

A TRAGIC IDYL

BY

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A TRAGIC IDYL

CHAPTER I

LE "TOUT EUROPE"

That night (toward the end of February, 188—) a vast crowd was thronging the halls of the Casino at Monte Carlo. It was one of the momentary occasions, well known to all who have passed the winter season on the Corniche, when a sudden and prodigious afflux of composite humanity transfigures that place, ordinarily so vulgar with the brutal luxury of the people whom it satisfies. The gay madness that breaks out at Nice during the Carnival attracts to this little point of the Riviera the moving army of pleasure hunters and adventurers, while the beauty of the climate allures thousands of invalids and people weary of living, the victims of disease and of ill fortune; and on certain nights, like that on which this narrative begins, when the countless representatives of the various classes, scattered ordinarily along the coast, suddenly rush together into the gaming-house, their fantastic variety of character appears in all its startling incongruities, with the aspect of a cosmopolitan pandemonium, dazzling and sinister, deafening and tragical, ridiculous and painful, strewn with all the wrecks of luxury and vice of every country and of every class, the victims of every misfortune and disaster. In this stifling atmosphere, amid the glitter of insolent and ignoble wealth, the ancient monarchies were represented by three princes of the house of Bourbon, and the modern by two grand-nephews of Bonaparte, all five recognizable by their profiles, which were reproduced on hundreds of the gold and silver coins rolling before them on the green tables.

Neither these princes nor their neighbors noticed the presence at one of the tables of a man who had borne the title of King in one of the states improvised on the Balkan Peninsula. Men had fought for this man, men had died for him, but his royal interests seemed now to be restricted to the pasteboard monarchs on the table of *trente-et-quarante*. And king and princes, grand-nephews and cousins of emperors, in the promiscuity of this international resort, elbowed noblemen whose ancestors had served or betrayed their own; and these lords elbowed the sons of tradesmen, dressed like them, nourished like them, amused like them; and these *bourgeois* brushed against celebrated artists—here the most famous of our portrait painters, there a well-known singer, there an illustrious writer—while fashionable women mingled with this crowd in toilets which rivalled in splendor those of the *demi-monde*. And other men poured in continually, and other women, and especially others of the *demi-monde*. Through the door they streamed in endlessly, of all categories, from the creature with hungry eyes and the face of a criminal, in search of some fortunate gambler whose substance she might absorb as a spider does that of a fly, to the insolent and triumphant devourer of fortunes, who stakes twenty-five louis on every turn of the roulette and wears in her ears diamonds worth 30,000f. These contrasts formed here and there a picture even more striking and significant; for example, between two of these venders of love, their complexion painted with ceruse and with rouge, their eyes depraved by luxury and greed, a young woman, almost a child, recently married and passing through Monte Carlo on her wedding journey, stretched forth her fresh, pretty face with a smile of innocence and roguish curiosity.

Further on, the amateurs of political philosophy might have seen one of the great Israelitish bankers of Paris placing his stake

beside that of the bitterest of socialist pamphleteers. Not far from them a young consumptive, whose white face spotted with purple, hollow cheeks, burning eyes, and fleshless hands announced the fast approach of death, was seated beside a "sporting" man, whose ruddy complexion, broad shoulders, and herculean muscles seemed to promise eighty years of life. The white glare of the electric globes along the ceiling and the walls, and the yellow light that radiated from the lamps suspended above the tables, falling upon the faces of this swarming crowd revealed differences no less extraordinary of race and origin. Russian faces, broad and heavy, powerfully, almost savagely Asiatic, were mingled with Italian physiognomies, of a Latin fineness and of a modelling that recalled the elegance of ancient portraits. German heads, thick, and, as it were, rough-hewn, with an expression of mingled cunning and good nature, alternated with Parisian heads, intelligent and dissipated, which suggested the boulevard and the *couloirs* of the *Variétés*. Red and energetic profiles of Englishmen and Americans sketched their vigorous outlines, evincing the habit of exercise, long exposure to the tanning air and also the daily intoxication of alcohol; while exotic faces, by the animation of their eyes and mouths, by the warm tones of their complexions, evoked visions of other climes, of far-off countries, of fortunes made in the antipodes, in those mysterious regions which our fathers called simply *the isles*. And money, money, endless money flowed from this crowd on to the green tables, whose number had been increased since the previous day. Although the hands of the great clock over the entrance marked a quarter to ten, the visitors became at every moment more numerous. It was not the sound of conversation that was audible in these rooms, but the noise of footsteps moving about the tables, which stood firm amid this surging crowd like flat rocks on the mounting sea, motionless under the lash of the waves.

The noise of footsteps was accompanied by another no less continuous—the clinking of gold and silver coins, which one could hear falling, piling, separating, living, in fact, with the sonorous and rapid life which they have under the rake of the *croupier*. The rattle of the balls in the roulette rooms formed a mechanical accompaniment to the formulae, mechanically repeated, in which the words "rouge" and "noir," "pair" and "impair," "passe" and "manque" recurred with oracular impassibility. And, still more monotonous, from the tables of *trente-et-quarante* which lacked the rattle of the wheel, other formulæ arose incessantly—"Quatre, deux. Rouge gagne et la couleur—Cinq, neuf. Rouge perd, la couleur gagne—Deux, deux. Après—" At the sight of the columns of napoleons and hundred-franc pieces rising and falling on the ten or twelve tables, the bank-notes of one hundred, five hundred, and a thousand francs, unfolded and heaped up; the full dress of the men, the jewels of the women, the evident prodigality of all these people, one felt the gaming-house vibrating with a frenzy other than that of loss and gain. One breathed in the fever of luxury, the excess and abuse of pleasure. On nights like this gold seems to have no longer any value, so fast is it won and lost on these tables, so wildly is it spent in the hotels, restaurants, and villas which crowd around the Casino like the houses of a watering-place around the spring. The beauty of women is here too tempting and accessible, pleasure is too abundant, the climate too soft, comfort is too easy. The paradise of brutal refinement installed here on this flower-clad rock is hostile to calm enjoyment and to cool reflection. The giddiness which it imparts to the passing guest has its crisis of intensity, and this night was one of them. It had something of the Kermess about it, and of Babylonian furore. Nor did it lack even the *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* of the Biblical feast, for the despatches posted on one of the columns in the vestibule recounted the bloody

episode of a strike that had broken out since the previous day in the mining district of the North. The telegram told of the firing of the troops, of workmen killed, and of an engineer murdered for revenge. But who pictured in concrete images the details of this tragic despatch? Who in this crowd, more and more athirst for pleasure, realized its revolutionary menace? The gold and silver coins continued to roll, the bank-notes to unfold and quiver, the *croupiers* to cry "*Faites vos jeux*" and "*Rien ne va plus*," the balls to spin around the wheels, the cards to fall on the green cloth, the rakes to grasp the money of the poor unfortunates, and each one to follow his mania for gambling or for luxury, his fancy for snobbery and vanity, or the caprice of his *ennui*. For how many different fancies this strange palace, with its doors like those of the Alhambra, served as the theatre. On this night of feverish excitement it was lending one of its divans to the preparatives for a most fantastic adventure, the mere announcement of which recalls the advertisements of the *Opéra Comique*, the music of our great-grandmothers, and the forgotten name of Cimarosa—a secret marriage.

The group of three persons who had been compelled to choose a corner of this mundane caravansary for that romantic conspiracy was composed of a young man and two women. The young man appeared to be thirty-two years old. That was also the age of one of the women, who was, as they say in America, the chaperon of the other, a girl ten years younger. To complete the paradoxical character of this matrimonial conference in the long room that separates the roulette halls from those of the *trente-et-quarante*, it is only necessary to add that the young girl, an American, was in reality chaperoning the official chaperon, and that the project of this secret marriage did not concern her in the least. She was seated

at the end of the divan, unmistakably a sentinel, while her friend and the young man talked together. Her beautiful brown eyes fearlessly scrutinized the passing crowd with the energy and confidence natural to a girl of the United States, accustomed from her childhood to realize her individuality, and who, if she dispenses with certain conventionalities, at least knows why, and is not ashamed of it. She was beautiful, with that beauty already so ripe which, accentuated by a toilet almost too fashionable, gives to so many American women the air of a creature on exhibition. Her features were delicate, even too small for the powerful moulding of her face and the strength of her chin. On her thick, chestnut-colored hair she wore a round hat of black velvet, with a rim too wide and with plumes too high, which rose in the back over a *cachepeigne* of artificial orchids. It was the hat of a young girl and a hat for the afternoon, but, in its excess, it was quite in keeping with her dress of glossy cloth and her corsage, or rather cuirass, trimmed with silver, which the most celebrated couturier in Paris had designed for her. Thus adorned, and with the superabundance of jewellery that accompanied this toilet, Miss Florence Marsh—that was her name—might have passed for anything in the world except what she really was—the most straightforward and honest of young girls, helping to prepare for the conjugal happiness of a woman equally honest and irreproachable. This woman was the Marquise Andryana Bonnacorsi, a Venetian by birth, belonging to the ancient and illustrious dogal family of the Navagero. Her dress, though it, too, came from Paris, bore the marks of that taste for tinsel peculiar to Italian finery, which gives it that *fufu* air, to employ an untranslatable term, with which our provincial *bourgeoisie* ridicules these unsubstantial ornaments. A flock of butterflies in black jet rested upon her black satin dress. The same butterflies appeared on the satin of her small shoes and among the

pink roses of her hat, above her beautiful light hair of that red gold so dear to the painters of her country. The voluptuous splendor of her complexion, the nobility of her somewhat heavy features, the precocious development of her bust accorded well with her origin, and even more the soft blue of her eyes, in which there floated all the passion and languor of the lagoons. The light of her blue eyes enveloped the young man who was now speaking to her, and with whom she was visibly in love, madly in love. He, in the full maturity of his strength, justified that adoration more sensual than sentimental. He was a remarkable type of the manly beauty peculiar to our Provence, which attests that for centuries it was the land where the Roman race left its deepest imprint. His short, black hair, over the straight, white forehead; his pointed, slightly curling beard, the firm line of his nose, and the deep curve of his brows, gave him a profile like that of a medal, which would have been severe, if all the energy of a born lover had not burned in his soft eyes, and all the gayety of the South sparkled in his smile. His robust and supple physique could be divined even under his coat and white waistcoat, and these signs of animal health were so evident, his somewhat excessive gestures seemed to evince such exuberance, such perfect joy in living, that one failed to notice how impenetrable were those ardent eyes, how shrewd the smiling mouth, and how all the signs of cunning calculation were imprinted on that face, so reflective under its mobility.

Two kinds of men thus excel in utilizing their defects to the profit of their interest—the German, who shelters his diplomacy behind his apparent dulness, and the Provençal, who conceals his beneath his instinctive petulance, and who appears, as he really is on the surface, an enthusiast, while he is executing some plan as solidly and coldly realistic as though he were a Scotchman of the

Border. Who would have guessed that on this lounge of the Casino, while he talked so gayly with his habitual abandon, the Viscount de Corancez—he belonged to a family near Tarascon, of the least authentic title to nobility—was just bringing to a successful conclusion the most audacious, the most improbable, and the most carefully studied of intrigues? But who in all the world suspected the real character of this "careless Marius," as he was called by his father, the old vine-grower of Tarascon, whom his compatriots had seen die in despair at the eternal debts of his son? Certainly not these men of Tarascon and the Rhone valley, who had seen the beautiful vines, so well cared for and regenerated by the father, disappear, vineyard by vineyard, to satisfy the follies of the heir at Paris. Nor was his real character known to the companions of his folly, the Casal, the Vardes, the Machault, all be noted men of pleasure of the time, who had clearly recognized the sensuality and vanity of the Southerner, but not his cunning, and who had classed him once ad for all among the provincials destined to disappear after shining like a meteor in the firmament of Paris. No one had perceived in this joyous companion, this gourmand ready for every pleasure, for a supper, for cards, for a love-affair, the practical philosopher who should when the hour arrived nimbly change his weapon. And the hour had struck several months ago; of the 600,000f. left him by his father scarcely 40,000 remained, and this winter the supple Southerner had begun to execute the programme of is thirty-second year—a successful marriage. The originality of this project lay in the peculiar conditions he affixed to it. In the first place, he had perceived that, even if enriched by the most fortunate marriage, his situation at Paris would never be what he wished. His defeat at an aristocratic club, to which he had attempted to gain admittance, trusting of certain influence imprudently offered and accepted, had shown him the difference

between mere comradeship and a solid standing in society. Two or three visits to Nice had revealed the cosmopolitan world to him, and, with his superior cleverness, he had divined its resources. He had resolved to marry some stranger who had a good standing in the society of Europe. He dreamed of passing the winter on the coast, the summer in the Alps, the hunting season in Scotland, the autumn on his wife's estate, and a few festive weeks in Paris in the spring. This plan of existence presupposed that his wife should not be a mere young girl. Corancez wished her to be a widow, older than himself if need be, and yet still beautiful in her autumn. As he based his hopes of success mainly upon his youthful and handsome appearance, it was desirable that the matrimonial labors should not be too severe. An Italian Marquise, belonging by birth to the highest Venetian aristocracy, the widow of a nobleman, left with an income of 200,000f., irreproachable in character, and devotedly religious, which would save her from any love-affairs unsanctioned by marriage, and nevertheless led by the influence of her Anglomaniac brother into cosmopolitan life, was the ideal of all his hopes, embodied as though by enchantment. But all the apples of Hesperides have their dragon, and the mythical monster was in this case represented by the brother, the Count Alvisè Navagero, a doubtful personage under his snobbish exterior, who well understood how to keep for his own use the millions of his deceased brother-in-law, Francesco Bonnacorsi. How had the Provençal trickery eluded the Venetian watchfulness? Even to this day, when those events are things of the past, the five o'clock *habitués* of the yacht club at Cannes confess themselves unable to explain it, such astuteness had the ingenious Corancez employed in preparing the mine without arousing a suspicion of his subterranean labor. And four short months had sufficed. Through an inner conflict of emotions and of scruples, of timidity and

passion, the Marquise Andryana had been brought to accept the idea of a secret marriage, finding no other way to satisfy the ardor with which she now burned, the exigencies of her religion, and her fear of her brother, which grew with her love for Corancez. She trembled now at the thought of it, although she knew this redoubtable guardian to be engaged in risking at a near table the thousand-franc notes she had given to be rid of him. Alwise was staking his money with the thoughtfulness and care of an old gambler who had already been once ruined by cards, unaware that within a few yards of him another game that concerned him was being played, and a fortune was at stake which he, like a perfect parasite, considered as his own. It was not simply at stake, it was lost; for the romantic plan invented by Corancez to fasten an inseparable bond between the Marquise and himself was about to be consummated; the two lovers had just settled upon the place and time and details.

"And now," concluded Marius, "*rien ne va plus*, as they say in roulette. We have only to wait patiently for two weeks.—I believe we have not forgotten anything."

"But I am so afraid of some mischance," said the Marquise Andryana, softly shaking her blond head, the black butterflies trembling on her hat. "If Marsh changes the date of his yachting party?"

"You will telegraph me," said Corancez, "and I will meet you at Genoa another day.—Anyhow, Marsh will not change the date. It was the Baroness Ely who chose the 14th, and the wife of an archduke, though morganatic, is not to be disappointed, even were Marsh such a democrat as the western ranchman, who said once, with a strong handshake to an Infanta of Spain, 'Very glad to meet

you, Infanta.' It was Marsh himself who told me this, and you remember his disgust, don't you, Miss Florence?"

"My uncle is as punctual in his pleasures as in his business," replied the American girl; "and since the Baroness Ely is in the party—"

"But if Alvisé changes his mind and sails with us?" said the Venetian.

"Ah, Marquise, Marquise," Corancez cried, "what dismal forebodings. You forget that the Count Alvisé is invited to the *Dalilah*, the yacht of Lord Herbert Bohun, to meet H.K.H. *Alberto Edoardo*, Prince of Wales, and Navagero miss that appointment? Never."

In light mockery at his future brother-in-law's Anglomania, he imitated the British accent which the Count affected, with a mimicry so gay that the Marquise could not help exclaiming:—

"Che carino!"

And with her fan she stroked the hand of her *fiancé*. Notwithstanding his pleasantry at the expense of the domestic tyrant, at which the Marquise was ready to smile, much as she trembled in his presence, Corancez seemed to think the conversation dangerous, for he attempted to bring it to an end:—

"I do not wish my happiness to cost you a moment of worry, and it will not. I can predict hour by hour everything that will take place on the 14th, and you will see if your friend is not a prophet. You know what a lucky line I have here," he added, showing the palm of his hand, "and you know what I have read in your own pretty hand."

It was one of his tricks, and at the same time one of his own superstitions, to play the rôle of a parlor wizard and chiromancer, and he continued with that tone of certitude that imparts firmness to the irresolute:—

"You will have a magnificent passage to Genoa. You will find me you know where with Dom Fortunato Lagumina, for the old *abbé* is eager to act as chaplain in this *matrimonio segreto*. You will return to Cannes without any one in the world suspecting that *Mme. la Marquise Bonnacorsi* has become *Mme. la Vicomtesse de Corancez*, excepting the Vicomte, who will find some way of making our little *combinazione* acceptable to the good Alvisé. Until then you will write to me at Genoa, *poste restante*, and I to you, in care of our dear Miss Florence."

"Whose name is also Miss Prudence," said the young girl, "and she thinks you are talking too long for conspirators. Beware of pickpockets," she added in English.

This was the signal agreed upon to warn them of the approach of some acquaintance.

"Bah, that pickpocket is not dangerous," said Corancez, following the direction of Miss Marsh's fan, and recognizing the person who had attracted her attention. "It is Pierre Hautefeuille, my old friend. He doesn't even notice us. Marquise, do you wish to see a lover desperate at not finding his loved one? And to think that I should be like him," he added, in a lower tone, "if you were not here to intoxicate me with your beauty." Then, raising his voice, "Watch him sit down on that lounge in the corner, unconscious of the three pairs of eyes that are observing him. A ruined gambler

might blow out his brains beside him and he would not turn his head. He would not even hear."

The young man had at this moment an air of absorption so profound, so complete, that he justified the laughing raillery of Corancez. If the plot of a secret marriage, mapped out in these surroundings and amid this crowd, appear strangely paradoxical, the reveries of this man whom Corancez had called his "old friend"—they had been at school together in Paris for two years—were still stranger and more paradoxical. The contrast was too strong between the crowd swarming around Pierre Hautefeuille and the hypnotism that appeared to be upon him. Evidently the two thousand people scattered through these rooms ceased to exist for him as soon as he had discovered the absence of a certain person. And who could this be if not a woman? The disappointed lover had fallen, rather than seated himself, upon the lounge in front of Corancez and his fellow-conspirators. With his elbow on the arm of the divan, he pressed his hand over his forehead, disconsolately. His slender fingers, pushing back his hair, disclosed the noble outline of his brow, revealed his profile, the slightly arched nose, the severe lips, whose proud expression would have been almost fierce were it not for the tender softness of his eyes. This look of strangely intense meditation in a face so exhausted and pale, with its small, dark mustache, gave him a resemblance to the classic portrait of Louis XIII. in his youth. His narrow shoulders, his slightly angular limbs, the evident delicacy of his whole body indicated one of those fragile organizations whose force lies wholly in the nerves, a physique with no vital power of resistance, ravaged eternally by emotions, down to the obscure and quivering centre of consciousness, and as easily exhausted by sentiment as muscular natures are by action and sensation. Although Pierre

Hautefeuille was, in his dress and manner, indistinguishable from Corancez and the countless men of pleasure in the rooms, yet either his physiognomy was very deceptive or he did not belong to the same race morally as these cavaliers of the white waistcoat and the varnished pumps, who encircled the ladies dressed like *demi-mondaines*, and the *demi-mondaines* dressed like ladies, or crowded around the tables, amid the throng of gentlemen and swindlers. The melancholy in the curve of his lips and in his tired eyelids revealed a sadness, not momentary, but habitual, an abiding gloom, and if it were true that he had come to this place in search of a woman whom he loved, this sadness was too naturally explained. He must suffer from the life that this woman was leading, from her surroundings, her pleasures, her habits, her inconsistencies—suffer even to the extent of illness, and, perhaps, without knowing why, for he had not the eyes that judge of one they love. In any case, if he was, as Corancez said, a lover, he was certainly not a successful one. His face showed neither the pride nor the bitterness of a man to whom the loved woman has given herself, and who believes in her or suspects her. Even the simplicity with which he indulged his reveries in the midst of this crowd and on the lounge of a gaming-house was enough to prove a youthfulness of heart and imagination rare at his age. Corancez's companions were struck at the same time with this naïve contrast, and each made to herself a little exclamation in her native tongue:—

"*Com'è simpatico*," murmured the Italian.

"*Oh, you dear boy*," said Miss Florence.

"And with whom is he in love?" they asked together.

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