

The Dead Leman

By Théophile Gautier

You ask me, brother, if I have ever loved; yes. It is strange and terrible story, and although I am sixty-six years old, I hardly dare to stir the ashes of that memory. I am unwilling to refuse you anything, but I would not tell such a tale to a mind less experienced than yours. The incidents are so extraordinary that I cannot believe that they ever happened to me. For more than three years I was the sport of a strange and devilish delusion. I, a poor country priest, led the life of one damned, the life of a worldling, of a Sardanapalus, every night in dreams (God grant they were dreams!). One single look too freely cast upon a woman nearly caused the ruin of my soul; but at last, with the aid of God and of my blessed patron saint, I succeeded in expelling the wicked spirit which had taken possession of me. My life was intermingled with a nocturnal life entirely different. By day I was a priest of the Lord, chaste, intent upon prayer and sacred things; at night, as soon as I had closed my eyes, I became a young nobleman, a fine connoisseur in women, dogs, and horses, throwing dice, drinking, and blaspheming; and when I woke at sunrise, it seemed to me that on the other hand, I had fallen asleep, and that I was dreaming that I was a priest. My mind has retained memories, objects, and words of that somnambulistic life, from which I cannot escape, and although I have never gone without the bounds of my presbytery, one would say, to hear me, that I was a man who having become satiated with everything and having turned his back upon the world, had betaken himself to religion, and proposed to end his too agitated life in the bosom of God, rather than a humble seminarist, who had grown old in this obscure curacy, in the depths of the woods, and aloof from all connection with the affairs of his time.

Yes, I loved as no one in the world has ever loved, with an insensate and furious passion, so violent that I am surprised that it did not cause my heart to burst. Ah! what nights! what nights!

From my earliest childhood, I had felt a calling to the priesthood; so that all my studies tended in that direction, and my life, up to the age of twenty-four, was simply a prolonged novitiate. My theological studies completed, I passed through all the minor orders in succession, and my superiors deemed me worthy, despite my extreme youth, to take the last and formidable step. The day of my ordination was fixed for Easter week.

I had never been into society; for me the world was the enclosure of the college and the seminary. I had a vague knowledge that there was a something called woman, but I never dwelt upon the subject; I was absolutely innocent. I saw my infirm old mother only twice a year; that was the extent of my connection with the outside world.

I had no regrets, I felt not the slightest hesitation in the face of that irrevocable engagement; I was overflowing with joy and impatience. Never did a young fiancé count the hours with more feverish ardour; I did not sleep, I dreamed that I was saying mass; I could imagine nothing nobler in the world than to be a priest; I would have declined to be a king or a poet. My ambition could conceive of no loftier aim.

I say this to show you that the things that happened to me should not have happened, and how inexplicable was the fascination to which I fell a victim.

When the great day came, I walked to the church with a step so light that it seemed to me that I was sustained in air, or that I had wings on my shoulders. I fancied myself an angel, and I was amazed at the gloomy and preoccupied faces of my companions; for there were several of us. I

had passed the night in prayer, and I was in a condition almost bordering on ecstasy. The bishop, a venerable old man, seemed to me to be God the Father leaning over His eternity, and I beheld Heaven through the arched ceiling of the temple.

You know the details of the ceremony: the benediction, the communion under both forms, the anointing of the palms of the hands with the novices oil, and lastly the holy sacrifice, administered by the priest in conjunction with the bishop. I will not dwell upon it. Oh! how truly did Job say that he is imprudent who does not conclude a covenant with his eyes! I chanced to raise my head, which I had thus far kept lowered, and I saw before me, so near that it seemed I could have touched her, although in reality she was at a considerable distance and on the other side of the rail, a young woman of rare beauty, attired with royal magnificence. It was as if scales fell from my eyes. I experienced the sensation of a blind man suddenly recovering his sight. The bishop, but now so radiant, suddenly faded away, the candles turned pale in their golden sconces, like stars at dawn, and the whole church was enveloped in complete darkness. The charming creature stood out against that dark background like an angelic revelation; she seemed illuminated by herself, and to shed light rather than to receive it.

I lowered my eyes, fully determined not to raise them again, in order to escape the influence of exterior objects; for distraction took more and more complete possession of me, and I hardly knew what I was doing.

A moment later I opened my eyes again, for through my lashes I could see her glistening with all the colours of the rainbow, and in a purplish penumbra as when one looks at the sun.

Oh! how lovely she was! The greatest painters, when, turning to Heaven for ideal beauty, they have brought to earth the divine portrait of the Madonna, do not even approach that wondrous reality. Neither the verses of the poet nor the painter's palette can convey an idea of it. She was rather tall, with the form and bearing of a goddess; her hair, of a soft, light shade, was parted on top of her head, and fell over her temples like two golden waves; she was like a queen with her diadem; her forehead, of a bluish and transparent whiteness, rose broad and serene over arched eyebrows, almost black; a peculiarity which intensified the effect of sea-green pupils of an unsustainable vivacity and brilliancy. What eyes! With one flash they decided a man's destiny; they had a limpidity, a life, an ardour, a glistening humidity which I have never seen in other human eyes; they shot forth rays like arrows, which I distinctly saw flying towards my heart. I do not know whether the flame which illuminated them came from heaven or hell, but it surely came from one or the other. That woman was an angel or a demon, perhaps both; she certainly did not issue from the loins of Eve, our common mother. Teeth of the purest pearl sparkled in her ruddy smile, and little dimples appeared with each motion of her mouth, in the satiny rose of her adorable cheeks. As for her nostrils, they were regal in their graceful and dignified shape, and indicated the noblest origin. A lustre as of agate played upon the smooth, glossy skin of her half-bare shoulders, and strings of great blonde pearls, of a shade almost like her neck, hung down upon her bosom. From time to time she elevated her head with the undulating grace of a snake, or of a startled peacock, and imparted a slight quiver to the high embroidered openwork ruff which surrounded her neck like a silver trelliswork.

She wore a dress of flame-coloured velvet, and from the broad sleeves lined with ermine peeped forth patrician hands of infinite delicacy, with long, plump fingers, and so transparent that they allowed the light to shine through, like Aurora's.

All these details are still vivid as if they were of yesterday, and although I was extremely perturbed, nothing escaped me: the faintest touch of shading, the little dark spot at the point of

the chin, the imperceptible down at the parting of the lips, the velvety softness of the forehead, the quivering shadow of the eyelashes on the cheeks, I grasped them all with amazing lucidity.

As I gazed at her, I felt doors open within me which had hitherto been closed; the rubbish was cleared away from choked-up openings on every side, and gave me a glimpse of prospects theretofore undreamed of; life appeared to me in a totally different aspect; I was born to a new order of ideas. A frightful anguish gnawed at my heart; every moment that passed seemed to me but a second and yet a century. The ceremony progressed, however, and I was carried very far from the world, the entrance to which my rising passions fiercely besieged. I said yes, however, when I longed to say no; when everything within me rose in revolt and protest against the violence my tongue exerted on my mind; a hidden force tore the words from my throat against my will. It is the same feeling, perhaps, that makes so many maidens go to the altar with the firm resolution of refusing publicly the husband who is forced upon them, although not a single one fulfills her intention. It is that, without doubt, which makes so many unhappy novices take the veil, although they are firmly resolved to tear it in shreds when the time comes to pronounce their vows. One dares not cause such a scandal before the world, or disappoint the expectation of so many people; all their wishes, all their glances seem to weigh upon you like a cloak of lead; and then, measures are so carefully taken, everything is so fully arranged beforehand, in so clearly irrevocable fashion, that the will yields to the weight of the thing and collapses utterly.

The expression of the fair unknown changed as the ceremony progressed. Tender and caressing at first, it became disdainful and dissatisfied, as if because it had not been understood.

I made an effort that might have moved a mountain, to cry out that I would not be a priest; but I could not accomplish it: my tongue was glued to my palate, and it was impossible for me to give effect to my desire by the least syllable of negation. Fully awake as I was. I was in a plight similar to that stage of a nightmare where you try to utter a word upon which your life depends, but cannot succeed.

She seemed to appreciate the martyrdom I was suffering, and, as if to encourage me, she flashed at me a glance replete with divine promise. Her eyes were a poem of which each glance formed a stanza.

She seemed to say to me:

“If thou wilt be mine, I will make thee happier than God Himself in His Paradise; the very angels will be jealous of thee. Tear away that funereal shroud in which thou art about to wrap thyself; I am Beauty, I am Youth, I am Life; come to me and together we shall be Love. What can Jehovah offer you in exchange? Our lives will flow on like a dream, and will be but an everlasting kiss. Pour the wine from that chalice, and thou art free. I will bear thee away to unknown isles; thou shalt sleep between my breasts, in a bed of massy gold, beneath a canopy of silver; for I love thee and I long to take thee away from this God of thine, before whom so many noble hearts pour out floods of love which never reach Him.”

It seemed to me that I could hear these words, uttered in a rhythm of infinite sweetness; for her glance was actually sonorous, and the sentences that her eyes sent forth to me echoed in the depths of my heart as if an invisible mouth had breathed them into my very being. I felt that I was ready to renounce God, and yet my heart mechanically went through with the formalities of the ceremony. The beautiful creature cast at me a second glance, so beseeching, so despairing, that keen blades pierced my heart, and I felt more sword-points in my breast than Our Lady of Sorrows herself.

All was consummated; I had become a priest.

Never did human features express such poignant suffering; the maiden who sees her betrothed suddenly fall dead at her side, the mother by her child's empty cradle, Eve seated at the threshold of the gate of Paradise, the miser who finds a stone in place of his hoard, the poet who has allowed the only copy of his manuscript of his finest work to fall into the fire, seem no more crushed and inconsolable. The blood entirely left her charming face, and she became as white as marble, her beautiful arms fell beside her body, as if the muscles had lost their power; and she leaned against a pillar, for her limbs trembled and gave way beneath her. As for myself, with livid cheeks and brow bathed in sweat more bloody than that of Calvary, I walked with tottering steps towards the door of the church; I was suffocating; the arches seemed to rest on my shoulders, and I fancied that my head alone bore the whole weight of the dome.

As I was about to cross the threshold, a hand suddenly seized mine, a woman's hand! I had never touched one before. It was as cold as the skin of a serpent, and yet the impression burned like the brand of a red-hot iron. It was she. "Unhappy man! unhappy man! what hast thou done?" she said in a low voice; then she disappeared in the crowd.

The aged bishop passed; he looked at me with a stern expression. I cut the most extraordinary figure imaginable; I turned pale, I flushed, I was giddy. One of my comrades had pity on me, and led me way; I was incapable of finding the road to the seminary alone. At the corner of the street, while the young priest's head was turned in another direction, a negro page, singularly attired, approached me and placed in my hand, without stopping, a small wallet with corners of carved gold, motioning to me to hide it; I slipped it up my sleeve and kept it there until I was alone in my cell. Then I broke the lock; there was nothing inside save two sheets of paper with the words: "Clarimonde, at the Concini Palace." I was then so little acquainted with the affairs of life that I knew nothing of Clarimonde despite her celebrity, and I was absolutely ignorant as to the location of the Concini Palace. I made a thousand conjectures each more extravagant than the last: but in truth, provided that I might see her again, I cared very little what she might be, whether a great lady or a courtesan.

That passion, born in an instant had taken imperishable root; I did not even think of trying to tear it up, I realised so fully that it was impossible. That woman had taken complete possession of me; a single glance had sufficed to change me; she had breathed her will into me; I no longer lived in myself, but in her and through her. I did a thousand foolish things; I kissed the spot on my hand that she had touched and I repeated her name hours at a time. I had only to close my eyes to see her as distinctly as if she were really present, and I said to myself again and again the words that she had said to me beneath the church porch: "Unhappy man! unhappy man! what hast thou done?" I realised all the horror of my situation, and the terrible and fatal aspects of the profession I had embraced were clearly revealed to me. To be a priest! That is to say, to be chaste, not to love, to distinguish neither sex nor age, to turn aside from all beauty, to put out one's eyes, to crawl beneath the icy shadow of a cloister or a church, to see none but the dying, to keep vigil by unknown corpses, and to wear mourning for yourself over your black soutane, so that your garment may be used to make your winding-sheet!

And I felt life rising within me like a subterranean lake expanding and overflowing; my blood beat violently in my veins; my youth, so long held in restraint, suddenly burst forth like the aloe which takes a hundred years to flower and then blossoms with a clap of thunder.

How was I to arrange to see Clarimonde again? I had no pretext for leaving the seminary as I knew no one in the city; indeed, I was not to remain there, and I was waiting only until I should be told what curacy I was to occupy. I tried to loosen the bars at the window; but it was terribly high, and as I had no ladder, I could not think of escaping that way. Besides, I could descend

only at night; and how could I find my way through the inextricable labyrinth of streets? All these obstacles, which would have been nothing at all to others, were enormous to me, a poor seminarist, in love since yesterday, without experience, without money, and without attire.

“Ah! if I had not been a priest, I might have seen her every day; I might have been her lover, her husband,” I said to myself in my blindness; “instead of being wrapped in my dismal winding-sheet, I should have garments of silk and velvet, gold chains, a sword, and plumes, like the gallant young cavaliers. My hair, instead of being dishonoured by a broad tonsure, would play about my neck in waving curls; I should have a fine waxed mustache, I should be a hero.” But an hour passed in front of an altar, a few words barely spoken, had cut me off forever from the ranks of the living, and I myself had sealed the door of my tomb; I had shot with my own hand the bolt of my prison!

I stood at the window. The sky was beautifully blue, the trees had donned their spring robes; Nature bedecked herself with ironical joy. The square was full of people, going and coming young beaux and youthful beauties, two by two, walked towards the garden and the arbours. Merry companions passed, singing drinking-songs; there was a bustle, an animation, a merriment, which made my black garments and my solitude stand out in painful relief. A young mother, on her doorstep, was playing with her child; she kissed its little red lips, still empearled with drops of milk, and indulged in a thousand of those divine puerilities which mothers alone can invent. The father, standing at a little distance, smiled pleasantly at the charming group, and his folded arms pressed his joy to his heart. I could not endure that spectacle; I closed my window and threw myself on my bed with a horrible hatred and jealousy in my heart, gnawing my fingers and my bedclothes like a tiger who has fasted three days.

I do not know how long I remained in this condition; but as I turned over in a spasm of frenzy, I saw the Abbé Sérapion standing in the middle of the room and watching me closely. I was ashamed of myself, and dropping my head upon my breast, covered my eyes with my hand.

“Romuald, my friend, something extraordinary is taking place in you,” said Sérapion after a few moments of silence; “your conduct is really inexplicable! You, who were so pious, so quiet, and so gentle, rave in your cell like a wild beast. Beware, my brother, and do not listen to the suggestions of the devil; the evil spirit, irritated because you have consecrated yourself forever to the Lord, is prowling about you like a savage wolf, making a last effort to lure you to him. Instead of allowing yourself to be vanquished, my dear Romuald, make a shield for yourself with prayers, a buckler with mortifications, and fight valiantly against the foe; you will overcome him. Trial is necessary to virtue, and gold comes forth refined from the crucible. Do not be dismayed or discouraged; the most watchful and steadfast souls have had such moments. Pray, fast, meditate, and the evil spirit will depart.”

The Abbé Sérapion’s words caused me to reflect, and I became a little calmer.

“I came to inform you of your appointment to the curacy of C———. The priest who held it has died, and monseigneur the bishop has instructed me to go with you and install you; be ready tomorrow.”

I answered with a nod that I would be, and the abbé withdrew. I opened my missal and began to read prayers; but the lines soon became blurred beneath my eyes; the thread of the ideas became entangled in my brain, and the book slipped from my hands unheeded.

To go away on the morrow without seeing her again! To add still another impossibility to those which already lay between us! To lose forever the hope of meeting her, unless by a miracle! Write to her?—by whom could I send my letter? With the sacred character which I bore, to whom could I open my heart, in whom could I confide? I was terribly perplexed. And then, what

Abbé Sérapion had said to me of the wiles of the devil returned to my mind; the oddity of the adventure, the supernatural beauty of Clarimonde, the phosphorescent gleam of her eyes, the burning touch of her hand, the confusion into which she had thrown me, the sudden change which had taken place in me, my piety vanished in an instant—all these clearly demonstrated the presence of the devil, and perhaps that satiny hand was only the glove with which he had covered his claw. These ideas caused me the greatest alarm; I picked up the missal which had fallen from my knees to the floor, and began anew to pray.

The next day Sérapion called for me; two mules awaited us at the door, laden with our thin valises, he mounted one and I the other as well as we might. As we rode through the streets of the city, I looked at all the windows and all the balconies to see if I could not espy Clarimonde; but it was too early, the city had not yet opened its eyes. My glance tried to pierce behind the blinds and through the curtains of all the palaces we passed. Sérapion doubtless attributed my curiosity to the beauty of the architecture, for he slackened the pace of his steed to give me time to look. At last we reached the city gates and began to climb the hill. When I was at the top, I turned to glance once more at the place where Clarimonde lived. The shadow of a cloud covered the city entirely; its blue and red roofs were blended in the prevailing half-light, above which rose here and there, like patches of white foam, the morning smoke. By a curious optical effect, a single edifice surpassing in height the neighbouring buildings, which were completely drowned in vapour, stood out, golden-hued, in a single beam of light; although it was more than a league away, it seemed very near. I could distinguish the slightest details, the turrets, the platforms, the windows, and even the weather-vanes in the shape of a swallow's tail.

“What is that palace that I see yonder, all lighted up by the sun?” I asked Sérapion. He put his hand over his eyes, and, having looked, he answered:

“It is the ancient palace which Prince Concini has given to the courtesan Clarimonde; shocking scenes take place there.”

At that moment—and I do not know even now whether it was a reality or an illusion—I fancied that I saw a slender white form glide along the terrace, gleam for an instant, and vanish. It was Clarimonde!

Oh! did she know that at that moment from the height of the rugged road which separated me from her, and which I was never to descend again, I was gazing, ardent and restless, at the palace in which she dwelt and which a mocking trick of the light seemed to bring nearer to me, as if to invite me to enter as its lord? Doubtless she knew it, and her soul was too closely bound to mine not to feel its slightest emotions; and it was that sympathy which had impelled her, still clad in her night-robe, to go out upon the terrace amid the icy dews of the morning.

The shadow gained the palace, and there was nothing but a motionless ocean of roofs and gables, in which one could distinguish naught save one mountainous undulation. Sérapion urged forward his mule, whose gait mine immediately imitated, and a turn in the road concealed from me forever the city of S——; for I was destined never to go thither again. After travelling three days through an unattractive country, we saw the weather-vane of the steeple of the church in which I was to officiate appear through the trees; and after riding through a number of winding streets, lined with hovels and garden-plots we found ourselves in front of the edifice, which was not very magnificent. A porch ornamented with a moulding or two, and two or three pillars of rough-hewn sandstone a tile roof, and buttresses of the same material as the pillars—that was all. At the left was the cemetery, full of high weeds, with a tall iron cross in the centre; at the right, and in the shadow of the church, the presbytery. It was a house of extreme simplicity, clean, but bare. We entered; a few hens were pecking at grains of oats scattered on the ground;

accustomed apparently to the black garments of ecclesiastics they did not take fright at our presence and hardly moved aside to let us pass. We heard a hoarse, wheezy bark, and an old dog ran towards us. It was my predecessor's dog. He had the dull eye, the gray hair, and all the other symptoms of the extremest old age which a dog may attain. I patted him gently with my hand and he at once walked beside me with an air of inexpressible gratification. A woman advanced in years, who had been the former curé's housekeeper, also came to meet us, and after showing me into a room on the ground floor, asked me if I intended to keep her. I told her that I would retain her and the dog, the hens, too, and all the furniture which her master had left her at his death; this caused her a transport of joy, and the Abbé Sérapion at once gave her the price that she asked.

My installation completed, the Abbé Sérapion returned to the seminary. So I was left alone, with nobody to lean upon but myself. Thoughts of Clarimonde began to haunt me once more, and strive as I would to banish them, I could not always succeed. One evening, as I walked along the box-bordered paths of my little garden, it seemed to me that I saw through the hedge a female form following my every movement, and sea-green eyes gleaming among the leaves; but it was only an illusion, and, having gone to the other side of the hedge, I found nothing there but a footprint on the gravel, so small that one would have said that it was made by a child's foot. The garden was enclosed by very high walls; I searched every nook and corner, and there was no one there. I have never been able to explain that circumstance, which, however, was as nothing compared with the strange things which were to happen to me.

I had been living thus a year, performing with scrupulous exactitude all the duties of my profession, praying, fasting, exhorting, and assisting the sick, and giving alms to such an extent that I went without the most indispensable necessities of life. But I was conscious of a great aridness within me, and the sources of grace were closed to me. I enjoyed none of that happiness which the accomplishment of a sacred mission affords; my thoughts were elsewhere, and Clarimonde's words often came to my lips like a sort of involuntary refrain. O brother, consider this well! Because I raised my eyes a single time to a woman's face, for a fault apparently so venial, I experienced for many years the most wretched perturbation of spirit, and the happiness of my life was forever destroyed.

I will dwell no longer upon these defeats and these inward victories always followed by heavier falls, but I will pass at once to a decisive incident. One night someone rang violently at my door. The aged housekeeper answered the bell, and a copper-coloured man, richly clad, but in outlandish fashion, and wearing a long dagger, appeared in the rays of Barbara's lantern. Her first impulse was one of terror; but the man reassured her and told her that he must see me at once about a matter concerning my ministry. Barbara showed him upstairs, where I was on the point of retiring. The man told me that his mistress, a very great lady, was at death's door and desired to see a priest. I replied that I was ready to accompany him; I took with me what I needed for administering extreme unction, and I went downstairs in all haste. At the door two horses black as night were pawing the ground impatiently and blowing from their nostrils long streams of vapour against their breasts. He held the stirrup for me and assisted me to mount one of them; then he leaped upon the other, simply placing one hand up on the pommel of the saddle. He pressed his knees against the horses' flanks and dropped the reins; the beast started off like an arrow. Mine, whose bridle he held, also fell into a gallop and kept pace with him. We devoured the road, the ground glided away beneath our feet, gray and streaked; and the black silhouettes of the trees fled like an army in full retreat. We passed through a forest so intensely dark and so icy chill that I felt a shudder of superstitious terror run through my body. The sparks that our horses' shoes struck upon the stones left a trail of fire as it were behind us as we passed; and if any one

had seen my guide and myself, at that hour of the night, he would have taken us for two spectres riding upon nightmares. Will-o'-the-wisps crossed the road from time to time and the jackdaws shrieked fearsomely in the dense woods, where at intervals we saw the gleam of the phosphorescent eyes of wildcats. The manes of the horses tossed more and more wildly, the sweat poured down their sides, and their breath came through their nostrils hard and fast. But when he saw them losing heart, the guide, to encourage them, uttered a guttural cry in which there was nothing human, and they resumed their frenzied course. At last the whirlwind paused; a black mass, with points of light here and there, suddenly reared itself before us; the hoofs of our beasts rang out more loudly upon a strong wooden drawbridge, and we rode beneath an arch which darkly yawned between two enormous towers.

Intense excitement reigned in the palace; servants were crossing the courtyard in all directions, with torches in their hands, and lights ascended and descended from landing to landing. I caught a confused glimpse of huge masses of masonry, of columns, arcades, staircases and balustrades—a riotous luxury of construction, altogether regal and fabulous. A negro page, the same who had handed me Clarimonde's tablets and whom I instantly recognised, assisted me to dismount, and the majordomo, dressed in black velvet, with a gold chain about his neck and an ivory cane in his hand, came forward to meet me. Great tears streamed from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks to his white beard. "Too late!" he cried, shaking his head; "too late, sir priest! But although you have not been able to save the soul, come and keep vigil over the poor body."

He took my arm and led me to the hall of death; I wept as bitterly as he, for I understood that the dead woman was no other than that Clarimonde whom I had loved so fondly and so madly. A *priedieu* was placed beside the bed; a bluish flame, flickering in a bronze patera, cast a wan and deceptive light about the room, and here and there caused some protruding decoration of a piece of furniture or a cornice to twinkle in the darkness. On the table, in a carved vase, was a faded white rose, whose leaves, with the exception of a single one which still clung to the stalk, had all fallen at the foot of the vase, like odorous tears; a broken black masque, a fan, and disguises of all sorts, were lying about on the chairs, and showed that death had appeared in that sumptuous abode unexpectedly and unannounced. I knelt, not daring to turn my eyes towards the bed, and I began to recite the Psalms with great fervour, thanking God that he had placed the grave between the thought of that woman and myself, so that I might add to my prayers her name, thenceforth sanctified. But gradually that burst of enthusiasm subsided and I fell into a reverie. That room had nothing of the aspect of a chamber of death. Instead of the fetid and cadaverous air which I was accustomed to breathe in such death-vigils, a languorous vapour of Oriental essences, an indefinable amorous odour of woman, floated softly in the warm air. That pale gleam had rather the aspect of a subdued light purposely arranged for purposes of pleasure, than of the yellow night-light which flickers beside corpses. I mused upon the strange chance which had led me to Clarimonde at the very moment that I lost her forever, and a sigh of regret escaped from my breast. It seemed to me that there was an answering sigh behind me, and I involuntarily turned. It was the echo. In that movement my eyes fell upon the bed of death, which they had thus far avoided. The curtains of red damask with large flowers, looped back by golden tassels, revealed the dead woman lying at full length, her hands clasped up on her breast. She was covered with a linen veil of dazzling whiteness, of which the dark purple of the hangings heightened the effect, and of such fineness that it did not at all conceal the charming outlines of her body, and enabled me to follow those lovely lines, as undulating as the neck of a swan, which death itself had not been able to stiffen. She was like an alabaster statue made by some clever sculptor to place upon the tomb of a queen, or like a slumbering maiden upon whom snow had fallen.

I could endure it no longer; that voluptuous atmosphere intoxicated me, that feverish odour of half-withered roses went to my brain, and I paced restlessly back and forth, pausing at every turn beside the platform of the bed to gaze upon the lovely dead woman beneath her transparent winding-sheet. Strange thoughts passed through my mind; I imagined that she was not really dead, and that it was only a feint to which she had resorted to lure me to her palace, and to tell me of her love. For an instant, I even thought that I saw her foot move under the white veil, and disarrange the smooth folds of the shroud.

And then I said to myself: "Is this really Clarimonde? What proof have I of it? May not that black page have entered the service of another woman? I am very foolish to despair thus and to become so excited." But my heart replied with a throb: "It is really she; it is really she." I drew near the bed and gazed with redoubled attention upon the object of my uncertainty. Shall I confess it to you? That perfection of form, although purified and sanctified by the shadow of death, aroused my senses more than it should have done; and that repose was so like sleep that any one might have been deceived. I forgot that I had come there to perform a solemn duty, and I fancied that I was a young bridegroom, entering the bedroom of his betrothed, who conceals her face, from modesty, and refuses to allow him to see her features. Heartbroken with grief, beside myself with joy, quivering with dread and with my pleasure, I leaned over her and seized the upper corner of the sheet; I raised it slowly, holding my breath for fear of waking her. My pulses throbbed with such force that I felt the blood hissing through my temples, and my forehead dripped with perspiration, as if I had lifted a marble flagstone. It was in very truth Clarimonde, as I had seen her in the church at the time of my ordination; she was as fascinating as then, and, in her, death seemed but an additional coquetry. The pallor of her cheeks, the less vivid red of her lips, her long lashes, downcast and standing out with their dark fringe against that white flesh, imparted to her face an expression of chaste melancholy and of pensive suffering, whose power of seduction was immeasurable; her long flowing hair, with which were mingled still a few small blue flowers, made a pillow for her head and sheltered with its curls her bare shoulders; her beautiful hands, purer and more transparent than the consecrated wafer, were clasped in an attitude of pious rest and silent prayer, which neutralised what there might have been too alluring, even in death, in the exquisite roundness and ivory polish of her arms, From which the pearl bracelets had not been removed. I stood for a long while absorbed in mute contemplation, and the more I gazed at her, the less I could believe that life had abandoned that lovely body forever. I know not whether it was an illusion or a reflection of the lamp, but one would have said that the blood began to circulate anew beneath that lifeless pallor; however, she continued absolutely motionless. I touched her arm lightly; it was cold, but no colder than her hand on the day that it had touched mine beneath the church porch. I resumed my position, bending my face over hers, and letting the warm dew of my tears rain upon her cheeks. Ah! what a bitter sensation of despair and helplessness! What a period of agony was that vigil! I would have been glad to be able to collect my life in a pile, in order to give it to her, and to breathe upon her chill remains the flame that consumed me. The night was passing, and realising that the moment of eternal separation was drawing nigh, I could not deny myself the melancholy and supreme pleasure of imprinting a kiss upon the dead lips of her who had had all my love. Oh, miracle! a faint breath mingled with mine, and Clarimonde's lips responded to the pressure of mine; her eyes opened and took on a little life, she heaved a sigh, and unclasping her hands, she put her arms about my neck with an expression of ineffable rapture.

"Ah! is it thou, Romuald?" she said in a voice as languishing and sweet as the dying vibrations of a harp; "what art thou doing, pray? I waited for thee so long that I am dead; but now we are

betrothed, and I shall be able to see thee and to come to thee. Adieu, Romuald, adieu! I love thee; that is all that I wished to say to thee, and I give thee back the life to which thou hast recalled me for an instant by thy kiss; we shall soon meet again.”

Her head fell back, but she kept her arms about me as if to detain me. A fierce gust of wind blew the window in and entered the room; the last leaf of the white rose fluttered a little longer, like a wing, on the end of the stalk, then became detached and flew away through the open window, carrying with it Clarimonde’s soul. The lamp went out, and I fell unconscious on the dead woman’s bosom.

When I returned to myself, I was lying in my bed, in my little room at the presbytery, and the former cure’s old dog was licking my hand, which lay upon the coverlet. Barbara was bustling about the room with a senile trembling, opening and closing drawers, or stirring powders in glasses. When she saw me open my eyes, the old woman uttered a joyful cry, the dog yelped and wagged his tail; but I was still so weak that I could not utter a single word, nor make a single movement. Afterwards I learned that I had been three days in that condition, giving no other sign of life than an almost imperceptible breathing. Those three days do not count in my life, and I know not where my mind had journeyed during all that time; I have no recollection whatever of it. Barbara told me that the same man with the copper-coloured complexion, who had come to fetch me during the night, had brought me back in the morning in a closed litter and had gone away immediately. As soon as I could collect my thoughts, I reviewed all the incidents of that fatal night. At first I thought that I had been the plaything of some trick of magic; but real and palpable circumstances soon dispelled that theory. I could not believe that I had dreamed, for Barbara had seen as well as I the man with the black horses, whose costume and appearance she described exactly. But no one knew of any castle in the neighbourhood answering to the description of that where I had seen Clarimonde.

One morning I saw the Abbé Sérapion enter my room. Barbara had written him that I was ill, and he had hastened to me at once. Although that zeal denoted interest and affection for my person, his visit did not cause me the pleasure which it should have done. There was in the Abbé Sérapion’s glance a penetrating and searching expression which embarrassed me. I felt ill at ease and guilty in his presence. He had been the first to discover my inward distress, and I was angry with him for his clairvoyance.

While he asked me about my health in a hypocritically sweet tone, he fixed his yellow lion-eyes upon me, and plunged his glance into my very soul, like a sounding-lead. Then he asked me some questions as to the way in which I performed my duties, whether I enjoyed them, how I passed the time which my ministry left at my disposal, whether I had made any acquaintances among the people of the parish, what my favourite books were, and a thousand other similar details. I answered as briefly as possible, and he himself, without waiting for me to finish my answer, passed to another subject. This conversation evidently had no connection with what he desired to say. At last, without any prelude, and as if it were a piece of news which he recalled at the moment and which he was afraid of forgetting, he said to me in a clear and vibrating voice, which rang in my ear like the trumpets of the Last Judgment:

“The famous courtesan Clarimonde died recently, as the result of an orgy which lasted eight days and eight nights. It was something infernally magnificent. They revived the abominations of the feasts of Belshazzar and Cleopatra. Great God! what an age this is in which we live! The guests were served by swarthy slaves speaking an unknown tongue, who to my mind had every appearance of veritable demons; the livery of the meanest among them might have served as a gala-costume for an emperor. There have always been current some very strange stories

concerning this Clarimonde, and all her lovers have come to a miserable or a violent end. It has been said that she was a ghou, a female vampire; but I believe that she was Beelzebub in person.

He ceased to speak and watched me more closely than ever, to see what effect his words had produced upon me. I was unable to refrain from a movement when he mentioned Clarimonde's name, and the news of her death, in addition to the pain that it caused me by reason of its extraordinary coincidence with the nocturnal scene which I had witnessed, produced within me a confusion and a terror which appeared upon my face, strive as I would to control it. Sérapion cast an anxious and stern glance at me; then he said:

“My son, I must warn you that you are standing on the brink of an abyss; beware lest you fall into it. Satan's claws are long, and the grave is not always trustworthy. Clarimonde's tomb should be sealed with a triple seal; for this is not the first time that she has died, so it is said. May God watch over you, Romuald!”

Having said this, Sérapion walked slowly to the door, and I saw him no more; for he returned to S—— almost immediately.

I was entirely restored to health and I had resumed my usual duties. The memory of Clarimonde and the old abbé's words were always present in my mind; but nothing extraordinary had happened to confirm the lugubrious presentiments of Sérapion, and I was beginning to believe that his fears and my own terrors were exaggerated; but one night I had a dream. I had hardly imbibed the first mouthfuls of slumber when I heard the curtains of my bed open and the rings slide upon the rod with a loud noise; I instantly raised myself on my elbow, and I saw a female figure standing before me. I recognised Clarimonde on the instant. She held in her hand a small lamp of the shape of those which are placed in tombs, and its light imparted to her taper fingers a pink transparence which extended by insensible degrees to the opaque and milky whiteness of her bare arm. Her only clothing was the linen winding-sheet which had covered her up on the bed of death, the folds of which she held about her breast as if ashamed of being so scantily clad; but her little hand did not suffice; she was so white that the colour of the drapery blended with that of the flesh in the pale light of the lamp. Enveloped in that subtle tissue, which revealed the whole contour of her body, she resembled a marble statue of a woman bathing, rather than a real woman endowed with life. Dead or alive, statue or woman, ghost or body, her beauty was still the same: but the green splendour of her eyes was slightly dimmed, and her mouth, formerly so ruddy, was tinted with a faint tender rosiness, almost like that of her cheeks. The little blue flowers which I had noticed in her hair were entirely withered and had lost almost all their petals; all of which did not prevent her from being charming, so charming that, despite the extraordinary character of the adventure, and the inexplicable manner in which she had entered my room, I was not terrified for an instant.

She placed the lamp on the table and seated herself at the foot of my bed; then, leaning towards me, said to me in that voice, at once silvery and soft as velvet, which I have never heard from other lips:

“I have kept thee long in waiting, dear Romuald, and thou mayst well have thought that I had forgotten thee. But I have come from a long distance and from a place from which no one has ever before returned; there is neither moon nor sun in the country from which I come; there is naught but space and shadow; neither road nor path; no ground for the foot, no air for the wing; and yet here I am, for love is stronger than death, and it will end by vanquishing it. Ah! what gloomy faces and what terrible things I have seen in my journeying! What a world of trouble my soul, returned to this earth by the power of my will, has had in finding its body and reinstating itself therein! What mighty efforts I had to put forth before I could raise the stone with which

they had covered me! See! the palms of my poor hands are all blistered from it. Kiss them to make them well, dear love!”

She laid the cold palms of her hands on my mouth one after the other; I kissed them again and again, and she watched me with a smile of ineffable pleasure.

To my shame I confess that I had totally forgotten the Abbé Sérapion’s warnings and my own priestly character. I fell without resistance and at the first assault. I did not even try to spurn the tempter; the coolness of Clarimonde’s flesh penetrated mine, and I felt a voluptuous tremor pass over my whole body.

Poor child! Despite all I have seen, I still have difficulty in believing that she was a demon; at all events she had not the aspect of one, and Satan never concealed his claws and his thorns more deftly. She had drawn her feet up beneath her, and sat thus on the edge of my couch, in an attitude full of negligent coquetry. From time to time she passed her little hand through my hair and twisted it about her fingers, as if to try the effect of new methods of arranging my locks about my face. I allowed her to do it with the most guilty pleasure, and she accompanied it all with the most fascinating prattle. It is a lamentable fact that I felt no astonishment at such an extraordinary occurrence, and, with the facility with which one in a dream looks upon the most unusual events as perfectly simple, I saw nothing in it all that was not quite natural.

“I loved thee a long while ere I saw thee, dear Romuald, and I sought thee everywhere. Thou wert my dream, and I spied thee in the church at the fatal moment. I said instantly: “It is he!” I cast a glance at thee, in which I put all the love that I had felt, that I was then feeling, and that I was destined to feel for thee; a glance to lead a cardinal to perdition, to force a king to kneel at my feet before his whole court. Thou didst remain unmoved, and didst prefer thy God to me. Ah! how jealous I am of God, whom thou lovedst and whom thou dost still love better than me! Unhappy woman, unhappy woman that I am! I shall never have thy heart all to myself, I, whom thou didst bring back to life with thy kiss; dead Clarimonde, who for thy sake has forced the doors of the tomb, and who now consecrates to thee a life which she has resumed only to make thee happy!”

All these words were accompanied by maddening caresses which bewildered my senses and my reason to such a point that I did not shrink from uttering a horrible blasphemy to comfort her, and from telling her that I loved her as much as I loved God.

Her eyes recovered their fire and shone like chrysoprases.

“In truth! in very truth? as much as God?” she said, flinging her lovely arms about me. “Since it is so, thou wilt come with me, thou wilt follow me wherever I list. Thou wilt lay aside thy ugly black garments, thou shalt be my lover. To be the acknowledged lover of Clarimonde, who has refused a pope, is magnificent! Ah! what a happy life, what a lovely, golden life we will lead! When shall we start, my fair sir?”

“To-morrow! to-morrow!” I cried in my delirium.

“To-morrow, so be it,” she replied. “I shall have time to change my dress, for this is a little scanty and is not suited for travelling. I must also go and notify my servants, who really believe me to be dead and who are as distressed as they can be. Money, clothes, carriages, everything will be ready, and I shall call for thee at this same hour. Adieu, dear heart!”

And she lightly touched my forehead with the ends of her lips. The lamp went out, the curtains closed again, and I saw nothing more; a leaden dreamless sleep fell upon me, and held me unconscious until the morning. I woke later than usual, and the recollection of that strange vision troubled me all day; I ended by persuading myself that it was naught but the vapour of my overheated imagination. And yet the sensation had been so vivid that it was difficult to believe

that it was not real; and not without some presentiment of what was about to happen did I retire, after praying God to put away from me evil thoughts and to protect the chastity of my slumber.

I was soon sleeping soundly, and my dream was continued. The curtains were drawn aside and I beheld Clarimonde, not as before, pale in her pale winding-sheet, and with the violet hue of death upon her cheeks, but merry, alert, and smartly dressed, in a magnificent travelling-dress of green velvet, trimmed with gold lace and caught up at the side to reveal a satin petticoat. Her fair hair escaped in huge curls from beneath a broad-brimmed hat of black felt decorated with white feathers capriciously arranged; she held in her hand a little riding-whip with a gold whistle in the handle. She tapped me lightly with it, and said:

“Well! my fine sleeper, is this the way you make your preparations? I expected to find you on your feet. Rise at once, we have no time to lose.”

I leaped out of bed.

“Come, dress yourself and let us go,” she said, pointing to a small bundle which she had brought; “the horses are impatient and are champing their bits at the door. We should be already ten leagues away.”

I dressed myself hastily and she handed me the different parts of my costume, bursting into laughter at my awkwardness, and indicating their respective uses when I made a mistake. She gave a twist to my hair, and when it was done, she handed me a little pocket-mirror of Venetian crystal, with a rim of silver filigree, and said to me:

“How dost find thyself now? Wouldst care to take me into thy service as valet?”

I was no longer the same, and I did not know myself. I resembled myself no more than a finished statue resembles a block of stone. My former face demed to be only the rough sketch of that which the mirror reflected. I was handsome, and my vanity was sensibly tickled by the metamorphosis. That elegant apparel, that richly embroidered vest, made of me a totally different person, and I marvelled at the power of a few yards of cloth cut in a certain way. The spirit of my costume penetrated my very skin, and within ten minutes I was reasonably conceited.

I walked about the chamber several times to give myself ease of manner. Clarimonde watched me with an air of maternal pleasure, and appeared well satisfied with her work.

“We have had enough of child’s play; let us be off, Romuald dear; we have a long way to go and we shall never arrive.”

She took my hand and led me away. All the doors opened before her as soon as she touched hem, and we passed by the dog without waking him.

At the gate we found Margheritone; he was the groom who had escorted me before; he was holding three horses, black like the first ones; one for me, one for Clarimonde, and one for himself. Those horses must have been Spanish jennets, born of mares mated with a zephyr; for they went as swiftly as the wind, and the moon, which had risen at our departure to give us light, rolled through the sky like a wheel detached from its carriage; we saw it at our right, jumping from tree to tree, and panting for breath as it ran after us. We soon reached a level tract where, in a clump of trees, a carriage drawn by four beautiful horses awaited us; we entered it, and the postillions urged them into a mad gallop. I had one arm about Clarimonde’s waist and one of her hands clasped in mine; she rested her head on my shoulder, and I felt her bosom, half bare, pressing against my arm. I had never known such bliss. I forgot everything at that moment, and I no more remembered that I had once been a priest than I remembered what I had been doing in my mother’s womb, so great was the fascination that the evil spirit exerted upon me. From that night my nature was in a certain sense halved, and there were within me two men, neither of whom knew the other. Sometimes I fancied myself a priest who dreamed every night he was a

gentleman, at other times a gentleman who dreamed he was a priest. I could no longer distinguish between dreaming and waking, and I knew not where reality began and illusion ended. The conceited and dissipated young nobleman railed at the priest; the priest loathed the debauchery of the young nobleman. Two spirals entangled in each other and inextricably confounded without ever touching would represent very well the bicephalous life which I led. Despite the abnormality of my position, I do not think that I was mad, for a single instant. I always retained very clearly the consciousness of my two existences. But there was one absurd fact which I could not explain: that was that consciousness of the same ego could exist in two men so entirely different. It was an anomaly which I did not understand, whether I fancied myself the cure of the little village of C—— or II Signor Romualdo, the titled lover of Clarimonde.

However, I was, or at least I fancied that I was, at Venice; I have never been able to distinguish between illusion and reality in that extraordinary adventure. We occupied a large marble palace on the Canaleio, filled with frescoes and statues, with two Titians, of the artist's best period, in Clarimonde's bedroom. It was a palace worthy of a king. We had each our gondola and our boatmen in our livery, our music-hall, and our poet. Clarimonde had a magnificent idea of life, and she had a touch of Cleopatra in her nature. As for me, I cut the swath of a prince's son, and I raised such a dust as if I had belonged to the family of one of the twelve apostles or of the four evangelists of the Most Serene Republic; I would not have turned aside from my path to allow the Doge to pass, and I do not believe that since Satan fell from heaven, any creature was ever prouder or more insolent than I. I went to the Ridotto, and I gambled frantically. I consorted with the best society in the world, ruined sons of noble families, actresses, swindlers, parasites, and swashbucklers; however, despite the dissipated life I led, I remained faithful to Clarimonde. I loved her wildly. She would have excited satiety itself and chained inconstancy. To have Clarimonde was to have twenty mistresses, she was so mobile, so changing, and so unlike herself; a very chameleon! She would make you commit with her the infidelity you might have committed with others, by assuming the nature, the manners, and the style of beauty of the woman who seemed to please you. She returned my love a hundredfold; and in vain did young patricians, and even the ancients of the Council of Ten, make her the most magnificent offers. A Foscari even went so far as to propose to marry her; but she refused everything. She had money enough; she wanted only love, a pure, youthful love, inspired by herself, which should be a first and last passion. I should have been perfectly happy but for an infernal nightmare which recurred every night, and in which I imagined myself a village curé, macerating himself and doing penance for my orgies during the day. Reassured by the habit of being with her, I hardly ever thought of the strange way in which I had made Clarimonde's acquaintance. However, what the Abbé Sérapion had said returned sometimes to my memory and never failed to cause me uneasiness.

For some time Clarimonde's health had become impaired; her bright colour faded from day to day. The doctors whom I summoned failed utterly to understand her disease, and they had no idea what to do. They prescribed some insignificant remedies and came no more. Meanwhile she turned visibly paler, and became colder and colder. She was almost as white and as dead as on that memorable night in the unknown castle. I was in despair to see her thus slowly fall away. She, touched by my grief, would smile at me sweetly and sadly, with the fateful smile of those who feel that they must die.

One morning I was seated by her bed, breakfasting at a small table, in order not to leave her for an instant. As I was cutting some fruit, I accidentally made a deep gash in my finger. The blood

immediately gushed forth in a purple jet, and a few drops spurted upon Clarimonde. Her eyes flashed and her face assumed an expression of fierce and savage joy which I had never before seen upon it. She jumped out of bed with the agility of a monkey or a cat, and pounced upon my wound, which she began to suck with an expression of unutterable pleasure. She swallowed the blood in little mouthfuls, slowly and gloatingly, as a gourmand sips a wine of Xeres or of Syracuse; she half closed her green eyes, and the lids about them became oblong instead of round. From time to time she paused in order to kiss my hand, then pressed her lips once more to the lips of the wound, to coax forth a few more red drops. When she found that no more blood came, she stood erect with liquid and gleaming eyes, rosier than a May dawn; her face full and fresh, her hand warm and moist,—in fine, lovelier than ever and in the most perfect health.

“I shall not die! I shall not die!” she exclaimed, half mad with joy and clinging to my neck; “I shall be able to love thee for a long time to come. My life is in thine, and all that is of me comes from thee. A few drops of thy rich and noble blood, more precious and more potent than all the elixirs of the world, have restored me to life.”

This scene engrossed my thoughts for a long while and aroused within me strange doubts concerning Clarimonde; and that same night, when sleep had taken me back to my presbytery, I saw the Abbé Sérapion, more grave and more anxious than ever. He gazed at me attentively and said:

“Not content with losing your soul, you propose to destroy your body. Wretched young man, into what a snare have you fallen!”

The tone in which he said these few words impressed me deeply; but despite his earnestness, that impression soon vanished and a thousand other preoccupations blotted it from my mind. But one evening I saw in my mirror, the treacherous position of which she had not reckoned upon, Clarimonde pour a powder into the cup of spiced wine which she was accustomed to prepare after our dinner. I took the cup, I pretended to put my lips to it, then placed it upon some piece of furniture, as if to finish it later at my leisure; and taking advantage of a moment when she had her back turned, I tossed the contents under the table; after which I withdrew to my apartment and went to bed, fully determined not to go to sleep and to see what it all meant. I did not wait long; Clarimonde entered in her nightrobe, and, having cast it aside, knelt beside my bed. When she was fully assured that I was asleep, she bared my arm and drew a gold pin from her hair; then she murmured in a low voice:

“One drop, just one little red drop, one ruby at the end of my pin! Since thou dost still love me, I must not die. Ah! poor love! I will drink his noble blood, his brilliant purple blood. Sleep, my only treasure, sleep, my god, my child! I will not hurt thee, I will take of thy life only what is necessary to prevent mine from departing. If I did not love thee so dearly I might determine to have other lovers upon whose veins I might draw; but since I have known thee I have held all the world in horror. Ah! the lovely arm! how round it is! and how white! I shall never dare to prick that pretty blue vein.”

And as she said this she wept, and I felt her tears raining upon my arm, as she clasped it in her hands. At last she made up her mind, made a little prick with her pin, and began to suck the blood that flowed from it. Although she had drunk but a few drops, the fear of exhausting me seized her, and she carefully wrapped around my arm a little bandage, afterward rubbing the wound with an unguent which cicatrised it instantly.

I could doubt no longer. The Abbé Sérapion was right. However, despite that certainty, I could not help loving Clarimonde, and I would gladly have given her all the blood that she needed to sustain her factitious life. Besides, I was not much afraid; the woman reassured me concerning

the vampire, and what I had heard and seen set my mind at rest; in those days my veins were richly supplied, and could not be easily exhausted, and I would not haggle for my life drop by drop. I would have opened my arm myself and have said to her: "Drink! and let my love infuse itself into thy body with my blood!" I carefully avoided making the slightest allusion to the narcotic which she had poured out for me, or to the scene of the pin, and we lived in the most absolute harmony.

Yet my priestly scruples tormented me more than ever, and I did not know what new maceration to invent, to punish and mortify my flesh. Although all these visions were involuntary and I had no share in bringing them about, I dared not touch the Christ with hands so impure, and with a mind sullied by such debauchery, real or dreamed. To avoid the recurrence of these fatiguing hallucinations, I tried to keep from sleeping; I held my eyelids open with my fingers, and I stood against the wall, struggling against sleep with all my might; but the sand of drowsiness soon entered my eyes, and, seeing that it was useless to struggle, I would drop my arms in discouragement and weariness, and the current would sweep me away towards my perfidious dreams.

Sérapion exhorted me most vehemently, and reproached me severely for my listlessness and my lack of fervour. One day, when I had been more agitated than usual, he said to me:

"To rid you of this obsession, there is but one means, and, although it is an extreme means, we must resort to it; great evils demand heroic remedies. I know where Clarimonde is buried; we must disinter her, so that you may see in what a pitiful plight the object of your love is; you will be tempted no more to imperil your soul for a disgusting corpse, devoured by worms and ready to crumble to dust; that sight will assuredly cause you to reflect."

For my own part, I was so wearied of that double life that I assented, desiring to know once for all whether the priest or the nobleman was the dupe of a delusion; I was determined to kill, for the benefit of the other, one of the two men who lived in me, or to kill them both; for such a life could not last.

Abbé Sérapion provided himself with a mattock, a lever, and a lantern, and at midnight we betook ourselves to the cemetery of —, of which he knew perfectly the location and the arrangement. After turning the light of the dark lantern upon the inscriptions of several tombs, we reached at last a stone, half hidden by tall grasses, and devoured by mosses and parasitic plants, upon which we deciphered the opening lines of the epitaph:

"Here lies Clarimonde
Who was famed in her lifetime
As the fairest of women——"

"Here is the place," said Sérapion; and putting his lantern on the ground, he inserted the lever in the interstice between the stones and began to pry. The stone yielded, and he set to work with his mattock. For my part, I watched him, more gloomy and silent than the night itself; meanwhile he, bending over his ghastly task, was dripping with perspiration, and his hurried breath was like the rattle of a dying man. It was an extraordinary spectacle, and whoever had seen us from without would have taken us for profane robbers of graves rather than for priests of God. There was something stern and savage in Sérapion's ardour, which made him resemble a demon rather than an apostle or an angel; and his face, with its large, stern features sharply outlined by the light of the lantern, was in no wise reassuring. I felt an icy sweat upon my limbs, and my hair stood painfully erect upon my head; in the inmost depths of my heart, I looked upon the pitiless

Sérapion's act as an outrageous sacrilege, and I would have been glad if a triangle of fire had come forth from the dark clouds that moved slowly over our heads and had reduced him to dust. The owls perched upon the cypresses, disturbed by the light of the lantern, beat heavily against the glass with their dusty wings, uttering plaintive cries; wild foxes yelped in the distance, and a thousand sinister noises detached themselves from the silence. At last Sérapion's mattock came in contact with the coffin, the boards of which resounded with a deep, sonorous sound, with that terrible sound nothing utters when stricken. He drew back the lid, and I saw Clarimonde, pale as a marble statue, with clasped hands; her white winding-sheet covered her in a single fold from head to feet. A tiny little drop showed like a rose in the corner of her leaden-hued lips. Sérapion, at that sight, flew into a rage.

"Ah! there you are, demon, shameless courtesan, drinker of blood and gold!" And he drenched with holy-water the body in the coffin, upon which he made the sign of the cross with his sprinkler. Poor Clarimonde was no sooner touched by the blessed spray than her beautiful body crumbled into dust; there was nothing left but a ghastly, shapeless mass of cinders and of half-calcined bones.

"Behold your mistress, my Lord Romuald!" cried the inexorable priest, pointing to the sad remains; "shall you be tempted again to promenade on the Lido or at Fusina with your beauty?"

I hung my head; a great catastrophe had taken place within me. I returned to my presbytery, and Lord Romuald, Clarimonde's lover, parted from the poor priest, with whom he had maintained such a strange companionship for so long. But the following night I saw Clarimonde; she said to me as she said the first time, in the church porch: "Unhappy man! Unhappy man! What hast thou done? Why didst thou listen to that foolish priest? Wert thou not happy? And what had I done to thee that thou shouldst violate my poor grave and lay bare the shame of my nothingness? All communication between our souls and our bodies is broken henceforth. Adieu! thou wilt yet regret me."

She vanished in the air like smoke, and I never saw her again.

Alas! she told the truth. I have regretted her more than once, and I regret her still. My soul's peace was purchased very dearly; the love of God was none too much to replace hers. Such, brother, is the story of my youth. Never look upon a woman, and walk abroad always with your eyes on the ground; for, however chaste and watchful you may be, the error of a single moment is enough to cause you to lose eternity.