HONORÉ DE BALZAC

SERAPHITA

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Содержание

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DEDICATION

To Madame Eveline de Hanska, nee Comtesse Rzewuska.

Madame, – Here is the work which you asked of me. I am happy, in thus dedicating it, to offer you a proof of the respectful affection you allow me to bear you. If I am reproached for impotence in this attempt to draw from the depths of mysticism a book which seeks to give, in the lucid transparency of our beautiful language, the luminous poesy of the Orient, to you the blame! Did you not command this struggle (resembling that of Jacob) by telling me that the most imperfect sketch of this Figure, dreamed of by you, as it has been by me since childhood, would still be something to you?

Here, then, it is, – that something. Would that this book could belong exclusively to noble spirits, preserved like yours from worldly pettiness by solitude! THEY would know how to give to it the melodious rhythm that it lacks, which might have made it, in the hands of a poet, the glorious epic that France still awaits. But from me they must accept it as one of those sculptured balustrades, carved by a hand of faith, on which the pilgrims lean, in the choir of

some glorious church, to think upon the end of man.

I am, madame, with respect,

Your devoted servant,

De Balzac.

CHAPTER I. SERAPHITUS

As the eye glances over a map of the coasts of Norway, can the imagination fail to marvel at their fantastic indentations and serrated edges, like a granite lace, against which the surges of the North Sea roar incessantly? Who has not dreamed of the majestic sights to be seen on those beachless shores, of that multitude of creeks and inlets and little bays, no two of them alike, yet all trackless abysses? We may almost fancy that Nature took pleasure in recording by ineffaceable hieroglyphics the symbol of Norwegian life, bestowing on these coasts the conformation of a fish's spine, fishery being the staple commerce of the country, and well-nigh the only means of living of the hardy men who cling like tufts of lichen to the arid cliffs. Here, through fourteen degrees of longitude, barely seven hundred thousand souls maintain existence. Thanks to perils devoid of glory, to year-long snows which clothe the Norway peaks and guard them from profaning foot of traveller, these sublime beauties are virgin still; they will be seen to harmonize with human phenomena, also virgin – at least to poetry – which here took place, the history of which it is our purpose to relate.

If one of these inlets, mere fissures to the eyes of the eider-ducks, is wide enough for the sea not to freeze between the prison-walls of rock against which it surges, the country-people call the little bay a "fiord," – a word which geographers of every

nation have adopted into their respective languages. Though a certain resemblance exists among all these fiords, each has its own characteristics. The sea has everywhere forced its way as through a breach, yet the rocks about each fissure are diversely rent, and their tumultuous precipices defy the rules of geometric law. Here the scarp is dentelled like a saw; there the narrow ledges barely allow the snow to lodge or the noble crests of the Northern pines to spread themselves; farther on, some convulsion of Nature may have rounded a coquettish curve into a lovely valley flanked in rising terraces with black-plumed pines. Truly we are tempted to call this land the Switzerland of Ocean.

Midway between Trondhjem and Christiansand lies an inlet called the Strom-fiord. If the Strom-fiord is not the loveliest of these rocky landscapes, it has the merit of displaying the terrestrial grandeurs of Norway, and of enshrining the scenes of a history that is indeed celestial.

The general outline of the Strom-fiord seems at first sight to be that of a funnel washed out by the sea. The passage which the waves have forced present to the eye an image of the eternal struggle between old Ocean and the granite rock, – two creations of equal power, one through inertia, the other by ceaseless motion. Reefs of fantastic shape run out on either side, and bar the way of ships and forbid their entrance. The intrepid sons of Norway cross these reefs on foot, springing from rock to rock, undismayed at the abyss – a hundred fathoms deep and only six feet wide – which yawns beneath them. Here a tottering block of

gneiss falling athwart two rocks gives an uncertain footway; there the hunters or the fishermen, carrying their loads, have flung the stems of fir-trees in guise of bridges, to join the projecting reefs, around and beneath which the surges roar incessantly. This dangerous entrance to the little bay bears obliquely to the right with a serpentine movement, and there encounters a mountain rising some twenty-five hundred feet above sea-level, the base of which is a vertical palisade of solid rock more than a mile and a half long, the inflexible granite nowhere yielding to clefts or undulations until it reaches a height of two hundred feet above the water. Rushing violently in, the sea is driven back with equal violence by the inert force of the mountain to the opposite shore, gently curved by the spent force of the retreating waves.

The fiord is closed at the upper end by a vast gneiss formation crowned with forests, down which a river plunges in cascades, becomes a torrent when the snows are melting, spreads into a sheet of waters, and then falls with a roar into the bay, – vomiting as it does so the hoary pines and the aged larches washed down from the forests and scarce seen amid the foam. These trees plunge headlong into the fiord and reappear after a time on the surface, clinging together and forming islets which float ashore on the beaches, where the inhabitants of a village on the left bank of the Strom-fiord gather them up, split, broken (though sometimes whole), and always stripped of bark and branches. The mountain which receives at its base the assaults of Ocean, and at its summit the buffeting of the wild North wind, is called

the Falberg. Its crest, wrapped at all seasons in a mantle of snow and ice, is the sharpest peak of Norway; its proximity to the pole produces, at the height of eighteen hundred feet, a degree of cold equal to that of the highest mountains of the globe. The summit of this rocky mass, rising sheer from the fiord on one side, slopes gradually downward to the east, where it joins the declivities of the Sieg and forms a series of terraced valleys, the chilly temperature of which allows no growth but that of shrubs and stunted trees.

The upper end of the fiord, where the waters enter it as they come down from the forest, is called the Siegdahlen, – a word which may be held to mean "the shedding of the Sieg," – the river itself receiving that name. The curving shore opposite to the face of the Falberg is the valley of Jarvis, – a smiling scene overlooked by hills clothed with firs, birch-trees, and larches, mingled with a few oaks and beeches, the richest coloring of all the varied tapestries which Nature in these northern regions spreads upon the surface of her rugged rocks. The eye can readily mark the line where the soil, warmed by the rays of the sun, bears cultivation and shows the native growth of the Norwegian flora. Here the expanse of the fiord is broad enough to allow the sea, dashed back by the Falberg, to spend its expiring force in gentle murmurs upon the lower slope of these hills, – a shore bordered with finest sand, strewn with mica and sparkling pebbles, porphyry, and marbles of a thousand tints, brought from Sweden by the river floods, together with ocean waifs, shells, and flowers of the sea

driven in by tempests, whether of the Pole or Tropics.

At the foot of the hills of Jarvis lies a village of some two hundred wooden houses, where an isolated population lives like a swarm of bees in a forest, without increasing or diminishing; vegetating happily, while wringing their means of living from the breast of a stern Nature. The almost unknown existence of the little hamlet is readily accounted for. Few of its inhabitants were bold enough to risk their lives among the reefs to reach the deep-sea fishing, – the staple industry of Norwegians on the least dangerous portions of their coast. The fish of the fiord were numerous enough to suffice, in part at least, for the sustenance of the inhabitants; the valley pastures provided milk and butter; a certain amount of fruitful, well-tilled soil yielded rye and hemp and vegetables, which necessity taught the people to protect against the severity of the cold and the fleeting but terrible heat of the sun with the shrewd ability which Norwegians display in the two-fold struggle. The difficulty of communication with the outer world, either by land where the roads are impassable, or by sea where none but tiny boats can thread their way through the maritime defiles that guard the entrance to the bay, hinder these people from growing rich by the sale of their timber. It would cost enormous sums to either blast a channel out to sea or construct a way to the interior. The roads from Christiana to Trondhjem all turn toward the Strom-fiord, and cross the Sieg by a bridge some score of miles above its fall into the bay. The country to the north, between Jarvis and Trondhjem, is covered

with impenetrable forests, while to the south the Falberg is nearly as much separated from Christiana by inaccessible precipices. The village of Jarvis might perhaps have communicated with the interior of Norway and Sweden by the river Sieg; but to do this and to be thus brought into contact with civilization, the Strom-fiord needed the presence of a man of genius. Such a man did actually appear there, – a poet, a Swede of great religious fervor, who died admiring, even reverencing this region as one of the noblest works of the Creator.

Minds endowed by study with an inward sight, and whose quick perceptions bring before the soul, as though painted on a canvas, the contrasting scenery of this universe, will now apprehend the general features of the Strom-fiord. They alone, perhaps, can thread their way through the tortuous channels of the reef, or flee with the battling waves to the everlasting rebuff of the Falberg whose white peaks mingle with the vaporous clouds of the pearl-gray sky, or watch with delight the curving sheet of waters, or hear the rushing of the Sieg as it hangs for an instant in long fillets and then falls over a picturesque abatis of noble trees toppled confusedly together, sometimes upright, sometimes half-sunken beneath the rocks. It may be that such minds alone can dwell upon the smiling scenes nestling among the lower hills of Jarvis; where the luscious Northern vegetables spring up in families, in myriads, where the white birches bend, graceful as maidens, where colonnades of beeches rear their boles mossy with the growth of centuries, where shades of green

contrast, and white clouds float amid the blackness of the distant pines, and tracts of many-tinted crimson and purple shrubs are shaded endlessly; in short, where blend all colors, all perfumes of a flora whose wonders are still ignored. Widen the boundaries of this limited ampitheatre, spring upward to the clouds, lose yourself among the rocks where the seals are lying and even then your thought cannot compass the wealth of beauty nor the poetry of this Norwegian coast. Can your thought be as vast as the ocean that bounds it? as weird as the fantastic forms drawn by these forests, these clouds, these shadows, these changeful lights?

Do you see above the meadows on that lowest slope which undulates around the higher hills of Jarvis two or three hundred houses roofed with "noever," a sort of thatch made of birch-bark, – frail houses, long and low, looking like silk-worms on a mulberry-leaf tossed hither by the winds? Above these humble, peaceful dwellings stands the church, built with a simplicity in keeping with the poverty of the villagers. A graveyard surrounds the chancel, and a little farther on you see the parsonage. Higher up, on a projection of the mountain is a dwelling-house, the only one of stone; for which reason the inhabitants of the village call it "the Swedish Castle." In fact, a wealthy Swede settled in Jarvis about thirty years before this history begins, and did his best to ameliorate its condition. This little house, certainly not a castle, built with the intention of leading the inhabitants to build others like it, was noticeable for its solidity and for the wall that inclosed it, a rare thing in Norway where, notwithstanding the abundance

of stone, wood alone is used for all fences, even those of fields. This Swedish house, thus protected against the climate, stood on rising ground in the centre of an immense courtyard. The windows were sheltered by those projecting pent-house roofs supported by squared trunks of trees which give so patriarchal an air to Northern dwellings. From beneath them the eye could see the savage nudity of the Falberg, or compare the infinitude of the open sea with the tiny drop of water in the foaming fiord; the ear could hear the flowing of the Sieg, whose white sheet far away looked motionless as it fell into its granite cup edged for miles around with glaciers, – in short, from this vantage ground the whole landscape whereon our simple yet superhuman drama was about to be enacted could be seen and noted.

The winter of 1799-1800 was one of the most severe ever known to Europeans. The Norwegian sea was frozen in all the fiords, where, as a usual thing, the violence of the surf kept the ice from forming. A wind, whose effects were like those of the Spanish levanter, swept the ice of the Strom-fiord, driving the snow to the upper end of the gulf. Seldom indeed could the people of Jarvis see the mirror of frozen waters reflecting the colors of the sky; a wondrous site in the bosom of these mountains when all other aspects of nature are levelled beneath successive sheets of snow, and crests and valleys are alike mere folds of the vast mantle flung by winter across a landscape at once so mournfully dazzling and so monotonous. The falling volume of the Sieg, suddenly frozen, formed an immense arcade beneath

which the inhabitants might have crossed under shelter from the blast had any dared to risk themselves inland. But the dangers of every step away from their own surroundings kept even the boldest hunters in their homes, afraid lest the narrow paths along the precipices, the clefts and fissures among the rocks, might be unrecognizable beneath the snow.

Thus it was that no human creature gave life to the white desert where Boreas reigned, his voice alone resounding at distant intervals. The sky, nearly always gray, gave tones of polished steel to the ice of the fiord. Perchance some ancient eider-duck crossed the expanse, trusting to the warm down beneath which dream, in other lands, the luxurious rich, little knowing of the dangers through which their luxury has come to them. Like the Bedouin of the desert who darts alone across the sands of Africa, the bird is neither seen nor heard; the torpid atmosphere, deprived of its electrical conditions, echoes neither the whirr of its wings nor its joyous notes. Besides, what human eye was strong enough to bear the glitter of those pinnacles adorned with sparkling crystals, or the sharp reflections of the snow, iridescent on the summits in the rays of a pallid sun which infrequently appeared, like a dying man seeking to make known that he still lives. Often, when the flocks of gray clouds, driven in squadrons athwart the mountains and among the tree-tops, hid the sky with their triple veils Earth, lacking the celestial lights, lit herself by herself.

Here, then, we meet the majesty of Cold, seated eternally

at the pole in that regal silence which is the attribute of all absolute monarchy. Every extreme principle carries with it an appearance of negation and the symptoms of death; for is not life the struggle of two forces? Here in this Northern nature nothing lived. One sole power – the unproductive power of ice – reigned unchallenged. The roar of the open sea no longer reached the deaf, dumb inlet, where during one short season of the year Nature made haste to produce the slender harvests necessary for the food of the patient people. A few tall pine-trees lifted their black pyramids garlanded with snow, and the form of their long branches and depending shoots completed the mourning garments of those solemn heights.

Each household gathered in its chimney-corner, in houses carefully closed from the outer air, and well supplied with biscuit, melted butter, dried fish, and other provisions laid in for the seven-months winter. The very smoke of these dwellings was hardly seen, half-hidden as they were beneath the snow, against the weight of which they were protected by long planks reaching from the roof and fastened at some distance to solid blocks on the ground, forming a covered way around each building.

During these terrible winter months the women spun and dyed the woollen stuffs and the linen fabrics with which they clothed their families, while the men read, or fell into those endless meditations which have given birth to so many profound theories, to the mystic dreams of the North, to its beliefs, to its studies (so full and so complete in one science, at least, sounded as

with a plummet), to its manners and its morals, half-monastic, which force the soul to react and feed upon itself and make the Norwegian peasant a being apart among the peoples of Europe.

Such was the condition of the Strom-fiord in the first year of the nineteenth century and about the middle of the month of May.

On a morning when the sun burst forth upon this landscape, lighting the fires of the ephemeral diamonds produced by crystallizations of the snow and ice, two beings crossed the fiord and flew along the base of the Falberg, rising thence from ledge to ledge toward the summit. What were they? human creatures, or two arrows? They might have been taken for eider-ducks sailing in consort before the wind. Not the boldest hunter nor the most superstitious fisherman would have attributed to human beings the power to move safely along the slender lines traced beneath the snow by the granite ledges, where yet this couple glided with the terrifying dexterity of somnambulists who, forgetting their own weight and the dangers of the slightest deviation, hurry along a ridge-pole and keep their equilibrium by the power of some mysterious force.

"Stop me, Seraphitus," said a pale young girl, "and let me breathe. I look at you, you only, while scaling these walls of the gulf; otherwise, what would become of me? I am such a feeble creature. Do I tire you?"

"No," said the being on whose arm she leaned. "But let us go on, Minna; the place where we are is not firm enough to stand

on."

Once more the snow creaked sharply beneath the long boards fastened to their feet, and soon they reached the upper terrace of the first ledge, clearly defined upon the flank of the precipice. The person whom Minna had addressed as Seraphitus threw his weight upon his right heel, arresting the plank – six and a half feet long and narrow as the foot of a child – which was fastened to his boot by a double thong of leather. This plank, two inches thick, was covered with reindeer skin, which bristled against the snow when the foot was raised, and served to stop the wearer. Seraphitus drew in his left foot, furnished with another "skee," which was only two feet long, turned swiftly where he stood, caught his timid companion in his arms, lifted her in spite of the long boards on her feet, and placed her on a projecting rock from which he brushed the snow with his pelisse.

"You are safe there, Minna; you can tremble at your ease."

"We are a third of the way up the Ice-Cap," she said, looking at the peak to which she gave the popular name by which it is known in Norway; "I can hardly believe it."

Too much out of breath to say more, she smiled at Seraphitus, who, without answering, laid his hand upon her heart and listened to its sounding throbs, rapid as those of a frightened bird.

"It often beats as fast when I run," she said.

Seraphitus inclined his head with a gesture that was neither coldness nor indifference, and yet, despite the grace which made the movement almost tender, it none the less bespoke a certain

negation, which in a woman would have seemed an exquisite coquetry. Seraphitus clasped the young girl in his arms. Minna accepted the caress as an answer to her words, continuing to gaze at him. As he raised his head, and threw back with impatient gesture the golden masses of his hair to free his brow, he saw an expression of joy in the eyes of his companion.

"Yes, Minna," he said in a voice whose paternal accents were charming from the lips of a being who was still adolescent, "Keep your eyes on me; do not look below you."

"Why not?" she asked.

"You wish to know why? then look!"

Minna glanced quickly at her feet and cried out suddenly like a child who sees a tiger. The awful sensation of abysses seized her; one glance sufficed to communicate its contagion. The fiord, eager for food, bewildered her with its loud voice ringing in her ears, interposing between herself and life as though to devour her more surely. From the crown of her head to her feet and along her spine an icy shudder ran; then suddenly intolerable heat suffused her nerves, beat in her veins and overpowered her extremities with electric shocks like those of the torpedo. Too feeble to resist, she felt herself drawn by a mysterious power to the depths below, wherein she fancied that she saw some monster belching its venom, a monster whose magnetic eyes were charming her, whose open jaws appeared to craunch their prey before they seized it.

"I die, my Seraphitus, loving none but thee," she said, making

a mechanical movement to fling herself into the abyss.

Seraphitus breathed softly on her forehead and eyes. Suddenly, like a traveller relaxed after a bath, Minna forgot these keen emotions, already dissipated by that caressing breath which penetrated her body and filled it with balsamic essences as quickly as the breath itself had crossed the air.

"Who art thou?" she said, with a feeling of gentle terror. "Ah, but I know! thou art my life. How canst thou look into that gulf and not die?" she added presently.

Seraphitus left her clinging to the granite rock and placed himself at the edge of the narrow platform on which they stood, whence his eyes plunged to the depths of the fiord, defying its dazzling invitation. His body did not tremble, his brow was white and calm as that of a marble statue, – an abyss facing an abyss.

"Seraphitus! dost thou not love me? come back!" she cried. "Thy danger renews my terror. Who art thou to have such superhuman power at thy age?" she asked as she felt his arms inclosing her once more.

"But, Minna," answered Seraphitus, "you look fearlessly at greater spaces far than that."

Then with raised finger, this strange being pointed upward to the blue dome, which parting clouds left clear above their heads, where stars could be seen in open day by virtue of atmospheric laws as yet unstudied.

"But what a difference!" she answered smiling.

"You are right," he said; "we are born to stretch upward to the

skies. Our native land, like the face of a mother, cannot terrify her children."

His voice vibrated through the being of his companion, who made no reply.

"Come! let us go on," he said.

The pair darted forward along the narrow paths traced back and forth upon the mountain, skimming from terrace to terrace, from line to line, with the rapidity of a barb, that bird of the desert. Presently they reached an open space, carpeted with turf and moss and flowers, where no foot had ever trod.

"Oh, the pretty saeter!" cried Minna, giving to the upland meadow its Norwegian name. "But how comes it here, at such a height?"

"Vegetation ceases here, it is true," said Seraphitus. "These few plants and flowers are due to that sheltering rock which protects the meadow from the polar winds. Put that tuft in your bosom, Minna," he added, gathering a flower, – "that balmy creation which no eye has ever seen; keep the solitary matchless flower in memory of this one matchless morning of your life. You will find no other guide to lead you again to this saeter."

So saying, he gave her the hybrid plant his falcon eye had seen amid the tufts of gentian acaulis and saxifrages, – a marvel, brought to bloom by the breath of angels. With girlish eagerness Minna seized the tufted plant of transparent green, vivid as emerald, which was formed of little leaves rolled trumpet-wise, brown at the smaller end but changing tint by tint to their

delicately notched edges, which were green. These leaves were so tightly pressed together that they seemed to blend and form a mat or cluster of rosettes. Here and there from this green ground rose pure white stars edged with a line of gold, and from their throats came crimson anthers but no pistils. A fragrance, blended of roses and of orange blossoms, yet ethereal and fugitive, gave something as it were celestial to that mysterious flower, which Seraphitus sadly contemplated, as though it uttered plaintive thoughts which he alone could understand. But to Minna this mysterious phenomenon seemed a mere caprice of nature giving to stone the freshness, softness, and perfume of plants.

"Why do you call it matchless? can it not reproduce itself?" she asked, looking at Seraphitus, who colored and turned away.

"Let us sit down," he said presently; "look below you, Minna. See! At this height you will have no fear. The abyss is so far beneath us that we no longer have a sense of its depths; it acquires the perspective uniformity of ocean, the vagueness of clouds, the soft coloring of the sky. See, the ice of the fiord is a turquoise, the dark pine forests are mere threads of brown; for us all abysses should be thus adorned."

Seraphitus said the words with that fervor of tone and gesture seen and known only by those who have ascended the highest mountains of the globe, – a fervor so involuntarily acquired that the haughtiest of men is forced to regard his guide as a brother, forgetting his own superior station till he descends to the valleys and the abodes of his kind. Seraphitus unfastened the skees from

Minna's feet, kneeling before her. The girl did not notice him, so absorbed was she in the marvellous view now offered of her native land, whose rocky outlines could here be seen at a glance. She felt, with deep emotion, the solemn permanence of those frozen summits, to which words could give no adequate utterance.

"We have not come here by human power alone," she said, clasping her hands. "But perhaps I dream."

"You think that facts the causes of which you cannot perceive are supernatural," replied her companion.

"Your replies," she said, "always bear the stamp of some deep thought. When I am near you I understand all things without an effort. Ah, I am free!"

"If so, you will not need your skees," he answered.

"Oh!" she said; "I who would fain unfasten yours and kiss your feet!"

"Keep such words for Wilfrid," said Seraphitus, gently.

"Wilfrid!" cried Minna angrily; then, softening as she glanced at her companion's face and trying, but in vain, to take his hand, she added, "You are never angry, never; you are so hopelessly perfect in all things."

"From which you conclude that I am unfeeling."

Minna was startled at this lucid interpretation of her thought.

"You prove to me, at any rate, that we understand each other," she said, with the grace of a loving woman.

Seraphitus softly shook his head and looked sadly and gently

at her.

"You, who know all things," said Minna, "tell me why it is that the timidity I felt below is over now that I have mounted higher. Why do I dare to look at you for the first time face to face, while lower down I scarcely dared to give a furtive glance?"

"Perhaps because we are withdrawn from the pettiness of earth," he answered, unfastening his pelisse.

"Never, never have I seen you so beautiful!" cried Minna, sitting down on a mossy rock and losing herself in contemplation of the being who had now guided her to a part of the peak hitherto supposed to be inaccessible.

Never, in truth, had Seraphitus shone with so bright a radiance, – the only word which can render the illumination of his face and the aspect of his whole person. Was this splendor due to the lustre which the pure air of mountains and the reflections of the snow give to the complexion? Was it produced by the inward impulse which excites the body at the instant when exertion is arrested? Did it come from the sudden contrast between the glory of the sun and the darkness of the clouds, from whose shadow the charming couple had just emerged? Perhaps to all these causes we may add the effect of a phenomenon, one of the noblest which human nature has to offer. If some able physiologist had studied this being (who, judging by the pride on his brow and the lightning in his eyes seemed a youth of about seventeen years of age), and if the student had sought for the springs of that beaming life beneath the whitest skin that ever the

North bestowed upon her offspring, he would undoubtedly have believed either in some phosphoric fluid of the nerves shining beneath the cuticle, or in the constant presence of an inward luminary, whose rays issued through the being of Seraphitus like a light through an alabaster vase. Soft and slender as were his hands, ungloved to remove his companion's snow-boots, they seemed possessed of a strength equal to that which the Creator gave to the diaphanous tentacles of the crab. The fire darting from his vivid glance seemed to struggle with the beams of the sun, not to take but to give them light. His body, slim and delicate as that of a woman, gave evidence of one of those natures which are feeble apparently, but whose strength equals their will, rendering them at times powerful. Of medium height, Seraphitus appeared to grow in stature as he turned fully round and seemed about to spring upward. His hair, curled by a fairy's hand and waving to the breeze, increased the illusion produced by this aerial attitude; yet his bearing, wholly without conscious effort, was the result far more of a moral phenomenon than of a corporal habit.

Minna's imagination seconded this illusion, under the dominion of which all persons would assuredly have fallen, – an illusion which gave to Seraphitus the appearance of a vision dreamed of in happy sleep. No known type conveys an image of that form so majestically made to Minna, but which to the eyes of a man would have eclipsed in womanly grace the fairest of Raphael's creations. That painter of heaven has ever put a

tranquil joy, a loving sweetness, into the lines of his angelic conceptions; but what soul, unless it contemplated Seraphitus himself, could have conceived the ineffable emotions imprinted on his face? Who would have divined, even in the dreams of artists, where all things become possible, the shadow cast by some mysterious awe upon that brow, shining with intellect, which seemed to question Heaven and to pity Earth? The head hovered awhile disdainfully, as some majestic bird whose cries reverberate on the atmosphere, then bowed itself resignedly, like the turtledove uttering soft notes of tenderness in the depths of the silent woods. His complexion was of marvellous whiteness, which brought out vividly the coral lips, the brown eyebrows, and the silken lashes, the only colors that trenched upon the paleness of that face, whose perfect regularity did not detract from the grandeur of the sentiments expressed in it; nay, thought and emotion were reflected there, without hindrance or violence, with the majestic and natural gravity which we delight in attributing to superior beings. That face of purest marble expressed in all things strength and peace.

Minna rose to take the hand of Seraphitus, hoping thus to draw him to her, and to lay on that seductive brow a kiss given more from admiration than from love; but a glance at the young man's eyes, which pierced her as a ray of sunlight penetrates a prism, paralyzed the young girl. She felt, but without comprehending, a gulf between them; then she turned away her head and wept. Suddenly a strong hand seized her by the waist, and a soft voice

said to her: "Come!" She obeyed, resting her head, suddenly revived, upon the heart of her companion, who, regulating his step to hers with gentle and attentive conformity, led her to a spot whence they could see the radiant glories of the polar Nature.

"Before I look, before I listen to you, tell me, Seraphitus, why you repulse me. Have I displeased you? and how? tell me! I want nothing for myself; I would that all my earthly goods were yours, for the riches of my heart are yours already. I would that light came to my eyes only though your eyes just as my thought is born of your thought. I should not then fear to offend you, for I should give you back the echoes of your soul, the words of your heart, day by day, – as we render to God the meditations with which his spirit nourishes our minds. I would be thine alone."

"Minna, a constant desire is that which shapes our future. Hope on! But if you would be pure in heart mingle the idea of the All-Powerful with your affections here below; then you will love all creatures, and your heart will rise to heights indeed."

"I will do all you tell me," she answered, lifting her eyes to his with a timid movement.

"I cannot be your companion," said Seraphitus sadly.

He seemed to repress some thoughts, then stretched his arms towards Christiana, just visible like a speck on the horizon and said: —

"Look!"

"We are very small," she said.

"Yes, but we become great through feeling and through

intellect," answered Seraphitus. "With us, and us alone, Minna, begins the knowledge of things; the little that we learn of the laws of the visible world enables us to apprehend the immensity of the worlds invisible. I know not if the time has come to speak thus to you, but I would, ah, I would communicate to you the flame of my hopes! Perhaps we may one day be together in the world where Love never dies."

"Why not here and now?" she said, murmuring.

"Nothing is stable here," he said, disdainfully. "The passing joys of earthly love are gleams which reveal to certain souls the coming of joys more durable; just as the discovery of a single law of nature leads certain privileged beings to a conception of the system of the universe. Our fleeting happiness here below is the forerunning proof of another and a perfect happiness, just as the earth, a fragment of the world, attests the universe. We cannot measure the vast orbit of the Divine thought of which we are but an atom as small as God is great; but we can feel its vastness, we can kneel, adore, and wait. Men ever mislead themselves in science by not perceiving that all things on their globe are related and co-ordinated to the general evolution, to a constant movement and production which bring with them, necessarily, both advancement and an End. Man himself is not a finished creation; if he were, God would not Be."

"How is it that in thy short life thou hast found the time to learn so many things?" said the young girl.

"I remember," he replied.

"Thou art nobler than all else I see."

"We are the noblest of God's greatest works. Has He not given us the faculty of reflecting on Nature; of gathering it within us by thought; of making it a footstool and stepping-stone from and by which to rise to Him? We love according to the greater or the lesser portion of heaven our souls contain. But do not be unjust, Minna; behold the magnificence spread before you. Ocean expands at your feet like a carpet; the mountains resemble ampitheatres; heaven's ether is above them like the arching folds of a stage curtain. Here we may breathe the thoughts of God, as it were like a perfume. See! the angry billows which engulf the ships laden with men seem to us, where we are, mere bubbles; and if we raise our eyes and look above, all there is blue. Behold that diadem of stars! Here the tints of earthly impressions disappear; standing on this nature rarefied by space do you not feel within you something deeper far than mind, grander than enthusiasm, of greater energy than will? Are you not conscious of emotions whose interpretation is no longer in us? Do you not feel your pinions? Let us pray."

Seraphitus knelt down and crossed his hands upon his breast, while Minna fell, weeping, on her knees. Thus they remained for a time, while the azure dome above their heads grew larger and strong rays of light enveloped them without their knowledge.

"Why dost thou not weep when I weep?" said Minna, in a broken voice.

"They who are all spirit do not weep," replied Seraphitus

rising; "Why should I weep? I see no longer human wretchedness. Here, Good appears in all its majesty. There, beneath us, I hear the supplications and the wailings of that harp of sorrows which vibrates in the hands of captive souls. Here, I listen to the choir of harps harmonious. There, below, is hope, the glorious inception of faith; but here is faith – it reigns, hope realized!"

"You will never love me; I am too imperfect; you disdain me," said the young girl.

"Minna, the violet hidden at the feet of the oak whispers to itself: 'The sun does not love me; he comes not.' The sun says: 'If my rays shine upon her she will perish, poor flower.' Friend of the flower, he sends his beams through the oak leaves, he veils, he tempers them, and thus they color the petals of his beloved. I have not veils enough, I fear lest you see me too closely; you would tremble if you knew me better. Listen: I have no taste for earthly fruits. Your joys, I know them all too well, and, like the sated emperors of pagan Rome, I have reached disgust of all things; I have received the gift of vision. Leave me! abandon me!" he murmured, sorrowfully.

Seraphitus turned and seated himself on a projecting rock, dropping his head upon his breast.

"Why do you drive me to despair?" said Minna.

"Go, go!" cried Seraphitus, "I have nothing that you want of me. Your love is too earthly for my love. Why do you not love Wilfrid? Wilfrid is a man, tested by passions; he would clasp you in his vigorous arms and make you feel a hand both broad and

strong. His hair is black, his eyes are full of human thoughts, his heart pours lava in every word he utters; he could kill you with caresses. Let him be your beloved, your husband! Yes, thine be Wilfrid!"

Minna wept aloud.

"Dare you say that you do not love him?" he went on, in a voice which pierced her like a dagger.

"Have mercy, have mercy, my Seraphitus!"

"Love him, poor child of Earth to which thy destiny has indissolubly bound thee," said the strange being, beckoning Minna by a gesture, and forcing her to the edge of the saeter, whence he pointed downward to a scene that might well inspire a young girl full of enthusiasm with the fancy that she stood above this earth.

"I longed for a companion to the kingdom of Light; I wished to show you that morsel of mud, I find you bound to it. Farewell. Remain on earth; enjoy through the senses; obey your nature; turn pale with pallid men; blush with women; sport with children; pray with the guilty; raise your eyes to heaven when sorrows overtake you; tremble, hope, throb in all your pulses; you will have a companion; you can laugh and weep, and give and receive. I, – I am an exile, far from heaven; a monster, far from earth. I live of myself and by myself. I feel by the spirit; I breathe through my brow; I see by thought; I die of impatience and of longing. No one here below can fulfil my desires or calm my griefs. I have forgotten how to weep. I am alone. I resign myself, and I wait."

Seraphitus looked at the flowery mound on which he had seated Minna; then he turned and faced the frowning heights, whose pinnacles were wrapped in clouds; to them he cast, unspoken, the remainder of his thoughts.

"Minna, do you hear those delightful strains?" he said after a pause, with the voice of a dove, for the eagle's cry was hushed; "it is like the music of those Eolian harps your poets hang in forests and on the mountains. Do you see the shadowy figures passing among the clouds, the winged feet of those who are making ready the gifts of heaven? They bring refreshment to the soul; the skies are about to open and shed the flowers of spring upon the earth. See, a gleam is darting from the pole. Let us fly, let us fly! It is time we go!"

In a moment their skees were refastened, and the pair descended the Falberg by the steep slopes which join the mountain to the valleys of the Sieg. Miraculous perception guided their course, or, to speak more properly, their flight. When fissures covered with snow intercepted them, Seraphitus caught Minna in his arms and darted with rapid motion, lightly as a bird, over the crumbling causeways of the abyss. Sometimes, while propelling his companion, he deviated to the right or left to avoid a precipice, a tree, a projecting rock, which he seemed to see beneath the snow, as an old sailor, familiar with the ocean, discerns the hidden reefs by the color, the trend, or the eddying of the water. When they reached the paths of the Siegdahlen, where they could fearlessly follow a straight line to regain the ice

of the fiord, Seraphitus stopped Minna.

"You have nothing to say to me?" he asked.

"I thought you would rather think alone," she answered respectfully.

"Let us hasten, Minette; it is almost night," he said.

Minna quivered as she heard the voice, now so changed, of her guide, – a pure voice, like that of a young girl, which dissolved the fantastic dream through which she had been passing. Seraphitus seemed to be laying aside his male force and the too keen intellect that flames from his eyes. Presently the charming pair glided across the fiord and reached the snow-field which divides the shore from the first range of houses; then, hurrying forward as daylight faded, they sprang up the hill toward the parsonage, as though they were mounting the steps of a great staircase.

"My father must be anxious," said Minna.

"No," answered Seraphitus.

As he spoke the couple reached the porch of the humble dwelling where Monsieur Becker, the pastor of Jarvis, sat reading while awaiting his daughter for the evening meal.

"Dear Monsieur Becker," said Seraphitus, "I have brought Minna back to you safe and sound."

"Thank you, mademoiselle," said the old man, laying his spectacles on his book; "you must be very tired."

"Oh, no," said Minna, and as she spoke she felt the soft breath of her companion on her brow.

"Dear heart, will you come day after to-morrow evening and

take tea with me?"

"Gladly, dear."

"Monsieur Becker, you will bring her, will you not?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

Seraphitus inclined his head with a pretty gesture, and bowed to the old pastor as he left the house. A few moments later he reached the great courtyard of the Swedish villa. An old servant, over eighty years of age, appeared in the portico bearing a lantern. Seraphitus slipped off his snow-shoes with the graceful dexterity of a woman, then darting into the salon he fell exhausted and motionless on a wide divan covered with furs.

"What will you take?" asked the old man, lighting the immensely tall wax-candles that are used in Norway.

"Nothing, David, I am too weary."

Seraphitus unfastened his pelisse lined with sable, threw it over him, and fell asleep. The old servant stood for several minutes gazing with loving eyes at the singular being before him, whose sex it would have been difficult for any one at that moment to determine. Wrapped as he was in a formless garment, which resembled equally a woman's robe and a man's mantle, it was impossible not to fancy that the slender feet which hung at the side of the couch were those of a woman, and equally impossible not to note how the forehead and the outlines of the head gave evidence of power brought to its highest pitch.

"She suffers, and she will not tell me," thought the old man. "She is dying, like a flower wilted by the burning sun."

And the old man wept.

CHAPTER II. SERAPHITA

Later in the evening David re-entered the salon.

"I know who it is you have come to announce," said Seraphita in a sleepy voice. "Wilfrid may enter."

Hearing these words a man suddenly presented himself, crossed the room and sat down beside her.

"My dear Seraphita, are you ill?" he said. "You look paler than usual."

She turned slowly towards him, tossing back her hair like a pretty woman whose aching head leaves her no strength even for complaint.

"I was foolish enough to cross the fiord with Minna," she said. "We ascended the Falberg."

"Do you mean to kill yourself?" he said with a lover's terror.

"No, my good Wilfrid; I took the greatest care of your Minna."

Wilfrid struck his hand violently on a table, rose hastily, and made several steps towards the door with an exclamation full of pain; then he returned and seemed about to remonstrate.

"Why this disturbance if you think me ill?" she said.

"Forgive me, have mercy!" he cried, kneeling beside her. "Speak to me harshly if you will; exact all that the cruel fancies of a woman lead you to imagine I least can bear; but oh, my beloved, do not doubt my love. You take Minna like an axe to hew me down. Have mercy!"

"Why do you say these things, my friend, when you know that they are useless?" she replied, with a look which grew in the end so soft that Wilfrid ceased to behold her eyes, but saw in their place a fluid light, the shimmer of which was like the last vibrations of an Italian song.

"Ah! no man dies of anguish!" he murmured.

"You are suffering?" she said in a voice whose intonations produced upon his heart the same effect as that of her look. "Would I could help you!"

"Love me as I love you."

"Poor Minna!" she replied.

"Why am I unarmed!" exclaimed Wilfrid, violently.

"You are out of temper," said Seraphita, smiling. "Come, have I not spoken to you like those Parisian women whose loves you tell of?"

Wilfrid sat down, crossed his arms, and looked gloomily at Seraphita. "I forgive you," he said; "for you know not what you do."

"You mistake," she replied; "every woman from the days of Eve does good and evil knowingly."

"I believe it," he said.

"I am sure of it, Wilfrid. Our instinct is precisely that which makes us perfect. What you men learn, we feel."

"Why, then, do you not feel how much I love you?"

"Because you do not love me."

"Good God!"

"If you did, would you complain of your own sufferings?"

"You are terrible to-night, Seraphita. You are a demon."

"No, but I am gifted with the faculty of comprehending, and it is awful. Wilfrid, sorrow is a lamp which illumines life."

"Why did you ascend the Falberg?"

"Minna will tell you. I am too weary to talk. You must talk to me, – you who know so much, who have learned all things and forgotten nothing; you who have passed through every social test. Talk to me, amuse me, I am listening."

"What can I tell you that you do not know? Besides, the request is ironical. You allow yourself no intercourse with social life; you trample on its conventions, its laws, its customs, sentiments, and sciences; you reduce them all to the proportions such things take when viewed by you beyond this universe."

"Therefore you see, my friend, that I am not a woman. You do wrong to love me. What! am I to leave the ethereal regions of my pretended strength, make myself humbly small, cringe like the hapless female of all species, that you may lift me up? and then, when I, helpless and broken, ask you for help, when I need your arm, you will repulse me! No, we can never come to terms."

"You are more maliciously unkind to-night than I have ever known you."

"Unkind!" she said, with a look which seemed to blend all feelings into one celestial emotion, "no, I am ill, I suffer, that is all. Leave me, my friend; it is your manly right. We women should ever please you, entertain you, be gay in your presence

and have no whims save those that amuse you. Come, what shall I do for you, friend? Shall I sing, shall I dance, though weariness deprives me of the use of voice and limbs? – Ah! gentlemen, be we on our deathbeds, we yet must smile to please you; you call that, methinks, your right. Poor women! I pity them. Tell me, you who abandon them when they grow old, is it because they have neither hearts nor souls? Wilfrid, I am a hundred years old; leave me! leave me! go to Minna!"

"Oh, my eternal love!"

"Do you know the meaning of eternity? Be silent, Wilfrid. You desire me, but you do not love me. Tell me, do I not seem to you like those coquettish Parisian women?"

"Certainly I no longer find you the pure celestial maiden I first saw in the church of Jarvis."

At these words Seraphita passed her hands across her brow, and when she removed them Wilfrid was amazed at the saintly expression that overspread her face.

"You are right, my friend," she said; "I do wrong whenever I set my feet upon your earth."

"Oh, Seraphita, be my star! stay where you can ever bless me with that clear light!"

As he spoke, he stretched forth his hand to take that of the young girl, but she withdrew it, neither disdainfully nor in anger. Wilfrid rose abruptly and walked to the window that she might not see the tears that rose to his eyes.

"Why do you weep?" she said. "You are not a child, Wilfrid.

Come back to me. I wish it. You are annoyed if I show just displeasure. You see that I am fatigued and ill, yet you force me to think and speak, and listen to persuasions and ideas that weary me. If you had any real perception of my nature, you would have made some music, you would have lulled my feelings – but no, you love me for yourself and not for myself."

The storm which convulsed the young man's heart calmed down at these words. He slowly approached her, letting his eyes take in the seductive creature who lay exhausted before him, her head resting in her hand and her elbow on the couch.

"You think that I do not love you," she resumed. "You are mistaken. Listen to me, Wilfrid. You are beginning to know much; you have suffered much. Let me explain your thoughts to you. You wished to take my hand just now"; she rose to a sitting posture, and her graceful motions seemed to emit light. "When a young girl allows her hand to be taken it is as though she made a promise, is it not? and ought she not to fulfil it? You well know that I cannot be yours. Two sentiments divide and inspire the love of all the women of the earth. Either they devote themselves to suffering, degraded, and criminal beings whom they desire to console, uplift, redeem; or they give themselves to superior men, sublime and strong, whom they adore and seek to comprehend, and by whom they are often annihilated. You have been degraded, though now you are purified by the fires of repentance, and to-day you are once more noble; but I know myself too feeble to be your equal, and too religious to bow

before any power but that On High. I may refer thus to your life, my friend, for we are in the North, among the clouds, where all things are abstractions."

"You stab me, Seraphita, when you speak like this. It wounds me to hear you apply the dreadful knowledge with which you strip from all things human the properties that time and space and form have given them, and consider them mathematically in the abstract, as geometry treats substances from which it extracts solidity."

"Well, I will respect your wishes, Wilfrid. Let the subject drop. Tell me what you think of this bearskin rug which my poor David has spread out."

"It is very handsome."

"Did you ever see me wear this 'doucha greka'?"

She pointed to a pelisse made of cashmere and lined with the skin of the black fox, – the name she gave it signifying "warm to the soul."

"Do you believe that any sovereign has a fur that can equal it?" she asked.

"It is worthy of her who wears it."

"And whom you think beautiful?"

"Human words do not apply to her. Heart to heart is the only language I can use."

"Wilfrid, you are kind to soothe my griefs with such sweet words – which you have said to others."

"Farewell!"

"Stay. I love both you and Minna, believe me. To me you two are as one being. United thus you can be my brother or, if you will, my sister. Marry her; let me see you both happy before I leave this world of trial and of pain. My God! the simplest of women obtain what they ask of a lover; they whisper 'Hush!' and he is silent; 'Die' and he dies; 'Love me afar' and he stays at a distance, like courtiers before a king! All I desire is to see you happy, and you refuse me! Am I then powerless? – Wilfrid, listen, come nearer to me. Yes, I should grieve to see you marry Minna but – when I am here no longer, then – promise me to marry her; heaven destined you for each other."

"I listen to you with fascination, Seraphita. Your words are incomprehensible, but they charm me. What is it you mean to say?"

"You are right; I forget to be foolish, – to be the poor creature whose weaknesses gratify you. I torment you, Wilfrid. You came to these Northern lands for rest, you, worn-out by the impetuous struggle of genius unrecognized, you, weary with the patient toils of science, you, who well-nigh dyed your hands in crime and wore the fetters of human justice – "

Wilfrid dropped speechless on the carpet. Seraphita breathed softly on his forehead, and in a moment he fell asleep at her feet.

"Sleep! rest!" she said, rising.

She passed her hands over Wilfrid's brow; then the following sentences escaped her lips, one by one, – all different in tone and accent, but all melodious, full of a Goodness that seemed to

emanate from her head in vaporous waves, like the gleams the goddess chastely lays upon Endymion sleeping.

"I cannot show myself such as I am to thee, dear Wilfrid, – to thee who art strong.

"The hour is come; the hour when the effulgent lights of the future cast their reflections backward on the soul; the hour when the soul awakes into freedom.

"Now am I permitted to tell thee how I love thee. Dost thou not see the nature of my love, a love without self-interest; a sentiment full of thee, thee only; a love which follows thee into the future to light that future for thee – for it is the one True Light. Canst thou now conceive with what ardor I would have thee leave this life which weighs thee down, and behold thee nearer than thou art to that world where Love is never-failing? Can it be aught but suffering to love for one life only? Hast thou not felt a thirst for the eternal love? Dost thou not feel the bliss to which a creature rises when, with twin-soul, it loves the Being who betrays not love, Him before whom we kneel in adoration?

"Would I had wings to cover thee, Wilfrid; power to give thee strength to enter now into that world where all the purest joys of purest earthly attachments are but shadows in the Light that shines, unceasing, to illumine and rejoice all hearts.

"Forgive a friendly soul for showing thee the picture of thy sins, in the charitable hope of soothing the sharp pangs of thy remorse. Listen to the pardoning choir; refresh thy soul in the dawn now rising for thee beyond the night of death. Yes, thy life,

thy true life is there!

"May my words now reach thee clothed in the glorious forms of dreams; may they deck themselves with images glowing and radiant as they hover round you. Rise, rise, to the height where men can see themselves distinctly, pressed together though they be like grains of sand upon a sea-shore. Humanity rolls out like a many-colored ribbon. See the diverse shades of that flower of the celestial gardens. Behold the beings who lack intelligence, those who begin to receive it, those who have passed through trials, those who love, those who follow wisdom and aspire to the regions of Light!

"Canst thou comprehend, through this thought made visible, the destiny of humanity? – whence it came, whither to goeth? Continue steadfast in the Path. Reaching the end of thy journey thou shalt hear the clarions of omnipotence sounding the cries of victory in chords of which a single one would shake the earth, but which are lost in the spaces of a world that hath neither east nor west.

"Canst thou comprehend, my poor beloved Tried-one, that unless the torpor and the veils of sleep had wrapped thee, such sights would rend and bear away thy mind as the whirlwinds rend and carry into space the feeble sails, depriving thee forever of thy reason? Dost thou understand that the Soul itself, raised to its utmost power can scarcely endure in dreams the burning communications of the Spirit?

"Speed thy way through the luminous spheres; behold,

admire, hasten! Flying thus thou canst pause or advance without weariness. Like other men, thou wouldst fain be plunged forever in these spheres of light and perfume where now thou art, free of thy swooning body, and where thy thought alone has utterance. Fly! enjoy for a fleeting moment the wings thou shalt surely win when Love has grown so perfect in thee that thou hast no senses left; when thy whole being is all mind, all love. The higher thy flight the less canst thou see the abysses. There are none in heaven. Look at the friend who speaks to thee; she who holds thee above this earth in which are all abysses. Look, behold, contemplate me yet a moment longer, for never again wilt thou see me, save imperfectly as the pale twilight of this world may show me to thee."

Seraphita stood erect, her head with floating hair inclining gently forward, in that aerial attitude which great painters give to messengers from heaven; the folds of her raiment fell with the same unspeakable grace which holds an artist – the man who translates all things into sentiment – before the exquisite well-known lines of Polyhymnia's veil. Then she stretched forth her hand. Wilfrid rose. When he looked at Seraphita she was lying on the bear's-skin, her head resting on her hand, her face calm, her eyes brilliant. Wilfrid gazed at her silently; but his face betrayed a deferential fear in its almost timid expression.

"Yes, dear," he said at last, as though he were answering some question; "we are separated by worlds. I resign myself; I can only adore you. But what will become of me, poor and alone!"

"Wilfrid, you have Minna."

He shook his head.

"Do not be so disdainful; woman understands all things through love; what she does not understand she feels; what she does not feel she sees; when she neither sees, nor feels, nor understands, this angel of earth divines to protect you, and hides her protection beneath the grace of love."

"Seraphita, am I worthy to belong to a woman?"

"Ah, now," she said, smiling, "you are suddenly very modest; is it a snare? A woman is always so touched to see her weakness glorified. Well, come and take tea with me the day after to-morrow evening; good Monsieur Becker will be here, and Minna, the purest and most artless creature I have known on earth. Leave me now, my friend; I need to make long prayers and expiate my sins."

"You, can you commit sin?"

"Poor friend! if we abuse our power, is not that the sin of pride? I have been very proud to-day. Now leave me, till to-morrow."

"Till to-morrow," said Wilfrid faintly, casting a long glance at the being of whom he desired to carry with him an ineffaceable memory.

Though he wished to go far away, he was held, as it were, outside the house for some moments, watching the light which shone from all the windows of the Swedish dwelling.

"What is the matter with me?" he asked himself. "No, she is

not a mere creature, but a whole creation. Of her world, even through veils and clouds, I have caught echoes like the memory of sufferings healed, like the dazzling vertigo of dreams in which we hear the plaints of generations mingling with the harmonies of some higher sphere where all is Light and all is Love. Am I awake? Do I still sleep? Are these the eyes before which the luminous space retreated further and further indefinitely while the eyes followed it? The night is cold, yet my head is on fire. I will go to the parsonage. With the pastor and his daughter I shall recover the balance of my mind."

But still he did not leave the spot whence his eyes could plunge into Seraphita's salon. The mysterious creature seemed to him the radiating centre of a luminous circle which formed an atmosphere about her wider than that of other beings; whoever entered it felt the compelling influence of, as it were, a vortex of dazzling light and all consuming thoughts. Forced to struggle against this inexplicable power, Wilfrid only prevailed after strong efforts; but when he reached and passed the inclosing wall of the courtyard, he regained his freedom of will, walked rapidly towards the parsonage, and was soon beneath the high wooden arch which formed a sort of peristyle to Monsieur Becker's dwelling. He opened the first door, against which the wind had driven the snow, and knocked on the inner one, saying: —

"Will you let me spend the evening with you, Monsieur Becker?"

"Yes," cried two voices, mingling their intonations.

Entering the parlor, Wilfrid returned by degrees to real life. He bowed affectionately to Minna, shook hands with Monsieur Becker, and looked about at the picture of a home which calmed the convulsions of his physical nature, in which a phenomenon was taking place analogous to that which sometimes seizes upon men who have given themselves up to protracted contemplations. If some strong thought bears upward on phantasmal wing a man of learning or a poet, isolates him from the external circumstances which environ him here below, and leads him forward through illimitable regions where vast arrays of facts become abstractions, where the greatest works of Nature are but images, then woe betide him if a sudden noise strikes sharply on his senses and calls his errant soul back to its prison-house of flesh and bones. The shock of the reunion of these two powers, body and mind, – one of which partakes of the unseen qualities of a thunderbolt, while the other shares with sentient nature that soft resistant force which deifies destruction, – this shock, this struggle, or, rather let us say, this painful meeting and co-mingling, gives rise to frightful sufferings. The body receives back the flame that consumes it; the flame has once more grasped its prey. This fusion, however, does not take place without convulsions, explosions, tortures; analogous and visible signs of which may be seen in chemistry, when two antagonistic substances which science has united separate.

For the last few days whenever Wilfrid entered Seraphita's presence his body seemed to fall away from him into

nothingness. With a single glance this strange being led him in spirit through the spheres where meditation leads the learned man, prayer the pious heart, where vision transports the artist, and sleep the souls of men, – each and all have their own path to the Height, their own guide to reach it, their own individual sufferings in the dire return. In that sphere alone all veils are rent away, and the revelation, the awful flaming certainty of an unknown world, of which the soul brings back mere fragments to this lower sphere, stands revealed. To Wilfrid one hour passed with Seraphita was like the sought-for dreams of Theriakis, in which each knot of nerves becomes the centre of a radiating delight. But he left her bruised and wearied as some young girl endeavoring to keep step with a giant.

The cold air, with its stinging flagellations, had begun to still the nervous tremors which followed the reunion of his two natures, so powerfully disunited for a time; he was drawn towards the parsonage, then towards Minna, by the sight of the every-day home life for which he thirsted as the wandering European thirsts for his native land when nostalgia seizes him amid the fairy scenes of Orient that have seduced his senses. More weary than he had ever yet been, Wilfrid dropped into a chair and looked about him for a time, like a man who awakens from sleep. Monsieur Becker and his daughter accustomed, perhaps, to the apparent eccentricity of their guest, continued the employments in which they were engaged.

The parlor was ornamented with a collection of the shells

and insects of Norway. These curiosities, admirably arranged on a background of the yellow pine which panelled the room, formed, as it were, a rich tapestry to which the fumes of tobacco had imparted a mellow tone. At the further end of the room, opposite to the door, was an immense wrought-iron stove, carefully polished by the serving-woman till it shone like burnished steel. Seated in a large tapestried armchair near the stove, before a table, with his feet in a species of muff, Monsieur Becker was reading a folio volume which was propped against a pile of other books as on a desk. At his left stood a jug of beer and a glass, at his right burned a smoky lamp fed by some species of fish-oil. The pastor seemed about sixty years of age. His face belonged to a type often painted by Rembrandt; the same small bright eyes, set in wrinkles and surmounted by thick gray eyebrows; the same white hair escaping in snowy flakes from a black velvet cap; the same broad, bald brow, and a contour of face which the ample chin made almost square; and lastly, the same calm tranquillity, which, to an observer, denoted the possession of some inward power, be it the supremacy bestowed by money, or the magisterial influence of the burgomaster, or the consciousness of art, or the cubic force of blissful ignorance. This fine old man, whose stout body proclaimed his vigorous health, was wrapped in a dressing-gown of rough gray cloth plainly bound. Between his lips was a meerschaum pipe, from which, at regular intervals, he blew the smoke, following with abstracted vision its fantastic wreathings, – his mind employed, no doubt,

in assimilating through some meditative process the thoughts of the author whose works he was studying.

On the other side of the stove and near a door which communicated with the kitchen Minna was indistinctly visible in the haze of the good man's smoke, to which she was apparently accustomed. Beside her on a little table were the implements of household work, a pile of napkins, and another of socks waiting to be mended, also a lamp like that which shone on the white page of the book in which the pastor was absorbed. Her fresh young face, with its delicate outline, expressed an infinite purity which harmonized with the candor of the white brow and the clear blue eyes. She sat erect, turning slightly toward the lamp for better light, unconsciously showing as she did so the beauty of her waist and bust. She was already dressed for the night in a long robe of white cotton; a cambric cap, without other ornament than a frill of the same, confined her hair. Though evidently plunged in some inward meditation, she counted without a mistake the threads of her napkins or the meshes of her socks. Sitting thus, she presented the most complete image, the truest type, of the woman destined for terrestrial labor, whose glance may piece the clouds of the sanctuary while her thought, humble and charitable, keeps her ever on the level of man.

Wilfrid had flung himself into a chair between the two tables and was contemplating with a species of intoxication this picture full of harmony, to which the clouds of smoke did no despite. The single window which lighted the parlor during the fine weather

was now carefully closed. An old tapestry, used for a curtain and fastened to a stick, hung before it in heavy folds. Nothing in the room was picturesque, nothing brilliant; everything denoted rigorous simplicity, true heartiness, the ease of unconventional nature, and the habits of a domestic life which knew neither cares nor troubles. Many a dwelling is like a dream, the sparkle of passing pleasure seems to hide some ruin beneath the cold smile of luxury; but this parlor, sublime in reality, harmonious in tone, diffused the patriarchal ideas of a full and self-contained existence. The silence was unbroken save by the movements of the servant in the kitchen engaged in preparing the supper, and by the sizzling of the dried fish which she was frying in salt butter according to the custom of the country.

"Will you smoke a pipe?" said the pastor, seizing a moment when he thought that Wilfrid might listen to him.

"Thank you, no, dear Monsieur Becker," replied the visitor.

"You seem to suffer more to-day than usual," said Minna, struck by the feeble tones of the stranger's voice.

"I am always so when I leave the chateau."

Minna quivered.

"A strange being lives there, Monsieur Becker," he continued after a pause. "For the six months that I have been in this village I have never yet dared to question you about her, and even now I do violence to my feelings in speaking of her. I began by keenly regretting that my journey in this country was arrested by the winter weather and that I was forced to remain here. But during

the last two months chains have been forged and riveted which bind me irrevocably to Jarvis, till now I fear to end my days here. You know how I first met Seraphita, what impression her look and voice made upon me, and how at last I was admitted to her home where she receives no one. From the very first day I have longed to ask you the history of this mysterious being. On that day began, for me, a series of enchantments."

"Enchantments!" cried the pastor shaking the ashes of his pipe into an earthen-ware dish full of sand, "are there enchantments in these days?"

"You, who are carefully studying at this moment that volume of the 'Incantations' of Jean Wier, will surely understand the explanation of my sensations if I try to give it to you," replied Wilfrid. "If we study Nature attentively in its great evolutions as in its minutest works, we cannot fail to recognize the possibility of enchantment – giving to that word its exact significance. Man does not create forces; he employs the only force that exists and which includes all others namely Motion, the breath incomprehensible of the sovereign Maker of the universe. Species are too distinctly separated for the human hand to mingle them. The only miracle of which man is capable is done through the conjunction of two antagonistic substances. Gunpowder for instance is germane to a thunderbolt. As to calling forth a creation, and a sudden one, all creation demands time, and time neither recedes nor advances at the word of command. So, in the world without us, plastic nature obeys laws the order and

exercise of which cannot be interfered with by the hand of man. But after fulfilling, as it were, the function of Matter, it would be unreasonable not to recognize within us the existence of a gigantic power, the effects of which are so incommensurable that the known generations of men have never yet been able to classify them. I do not speak of man's faculty of abstraction, of constraining Nature to confine itself within the Word, – a gigantic act on which the common mind reflects as little as it does on the nature of Motion, but which, nevertheless, has led the Indian theosophists to explain creation by a word to which they give an inverse power. The smallest atom of their subsistence, namely, the grain of rice, from which a creation issues and in which alternately creation again is held, presented to their minds so perfect an image of the creative word, and of the abstractive word, that to them it was easy to apply the same system to the creation of worlds. The majority of men content themselves with the grain of rice sown in the first chapter of all the Geneses. Saint John, when he said the Word was God only complicated the difficulty. But the fructification, germination, and efflorescence of our ideas is of little consequence if we compare that property, shared by many men, with the wholly individual faculty of communicating to that property, by some mysterious concentration, forces that are more or less active, of carrying it up to a third, a ninth, or a twenty-seventh power, of making it thus fasten upon the masses and obtain magical results by condensing the processes of nature.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.