

glanced at the original to compare it with his work.

Her face had lost its brightness as though overcast by the cloud of some mournful thought.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE RETURN OF THE BARON

THE following night a little before eleven o'clock, Herdjiman, who had retired to rest at ten, was awakened by a knocking at the front door. His wife was away, having gone on a visit to a relation living at Spalato, a Frenchwoman married to one of the sailors of the Lloyd Trentino Company.

The good Herdjiman roused from his sleep turned on his elbow listening, he fancied for a moment that it was a sound heard in a dream, but it came again, and springing from bed he went to the window and opened it.

"Coming," he cried.

Then he lit the candle, got into a shirt, coat and trousers and came down, candle in hand.

His mind was all upset. Could anything have happened to Jean, or might it possibly be Customs?

He was not entirely innocent. Small parcels of tobacco and little casks of Italian brandy were sometimes to be found deposited as by fairies under his bed, or in the big locker of the sitting-room. However, the fairies had not been at work lately, and the house was clear of anything that a preposterous government always grinding the faces of the poor might call Contraband.

So, with a fairly stout heart he undid the bolts,

flung open the door and found himself face to face with Jean.

"You!" said Herdjiman, astonished at the visitor and his strange look. "*Mon Dieu*—what ails you? What has happened? Stay! Come in."

He made the other enter, closed the door and led the way to the parlour.

Jean following him stood with fingers resting on the table, whilst Herdjiman whipped the globe off the lamp that stood on the table's centre preparatory to lighting it.

"I have killed Baron Stein," said Jean.

Herdjiman, globe in hand, stood as if struck to stone, the light of the candle up-flung on his grizzled beard and powerful shoulders.

"You have killed——"

"Baron Stein."

The ticking of the Dutch clock above the mantel filled the silence.

"How, killed him? What do you mean? The *Baron*! Killed him—you come here to tell me that—killed him, how?"

"I fought with him and killed him."

"In fair fight?"

"Yes."

Herdjiman put the globe on the table and took the glass off the lamp and turned up the wick, he had no match. Jean took a match-box from his pocket and lit the wick.

"This is a bad day," said Herdjiman, putting the glass on and the globe over the glass, then he turned up the wick so that the little room became brightly lit and the little ship models stood out to be seen, bravely sailing with the frightful indifference of inanimate things to human affairs and tragedies.

Jean sat down on a chair, his hat between his hands.

The Dutch clock began to strike, hard and vigorous and quick as if alarmed, and trying to wake the town.

Herdjiman glanced at it, then he took his tobacco pipe from his pocket, mechanically, holding it in his hand, thrusting a finger in the bowl, and then throwing it on the table as the clock ceased and Jean shifting in his chair, said :

"I don't know why I came to you. I had to find some one—I can't believe it myself, but it's true."

"Well, speak—say. What was it—ah! that woman, was it then the woman?"

"Yes, it started with her," said Jean.

"I knew," said Herdjiman. "Long ago, when you told me one day, I had it in my mind to say keep clear of that business. Why? I don't know. She was the Baron's woman, and women like that are all that sort, bound to tangle the gear and break the nets. Well, go on. Say, speak. How did it come about?"

Jean, his eyes fixed on the table ledge, began to talk, speaking calmly and in a detached manner, almost as though he were talking of what had happened to some other person.

The return of Baron Stein had been expected. The girl had asked Jean to wait the Baron's coming, so that he might see the finished picture which was to be a surprise for him.

She had asked him this earlier in the day, and Jean had objected. Firstly, he wished the picture to be shown by daylight, not artificial light. Secondly, as Stein was not expected till nine o'clock it would make him late getting back to Beljazi. However, as the weather was clear and there was a moon, this last consideration—which he did not mention to the girl—was not of much importance,

and he gave in, dining at the villa and spending the time after dinner in the improvised studio.

He should not have stayed. It had been clear to him during the last couple of days that Sidonie Hauptmarch had become, if not attached to him, at least drawn towards him. She had shown this in many little ways, all innocent, yet all indicative of a friendship surely dangerous.

There may be friendship pure and simple between a man and a woman, but not between a woman and a man.

Jean did not in the least appreciate the fact that this turning towards him might be a turning away from Stein, that his youth and good looks might, unknown to him, be playing a game against the age and indifferent looks of the elder man—a war game that might develop into real war between Sidonie and the man who owned her by right of money.

He never dreamed of other developments. Leaving Karan aside he was Stein's guest; leaving that alone Stein was his future. Ambition, business and honour itself came between him and this girl.

Coffee was served to them in the studio, and the lamps were not turned on as the reflected glow of the great arc light over the villa front came through the top light of the studio, which had once been a billiard room, making it possible to see the objects around—the canvas with the portrait, the table with the brushes, palette and mahl stick, the basket-chairs with their thick leather cushions and the arms that decorated the walls, shields, battle axes, krisses, glinting in the chiaroscuro, weapons of destruction belonging to who knows what ghosts of old time or wielded in what wars.

Jean and the girl had taken their places on a couch. They were almost knee to knee, and she was

talking to him of her past when she was a little girl.

She spoke in such a manner that he could not make out from her talk exactly what her position had been in this past of hers, which could not be so far distant. He only understood that she had been born in the Rhineland, and that she had never known such happy days as those she had spent over there; that she had a brother Carl, and a cousin Max and a great friend, Gretchen. But whether she had known all these in a slum of Cologne or in a schloss farther up the river it was impossible to say. Caught young and intensively educated, it might have been a slum that turned her forth; at all events, she gave the name of no schloss.

But one thing was very apparent now in her talk, she did not want to lose Jean. The finishing of the picture threatened to be the death of their acquaintanceship. Now that it was done Jean would have to go. Stein's return would be the signal. Meantime, he was late, it was past the hour for his return. Had he missed his train or had some accident happened to him?

No, nothing had happened to him.

Suddenly the electric lights blazed out and there stood Stein. He had opened the studio door and switched on the lights almost at the same moment, so that the pair on the couch started, and the girl gave an exclamation as though some one had made a feint to strike her.

Stein wore the light overcoat in which he had travelled; he had left his hat in the hall, but he still wore his left-hand glove. It was evident that the servant having apprised him of Jean's coming, and his presence at dinner and the fact that he had had coffee in the studio and was possibly still there,

had brought the Baron to see what might be going forward before divesting himself of his overcoat or attending to his toilet.

His hair was disordered and altogether he did not look his best.

"The Baron," said Jean, as he told the story to Herdjiman, "stood for a moment, and he did not speak for the moment as he stood there, just an ill-tempered man who had come home late and bustled in. That is what I felt towards him, but the Baroness felt different, for she got angry at once on account of the light having been switched on like that.

"He never noticed me though he looked me over. I think he was angry that I had been doing the picture in his absence, and that she had never told him I was there. I think he was jealous of me having been so long with the Baroness, I don't know, but he said something which made her fly out in a fury. Then the Baron was saying to her, 'Well, what were you doing here alone in the dark with this man?' Meaning me.

"For a second I could scarcely understand or grasp that he was making a suggestion against me. But, yes, there it was, and she was replying, 'At all events, he is a man and not an insulter of women.'

"I stood for a moment unable to move or put in a word. It seemed they were both quarrelling over me, yet I had nothing to do with their quarrel and nothing at all in my mind to feel ashamed of. It was their quarrel. It was horrible, I only wanted to get away, I was shocked by their faces. I had no more to do with them than the table had, and yet—well, listen.

"I tried to put in a word and my temper began to rise, more at the situation than anything else,

till the Baron turning all of a sudden, owing to something the woman had said, to the picture, cried out, "that daub," and reaching out his hand to the wall took hold of a stick with a spike on the end of it. I must tell you that this room had been a billiard room, and the walls had been decorated with swords and axes and helmets, and such things. He reached out and seized this thing and turned to the picture.

"Stop," I cried.

"I saw what he meant to do; I sprang forward; too late, the blow not only slashed the canvas but it smashed the wooden frame on which the canvas was stretched.

"My picture! I sprang on him and seized the stick. We wrestled for it."

"What for did you do that?" asked Herdjiman.

"Do what?"

"Get hold of the thing."

Jean paused as if before an obstacle, then he said:

"I don't know——"

"Ah," said Herdjiman.

"I was mad," said Jean. "I have never been like that before. I suppose I have never been tried like that before. But it was my picture, my life, myself, destroyed. God!"

The recollection seemed to choke him.

"Did you get the thing from him?"

"No, he was like iron. We struggled and he twisted it from me, and I jumped aside; he flung it at me and it smashed the things on the table, and I got hold of it. He came for me and I hit at him and missed, and he came for me again, and I cannot remember the blow, but there he was, lying dead on the floor."

"Sure he was dead?"

"Yes, he was dead."

"And the girl?"

"She was standing the whole time without a word."

"Seeing you were fighting with him like that, how did you have time to be telling what she was doing?"

"I don't know; it's as if part of my mind were watching her. Then, when he was lying there, she was lying on the couch with her arms out. No, she was not dead, she had fainted."

"Well, you must be right. If she hadn't been standing there without saying anything she'd have been screeching, and the servants would have come. They didn't come?"

"No; we were alone; blood was running from his head. His mouth hung open as he lay; he was dead. I lifted his head and it dropped on the floor when I let it go, I had never seen a dead man before—and I had killed him. I came out of the room and left the house by the window of the lower room where I had seen her first."

"The window."

"It is a long window that opens like a door. When I came into the hall I saw the room, it had its lights on, and I came in and opened the long window, and came into the garden and round the house to the front. The big electric lamp was alight and showed the way to the gate. I came into the road and went away. I did not know where I was going, then I remembered you."

Herdjiman looked at the clock, it pointed to quarter to twelve.

"They'll have been after you by this," said he. "That girl will have come to and she'll have told, can't help telling. Does she know where you live?"

"No. I have never mentioned Beljazi."



"All the same, folk will know; to-morrow when the hunt's up they'll have it all in their hands. Anyhow, they'll know the sort of looking man they're after, and they'll be hunting the country for you. The fisher folk here won't say a word, they aren't in love with the police, and I've got a hold on them; anyhow, they won't think of hunting in Ragusa, it's the country round they'll be going through. All the same, you can't stay in Ragusa, that's plain, and the country is no good; you must get over to the Italian side, it's your only chance." Herdjiman paused in thought.

"That's not much better. It's near two hundred kilometres to Gargano, and it's more than that to Barletta, and there's always inquiries about folk that land—all eyes and garlic those Italians. No, your only chance is to make away down towards the open sea and try and pick up a ship. Say you've been blown off the land. See! Maybe you may pick up a ship going east. It's a dog's chance, but it's the only thing."

Jean listened as he might have listened to the instruction of some shade as to whereabouts Charon's ferry might be found.

The world he had known was clean cut off from him, as by death.

What he was to do were he to find a ship and be picked up was a matter as obscure to him as the question of what was to be done on the other side of the Styx.

"It's the only thing," said Herdjiman. "Rightly or wrongly, you've killed the man in his own house. Either that, or stuck in a cell for your life—or this." And, with the brutality of the common man, even though of good heart, he put his hand to his throat and made pantomime of a man being strangled.

The Executioner !

It was Herdjiman who brought the full cold horror of this thing upon Jean suddenly like a wave. Herdjiman was no longer Herdjiman, he was Truth, utterly relentless, without sophistry, yet without malice—nay, even friendly.

Jean, looking at Herdjiman, said to himself that which is the most terrible thing a man can say to himself : “ Oh, if this could only be a dream. If I could only awake and find myself once again as I was only a few hours ago ! ”

But Herdjiman was real, he was the concretion of the whole nightmare, and he was saying in effect : “ Cast yourself into the sea of Time and Space, leave forever all you have known, it is your only chance—and not much of a chance at that.”

The vision of Karan and the old man came before the mind of Jean, like far off things unreachable, yet beckoning to him.

He must have spoken of them, for Herdjiman was now saying : “ She and the old man won't hurt, not if you leave them alone ; you wouldn't have them dragged into the mess, would you ? I'll keep an eye to them. Come you now and get your pins under you, what money have you got ? ”

The Dutch clock broke in on the question hurriedly and alarmedly, striking midnight.