

THE SEVEN SIGILS.



PART I.

BRAVO AND POISONER.



THE BOTTOMLESS LAKE of our Legend was reputed an outlet of the Bottomless Pit. No creature of our world had ever swum its lethal ebb and flow, but on the nights of the great Sabbaths, when the wizardry of all Italy swept to its beetling cliffs as to their Holiest of Holies, its waters eructed to the rendezvous the retinue of Hell—the wealth of an argosy would not have tempted a Lombard to venture within eye-shot of it after nightfall. Who, then, are these two men of mortal mould that outstare the depths of the Bottomless Lake itself, and not only that but from the very horns of the Altar of the Black Mass, and not only that, but at the witching hour forsooth of night, when graveyards yawn, and the everlasting doors of Tophet open wide? Their guardian angels of good have surely turned from their right hands, and their evil guardians of the left are grinning from

horn to horn. With the chime of twelve from the distant steeple dies out the last echo of admonition, and they begin to work out such unhallowed errand as alone can have brought them to so damned a spot; the elder of the two in a tone of hushed solemnity addresses a series of questions to the younger, who responds to them with an equally awful gravity, after the manner of a catechism.

“Dost know me who I am?”

“Tosca of Venice, bravo and poisoner.”

“And Yourself?”

“Janko the Illyrian, bravo with a right good will, but not yet poisoner.”

“My ancestry?”

“Sorcerer stock, whose secrets you would fain have inherited and their trade pursued.”

“Why did I not?”

“The Council of Ten bore down upon your race, and but for your extreme youth you yourself would have crossed the Bridge of Sighs. Orphaned by the State, and retaining for sole inheritance the swashing blade that still gnaws at your scabbard, and a few recipes for poisons (which last, however, were worth a Borgia’s envy), you soon found yourself compelled to use both the one and the other to buy you bed and board. Proceeding at first with hesitancy, and never sojourning long in one locality, you became by degrees the repository of so many family secrets that at the present day you may stalk assured through the length and breadth of Italy, and ruffle it in what company you will.”

“And your own story?”

“I know not by what catastrophe the memory of all my earliest years was shaken loose from me. Suffice it then, that once on a visit to my native country you found me wandering an orphan like yourself, and with a mind so blank that you appropriated it instantly to write on it as it were your own ten commandments. Since that day I have never left you, and I am only repeating what you yourself tell me when I say that you have made me your equal master in every trick of fence. But of that other art of yours that rivals the Creator, my most dutiful entreaties have never availed with you to teach me anything.”

“But did I not reasonably argue that you would better attend the heaviness of so terrific a responsibility, until you were of man’s estate? And is not to-day the anniversary of your coming of age? And have we not pelted hither hot-foot from the confines of the land upon that very business?”

“It is true that before entrusting me with even the least of these your ancient awful secrets you have brought me here to-night—for what?”

“To enter you with fitting state upon the bead-roll of that glorious mystery, that with the mere putting on of a glove, or sniffing of a flower can check the most rebellious blood with a thus far shall thou flow, but no farther!”

“Say, rather to better the assurance that you have of me already from years of fraternal familiar common life, by laying upon me in addition a binding bond ensanctified by centuries of warlock use, and now to be imposed in this very spot where

the Master whom thereby we both shall serve is at this hour present, though to us invisible, the Prince of the Power of the Air."

"You are at any rate resolved to link yourself to me with fetters forged in the fire that is not quenched, and by a testament registered in the Chancery of Hell to the effect that any treachery from one of us to the other shall be resented and avenged by that common Master of ours who hears us at this moment from his postern gate, the Bottomless Lake below?"

"I am resolved to that for which I came here."

"Follow, then, with me the observance of that visible sign and token that unites us in one blood and in one flesh. This horn is from that beast whose form our Master loves to take, when from this altar where we stand he greets his liegemen and his liegewomen turned backward like his prayers. This horn I charge to the half with my own blood, obtained by the biting of my arm. Now do you likewise bite and fill and then drink (to my health) the moiety of the draught so mixed."

"May you live till the Last Trump!"

"You have pledged me in it as I now pledge you, and there remains but one more ceremony. I am about to throw this emptied receptacle into the waters of the Bottomless Lake. You know already that everything that touches its surface, whether living or dead, is forfeit to that Ancient of Days that crouches in wait below. Do you agree that this will be the fate reserved for that one of us two that shall first contravene this super-sacred oath?"

"His soul be the devil's fee."

The emptied horn shot like an elf-bolt into the pathless waters of the Bottomless Lake. The benighted pair that watched it from the unhallowed shrine above could have sworn that a hand came up and caught it as it fell, but a sudden flash of lightning that snapped in their eyes and a peal of thunder that made the four corners of the earth to quake rendered that fact uncertain. The strangers would then have been only too gladly drenched to the skin that they might have hugged their wagered souls in the belief that this unweather was of Nature, and not of the Evil One. But the Heavens shed no tear. There succeeded to that single flash and single peal only the same deadly calm that had preceded them. Although their business there was over, neither of the two men cared to suggest to the other his secret persuasion that there was no need for further stay. One o'clock whispered from afar its holy amen to their accursed ritual. Other hours flitted by, and still they gazed into unplummeted waves enwrapped in gloom as in their cloaks. At last as it were by a simultaneous impulse they turned together, and with a mutual sigh descended in the direction of the dawning city. From what has been said of the superstitious awe with which the Bottomless Lake was regarded, it will be readily understood that they had to traverse a considerable distance of uninhabited country before coming in sight of the main travelled road.

When at last after the painful up and down of many hills, they perceived the highway cutting through a valley at their feet, the habitual reserve engendered by their profession moved them to await

atop the passage of a carriage that appeared in sight in the distance going towards the town rather than continue their journey, and be passed by it. As it came nearer both these men who had recently drunk so deeply of forbidden founts, suddenly uttered an exclamation that sounded very like a fear. For they saw at the self-same second that the coach contained a girl of beauty beyond a sultan's dream, and that some dozen or so of foot-pads darted from both sides of the road and seized the heads of her horses. The report of a pistol was obviously connected with the fall of the driver like a log from his box. The young lady was left with no other defender than a large black dog that ran behind the carriage, but as the assailants threw the doors open and hustled her out it became apparent that he was chained to the vehicle, and in an instant they were beyond his reach. But at this critical juncture Tosca descended almost, as it seemed, to the startled abductors with one leap from the heights above, and with a howl like a wild beast.

Although they did not know it, the finest sword player in Europe was in their midst. They went down by couples before him, spitted like larks. They had scarcely grasped the miracle of his presence before the lovely vision of the coach was resting in his left arm (the right still continuing to deal destruction), and she had scarcely glanced at his face, when, with a sigh of evident content with her defender, she hid her golden head in his breast to shut out the shambles from her eyes. But the fight was already past. Half the ravishers lay stretched upon the ground, and the bravo of Venice

needed no second or even first glance at them to know that they would never rise again. The remainder, appalled by a result which they were far from attributing to the purely human agency which had caused it, had only to cast a look beneath his black-a-vised brows, when with a shriek that he was signed in the corner of his eye with the devil's private mark, they precipitately fled. The bravo dropped his sword into its sheath, and now with both arms round her waist he drew the goddess (as she appeared to him) towards her carriage. In doing so he perceived that she had fainted, and printed upon her lips the fiercest as it was the chastest kiss that he had ever bestowed upon woman. By an extraordinary chance (but there was more than chance in it), after completing the foulest rite, he had stumbled upon the purest passion of his life. For no other woman would he have shut the carriage door as he did now after placing her within it, remaining himself outside. And it is needful to add in this connexion that he had entirely forgotten the very existence of that comrade just bound to him by a tie indissoluble. That comrade, nevertheless, had watched the whole from the altitude where both had first stood. Could he have followed the giddy foot-hold of his patron he would in that moment have slain him in his tracks. And that he could in no wise stir from where he stood either previously to take part in that chance medley, or now to snatch a share in the reward of it, was due not at all to cowardice (a thing that must of necessity be unknown to any that followed the fortunes of Tosca), but to a kind,

of spell as he fancied that froze him to his place. And of this he was indeed well qualified to judge since he had already experienced the self-same sensation on one (and one only) former occasion. What puzzled him was that the obvious cause in the prior case was a certain amulet of unknown antiquity and power, which Tosca was accustomed to wear round his neck upon a chain of gold, and which in a moment of confidence he had shown that once to his pupil. Whereas on the present occasion the cause of his vertigo could scarcely be the same, the talisman being invisible. And yet the effect was identical. If anything more than another had been the actual moving cause of his present icy chill it must certainly be the damsel of the coach. So unmistakeable was the hold which the mere sight of her had taken upon him, that at the instant when Tosca placed his lips upon hers (and they had never been touched before by man), the surging up of jealousy burst the shackles of the spell, and the Illyrian clattered down like an avalanche. He reached the road at the important moment when his oblivious partner, after shutting the door of the coach, was upon the point of mounting the box to drive the young beauty he knew not whither. Nor did it occur to him that he knew not. But at this precise juncture his dream was shattered by the advent of the Illyrian flashing fires of jealous heat from his eyes. So choked with it was he that he could not speak, but only pointed with one hand to the carriage while he clenched the other in Tosca's face. The Venetian was equally taken aback by the sudden resurrection of one whose presence in the

world he had totally overlooked. How long they would have stared at one another had nothing intervened it would be impossible to say. They were heedless of the barking of the black dog; since that had continued without intermission from the first irruption of the bid-stands. But they were twitched bolt round in the direction of the coach by a sudden crack of its wheels. Whether the coachman had fallen from his box through a genuine belief that he was hurt; or whether through an equally genuine desire not to be; or, lastly, through collusion did not appear, but it was sufficiently obvious that the fellow had not received a scratch. Concluding the danger to be over he had now quietly reassumed his post, and was driving off. He took no more notice of the other two than if he had not seen them (which again might really have been the case), and used his whip to such good purpose that the vehicle was lost to sight (to memory dear) before the rivals had taken a step to arrest its progress. Then burst the storm of mutual recrimination. Tosca first spoke.

“Darkness and devils! You have robbed me of that for which I would not leave whole the skin of any man alive.”

“’S death, kinsman, would you draw on me? Remember you not the oath of some few hours ago? Are you already so anxious to tap at that postern we both wot of? Knock then, and it shall be opened unto you. Ho, you pale at this reminder, and suffer your hand to drop from the hilt of that ancestral spit of yours.”

“You were well advised to speak before I had drawn, or you would perchance have learned ere this

that there are one or two tricks of fence I never taught even to you."

"Deceit upon deceit. You have always given me to understand that there was absolutely nothing in that branch of our partnership that you had not revealed to me. Perchance I shall ere long come upon some other tit-bit churlishly rapt aside. But why do I chide you for teaching me too little, when I had rather cause to weep salt tears that you have fathered me too much? When you met me, I had, as you have told me oft, a mind so blank that you could write on it (and that was the attraction that led you to adopt me) whatever kind of script you chose. And you chose to scribble the Devil's A, B, C. It is through your corruption of my innocent youth that I am unfit to-day to even look upon such as she who has just escaped us (and there ruled her favouring star). And if you reply that you have kept me till I was of age, unspotted from the worst half of your villainies, I dare swear that I should not be far out in conjecturing that regard for the safety of your body, rather than for that of my soul, was the true reason why you have never yet suffered me to wear the glass mask in your laboratories. And, to crown all, you kissed her."

"Did I kiss her? I thought it was a dream."

Thus Tosca murmured softly to himself, his head falling upon his breast, as if in communion with some saint. It was Janko who this time broke the silence by clutching of his sword. But Tosca looked up with a glance so diabolical, that he dropped it again at once. By a motion of his hand, the Venetian, as it were, compelled him to seat himself by the side of

the road ; and, sitting quietly beside him, commenced in the following strain :—

“You make me laugh apart when you speak of my corrupting your innocent youth. If you only knew the truth! Or, as you said just now. (God knows whether inspired by good or evil chance), if you only knew that tit-bit rapt aside, as you thought, churlishly (when you merely guessed at it), but in reality with more generosity than you will be decently able to thank me for (when you only know the facts). Your innocent youth, indeed!! By the God above us, whom we both fear, and neither serves, you will see by the story I am about to tell you that I knew all the time, and as I say with generosity have concealed from you, the nature of that catastrophe that shook loose from you the memories of all your earliest years. You will see that before your mind became a blank, I had read upon it (tender as were your years) the lurid brand of Cain. You will see that your brain was seared by your own atrocious hand, and that my adoption of you afterwards was based on the calculation that for a bravo and poisoner there could be in the whole round world no better raw material than a matricide! Start not till you have heard me out. I was in Illyria. Reasons which your experience of ups and downs in our profession will readily enable you to appreciate had caused me to retire (rather hurriedly, I confess) from the town which I had honoured with my presence for some months. The same reasons oblige me to travel in preference by night, and to secrete myself by day. On the first occasion of my doing this latter, I settled upon an apparently deserted hut

in the trackless depths of the forest. This hut consisted of a large front room (reaching to the roof tree) for the accommodation of the two-footed, and a stall at back for that of the four-footed creation. The latter did not run so high as the front room, inasmuch as it contained a loft for fodder atop, and it was in this airy apartment that I decided to take my siesta, since it had openings both upon the stables (if I may so call it) and the front chamber, and my disposition as you know is strategic. I had slept, I know not how long, when I was awakened by a noise in front, and speedily ascertained that it was caused by an altercation going on among visitors to the parlour. Do not start till you have heard me out. One of the disputants was yourself. The other, who occupied the only stool in the place, was a grey-haired, blear-eyed female of considerable antiquity. I know nothing of your accursed Illyrian jargon. But without understanding the conversation I could see the beldame hugging to her withered breast a jewel, small, but of great price, and withal slung upon a golden chain. I tell you without hesitation that it was the same amulet you have been shown by me upon a previous occasion, foolishly as it happened, since it stirred you so profoundly as to almost resurrect your buried remembrances. That it came into the hands of your precious dame by some feat of robbery I have no doubt whatever. How it came into mine you will presently see. Your excited gesture, as it seemed to me, might afford me some clue to the progress of the quarrel, which I presumed had arisen as to the fate of your booty, but I had scarcely awakened up sufficiently to pull my reasoning faculties together,

when the whole thing ended in an, even to me, unexpectedly horrible manner. You suddenly pushed a pail (which stood hard by) beneath the back of the unsuspecting crone, and flashing a hanger from under your rags you swept off her grey head into the bucket with the single shearing stroke of a seasoned cut-throat. Then throwing upon the floor the glittering bauble of contention, you surprised me still more by swiftly separating the hands and feet, then the arms at elbow, and the legs at knee, then the stumps from the trunk, and finally the trunk itself into smaller parcels. That moment, and to-day, are the two occasions of my life upon which I have loathed my calling. By my word and oath I was as sick as a dog upon the litter of your loft. When I looked again you had cast down the weeping steel which had been the unwilling instrument of your crime. Packing all the sections in a kind of bag or sack you rolled it up compactly. Then seizing the ensanguined pail in the hand that was not occupied by that pitiful truss of what had just been humanity, you strode with them both from the desecrated home, but how you disposed of your burdens I neither know nor care. That you had loaded your conscience with a grislier deed than it could bear, I soon had good reason to know. Perturbed at my perturbation I had scrambled to *terra firma*, and had recovered myself sufficiently only to secure that amulet (which as you know I still wear), when you re-entered empty handed in that same state of idiocy, which moved me to overcome my distaste for associates and adjoin you to myself in my profession. Besides, I could not but admit (when once more fully

myself) that you had shown for it considerable vocation."

The face of the Illyrian rolled with beads of sweat. For the third time he was bound hard and fast by that same fascination which already twice before had enthralled him. And as each time before so again it was for a different cause. The first of these two prior occasions resulted, as we know, from the sighting of the amulet. The second on the sighting of the divinity of the coach. But this third time was again different from the other two, in this respect, that (although he would not have confessed it for all the riches entombed in earth) he had now fully recognised the reason and connexion of all three. He rose deliberately and spoke:—

"Now, you have told me, to suit your own purposes, a certain amount of the truth, I remember to your confusion the details you intentionally omitted. You lie in your throat when you say that when I re-entered that room I was in the vacant state already. I re-entered that room (and you know it) as sane as when I left it. I found you standing there prepared with a glib story to the effect that you were a stranger just stepped into the hut with the view of seeing whether it was inhabited or not by anyone who could serve you as a guide through the forest. Not knowing you so well as I do now, I was simple enough to believe you. It never entered my head that you could have witnessed the drama that had just been played, nor did I think of the talisman in my momentary confusion at seeing in the place a foreigner. I have now no doubt but that if I had looked for it I should not have been able

to find it. You diverted my attention by inviting me to quaff from your spirit flask on the plea that I looked unwell, as in truth I might, after the ordeal I had just passed through. In my innocence (for I was innocent) I accepted the draught, and the drug which you had placed in the liquor beforehand destroyed my memory, never to return, until this eventful day. Yet I think there was, however, one former occasion which it just missed a return. That was when you showed me that ill-omened amulet, and it awakened in me sentiment inexplicable then, but which now I am no longer at a loss to understand. That jewel was wrought by the science of my kinswoman, in whose hands you surprised it—for my people, too, were of the ancient religion, like your own, and sorcerers of the Black Side.”

At the commencement of this speech, Tosca seemed momentarily disconcerted, but, as it continued, this sentiment was succeeded by something very like prostration, and when he replied it was with reverence.

“What a galliard this is, and how aright I guessed when I saw in him the making of a master in my trade. I thought to dash him with my revelation of a monstrosity among crimes. I was a fool, indeed, to think that a youngster would bleach over the dissection of a granny, who had anointed him from his cradle with the grease of unbaptised babes. But I failed, and there’s an end on’t, and now sheer steel must decide the issue, for we meet on equal ground. Equal do I say? Nay! the boy is my superior in callousness, for I dearly loved my own old people, though I never say God rest their souls.”

He rose, and both men laid their hands upon their hilts. One of them had not very long to live. But before entering upon the fateful lists, the Illyrian turned to speak again.

“In case you slay me, which I believe will not be the case (for God does sometimes defend the right), I cannot forbear an answer to your last taunt. You did not understand, and you have never understood, and you never will understand the real meaning of the scene you saw enacted in that room upon that day. I am not sure whether it was a blessing or a curse upon our race that you did not catch the drift of our remarks in our native language, which you contemptuously term jargon. Had you done so the fate of all three of us would have been better or worse, but at any rate far different. The tortures of the Inquisition would not force from me the secret, which was confided to me then by that ancient lady whom you saw me slay indeed, but only after her own repeated prayers and instructions. I shudder to think what has become of her remains which she entrusted to my pious care, and which for your accursed interference I have been unwillingly prevented from attending to. I know, indeed, the fate of her other legacy (for the amulet was a legacy that you thought a theft); but it is now too late (again through your accursed interference) for me to make such use of that knowledge as she had enjoined upon me to do. But to you (who know nothing of its use and profit) it shall hang as a millstone round your neck, and whether you live or whether you die it shall infallibly sink you now or hereafter to the undiscovered bottom of that

Bottomless Lake whose source we both do know. And whichever of us falls shall by the terms of that enactment (of so short a while ago) be resented and avenged by that Master of ours, who waits even at this moment for that most unhappy man."

The face of Tosca became white and red. He flashed that time-honoured blade of his from its sheath, and motioned with it to the Illyrian to take up a position opposite to him. Janko turned round for one second to do so, and in that second the sword of his faithless foe was plunged remorselessly through his back. The point protruded through his breast. The next instant the sword had been withdrawn, and the Illyrian lay upon the turf among the ragged hedge pirates, who had fallen before by the same trained hand. But this time the Venetian took the trouble to assure himself of the death of his foe before returning his sword to its bed. That was the only honour he paid to the body that had once been only less dear to him than his own. That done, he threw himself down at the road side, and took out from under his doublet that very talisman of which we have heard so much. It had gained greatly in his estimation by the mystery which had lately thickened round it. We have already mentioned that it was suspended round his neck by a gold chain; but we must now give a more particular description of the gem itself. It had undoubtedly originally been intended for a seal, or, to speak more correctly, seven seals, for it had (and this constituted its particularity) seven sides or facets, and on each of these engraved a sigil or cabalistic monogram, and

each sigil was that of a different planet of the seven that rule over the seven days of the week. All this the bravo, from his early environment, was sufficiently skilled to know. He also recognised at once that the person wishing to use the stone for its original purpose of sealing, would choose on each day that facet of the gem which bore the signature of the planet that presided over the day in question. But this, though no doubt of considerable efficiency, was not by any means of so great virtue as to sufficiently explain the very enigmatical manner in which the amulet had been alluded to by the hapless boy, whose present fate he shuddered to reflect on. He endeavoured, with more or less success, to banish speculation on that point by returning to his examination of the ring, if we may apply that term to a jewel which was not pierced with sufficiently large a hole to fit even upon the smallest of fingers. Such hole as it had, and through which its chain now passed, he conjectured must have been originally intended to receive the handle of the seal, upon which, fitting loosely, the gem turning round and round could be made to present any facet desired to the paper which its owner intended to impress. At this point of his meditation the bravo was aroused by the sound of footsteps. A number of officials, both on horse and otherwise, had arrived from the neighbouring town. These he recognised at once as belonging to that inconvenient class (the guardians, let us say, of public safety) from whom he had fled on many another well remembered occasion besides the one he had just made mention of in his

story to the ill-starred Illyrian. Yet at the present moment he had no fear of them. Perhaps this was because he knew that they came on account of the depositions of the lodestar of his dreams, and that he would have run any risk to be brought once more into chain with her. A less hardened adventurer might have been embarrassed by the presence of Janko's body. But to a fertility of resource such as Tosca had needs acquired, it presented no obstacle whatever. He rose, and bowed with a grace he had learned in the very highest society. The officers returned his salute. They conjectured rightly that this stranger of distinguished appearance was the beaten blade who had performed the prodigies of valour, which when told them in the city they had deemed to be fabulous, but of which they now saw the proofs before their eyes. The obliging champion was quite willing to relate his own private version of the affair. He paused only to consider whether it would be advisable to have been wounded slightly, but he decided against this fiction as liable to lead to trouble.

"Yes; as you say, I naturally wished to rest awhile after the fatigues of such a combat. Besides, I guessed, of course, that I should soon see upon the field of battle you gentlemen of justice, whose promptness in these matters has become proverbial, and with whom I would not for the world have lost the chance of an interview. I might, it is true, have foisted myself into the carriage for its journey to town. But the lady, as she doubtless told you, had fainted right away, and I was therefore debarred from

obtaining that permission, without which no man of breeding could venture to take such a liberty. And before I had time to achieve a seat on the box, the coachman was off ; for the fellow was drunk, as your penetration must have perceived from the muddled state of his evidence. Of the valour you so kindly allude to, my modesty forbids me to speak. But I am bound in honour to temper your flattering opinion of the achievement by confessing that I am a fencing master by profession, and that a score or so of thrusts and parries is merely a matter of daily bread with me. I must add, in this connexion, that I am also a physician, and one possessed of medicaments that cure all ills. Further, I was proceeding to your town with the view of establishing a dual practice among you, when this trifle we are discussing fell athwart the even tenor of my way, and I hope still to establish myself there, and even to continue my journey in your company (which is such as I most affect) now this accident has given me, as I perceive, introduction to all the most desirable connexions in the place. You will notice yonder, by the way, a fellow of better apparal than the rest of the run-a-gates, and whom I take to be their captain. The other scaramouches gave me no trouble whatever, but I must confess that the spadassin in question was a little bit more of a customer. I had the lady on one arm (as she doubtless told you), and had the rabble been able to get on all sides of me at once, the affair would indeed have been the devil's delight. But since I kept my back, like an old campaigner, to the coach, I felt no kind of flurry ; and, as I knew from the first that I should, I came at length to disarm

him. The poltroon then turned to save his skin (I had thought him braver stuff); but I, as you may suppose, was far too limber for him, and skewered him through the back. You can see for yourselves how my point protruded through his breast. In my humble opinion he might well dance in chains here on a gibbet upon the scene of his crime, as a warning to the rest of his riff-raff that scuttled away from my invincible arm as soon as their leader fell."

This Tosca considered the master-stroke of his dissimulation. No suspicion could now light upon him. The lady had seen but him, and knew nothing of his companion. The coachman had either seen two men or none. If he spoke of two they would ascribe it to his drunkenness, and inquire if he did not also see two ladies. Tosca was furthest of all from suspecting that by this very suggestion he thought to be so masterly he was forging the bolt that should destroy him. With delight he perceived that the officers had clutched at his idea, and immediately set their underlings to work upon the gallows, after first entombing the raggeder ruffians ignominiously in a ditch. Leaving them to their congenial work Tosca proceeded with the officers to town, and gathered as he went all the particulars that he could of his enchantress. And her name, which he heard for the first time, seemed familiar as a household word. Vergilia had resided for months in the city, but was by birth a stranger, from what country no one knew. It was only known that she had sojourned for similar periods in other principal places. She was an orphan, she was unmarried, she was an heiress. Wherever she pleased to set her

wandering feet men flocked in shoals to be trampled beneath them. And of these, Tosca shrewdly guessed, were the majority of his present companions. She consistently refused all offers, and this was the unanswerable argument of the more logical sex to their women, who hated her like poison, and who would have it that she made use of love philtres to effect her endless conquests. The only ground for this assertion seemed to be that wherever she travelled her bed chamber was always sacredly reserved to her own person, entered by no one else under any circumstances whatever, and locked when she was not within, she herself performing all domestic duties connected with it. Those admirers of hers, who had not yet put their fate to the touch, all indignantly scouted the theory advanced by the rejected that she concealed a lover in this sanctum. Nor was such an idea surely possible to any one who looked with unjaundiced eye, even once on her virginal purity. Tosca gazed on her for the second time that day, and swore within his heart of hearts (quite drowning all recollection of that prior oath) that the very first lover she should have would be none other than himself.

(End of Part I.)

PART II.

THE DEVIL'S CANDLE.

THE revolution of our legend brings us once more round to that same direful boundary hour, with which it was commenced between midnight and the first born of the day. But on the hills a gibbet stands that stood not there before, a beacon to the minions of the moon. Alas for the misguided youth that hangs there helpless and unhouseled. His brave attire the cupidity of his topsmen had appropriated to their own use. His body they had arrayed for the sake of decency in rags stripped from the verminiferous trunks of his several supposed followers, and these huddled him like the swathings of some dismantled mummy. A gorged carrion bird dozes upon each of his shoulders. The hinds, whom their business brought upon the road even so late as twilight, had run afield copiously crossing themselves. Who, then, is this—a woman, too—that comes at the awfulest hour of all, and to the very foot of the gallows? Nothing but her eyes can be seen from under her hood. Are those the eyes of Vergilia that Tosca dreams of and deems unfathomable as the Bottomless Lake itself? Is the intuition of her sex, then, unailing after all, and she a witch, that with love philtres works her syren spell, and seeks at this dread hour for the where-withal? And what, then, can she peer for about the foundations of a gibbet, save alone that fetid and

fearsome white - flowered orange - berried Devil's Candle mandragora that is engendered in the womb of earth from a gibbeted murderer's drippings on the midnight of his death? The Illyrian bravo had been seven times a murderer (if not seventy times seven), and many a lost soul rejoiced in Hell that night over the weird that the witch woman was to work. She has found it at last, the favourable specimen, by her long sought through fruitless years. She has found the root in human form complete—two armed, two legged—the Microcosm caricaturing man. And now her low whistle brings her black hound forward out of the black night. Even she is affected as she kisses him for the last time. Iscariotical kiss! With a cord from her youthful waist she attaches animal and plant together, and flees from thence, stopping her ears as she runs. The hound (whose faith is to strike his death-knell) seeks to follow her, and finds himself held back. He wrestles with the invisible obstacle and conquers, but to die, for as the unholy mannikin root is perforce torn out of its mother earth it utters a piercing shriek that makes rattle the chains of its father above, and the hound, in an instant foaming at the mouth, in fits expires. Then, and then only, turns the murderess back on her blood-stained steps. The carcase of her sole unvenial follower she casts falteringly apart. The girdle is already attached by one end to the gruesome plant. By throwing round to it the other end she completes the circuit of her shapely throat, and held fast by this improvised necklace tucks the loathsome herb creature into her lovely bosom, which no

being of its sex had ever yet been free of. Hence now to develop him, for to this is that secret chamber destined that had never seen denizen but herself before. There is her laboratory, and there shall this earth child be magically tendered and nourished, and most magically grow to more and more of man's resemblance. Since in a manner by his mystical birth he is one flesh and blood with the murderer that begot him, he is perforce of Hell, and can Hell's secrets impart to the enchantress that holds him in her power. To what her cravings tend, which by his means or any other that affords itself, she must and will by hook or crook attain, we now shall shortly see. In spite of her evident youth, Vergilia was far too accomplished an actress, of course, to reveal by word or sign her secret studies to the gilded youth that continue to throng her halls. But Tosca visited her upon a different footing. Spending his days with her in the body, and his nights with her in the spirit—spacing out with drink and dice the unutterable intervals when he could do neither one nor the other—he neglected his professional avocations altogether, and existed absolutely for her. On her part she had shown him, as we have seen, particular favour from the first moment she saw him, and this became continuously more and more after she had wormed his story from him—as much as he chose to tell, and which of course excluded entirely the existence of the Illyrian—until at length she requited him with like confidence. What the butterflies that sought their own purposes about her chose to think of her preference she cared not, but her modesty at length obliged her to account for it in private to the pre-

ferred one himself by alleging the similarity of their descent (for that she also came of old necromantic stock), and to explain her refusal of all suitors (even to coronets) on the grounds that none of them could satisfy, till Tosca came, her yearnings for the occult. To an archimage alone would she give her right hand, and his right hand she meant to be. The blessing of the Church would be a curse to such a pair. Heedless then of what, in their position, they needs must deem the degradation of any such ceremony, she had herself devised her own test piece by which a favoured suitor could be at the same time tried, and by its failure or success dismissed or indissolubly wedded. She had sworn in fact to bestow herself without reserve upon the student (his person being also to her fancy) who could call up for her substantial from the vasty deep a magical palace in which her fantastic imagination had long run riot, and in which carnal love and cabalistic lore should wander hand in hand the livelong day without let or hindrance from the outer world well lost. Prone to such thoughts from her cradle, this aerial architecture of hers had taken final shape in the first days of her visit to that town, when disdaining the legend of the boors, she had penetrated the precincts of the Bottomless Lake, and quickened her brain with the idea of how suitable to a lover and his mistress would be retreat into a never-visited seclusion such as that. Then the thing grew. She pictured and demolished one after another various enchanted buildings floating upon the waters themselves (and that was the common thread that ran through them all) sailing to the shore upon the wish of the dwellers in

them, but entirely inaccessible to any outward authority, either human or divine. Now that she had discovered the Venetian to be the one man to whom she would accord permission to substantialise her dreams (supposing he could find the power) she submitted to him with much shy laughter her latest ground plan of this castle in the air. She had borrowed from the sensuous East its key-hole arches and quadrangular bowers built round, and enclosing court yards glowing with flowers from every region of the earth, and never the same at two successive visits. Birds interchanged at every inspection in like manner were to agitate the air with their antiphonies. And the fountains in the centres of all the court yards (fed from the waters of the Bottomless Lake) when lapped into the beakers of the lovers would become the rarest wine. The outermost waters would glister with gold and silver fish, shot through with the plungings of white aquatic birds. Within the building, the rooms kaleidoscopically should never meet them twice with the same face. Their servants should be automata scattered through every chamber, and ready at a touch to fly to master or mistress like genii of the Arabian Nights, but instantly relapsing after service into their first stony insensibility. Of much more Vergilia whispered such as at times frenzied in Tosca the knowledge of his impotence to win her upon her terms. Had he but inherited the secrets of his fathers! Had he but the knowledge stored up in the grey brain of that hairless blear-eyed Hell-sent hag of Illyria! Could he but solve the enigma of the Seven Sigils, that

at any rate might bring him somewhat nearer to his end! And his rivals envied him. Closer and closer there seemed to flutter to him the moth they thought he had singed. But never close enough. Then came an event that led up to his climax of fruition found green in the mouth. Stated in short, it fell somewhat as follows: At the end of her daily banquet she was wont to leave her guests to their wine, while she paid one of her frequent visits to that unseen chamber. One of those disappointed suitors of hers (as it chanced, or was fated on a certain day), inspired with the valour of much wine imbibed after she had left her table, swore roundly that he would follow her, and pluck out at any hazard the heart of that mystery. Before he could be stopped by fellow guest or flunkey he had stumbled up the stairway, and burst open the door she had but lately closed behind her. The next moment a most frightful shriek resounded through every corner of the house. It was not Vergilia's. It was uttered by the foolhardy intruder. The company started from their seats. But before they could do anything he staggered into the room again with hair as white as snow, and lips that gibbered loathsomely. Amid a scene of indescribable confusion he was carried off by his friends insane and impenetrable as to the cause of his fright, nor did he ever recover sufficiently to give an explanation of it. When all the rest of the terrified crowd of loungers and lackeys had hustled pell mell from the house, Tosca alone remained. His hour he thought had come. But it was only in a measure so.

The lady of the house re-appeared, it is true, after the hurried exodus of masters and servants, and agitated as he had expected, but not to his surprise by their defection. She babbled brokenly, instead, of some one else whom she had lost through the unexpected intrusion of that venturesome drunkard, now sobered for good and all. Thus she rooted from that moment in the mind of Tosca the horrible suspicion that the story of the concealed lover might have some truth in it after all. How could he know aught of her experimental mandrake culture, for of course it was the mandrake she referred to? The only creature besides herself that had witnessed her infernal arcana had just been borne a mouthing maniac from the seat of her operations, and perhaps not even had time enough to notice the nature of the disaster, which his untimely interference had brought about. However, for the time Tosca dismissed his suspicions when she fell into his arms and telling him between laughter and tears that he was now the only hope that remained to her, she begged him at once to summon together all his scattered occult acquirements, and make an incantation that very night that should yield them both their heart's desire. He swore to do so, hardly knowing what he swore, and fled from her in a wind of excited passion and passionate resolve. For some time after this he endeavoured to put his ideas coherently together by dint of pacing madly through the streets. It was already dusk, and at first he elicited no remark. But presently he noticed that his footsteps were being dogged. He was a connoisseur in such

matters. This must be a rival more fixed than the remainder of the craven herd that had so readily taken flight, and one that had watched the bravo during the time that he stayed behind. Or perchance nothing more mysterious than a dunning creditor, for Tosca had lately run out of ready money, and while exercising no trade still maintained a splendid appearance. Nor had this also been altogether without weight with him when he accepted the challenge of his bewitching mistress. Not wishing to embroil himself with the person whom he supposed to be shadowing him, he entered a tavern and called for wine. He had scarcely seated himself when a masked stranger of short stature and somewhat uncouth appearance entered the same inn, and sat down at the same table, giving the same order. The nerves of our Venetian were more shaken by the extraordinary episode of the afternoon than he would himself have cared to own. Not liking the looks of his would-be boon companion, and conjecturing some connexion between that individual and the counter of his paces, Tosca got up and left the tavern without awaiting the execution of his command. To his consternation the stranger followed him. An exciting chase ensued. The bravo entered house after house, seating himself in each case, and always closely hugged by his mysterious hanger on, who as regularly seated himself by the bravo's side, and as soon as he withdrew followed him out into the street. A kind of panic seized the fearless swordsman. A challenge to the inexplicable stranger stuck again and again in his throat. At last the houses

began to close their shutters. The baffled fugitive struck desperately out of the town into the open country, and made his way in the direction of the Bottomless Lake. As the footfalls of his ghostly visitant pattered still behind him he consoled himself with the grim reflection that right up to that ill-omened shore, at any rate, the spy would not dare to venture. But he was mistaken. As he paused breathless on the brink of that Stygian sea and faced round boldly on to what he deemed to be invisibility, he found it was instead the form of his fear that stood there as before. He was seized with the boldness of desperation, and addressed the mysterious and still masked being with a voice of tolerable calm.

“Who are you, and what is your need of me?”

“I am Magloire, a necromancer of France, and it is you that have need of me.”

“You are over bold to say so.”

“I say what I know. Dare you deny that you entertain the intention of making an incantation here this very night, and that you lack only the means to do so? A scheme of geomancy acquainted me with your design, and being entangled in your fate, for reasons that you must not know (for you will know them if anything too soon) I sped from afar upon wings of wind to conduct your conjuration for you.”

“You have a price for this?”

“I see you are a man of the world, and are aware that nothing is usually given for nothing. I ask you merely to sign this bond.”

“I understand your interest in me better than

you seem to think, and on no account will I barter away my immortal soul."

"Your immortal soul, do you say? By the Nine Legions of Hell, does the man think that the cross was stretched on Calvary for any such scum as he? Your immortal soul, of which you hug yourself the possessor, was lost irredeemably from your cradle up. The signature to the bond is a matter of form."

"You do not think so since you ask me to sign it. But ask of me anything else, and it shall be given to you."

"By the tie of which I spoke, that is stronger than blood as blood is thicker than water (so they say), I will help you, though you vouchsafe me a mere keepsake. Make over to me that amulet that you wear around your neck, and the bargain is firm and true. The dawn shall caress a tenement based on the shifting foundation of these waters, such as even shall satisfy the caprices of Vergilia."

The bravo had recovered himself, as we have said, but these evidences of an intimate knowledge of his affairs filled him again with apprehension. And the stranger still continued masked. After a short deliberation, however, Tosca decided not to let slip an opportunity as welcome as unexpected, and granted apparently in exchange for a trinket of no worth to him whatever, though he was not unaware that it might be of inestimable value to any one who knew (as this Frenchman presumably did) the secret of the Seven Sigils. With a parting sigh for its enigma still unsolved, so often the toy of his leisure hours, he detached it from his neck, and passed it on to

the Gaul, who fastened it about his own. That he was a wizard of his word became immediately apparent. Taking up a piece of chalk he scored out rapidly a double circle, one circumference within the other, upon the shelf of rock upon which they stood. Between the two circumferences he drew a ring of symbols of purport to the Venetian unknown, but which he endeavoured to retain in his memory for possible future use. Within the innermost of these two lines of defence the sorcerer collected a quantity of brushwood, and after having ignited these materials he entrusted the bravo with sundry perfumes, some in the shape of evil smelling dried stuffs, and some sealed up in phials, with minute instructions as to the order and quantities in which (the incantation having commenced) they were to feed the fire. To Magloire would fall the duty of reciting the continuous charge which for the whole duration of the work was to hold the evil angels in thrall. Lastly, the Gaul drew his companion's attention to the fact that as soon as midnight sounded the conjuration was to commence, and before one must end. For that hour alone would signatory protectors avail him against the furies he evoked. But this Tosca already knew. He was, as we have seen, no such novice in the worship of powers retrograde as this schooling showed his colleague to believe. The distant clock now struck (how well the bravo remembered all the circumstances in which he had heard that sound from this spot before), and the sorcerer began in a thunderous voice to recite his litanies. Couched throughout in somewhat dubious Latinity they were by the

bravo only partially understood, but he perceived that commencing with extravagant bead roll of the Heavenly powers with which they two had fortified themselves, and with impudent encomiums of their own matchless courage and endurance among men, Magloire proceeded to eulogise the nine princes of the lower world in terms the most complimentary, exhorting them to satisfy their good friends the exorcists in the mere trifle they demanded. As this modest request was not responded to, the reciter gradually changed his tone. The compliments became thinned by degrees and beautifully less, and were fairly well mixed with horrible threats, and approbrious epithets, which again meeting with no recognition, the theme of the chant now ceased to contain any allusion whatever of a gratifying character. All was menace piled on menace and insult piled on insult, Pelion upon Ossa till the riotous whirl of words merged into one continuous curse, in the midst of which reverberated again and again (amid the shudders of the waters and the trembling of the earth) that ineffable sacred and secret Name of Names, at which the celestials and the terrestrials and the infernals do shake together and are troubled and confused. And with that there rumbled thunders round the skirts of earth and belched forth lightnings from their midst. And the lightnings continued to lighten without pause, until they seemed all one meteor of fire that hovered over the surface of the Bottomless Lake. And the meteor burst and shot forth myriads upon myriads of shapeless forms down towards the surface, whilst upwards from the surface rose a sort of scum or mist. And

this scum or mist, meeting those shapeless forms, they seemed to seize upon it—and work it—and make it build as it were walls. But all was seen as through a glass darkly, and, besides, the bravo was still employed in casting priceless balsams upon hissing flames that many a time and oft became half extinguished (to his terror) by the sweat that rained from his brow. By his side the French enchanter still swayed his arms towards on high, and on high unceasingly rolled his incomprehensible cabala. The slightest fear or the slightest hesitation, and what might not be their fate? For such a slip innumerable infernal skirmishers were hovering hard by in readiness. But now the danger is almost over. The gangs have done their grudging work, and a palace hangs between wind and water seductive and serene where nothing hung before. The last odours are burning. The weird wailing of the magus is slackening into the majestic formulæ of dismissal. Without this termination to the ritual the magicians on leaving their sanctuary would have been torn limb from limb by the awaiting fiends. But being expelled as ceremoniously as they had been evoked, the filmy hosts had no choice for it but to crumble into the nothingness from which they came.

“Go in peace unto your place! Peace be between you and us! Be you ready to come when you are called.”

These culminating words of the oration were uttered at the very moment that the faithful distant watchman proclaimed it the hour of one. As the two daring trespassers upon realms forbid stepped out from their double breast-work, the bravo in vain

endeavoured to make out the exact architectural details of his palace in the darkness. It was pretty clear to him, however, that instructions given had been faithfully fulfilled. He considered that he had done a very good night's work. How unexpected when he left Vergilia's house was this chance rencounter that fate had in store for him. He began to have some regard for Providence. He paid no attention to the wizard who was commencing to obliterate his signs. Magloire had done his work well, but he had been paid for it in advance. So much for Monsieur Magloire (of France), who, he presumed, would now be off again about his own affairs. Tosca strolled towards the city. His business was to wait upon his betrothed (for such she now surely was), and drag her off at once to the castle of her behest. A day of luxury followed by a night of love. That was his bill of fare. But he had reckoned without his host. He was ignorant that, in exchange for the palace, he had bartered the true key to the situation and most stringent claim of all upon the regard of his Vergilia. He was far from suspecting that essential clue to the labyrinth which Janko had recovered only just before his death, but which world without end would never have wrung from him to the advantage of his assassin. This essential clue consisted in the recognition of the hag of Illyria and the beautiful Vergilia as one and the same person. Now Janko had been her kinsman, and her intimate in her former existence, and had been privy and assistant (as we know) to the rite by which her youth was to be renewed. To him the inheritance was destined of the seal which she had

constructed for this end, and by the existence of which alone her rejuvenescence could be effected. Upon the success of her experiment, after seven days of seeming death, it was intended that he should restore it to her; but we are already aware that, through the interference of the Venetian, that success he had never seen. The memory of his obligation being destroyed by the drug of the poisoner, the talisman that was bound up with it became the plaything of the bravo. The plaything of the bravo we repeat, and it could never be anything else to him, so long as he remained in ignorance of the peculiar power it exerted over the transfigured witch. For the amulet was the invisible load-stone that at the moment when first they met had drawn her head down irresistibly to his breast, where it lay concealed. Hold out as she might, she must nevertheless infallibly have ultimately yielded to the spell by which the Seven Sigils gave its holder power over her life. And Tosca had unwittingly exchanged it for Dead Sea fruit. The fantastical personage calling himself Magloire was, on the other hand, well aware (for reasons which, for the moment, we leave in the dark) of the power of the pawn he thus obtained. His proffer of the bond, in the first instance, was a ruse (for he knew it would not be signed), and it served very well its end of diverting suspicion from his real purpose by making that appear an after thought. Now that he had obtained the long-sought-for prize, he stopped in his work of demolishing his geometry (the bravo being no longer in sight), and stood for a long time collecting in the jewel every possible ray of light. Then he did a most extraordinary thing, even

for him, whose every deed was extraordinary. He took it off its chain, which he threw carelessly away, and conveying the glittering heptagon to his mouth, he swallowed it. There was method in his apparent madness. Its virtues would not suffer in the slightest from its imprisonment. The fortunes borne by its Seven Sigils for good or for evil were henceforth indissolubly bound up with his being. In this way he avoided any possible chance of its ever passing out of his possession. But the most urgent reason for his caution was the imminent return of his late assistant. He had gauged the character of that individual too deeply to feel safe while in his company. And in his company he evidently intended to remain. The sun had now risen, and the structure he had wrought by a word out of nothing was at last entirely visible. And he saw that it was good. The waters around it swarmed with love and feud between fishes gold and silver and white aquatic birds. Other feathered life hopped the countless little streamers which adorned the shining turrets. A broad landing stage fronted the chief gate which was the higher of it to the extent of a magnificent flight of steps. As to the interior the Moorish lattices were inscrutable. But curiosity need not long remain unsatisfied. The handsome pair for whom this casket was destined were already joyously approaching. The bravo started when he came in sight of the secretive Gaul still masked, and as at the moment when he left him rubbing out the traces of his circles. Vergilia started, as if in recognition

of some acquaintance perchance of her youth. The vaguely mysterious Seven Sigils had launched their erotic work. The bravo surprised the attention which the Frenchman had excited—remembered that he had never liked him, from the first—and began to look upon him as a possible rival. But the desire to take French leave of him begot the bewildering discovery that although the castle floated, complete as per contract, he was powerless himself by any exertion of wish or will to cause it to sail to shore that they might enter in according to the original plan sketched out by its fair young architect. In this dilemma the Gaul came bowing and scraping to his aid, and showed that by a simple signal of his hand he could attract it to him as a magnet attracts iron. And now Tosca began to suspect the lurking of some design in all this. His suspicions were confirmed when Magloire stepped with them upon the threshold of their new home, and the palace immediately resumed its place in the centre of the Bottomless Lake. There was now no chance for it but to admit the unwelcome guest. Their feet were lost to the ankles in the carpet that covered the nakedness of that royal flight of stairs we have already alluded to. They passed into a banqueting hall of exquisite proportion, and sculpt with a fairy chisel. Through keyhole arches that overlooked a central court, the melodies of all kinds of singing birds were wafted contrapuntally across the strains of the equally invisible musicians inside the banqueting hall itself, while the sun-litten plashings of a fountain formed the organ point

that threaded through the whole—so much as this the Venetian came, and saw, and enjoyed; but as to the laced and liveried semblances of life with which the banqueting hall was alive, they were semblances of death for all the service which the wish and will of Tosca sought to exact from them. And here again the Frenchman came to his aid, and these genii, at his command, throbbled with obsequious ichor. Tables (in a second, magnificently clothed) groaned under the newest of foods and beakers filled at the central spring (fed from the waters of the Bottomless Lake) brimmed with the oldest of wines. Vergilia and Magloire appeared infused with perfect life, but to the bravo all was bitter in the mouth. He saw by the action of the genii of the place that the contract agreed to, and possibly only too literally carried out, had not been sufficiently comprehensive. The day had dawned, it is true, upon a tenement that eminently satisfied the caprices of Vergilia. But the bravo was only in name its master and hers. The castle that mocked his efforts to move it came and went at the motion of his rival, the servants that were automata to Tosca were alive to the bidding of Magloire, and Vergilia had forsaken her old love and beamed only upon the new. Nay, she cast upon Magloire the self-same love light which had fired Tosca's blood in her defence when he snatched her from her ravishers, that never to be forgotten day when first they met. He had thought his valour saved her from a fortune worse than death, which now he feared would have affected her not at all. For he saw that all the signs of an apparently virgin love could rise up like

phoenix from the ashes of a past one. And he shuddered to think how often this process might have been repeated. Had all her lovers then enjoyed her perchance save Tosca alone? And yet all the more she sank in his estimation, the fuller swelled the tide of his desire. The long luxurious banquet was a torture to him with this death's head at his feast. His rage increased steadily with the jealousy it fed upon. The long drawn courses were no sooner over than he seized upon some trifling pretext (we know not what) to leave Vergilia alone for a few moments while he drew his rival to that central court, whence perfumed zephyrs blew. The stranger still continued masked. To this Tosca first alluded laying his hand upon the hilt of that famous old sword of his.

"Unmask your face that I may know you."

"You shall know me too well ere long."

"Restore me that amulet unearned by your accursed jugglery."

"You will never see it again."

"Then let this sword of justice decide between us that has settled many a case for me before, and the Devil help his own! But first reveal to me your real style and title (and a fig for the assumed one that you go by), that I may learn with what enemy I have to deal that has cause to hunt me down as you have hunted me."

"You deal with the Resenter and Avenger of the murder of the Illyrian."

A shiver ran down the spine of the Venetian. Yet his blade nevertheless flashed from its sheath, and he motioned to the stranger to take up a position

opposite to him. Magloire turned round for one second to do so, and in that second the sword of his faithless foe was plunged remorselessly through his back. The point protruded through his breast. The next instant the sword had been withdrawn, and the still unexplained Frenchman lay prone upon the ground by the self-same stratagem that had availed with the man of whom he styled himself avenger. And this time also the Venetian took the trouble to assure himself of the death of his victim before returning his sword to its scabbard. That done, he proceeded next to ascertain the real identity of this mysterious being whom he had supposed to be one of his numerous enemies working out a long delayed vendetta. With a clutch the mask was torn to ribbons, and with a shriek the bravest of the brave recoiled from the Mandrake it revealed; and, as the shrieker heard his shriek, he recognised its kind. It was fellow to that one he had heard the day before from the chamber of Vergilia, never deeming that he himself in turn would be frightened with the same basilisk face. But it frightened him (after all) with a difference. The soul of the pot valiant courtier had been reft from its silken frame, but the tempered ribs of the Man of War held fast their trust within. His brain whirled and steadied itself—his blood shot forth and back again—his eye grew dark and cleared. On to his knees he sank, indeed, that never had bent to conquered (or unconquered) foe before, but that was the only abatement from his pride of place. That was his only homage to the escaped familiar of the sorceress' privacy, that grim guardian whose gorgon glimpse had yesterday sobered the drunkard

and petrified the itching flesh of lust. And the situation brought its panacea. Ignorant still of the effect of the Seven Sigils, he fancied he had discovered now why the sorceress had favoured the Mandragorean watchman with the love glance once reserved for Tosca. It must be because that monster also had rendered service to her virtue as the bravo had rendered it before. One question still remained unanswered. Had Vergilia herself never seen the face of this awful animated root? Or had she, by daily touch, kept up from the very first plucking of the plant, so grown up along with its progressing hideosity as to feel no inception of abhorrence? At any rate, his Mandrakeship was now placed finally *hors de boudoir*. And the bravo reflected that he laughs best who laughs the last. Take heed, though, Tosca, there rests one yet unslain till the day of final doom, in whose danger you still stand, and whose claws are creeping towards you from the dark places of the earth! Who sups with the Devil had need have a very long spoon. But now there flashes like a sunbeam through the court the golden-haired vision of whose destiny he now hoped himself sole arbiter. Roused by that fell shriek, her anxiety nevertheless was far from being for the utterer of it. With a cry of agonised acute despair she flung past the outstretched arms of the bravo on to the prostrate body of the lover still bound to her in death by the magic of the talisman he had swallowed with so justified a foresight. The bravo knelt no longer to the Mandrake, but to her, and with a cry plucked up the thoughts of his deepest soul.

“Thou wanton and thing of many lovers, yet

whom still I madly love! By the love you once bore me, have pity on me now and vouchsafe me but the leavings of this man or monster. A living dog is better than a dead lion, so they say. Call me your dog or what you will, so that you call me yours. For you I placed my soul in pledge, and would you now desert me in my indignity? Nay then, if your choice be irrevocably riveted to this carrion, so be it! But you shall share the fate of him whom you so fancy. The Grand Seigneur is connoisseur in the art of fittest punishing the faithless. With my own eyes I have seen his favourite odalisques sewn up in sacks, and dropped into the Bosphorus. And with my own hands I will deal with you even so. You shall have your fill of local colour ere you have done with your palace of the East."

The bravo was now crouching instead of kneeling, and gathering himself up into a spring as of a panther he plunged upon the still disconsolable mourner. Twining his fingers recklessly about the golden hair he oft had kissed, he dragged her, not without difficulty from the corpse of the Thing, whose fall she wept, jerking her spasmodically into the hall and overturning its furniture right and left. Amid the crashing of shattered bric-a-brac, he grabbed at the nearest cushion from a divan that stood hard by, and ripping out its entrails with the ferocity of an attack upon a living thing, he felled the shrieking girl to the ground with a blow that would have startled an ox, and forced his contrived receptacle somehow and anyhow over her body, she uttering never a syllable the while. Did she think that he

had no heart to carry to a finish such a deed? Or was it still the eccentric influence of the Seven Sigils that made death to her preferable to life apart from the one beloved? This we cannot answer. Enough that Tosca seemed in deadly earnest as he shook together the members of his mistress, and compressing the mouth of his improvised sarcophagus, tied it up with the belt from his waist. This done he left it on the couch, and returned to the central court drowsy with incense laden flowers. He intended to yield Vergilia one more chance. Left to herself, and already wrapped in her winding sheet, the present expectation of a painful death would surely lead to second thoughts, and induce her to lavish less carelessly the future of her youth and beauty—the splash that heralded the committal of her paramour to the water would be echoed by her appeal for mercy—and he had resolved in that case to forgive her the worst she dared confess to him. But now to the work. Not entirely without spasms of fresh fear he re-entered the courtyard of the fateful duel, and where the duellist who had fallen lay. His body the bravo now conveyed down the steps to the landing stage in front of the main building. It did not fail to occur to the practical mind of the Venetian as he strained under the repulsive corpse of his quondam adversary that somewhere upon his person (as he thought) must lie concealed the talisman of the Seven Sigils. He did not know that to find it he should have to search for it within and not without. The consequence naturally was that his search was unrewarded by any trace whatever of the coveted gem. But the more

he searched and pondered — and pondered and searched again—the more he became convinced of the necessity for finding it, and the clearer became to him the momentous part it had played in recent events. He remembered now too late that while he had it in his possession his suit with Vergilia had prospered, whereas Heaven had begun to frown upon him as soon as he had parted with it to Magloire. He was too shrewd a conjuror to fail to connect the one fact with the other, and with them both the anxiety of the Mandrake to possess the talisman of whose virtues he had obviously knowledge. Yet still it could not be found upon his person. With a fearful oath the Venetian at length gave up the search, and consigned the fruitless body to the Bottomless Lake. He would find the bauble yet (he swore) by all his left hand gods in whatsoever nook of earth it lay. And with that very oath upon his lips he cast it off unwittingly for ever, deep buried in the body that he spurned. Flotsam and jetsam whatsoever touched the surface of those Stygian waves became the forfeit of the Fiend. Such was the fate of body and gem. No more to appear in substance in our story, the seal of the Seven Sigils shall, nevertheless, ride through it to the end, completing the curse of the Illyrian. The Venetian (ignorant as we have said of the loss he had inflicted upon himself) once more re-entered the banqueting hall. His purpose, before dealing with the question of his lady-love, was to order up a second collation accompanied by fresh founts of wine. This *tele-a-tele* (as he ordained it in his mind) should obliterate the memory of the previous banquet with

its presence of an inconvenient third. He gave his order roundly to the servants, quite forgetting how impotent his commands. The automata remained unmoved, save for the fancy of the bravo that they leered somewhat upon him with an unmistakeable expression of contempt. Stung to sudden rage he drew his keen ancestral blade, and made a lunge at the vitals of the nearest one. In a moment he saw his mistake. The steel shivered into a thousand fragments, and shattered in its flight all the mirrors of the room. The hilt alone remained in his hand, which was jarred through and through by the shock. But the mental effect was even worse. For the first time a sense of impending Nemesis began to steal upon him. This unique companion of all his vicissitudes had been beloved of his inmost soul. From his jeopardous early days up he had been accustomed never to sleep without it, until it had become almost necessary to his slumbers that he should clap it to his breast. Slowly he recovered, and even comforted himself. What could his ancient hanger on avail him in his imprisonment on that island of enchantment? And had he not at hand metal far more attractive—damaskeened with gold—and suppler than Damascus steel? He gathered together lingeringly the shards of his faithful bedfellow, that he might cast those also into that Bottomless Lake that had just received their latest victim. But when he had them all embraced together in his arms, and had thrown aside the portal that he might descend the steps to the landing stage—he was blasted with a shock not so easy to rebound

from as this matter of a broken weapon—there existed no longer a landing stage at all! Where it formerly stood the remorseless tide of the Bottomless Lake now swept the foot of the steps! The bravo reeled. For a moment the air was thick with curses loud and deep upon the day when the Seven Sigils had first flashed its baleful light athwart his path. He now saw the full significance of the fact that Magloire alone could shift the castle's site, and vivify its phlegmatic flunkeydom. The castle having been created by Magloire, for him alone existed. The handing over of his body to Beelzebub, of which the bravo himself had been the unthinking agent, had finally snapped the charm which held the building in existence. It was now slowly sinking into the waters from which it rose, and would continue to slowly sink till not a stone of it was visible above the surface of the darkling deep. Tosca reeled at this slap in the face that his fortune dealt him. He never knew how he found himself once more within the central court, a beaker in his hand, filling it to the brim with a vintage of the fountains of which we made mention before. He raised the vessel to his lips. The next moment it fell from his palsied hand and dashed into a thousand pieces. The fluid he had tried to drink slobbered over his knees as he rolled ignominiously upon the tessellated pavement. It was no longer wine that the fountain had yielded, but the fetid water of the Bottomless Lake! And this also resulted from the breaking of the charm by burial of the body of Magloire. The curse of the Illyrian was closing in upon its victim. The fate of the Venetian was

written large upon his forehead. Abrupt Despair gripped upon his heart-strings. Yet still the honour of the bout remained with Tosca. For he remembered in his extremity that the bundle on the couch with all its possibilities was his. In despite of all that Doom had done he still remained the owner of a wallet that beggared Fortunatus. He sprang to his feet like an Antæus, all the tenser for his momentary lapse to earth. He stretched out his arms towards the Bottomless Lake, and roared in tones of thunder:—

“Hell from beneath is moved for me to meet me at my coming! Now runs my sand apace, and I am ripe for my enrolment in the legions that eternally curse God and do not die! Yet still the victory of victories is mine, and eyeless Death shall not outstare me from it! Is it for this you work (you who sit in the High Places of the Pit), that I should flaunt in your faces the most fragrant hour of Life? Oh, how you have wrought your work awry! And you—you myriad victims of the dagger or the bowl that I have ushered unannealed to the account—I invite you every one to my bridal! Is this then your vengeance (oh, viperine Magloire!) that fruition should wait on my desire? And you, Illyrian Janko, is this then your revenge that you watch my wedding eve from the impotent other side of that great gulf fixed between? Here, on this side, I exact value in advance for the eternal price I pay. Here shall our ardent heat outblaze your fires, and when your ruffian waters reach our level shall the floor above receive us—and still the floor above—till on the

roof itself at last we still out-laugh you! Hours must elapse or ever your icy billows reach our hearts, and wash them to the portal of Infinity! These hours shall be mine (though all Gehenna gnash its teeth), and our content shall give the lie to Hell."

Firm as a rock, he strode to his bag and cast off the belt from its mouth. A head appeared. But not a golden one. Its scanty hair was grey. Tosca recoiled. The ground reeled beneath him. His brain was furnace, and his blood arterial snow. With a mighty effort he recovered himself, and leaped like a madman into the sack, rending it seam from seam. The whole fabric parted, and disclosed, not the nonpareil that he had placed in its safe keeping, but the withered stubs of limbs and yellow disjected trunk of that ancient harridan of Illyria, whom he had seen on that never to be forgotten former occasion anatomised by the hand of Janko. And as he stared dead eyed upon that death, he was mercifully unaware that his feet were being swept by the inexorable waves of the advancing Bottomless Lake.

