AN ORCHESTRAL VIOLIN

I

AT my dining-place in old Soho—I call it mine because there was a time when I became somewhat inveterate there, keeping my napkin (changed once a week) in a ring recognisable by myself and the waiter, my bottle of Beaune (replenished more frequently), and my accustomed seat—at this restaurant of mine, with its confusion of tongues, its various, foreign *clientèle*, amid all the coming and going, the nightly change of faces, there were some which remained the same, persons with whom, though one might never have spoken, one had nevertheless from the mere continuity of juxtaposition a certain sense of intimacy.

There was one old gentleman in particular, as inveterate as myself, who especially aroused my interest. A courteous, punctual, mild old man with an air which deprecated notice; who conversed each evening for a minute or two with the proprietor, as he rolled, always at the same hour, a valedictory cigarette, in a language that arrested my ear by its strangeness; and which proved to be his own, Hungarian; who addressed a brief remark to me at times, half apologetically, in the precisest of English. We sat next each other at the same table, came and went at much the same hour; and for a long while our intercourse was restricted to formal courtesies; mutual enquiries after each other's health, a few urbane strictures on the climate. The little old gentleman in spite of his aspect of shabby gentility,—for his coat was sadly inefficient, and the nap of his carefully brushed hat did not indicate prosperity—perhaps even because of this suggestion of fallen fortunes, bore himself with pathetic erectness, almost haughtily. He did not seem amenable to advances. It was a long time before I knew him well enough to value rightly this appearance, the timid defences, behind which a very shy and delicate nature took refuge from the world's coarse curiosity. I can smile now, with a certain sadness, when I remind myself that at one time I was somewhat in awe of M. Maurice Cristich and his little air of proud humility. Now that his place in that dim, foreign eating-house knows him no more, and his yellow napkin-ring, with its distinguishing number,

has been passed on to some other customer; I have it in my mind to set down my impressions of him, the short history of our acquaintance. It began with an exchange of cards; a form to which he evidently attached a ceremonial value, for after that piece of ritual his manner underwent a sensible softening, and he showed by many subtile indefinable shades in his courteous address, that he did me the honour of including me in his friendship. I have his card before me now; a large, oblong piece of pasteboard, with *M. Maurice Cristich, Theatre Royal,* inscribed upon it, amid many florid flourishes. It enabled me to form my first definite notion of his calling, upon which I had previously wasted much conjecture; though I had all along, and rightly as it appeared, associated him in some manner with music.

In time he was good enough to inform me further. He was a musician, a violinist; and formerly, and in his own country, he had been a composer. But whether for some lack in him of original talent, or of patience, whether for some grossness in the public taste, on which the nervous delicacy and refinement of his execution was lost, he had not continued. He had been driven by poverty to London, had given lessons, and then for many years had played a second violin in the orchestra of the Opera.

"It is not much, Monsieur!" he observed, deprecatingly, smoothing his hat with the cuff of his frayed coat-sleeve. "But it is sufficient; and I prefer it to teaching. In effect, they are very charming, the seraphic young girls of your country! But they seem to care little for music; and I am a difficult master, and have not enough patience. Once, you see, a long time ago, I had a perfect pupil, and perhaps that spoilt me. Yes! I prefer the theatre, though it is less profitable. It is not as it once was," he added, with a half sigh; "I am no longer ambitious. Yes, Monsieur, when I was young, I was ambitious. I wrote a symphony and several concertos. I even brought out at Vienna an opera, which I thought would make me famous; but the good folk of Vienna did not appreciate me, and they would have none of my music. They said it was antiquated, my opera, and absurd; and yet, it seemed to me good. I think that Gluck, that great genius, would have liked it; and that is what I should have wished. Ah! how long ago it seems, that time when I was ambitious! But you must excuse me, Monsieur! your good company makes me garrulous. I must be at the theatre. If I am not in my place at the half-hour, they fine me two shillings and sixpence, and that I can ill afford, you know, Monsieur!"

In spite of his defeats, his long and ineffectual struggle with adversity, M. Cristich, I discovered, as our acquaintance ripened, had none of the spleen and little of the vanity of the unsuccessful artist. He seemed in his

forlorn old age to have accepted his discomfiture with touching resignation, having acquired neither cynicism nor indifference. He was simply an innocent old man, in love with his violin and with his art, who had acquiesced in disappointment; and it was impossible to decide, whether he even believed in his talent, or had not silently accredited the verdict of musical Vienna, which had condemned his opera in those days when he was ambitious. The precariousness of the London Opera was the one fact which I ever knew to excite him to expressions of personal resentment. When its doors were closed, his hard poverty (it was the only occasion when he protested against it), drove him, with his dear instrument and his accomplished fingers, into the orchestras of lighter houses, where he was compelled to play music which he despised. He grew silent and rueful during these periods of irksome servitude, rolled innumerable cigarettes, which he smoked with fierceness and great rapidity. When dinner was done, he was often volubly indignant, in Hungarian, to the proprietor. But with the beginning of the season his mood lightened. He bore himself more sprucely, and would leave me, to assist at a representation of *Don Giovanni,* or *Tannhäuser,* with a face which was almost radiant. I had known him a year before it struck me that I should like to see him in his professional capacity. I told him of my desire a little diffidently, not knowing how my purpose might strike him. He responded graciously, but with an air of intrigue, laying a gentle hand upon my coat sleeve and bidding me wait. A day or two later, as we sat over our coffee, M. Cristich with an hesitating urbanity offered me an order.

"If you would do me the honour to accept it, Monsieur! It is a stall, and a good one! I have never asked for one before, all these years, so they gave it to me easily. You see, I have few friends. It is for to-morrow, as you observe. I demanded it especially; it is an occasion of great interest to me,—ah! an occasion! You will come?"

"You are too good, M. Cristich!" I said with genuine gratitude, for indeed the gift came in season, the opera being at that time a luxury I could seldom command. "Need I say that I shall be delighted? And to hear Madame Romanoff, a chance one has so seldom!"

The old gentleman's mild, dull eyes glistened. "Madame Romanoff!" he repeated, "the marvelous Leonora! yes, yes! She has sung only once before in London. Ah, when I remember—" He broke off suddenly. As he rose, and prepared for departure, he held my hand a little longer than usual, giving it a more intimate pressure.

"My dear young friend, will you think me a presumptuous old man, if I ask you to come and see me to-morrow in my apartment, when it is over? I will give you a glass of whiskey, and we will smoke pipes, and you shall tell me your impressions—and then I will tell you why to-morrow I shall be so proud, why I show this emotion."

II

THE Opera was *Fidelio,* that stately, splendid work, whose melody, if one may make a pictorial comparison, has something of that rich and sun-warm colour which, certainly, on the canvases of Rubens, affects one as an almost musical quality. It offered brilliant opportunities, and the incomparable singer had wasted none of them. So that when, at last, I pushed my way out of the crowded house and joined M. Cristich at the stage door, where he waited with eyes full of expectancy, the music still lingered about me, like the faint, past fragrance of incense, and I had no need to speak my thanks. He rested a light hand on my arm, and we walked towards his lodging silently; the musician carrying his instrument in its sombre case, and shivering from time to time, a tribute to the keen spring night. He stopped as he walked, his eyes trailing the ground; and a certain listlessness in his manner struck me a little strangely, as though he came fresh from some solemn or hieratic experience, of which the reaction had already begun to set in tediously, leaving him at the last unstrung and jaded, a little weary, of himself and the too strenuous occasion. It was not until we had crossed the threshold of a dingy, high house in a byway of Bloomsbury, and he had ushered me, with apologies, into his shabby room, near the sky, that the sense of his hospitable duties seemed to renovate him.

He produced tumblers from an obscure recess behind his bed; set a kettle on the fire, a lodging-house fire, which scarcely smouldered with flickers of depressing, sulphurous flame, talking of indifferent subjects, as he watched for it to boil.

Only when we had settled ourselves, in uneasy chairs, opposite each other, and he had composed me, what he termed "a grog": himself preferring the more innocent mixture known as *eau sucrée,* did he allude to *Fidelio.* I praised heartily the discipline of the orchestra, the prima-donna, whom report made his country-woman, with her strong, sweet voice and her extraordinary beauty, the magnificence of the music, the fine impression of the whole.

M. Cristich, his glass in hand, nodded approval. He looked intently into the fire, which cast mocking shadows over his quaint, incongruous figure,

his antiquated dress coat, which seemed to skimp him, his frost-bitten countenance, his cropped gray hair. "Yes," he said, "Yes! So it pleased you, and you thought her beautiful? I am glad."

He turned round to me abruptly, and laid a thin hand impressively on my knee.

"You know I invented her, the Romanoff, discovered her, taught her all she learnt. Yes, Monsieur, I was proud to-night, very proud, to be there, playing for her, though she did not know. Ah! the beautiful creature! . . . and how badly I played! execrably! You could not notice that, Monsieur, but they did, my *confrères,* and could not understand. How should they? How should they dream, that I, Maurice Cristich, second violin in the orchestra of the opera, had to do with the Leonora; even I! Her voice thrilled them; ah, but it was I who taught her her notes! They praised her diamonds; yes, but once I gave her what she wanted more than diamonds, bread, and lodging and love. Beautiful they called her; she was beautiful too, when I carried her in my arms through Vienna. I am an old man now, and good for very little; and there have been days, God forgive me! when I have been angry with her; but it was not to-night. To see her there, so beautiful and so great; and to feel that after all I had a hand in it, that I invented her. Yes, yes! I had my victory to-night too; though it was so private; a secret between you and me, Monsieur? Is it not?"

I assured him of my discretion, but he hardly seemed to hear. His sad eyes had wandered away to the live coals, and he considered them pensively, as though he found them full of charming memories. I sat back, respecting his remoteness; but my silence was replete with surprised conjecture, and indeed the quaint figure of the old musician, every line of his garments redolent of ill success, had become to me, of a sudden, strangely romantic. Destiny, so amorous of surprises, of pathetic or cynical contrasts, had in this instance excelled herself. My obscure acquaintance, Maurice Cristich! The renowned Romanoff! Her name and acknowledged genius had been often in men's mouths of late, a certain luminous, scarcely sacred, glamour attaching to it, in an hundred idle stories, due perhaps as much to the wonder of her sorrowful beauty, as to any justification in knowledge, of her boundless extravagance, her magnificent fantasies, her various perversity, rumour pointing specially at those priceless diamonds, the favours not altogether gratuitous it was said of exalted personages. And with all deductions made, for malice, for the ingenuity of the curious, the impression of her perversity was left; she remained enigmatical and notorious, a somewhat scandalous heroine! And Cristich had known her; he had, as he declared, and his accent was not that of braggadocio, invented her. The conjuncture puzzled and fascinated me. It did not make Cristich less interesting, nor the prima-donna more perspicuous.

By-and-by the violinist looked up at me; he smiled with a little dazed air, as though his thoughts had been a far journey.

"Pardon me, Monsieur! I beg you to fill your glass. I seem a poor host; but to tell you the truth, I was dreaming; I was quite away, quite away."

He threw out his hands, with a vague expansive gesture.

"Dear child!" he said to the flames, in French; "good little one! I do not forget thee." And he began to tell me.

"It was when I was at Vienna, ah! a long while ago. I was not rich, but neither was I very poor; I still had my little patrimony, and I lived in the —— Strasse, very economically; it is a quarter which many artists frequent. I husbanded my resources, that I might be able to work away at my art without the tedium of making it a means of livelihood. I refused many offers to play in public, that I might have more leisure. I should not do that now; but then, I was very confident; I had great faith in me. And I worked very hard at my symphony, and I was full of desire to write an opera. It was a tall dark house, where I lived; there were many other lodgers, but I knew scarcely any of them. I went about with my head full of music and I had my violin; I had no time to seek acquaintance. Only my neighbour, at the other side of my passage, I knew slightly and bowed to him when we met on the stairs. He was a dark, lean man, of a very distinguished air; he must have lived very hard, he had death in his face. He was not an artist, like the rest of us: I suspect he was a great profligate, and a gambler; but he had the manners of a gentleman. And when I came to talk to him, he displayed the greatest knowledge of music that I have ever known. And it was the same with all; he talked divinely, of everything in the world, but very wildly and bitterly. He seemed to have been everywhere, and done everything; and at last to be tired of it all; and of himself the most. From the people of the house I heard that he was a Pole; noble, and very poor; and, what surprised me, that he had a daughter with him, a little girl. I used to pity this child, who must have lived quite alone. For the Count was always out, and the child never appeared with him; and, for the rest, with his black spleen and tempers, he must have been but sorry company for a little girl. I wished much to see her; for you see, Monsieur! I am fond of children, almost as much as of music; and one day it came about. I was at home with my violin; I had been playing all the evening some songs I had made; and once or twice I had seemed to be interrupted by little, tedious sounds. At last I

stopped, and opened the door; and there, crouching down, I found the most beautiful little creature I had ever seen in my life. It was the child of my neighbour. Yes, Monsieur! you divine, you divine! That was the Leonora!"

"And she is not your compatriot," I asked.

"A Hungarian? ah, no! yet every piece of her pure Slav. But I weary you, monsieur; I make a long story."

I protested my interest; and after a little side glance of dubious scrutiny, he continued in a constrained monotone, as one who told over to himself some rosary of sad enchanting memories.

"Ah, yes! she was beautiful; that mysterious, sad Slavonic beauty! a thing quite special and apart. And, as a child, it was more tragical and strange; that dusky hair! those profound and luminous eyes! seeming to mourn over tragedies they have never known. A strange, wild, silent child! She might have been eight or nine then; but her little soul was hungry for music, it was a veritable passion; and when she became at last my good friend, she told me how often she had lain for long hours outside my door, listening to my violin. I gave her a kind of scolding, such as one could to so beautiful a little creature, for the passage was draughty and cold, and sent her away with some *bon-bons*. She shook back her long, dark hair: 'You are not angry, and I am not naughty,' she said: 'and I shall come back. I thank you for your *bon-bons;* but I like your music better than *bon-bons,* or fairy tales, or anything in the world.'

"But she never came back to the passage again, monsieur! The next time I came across the Count, I sent her an invitation, a little diffidently, for he had never spoken to me of her, and he was a strange and difficult man. Now, he simply shrugged his shoulders, with a smile, in which, for once, there seemed more entertainment than malice. The child could visit me when she chose; if it amused either of us, so much the better. And we were content, and she came to me often; after a while, indeed, she was with me almost always. Child as she was, she had already the promise of her magnificent voice; and I taught her to use it, to sing, and to play on the piano and on the violin, to which she took the most readily. She was like a singing bird in the room, such pure, clear notes! And she grew very fond of me; she would fall asleep at last in my arms, and so stay until the Count would take her with him when he entered, long after midnight. He came to me naturally for her soon; and they never seemed long those hours that I watched over her sleep. I never knew him harsh or unkind to the child; he seemed simply indifferent to her as to everything else. He had exhausted life and he hated it; and he knew that death was on him, and he hated that even more. And

yet he was careful of her after a fashion, buying her *bon-bons* and little costumes, when he was in the vein, pitching his voice softly when he would stay and talk to me, as though he relished her sleep. One night he did not come to fetch her at all, I had wrapped a blanket round the child where she lay on my bed, and had sat down to watch by her and presently I too fell asleep. I do not know how long I slept but when I woke there was a gray light in the room, I was very cold and stiff, but I could hear close by, the soft, regular breathing of the child. There was a great uneasiness on me, and after a while I stole out across the passage and knocked at the Count's door, there was no answer but it gave when I tried it, and so I went in. The lamp had smouldered out, there was a sick odour of *pétrol* everywhere, and the shutters were closed: but through the chinks the merciless gray dawn streamed in and showed me the Count sitting very still by the table. His face wore a most curious smile, and had not his great cavernous eyes been open, I should have believed him asleep: suddenly it came to me that he was dead. He was not a good man, monsieur, nor an amiable, but a true *virtuoso* and full of information, and I grieved. I have had Masses said for the repose of his soul."

He paid a tribute of silence to the dead man's memory, and then he went on.

"It seemed quite natural that I should take his child. There was no one to care, no one to object; it happened quite easily. We went, the little one and I, to another part of the city. We made quite a new life. Oh! my God! it is a very long time ago."

Quite suddenly his voice went tremulous; but after a pause, hardly perceptible, he recovered himself and continued with an accent of apology.

"I am a foolish old man, and very garrulous. It is not good to think of that, nor to talk of it; I do not know why I do. But what would you have? She loved me then, and she had the voice and the disposition of an angel. I have never been very happy. I think sometimes, monsieur, that we others, who care much for art, are not permitted that. But certainly those few, rapid days, when she was a child, were good; and yet they were the days of my defeat. I found myself out then. I was never to be a great artist, a *maestro:* a second-rate man, a good music-teacher for young ladies, a capable performer in an orchestra, what you will, but a great artist, never! Yet in those days, even when my opera failed, I had consolation, I could say, I have a child! I would have kept her with me always but it could not be, from the very first she would be a singer. I knew always that a day would come when she would not need me, she was meant to be the world's delight, and I had

no right to keep her, even if I could. I held my beautiful, strange bird in her cage, until she beat her wings against the bars, then I opened the door. At the last, I think, that is all we can do for our children, our best beloved, our very heart-strings, stand free of them, let them go. The world is very weary, but we must all find that out for ourselves, perhaps when they are tired they will come home, perhaps not, perhaps not. It was to the Conservatoire, at Milan, that I sent her finally, and it was at La Scala that she afterwards appeared, and at La Scala too, poor child, she met her evil genius, the man named Romanoff, a baritone in her company, own son of the devil, whom she married. Ah, if I could have prevented it, if I could have prevented it!"

He lapsed into a long silence; a great weariness seemed to have come over him, and in the gray light which filtered in through the dingy window blinds, his face was pinched and wasted, unutterably old and forlorn.

"But I did not prevent it," he said at last, "for all my good will, perhaps merely hastened it by unseasonable interference. And so we went in different ways, with anger I fear, and at least with sore hearts and misunderstanding."

He spoke with an accent of finality, and so sadly that in a sudden rush of pity I was moved to protest.

"But surely you meet sometimes; surely this woman, who was as your own child—"

He stopped me with a solemn, appealing gesture.

"You are young, and you do not altogether understand. You must not judge her; you must not believe that she forgets, that she does not care. Only, it is better like this, because it could never be as before. I could not help her. I want nothing that she can give me, no not anything; I have my memories! I hear of her, from time to time; I hear what the world says of her, the imbecile world, and I smile. Do I not know best? I, who carried her in my arms, when she was that high!"

And in effect the old violinist smiled, it was as though he had surprised my secret of dissatisfaction, and found it, like the malice of the world, too ignorant to resent. The edge of his old, passionate adoration had remained bright and keen through the years; and it imparted a strange brilliancy to his eyes, which half convinced me, as presently, with a resumption of his usual air of diffident courtesy, he ushered me out into the vague, spring dawn. And yet, when I had parted from him and was making my way somewhat wearily to my own quarters, my first dubious impression remained. My imagination was busy with the story I had heard, striving quite vainly to supply omissions, to fill in meagre outlines. Yes! quite vainly! the

figure of the Romanoff was left, ambiguous and unexplained; hardly acquitted in my mind of a certain callousness, an ingratitude almost vulgar as it started out from time to time, in contraposition against that forlorn old age.

III

I saw him once more at the little restaurant in Soho, before a sudden change of fortune, calling me abroad for an absence, as it happened, of years, closed the habit of our society. He gave me the god-speed of a brother artist, though mine was not the way of music, with many prophecies of my success; and the pressure of his hand, as he took leave of me, was tremulous.

"I am an old man, monsieur, and we may not meet again, in this world. I wish you all the chances you deserve in Paris; but I—I shall greatly miss you. If you come back in time, you will find me in the old places; and if not—there are things of mine, which I should wish you to have, that shall be sent you."

And indeed it proved to be our last meeting. I went to Paris; a fitful correspondence intervened, grew infrequent, ceased; then a little later, came to me the notification, very brief and official, of his death in the French Hospital of pneumonia. It was followed by a few remembrances of him, sent at his request, I learnt, by the priest who had administered to him the last offices: some books that he had greatly cherished, works of Gluck, for the most part; an antique ivory crucifix of very curious workmanship; and his violin, a beautiful instrument dated 1670 and made at Nuremberg, yet with a tone which seemed to me, at least, as fine as that of the Cremonas. It had an intrinsic value to me, apart from its associations; for I too was something of an amateur, and since this seasoned melodious wood had come into my possession, I was inspired to take my facility more seriously. To play in public, indeed, I had neither leisure nor desire: but in certain *salons* of my acquaintance, where music was much in vogue, I made from time to time a desultory appearance. I set down these facts because, as it happened, this ineffectual talent of mine, which poor Cristich's legacy had recalled to life, was to procure me an interesting encounter. I remember the occasion well, it was too appropriate to be forgotten—as though my old friend's lifeless fiddle, which had yet survived so many *maestri,* was to be a direct instrument of the completion of his story the resurrection of those dormant and unsatisfied curiosities which still now and again concerned me. I had played at an house where I was a stranger; brought there by a friend, to whose

insistence I had yielded somewhat reluctantly; although he had assured me, and, I believe, with reason, that it was a house where the indirect, or Attic invitation greatly prevailed, in brief, a place where one met very queer people. The hostess was American, a charming woman, of unimpeachable antecedents; but her passion for society, which, while it should always be interesting, was not always equally reputable, had exposed her evenings to the suspicion of her compatriots. And when I had discharged my part in the programme and had leisure to look around me, I saw at a glance that their suspicion was justified; very queer people indeed were there. The large hot rooms were cosmopolitan: infidels and jews, everybody and nobody; a scandalously promiscuous assemblage! And there, with a half start, which was not at first recognition, my eyes stopped before a face which brought to me a confused rush of memories. It was that of a woman who sat on an ottoman in the smallest room which was almost empty. Her companion was a small, vivacious man with a gray imperial, and the red ribbon in his buttonhole, to whose continuous stream of talk, eked out with meridional gestures, she had the air of being listlessly resigned. Her dress, a marvel of discretion, its colour the yellow of old ivory, was of some very rich and stiff stuff cut square to her neck; that, and her great black hair, clustered to a crimson rose at the top of her head, made the pallor of her face a thing to marvel at. Her beauty was at once sombre and illuminating, and youthful no less. The woman of thirty: but her complexion, and her arms, which were bare, were soft in texture as a young girl's.

I made my way as well as I could for the crowd, to my hostess, listened, with what patience I might, to some polite praise of my playing, and made my request.

"Mrs. Destrier, I have an immense favour to ask; introduce me to Madame Romanoff!"

She gave me a quick, shrewd smile; then I remembered stories of her intimate quaintness.

"My dear young man! I have no objection. Only I warn you, she is not conversational; you will make no good of it, and you will be disappointed; perhaps that will be best. Please remember, I am responsible for nobody."

"Is she so dangerous?" I asked. "But never mind; I believe that I have something to say which may interest her."

"Oh, for that!" she smiled elliptically; "yes, she is most dangerous. But I will introduce you; you shall tell me how you succeed."

I bowed and smiled; she laid a light hand on my arm; and I piloted her to the desired corner. It seemed that the chance was with me. The little

fluent Provençal had just vacated his seat; and when the prima-donna had acknowledged the hasty mention of my name, with a bare inclination of her head, I was emboldened to succeed to it. And then I was silent. In the perfection of that dolorous face, I could not but be reminded of the tradition which has always ascribed something fatal and inevitable to the possession of great gifts: of genius or uncommon fortune, or singular personal beauty; and the common-place of conversation failed me.

After a while she looked askance at me, with a sudden flash of resentment.

"You speak no French, Monsieur! And yet you write it well enough; I have read your stories."

I acknowledged Madame's irony, permitted myself to hope that my efforts had met with Madame's approval.

"*A la bonne heure!* I perceive you also speak it. Is that why you wished to be presented, to hear my criticisms?"

"Let me answer that question when you have answered mine."

She glanced curiously over her feathered fan, then with the slightest upward inclination of her statuesque shoulders—"I admire your books; but are your women quite just? I prefer your playing."

"That is better, Madame! It was to talk of that I came."

"Your playing?"

"My violin."

"You want me to look at it? It is a Cremona?"

"It is not a Cremona; but if you like, I will give it you."

Her dark eyes shone out in amazed amusement.

"You are eccentric, Monsieur! but your nation has a privilege of eccentricity. At least, you amuse me; and I have wearied myself enough this long evening. Show me your violin; I am something of a *virtuosa*."

I took the instrument from its case, handed it to her in silence, watching her gravely. She received it with the dexterous hands of a musician, looked at the splendid stains on the back, then bent over towards the light in a curious scrutiny of the little, faded signature of its maker, the *fecit* of an obscure Bavarian of the seventeenth century; and it was a long time before she raised her eyes.

When she spoke, her rich voice had a note of imperious entreaty in it. "Your violin interests me, Monsieur! Oh, I know that wood! It came to you—?"

"A legacy from an esteemed friend."

She shot back. "His name?" with the flash which I waited for.

"Maurice Cristich, Madame!"

We were deserted in our corner. The company had strayed in, one by one, to the large *salon* with the great piano, where a young Russian musician, a pupil of Chopin, sat down to play, with no conventional essay of preliminary chords, an expected morsel. The strains of it wailed in just then, through the heavy, screening curtains; a mad *valse* of his own, that no human feet could dance to, a pitiful, passionate thing that thrilled the nerves painfully, ringing the changes between voluptuous sorrow and the merriment of devils, and burdened always with the weariness of "all the Russias," the proper *Welt-schmerz* of a young, disconsolate people. It seemed to charge the air, like electricity, with passionate undertones; it gave intimate facilities, and a tense personal note to our interview.

"A legacy! so he is gone." She swayed to me with a wail in her voice, in a sort of childish abandonment: "and *you* tell me! Ah!" she drew back, chilling suddenly with a touch of visible suspicion. "You hurt me, Monsieur! Is it a stroke at random? You spoke of a gift; you say you knew, esteemed him. You were with him? Perhaps, a message . . . ?"

"He died alone, Madame! I have no message. If there were none, it might be, perhaps, that he believed you had not cared for it. If that were wrong, I could tell you that you were not forgotten. Oh! he loved you! I had his word for it, and the story. The violin is yours—do not mistake me; it is not for your sake but his. He died alone; value it, as I should, Madame!"

They were insolent words, perhaps cruel, provoked from me by the mixed nature of my attraction to her; the need of turning a reasonable and cool front to that pathetic beauty, that artful music, which whipped jaded nerves to mutiny. The arrow in them struck so true, that I was shocked at my work. It transfixed the child in her, latent in most women, which moaned at my feet; so that for sheer shame as though it were actually a child I had hurt, I could have fallen and kissed her hands.

"Oh, you judge me hard, you believe the worst of me and why not? I am against the world! At least he might have taught you to be generous, that kind old man! Have I forgotten, do you think! Am I so happy then? Oh it is a just question, the world busies itself with me, and you are in the lap of its tongues. Has it ever accused me of that, of happiness? Cruel, cruel! I have paid my penalties, and a woman is not free to do as she will, but would not I have gone to him, for a word, a sign? Yes, for the sake of my childhood. And to-night when you showed me that," her white hand swept over the violin with something of a caress, "I thought it had come, yes, from the grave, and you make it more bitter by readings of your own. You strike me hard."

I bent forward in real humility, her voice had tears in it, though her splendid eyes were hard.

"Forgive me, Madame! a vulgar stroke at random. I had no right to make it, he told me only good of you. Forgive me, and for proof of your pardon—I am serious now—take his violin."

Her smile, as she refused me, was full of sad dignity.

"You have made it impossible, Monsieur! It would remind me only now of how ill you think of me. I beg you to keep it."

The music had died away suddenly, and its ceasing had been followed by a loud murmur of applause. The prima-donna rose, and stood for a moment observing me, irresolutely.

"I leave you and your violin, Monsieur! I have to sing presently, with such voice as our talk has left me. I bid you both adieu!"

"Ah Madame!" I deprecated, "you will think again of this, I will send it you in the morning. I have no right . . . "

She shook her head, then with a sudden flash of amusement, or fantasy—"I agree, Monsieur! on a condition. To prove your penitence you shall bring it to me yourself."

I professed that her favour overpowered me. She named an hour when she would be at home: an address in the Avenue des Champs Elysées, which I noted on my tablets.

"Not adieu, then Monsieur! but *au revoir.*"

I bowed perplexedly, holding the curtain aside to let her sweep through; and once more she turned back, gathering up her voluminous train, to repeat with a glance and accent, which I found mystifying: "Remember, Monsieur! It is only *au revoir.*"

That last glimpse of her, with the strange mockery and an almost elfish malice in her fine eyes, went home with me later to cause vague disquiet and fresh suspicion of her truth. The spell of her extraordinary, personal charm removed, doubt would assert itself. Was she quite sincere? Was her fascination not a questionable one? Might not that almost childish outburst of a grief so touching, and at the time convincing, be after all factitious; the movement of a born actress and enchauntress of men, quick to seize as by a nice professional instinct the opportunity of an effect? Had her whole attitude been a deliberate pose, a sort of trick? The sudden changes in her subtile voice, the under current of mockery in an invitation which seemed inconsequent, put me on my guard, reinforced all my deep-seated prejudices against the candour of the feminine soul. It left me with a vision of her, fantastically vivid, raccounting to an intimate circle, to an accom-

paniment of some discreet laughter and the popping of champagne corks, the success of her imposition, the sentimental concessions which she had extorted from a notorious student of cynical moods.

A dangerous woman! cried Mrs. Destrier with the world, which might conceivably be right; at least I was fain to add, a woman whose laughter would be merciless. Certainly, I had no temper for adventures; and a visit to Madame Romanoff on so sentimental an errand seemed to me, the more I pondered it, to partake of this quality to be rich in distasteful possibilities. Must I write myself pusillanimous, if I confess that I never made it, that I committed my old friend's violin into the hands of the woman who had been his pupil by the vulgar aid of a *commissionnaire?*

Pusillanimous or simply prudent; or perhaps cruelly unjust, to a person who had paid penalties and greatly needed kindness? It is a point I have never been able to decide, though I have tried to raise theories on the ground of her acquiescence. It seemed to me on the cards, that my fiddle bestowed so cavalierly, should be refused. And yet even the fact of her retaining it is open to two interpretations, and Cristich testified for her. Maurice Cristich! Madame Romanoff! the renowned Romanoff, Maurice Cristich! Have I been pusillanimous, prudent or merely cruel? For the life of me I cannot say!