again: "What was your friend's idea in calling on Jack last night, then? I acquit him of celebrity-hunting."

Francine looked back at him coldly: "Lorraine asked me that. How am I to know? I'm not responsible for what my friends do. Perhaps he called on Jack to see the father of someone he had served with during the War - and whom he buried."

Charpentier nodded politely: "I see." He smiled at her and got up from the divan. "Whenever you mention the War to me you sound a little bitter, Francine." He walked towards her. "Do you know what I did during your War?"

She stared at his shoes: "No."

"I kept my head well down." He ducked his head with a chuckle. "Whereas you were positively up to your eyes in blood, weren't you? And by the look on your face you are going to ask me why I should have considered myself different from anybody else. But I won't let you say it, because it would be so boring. That's the trouble with heroes and heroines, isn't it - they're so boring."

He teased her with a smile and she lowered her eyes.

"I wasn't going to say that, as a matter of fact," she replied.

"By the grace of God, then, we were spared it." He turned and went towards the door. "I shall go up and see the old gentleman now." He glanced at Francine again. "Try and pretend you're a human being, my dear. The results might be interesting."

Hellebore laughed and patted Francine's arm, and Charpentier left the room.

The blood was dripping from Eiselheim's hand where one of the tigers had suddenly caught him with its claw, making a long, deep wound as far as his wrist, and the audience were talking among themselves, not understanding. He had managed to conceal the attack from everyone in the theatre except Helen and Eliza, and there was a danger that the scent of human blood would excite the animals beyond control. Helen had run towards him with a scarf, to staunch the wound, but he waved her away fiercely. He cast a quick, resentful glance at Eliza, as if to blame her for what had happened, and she was now almost in tears, standing quite apart from the others, close to the cage-wall, no longer making any effort to act her part as Helen was doing.

Two of the tigers were out of hand, and Eiselheim, his anger up, was advancing on them slowly with his whip as they snarled at him, their teeth bared and their ears flat. At first they would not go back to their boxes. He shrieked out their names and beat his whip furiously on the floor, as if he were quite unaware of the audience. His back was turned to the footlights. He was trembling with rage, while the blood ran slowly down his whip-handle. It seemed impossible now that he should regain his hold on the audience. Eliza moved cautiously towards the door of the cage, as if she would leave. She kept her eyes on the tigers as she did so, with her hand held up to her cheek, covering her scar, and it was clear from the

auditorium that she was terrified. But no stagehand came forward from the wings to unlock the door.

Charpentier went into Lorraine's office. The latter indicated a chair and yawned.

"You ought to be downstairs with Jack," Charpentier told him. "He has just taken eight curtains and there you are sitting with your head in your hands. Did you even see the turn?"

[No, Bernard... 267(a)]

"No, Bernard."

The rain had stopped, though there were still gusts of wind which blew the elm-leaves against the window. Only one light was shining in the room, of a soft amber colour, at the edge of Lorraine's desk. They were sitting in the shadows, and could only make each other out dimly.

Charpentier sighed: "I've been hearing a strange account of how you sent the Duloi-Bordeau's to waylay a young friend of Francine's."

"I wasn't to know he was harmless. Do I know now? Ah, I'm confused. Everything seemed different before the show. I felt feverish."

"But that sort of behaviour can get you into the law-courts."

Lorraine smiled in a friendly way: "It wouldn't be for the first time."

"You threatened Francine with dismissal, I believe."

"You know, Bernard, I thought that was the end of my career when I saw him lying on that stage. I thought it was the end of all of us." He yawned again. "I feel so tired I could sleep the eternal sleep. How quiet everything is. Who's on?"

"Eiselheim."

"Ah, that explains it."

He got up and went to the door leading out onto

the gallery. Charpentier followed him, and together they looked down at the stage. Helen was trying to coax one of the tigers back to its box. She was trailing her whip along the floor in front of the animal, her head and shoulders bent forward. The tiger watched her, its long body stretched out, and growled at the whip. Eiselheim was holding two doves in a purple kerchief and trying to prevent them fluttering about, so that he ^{could} wrap them up. ~~Etáacacacáacacacbeasacáron~~ Throughout the theatre there was utter silence, apart from the tiger's low growling. Eliza could not be seen from above.

They went back into the office and closed the door.

Hellebore leaned forward and warmed his hands at the fire: "What annoys me is when people try and stuff me alive. That's why I hate this room." He took Francine's chin gently and pulled her face round so that he could look into her eyes. "Have you told Lorraine about that?"

"No. I think it's a lovely room."

Hellebore looked about him and smiled. He glanced back at the dressing table, at the champagne glasses reflecting the white flames from the hearth, and the dark curtains behind.

"Well," he said, "it looks better than it did an hour ago. I grant you that."

"It only needs to be lived in."

Hellebore spoke to Jean again: "Who was he to

protect me, as if I hadn't got a mind of my own.

If I want to be robbed or kidnapped or blackmailed, that's my own business. I'm free. I could leave the stage tomorrow if I wanted to. I like being alone, standing on my own two feet. You never got a minute to yourself in the circus, but at least your boss never interfered with your friends."

There was a sudden hushed sound of applause from the auditorium below, and Lorraine's telephone rang. He had a brief conversation, and when he put the receiver down he looked across at Charpentier sternly.

"The boot's on the other foot," he said. "The audience went dead on Eiselheim. I thought it looked slow, didn't you? Well, one can never account for these things."

"Were there cat-calls?"

"No, they just went dead on him. He'll take it to heart, of course. He takes everything to heart."

Lorraine left the office by the gallery-door, Charpentier by the other one. Lorraine hurried down to the stage; he slipped between the running stagehands, jumped over one of Eiselheim's coloured boxes, bent to avoid a swinging flat and made for the right of the stage.

Eliza cracked her whip at one of the tigers who had stopped on its way back along the wire passage. There were tears in her eyes. Lorraine called to her and she turned.

He took her hand: "What went wrong, my dear?"

She could hardly speak through her sobs, wishing at the same time to hide her tears from the stagehands who kept passing to and fro with pieces of scenery and the wire walls of the tiger-cage: "One of the animals turned on him. That little swine." She thrust her stick between the bars at the ribs of the last tiger, who turned and growled up at her. "I've never liked that one."

"Is he hurt?"

"Just across the back of his hand. And it was my fault."

He drew her away from the wire passage: "Why your fault, Eliza?"

"Oh, I don't know!" She shook her head angrily. "It's a beautiful act, Albert. He did the same turn in Brussels a fortnight ago and they wouldn't let him go off the stage. He seemed to hand fire tonight. He's broken-hearted about it. He's going to ask you to cancel his contract: you won't do it, will you?"

Lorraine averted his eyes from her: "Well, perhaps he does need a rest."

She shook his arm: "No, Albert! Once you cancel his contract he'll never try again. Look at me, dear. You won't cancel his contract, even if he pleads with you, will you?"

He looked at her tenderly for a moment, then murmured: "Very well, then."

The arc-lamps came on, and the stage was cleared for the chorus. The orchestra struck up again. Eliza and Lorraine walked behind the backdrop towards the wooden staircase.

"Come up to the office, Eliza."

"No, I want to change now. I'll see you at

Jack's

[party ...

party."

Lorraine looked about him and saw that they were hidden from the stagehands and the girls of the chorus by a flat. He gripped her arm and pulled her closer to him:

"Leave him, Eliza! Let Helen look after him for a little while. Don't go away so soon. Stay here on whatever terms you like to make. I shall agree to anything. Will you?"

She stood there helplessly, her head bowed, and she spoke as if there were no strength left in her: "No. My answer will always be no." There was a terrible weariness in her voice. "Always no, no. Even if you cancel his contract I shall go away just the same. I don't know where I shall go, but I shan't stay here."

Slowly Lorraine withdrew his hand and murmured: "Forgive me for asking you, then. Say you forgive me."

She was about to reply when she glanced up and saw with horror the expression on his face. She gasped and seized his hand, gazing into his eyes:

"Yes, my dear, I forgive you. But I am the one who needs to be forgiven."

The lights in the auditorium were put out, and the

front doors were closed as the last cabs drove away. Hellebore tidied the divan cover and patted down the cushions where Charpentier had been lying. Only he and Francine were now in the room.

"Will you help me unbutton?" he asked her.

She followed him behind the screen, where he sat down on a stool, and began unbuttoning the back of his sequin dress. Nothing could be heard from the rest of the theatre. But suddenly there was a knock on the door and someone came into the room. Francine looked round the screen and said, "Good evening" in a surprised voice. Hellebore turned and asked, "Who is it?"

"Mr. Eiselheim."

He stared at her in astonishment.

"Tell him to come through."

He stood up, and Eiselheim came to the edge of the screen. He wore his overcoat and was carrying a hat and cane. For a few seconds he stood quite rigid and pale gazing at Hellebore, then said: "I shall take very little of your time."

"Won't you sit down?" Hellebore asked.

Francine Berger went across the room to the hearth and began putting logs on the fire, aware of the embarrassment between the two men. Eiselheim was watching Hellebore nervously:

"No, thank you. I must go immediately."

~~Hellebore stood awkwardly by his stool with his~~

Hellebore stood awkwardly by his stool with his sequin costume open at the back.

"What have you done there?" he asked, pointing to the bandage.

"One of my animals attacked me," Eiselheim replied in a low voice. "And the audience died on me."

Hellebore looked at him quickly: "You got the bird?"

"Not exactly. But it amounts to the same thing."

"Well, it won't happen tomorrow night."

"I've come to tell you that I shall be leaving Paris tonight."

It had been clear that he would say something like this. But Hellebore frowned, as if taken by surprise, and asked: "Why?"

"Because I am not fit for a stage, and I haven't had a rest for twelve years. So just now I asked Lorraine to cancel my contract."

"And what did he say?"

"He agreed it was wise."

Hellebore nodded and said with disgust: "He drops a man just like that, - " He snapped his fingers. " - and it might be me one day."

"Yes, it might be you." Eiselheim came closer to the screen, never for an instant ceasing to stare him in the eyes. "There has been nothing but trouble for me since you arrived in Paris. Eliza has never been like this before. And she changed the moment you came into this city. You turn her into a rebel, - a rebel

with a nasty tongue, - you and Lorraine, between the two of you!"

"Eliza's got a mind of her own." Hellebore answered him calmly, with a glance across the room at Francine. "Is that all you've come here to tell me?"

"I'm not here for my own sake. I'm no friend of yours, and I don't want to be. I only want a promise from you: that while she is away from me you will always keep an eye on her."

"Why not take her with you, and see to it yourself?"

"I shall be taking Helen, no one else. Helen and I are like brother and sister." There was the faintest smile on his lips as he said these words. "She ~~tries~~ to turn me into a dear, gentle old man. But Eliza really knows me, - and perhaps loves me, for all your schemes and Lorraine's schemes to take her away from me and encourage her rudeness and then make her the instrument of my downfall, as she was tonight. My mind was full of her tonight -" He looked away from Hellebore for the first time, remembering. " - and that should never have been so, on a first night."

"I've never tried to take her away from you."

"Oh, she'll come to me at last. One day she'll give in. You haven't won her." He spoke proudly. "Because just now she pleaded with me to take her away tonight."

"Well, then..."

"But at present I am her excuse for not being

happy. I shall remove that excuse. She'll come after me if the need is really there. She is too proud to take advice or help from me, and I don't like the idea of her being alone in Paris with Lorraine: that's why I'm here."

Hellebore half turned away from him: "I can look after my friends. I don't need advice from you."

"Then I'm very happy." He nodded ironically. "It was really you who broke up our little trio. We were perfectly happy before you came: no, not perfectly, but we were happy enough, though there were always quarrels between Eliza and Helen. It isn't that there have been more ^{qu}arrels since yesterday, but that for the first time since I met her fifteen years ago Eliza has been sneering at me."

"And that's my fault? Shall I cancel my tour and go back to my cows, just to keep your name on the bills?"

"I'm down now, but that won't be for all eternity. You thought you'd ridicule me tonight, didn't you: in that little conjuring act of yours?"

"Ridicule you?"

"You know what I mean."

"There was nothing deliberate in that." Hellebore answered him in a tired way. "I worked out that skit before Lorraine put you on the bill. I worked it out in England."

"Yes, but it's easy to see where her sneering

comes from. I've done nothing to interfere with her freedom as long as we've been together. I have always known that Lorraine wanted to marry her. I never tried to alter her mind one way or the other. And this is the result. Well, we can at least part on good terms for her sake."

"You may see things clearer out of Paris."

Hellebore looked down, avoiding Eiselheim's cold gaze.

"Where are you going?"

"I shall be taking Helen to Germany, or perhaps Poland." He held out his hand, and Hellebore looked at it without moving. They stood close together, while Francine was still bending at the hearth, waiting for the conversation to end. "Good bye."

At last Hellebore took his hand firmly, and Eiselheim left the room. Hellebore went to the edge of the screen and stared after him. He took a white flower from the bank of roses and put it to his nose.

A log fire was burning in Maria Celida's bedroom. Close to it there was a table laid for two, with two bottles of champagne, several covered dishes and a lighted candelabra in the middle. On the other side of this dark, warm room there was a wide four-poster bed enclosed by heavy damask curtains. These curtains hung down from a dome of carved wood fixed to the ceiling, and were drawn back with tasseled ropes of silk to show the bed. The only light was from the candelabra. Not a sound could be heard from outside, for the Casa Celida was hidden from the Rue du Bois de Boulogne by trees.

Hellebore sat on one of the chairs by the table, while Maria lay on the bed, still in her silvery grey gown. She had taken off her tiara and had loosened her long, black hair. It was ~~long~~ past midnight, and they were both tired. He gazed into the fire, his legs stretched out before him.

"I shall never forget your dances," she said. She opened her eyes and looked across at him. "You were quite near our box when you ate the apple."

"I could have given you a little wink."

He got up and went towards the bed. He sat down at her side, and they kissed. She drew him further towards her, whispering: "Come closer."

He spoke into her ear: "I feel drunk after that champagne, but not like last night."

"Open one of these bottles if you want to."

"Later. We've got the night all to ourselves."

Suddenly she lifted his head and looked into his eyes: "I feel happy."

"Shall we go for a walk at dawn?"

"No, you must sleep," she replied.

"I love dawns. I remember..." He turned his head and stared down at the carpet, lost, his mouth open.

"What?"

He smiled and said: "I don't feel tired any longer."

She pulled his arms underneath her shoulders, and again he kissed her. Footsteps sounded from above them, and at once Maria raised herself on her elbows. She listened.

"Who is that?" she asked him in a whisper.

The footsteps left the room above and came down the stairs at the far end of the corridor leading to the bedroom. They slowly came nearer the bedroom and stopped just outside. There was a light knock on the door, and Maria gripped Hellebore's arm. They waited in silence, and there was another louder knock.

Sangson spoke from outside, in a soft voice:

"Maria, did Giordano come back with you?"

Neither of them moved. Hellebore stared into the fire, bent forward.

"Maria, is Giordano in the house? Are you there, Maria?"

Maria tried to get up. She whispered to Hellebore: "He needs somebody. Call him in. Please call him in."

But he held her shoulders down.

"What can you do for him?" he asked. "Leave him alone."

Sangson walked away, and after a few moments a door at the other end of the corridor closed quietly. They lay together again in silence, his head sunk down on her shoulder.

"What did you mean," he whispered, "when you said he needed somebody?"

"Oh, I don't know, - he needs our help."

"We must forget about him. Let him suffer if he's got to. Let him suffer."

He went to the door and quietly turned the key in the lock, then returned to the bed and sat down at her side. He touched her brow, then her hair.

"Forget about him, Maria," he said.
