

THE POISONED PARADISE

A ROMANCE OF MONTE CARLO

**BY
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THE POISONED PARADISE

PROLOGUE

The boy was sitting in a corner of the shabby room. The mother watched him from her pillow.

“What are you doing, dear?”

“Drawing, Mother Lovely.”

“Strange! Always drawing. Did I ever tell you that your father was an artist?”

The boy looked at her thoughtfully. His eyes were like her own, dark and velvety; but his sunny hair contrasted with her black braids.

“No, Mother Lovely. Had I a father?”

“Yes, dearest. He died just before you were born. I came here hoping that his people, so rich, so proud, would be glad to see you. But, no, they cannot understand.... We’ll go home together, you and I, to my home.”

“Where is that, Mother?”

“Monaco, the great rock that rises from the sea, where my family has lived for generations. Listen, little son ... if I should not be able to go with you, you must go alone. You will find the house where lives my mother, a plain, quiet house with brown shutters near the Cathedral. In front four pepper-trees shield it from the sun, and through the pines one can see the blue glimmer of the sea....”

“Is it beautiful, my mother?”

“Always beautiful. The people sing from very joy. In the garden of the Prince, just in front of our house, there is a broken pillar covered with ivy. Beside it is a spring where flowers bloom even in summer heat. It was there we used to meet, your father and I.... Ah! I have never regretted it, never....”

Her girlish face was as sweet as a flower, but her eyes held memories too tragic for tears.

Then the door opened and a woman entered with a masterful air.

“I’m preparin’ yer potion, ma’am. The doctor said you was to take it at eight o’clock. Come on, sonny, it’s bedtime. Ma wants to get a good long night.”

The child looked imploringly at his mother. She shook her head.

“No, dearest, you must do what the lady tells you. Come, good-night.”

She held him in her arms, kissing him again and again. “You, too, will be an artist ... but you must be brave, my little son; for you have a hard, hard life before you.”

Then she let him go, but he turned at the door. “Good-night, Mother Lovely.”

“Good-night, darling one. Think of what I told you,—of *home*....”

She was alone now. Closing her eyes she saw a little *U* shaped harbour shielded from the sea. It was as delicate as a pastel, a plaque of sapphire set in pearl. In the crystal air the red-

roofed houses crowded close to it, the terraced town rose on tip-toe to peer at it. All was glitter and gleam and radiant beauty. Yet yonder in sombre contrast rose the Rock, monstrous, moody, mediæval.

Once more she climbed the long steep hill; she crossed the sunny square in front of the palace; she passed into the cool gloom of the narrow streets. Then at last she stood before the low brown house with its tiny porch and its four pepper-trees....

Home.... Home. Would she ever see it again?

Moaning, she turned her face to the wall.

.....

BOOK ONE
The Story of Margot

CHAPTER ONE THE OUTCAST

1.

“**T**HAT you, Margot?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“For God’s sake close the door. You don’t think I break my back gathering wood that you may warm the wide world.”

There was a scuffle of sabots anxiously retreating.

“Margot!”

“Yes, Mother.”

“You’re not going away again, are you?”

“I...”

“Come here, little toad. I’ve something to say to you.”

Submissively from the shadow of the doorway slipped a girl. She had twin braids of pale gold hair, and between them like a wedge, her face showed waxen with cold.

“‘Fraid I’ll eat you?” snapped the woman. “Come here, near to me. Brought home any money?”

“No, Mother.”

“But I told you to ask.”

“I did not dare. Madame will not pay in advance. The last time I asked her she almost sent me away.”

“Nom de Dieu! Couldn’t you give her some story? Your little sister’s sick. There’s no food in the house. Your poor mother’s.... Ugh! What a fool I have for a daughter. So all you’ve brought back’s an empty stomach. Oh, I could strike you, I could.”

She suited the gesture to the threat, and the girl arched her slender arms to stave off the blow. But the woman dropped her hands disgustingly.

“Bah! what’s the use. If I could only make you cry there’d be some relish in it. But no! I beat you till my arms ache and never a whimper. That’s your stubborn nature. You’ll do nothing to please me. Oh, you’re a stubborn little devil, still as a mouse, obstinate as a mule. There’s something in you, daughter, I can’t get at. But I will. I’ll thrash it out of you. You wait. Not to-night. I’m too tired to-night....”

From the tumbler at her elbow she took a gulp of cider and brandy, then turned broodingly to the fire. The sickly flames betrayed the wretchedness of the room, the gaunt rafters, the floor of beaten earth. On a deal table lay a clasp knife, and beside it a loaf of bread. The girl eyed the bread avidly. Then her hand, red and claw-cold, stole to the knife, while her gaze rested fearfully on her mother. But the woman no longer heeded.

“What a life!” she was muttering. “What a home! And to think I’d have been rolling in my auto, and crackling in silk and satin,

if I hadn't been a fool. That's my weak point.... I always wanted to be respectable, to be married—all that sentimental rot. Well, I've made my bed and I've got to lie on it. But it's hell...."

She stared dismally at her draggled skirts, her coarsely stockinged feet, her wooden shoes so warped and worn. Seeing her absorbed, the girl hacked off a piece of bread and fell to wolfing it. The woman went on, her face harsh and haggard in the light of the fire:

"There was the American. Mad about me, he was. If I'd played my cards right he'd have married me. What a time he gave me, Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo.... Oh, Monte Carlo! But he had to go back home at last. His wife! Told me to wait and he'd get a divorce. Gave me all the money he had. Nearly five hundred pounds. Believe me, I was pretty in them days."

As if for confirmation, she stroked her hollow cheeks. Tears of self-pity welled in her weary eyes.

"Ah! if I'd known, I would have waited. But there was Pierre plaguing me to marry him. Told me he'd loved me since we'd worked together in that hotel in Brighton; me as bar-maid, him as head-waiter. Mighty nice he used to look too in his dress suit. He said he'd been left some money and wanted to go back to the little town where he was born and buy a pub. So we was married, once in England and once in France. God! I was particular in them days."

She laughed bitterly, and took another gulp of the mixture in her glass. Her eyes went glassy. Her fingers clutched unseen things. She maundered on.

“Yes, I was happy there. It was all so new to me. Then we began to get ambitious. The landlord of the big hotel died suddenly. It was a great chance for Pierre, but he had not money enough to take it. There was where I came in. I gave him my five hundred pounds. Told him an aunt had left it to me. He believed me. We bought the hotel and everything seemed to go well. Yes, then were the happy days.”

A fit of coughing interrupted her. When it was over she took another drink.

“I don’t know how Pierre got to know about the American. He was away a month and when he came back he was changed. He explained nothing, but he treated me like dirt. It was that made me take to the drink.”

She was silent awhile. Then....

“He didn’t seem to care about the business any more and I was drinking too much to care; so we went from bad to worse. We lost the hotel and went back to the *buvette*. Then we lost that too, and he had to take a waiter’s place. By this time the drink was master of me. I tried to give it up but it was no use. When Cécile was born I thought I’d be able to stop, but I was worse than ever. If he’d only tried to help me! But no, he hated me; and I began to hate him too. We fought day and night, like cat and dog. Well, it’s a long, long story, and here’s the end.”

She threw a withered branch of gorse on the fire. It blazed up gold as its own May-day bloom. The girl had climbed on a bench by the high bed and was bending fondly over.

“Margot!” screamed the woman.

The girl started. In the sudden flare, her face was an ashen mask of fear.

“What are you doing there?”

“I’m just looking at Cécile, Mother.”

“Come away at once. Haven’t I told you a hundred times not to go near her? I know you with your sneaking ways. You want to steal her away from me. She’s the only one I’ve got left, and I want her to myself,—all, all. If ever you go near her, I’ll kill you. See!”

A fit of coughing choked her utterance. Again the girl stole to the door.

“Margot!”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Fetch the bottle of brandy from the cupboard.”

The woman poured herself a stiff glass and downed it in a gulp.

“Come here, you little imp; I want to look at you.”

She drew the shrinking girl to her. Her lips twitched with spite.

“His eyes, his mouth, his chin. The very image of him. And he says you’re not his daughter. Ah! that was the knife in me. Do you hear, girl? Your father says you’re not his daughter.”

She laughed harshly, scornfully.

“You’re so much his daughter that I hate you, hate you!”

The girl had begun to struggle, but the woman was holding her with spiteful strength.

“Let me tell you something. He came to-day and told me he was going away for ever. He tried to take Cécile, but I fought for her, fought like a wild cat to hold her. You understand?”

The girl winced in her savage grip.

“Hear that. You’ve no father. He disowns you. And let me tell you something more,—you’ve no mother.... I disown you, too. After to-night I never want to see you again. You’re the dead image of him and I hate him too much. Now go!”

She hurled the girl from her and took another gulp of the neat brandy. The glass dropped from her hand. She sagged forward.

Except for the crackle of the burning twigs all was quiet. The girl gathered a hurried armful of clothes. She was glad to go, but for Cécile!

She stole over to the bed where her sister lay sleeping. She saw a cluster of golden curls, a wan little face with lips parted and lashes that seemed to cast a shadow. Bending down, she kissed the white cheek. The heavy lashes stirred, the big blue eyes opened, the child’s silken arm stole around her neck.

“You’ve come home, Margot?”

“Yes, but I’m going away again.”

“Don’t go, Margot. Don’t leave me. I’m afraid of Mother. Stay with me. Stay with your little Cécile.”

“No, I can’t. Kiss me, dear.”

The child held her so tightly it was difficult to free herself. Then the mother turned. She shrieked in sudden fury, and the girl in her terror made a leap for the door. But the latch jammed; and, while she was fumbling with it, the woman made a rush for her.

The girl screamed with fright. The woman, in her haste, stumbled, caught herself, and with a foul oath snatched the knife from the table....

That was Margot's last memory of her mother,—a harriidan hurling curses at her and threatening her with a naked knife....

Sobbing with terror, she stumbled over the stone sill of the doorway and gained the sanctuary of the night.

2.

The night had on her robe of carnival, and her spangled skirts made glorious the sky. The girl halted by the wayside, where a line of clipped oaks blotted themselves against the stars. She did not cry, for she had lost the habit of tears, but drew long sobbing breaths.

The night wore drearily on, the stars seemed to glitter in cruel unconcern. The girl dozed and dreamed a little....

She was a child of four, the happiest and best dressed in all the village. She had robes of lace, and silk ribbands, and shoes of satin. Her mother cared for her like a little princess, and her father carried her proudly in his arms. Every one said she was spoiled. She had more toys than all the other children put together. But the most precious of all was a doll as big as a real

baby, a doll that opened and shut its eyes, and had jointed arms and legs. She had a dozen dresses for this doll, and spent hours and hours caring for it....

She was a girl of ten. She wore a long white robe and a veil over her head. Some said she looked like a fairy, some an angel. It was her first Communion, and of a score of girls she was the prettiest by far. She it was who headed the shining procession through the long grey street of the village. The way was strewn with lily leaves, and child-voices blended sweetly in the June sunshine....

That was her last memory of happiness. Her father suddenly changed. Where she had known only caresses, harsh words and bitter looks were now her portion. The home once so joyful, was the scene of sordid wrangling. She was allowed to go about shabby and dirty, and became nothing but a slipshod drudge.

Her father never struck her, but her mother beat her cruelly. It was a relief when she was apprenticed to the local dress-maker and spent her day away from the misery of home. But oh, the nights when she ate her slovenly supper and waited for the inevitable out-break! When it came and the storm raged at its height, her father would retreat with Cécile to the cottage of her grandmother and leave her to bear the brunt of her mother's drunken spite. How often had she been thrashed, how often torn from her bed, and flung half-clad into the night! In the old barn there was a corner where she had many a time crouched and shivered until dawn. Ah, what bitter memories! Would any amount of happiness ever efface them?

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