

# The Magic Skin

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# 1. The Talisman

Towards the end of the month of October 1829 a young man entered the Palais-Royal just as the gaming-houses opened, agreeably to the law which protects a passion by its very nature easily excisable. He mounted the staircase of one of the gambling hells distinguished by the number 36, without too much deliberation.

"Your hat, sir, if you please?" a thin, querulous voice called out. A little old man, crouching in the darkness behind a railing, suddenly rose and exhibited his features, carved after a mean design.

As you enter a gaming-house the law despoils you of your hat at the outset. Is it by way of a parable, a divine revelation? Or by exacting some pledge or other, is not an infernal compact implied? Is it done to compel you to preserve a respectful demeanor towards those who are about to gain money of you? Or must the detective, who squats in our social sewers, know the name of your hatter, or your own, if you happen to have written it on the lining inside? Or, after all, is the measurement of your skull required for the compilation of statistics as to the cerebral capacity of gamblers? The executive is absolutely silent on this point. But be sure of this, that though you have scarcely taken a step towards the tables, your hat no more belongs to you now than you belong to yourself. Play possesses you, your fortune, your cap, your cane, your cloak.

As you go out, it will be made clear to you, by a savage irony, that Play has yet spared you something, since your property is returned. For all that, if you bring a new hat with you, you will have to pay for the knowledge that a special costume is needed for a gambler.

The evident astonishment with which the young man took a numbered tally in exchange for his hat, which was fortunately somewhat rubbed at the brim, showed clearly enough that his mind was yet untainted; and the little old man, who had wallowed from his youth up in the furious pleasures of a gambler's life, cast a dull, indifferent glance over him, in which a philosopher might have seen wretchedness lying in the hospital, the vagrant lives of ruined folk, inquests on numberless suicides, life-long penal servitude and transportations to Guazacoalco.

His pallid, lengthy visage appeared like a haggard embodiment of the passion reduced to its simplest terms. There were traces of past anguish in its wrinkles. He supported life on the glutinous soups at Darcet's, and gambled away his meagre earnings day by day. Like some old hackney which takes no heed of the strokes of the whip, nothing could move him now. The stifled groans of ruined players, as they passed out, their mute imprecations, their stupefied faces, found him impassive. He was the spirit of Play

incarnate. If the young man had noticed this sorry Cerberus, perhaps he would have said, "There is only a pack of cards in that heart of his."

The stranger did not heed this warning writ in flesh and blood, put here, no doubt, by Providence, who has set loathing on the threshold of all evil haunts. He walked boldly into the saloon, where the rattle of coin brought his senses under the dazzling spell of an agony of greed. Most likely he had been drawn thither by that most convincing of Jean Jacques' eloquent periods, which expresses, I think, this melancholy thought, "Yes, I can imagine that a man may take to gambling when he sees only his last shilling between him and death."

There is an illusion about a gambling saloon at night as vulgar as that of a bloodthirsty drama, and just as effective. The rooms are filled with players and onlookers, with poverty-stricken age, which drags itself thither in search of stimulation, with excited faces, and revels that began in wine, to end shortly in the Seine. The passion is there in full measure, but the great number of the actors prevents you from seeing the gambling-demon face to face. The evening is a harmony or chorus in which all take part, to which each instrument in the orchestra contributes his share. You would see there plenty of respectable people who have come in search of diversion, for which they pay as they pay for the pleasures of the theatre, or of gluttony, or they come hither as to some garret where they cheapen poignant regrets for three months to come.

Do you understand all the force and frenzy in a soul which impatiently waits for the opening of a gambling hell? Between the daylight gambler and the player at night there is the same difference that lies between a careless husband and the lover swooning under his lady's window. Only with morning comes the real throb of the passion and the craving in its stark horror. Then you can admire the real gambler, who has neither eaten, slept, thought, nor lived, he has so smarted under the scourge of his martingale, so suffered on the rack of his desire for a coup of trente-et-quarante. At that accursed hour you encounter eyes whose calmness terrifies you, faces that fascinate, glances that seem as if they had power to turn the cards over and consume them. The grandest hours of a gambling saloon are not the opening ones. If Spain has bull-fights, and Rome once had her gladiators, Paris waxes proud of her Palais-Royal, where the inevitable roulettes cause blood to flow in streams, and the public can have the pleasure of watching without fear of their feet slipping in it.

Take a quiet peep at the arena. How bare it looks! The paper on the walls is greasy to the height of your head, there is nothing to bring one reviving thought. There is not so much as a nail for the convenience of suicides. The floor is worn and dirty. An oblong table stands in the middle of the room, the tablecloth is worn by the friction of gold, but the straw-bottomed chairs about it indicate an odd indifference to luxury in the men who will lose their lives here in the quest of the fortune that is to put luxury within their reach.

This contradiction in humanity is seen wherever the soul reacts powerfully upon itself. The gallant would clothe his mistress in silks, would deck her out in soft Eastern fabrics, though he and she must lie on a truckle-bed. The ambitious dreamer sees himself at the

summit of power, while he slavishly prostrates himself in the mire. The tradesman stagnates in his damp, unhealthy shop, while he builds a great mansion for his son to inherit prematurely, only to be ejected from it by law proceedings at his own brother's instance.

After all, is there a less pleasing thing in the world than a house of pleasure? Singular question! Man is always at strife with himself. His present woes give the lie to his hopes; yet he looks to a future which is not his, to indemnify him for these present sufferings; setting upon all his actions the seal of inconsequence and of the weakness of his nature. We have nothing here below in full measure but misfortune.

There were several gamblers in the room already when the young man entered. Three bald-headed seniors were lounging round the green table. Imperturbable as diplomatists, those plaster-cast faces of theirs betokened blunted sensibilities, and hearts which had long forgotten how to throb, even when a woman's dowry was the stake. A young Italian, olive-hued and dark-haired, sat at one end, with his elbows on the table, seeming to listen to the presentiments of luck that dictate a gambler's "Yes" or "No." The glow of fire and gold was on that southern face. Some seven or eight onlookers stood by way of an audience, awaiting a drama composed of the strokes of chance, the faces of the actors, the circulation of coin, and the motion of the croupier's rake, much as a silent, motionless crowd watches the headsman in the Place de Greve. A tall, thin man, in a threadbare coat, held a card in one hand, and a pin in the other, to mark the numbers of Red or Black. He seemed a modern Tantalus, with all the pleasures of his epoch at his lips, a hoardless miser drawing in imaginary gains, a sane species of lunatic who consoles himself in his misery by chimerical dreams, a man who touches peril and vice as a young priest handles the unconsecrated wafer in the white mass.

One or two experts at the game, shrewd speculators, had placed themselves opposite the bank, like old convicts who have lost all fear of the hulks; they meant to try two or three coups, and then to depart at once with the expected gains, on which they lived. Two elderly waiters dawdled about with their arms folded, looking from time to time into the garden from the windows, as if to show their insignificant faces as a sign to passers-by.

The croupier and banker threw a ghastly and withering glance at the punters, and cried, in a sharp voice, "Make your game!" as the young man came in. The silence seemed to grow deeper as all heads turned curiously towards the new arrival. Who would have thought it? The jaded elders, the fossilized waiters, the onlookers, the fanatical Italian himself, felt an indefinable dread at sight of the stranger. Is he not wretched indeed who can excite pity here? Must he not be very helpless to receive sympathy, ghastly in appearance to raise a shudder in these places, where pain utters no cry, where wretchedness looks gay, and despair is decorous? Such thoughts as these produced a new emotion in these torpid hearts as the young man entered. Were not executioners known to shed tears over the fair-haired, girlish heads that had to fall at the bidding of the Revolution?

The gamblers saw at a glance a dreadful mystery in the novice's face. His young features were stamped with a melancholy grace, his looks told of unsuccess and many blighted hopes. The dull apathy of the suicide had made his forehead so deadly pale, a bitter smile carved faint lines about the corners of his mouth, and there was an abandonment about him that was painful to see. Some sort of demon sparkled in the depths of his eye, which drooped, wearied perhaps with pleasure. Could it have been dissipation that had set its foul mark on the proud face, once pure and bright, and now brought low? Any doctor seeing the yellow circles about his eyelids, and the color in his cheeks, would have set them down to some affection of the heart or lungs, while poets would have attributed them to the havoc brought by the search for knowledge and to night-vigils by the student's lamp.

But a complaint more fatal than any disease, a disease more merciless than genius or study, had drawn this young face, and had wrung a heart which dissipation, study, and sickness had scarcely disturbed. When a notorious criminal is taken to the convict's prison, the prisoners welcome him respectfully, and these evil spirits in human shape, experienced in torments, bowed before an unheard-of anguish. By the depth of the wound which met their eyes, they recognized a prince among them, by the majesty of his unspoken irony, by the refined wretchedness of his garb. The frock-coat that he wore was well cut, but his cravat was on terms so intimate with his waistcoat that no one could suspect him of underlinen. His hands, shapely as a woman's were not perfectly clean; for two days past indeed he had ceased to wear gloves. If the very croupier and the waiters shuddered, it was because some traces of the spell of innocence yet hung about his meagre, delicately-shaped form, and his scanty fair hair in its natural curls.

He looked only about twenty-five years of age, and any trace of vice in his face seemed to be there by accident. A young constitution still resisted the inroads of lubricity. Darkness and light, annihilation and existence, seemed to struggle in him, with effects of mingled beauty and terror. There he stood like some erring angel that has lost his radiance; and these emeritus-professors of vice and shame were ready to bid the novice depart, even as some toothless crone might be seized with pity for a beautiful girl who offers herself up to infamy.

The young man went straight up to the table, and, as he stood there, flung down a piece of gold which he held in his hand, without deliberation. It rolled on to the Black; then, as strong natures can, he looked calmly, if anxiously, at the croupier, as if he held useless subterfuges in scorn.

The interest this coup awakened was so great that the old gamesters laid nothing upon it; only the Italian, inspired by a gambler's enthusiasm, smiled suddenly at some thought, and punted his heap of coin against the stranger's stake.

The banker forgot to pronounce the phrases that use and wont have reduced to an inarticulate cry--"Make your game. . . . The game is made. . . . Bets are closed." The croupier spread out the cards, and seemed to wish luck to the newcomer, indifferent as he was to the losses or gains of those who took part in these sombre pleasures. Every

bystander thought he saw a drama, the closing scene of a noble life, in the fortunes of that bit of gold; and eagerly fixed his eyes on the prophetic cards; but however closely they watched the young man, they could discover not the least sign of feeling on his cool but restless face.

"Even! red wins," said the croupier officially. A dumb sort of rattle came from the Italian's throat when he saw the folded notes that the banker showered upon him, one after another. The young man only understood his calamity when the croupiers's rake was extended to sweep away his last napoleon. The ivory touched the coin with a little click, as it swept it with the speed of an arrow into the heap of gold before the bank. The stranger turned pale at the lips, and softly shut his eyes, but he unclosed them again at once, and the red color returned as he affected the airs of an Englishman, to whom life can offer no new sensation, and disappeared without the glance full of entreaty for compassion that a desperate gamester will often give the bystanders. How much can happen in a second's space; how many things depend on a throw of the die!

"That was his last cartridge, of course," said the croupier, smiling after a moment's silence, during which he picked up the coin between his finger and thumb and held it up.

"He is a cracked brain that will go and drown himself," said a frequenter of the place. He looked round about at the other players, who all knew each other.

"Bah!" said a waiter, as he took a pinch of snuff.

"If we had but followed HIS example," said an old gamester to the others, as he pointed out the Italian.

Everybody looked at the lucky player, whose hands shook as he counted his bank-notes.

"A voice seemed to whisper to me," he said. "The luck is sure to go against that young man's despair."

"He is a new hand," said the banker, "or he would have divided his money into three parts to give himself more chance."

The young man went out without asking for his hat; but the old watch-dog, who had noted its shabby condition, returned it to him without a word. The gambler mechanically gave up the tally, and went downstairs whistling *Di tanti Palpiti* so feebly, that he himself scarcely heard the delicious notes.

He found himself immediately under the arcades of the Palais-Royal, reached the Rue Saint Honore, took the direction of the Tuileries, and crossed the gardens with an undecided step. He walked as if he were in some desert, elbowed by men whom he did not see, hearing through all the voices of the crowd one voice alone--the voice of Death. He was lost in the thoughts that benumbed him at last, like the criminals who used to be

taken in carts from the Palais de Justice to the Place de Greve, where the scaffold awaited them reddened with all the blood spilt here since 1793.

There is something great and terrible about suicide. Most people's downfalls are not dangerous; they are like children who have not far to fall, and cannot injure themselves; but when a great nature is dashed down, he is bound to fall from a height. He must have been raised almost to the skies; he has caught glimpses of some heaven beyond his reach. Vehement must the storms be which compel a soul to seek for peace from the trigger of a pistol.

How much young power starves and pines away in a garret for want of a friend, for lack of a woman's consolation, in the midst of millions of fellow-creatures, in the presence of a listless crowd that is burdened by its wealth! When one remembers all this, suicide looms large. Between a self-sought death and the abundant hopes whose voices call a young man to Paris, God only knows what may intervene; what contending ideas have striven within the soul; what poems have been set aside; what moans and what despair have been repressed; what abortive masterpieces and vain endeavors! Every suicide is an awful poem of sorrow. Where will you find a work of genius floating above the seas of literature that can compare with this paragraph:

"Yesterday, at four o'clock, a young woman threw herself into the Seine from the Pont des Arts."

Dramas and romances pale before this concise Parisian phrase; so must even that old frontispiece, *The Lamentations of the glorious king of Kaernavan*, put in prison by his children, the sole remaining fragment of a lost work that drew tears from Sterne at the bare perusal--the same Sterne who deserted his own wife and family.

The stranger was beset with such thoughts as these, which passed in fragments through his mind, like tattered flags fluttering above the combat. If he set aside for a moment the burdens of consciousness and of memory, to watch the flower heads gently swayed by the breeze among the green thickets, a revulsion came over him, life struggled against the oppressive thought of suicide, and his eyes rose to the sky: gray clouds, melancholy gusts of the wind, the stormy atmosphere, all decreed that he should die.

He bent his way toward the Pont Royal, musing over the last fancies of others who had gone before him. He smiled to himself as he remembered that Lord Castlereagh had satisfied the humblest of our needs before he cut his throat, and that the academician Auger had sought for his snuff-box as he went to his death. He analyzed these extravagances, and even examined himself; for as he stood aside against the parapet to allow a porter to pass, his coat had been whitened somewhat by the contact, and he carefully brushed the dust from his sleeve, to his own surprise. He reached the middle of the arch, and looked forebodingly at the water.

"Wretched weather for drowning yourself," said a ragged old woman, who grinned at him; "isn't the Seine cold and dirty?"



His answer was a ready smile, which showed the frenzied nature of his courage; then he shivered all at once as he saw at a distance, by the door of the Tuileries, a shed with an inscription above it in letters twelve inches high: THE ROYAL HUMANE SOCIETY'S APPARATUS.

A vision of M. Dacheux rose before him, equipped by his philanthropy, calling out and setting in motion the too efficacious oars which break the heads of drowning men, if unluckily they should rise to the surface; he saw a curious crowd collecting, running for a doctor, preparing fumigations, he read the maundering paragraph in the papers, put between notes on a festivity and on the smiles of a ballet-dancer; he heard the francs counted down by the prefect of police to the watermen. As a corpse, he was worth fifteen francs; but now while he lived he was only a man of talent without patrons, without friends, without a mattress to lie on, or any one to speak a word for him--a perfect social cipher, useless to a State which gave itself no trouble about him.

A death in broad daylight seemed degrading to him; he made up his mind to die at night so as to bequeath an unrecognizable corpse to a world which had disregarded the greatness of life. He began his wanderings again, turning towards the Quai Voltaire, imitating the lagging gait of an idler seeking to kill time. As he came down the steps at the end of the bridge, his notice was attracted by the second-hand books displayed on the parapet, and he was on the point of bargaining for some. He smiled, thrust his hands philosophically into his pockets, and fell to strolling on again with a proud disdain in his manner, when he heard to his surprise some coin rattling fantastically in his pocket.

A smile of hope lit his face, and slid from his lips over his features, over his brow, and brought a joyful light to his eyes and his dark cheeks. It was a spark of happiness like one of the red dots that flit over the remains of a burnt scrap of paper; but as it is with the black ashes, so it was with his face, it became dull again when the stranger quickly drew out his hand and perceived three pennies. "Ah, kind gentleman! carita, carita; for the love of St. Catherine! only a halfpenny to buy some bread!"

A little chimney sweeper, with puffed cheeks, all black with soot, and clad in tatters, held out his hand to beg for the man's last pence.

Two paces from the little Savoyard stood an old pauvre honteux, sickly and feeble, in wretched garments of ragged druggeting, who asked in a thick, muffled voice:

"Anything you like to give, monsieur; I will pray to God for you . . ."

But the young man turned his eyes on him, and the old beggar stopped without another word, discerning in that mournful face an abandonment of wretchedness more bitter than his own.

"La carita! la carita!"

The stranger threw the coins to the old man and the child, left the footway, and turned towards the houses; the harrowing sight of the Seine fretted him beyond endurance.

"May God lengthen your days!" cried the two beggars.

As he reached the shop window of a print-seller, this man on the brink of death met a young woman alighting from a showy carriage. He looked in delight at her prettiness, at the pale face appropriately framed by the satin of her fashionable bonnet. Her slender form and graceful movements entranced him. Her skirt had been slightly raised as she stepped to the pavement, disclosing a daintily fitting white stocking over the delicate outlines beneath. The young lady went into the shop, purchased albums and sets of lithographs; giving several gold coins for them, which glittered and rang upon the counter. The young man, seemingly occupied with the prints in the window, fixed upon the fair stranger a gaze as eager as man can give, to receive in exchange an indifferent glance, such as lights by accident on a passer-by. For him it was a leave-taking of love and of woman; but his final and strenuous questioning glance was neither understood nor felt by the slight-natured woman there; her color did not rise, her eyes did not droop. What was it to her? one more piece of adulation, yet another sigh only prompted the delightful thought at night, "I looked rather well to-day."

The young man quickly turned to another picture, and only left it when she returned to her carriage. The horses started off, the final vision of luxury and refinement went under an eclipse, just as that life of his would soon do also. Slowly and sadly he followed the line of the shops, listlessly examining the specimens on view. When the shops came to an end, he reviewed the Louvre, the Institute, the towers of Notre Dame, of the Palais, the Pont des Arts; all these public monuments seemed to have taken their tone from the heavy gray sky.

Fitful gleams of light gave a foreboding look to Paris; like a pretty woman, the city has mysterious fits of ugliness or beauty. So the outer world seemed to be in a plot to steep this man about to die in a painful trance. A prey to the maleficent power which acts relaxingly upon us by the fluid circulating through our nerves, his whole frame seemed gradually to experience a dissolving process. He felt the anguish of these throes passing through him in waves, and the houses and the crowd seemed to surge to and fro in a mist before his eyes. He tried to escape the agitation wrought in his mind by the revulsions of his physical nature, and went toward the shop of a dealer in antiquities, thinking to give a treat to his senses, and to spend the interval till nightfall in bargaining over curiosities.

He sought, one might say, to regain courage and to find a stimulant, like a criminal who doubts his power to reach the scaffold. The consciousness of approaching death gave him, for the time being, the intrepidity of a duchess with a couple of lovers, so that he entered the place with an abstracted look, while his lips displayed a set smile like a drunkard's. Had not life, or rather had not death, intoxicated him? Dizziness soon overcame him again. Things appeared to him in strange colors, or as making slight

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