

VOLUME III

CHAPTER 17

“L’homme n’est qu’un roseau le plus faible de l’univers; mais c’est un roseau pensant. Il ne faut pas que l’univers entier s’arme pour l’écraser. Une vapeur, une goutte d’eau suffit pour le tuer. Mais quand l’univers l’écraserait, l’homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, parce qu’il sait qu’il meurt; et l’avantage que l’univers a sur lui l’univers n’en sait rien. Ainsi toute notre dignité consiste dans la pensée.”

—*Pensées de Pascal.*

MONSIEUR AND MADAME de Prédéliac,—for such was the *nom de guerre* adopted by Saltasche and Mrs. Poignarde—did not remain long in Baja. Almost directly after his arrival from London they took passages in a fishing-boat, and crossed to Algiers. Here a fortnight was sufficient to weary Mrs. Poignarde; and impelled by some sudden whim, they passed over to Marseilles. Everywhere the same lassitude and devouring *ennui* possessed her. She seemed as if consumed by some inward fire, urging her onwards eternally. Scarce a city in the south of Europe but saw them alight, and after a few days’ feverish sojourn take wing again. North, south, east, or west, she cared not,—so that they were in motion. Wearying of the noise and bustle of Marseilles, they went on to Nice, and hired rooms at the chief hotel.

The morning after his arrival, Monsieur de Prédéliac sauntered into the smoking-room to have a look at the papers. Several gentlemen were lounging there; one pushed a pile of papers towards the new-comer. He, seeing them to be English, politely declined; and taking up a *Moniteur*, said in French,—

“Thank you; I take the *Moniteur*.”

“Did you see here,” said one of the loungers, “there’s a paragraph in the *Swiss Times*, saying the detectives are on the trail of that fellow Salt— something or other, who bolted with a pot of money last November?”

The *Moniteur* drooped ever so little, and Monsieur de Prédéliac’s face wore an expression of interest too intense to be warranted by the accounts of the debates in the French Assembly, which were spread before him.

“Where’s the *Swiss Times*? Oh! ‘Traced to Naples. It is supposed sailed to Algiers or Ajaccio. Five hundred pounds reward!’ They’re very apt to catch him, don’t you think, Ross?”

“Yes; especially as he is English. The accent is sure to betray him. So few can ever attain the pure tone.”

“Very few. Ross, you are peculiarly blessed in that particular.”

“Hee—ee! I’ve lived such years abroad, you know.”

Presently Monsieur de Prédéliac laid down his *Moniteur*. The last speaker, impelled either by a desire to display his powers, or the almost equally irresistible temptation to practise his French, turned to him, and with an air of conscious power said,—

“*Monsieur, veuillez byong m’ prêter voter journal?*”

“With pleasure,” returned Monsieur de Prédéliac. “There is nothing in it. The debate is so poor: I blush for my country-men. Ah! monsieur, we are fallen upon bad times. *La France* is truly in a pitiable state. Ah! Heaven!—pitiable!”

All this was uttered in the quickest, most idiomatic French, and accompanied by shrugs, grimaces, and gestures sufficient of themselves to bewilder anybody. The Englishman, who little expected such a volley in return for his adventurous random pebble, could only ejaculate,—

“Er—*vraiment*.” His two friends pricked up their ears.

“Ah!” continued the mischievous Parisian. “In Paris, monsieur—in Paris the demoralisation is frightful to contemplate: no order, no security; business is at a standstill. With a Republic which to-morrow may be a Revolution, and the day after a Commune, what security for anything? Monsieur, there is not that!”

Here Monsieur de Prédéliac, forgetting that the gesture was slightly incongruous with his aristocratic name, turned the palm of his

hand outwards, and with the nail of his index finger slightly scraped the inside of one of his front incisors.

“*Paz—za de securité, monsieur?*” he repeated.

“*Er—vraiment,*” from the Englishman again; who, feeling his friends’ eyes upon him, felt bound to do something. A phrase occurred to him.

“*Foo l’Emperor, maintenong—*” But he could get no further; his opponent cut in with a burst.

“*Feu sa Majesté? Ah! Monsieur, quelle perte terrible! Lui et moi, nous étions comme des frères. Je lui dois tout ce que j’ai, tout ce que je suis. Quand je dis ça comme à vous, je suis toujours de Prédéliac.*” The aristocratic air which accompanied this assertion was inimitable. “*Mais toute ma fortune, ma position, je les dois à lui—à mon cher Louis. Car il était Louis pour moi. Quand nous étions seuls, dans l’intimité, je le tutoyais. O! qu’il était bon! Mais je suis égöiste dans mes regrets. La Patrie, la France, demande mes pleurs.*”

“*Er—vraiment*” (this time rather frigidly); “*vous devez le regretter. Oh, oui—sans doute. Permettez: merci,*”—and the Englishman, feeling it high time to beat a retreat, opened his *Moniteur* with as much dignity as he could command.

“*Voluble party that, hey, Ross?*” observed one of the bystanders, as Monsieur de Prédéliac left, having finished his cigar.

“*Er—yes; don’t feel too sure about him. Those wandering Frenchies are seldom worth much. That fellow has a sharp eye in his head—talks a deal too much. Hem—I never like to let those sort of fellows go on too far, you know; they’re always delighted to get a chance. I’m pretty well up to that sort of thing.*”

Monsieur de Prédéliac strolled out, in the hope of getting hold of a *Swiss Times* or *Galignani*. He was afraid to be seen reading an English paper, lest suspicion should be aroused. And he knew well that a mere surmise, raised even in jest, would be greedily caught up by idlers such as he had just quitted,—delighted to have something sensational wherewith to kill time. He found what he wanted at last, and folding it up hurriedly, stuffed it into his pocket and returned to the hotel. Once safe in his own room, he hastened to read the paragraph, and had the pleasure of finding a tolerably accurate description of himself.

“Height, five-seven; stoutish figure.” He grinned as he read this, and got up and walked to a great mirror opposite the window. “Five-seven—the rascals; I’m five-eight. ‘No whiskers or moustache:’ humph! ‘Traced to Naples; it’s conjectured is in Algiers.’ No hurry, my lads; take it easy,” he said, throwing down the paper and beginning to walk up and down the room. “I shall stay here unless something wonderful happens.”

However, three days later found him at Monaco. Mrs. Poignarde got tired of Nice,—there were too many English. And it was windy; and she disliked the sea. And there were American women, who insisted, whether she liked it or not, on talking vile French to or at her. So they found themselves at Monaco, where the gaming-tables at least promised some excitement.

They made their appearance at the roulette table the second night of their arrival. A Russian prince, the handsomest man in the Imperial Guards and one of the largest sheep-owners in the world, had had an unprecedented run of luck for two nights in succession. The excitement caused by this rare occurrence had spread everywhere, and the Conversation Salon was thronged with a curious host, gamblers eager to divine the “*système*,” and gaping listless sight-seers greedy of the sensation. The Russian sat unmoved—the cynosure of all eyes, silent and impassive, staking every time the maximum. He scarcely raised his eyes, even. The heat and glare were tremendous; but not one seemed conscious of it, so tense was the excitement. The croupier’s hoarse voice was almost the only one heard, except the sort of hoarse murmur that followed the transfer of the stakes; and English, German, French, and Italian tongues exchanged ejaculations.

Monsieur and Madame de Prédélic managed to secure good places, almost opposite to the Russian. He was seated in a careless attitude; one hand thrown over the back of his chair, the white jewelled fingers of the other just resting on the rim of the table. His face was pale, but it was a natural paleness; the eyes, of violet blue, betrayed his race by their somewhat oblique setting; but the beautifully formed mouth and perfect chin and nostrils amply compensated for a defect in itself so slight as almost to escape notice.

“*Rouge gagne. Couleur perd.*” The croupier’s monotonous cry went on, his little black eyes glancing round the table with the quickness and brightness of a squirrel’s. “*Faites votre jeu, messieurs, mesdames!*”

Mrs. Poignarde, watching the sweep of the index, felt that sudden greed that takes the least avaricious of us sometimes; and she looked up in Saltasche's face for permission. He nodded assent, with a pleased smile, and took a gold piece out of his pocket.

She took it from his hand, and leaning forward, placed it herself on the board. The other stakes were already laid. The croupier set the ball in motion; and after a moment or so she found herself the winner of twenty-five napoleons; the Russian had lost: his eyes lazily followed the *rouleau* to her hands from those of the croupier. She received them with a smile; and whispered something to Saltasche. He nodded assent, and she took five of the pieces out of the *rouleau*, and laid them on the table again. As she drew back to her place beside Saltasche, her eyes suddenly met those of the Prince, fixed in bold admiration upon her. A transient glitter shone in her eyes; and the heat of the place or the excitement tinged her cheeks with a faint flush. Saltasche did not see the eager gaze of the Prince; he was looking at Adelaide, and thinking of that day when she stood in the tent at the Rose Show, with the glow of the flowers reflected in her face. She was dressed in a black, close-fitting costume, unrelieved by any colour, and with soft ruffles of lace at her throat and wrists. A bonnet of black and white tulle, with a wreath of pale roses, lay on the thick braids which encircled her head; her right hand, gloveless, and sparkling with diamonds, rested on his sleeve. She stooped forward, watching the course of the ball whirling round the table: her lips were parted a little, showing the small white teeth; and the white eyelids drooped till their long lashes almost swept her cheek.

She lost this time her five gold pieces, which with the Prince's fifty were raked up by the croupier. The Russian saw nothing; his attention was riveted on her face.

The appetite newly awakened within her refused to be satisfied. Another glance to Saltasche, and she risked five more pieces. The Russian waited until her stake was placed; then, reaching over, laid a long *rouleau* beside it.

Again the ball swept round and round.

"*A vous, madame.*" And the croupier handed her five *rouleaus* of twenty-five each. She had won one hundred and twenty-five napoleons.

Astonished beyond measure, she forgot herself.

"Why, look!" she cried, in English, to Saltasche.

A hasty glance from him warned her. Greatly alarmed, he turned his eyes cautiously round the table. They had been heard, no doubt; but no one seemed to take any notice. One man, who had been standing near the Prince, and who belonged to his party, whispered something in his ear, and having received a whisper in return, left the room hurriedly. Saltasche followed him with his eyes; he felt some indefinable uneasiness. Could this have been a spy set to watch him? He waited for nearly half an hour, nervous and alarmed; then, unable to bear the suspense longer, he whispered to her to leave.

Once outside in the open air, he felt better. Another moment in the room, and he must have fainted.

“What is the matter, pray?” asked she, in a whisper; “what have I done? No one noticed that I said anything.”

“Hush, hush!” said he; “come out here in this open place.” They walked across a grass-plot towards a broad terrace with benches set here and there, which the moonlight showed to be untenanted.

They sat down on one of them. Behind them was the light and noise of the Salle; and the footsteps of the people going in and out could be heard distinctly. The groves of ilex and orange looked ghostly in the cold light of the moon, and the dry leaves rustled harshly in the wind.

“There was a man at the side, near me; he left when you said that in English. I fear they have traced me. That he is English I am convinced; and no doubt it is a detective. I wonder could they by any chance have got upon our track?”

“You ought to go at once; never mind me,” replied Mrs. Poignarde, anxiously.

“Bah! How? If I am right, the gendarmes are on the alert, and every road will be watched. No, no; there is no chance if I am right.”

“Why not get a horse now, at the hotel, ride off at a gallop and distance them? Disguise yourself. Once up the country——”

“Adelaide,” whispered he in a strange tone, catching her by the wrist as he spoke, look yonder by the orange trees—quickly—on a line with the end of this bench.”

“A man’s shadow,” she faltered. “We are watched. Oh my God! we are lost!”

The shadow was that of one of the followers of the Russian, who had been sent by him to watch them home, in order to find out their address; and who, having watched for them outside, was lurking among the orange trees, waiting for them to move.

“Now to think of you, in case I try to escape. All I have to do is to give you the banker’s receipt for the money I lodged in your name, in case this—this happened. How fortunate that we arranged that!”

“Will you not make an effort to escape?” she insisted, catching him by the arm. “Think of what you risk! Come, oh, come!”

“Ten years! I think,” he said coolly, getting up quickly off his chair as he spoke.

She looked at him in bewilderment. His face was deadly pale, and his brows set in a painful frown; the lips, however, though smiling, were white; and he seemed to walk unsteadily.

“Adelaide,” said he, whispering low as they walked along, “the game is up—no doubt of it. What else could that mean? I remember, too, that I noticed to-day we several times came on the same man in the wood; and as we were at dinner the waiter seemed to be a little strange in his manner: no doubt he has been bribed. It may be only fancy; but anyhow, I don’t see much hope. I’ll make an attempt to get off up country. If I could get to Turbia!”

By this time they had reached the *perron* of their hotel. They entered—casting, in spite of themselves, uneasy looks round. The porter in the hall, on seeing them come in, telegraphed a glance to a personage who was reading a paper in one of the embrasures. They saw the smile and nod with which the glance was received; and passed on, as fast as they could, up the grand staircase. She was so terrified that she could scarcely walk. It was the same man, who had made known to the porter his errand, and had been admitted into the hall in order to copy their names from the book.

The doors of their apartments locked, Adelaide flung herself on the sofa; but Saltasche set to work energetically, and having packed all the papers securely and confided them to her keeping, counted out some gold pieces and sewed them into the lining of his vest. This done, he unfolded a map and laid it on the table.

“I don’t see what I can do, unless to get off into the mountains by way of Turbia, up the country—or maybe hold on along the coast to

Ventimiglia, or some fishing village, and set out to sea. And that matter, anyhow, is a secondary consideration; how to elude the people who are watching the house is the question.”

“You must wait until the moon has set,” said she, walking over to the window and looking out. “I suppose between one and two it will be dark enough for you. Maybe sooner; see those clouds hanging over the sea.”

Saltasche turned out the gas, and walking over to the window, took her hand and made her sit down beside him. The casement remained open, and the moonlight streamed in over her white, wan face; the dark circles round her eyes were livid, and her lips twitched and trembled. Outside, the murmur of the ilex leaves came on the breeze, mingling with the noise of the waves breaking on the beach below; and now and again a bat flitted by, like a shadow, between them and the light. For a moment or two they were silent; looking out on the pine woods, the dark crests of which hid the distant sea. He was the first to speak.

“Adelaide, surely we have something to say to each other. If I—I am taken: have you thought of that?”

She shuddered convulsively, and withdrawing her hands from his, clasped them together.

“Adelaide, could you? Oh! no,” he cried, the words breaking from him with a sort of sob. “Ten years—seven years: no, I could not ask it of you.” His eyes sought hers with a hungry, searching look.

Still she remained silent, only clasping her hands tighter together.

“Adelaide! will you let me have that sweet hope to cheer me, to keep me alive in my prison? You will, will you not?” He fell on his knees before her.

She sprang away from him with a violent effort.

“Stop!” she cried, gasping with the effort. “No, no. I have deceived you long enough. We have been wrong both of us wrong; but I most of all. Oh! shall I ever be forgiven? I never loved you—never! I deceived you from the first; and now this is the punishment of my crime; and all falls upon you.”

He was standing now, looking at her and holding by the window-frame for support. Drops of sweat stood on his forehead, and he shivered as if in an ague.

“Forgive me! oh, forgive me,” she moaned, kneeling to him; “and let me go free. Even had this not come upon us, I must have left you—I must—”

“Enough!” said he. “Enough, my poor child: we have indeed need to forgive each other. There, there, sit down now, and only think what you are to do for yourself.” He had mastered himself in one moment; to all outward appearance he was as calm as the day before. “The money is there; you will do as you choose with it. I shall not require any. For that matter, the affair may stand as we arranged it.”

He walked up and down the room with long strides. Then he stopped suddenly beside the window-seat where she was lying rather than sitting, and looked at her compassionately.

“Tell me,” said he: “that day at Inchicore, when you consented, did you deceive me knowingly then?”

“No, not then; but I wanted so to get away from, Eric; and——”

“Aye; that’s it,” he interrupted. “Fool—treble fool that I have been!” After a pause, “I am only losing valuable time. Adelaide, we must part. If I reach a place of safety I shall find a means to communicate with you. If not—”

“If not?” she repeated, her parched trembling lips scarcely able to frame the words.

“If not, you must judge how to act for yourself. Now, what I propose to do is this. See: these straps will lower me to the ground from the balcony. You will come when I am gone, and remove them, will you? That is my last request of you.”

She only looked at him despairingly.

“Now,” said he; and taking her by the hand again, he led her to a chair removed from the window. She gave him her hand, cold as ice, and obeyed him passively.

“Forgive me,” said he; “we were both wrong both: and good-bye.”

She tried to rise, to speak; but voice and limbs failed her, and she sank in a swoon on the floor. He lifted and laid her on a sofa; then pressing a kiss on her lips, seized hastily the trunk straps which he had fastened together, and passed through the window on to the balcony.

The moon had set, and it was dark. Not a light could be seen. The hotel windows were all closed for the night, and the Conversation Salon

was dark and silent. He passed rapidly and gently past the windows and across the front of the house; and when he reached the corner where the balcony ended, he stopped, and set to fasten the straps to a rail. To cross and glide down was the work of a minute, the straps were long enough for him to reach the ground without risking a fall, and in a moment or two he had reached the pine forest and was brushing at a rapid rate through the undergrowth.—No easy task in the darkness.

All his efforts were bootless. Adelaide, whose over-wrought frame had succumbed, remained unconscious until daybreak. The strap was found hanging on the balcony by the servants; the gendarmes were sent for, and instituted a search. In the midst of the commotion some English travellers, who had the evening before arrived from Nice, called the landlord's attention to the *Galignani* paragraph, and the description of the absconding defaulter Saltasche. The landlord, whom the mention of the five hundred pounds reward roused to an enthusiastic pitch of zeal, telegraphed to Ventimiglia; and just as the unfortunate Monsieur de Prédéliac, weary and footsore, walked into the town, he was arrested and lodged in prison. It did not take long to communicate with the detectives, who had in fact succeeded in tracing him to Marseilles. They hastened onwards, and in twelve hours' time Saltasche was being conveyed in the mail train to Paris, *en route* for Calais, Dover, and London; guarded with the watchful care that so valuable a prize demanded.

He was perfectly calm and unmoved, silent and moody, for the greater part of the train journey. When once they had reached Calais, he became quite cheery and talkative; the detectives were by no means bad companions, and showed themselves as indulgent as was compatible with the exercise of their functions.

It was a fine clear evening when they reached Calais; and there was every prospect of a calm passage. They went on board the mail boat early in the evening, in order not to attract attention; and Saltasche was glad to lie down for a couple of hours. The detectives always remained at his side. After the boat started, one of them seated himself beside the berth where the prisoner was sleeping, or trying to sleep, and the other stretched himself on a sofa opposite.

Both had revolvers ready for use at a second's warning.

They were puzzled greatly by the demeanour of their prisoner. He was neither sullen nor depressed; nor had he the feverish reckless exaltation which so often marks despair. He asked no favours, offered no

bribes,—which especially astonished them, knowing as they did that he had enormous resources at his command.

Saltasche, meantime, lay on his back in the narrow miserable berth of the saloon cabin, listening in a sort of half-stupor to the hissing of the water rushing past at the other side of the planks. He was preoccupied now but by one thought—to get his guardians on deck before they arrived at Dover. He dreaded to show the least uneasiness—to give them the merest shade of suspicion. He knew the time they would arrive in Dover. No doubt the boat would be met there by Stier and Bruen, and others, greedy to feast their eyes on him. He smiled, thinking of the disappointment that awaited them.

The swing lamp was burning faintly. He could hear the heavy breathing of the sleeping man on the sofa; and turning his head cautiously and gently, saw that the detective beside his berth was watching him closely. Doubtless they meant to divide the watch until they reached Dover. He turned on his left side, with his back to the light, and took out his watch. With difficulty he managed to see the hands. Nearly two hours yet. He could wait for another hour, and see if they meant to relieve each other.

He closed his eyes, which were stiff and sore from the dust and want of sleep; but there arose a sort of phantasmagoria, and the scenes he had passed through in the last terrible days all returned. Adelaide's white face and wild imploring eyes, the moonlight shining on her long hair as she knelt in the window, rose before him. He was in the wood again at Monaco—the brambles and the hard boughs of the pine-trees scratching his hands as he forced his way through. Then the train: the weary, endless journey, the grating and jar, and the shrieks of the steam whistle; the trees flying past. It was unbearable. He turned around impatiently, and this time without any effort at concealment looked again at his watch.

“I cannot sleep,” he said to the watcher. “Could we go on deck for a turn?”

The man hesitated.

“We're very tired; and Johnston and I were thinking of dividing this watch, you see.”

“Bah!” said Saltasche. “Call for some brandy, or say a pint of champagne: that will do you more good than sleep.”

“You can have what you like, Mr. Saltasche; nothing for us, much obliged. Shall I call for brandy?”

Brandy was brought in; and Saltasche swallowed a couple of glasses, to the evident content of his guards, who declined to touch it.

“Now,” said he, “let us go up. I’m smothering here.”

After some demur they agreed, and buttoning themselves well up in their overcoats, they passed up the companion ladder and on to the deck.

Saltasche drew a long breath as he stepped out of the grease-laden, reeking atmosphere of the cabin. The air was fresh and chill; and he pulled his great furred cloak around him tightly. It was a moonlit night, and the crests of the waves shone and sparkled like snow wreaths. Between sky and water, low down, hung fleecy clouds; and at times a flying scud of vapour passed over the face of the moon, and cast its shadow on the sea. They passed close by a great ship gliding southward—her masts and rigging looking black and ghost-like. The look-out man in the bows of the steamer shouted some strange greeting or warning. No answer came back, save the deep bark of a dog, frightened at the noise and lights. They walked up and down in silence for about a quarter of an hour.

“We can’t see the shore,” said one of the detectives at last; “but we shall be in, I expect, in half an hour. There are fishing-boats away there, to the right.”

“Ay,” grumbled the other, “I shall not be sorry to get in. It is cold work, here.”

“You will soon be at liberty, my friend,” said Saltasche, blandly. “See: try a cigar, will you?”—and he took a case out of his pocket.

They stood for a moment while the lights were being struck. Saltasche noticed a pile of boxes, bales, and trunks, along the side. The taffrail was high, as the steamer was saloon-decked. A white deal packing-case projected slightly; from that it was an easy step to a black trunk on top; then one more, and he would be on the edge.

One of the men—he who was on the prisoner’s right hand—turned a little aside as he struck a vesuvian on his boot-heel. Saltasche let slip his cloak, as if accidentally, off his shoulders. Both the officers stooped simultaneously to pick it up for him. Now was his chance. Three long rapid

strides bring him to the pile by the side. One step on the white packing-case—his left foot reaches the black trunk. It shakes. No: he seizes the taffrail with his right hand.

The detectives, with a wild yell, follow him. One of them has him almost grasped by the foot. But Saltasche vaults over, with a vigorous spring. A splash, and he is in the water just abaft the paddle-wheel.

He did not sink. On the contrary, he was swimming. From the side they could see his face, calm and defiant, as the moonlight fell upon it, for a few minutes. The crests of the waves were not whiter. A life-preserver was flung out. It floated by within arm's reach of him. He seemed only to wait to have the boat lowered. Then, in sight of all, he threw up his arms over his head. There was a ground-swell now. A high wave raised and shook its white mane between them, and hid him for a moment. Was it the sound it made breaking against the bow? or was it a sea-bird's cry? Something between a laugh and a sob—and he was gone.