

OUR LADY OF DARKNESS

A NOVEL

BY
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EPIGRAPH.

“She is the defier of God. She is also the mother of lunacies, and the suggestress of suicides. Deep lie the roots of her power; but narrow is the nation that she rules. For she can approach only those in whom a profound nature has been upheaved by central convulsions; in whom the heart trembles, and the brain rocks under conspiracies of tempest from without and tempest from within. ... And her name is Mater Tenebrarum--Our Lady of Darkness.”—DE QUINCEY.

OUR LADY OF DARKNESS.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

FROM two till four o'clock on any summer afternoon during the penultimate decade of the last century, the Right Honourable Gustavus Hilary George, third Viscount Murk, Baron Brindle and Knight of the Stews, with orders of demerit innumerable—and, over his quarterings, that bar-sinister which would appear to be designed for emphasis of the fact that the word *rank* has a double meaning—might be seen (in emulation of a more notable belswagger) ogling the ladies from the verandah of his house in Cavendish Square. That this, his lordship's daily habit, was rather the expression of an ineradicable self-complacency than its own justification by results, the appearance of the withered old applejohn himself gave testimony. For here, in truth, was a very *doyen* of dandy-cocks—a last infirmity of fribbles—a macaroni with a cuticle so hardened by the paint and powder of near fourscore years as to be impervious to the shafts of ridicule. He would blow a kiss along the palm of his palsied hand, and never misdoubt the sure flight of this missive, though his unmanageable wrist should beat a tattoo on his nose the while; he would leer through quizzing-glasses of a power to exhibit in horrible accent the rheum of his eyes; he would indite musky *billets-doux*, like meteorological charts, to Dolly or Dorine, and, forgetting their direction when despatched, would simper over the quiddling replies as if they were archly amorous solicitations. Upon the truth that is stranger than fiction he had looked all his life as upon an

outer barbarian, the measure of whose originality was merely the measure of uncouthness. Nature, in fact, was a dealer of ridiculous limitations; art, a merchant of inexhaustible surprises. Vanity! he would quote one fifty instances in support of the fact that it was the spring-head of all history. Selfishness! was it not the first condition of organic existence? Make-believe! the whole world's system of government, from royalty to rags, was founded upon it. Therefore he constituted himself understudy to his great prototype of Queensberry; and therefore he could actually welcome the loss or deterioration of anything bodily and personal for the reason that it presented him with the opportunity to substitute mechanical perfection for natural deficiency. Perhaps at no period of his life had he so realised his ideal of existence as when, upon his seventy-seventh year, he found himself false—inside and out—from top to toe.

“Death,” he chuckled, “will be devilish put to it to stab me in a vital part.”

He said this to his grand-nephew, the orphaned heir-apparent to his title and moderate estates and to nothing else that he valued.

The young man was, indeed, his uncle's very antithesis—his butt, his foil, his aggravation. He, the nephew, considered no doubt that he held a brief for the other side (truth to oneself, we will call it); and he was never at great pains to disguise his contempt of a certain order of licence. Cold, dry, austere, he had yet that observant faculty that, conceiving of circumstance, may fall pregnant with either justice or inhumanity. At present, from the height of his twenty-five years, he looked with a tolerant serenity into the arena of struggling passions.

“This is all vastly foolish,” was his superior reflection. “Am I destined to make a practice of turning my thumb up or down?”

Now, on a certain day of '88, he walked into the house in Cavendish Square and joined his unvenerable elder on the balcony.

“Give me the parasol, Jepps,” said he. “I will hold it over Lord Murk’s head.”

The man obeyed, and withdrew. The uncle turned himself about, with a little feint of protest.

“Well,” he said resignedly, “your chocolate makes a pretty foil to my azure; and if you must dress like an attorney’s clerk, you hev at least the unspeakable satisfaction of posing as background to a gentleman.”

His glasses dangled from his neck by a broad black ribbon. He lifted them as he spoke, and coned a passing face.

“Egad!” said he, involuntarily extending his left hand as if to deprecate interruption, “what a form! What a ravishing and seductive elegance! Strake me, Ned, but if thou wert other than a bran-stuffed jackalent, I’d send thee thither to canvass for me.”

He scratched his chin testily with one from several little cocked-hat notes that lay on a chair at his side. His fingers were steeped to the knuckles in gems; his cheeks, plastered with chalk and rouge, looked in texture like the dinted covering of honeycomb. Now and again he would shoot at his young relative a covert glance of extreme dislike.

“Rat thee, Ned!” he exclaimed suddenly; “thou hast a devilish face!”

“’Tis no index to my character, then, sir, I can assure you.”

“You needn’t, egad! There’s a shrewd measure of reserve in these matters. Show me a face that’s an index and I’ll show you an ass. But I’d like to learn, as a mere question of curiasity, why you persist in dressing like a cit, eating at beef ordinaries, and sleeping at some demned low tavern over against the Cock and Pye ditch?”

“Sure, sir, in this connection at least, you’ll grant me the authority of fashion?”

“Fashion! Paris fashion! Franklin fashion! But it’s not for the heir to an English viscountcy to model himself on a Yankee tallow-chandler.”

“I model myself on the principles of independence, sir.”

“Principles, quotha! Why, ’od rat me, Ned, you make me sick. Principles of independence are like other principals, I presume—clamorous for high rates of interest.”

“I think not, indeed.”

“Do you, indeed? But you’re a convert to the new religion, and rabid, of course; and a mighty pretty set of priests you’ve got to expound you your gospels.”

“Who, for an instance?”

The uncle leered round viciously. When he was moved to raise his voice, old age piped in him like winter in an empty house.

“I don’t know why I call you Ned,” he protested peevishly. “I don’t feel it, and it fits you worse than your cravat. Who, for an instance, Mr Edward Murk? Why, a defaulting exciseman for one,

a reskel by the name of Paine, that writ a pamphlet on Common Sense to prove himself devoid of it.”

“According to the point of view.”

“Oh, I cry you pardon, sir! I judge from a less exalted one than this patriarch of principles here.”

“But Voltaire—Diderot, my lord?”

“Gads my life! And now you hev me! A school of incontinent rakes to reform the warld! And not a man of ’em, I vow, but had drained his last glass of pleasure before he set to disparaging the feast.”

The nephew was silent. What, indeed, would it profit him to answer? He looked, with a passionless scrutiny, at the face so near his own. He could have thought that the old wood, the old block, had shrunk beneath its veneer, and he had an odd temptation to prod it with his finger and see if it would crackle.

“Oxford,” snapped his lordship, “is the very market-garden of self-sufficiency. Thou needst a power of weeding, nephew.”

“Oh, it’s possible, sir; only I would clear the ground myself.”

“Indeed! And how would you set about it?”

“By observing and selecting, that is all; by forming independent judgments uninfluenced by the respect of position; by assuming continence and sobriety to be the first conditions of happiness; by analysing impressions and restraining impulse; by studying what to chip away from the block out of which I intend to shape my own character, with the world for model.”

“I see, I see. A smug modest programme, i’ faith. I’d not have thy frog’s blood, Ned, though it meant another twenty years of life to me. And so you’ll do all this before you step into my shoes—and may the devil wedge them on thy feet!”

“You are bitter, sir. I think, perhaps, you misconstrue me. I’m no fanatic of prudery, but an earnest student of happiness. Were I to convince myself that yours was the highest expression of this, I would not hesitate to become your convert.”

“I’d not ask thee, thou chilly put. Hadst thou been my son, ’twere different. But thou’st got thine independent jointure, and thou’lt go thy ways—over the Continent, as I understand,—not making the Grand Tour like a gentleman of position, but joggling it in diligences, faugh! or stumping on thy soles like a demned brawny pedlar. And what is to be thy equipment for the adventure?”

“A fair knowledge of French, a roll of canvas, and a case of colours.”

“Cry you mercy, sir; I’d forgot you were an artist. Wilt thou paint me some naked women?”

“Ay, sir, and see no pleasant shame in it.”

“Ned, Ned—give me a hope of thee!”

“Oh, sir, believe me, ’tis only when woman begins to clothe herself that indelicacy is suggested. A hat, a pair of shoes, a shoulder-strap even, would have made a jill-flirt of Godiva.”

“H’mph! Looked at from my standpoint, that’s the first commendable thing thou’st said. But it’s a monstrous

ungentlemanly occupation, Ned; and that, no doubt, is the reason that moves thee to it.”

“No, sir; but the reason that a painter, more than another, has the opportunity to arrest and record for private analysis what is of its nature fugitive and perishable. His canvases, indeed, should be his text-book, his confessor, and his mentor.”

“Oh, spare me, Parson! Thou shalt go cully my neighbour here with thy plaguey texts. They’ll fit him like a skin glove.”

“What neighbour, sir?”

“Him that sold his brush to Charlie Greville’s mistress, a grim little toad—Romney by name—that my Lord Thurlow pits against Reynolds for something better than a whore’s sign-painter.”

“Well, sir, doubtless the man will learn to read himself in his work, and to profit by the lesson.”

“Master Ned Parson, when do you go? It cannot be too soon for me.”

“I may start at any moment.”

“Heaven be praised! And whither?”

“Possibly by way of the Low Countries at the outset. Will your lordship give me some letters of introduction?”

“What! Your independence doesn’t strake at that?”

“You greatly misapprehend me, sir. I go to seek mental, not bodily discipline; chastisement, as a forcing medium, ceases of its effect with the second age of reason.”

“And that you have come to, I presume. Go to the Low Countries, i’ Gad’s name, and find your level there! I’ll give you fifty recommendations, and trust to procure you a year’s hospitality from each. Only, one word in your ear, Ned: if you bring back a prig to wife, I’ll hev the two of ye poisoned, if I hang for it.”

The nephew condescended to a smile of some amused toleration.

“My marriage, when it occurs,” said he, “will mark a simple period in the evolution of my character. That, it may be easily understood, might require a foil to its processes of development, as a hen swallows gravel to assist her digestion. You need feel no surprise, sir, if in the end I marry a properly wicked woman.”

“Egad! ’tis my devout hope you will, and that she’ll brain you with that demned Encyclopedia that you get all your gallimaufry about equality from. Call back Jepps, and I’ll dictate the letters.”

CHAPTER II.

ON a supremely hot noon of August, Mr Edward Murk, walking leisurely along a road pounded and compounded of small coal, came down towards the ancient city of Liége, and paused at a vantage-point to take in the prospect. This was a fair enough one to any vision, and fair in the extreme to eyes so long drilled to the interminable perspectives of Flanders—to loveless dykes, to canals like sleek ingots of glass, to stretched ribbons of highways tapering to a flat horizon—as that a tumulus would seem as sweet a thing for them to rest on as a woman's bosom. Now his sight, reining up against hills, gave him a certain emotion of surprise, such as he might have felt if a familiar hunter had unexpectedly shied at a hedgerow.

He stood a little above the town, looking over and beyond it. In the middle-distance of his picture—pulled into the soft arms of hills that, melting to their own embrace, became mere swimming banks of mist—floated a prismatic blot of water—the vista of the Meuse—dinted like an opal with shadowy reflections, and lit with sudden sparks in dreamy places. Thence, nearer, a greystone bridge—its arches glazed, he could have thought, with mother-of-pearl windows, like a Chinese model in ivory—bestrode the river channel, seeming to dam back, against his foreground, an accumulated litter of wall and roof and gable, that choked the town reaches, and, breaking away piecemeal, stranded its jetsam all down the valley. Here and there fair steeples stood up from the litter; here and there, in his close neighbourhood, gaunt chimney-stocks exhaled a languid smoke, like tree trunks blasted in a forest fire.

Some distance to his left a pretty lofty eminence, that broke at its summit into a fret of turret and escarpment, stood sentinel over the ages; while below this, and nearer at hand, the great block of an episcopal palace sprouted from a rocky plateau, the velvet slopes of which trailed downwards into the very hands of the city.

“The bishop and his train-bearers,” thought Mr Murk. “The town holds up the skirts of the palace. That must all be changed by-and-by. But I confess I should like to record a little of the picturesqueness of life before the roller of equality is dragged over the continents.”

He had out his tools then and there, and essayed to give some expression to his mood. The sun crackled in his brain; a pug of a child, in a scarlet linsey petticoat, came and sniffed beside him, offending his ears and his eyes; a dawdling cart mounting the hill lurched into his perspective and blotted out its details foot by foot. Down below, in his farther foreground, a cluster of buildings, lying under a church-tower in a bath of shadow, invited him as if to a plunge into cool waters. He glanced crossly at the obtrusive child, collected his traps, and strode down the hill.

At its foot, however, he seemed to come upon the actual furnace-floor of noon—a broad *Place* that bickered, as it were, throughout its length with iridescent embers. These were figured in crates of Russian cranberries glowing like braziers, in pomegranates bleeding fire, in burning globes of oranges, in apricots pearly-pink as balls of white-hot glass; and over all, the long looped awnings of olive and stone-blue and cinnamon served to the emphasising of such a galaxy of hot dyes as made a core of flame in the heart of the blazing city.

The close air prickled with a multitudinous patter of voices like blisters of fat breaking on a grill. Old Burgundian houses—baked to a terra-sienna, drowsing and nodding as they took the warmth about their knees—retained and multiplied the heat like the walls of an oven. The shop windows were so many burning-glasses; the market-women fried amongst their cabbages like bubble-and-squeak; the very dogs of draught, hauling their gridirons of carts, had red-hot cinders for tongues. There seemed in the whole width of the square no shadow of which a devil could have taken solace.

Exhaling some little of the breath that remained to him in an appropriately volcanic interjection, Ned mounted the steps of the church he had looked down upon, brushed past the outstretched hand of a fly-blown beggar, and dived into the sequestered obscurity of amber-scented aisles.

Here the immediate fall of temperature took him by the throat like a shower-bath. “If I shiver,” he thought, “there is a goose walking over my grave.” So he stood still and hugged himself till his blood was accommodated to the change. Then he penetrated into the heart of the place.

He had visited many churches in the course of his travels, dispassionately, but with no irreverence. It interested him no less to note the expressions of faith than of faces. Generally, it seemed to him, religious ideals were not transmissible. There was seldom evidence that the spirit that had conceived and executed some noble monument yet informed its own work through tradition. The builders of cathedrals wrought, it was obvious, for little clans that, through all the ages, had never learned the respect of soul. They, the latter, had stuffed their heritages with trash, because their religion must come home to them in the homely sense. They could

not think but that the God of their understanding must be gratified to have His houses adorned after the fashion of the best parlour.

Now, to see a fine interior vulgarised by the introduction of barbaric images, of artificial flowers, and of pictures hung in incongruous places, offended Mr Murk as a fooling elephant in a circus offended him. He recognised and condemned the solecism in the present instance, yet at the same time was conscious of an atmosphere foreign to his accustomed experience—an atmosphere so like the faint breath of a revived paganism that he looked about him in wonder to see whence it emanated.

There could be, however, no doubt as to its source. The whole church was a grove of orange, oleander, and myrtle trees. They stood in tubs, filling the intercolumniations of the stone avenues, climbing the steps of the altar, thronging about the pulpit. The quiet air held their fragrance like smoke. They could fatten and bloom unvexed of any wind but the sweet gales blown from the organ.

And even as Ned looked, this wind rose and wooed them. Some one was at the keys, and the soft diapasons flowed forth and rolled in thunder along the roof.

The young man strolled down the nave. Music of itself held no particular charms for him. Its value here was in its subscription to other influences—to the cool perfume of flowers, to the sense of serene isolation, to the feeling of mysticism engendered of foggy vastness traversed by the soft moted dazzle of sunbeams. Such, spanning gulfs of shadow, propping the gross mechanism of the organ itself, seemed the very fabric of which the floating harmonies were compound. There needed only a living expression

of this poem of mingled scent and sound and colour, and to Ned this was vouchsafed of a sudden, in a luminous corner he came upon, where a painted statue of the Virgin standing sentry in a niche looked down upon a figure prostrate before it in devotion.

A little lamp, burning with a motionless light like a carbuncle, was laid at the Mother's feet. About her shoulders, suspended from the neighbouring walls, were a half-dozen certificates of *miracles approuvés*—decorated placards recording the processes and dates, some of them quite recent, of extraordinary recoveries. One of these related how to a Marie Cornelis was restored the sight of an eye that had been skewered by a thorn. Faith here had at least made its appeal in a sure direction. Who could forget how that other woman had worn a crown of thorns about her heart?

Now the gazer would have liked to know what manifestation of the supernatural was craved by the young girl, fair and quiet as the image itself, who knelt before the shrine. She, this *dévote*, reverencing, with her mouth pressed to the clasped knuckles of her hands, had so much of the Madonna in her own appearance as to suggest that she might perform, rather than demand, miracles. Her eyes—Ned fancied, but could not convince himself—were closed, as in a rapture of piety. She was very pure and colourless, apart from an accidentalism of tinted rays; for over her soft brown hair, from which a folded chaperon of white linen had slipped backwards, wings of parti-coloured light, entering through a stained window, played like butterflies. Lower down, the violet haze that slept upon her cheek gave her something of a phantasmal character; but her fingers were steeped in crimson as if they were bloody.

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