VOLUME III

CHAPTER 7

A JUNE MORNING in College Green. The Bank stood out clear and bright; the scarlet uniforms of the sentries and the white and blue wings of the pigeons gleaming in the sun, might, by a fanciful eye, have been taken for flowers set against the grey stone background. The strawberry sellers were crying their wares, and a flower-girl or two with a basket of pot roses and mignonette, scented the air as they loitered by. A blue haze shimmered in the sky; the smoke curled up in thin, transparent reeks. The awnings were all drawn down before the windows; and the day promised to be intensely hot.

Mr. Saltasche, driving over to his office from the terminus, seemed to find it so already. He lay back in his seat languidly, resting his elbow on the well of his car, and holding a newspaper so as to keep the strong sun out of his eyes. He reached the office in Dame Street, and ascended the steps slowly, nodding mechanically in reply to the greetings of some men who were standing in the lobby. He walked over to the window, and looked out. High over head, in the centre of the street, the telegraph wires ran; he followed their course with his eyes, and noted where they connected at the Commercial Buildings, and then went on again to the newspaper offices, to the Corn Exchange, and across town.

"Humph!" said he, almost aloud, "another couple of hours, and everything will be decided." Then, after a long glance up and down the street, he turned round to his desk. It held a goodly pile of letters and telegrams; and he seated himself to his morning's work. An envelope caught his eye directed in a lady's hand—large round English handwriting. He opened it quickly: it was from Mrs. Poignarde, and had been sent by hand.

"DEAR MR. SALTASCHE,—Eric has just had a telegram from London about the race, and he is in a terrible state. He has left with some men, in order to hear the result as soon as possible. C. P."

He tore this into tiny atoms, and sat for an instant debating whether to telegraph to her or not. "Useless," he decided; "I'll go out directly the news comes." The next letter that engaged his attention was one from Mrs. Bursford, asking him to sell out her shares in the Leadmines Company. This he disposed of quickly, scribbling her an intimation that he would see her in a few days, and asking her to postpone her decision. He meditated a decisive *coup* with that scheme shortly, and had no intention of allowing her money to be taken out of it yet. Then came telegrams from Stier and Bruen, one after the other. The Patagonian bubble, which they had inflated at his bidding, had burst with great report; ruining some people outright, maiming others, but leaving a fair sediment of solid profit in the hands of the dexterous manipulators. Saltasche grinned as he finished the letter, written in German, of Mr. Stier. This letter enclosed a draft of a prospectus—not in the German language—of a new company. Lord Brayhead was chairman; Mr. Hogan, M.P., was also a distinguished member of the board; Messrs. Stier and Bruen, and other great lights of the City, figured prominently. There is no need to go into the details: every inducement, social and political, joined to the promise of ten per cent., seemed to invite the speculator. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds were required; of this more than one-half was already paid up. Ten per cent!—and the Bank of England only paying two! Mr. Saltasche half closed his eyes, and ran over in his mind the names of possible subscribers: the reverend Mr. Grey, who had lately commuted; old Dillon; Mrs. Bursford had some money in Five Twenties. He remembered quite a number. There was that "Tract Distributors' Orphans Society," the meeting of which was to be held the same day at one o'clock, to receive the bequest of the late Mr. Fuzelle—seven thousand pounds. Then he ran his eye over the prospectus again, made some corrections, and prepared it for the post. He did a great deal of business that his clerks knew nothing of; the gas stove by the fireplace destroyed all traces of his private correspondence, and burnt paper told no stories.

So the morning passed away. At a quarter to one he touched the bell. His clerk appeared.

"Johns, the meeting is at one to-day, is it not?—the 'Orphans Board,' I mean?"

"Yes, sir," replied the clerk; "at Morrison's Hotel, at one."

"See here," said Saltasche. "Go over to the Buildings, and as soon as the telegram of the race comes in copy it down accurately, take a car and follow me to Morrison's; give it into my own hands, do you hear? No one else's: and don't delay."

Then Mr. Saltasche put on his hat, and stepped down into the street. He kept on along the shady side, exchanging gracious salutations with every one. He met a great number of men hurrying towards the offices, eager to hear the news of the race—some indifferent, and only sympathizing with the excitement of their friends, and some pale and anxious. A cigar shop by the College was crowded with loungers—well-dressed men, trimly shaven and brushed, with fatuous, vacant faces that always somehow seem to lack a feature until they are furnished with cigar or briar-root pipe. They filled the doorway and steps (fortunate he who secured the doorpost to lean against), watching the passers-by with interested looks, and now and again dropping a languid sentence. Poignarde was on the step, his face turned toward the Dame Street side, his pipe of course between his teeth, and feeling, thanks to an unlimited number of drams, in tolerable spirits. Still an observer might have noted a paleness betimes, in spite of the bravado; and there was a pinched, drawn look about his lips.

"There's a fellow goin' down there," he said to a man beside him, "wins a sweep every year. Every year for the last five he's won a hundred and fifty sovereigns. Fact!"

"I hate sweeps," was the laconic reply of Captain Du Maurel. "Hallo! good-morning, Mr. Saltasche!" cried he, stepping down to the pathway to greet that gentleman as he turned the corner.

"How do you do? Morning, Poignarde!" returned he, nodding to the group in general, and yet to each member of it in particular. "No news yet? When *does* the telegram come in? Do you stand to win, Du Maurel, hey?"

"I hope so," laughed Du Maurel, a handsome little man, with rosy cheeks and merry black eyes. "I've backed Rattler, and Poignarde has laid against him."

Poignarde tried to smile, pulling the ends of his moustache; but Saltasche noticed the pale lips beneath it and the contraction of his brows.

"Dear me!" said Saltasche, shrugging his shoulders, "I can only say I hope you'll both win." Then, with a nod and a sententious smile, he passed on.

"I say,—do any of you fellows know if he has any money on the event?" asked Du Maurel, striking a match.

"Too many (puff) irons in the (puff, puff) fire," Poignarde made answer oracularly: "deep old boy!"

"The innocent get-up of him that white waistcoat and the everlasting rose! He's a character, ain't he, now? Awful clever man."

"Clever!" put in a third man behind. "Gad, you don't know half. Mephistopheles was a child to him. He's been everywhere—is richer than Crœsus. Edgerton Cathcart, of the Dragoon Guards, says he used to be at the Tuileries constantly; the ex-emperor was awful chums with him. He corresponds with Gortschakoff——

"Draw it mild now, I say. As for Cathcart's stories, such a liar as that, you know——" and Captain Du Maurel scornfully puffed out a great mouthful of smoke.

"It's not Cathcart alone says it. Theo. Wyldoates, of the Embassy, told me also; and Metternich himself dined with Saltasche in Paris."

"Rot!" was the Captain's comprehensive reply. "Poign., my boy, do you believe all this?"

But Poignarde, lost in anxious thought, did not even hear the question.

The "deep old boy" strolled along leisurely to his appointment at Morrison's—to all appearance calmly indifferent to everything save the serene beauty of the day; he nodded smiling recognitions to every one of his acquaintance whom he met. Nothing of his bearing betrayed the consuming anxiety within him. He took his seat at the window of the room where the meeting was to take place, no one having yet arrived, and looked out musingly. Opposite was the College Park, and a fresh smell from the grass and the new-leaved trees crossed the asphalte and dust of Nassau street. A game of cricket was going on; and he could see the lads at play between the branches of the trees.

He was not long left to his meditations. All the members of the board entered together, and business commenced. Some sort of sick heaviness came over Saltasche suddenly, while speaking; he leaned back in his chair at the table, feeling almost overcome. The heat of the room was stifling, his temples throbbed painfully, and it was with difficulty he roused himself to follow and take his part in the business going on. How he longed for the sound of the car drawing up at the door! He was too nervous to look at his watch, so strained his ears to catch, above the din of the streets, the chiming of one of the town clocks. He felt sure it was past one; and the telegram was expected at one. The chairman was reading a report; and his prosy commonplaces fell upon Saltasche's ears indistinctly and drowsily, like sick-room voices to a worn-out patient. There seemed a lull at last below. A long line of dray carts ended, and he could again catch the voices of the cricketers shouting to each other at their play. He could hear the rattle of a car now, coming towards them. No; it went by. He wiped the perspiration off his brow, and leaned back in his chair.

"You seem very warm, Mr. Saltasche," said a gentleman beside him, looking at him pityingly.

"Indeed, yes. I feel the heat intensely to-day." Then with a strong effort he overcame his weakness, and sitting up, threw himself into the work energetically. When the quarter-past rang out, he scarcely heeded: the excitement had passed, and he was cool and impassive again. If an hour had yet to elapse, he could have borne it patiently.

He neither heard nor felt the door open; and when Johns, leaning over his chair, put the whitey-brown envelope in his hand, he showed no emotion whatever.

"Don't mind us, Mr. Saltasche. No apology," said the chairman, anticipating him politely.

Saltasche bowed, and rising, turned to the window as if for light. The bit of paper torn from the clerk's notebook needed no unfolding. The names of three horses were scribbled on it, one over the other in a column, and Skyscraper was not one of them.

Ten minutes concluded the meeting; and Saltasche, who scarcely seemed to feel the ground as he walked, hurried back towards his office. As he turned into College Green he met Captain Du Maurel, who had been with Poignarde in the cigar shop. His sparkling eyes and pleased

face showed that the result had not been displeasing to him. Saltasche stopped.

"Captain Du Maurel, might I ask you——?"

"Certainly, certainly," hastily interrupted the young man; thinking that his questioner could have but one idea in his head; like himself. "Rattler first, Mayfly second, and Oswald third."

"Thank you," returned Saltasche, with a mixture of surprise cunningly blended in his tone. "Might I ask you where is Captain Poignarde?"

"Oh, perhaps at Blunt's; it's most likely, poor devil!" and away went the lucky gambler, walking jauntily, and feeling immensely proud of his wise selection.

Saltasche ran into his office for a moment; and then, with as little delay as possible, hired a car, and was soon bowling along towards the Phœnix Park. He reached the Poignardes' lodgings without much loss of time. The windows were wide open, and he could hear her at the piano as he crossed the green before the house. He knocked gently at the door, and passed the servant, who indeed knew him well enough now, saying to her that Mrs. Poignarde expected him.

He knocked at the door, and on hearing her answer entered. She jumped up with a startled look from the piano, and stood for a moment as if bewildered. Evidently she had not expected a visitor; for she was dressed in a long white dressing-gown, and her hair, fastened in a bunch with a ribbon, hung down her back. Then she recollected his possible errand, her face flushed for an instant, and she advanced a step or two towards him.

"Your news! You have come to tell that—"

He took her hand and led her to a chair in the window, facing the light, then seated himself near her.

"Poignarde, as we anticipated, has lost everything," he said abruptly.

A paleness came about her lips, and the pupils of her eyes seemed to dilate as she looked at him, but she said not one word.

"This does not come unawares?" he said, affecting a surprise he did not feel at her apparent equanimity. He saw well the blank chill of despair that had taken hold of her.

"No, no," she replied, with an effort to control her voice; "I have been always expecting it, and prepared——"

"Prepared to do what, Mrs. Poignarde?" He leaned forward, grasping the arm of her chair, and looking into her eyes with an intense gaze. "In twenty-four hours you must be out of this: his creditors will be here. I have discovered that he owes money to the Jews. He may get off—may effect an exchange to India; but you—you?"

"Gertrude Stroude will receive me, and she will place me in a school to teach. Oh me!" she broke into a wail of despair,—"how different from what I had hoped!"

"Do you know what that is? Have you realized the life that is before you? Were there not governesses at the Kensington school? Do you remember them? And to remain there, I suppose, until Poignarde sends for you, to begin this"—and he glanced with a sneer round the squalid room—"this over again? That is what your friend, his friend rather, intends for you."

"No!" she cried wildly, springing from her chair. "No, no: have I not suffered enough? Why must I expiate his wrong-doings too? Oh, heavens! India! India with Eric,—and after all I have undergone? Never! never!" She threw herself on her knees, and buried her face in the cushion of the sofa, moaning with sheer despair.

For one moment Saltasche did not move; he watched her every breath. He had chosen the shaft with care and judgment, and now, having aimed and sent it home, was minded, to let it rankle in the wound awhile.

Presently she rose, and pushing back with both hands the locks of hair which, loosened from the fillet, clustered about her face, turned her wistful eyes on him.

"If I could only be sure of escaping from him, I don't care about the rest. I remember well the governesses at school; theirs was a wretched life indeed, but not so bad as this—oh, no!"

"If you go with Miss Stroude to London, she will never lose sight of you until she sends you to India with or after your husband. Rest assured of that."

She turned ashen grey, and clasped her hands together; drawing near to the open window, through which the murmur of the river came

distinctly, she pointed to where it glittered like a broad silver band in the sunlight, gliding fast under the narrowing banks towards the bridge, where the dark still pools, flecked with cream-like froth, showed the depths that lurked under the smiling surface.

"If it comes to that," said she, "I have a choice: a way lies there,"—and she turned her eyes upon him as she spoke. He had risen, and was beside her; so near that his breath was on her cheek.

"Adelaide, there is another way! Listen to me. A way out of all this misery and wretchedness, once for all, to freedom and happiness, far off from every tormentor. Leave them, my darling; leave them with me! In twenty-four hours you are lost for ever to them, and they are blotted out of your existence."

Her eyes grew larger and larger as he spoke, and a flush came and went upon her cheek. She raised her hands to free herself from the arms which clasped her as in a vice.

"One moment, for God's sake! I stifle!" she gasped.

He opened the door and the window wide, and placed her chair in the current of air. She opened her lips and inhaled it greedily. He knelt beside her, and took her hands, burning and trembling, into his, and showered kisses on them.

"Will you trust me, dear?" he whispered. "Adelaide: O God! will you kill me with suspense?" He let his head fall upon her knees. She raised it with a sudden movement, and looking into his eyes with a despairing gaze, murmured,—

"Leave me for to-day! leave me! I must think. This is too sudden; and" here her eyes fell on the open door, and with a startled gesture she bade him close it. He did so, and returned. "This is too sudden," she repeated.

"No!" he interrupted, almost fiercely. "You have seen, known long enough, my love for you. Come, Adelaide, I have nearly a hundred thousand pounds I can realize. We will go to Italy when you choose, my goddess," —and he lifted the great coil of brown hair off her neck and kissed it.

"Wait—wait only one day!" she pleaded, breaking from him. His face darkened ominously.

"Child," said he, "you don't know what you say. Look at my risk; consider the step I am taking,—not that I speak of that," he added hastily, "but I want you to think before you leave me in suspense. I must make my arrangements at once. Adelaide, give me one word of assurance. Pity me, dear." And he knelt again before her, and took her hands in his. "Say yes, Adelaide, darling just that one word."

Like a little bird before a hawk, or a child fascinated by a serpent, she trembled and faltered, powerless to resist the whirlwind of entreaty and passion that Saltasche poured forth. He read assent in her eye before it was spoken by the quivering lips, and leaping to his feet he seized her in a fierce embrace.

"Go away," she cried; "for God's sake go away! I have said yes; is it not enough for you? Leave me."

"Yes, I'll go—to work for you: I'll see you soon again."

Saltasche judged it well to leave her. He did not fear that reflection would alter her resolution; not a doubt of his success ever crossed his mind. She would remain dazzled and stunned for awhile; then Poignarde would appear on the scene—drunk and brutal, no doubt. That was the only thing needful. As for Miss Stroude's influence, he counted that as nought. The humdrum existence of her well-ordered English home, where even any excess of piano-playing was perhaps interdicted, would have little charm for her. The pear was perfectly ripe, indeed, he concluded, as he drove back to town, and all that was wanted was to give the tree the least possible shock. Now to find this Poignarde, and send him home. Then to business. Some of those letters he had written must be destroyed. Stier and Bruen must be stirred up. He had realized handsomely on the Patagonians; but there were Colorado mine shares which must be inflated by some means or another before he could consent to part with them. The Transcontinental Railway, too: some French fellow was blowing on that promising scheme in the *Phare de la Loire*. He could lay his hands on sixty thousand, as it was. If the Leadmines scheme were energetically worked, and Stier and Bruen's last company (Mrs. Bursford must invest in that),—it would require three months at least before he could get together all his money,—with care his sixty thousand might be doubled. Thus he planned and schemed as his car drove on—foreseeing events with the sagacity of a master-brain, and meeting them, combining and arranging. By the time he had reached his office his whole course had been struck out.

Not so with her. As soon as he left the room she threw herself on the sofa, with her hands clasped above her head, and shut her eyes in dazed bewilderment. What had happened? What was going to happen? Everything seemed to whirl round and round in the room. She was weak and exhausted with excitement and want of food—for she had eaten nothing since the previous night; and the reaction set in now. She lay still, feeling numb, almost cold, until little by little she realized the scene just enacted. Eric had lost all, and must go to India, and she remain in London and teach for her living until he could send for her, to begin over again the wretchedness and torture, the drunken excesses, the scenes that were so terrible to her, the degradation and misery. "Never! never! never!" she repeated, almost in a frenzy, and she rose from the sofa and walked to the window.

She could see away over the river to the mountains, where the gorse was yellowing in the sun. A sweet smell came on the breeze, the tall elms in the park were swaying gently at its will, and the white blossoms fell like summer snow from the hawthorns. She longed to be out in the open air: the hideous little room never felt so stifling. She went into her bedroom and hastily plaited up the long coil of hair, threw off the dressing-gown, and put on a thin black stuff dress. A coarse black straw hat completed her toilet; and she started at a quick pace across to the Park gate. The sentry, sweltering in his uniform on the hot gravel walk, stared at her as she walked fast by, with her white face and wild eyes. She never heeded the sun pouring down on the wide dusty path. She passed the People's Garden, with its flaring *parterres* of yellow and scarlet, and the ponds where the swans were gliding lazily among the reeds and water-flags. She turned aside at last into a solitary thicket of hawthorns, and flung herself on the grass. A wide green stretch lay before her; and beyond it, hiding themselves from the sun in a distant glade, she spied the deer. At her back the city lay seething in the heat. The domes of the Four Courts and the Cathedral glistened like mother-of-pearl, and a blue veil of gossamer-like sheen danced before her eyes. Summer had begun to reign in earnest. The great spikes of the chestnuts were fast stripping, and the ground was white and yellow with their scattered glories. The air was filled with the bitter-sweet of the fading hawthorn, and down in the orchard by the river-side the apples were swelling among the leaves, where it seemed as but yesterday she had marked the clusters of white and pink blossoms. She lay back against a tree-trunk, and opening her lips, drank in the balmy air; and taking off

her hat, let it play on her throbbing temples. How beautiful it was, and how calm and still! Almost insensibly the excitement passed away, and she was able to think calmly and to consider her position.

She was to be pitied indeed,—a wretched friendless creature, passionate and sensitive, with a past of terrible memories, and only now recovering from a blow which had shattered the dreams and nullified the labour of years. Disappointment seemed to be her lot. It had been so from the beginning: would it be so till the end? She asked herself the question with a sort of despair.

Gertrude Stroude's alternative was hateful; and she could not endure the cold pity which had prompted it. She remembered well, at the time of her marriage, how Miss Stroude, in common with the rest of Poignarde's relations, had testified her disappointment and chagrin at Rodolphe Chrestien's decision. They had all espoused Poignarde's side: not one of them had felt for her. She clenched her hands with revengeful determination. Were it only in opposition to them she would dare this. She had accepted, and she would keep her word. She secured a brilliant, happy life for herself, and punished everybody. Gertrude Stroude would condole doubly with Eric now, as she did when he brought home the news from Uncle Rodolphe's agents; but she would never have a chance to sneer at her, and insinuate how dear Eric was neglected and his comforts not attended to, and relate stories of other people, the point of which stories was meant for her. Bah! all that was done.

Then she felt stiff and cramped with sitting so long on the ground, and she got up and shook herself. She leaned against the tree, and took a long look round her. She could see the soldiers lounging, with their red coats loosened, in the shade by the lake. The deer were tossing their antlers restlessly, tormented by the flies; and the drone of the bees at work in the blossoms over her head was the only sound she heard. Her eyes felt tired and dazzled; she had brought no parasol, and her headache returned. To get back home, and lie on the sofa with the blinds pulled down, seemed to her now the most desirable thing. Besides, there might be a message from Mr. Saltasche; or Eric might have come home; so, creeping along the shadiest paths, she retraced her steps.

When she reached the door the servant put a telegram into her hand, saying that it had come nearly half an hour ago. She went up to her room, and first throwing herself on the sofa, for she was thoroughly exhausted, she broke open the envelope. As she guessed, it was from

Saltasche; but the contents were so startling that she jumped up off the sofa. It ran as follows: “Pack up everything, and meet London mail in Westland Row this evening; on no account fail. Poignarde will be there.”

It was nearly four o’clock, so she had not much time to lose. She rang for a cup of strong tea, and having drunk it and bathed her aching head with cold water, she went to work with a feverish energy, and long before six everything was ready for the route. Then she ordered a cab, and lay down until it was time for her to leave the house.