

VOLUME II

CHAPTER 4

“Les rivières sont des chemins qui marchent, et qui portent où l’on veut aller.”

—Pensées de Pascal.

THE DAY but one after the evening in the theatre, Mr. Saltasche, towards three o’clock in the afternoon, leisurely descended the handsome granite steps of his office. He stood for an instant thinking, when he reached the lowest step, then, having felt in his coat-pocket with one hand, he nodded as if reassured, and looked across to the cab-stand by King William’s statue. The jarvey whose turn it was, being at the head of the stand, to obey a signal, jumped quickly on the “driving side” of his vehicle, and was speedily at Mr. Saltasche’s orders. While waiting the arrival of his conveyance, the gentleman in question cast a scrutinizing look over his own dress, and having buttoned up his perfectly fitting brown surtout and flicked a faint trace of dust off his boots with his white silk handkerchief, gave his hat a cock and jumped lightly into his seat.

“Where now, your honour?” asked the jarvey.

“Er—Kingsbridge; and take the far side of the river.”

The car rolled quickly down Westmoreland Street, and threaded its way across the bridge, now densely thronged with traffic; and turning to the left, held on along the Quay. They passed the Four Courts rapidly; Saltasche looked keenly at the groups by the railings, but failed to recognize anybody. Park Gate Street was soon reached. Here he dismissed his driver, and turning to the left again, kept the high-road for a few minutes until he found the terrace he was looking for.

“Just what I expected,” he muttered to himself: “dingy lodgings. Let’s see,” and he vainly tried to decipher a half-obliterated inscription on the corner house of the row of little houses, seven or eight of which stood removed from the road by some forty feet of ill-kept front-gardens.

He opened the gate of the third house, and walked up the long weed-grown path; as he did so he became aware of a pianist, evidently in the house to which he was going, practising with a vigorous hand noisy scales and exercises, and breaking now and again into great wild chords and *cadenzas*. His skilled ear detected at once a master-hand: no tyro ever struck so boldly, or with such finished precision.

His knock brought a dirty servant-girl, with smirched visage and hands so black and grimy that it was not without some misgiving that he entrusted his card to them.

“Poignarde is not at home,” he thought, as he ascended the little narrow stairs after his guide. “I should imagine not, indeed; and my little beauty consoles herself with music pending his return.”

“A gentleman, ma’am,” said the menial, laying the card on the piano. Mrs. Poignarde ceased playing, and took it up between her fore and second finger.

“Did you say Captain Poignarde was out?”

Saltasche grinned as he heard the imperious tone of this question outside the door.

The servant, instead of answering, opened the door wide; and the gentleman with his sweetest smile presented himself. Mrs. Poignarde was not a whit embarrassed, and held out three fingers of her right hand, looking at her visitor the while with a blended expression of astonishment, greeting, and interrogation.

Saltasche took her taper white fingers and bowed over them.

“How do you do, Mrs. Poignarde? Did you get home safely on Saturday? Capital piece, now, was it not? You reached home quite safely? No cold? No annoyance? Such a long drive!”

All this and much more was uttered in the most suave, finished, courteous tone. The little lady in black, who was anything but in gracious humour, was first amused, then roused, and at last pleased and quite won to good humour by the well-laid plan of attack. She smiled,

and pointing to an easy-chair by the fire, seated herself with her side-face to the window nearly opposite.

“We got home very well. It was very stupid, though; and to add to my vexation, I lost my fan. I was so sorry and put out about it; and, of course, I have no chance of ever seeing it again. It was my poor uncle Rodolphe’s last gift.”

Saltasche smiled quite pleasantly. “I think I can give you some intelligence of it”; and he took a tissue-paper parcel out of his pocket as he spoke, and unrolling it leisurely, held up before her wondering eyes the ivory and scarlet of her treasure.

She gave a little scream of joy, and rising hastily, held out both hands to take it; then examining it closely, and holding up a broken scarlet ribbon, exclaimed,—

“See there: that went so, round my wrist; something must have broken or cut it, and I dropped it. How did you find it? And how good of you to bring it to me!”

“Do you remember getting into your cab?” said he. “You must have let it slip into the folds of your dress or mantle. I found it at my feet, under the colonnade. Then the initials, you see, guided me where to bring it.”

“How really good of you! I would not have lost it for the world”; and she raised her fine liquid eyes with a look of real gratitude full on his. “Poor Uncle Rodolphe!—his very last gift to me; and I never saw him again.”

“You can’t imagine how pleased I am, Mrs. Poignarde, to be the means of restoring it to you. I had no idea,” he added, with a spark of curiosity in his look, “that, apart from its intrinsic value, it was such a treasure. Captain Poignarde is not in, then?”

“No,” she answered. “Eric is scarcely ever here; at least, scarcely ever after twelve in the morning.”

“And you, Mrs. Poignarde, beguile your time with your charming music, no doubt: I heard you just now. What a magnificent touch you have! Not at all a feminine one—so strong and full.” And he looked as if incredulous at her small, fine fingers. “Do play me something,” he added entreatingly; “I am so passionately fond of music.”

She assented, after but little demur. Perhaps there was a particle of vanity in her doing so. She saw he was really eager to hear her; and feeling exactly in the humour for playing, she sat down carelessly and plunged into Mendelssohn's well-known Andante. Her piano was a Broadwood's cottage—one of the best make; and though now something worn, yet full and rich-toned. Her manipulation was splendid, and the rich chords and subtle variations of light and shade were brought out in perfection. She sat easily and unmoved—not a trace of self-consciousness or effort marring the perfect performance. Saltasche was astonished beyond measure. He, while listening with a perfect sense of enjoyment, leaned his elbow on the back of his chair, and deliberately surveyed the room; small, grimy, and shabbily furnished. On an ottoman lay Mrs. Poignarde's black lace bonnet and veil, her little silk umbrella stood in a corner, and a pair of Rash-leather gloves lay on the top of some whitey-brown packages on the sideboard. An untidy, ill-kept room—just the dwelling-place of an ill-conditioned, ill-mated couple. The woman who would spend a day in a chamber of that ilk must indeed be far gone on the road of despair and sullen indifference. Pipes and cigar-boxes were on the mantelpiece, and under the sideboard a little stack of soda-water bottles. Some trashy-looking books lay about; and on a footstool before the fire a hideous bull-terrier, with a black face, was curled up. Not a flower, not a work-basket, not a single trace of a lady's presence, beyond the piano and a pile of well-bound music-books, was there in the room. The keen eye of Saltasche noted everything; and then returned to the musician, now drawing near to the *finale* of her piece. Ere her fingers had touched the closing chords, Saltasche was beside her, and seating himself on a chair at one end of the piano, he leaned his elbow upon it, and waited till the sound had died away.

“What a treat, Mrs. Poignarde!” murmured he; “how perfectly you play! That piece is simply superb. Your style is exactly French.”

“I did take lessons from a Parisian,” she returned, negligently running the right hand over arpeggio chords.

“It's a great charm, music; such a resource to you, too.”

“Well, yes. At least,” she added, “I expect it will be so one day.” And she turned her head aside with a negligent, indifferent air, and then rose and went back towards her seat in the window.

“Oh, now, Mrs. Poignarde, will you not play me something more? Please do. I have heard from Mrs. Grey that you play Liszt’s music so perfectly.”

“Liszt’s is too much for this little room.”

“Will you help with our concert? Mrs. Grey must have told you of it. If you would only play a piece or two.”

“Yes; Mrs. Grey has told me about it. But I do not care for playing in public. I don’t know anybody here; I don’t go into society at all.” She turned as she spoke, and looked quickly down the road. “There comes Eric, you see, with that gentleman.” And as she spoke she bent her head a little forward, and looked closely at the advancing figures. The result of this inspection was apparently displeasing to her; for a settled frown gathered on her face, and her lips curled impatiently. She rose and gathered up her music, after which she locked the piano. Saltasche, whom a glance out of window had satisfied as to the cause of the change of her expression, smiled half in pity, half contemptuously. Rising, he held out his hand, and said, “It is quite time I was back in the City, Mrs. Poignarde. I am very glad to have been the medium of restoring to you your property.” He spoke slowly and deliberately, watching her face; for he knew she was dying to escape before Poignarde should enter the room.

She looked at him frankly, as if she divined his kind thoughtfulness, and held out her hand.

“I thank you very much indeed; and in token of my sincerity you may tell the Greys I will play at their concert.”

He held her soft white hand in his an instant; not venturing to press it, yet unwilling to let her go. Just then the swing of the gate was heard, and Poignarde’s uncertain, heavy step on the gravel. She released her hand, and hastily picking up her bonnet, flashed one look, in which terror and excuse were blended, at him, and escaped off upstairs to her own room.

Poignarde entered the room. Glancing round with a sulky and stupid look, his eyes fell on the broker, who, quite at home, was reading a *Bell’s Life* in an easy-chair.

“Hullo! Mr. Saltasche, eh? Glad to see you.”

“I’ve been waiting for you, Poignarde. I came here on a double errand: to restore Mrs. Poignarde’s fan (she lost it at the theatre on Satur-

day), and—ah—this to you, Captain.” And as he spoke he handed a slip of grey paper across the table.

“I’ve had a run of luck lately,” spoke the gallant officer, in a thick tone. “Hang it, man, when a fellow’s got capital, the thing for him is to back the colour long enough; it’s sure to come up if you just go on long enough. That’s what it is: back the colour and stick to it. Keep at it,” he muttered, nodding his head sapiently in the direction of his friend. “I say,” he broke out suddenly, “you’ve not seen Adelaide—Ad’laide—eh! my wife, sir. She’s locked herself in that beastly room of hers, I bet.” And he rocked himself to and fro in his seat, staring fatuously at the bell-rope, and plainly calculating the exertion needful to make a lurch at it.

Saltasche rose, and stood between him and the fireplace, stroking his chin and looking critically, and with a smile on his lips, at the interesting figure of his client. It seemed to supply the key to a riddle rising in his mind; for he glanced once more round the room, and nodded his head slightly, as if acknowledging to himself the fitness of things in general.

“Day, day, Captain!” said he, making a move to go. “I must be off; business in town.”

“Take somethin’?” stuttered the Captain, on hospitality intent. “Ad’laide, I say, where’s that ——?” and he gathered himself together as if for a plunge at the bell.

But Saltasche laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, and forced him down in his chair. “I’ll see you to-night, Cap.,” said he, laughing. “Don’t forget your—hey?—ah, ——” and he nodded towards the slip of paper lying on the table. “Bye, bye.” He shut the door quickly, and was gone.

“What a pair!” thought he to himself. “I wonder will Mrs. Grey be able to tell me anything about her. She must have something in her head when she works up her music like that. Why, it’s something superb. She is a lovely creature, too—a perfect *artiste*.” All the way back he mused on the queerness and incongruousness of the scene he had left. The mean, untidy room; the most sordid details of daily life obtruding themselves unabashed in every sense; and in the midst of it all, the determined, cold face, the slender, supple, black-robed figure of the musician—indifference and scorn on every beautiful line of her face—rapt, evidently, in her art, and bitter and cynical to all else. “She must have a history,” thought he. “What a bitter look she gave at him coming in! And that fan, too—lit-

tle vixen—she was pleased to get it back;” and he seemed to see the bright, glad look that flashed for an instant from between her white eyelids. And Poignarde: “Bet on the colour, and bet long enough.” Saltasche grinned to himself as he remembered the tone and look with which this axiom was enunciated, and the appearance of the prophet himself: the bleared eyes, the trembling lips and hands, and the thick utterance. “Why in this world doesn’t she leave him?” thought Mr. Saltasche.

There were reasons undreamt of by him. Adelaide Chrestien, for such was her (Mrs. Poignarde’s) maiden name, had been the only child and heiress of a wealthy South American planter and merchant. On his death, which occurred when she was a very young child, she had been adopted by her father’s brother, who had absolute control over her fortune. Mr. Rodolphe Chrestien ever married; and his niece, his only living relative, was reputed heiress to his wealth also. She was sent to England to be educated at a first-class school, in a manner befitting her condition and prospects in life. Here she made the acquaintance of the family of a school companion; and when about sixteen, met at their house, one summer vacation, Eric Poignarde, then a dashing cornet of dragoons,—deeply in debt, for his was one of the fastest regiments in London. The youth cast his eyes on the Brazilian heiress—an interesting and beautiful young girl, with the reputation of a fortune of nearly a quarter of a million; and with the aid of his relation, the school-girl friend, a clandestine correspondence was carried on.

In about six months more, Miss Chrestien eloped with the now almost penniless Poignarde, who believed that she was entitled to her fortune in her own right. She, filled with romance, had never dreamed of telling him that her uncle and guardian had unreserved powers over the money bequeathed to her, and that all she possessed in her own right was five thousand pounds, which was hers by virtue of her mother’s marriage settlement. However, the awakening came soon. Uncle Rodolphe, whom she had hoped to have won over in orthodox romantic fashion, had had ambitious designs for his niece, to whom he really was attached, and in whom centred all his ambition and hopes. Disappointed and furious on hearing of her marriage, he telegraphed some curt directions to his London agent, who, immediately on receiving them, sought an interview with the happy husband. Poignarde was informed that his wife’s allowance would be paid quarterly, as heretofore, by the agents of Rodolphe Chrestien; and that on her attaining her majority the five thousand pounds would be paid over to her husband. The rest of Mr. Chrestien’s

money he intended to devote to the Public Works of Rio—the city in which he had amassed his colossal fortune. The agent added, as a piece of supererogatory information, that the fortune which Adelaide Chrestien would have inherited, had she shown a sense of duty to her relative, amounted to nearly two millions English.

Poignarde reeled home, sick with fury; he cursed himself, his cousin, his wife—everything. What a prize he had missed! He had been swindled, he declared. The miserable five thousand would not pay his debts. Of course he was the victim, the injured one; her wretched situation in no way concerned him. He quarrelled with his relatives, at whose house he had met his school-girl wife; blaming them, with the short-sighted rage of disappointed egotism, for their instrumentality—inno-cent enough, in truth—in his downfall. He had to exchange out of the Guards, and getting a handsome sum of money into the bargain, he was enabled to settle his affairs; compromised with some creditors, paid one or two in full, and cheated the greater number. And then, having joined a line regiment, he took his wife, whom he began to treat with systematic brutality and neglect, to live in barracks with him.

She was too young to break her heart, and too vigorous of constitution to pine and waste in useless regrets. She retained her own piano, and at all times passionately fond of music, devoted herself to it now with heart and soul—inspired by the double purpose of one day making a living by it as a profession, and also as a present resource in the long hours of tedium and *ennui*, if not worse, that she had to spend by herself.

Poignarde drew her allowance and spent it; and had already, she knew, borrowed money at high rates of interest, to be repaid out of her five thousand pounds when it should fall due. So she had no hope but in herself; and worked and studied with a passionate persistency that astonished every one. Six hours a day was the minimum she allowed herself for practice; more frequently she sat at the piano all day long, with an interval for a walk in some quiet, unfrequented direction.

She and her husband hated each other with that persistency and thoroughness only to be found amongst married couples, and which hardens and grows with years of daily practice. It is a common enough mistake that people make when they suppose that time wears out inequalities of disposition and renders us less sensitive to the unpleasantnesses and peculiarities of the people with whom we live. Poignarde detested his wife more and more: every day, week, month, and year,

added in intensity and bitterness to the store. And with her, the desire to be free, now that she had attained her majority and saw the last few hundred pounds vanishing in the same way as the rest—swallowed up by the usurers, and squandered in vice—became a passion too strong almost for endurance. Yet her plans were misty and vague. Friends she had none; Poignarde had an aunt and cousin in London, both elderly and respectable women; and she counted that when the crash came, when he would be forced to go to India or on some other foreign service, she might find a temporary shelter with them, and remain until she earned enough to carry her out to Rio, to plead her cause in person to Rodolphe Chrestien. Every letter she addressed to him had been returned unopened; but she felt sure he would pity her when once the true story had been told him.

Sometimes visions of triumphs in the musical world would pass before her over-worked brain: she fancied herself an Arabella Goddard or a Madame Schumann; and then she would dream of a public concert in Rio. She almost saw herself, dressed in white, the centre-point of a crowd of listeners,—everybody hushed and silent; the Spanish women, with their dark eyes bent upon her enviously and curiously, keeping even their feather fans immovable lest the faint rustle should cause them to lose a note; and amongst the throng, listening and watching, Uncle Rodolphe's hard determined face, with his white hair and wavy moustache, like the Emperor's. He, as one of the notables, though, would be on the platform and quite close: she would play to him and for him; and he would listen to her and forgive her, and take her away where Eric could never follow.

So she would dream over her instrument, hardly knowing what she did, and playing from that wonderful memory which only born musicians like her, who assimilate and make a piece a part of themselves, ever have.

With Poignarde she was silent and distant, and as much as possible avoided provoking any of his outbursts of brutality. When he commenced to rail at and taunt her, she opposed him by a silence which no utterance of his could induce her to break. She knew the end was approaching fast. The five thousand pounds had melted away to as many hundreds, though she was not as yet more than six months past her majority. Poignarde was utterly unable to stop drinking and gambling; both

had become a part of his nature. Another year, she thought, would set a term to her punishment; and she worked harder than ever.

Saltasche reached his office again, shortly after four. Running up the stairs, he almost knocked against Lord Brayhead, who was coming down for the second time—having, with the fretful impatience characteristic of him, been twice within an hour to see if the broker had returned.

“I have been waiting for you, Mr. Saltasche,” he began in an ag-grieved tone; “I have an important message for you.”

Saltasche quickly opened the glass-panelled door leading into his office, and held it for his client to pass before him.

“Mr. Wyldoates cannot live twenty-four hours; and I have a tele-gram to the effect that Lord Kilboggan will send over his eldest nephew, Theodore Wyldoates, the *attaché* at Constantinople, to stand for the seat in the Conservative interest.”

“Ah! no matter, my lord. Hogan is the man: I shall have him in Peatstown the day after to-morrow—or to-morrow, if you like. And now about money matters. He has money; but of course your lordship is aware we are bound to do something. He is running a great risk—a very great risk.”

“I will allow him to draw upon me for one-third of the expenses.”

Saltasche gave his lordship to understand pretty plainly that he must be more liberal; that the Government would not assist Mr. Hogan; and that, the Dissolution being so near at hand, he could not afford to risk his capital. It was finally arranged that Lord Brayhead should pay two-thirds of the sum-total, and it was also stipulated that Mr. Hogan was to be very discreet concerning the transaction: in fact, he was to be made, if possible, to understand that it was in the form of a loan, rather than anything else, that the money was to be forthcoming. After a long consultation—a consultation which the impetuous Mr. Saltasche vainly endeavoured to cut short—Lord Brayhead took his leave, in great anxiety and tribulation as to the success of his dubious venture.

Saltasche sent a messenger with a note to Hogan’s lodgings, and be-took himself home. He was eager to see Mrs. Grey, his neighbour at Green Lanes, to learn from her the history, if history there were (and if she knew it), of Adelaide Poignarde.

Mrs. Grey and Poignarde were in some remote way connected through his aunt and cousin the Stroudes in London; and Saltasche, confident in his own powers of suasion, calculated on hearing the whole story ere he was many hours older.