The Soul of Lilith, Vol. 1

Marie Corelli

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

THE following story does not assume to be what is generally understood by a "novel." It is simply the account of a strange and daring experiment once actually attempted, and is offered to those who are interested in the unseen "possibilities" of the Hereafter, merely for what it is,—a single episode in the life of a man who voluntarily sacrificed his whole worldly career in a supreme effort to prove the apparently Unprovable.

THE SOUL OF LILITH

CHAPTER I.

THE theatre was full,—crowded from floor to ceiling; the lights were turned low to give the stage full prominence,—and a large audience packed close in pit and gallery as well as in balcony and stalls, listened with or without interest, whichever way best suited their different temperaments and manner of breeding, to the well−worn famous soliloquy in "Hamlet"—"*To be or not to be.*" It was the first night of a new rendering of Shakespeare's ever puzzling play,—the chief actor was a great actor, albeit not admitted as such by the petty cliques,—he had thought out the strange and complex character of the psychological Dane for himself, with the result that even the listless, languid, generally impassive occupants of the stalls, many of whom had no doubt heard a hundred Hamlets, were roused for once out of their chronic state of boredom into something like attention, as the familiar lines fell on their ears with a slow and meditative richness of accent not commonly heard on the modern stage. This new Hamlet chose his attitudes well,—instead of walking or rather strutting about as he uttered the soliloquy, he seated himself and for a moment seemed lost in silent thought;— then, without changing his position he began, his voice gathering deeper earnestness as the beauty and solemnity of the immortal lines became more pronounced and concentrated.

"To die—to sleep;—
To sleep!—perchance to dream; ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause..."

Here there was a brief and impressive silence. In that short interval, and before the actor could resume his speech, a man entered the theatre with noiseless step and seated himself in a vacant stall of the second row. A few heads were instinctively turned to look at him, but in the semi−gloom of the auditorium, his features could scarcely be discerned, and Hamlet's sad rich voice again compelled attention.

"Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourne
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action."

The scene went on to the despairing interview with Ophelia, which was throughout performed with such splendid force and feeling as to awaken a perfect hurricane of applause;—then the curtain went down, the lights went up, the orchestra recommenced, and again inquisitive eyes were turned towards the latest new−comer in the stalls who had made his quiet entrance in the very midst of the great philosophical Soliloquy. He was immediately discovered to be a person well worth observing; and observed he was accordingly, though he seemed quite

unaware of the attention he was attracting. Yet he was singular−looking enough to excite a little curiosity even among modern fashionable Londoners, who are accustomed to see all sorts of eccentric beings, both male and female, æsthetic and common−place, and he was so distinctively separated from ordinary folk by his features and bearing, that the rather loud whisper of an irrepressible young American woman—"I'd give worlds to know who that man is!" was almost pardonable under the circumstances. His skin was dark as a mulatto's,—yet smooth, and healthily coloured by the warm blood flushing through the olive tint,—his eyes seemed black, but could scarcely be seen on account of the extreme length and thickness of their dark lashes,—the fine, rather scornful curve of his short upper lip was partially hidden by a black moustache; and with all this blackness and darkness about his face, his hair, of which he seemed to have an extraordinary profusion, was perfectly white. Not merely a silvery white, but a white as pronounced as that of a bit of washed fleece or newly−fallen snow. In looking at him it was impossible to decide whether he was old or young,—because, though he carried no wrinkles or other defacing marks of Time's power to destroy, his features wore an impress of such stern and deeply resolved thought as is seldom or never the heritage of those to whom youth still belongs. Nevertheless, he seemed a long way off from being old,—so that, altogether, he was a puzzle to his neighbours in the stalls, as well as to certain fair women in the boxes, who levelled their opera−glasses at him with a pertinacity which might have made him uncomfortably self−conscious had he looked up. Only he did not look up; he leaned back in his seat with a slightly listless air, studied his programme intently, and appeared half asleep, owing to the way in which his eyelids drooped, and the drowsy sweep of his lashes. The irrepressible American girl almost forgot "Hamlet," so absorbed was she in staring at him, in spite of the *sotto−voce* remonstrances of her decorous mother, who sat beside her,—and presently, as if aware of, or annoyed by, her scrutiny, he lifted his eyes, and looked full at her. With an instinctive movement she recoiled,—and her own eyes fell. Never in all her giddy, thoughtless little life had she seen such fiery, brilliant, night−black orbs,—they made her feel uncomfortable,—gave her the "creeps," as she afterwards declared;—she shivered, drawing her satin opera−wrap more closely about her, and stared at the stranger no more. He soon removed his piercing gaze from her to the stage, for now the great "Play scene" of "Hamlet" was in progress, and was from first to last a triumph for the actor chiefly concerned. At the next fall of the curtain, a fair, dissipated−looking young fellow leaned over from the third row of stalls, and touched the white−haired individual lightly on the shoulder.

"My dear El−Râmi! You here? At a theatre? Why, I should never have thought you capable of indulging in such frivolity!"

"Do you consider 'Hamlet' frivolous?" queried the other, rising from his seat to shake hands, and showing himself to be a man of medium height, though having such peculiar dignity of carriage as made him appear taller than he really was.

"Well, no!"—and the young man yawned rather effusively. "To tell you the truth, I find him insufferably dull."

"You do?" and the person addressed as El−Râmi smiled slightly. "Well,—naturally you go with the opinions of your age. You would no doubt prefer a burlesque?"

"Frankly speaking, I should! And now I begin to think of it, I don't know really why I came here. I had intended to look in at the Empire—there's a new ballet going on there—but a fellow at the club gave me this stall, said it was a 'first−night,' and all the rest of it—and so—"

"And so Fate decided for you," finished El−Râmi sedately. "And instead of admiring the pretty ladies without proper clothing at the Empire, you find yourself here, wondering why the deuce Hamlet the Dane could not find anything better to do than bother himself about his father's ghost! Exactly! But, being here, you are here for a purpose, my friend;" and he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "Look!—Over there— observe her well!—sits your future wife;"—and he indicated, by the slightest possible nod, the American girl before alluded to. "Yes,—the pretty creature in pink, with dark hair. You don't know her? No, of course you don't—but you will. She will be introduced to you to−night before you leave this theatre. Don't look so startled—there's nothing miraculous about her, I assure you! She is merely Miss Chester, only daughter of Jabez Chester, the latest New York millionaire. A charmingly shallow, delightfully useless, but enormously wealthy little person!—you will propose to her within a month, and you will be accepted. A very good match for you, Vaughan—all your debts paid, and everything set straight with certain Jews. Nothing could be better, really—and, remember,—I am the first to congratulate you!"

He spoke rapidly, with a smiling, easy air of conviction; his friend meanwhile stared at him in profound

amazement and something of fear.

"By Jove, El−Râmi!"—he began nervously—"you know, this is a little too much of a good thing. It's all very well to play prophet sometimes, but it can be overdone."

"Pardon!" and El−Râmi turned to resume his seat. "The play begins again. Insufferably dull as 'Hamlet' may be, we are bound to give him some slight measure of attention."

Vaughan forced a careless smile in response, and threw himself indolently back in his own stall, but he looked annoyed and puzzled. His eyes wandered from the back of El−Râmi's white head to the half−seen profile of the American heiress who had just been so coolly and convincingly pointed out to him as his future wife.

"I don't know the girl from Adam,"—he thought irritably, "and I don't want to know her. In fact, I won't know her. And if I won't, why, I shan't know her. Will is everything, even according to El−Râmi. The fellow's always so confoundedly positive of his prophecies. I should like to confute him for once and prove him wrong."

Thus he mused, scarcely heeding the progress of Shakespeare's great tragedy, till, at the close of the scene of Ophelia's burial, he saw El−Râmi rise and prepare to leave the auditorium. He at once rose himself.

"Are you going?" he asked.

"Yes;—I do not care for 'Hamlet's' end, or for anybody's end in this particular play. I don't like the hasty and wholesale slaughter that concludes the piece. It is inartistic."

"Shakespeare inartistic?" queried Vaughan, smiling.

"Why yes, sometimes. He was a man, not a god;—and no man's work can be absolutely perfect. Shakespeare had his faults like everybody else,—and with his great genius he would have been the first to own them. It is only your little mediocrities who are never wrong. Are you going also?"

"Yes; I mean to damage your reputation as a prophet, and avoid the chance of an introduction to Miss Chester—for this evening, at any rate."

He laughed as he spoke, but El−Râmi said nothing. The two passed out of the stalls together into the lobby, where they had to wait a few minutes to get their hats and overcoats, the man in charge of the cloakroom having gone to cool his chronic thirst at the convenient "bar." Vaughan made use of the enforced delay to light his cigar.

"Did you think it a good 'Hamlet'?" he asked his companion carelessly while thus occupied.

"Excellent," replied El−Râmi. "The leading actor has immense talent, and thoroughly appreciates the subtlety of the part he has to play;—but his supporters are all sticks,—hence the scenes drag where he himself is not in them. That is the worst of the 'star' system,—a system which is perfectly ruinous to histrionic art. Still—no matter how it is performed, 'Hamlet' is always interesting. Curiously inconsistent, too, but impressive."

"Inconsistent? how?" asked Vaughan, beginning to puff rings of smoke into the air, and to wonder impatiently how much longer the keeper of the cloak−room meant to stay absent from his post.

"Oh, in many ways. Perhaps the most glaring inconsistency of the whole conception comes out in the great soliloquy, 'To be or not to be.'"

"Really?" and Vaughan became interested. —"I thought that was considered one of the finest bits in the play."

"So it is. I am not speaking of the lines themselves, which are magnificent, but of their connection with 'Hamlet's' own character. Why does he talk of a 'bourne from whence no traveller returns,' when he has, or thinks he has, proof positive of the return of his own father in spiritual form;—and it is just concerning that return that he makes all the pother? Don't you see inconsistency there?"

"Of course,—but I never thought of it," said Vaughan, staring. "I don't believe anyone but yourself has ever thought of it. It is quite unaccountable. He certainly does say 'no traveller returns,'—and he says it after he has seen the ghost too."

"Yes," went on El−Râmi, warming with his subject. "And he talks of the 'dread of something after death,' as if it were only a 'dread,' and not a Fact;—whereas if he is to believe the spirit of his own father, which he declares is 'an honest ghost,' there is no possibility of doubt on the matter. Does not the mournful phantom say—

> "'But that I am forbid
> To tell the secrets of my prison−house
> I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word
> Would harrow up thy soul; freeze thy young blood;

Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres;
Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end. . .'?"

"By Jove! I say, El−Râmi; don't look at me like that!" exclaimed Vaughan uneasily, backing away from a too close proximity to the brilliant flashing eyes and absorbed face of his companion, who had recited the lines with extraordinary passion and solemnity.

El−Râmi laughed.

"Did I scare you? Was I too much in earnest? I beg your pardon! True enough,—'this eternal blazon must not be, to ears of flesh and blood!' But, the 'something after death' was a peculiarly aggravating reality to that poor ghost, and Hamlet knew that it was so when he spoke of it as a mere 'dread.' Thus, as I say, he was inconsistent, or, rather, Shakespeare did not argue the case logically."

"You would make a capital actor,"—said Vaughan, still gazing at him in astonishment. "Why, you went on just now as if,—well, as if you meant it, you know."

"So I did mean it," replied El−Râmi lightly—"for the moment! I always find 'Hamlet' a rather absorbing study; so will you, perhaps, when you are my age."

"Your age?" and Vaughan shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I knew it! Why, nobody knows it. You may be thirty or a hundred—who can tell?"

"Or two hundred—or even three hundred?" queried El−Râmi, with a touch of satire in his tone;—"why stint the measure of limitless time? But here comes our recalcitrant knave"—this, as the keeper of the cloakroom made his appearance from a side−door with a perfectly easy and unembarrassed air, as though he had done rather a fine thing than otherwise in keeping two gentlemen waiting his pleasure. "Let us get our coats, and be well away before the decree of Fate can be accomplished in making you the winner of the desirable Chester prize. It is delightful to conquer Fate—if one can!"

His black eyes flashed curiously, and Vaughan paused in the act of throwing on his overcoat to look at him again in something of doubt and dread.

At that moment a gay voice exclaimed:

"Why, here's Vaughan!—Freddie Vaughan—how lucky!" and a big handsome man of about two or three and thirty sauntered into the lobby from the theatre, followed by two ladies. "Look here, Vaughan, you're just the fellow I wanted to see. We've left Hamlet in the thick of his fight, because we're going on to the Somers's ball,—will you come with us? And I say, Vaughan, allow me to introduce to you my friends—Mrs. Jabez Chester, Miss Idina Chester—Sir Frederick Vaughan."

For one instant Vaughan stood inert and stupefied; the next he remembered himself, and bowed mechanically. His presentation to the Chesters was thus suddenly effected by his cousin, Lord Melthorpe, to whom he was indebted for many favours, and whom he could not afford to offend by any show of brusquerie. As soon as the necessary salutations were exchanged, however, he looked round vaguely, and in a sort of superstitious terror, for the man who had so surely prophesied this introduction. But El−Râmi was gone. Silently and without adieu he had departed, having seen his word fulfilled.

CHAPTER II.

"*WHO* is the gentleman that just left you?" asked Miss Chester, smiling prettily up into Vaughan's eyes, as she accepted his proffered arm to lead her to her carriage,—"Such a distinguished−looking dreadful person!"

Vaughan smiled at this description.

"He is certainly rather singular in personal appearance," he began, when his cousin, Lord Melthorpe, interrupted him.

"You mean El−Râmi? It **was** El−Râmi, wasn't it? Ah, I thought so. Why did he give us the slip, I wonder? I wish he had waited a minute—he is a most interesting fellow."

"But who **is** he?" persisted Miss Chester. She was now comfortably ensconced in her luxurious brougham, her mother beside her, and two men of "title" opposite to her—a position which exactly suited the aspirations of her soul. "How very tiresome you both are! You don't explain him a bit; you only say he is 'interesting,' and of course one can see that; people with such white hair and such black eyes are always interesting, don't you think so?"

"Well, I don't see why they should be," said Lord Melthorpe dubiously. "Now, just think what horrible chaps Albinos are, and they have white hair and pink eyes—"

"Oh, don't drift off on the subject of Albinos, please!" pleaded Miss Chester, with a soft laugh. "If you do, I shall never know anything about this particular person—El−Râmi, did you say? Isn't it a very odd name? Eastern, of course?"

"Oh yes! he is a pure Oriental thoroughbred," replied Lord Melthorpe, who took the burden of the conversation upon himself, while he inwardly wondered why his cousin Vaughan was in such an evidently taciturn mood. "That is, I mean, he is an Oriental of the very old stock, not one of the modern Indian mixtures of vice and knavery. But when he came from the East, and why he came from the East, I don't suppose anyone could tell you. I have only met him two or three times in society, and on those occasions he managed to perplex and fascinate a good many people. My wife, for instance, thinks him quite a marvellous man; she always asks him to her parties, but he hardly ever comes. His name in full is El−Râmi−Zarânos, though I believe he is best known as El−Râmi simply."

"And what is he?" asked Miss Chester. "An artist?—a literary celebrity?"

"Neither, that I am aware of. Indeed, I don't know what he is, or how he lives. I have always looked upon him as a sort of magician—a kind of private conjurer, you know."

"Dear me!" said fat Mrs. Chester, waking up from a semi−doze, and trying to get interested in the subject. "Does he do drawing−room tricks?"

"Oh no, he doesn't do tricks;" and Lord Melthorpe looked a little amused. "He isn't that sort of man at all; I'm afraid I explain myself badly. I mean that he can tell you extraordinary things about your past and future—"

"Oh, by your hand—**I** know!" and the pretty Idina nodded her head sagaciously. "There really is something awfully clever in palmistry. **I** can tell fortunes that way!"

"Can you?" Lord Melthorpe smiled indulgently, and went on,—"But it so happens that El−Râmi does not tell anything by the hand,—he judges by the face, figure, and movement. He doesn't make a profession of it; but, really, he does foretell events in rather a curious way now and then."

"He certainly does!" agreed Vaughan, rousing himself from a reverie into which he had fallen, and fixing his eyes on the small piquante features of the girl opposite him. "Some of his prophecies are quite remarkable."

"Really! How very delightful!" said Miss Chester, who was fully aware of Sir Frederick's intent, almost searching, gaze, but pretended to be absorbed in buttoning one of her gloves. "I must ask him to tell me what sort of fate is in store for me—something awful, I'm positive! Don't you think he has horrid eyes?—splendid, but horrid? He looked at me in the theatre—"

"My dear, you looked at him first," murmured Mrs. Chester.

"Yes; but I'm sure I didn't make him shiver. Now, when he looked at me, I felt as if someone were pouring cold water very slowly down my back. It was **such** a creepy sensation! Do fasten this, mother—will you?" and she extended the hand with the refractory glove upon it to Mrs. Chester, but Vaughan promptly interposed:

"Allow me!"

"Oh, well! if you know how to fix a button that is almost off!" she said laughingly, with a blush that well

became her transparent skin.

"I can make an attempt"—said Vaughan, with due humility. "If I succeed, will you give me one or two dances presently?"

"With pleasure!"

"Oh! you **are** coming in to the Somers's, then!" said Lord Melthorpe, in a pleased tone. "That's right. You know, Fred, you're so absent−minded to−night, that you never said 'Yes' or 'No' when I asked you to accompany us."

"Didn't I? I'm awfully sorry!" and, having fastened the glove with careful daintiness, he smiled. "Please set down my rudeness and distraction to the uncanny influence of El−Râmi; I can't imagine any other reason."

They all laughed carelessly, as people in an idle humour laugh at trifles, and the carriage bore them on to their destination—a great house in Queen's Gate, where a magnificent entertainment was being held in honour of some Serene and Exalted foreign potentate who had taken it into his head to see how London amused itself during a "season." The foreign potentate had heard that the splendid English capital was full of gloom and misery—that its women were unapproachable, and its men difficult to make friends with; and all these erroneous notions had to be dispersed in his serene and exalted brain, no matter what his education cost the "Upper Ten" who undertook to enlighten his barbarian ignorance.

Meanwhile, the subject of Lord Mel− thorpe's conversation—El−Râmi, or El−Râmi−Zarânos, as he was called by those of his own race—was walking quietly homewards with that firm, swift, yet apparently unhasting pace which so often distinguishes the desert−born savage, and so seldom gives grace to the deportment of the cultured citizen. It was a mild night in May; the weather was unusually fine and warm; the skies were undarkened by any mist or cloud, and the stars shone forth with as much brilliancy as though the city lying under their immediate ken had been the smiling fairy, Florence, instead of the brooding giant, London. Now and again El−Râmi raised his eyes to the sparkling belt of Orion, which glittered aloft with a lustre that is seldom seen in the hazy English air;—he was thinking his own thoughts, and the fact that there were many passers to and fro in the streets besides himself did not appear to disturb him in the least, for he strode through their ranks, without any hurry or jostling, as if he alone existed, and they were but shadows.

"What fools are the majority of men!" he mused. "How easy to gull them, and how willing they are to be gulled! How that silly young Vaughan marvelled at my prophecy of his marriage!—as if it were not as easy to foretell as that two and two inevitably make four! Given the characters of people in the same way that you give figures, and you are certain to arrive at a sum−total of them in time. How simple the process of calculation as to Vaughan's matrimonial prospects! Here are the set of numerals I employed: Two nights ago I heard Lord Melthorpe say he meant to marry his cousin Fred to Miss Chester, daughter of Jabez Chester, of New York,—Miss Chester herself entered the room a few minutes later on, and I saw the sort of young woman she was. To−night at the theatre I see her again;—in an opposite box, well back in shadow, I perceive Lord Melthorpe. Young Vaughan, whose character I know to be of such weakness that it can be moulded whichever way a stronger will turns it, sits close behind me; and I proceed to make the little sum−total. Given Lord Melthorpe, with a determination that resembles the obstinacy of a pig rather than of a man; Frederick Vaughan, with no determination at all; and the little Chester girl, with her heart set on an English title, even though it only be that of a baronet, and the marriage is certain. What was **un** certain was the possibility of their all meeting to−night; but they were all there, and I counted that possibility as the fraction over,—there is always a fraction over in character−sums; it stands as Providence or Fate, and must always be allowed for. I chanced it,—and won. I always do win in these things,—these ridiculous trifles of calculation, which are actually accepted as prophetic utterances by people who never will think out anything for themselves. Good heavens! what a monster−burden of crass ignorance and wilful stupidity this poor planet has groaned under ever since it was hurled into space! Immense!—incalculable! And for what purpose? For what progress? For what end?"

He stopped a moment; he had walked from the Strand up through Piccadilly, and was now close to Hyde Park. Taking out his watch, he glanced at the time—it was close upon midnight. All at once he was struck fiercely from behind, and the watch he held was snatched from his hand by a man who had no sooner committed the theft than he uttered a loud cry, and remained inert and motionless. El−Râmi turned quietly round, and surveyed him.

"Well, my friend?" he inquired blandly—"What did you do that for?"

The fellow stared about him vaguely, but seemed unable to answer,—his arm was stiffly outstretched, and the

watch was clutched fast within his palm.

"You had better give that little piece of property back to me," went on El−Râmi, coldly smiling,—and, stepping close up to his assailant, he undid the closed fingers one by one, and, removing the watch, restored it to his own pocket. The thief's arm at the same moment fell limply at his side; but he remained where he was, trembling violently as though seized with a sudden ague−fit.

"You would find it an inconvenient thing to have about you, I assure you. Stolen goods are always more or less of a bore, I believe. You seem rather discomposed? Ah! you have had a little shock,—that's all. You've heard of torpedos, I dare say? Well, in this scientific age of ours, there are human torpedos going about; and I am one of them. It is necessary to be careful whom you touch nowadays,—it really is, you know! You will be better presently—take time!"

He spoke banteringly, observing the thief meanwhile with the most curious air, as though he were some peculiar specimen of beetle or frog. The wretched man's features worked convulsively, and he made a gesture of appeal:

"Yer won't 'ave me took up!" he muttered hoarsely. "I'm starvin'!"

"No, no!" said El−Râmi persuasively—"you are nothing of the sort. Do not tell lies, my friend; that is a great mistake—as great a mistake as thieving. Both things, as you practise them, will put you to no end of trouble,—and to avoid trouble is the chief aim of modern life. You are not starving—you are as plump as a rabbit,"—and, with a dexterous touch, he threw up the man's loose shirt−sleeve, and displayed the full, firm flesh of the strong and sinewy arm beneath. "You have had more meat in you to−day than I can manage in a week; you will do very well. You are a professional thief,—a sort of—lawyer, shall we say? Only, instead of protesting the right you have to live, politely by means of documents and red−tape, you assert it roughly by stealing a watch. It's very frank conduct,—but it is not civil; and, in the present state of ethics, it doesn't pay—it really doesn't. I'm afraid I'm boring you! You feel better? Then—good−evening!"

He was about to resume his walk, when the now−recovered rough took a hasty step towards him.

"I wanted to knock yer down!" he began.

"I know you did,"—returned El−Râmi composedly. "Well—would you like to try again?"

The man stared at him, half in amazement, half in fear.

"Yer see," he went on, "yer pulled out yer watch, and it was all jools and sparkles—"

"And it was a glittering temptation"—finished El−Râmi. "I see. I had no business to pull it out; I grant it; but, being pulled out, you had no business to want it. We were both wrong; let us both endeavour to be wiser in future. Good−night!"

"Well, I'm blowed if ye're not a rum un, and an orful un!" ejaculated the man, who had certainly received a fright, and was still nervous from the effects of it. "Blowed if he ain't the rummest card!"

But the "rummest card" heard none of these observations. He crossed the road, and went on his way serenely, taking up the thread of his interrupted musings as though nothing had occurred.

"Fools—fools all!" he murmured. "Thieves steal, murderers slay, labourers toil, and all men and women lust and live and die—to what purpose? For what progress? For what end? Destruction or new life? Heaven or hell? Wisdom or caprice? Kindness or cruelty? God or the Devil? Which? If I knew that I should be wise,—but **till** I know, I am but a fool also,—a fool among fools, fooled by a Fate whose secret I mean to discover and conquer—and defy!"

He paused,—and, drawing a long, deep breath, raised his eyes to the stars once more. His lips moved as though he repeated inwardly some vow or prayer, then he proceeded at a quicker pace, and stopped no more till he reached his destination, which was a small, quiet and unfashionable square off Sloane Street. Here he made his way to an unpretentious−looking little house, semi−detached, and one of a row of similar buildings; the only particularly distinctive mark about it being a heavy and massively−carved ancient oaken door, which opened easily at the turn of his latch−key, and closed after him without the slightest sound as he entered.

CHAPTER III.

A DIM red light burned in the narrow hall, just sufficient to enable him to see the wooden peg on which he was accustomed to hang his hat and overcoat,—and as soon as he had divested himself of his outdoor garb, he extinguished even that faint glimmer of radiance. Opening a side−door, he entered his own room—a picturesque apartment running from east to west, the full length of the house. From its appearance it had evidently once served as drawing−room and dining−room, with folding−doors between; but the folding−doors had been dispensed with, and the place they had occupied was now draped with heavy amber silk. This silk seemed to be of some peculiar and costly make, for it sparkled with iridescent gleams of silver like diamond−dust when El−Râmi turned on the electric burner, which, in the form of a large flower, depended from the ceiling by quaintly−worked silver chains, and was connected by a fine wire with a shaded reading−lamp on the table. There was not much of either beauty or value in the room,—yet without being at all luxurious, it suggested luxury. The few chairs were of the most ordinary make, all save one, which was of finely carved ebony, and was piled with silk cushions of amber and red,—the table was of plain painted deal, covered with a dark woollen cloth worked in and out with threads of gold,—there were a few geometrical instruments about,—a large pair of globes,—a rack on the wall stocked with weapons for the art of fence,—and one large book−case full of books. An ebony−cased pianette occupied one corner,—and on a small side−table stood a heavily−made oaken chest, brass−bound and double−locked. The furniture was completed by a plain camp−bedstead such as soldiers use, which at the present moment was partly folded up and almost hidden from view by a rough bearskin thrown carelessly across it.

El−Râmi sat down in the big ebony chair and looked at a pile of letters lying on his writing−table. They were from all sorts of persons,—princes, statesmen, diplomats, financiers, and artists in all the professions,—he recognised the handwriting on some of the envelopes, and his brows contracted in a frown as he tossed them aside still unopened.

"They must wait," he said half aloud. "Curious that it is impossible for a man to be original without attracting around him a set of unoriginal minds, as though he were a honey−pot and they the flies! Who would believe that I, poor in worldly goods, and living in more or less obscurity, should, without any wish of my own, be in touch with kings?—should know the last new policy of governments before it is made ripe for public declaration?—should hold the secrets of 'my lord' and 'my lady' apart from each other's cognisance, and be able to amuse myself with their little ridiculous matrimonial differences, as though they were puppets playing their parts for use at a marionette show! I do not ask these people to confide in me,—I do not want them to seek me out,—and yet the cry is, 'still they come!'—and the attributes of my own nature are such, that like a magnet, I attract, and so am never left in peace. Yet perhaps it is well it should be thus,—I need the external distraction,—otherwise my mind would be too much like a bent bow,—fixed on the one centre,—the Great Secret,—and its powers might fail me at the last. But no!—failure is impossible now. Steeled against love,—hate,—and all the merely earthly passions of mankind as I am,—I must succeed—and I will!"

He leaned his head on one hand, and seemed to suddenly concentrate his thoughts on one particular subject,—his eyes dilated and grew luridly brilliant as though sparks of fire burnt behind them. He had not sat thus for more than a couple of minutes, when the door opened gently, and a beautiful youth clad in a loose white tunic and vest of Eastern fashion, made his appearance, and standing silently on the threshold seemed to wait for some command.

"So, Féraz! you heard my summons?" said El−Râmi gently.

"I heard my brother speak,"—responded Féraz in a low melodious voice that had a singularly dreamy far−away tone within it—"Through a wall of cloud and silence his beloved accents fell like music on my ears;—he called me and I came."

And sighing lightly, he folded his arms cross−wise on his breast and stood erect and immovable, looking like some fine statue just endowed by magic with the flush of life. He resembled El−Râmi in features, but was fairer−skinned,—his eyes were softer and more femininely lovely,—his hair, black as night, clustered in thick curls over his brow, and his figure, straight as a young palm−tree, was a perfect model of strength united with grace. But just now he had a strangely absorbed air,—his eyes, though they were intently fixed on El−Râmi's face, looked like the eyes of a sleep−walker, so dreamy were they while wide−open,—and as he spoke he smiled

vaguely as one who hears delicious singing afar off.

El−Râmi studied him intently for a minute or two,—then, removing his gaze, pressed a small silver hand−bell at his side. It rang sharply out on the silence.

"Féraz!"

Féraz started,—rubbed his eyes,—glanced about him, and then sprang towards his brother with quite a new expression,—one of grace, eagerness and animation, that intensified his beauty and made him still more worthy the admiration of a painter or a sculptor.

"El−Râmi! at last! How late you are! I waited for you long—and then I slept. I am sorry! But you called me in the usual way, I suppose?—and I did not fail you? Ah no! I should come to you if I were dead!"

He dropped on one knee, and raised El−Râmi's hand caressingly to his lips.

"Where have you been all the evening?" he went on. "I have missed you greatly—the house is so silent."

El−Râmi touched his clustering curls tenderly.

"You could have made music in it with your lute and voice, Féraz, had you chosen," he said. "As for me, I went to see 'Hamlet.'"

"Oh, why did you go?" demanded Féraz impetuously. "**I** would not see it—no! not for worlds! Such poetry must needs be spoilt by men's mouthing of it,—it is better to read it, to think it, to feel it,—and so one actually **sees** it,—best."

"You talk like a poet,"—said El−Râmi indulgently. "You are not much more than a boy, and you think the thoughts of youth. Have you any supper ready for me?"

Féraz smiled and sprang up, left the room, and returned in a few minutes with a daintily arranged tray of refreshments, which he set before his brother with all the respect and humility of a well−trained domestic in attendance on his master.

"You have supped?" El−Râmi asked, as he poured out wine from the delicately shaped Italian flask beside him.

Féraz nodded.

"Yes. Zaroba supped with me. But she was cross to−night—she had nothing to say."

El−Râmi smiled. "That is unusual!"

Féraz went on. "There have been many people here,—they all wanted to see you. They have left their cards. Some of them asked me my name and who I was. I said I was your servant—but they would not believe me. There were great folks among them—they came in big carriages with prancing horses. Have you seen their names?"

"Not I."

"Ah, you are so indifferent," said Féraz gaily,—he had now quite lost his dreamy and abstracted look, and talked on in an eager boyish way that suited his years,—he was barely twenty. "You are so bent on great thoughts that you cannot see little things. But these dukes and earls who come to visit you do not consider themselves little,—not they!"

"Yet many of them are the least among little men," said El−Râmi with a touch of scorn in his mellow accents. "Dowered with great historic names which they almost despise, they do their best to drag the memory of their ancient lineage into dishonour by vulgar passions, low tastes, and a scorn as well as lack of true intelligence. Let us not talk of them. The English aristocracy was once a magnificent tree, but its broad boughs are fallen,—lopped off and turned into saleable timber,—and there is but a decaying stump of it left. And so Zaroba said nothing to you to−night?"

"Scarce a word. She was very sullen. She bade me tell you all was well,—that is her usual formula. I do not understand it;—what is it that should be well or ill? You never explain your mystery!"

He smiled, but there was a vivid curiosity in his fine eyes,—he looked as if he would have asked more had he dared to do so.

El−Râmi evaded his questioning glance. "Speak of yourself," he said. "Did you wander at all into your Dreamland today?"

"I was there when you called me," replied Féraz quickly. "I saw my home,—its trees and flowers,—I listened to the ripple of its fountains and streams. It is harvest−time there, do you know? I heard the reapers singing as they carried home the sheaves."

His brother surveyed him with a fixed and wondering scrutiny.

"How absolute you are in your faith!" he said half enviously. "You **think** it is your home,—but it is only an idea after all,—an idea, born of a vision."

"Does a mere visionary idea engender love and longing?" exclaimed Féraz impetuously. "Oh no, El−Râmi,—it cannot do so! I **know** the land I see so often in what you call a 'dream,'—its mountains are familiar to me,—its people are my people; yes!—I am remembered there, and so are you,—we dwelt there once,—we shall dwell there again. It is your home as well as mine,—that bright and far−off star where there is no death but only sleep,—why were we exiled from our happiness, El−Râmi? Can your wisdom tell?"

"I know nothing of what you say," returned El−Râmi brusquely. "As I told you, you talk like a poet,—harsher men than I, would add, like a madman. You imagine you were born or came into being in a different planet to this,—that you lived there,—that you were exiled from thence by some mysterious doom, and were condemned to pass into human existence here;—well, I repeat, Féraz—this is your own fancy,—the result of the strange double life you lead, which is not by my will or teaching. I believe only in what can be proved—and this that you tell me is beyond all proof."

"And yet," said Féraz meditatively,—"though I cannot reason it out, I am sure of what I feel. My 'dream' is more life−like than life itself,—and as for my beloved people yonder, I tell you I have heard them singing the harvest−home."

And with a quick soft step, he went to the piano, opened it and began to play. EI−Râmi leaned back in his chair mute and absorbed,—did ever common keyed instrument give forth such enchanting sounds? Was ever written music known that could, when performed, utter such divine and dulcet eloquence? There was nothing earthly in the tune,—it seemed to glide from under the player's fingers like a caress upon the air,—and an involuntary sigh broke from El−Râmi's lips as he listened. Féraz heard that sigh, and turned round smiling.

"Is there not something familiar in the strain?" he asked. "Do you not see them all, so fair and light and lithe of limb, coming over the fields homewards as the red Ring burns low in the western sky? Surely—surely you remember?"

A slight shudder shook El−Râmi's frame,—he pressed his hands over his eyes, and seemed to collect himself by a strong effort,—then walking over to the piano, he took his young brother's hands from the keys and held them for a moment against his breast.

"Keep your illusions"—he said in a low voice that trembled slightly. "Keep them,—and your faith,—together. It is for you to dream, and for me to prove. Mine is the hardest lot. There may be truth in your dreams,—there may be deception in my proofs—Heaven only knows! Were you not of my own blood, and dearer to me than most human things, I should, like every scientist worthy of the name, strive to break off your spiritual pinions and make of you a mere earth−grub even as most of us are made,—but I cannot do it,—I have not the heart to do it,—and if I had the heart"—he paused a moment,—then went on slowly—"I have not the power. Good−night!"

He left the room abruptly without another word or look,—and the beautiful young Féraz gazed after his retreating figure doubtfully and with something of wondering regret. Was it worth while, he thought, to be so wise, if wisdom made one at times so sad?—was it well to sacrifice Faith for Fact, when Faith was so warm and Fact so cold? Was it better to be a dreamer of things possible, or a worker−out of things positive? And how much was positive after all? and how much possible? He balanced the question lightly with himself,—it was like a discord in the music of his mind, and disturbed his peace. He soon dismissed the jarring thought, however, and closing the piano, glanced round the room to make sure that nothing more was required for his brother's service or comfort that night, and then he went away to resume his interrupted slumbers,—perchance to take up the chorus of his "people" singing in what he deemed his native star.

CHAPTER IV.

EL−RÂMI meanwhile slowly ascended the stairs to the first floor, and there on the narrow landing paused, listening. There was not a sound in the house,—the delicious music of the strange "harvest−song" had ceased, though to El−Râmi's ears there still seemed to be a throb of its melody in the air, like perfume left from the carrying by of flowers. And with this vague impression upon him he listened,—listened as it were to the deep silence; and as he stood in this attentive attitude, his eyes rested on a closed door opposite to him,—a door which might, if taken off its hinges and exhibited at some museum, have carried away the palm for perfection in panel−painting. It was so designed as to resemble a fine trellis−work, hung with pale clambering roses and purple passion−flowers,—on the upper half among the blossoms sat a meditative cupid, pressing a bud against his pouting lips, while below him, stretched in full−length desolation on a bent bough, his twin brother wept childishly over the piteous fate of a butterfly that lay dead in his curled pink palm. El−Râmi stared so long and persistently at the pretty picture that it might have been imagined he was looking at it for the first time and was absorbed in admiration, but truth to tell he scarcely saw it. His thoughts were penetrating beyond all painted semblances of beauty,—and,—as in the case of his young brother Féraz,—those thoughts were speedily answered. A key turned in the lock,—the door opened, and a tall old woman, bronze−skinned, black−eyed, withered, uncomely yet imposing of aspect, stood in the aperture.

"Enter, El−Râmi!" she said in a low yet harsh voice—"The hour is late,—but when did ever the lateness of hours change or deter your sovereign will! Yet truly as God liveth, it is hard that I should seldom be permitted to pass a night in peace!"

El−Râmi smiled indifferently, but made no reply, as it was useless to answer Zaroba. She was stone deaf, and therefore not in a condition to be argued with. She preceded him into a small ante−room, provided with no other furniture than a table and chair;—one entire side of the wall however was hung with a magnificent curtain of purple velvet bordered in gold. On the table were a slate and pencil, and these implements El−Râmi at once drew towards him.

"Has there been any change to−day?" he wrote.

Zaroba read the words.

"None," she replied.

"She has not moved?"

"Not a finger."

He paused, pencil in hand,—then he wrote—

"You are ill−tempered. You have your dark humour upon you."

Zaroba's eyes flashed, and she threw up her skinny hands with a wrathful gesture.

"Dark humour!" she cried in accents that were almost shrill—"Ay!—and if it be so, El−Râmi, what is my humour to you? Am I anything more to you than a cipher,—a mere slave? What have the thoughts of a foolish woman, bent with years and close to the dark gateways of the tomb, to do with one who deems himself all wisdom? What are the feelings of a wretched perishable piece of flesh and blood to a self−centred god and opponent of Nature like El−Râmi−Zarânos!" She laughed bitterly. "Pay no heed to me, great Master of the Fates invisible!—superb controller of the thoughts of men!—pay no heed to Zaroba's 'dark humours' as you call them. Zaroba has no wings to soar with—she is old and feeble, and aches at the heart with a burden of unshed tears,—she would fain have been content with this low earth whereon to tread in safety,—she would fain have been happy with common joys,—but these are debarred her, and her lot is like that of many a better woman,—to sit solitary among the ashes of dead days and know herself desolate!"

She dropped her arms as suddenly as she had raised them. El−Râmi surveyed her with a touch of derision, and wrote again on the slate.

"I thought you loved your charge?"

Zaroba read, and drew herself up proudly, looking almost as dignified as El−Râmi himself.

"Does one love a statue?" she demanded. "Shall I caress a picture? Shall I rain tears or kisses over the mere semblance of a life that does not live,—shall I fondle hands that never return my clasp? Love! Love is in my heart—yes! like a shut−up fire in a tomb,—but you hold the key, El−Râmi, and the flame dies for want of air."

He shrugged his shoulders, and putting the pencil aside, wrote no more. Moving towards the velvet curtain that draped the one side of the room he made an imperious sign. Zaroba, obeying the gesture mechanically and at once, drew a small pulley, by means of which the rich soft folds of stuff parted noiselessly asunder, displaying such a wonderful interior of luxury and loveliness as seemed for the moment almost unreal. The apartment opened to view was lofty and perfectly circular in shape, and was hung from top to bottom with silken hangings of royal purple embroidered all over with curious arabesque patterns in gold. The same rich material was caught up from the edges of the ceiling to the centre, like the drapery of a pavilion or tent, and was there festooned with golden fringes and tassels. From out the midst of this warm mass of glistening colour, swung a gold lamp which shed its light through amber−hued crystal,—while the floor below was carpeted with the thickest velvet pile, the design being pale purple pansies on a darker ground of the same almost neutral tint. A specimen of everything beautiful, rare and costly seemed to have found its way into this one room, from the exquisitely wrought ivory figure of a Psyche on her pedestal, to the tall vase of Venetian crystal which held lightly up to view, dozens of magnificent roses that seemed born of full midsummer, though as yet in the capricious English climate, it was scarcely spring. And all the beauty, all the grace, all the evidences of perfect taste, art, care and forethought, were gathered together round one centre,—one unseeing, unresponsive centre,—the figure of a sleeping girl. Pillowed on a raised couch such as might have served a queen for costliness, she lay fast bound in slumber,—a matchless piece of loveliness,—stirless as marble,—wondrous as the ideal of a poet's dream. Her delicate form was draped loosely in a robe of purest white, arranged so as to suggest rather than conceal its exquisite outline,—a silk coverlet was thrown lightly across her feet, and her head rested on cushions of the softest, snowiest satin. Her exceedingly small white hands were crossed upon her breast over a curious jewel,—a sort of giant ruby cut in the shape of a star, which scintillated with a thousand sparkles in the light, and coloured the under−tips of her fingers with a hue like wine, and her hair, which was of extraordinary length and beauty, almost clothed her body down to the knee, as with a mantle of shimmering gold. To say merely that she was lovely would scarcely describe her,—for the loveliness that is generally understood as such, was here so entirely surpassed and intensified that it would be difficult if not impossible to express its charm. Her face had the usual attributes of what might be deemed perfection,—that is, the lines were purely oval,—the features delicate, the skin most transparently fair, the lips a dewy red, and the fringes of the closed eyes were long, dark and delicately upcurled;—but this was not all. There was something else,—something quite undefinable, that gave a singular glow and radiance to the whole countenance, and suggested the burning of a light through alabaster,—a creeping of some subtle fire through the veins which made the fair body seem the mere reflection of some greater fairness within. If those eyes were to open, one thought, how wonderful their lustre must needs be!—if that perfect figure rose up and moved, what a harmony would walk the world in maiden shape!—and yet,—watching that hushed repose, that scarcely perceptible breathing, it seemed more than certain that she would never rise,—never tread earthly soil in common with earth's creatures,—never be more than what she seemed,—a human flower, gathered and set apart—for whom? For God's love? or Man's pleasure? Either, neither, or both?

El−Râmi entered the rich apartment followed by Zaroba, and stood by the couch for some minutes in silence. Whatever his thoughts were, his face gave no clue to them,—his features being as impassive as though cast in bronze. Zaroba watched him curiously, her wrinkled visage expressive of some strongly−suppressed passion. The sleeping girl stirred and smiled in her sleep,—a smile that brightened her countenance as much as if a sudden glory had circled it with a halo.

"Ay, she lives for you!" said Zaroba. "And she grows fairer every day. She is the sun, and you the snow. But the snow is bound to melt in due season,—and even you, El−Râmi−Zarânos, will hardly baffle the laws of Nature!"

El−Râmi turned upon her with a fierce mute gesture that had something of the terrible in it,—she shrank from the cold glance of his intense eyes, and in obedience to an imperative wave of his hand moved away to a further corner of the room, where, crouching down upon the floor, she took up a quaint implement of work, a carved triangular frame of ebony, with which she busied herself, drawing glittering threads in and out of it with marvellous speed and dexterity. She made a weird picture there, squatted on the ground in her yellow cotton draperies, her rough gray hair gleaming like spun silk in the light, and the shining threadwork in her withered hands. El−Râmi looked at her sitting thus, and was suddenly moved with compassion—she was old and sad,—poor Zaroba! He went up to her where she crouched, and stood above her, his ardent fiery eyes seeming to

gather all their wonderful lustre into one long, earnest and pitiful regard. Her work fell from her hands, and as she met that burning gaze, a vague smile parted her lips,—her frowning features smoothed themselves into an expression of mingled placidity and peace.

"Desolate Zaroba!" said El−Râmi slowly lifting his hands. "Widowed and solitary soul! Deaf to the outer noises of the world, let the ears of thy spirit be open to my voice—and hear thou all the music of the past! Lo, the bygone years return to thee and picture themselves afresh upon thy tired brain!—again thou dost listen to the voices of thy children at play,—the wild Arabian desert spreads out before thee in the sun like a sea of gold,—the tall palms lift themselves against the burning sky—the tent is pitched by the cool spring of fresh water,—and thy savage mate, wearied out with long travel, sleeps, pillowed on thy breast. Thou art young again, Zaroba!—young, fair and beloved!—be happy so! Dream and rest!"

As he spoke he took the aged woman's unresisting hands and laid her gently, gently, by gradual degrees down in a recumbent posture, and placing a cushion under her head watched her for a few seconds.

"By Heaven!" he muttered, as he heard her regular breathing and noted the perfectly composed expression of her face. "Are dreams after all the only certain joys of life? A poet's fancies,—a painter's visions—the cloud−castles of a boy's imaginings—all dreams!—and only such dreamers can be called happy. Neither Fate nor Fortune can destroy their pleasure,—they make sport of kings and hold great nations as the merest toys of thought—oh sublime audacity of Vision! Would I could dream so!—or rather, would I could prove my dreams not dreams at all, but the reflections of the absolute Real! 'Hamlet' again!

"To die—to sleep—
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay! there's the rub!"

Imagine it!—to die and **dream** of Heaven—or Hell,—and all the while if there should be no reality in either!"

With one more glance at the now soundly slumbering Zaroba, he went back to the couch, and gazed long and earnestly at the exquisite maiden there reclined,—then bending over her, he took her small fair left hand in his own, pressing his fingers hard round the delicate wrist.

"Lilith!—Lilith!" he said in low, yet commanding accents. "Lilith!—Speak to me! I am here!"

CHAPTER V.

DEEP silence followed his invocation,—a silence he seemed to expect and be prepared for. Looking at a silver timepiece on a bracket above the couch, he mentally counted slowly a hundred beats,—then pressing the fragile wrist he held still more firmly between his fingers, he touched with his other hand the girl's brow, just above her closed eyes. A faint quiver ran through the delicate body,—he quickly drew back and spoke again.

"Lilith! Where are you?"

The sweet lips parted, and a voice soft as whispered music responded—

"I am here!"

"Is all well with you?"

"All is well!"

And a smile irradiated the fair face with such a light as to suggest that the eyes must have opened,—but no!—they were fast shut.

El−Râmi resumed his strange interrogation.

"Lilith! What do you see?"

There was a moment's pause,—then came the slow response—

"Many things,—things beautiful and wonderful. But you are not among them. I hear your voice and I obey it, but I cannot see you—I have never seen you."

El−Râmi sighed, and pressed more closely the soft small hand within his own.

"Where have you been?"

"Where my pleasure led me"—came the answer in a sleepy yet joyous tone—"My pleasure and—your will."

El−Râmi started, but immediately controlled himself, for Lilith stirred and threw her other arm indolently behind her head, leaving the great ruby on her breast flashingly exposed to view.

"Away, away, far, far away!" she said, and her accents sounded like subdued singing—"Beyond,—in those regions whither I was sent—beyond—" her voice stopped and trailed off into drowsy murmurings—"beyond—Sirius—I saw—"

She ceased, and smiled—some happy thought seemed to have rendered her mute.

El−Râmi waited a moment, then took up her broken speech.

"Far beyond Sirius you saw—what?"

Moving, she pillowed her cheek upon her hand, and turned more fully round towards him.

"I saw a bright new world"—she said, now speaking quite clearly and connectedly—"A royal world of worlds; an undiscovered Star. There were giant oceans in it,—the noise of many waters was heard throughout the land,—and there were great cities marvellously built upon the sea. I saw their pinnacles of white and gold−spires of coral, and gates that were studded with pearl,—flags waved and music sounded, and two great Suns gave double light from heaven. I saw many thousands of people—they were beautiful and happy—they sang and danced and gave thanks in the everlasting sunshine, and knelt in crowds upon their wide and fruitful fields to thank the Giver of life immortal."

"Life immortal!" repeated El−Râmi,—"Do not these people die, even as we?"

A pained look, as of wonder or regret, knitted the girl's fair brows.

"There is no death—neither here nor there"—she said steadily—"I have told you this so often, yet you will not believe. Always you bid me seek for death,—I have looked, but cannot find it."

She sighed, and El−Râmi echoed the sigh.

"I wish"—and her accents sounded plaintively—"I wish that I could see you! There is some cloud between us. I hear your voice and I obey it, but I cannot see who it is that calls me."

El−Râmi paid no heed to these dove−like murmurings,—moreover, he seemed to have no eyes for the wondrous beauty of the creature who lay thus tranced and in his power,—set on his one object, the attainment of a supernatural knowledge, he looked as pitiless and impervious to all charm as any Grand Inquisitor of old Spain.

"Speak of yourself and not of me"—he said authoritatively,—"How can you say there is no death?"

"I speak truth. There is none."

"Not even here?"

"Not anywhere."

"O daughter of vision, where are the eyes of your spirit!" demanded El−Râmi angrily—"Search again and see! Why should all Nature arm itself against Death if there be no death?"

"You are harsh,"—said Lilith sorrowfully —"Should I tell you what is not true? If I would, I cannot. There is no death—there is only change. Beyond Sirius, they sleep."

El−Râmi waited; but she had paused again.

"Go on"—he said—"They sleep—why and when?"

"When they are weary"—responded Lilith. "When all is done that they can do, and when they need rest, they sleep, and in their sleep they change;—the change is—

She ceased.

"The change is death,"—said El−Râmi positively,—"for death is everywhere."

"Not so!" replied Lilith quickly, and in a ringing tone of clarion−like sweetness. "The change is life,—for Life is everywhere!"

There ensued a silence. The girl turned away, and bringing her hand slowly down from behind her head, laid it again upon her breast over the burning ruby gem. El−Râmi bent above her closely.

"You are dreaming, Lilith,"—he said as though he would force her to own something against her will. "You speak unwisely and at random."

Still silence.

"Lilith!—Lilith!" he called.

No answer;—only the lovely tints of her complexion, the smile on her lips and the tranquil heaving of her rounded bosom indicated that she lived.

"Gone!" and El−Râmi's brow clouded; he laid back the little hand he held in its former position and looked at the girl long and steadily—"And so firm in her assertion!—as foolish an assertion as any of the fancies of Féraz. No death?—Nay—as well say no life. She has not fathomed the secret of our passing hence; no, not though her flight has outreached the realm of Sirius.

> "'But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscovered country from whose bourne
> No traveller returns, puzzles the will.'

Ay, puzzles the will and confounds it! But must I be baffled then?—or is it my own fault that **I cannot believe?** Is it truly her spirit that speaks to me?—or is it my own brain acting upon hers in a state of trance? If it be the latter, why should she declare things that I never dream of, and which my reason does not accept as possible? And if it is indeed her Soul, or the ethereal Essence of her that thus soars at periodic intervals of liberty into the Unseen, how is it that she never comprehends Death or Pain? Is her vision limited only to behold harmonious systems moving to a sound of joy?"

And seized by a sudden resolution, he caught both the hands of the tranced girl and held them in his own, the while he fixed his eyes upon her quiet face with a glance that seemed to shoot forth flame.

"Lilith! Lilith! By the force of my will and mastery over thy life, I bid thee return to me! O flitting spirit, ever bent on errands of pleasure, reveal to me the secrets of pain! Come back, Lilith! I call thee—come!"

A violent shudder shook the beautiful reposeful figure,—the smile faded from her lips, and she heaved a profound sigh.

"I am here!"

"Listen to my bidding!" said El−Râmi, in measured accents that sounded almost cruel. "As you have soared to heights ineffable, even so descend to lowest depths of desolation! Understand and seek out sorrow,—pierce to the root of suffering,−explain the cause of unavailing agony! These things exist. Here in this planet of which you know nothing save my voice,—here, if nowhere else in the wide Universe, we gain our bread with bitterness and drink our wine with tears. Solve me the mystery of Pain,—of Injustice,—of an innocent child's anguish on its death−bed,—ay! though you tell me there is no death!—of a good man's ruin,—of an evil woman's triumph,—of despair—of self−slaughter,—of all the horrors upon horrors piled, which make up this world's present life. Listen,

O too ecstatic and believing Spirit!—we have a legend here that a God lives,—a wise all−loving God,—and He, this wise and loving one, has out of His great bounty invented for the torture of his creatures,—HELL! Find out this Hell, Lilith!—Prove it!—bring the plan of its existence back to me. Go,—bring me news of devils,—and suffer, if spirits **can** suffer, in the unmitigated sufferings of others! Take my command and go hence,—find out God's Hell!—so shall we afterwards know the worth of Heaven!"

He spoke rapidly,—impetuously,—passionately;—and now he allowed the girl's hands to fall suddenly from his clasp. She moaned a little,—and instead of folding them one over the other as before, raised them palm to palm in an attitude of prayer. The colour faded entirely from her face,—but an expression of the calmest, grandest wisdom, serenity and compassion came over her features as of a saint prepared for martyrdom. Her breathing grew fainter and fainter till it was scarcely perceptible,—and her lips parted in a short sobbing sigh,—then they moved and whispered something. El−Râmi stooped over her more closely.

"What is it?" he asked eagerly—"what did you say?"

"Nothing ... only ... farewell!" and the faint tone stirred the silence like the last sad echo of a song—"And yet ... once more ... farewell!"

He drew back, and observed her intently. She now looked like a recumbent statue, with those upraised hands of hers so white and small and delicate,—and El−Râmi remembered that he must keep the machine of the Body living, if he desired to receive through its medium the messages of the Spirit. Taking a small phial from his breast, together with the necessary surgeon's instrument used for such purposes, he pricked the rounded arm nearest to him, and carefully injected into the veins a small quantity of a strange sparkling fluid which gave out a curiously sweet and pungent odour;—as he did this, the lifted hands fell gently into their original position, crossed over the ruby star. The breathing grew steadier and lighter,—the lips took fresh colour,—and El−Râmi watched the effect with absorbed interest and attention.

"One might surely preserve her body so for ever," he mused half aloud. "The tissues renewed,—the blood re−organized,—the whole system completely nourished with absolute purity; and not a morsel of what is considered food, which contains so much organic mischief, allowed to enter that exquisitely beautiful mechanism, which exhales all waste upon the air through the pores of the skin as naturally as a flower exhales perfume through its leaves. A wonderful discovery!—if all men knew it, would not they deem themselves truly immortal, even here? But the trial is not over yet,—the experiment is not perfect. Six years has she lived thus, but who can say whether indeed Death has no power over her? In those six years she has changed,—she has grown from childhood to womanhood,—does not change imply age?—and age suggest death, in spite of all science? O inexorable Death!—I will pluck its secret out if I die in the effort!"

He turned away from the couch,—then seemed struck by a new idea.

"**If** I die, did I say? But **can** I die? Is her Spirit right? Is my reasoning wrong? Is there no pause anywhere?—no cessation of thought?—no end to the insatiability of ambition? Must we plan and work and live—FOR EVER?"

A shudder ran through him,—the notion of his own perpetuity appalled him. Passing a long mirror framed in antique silver, he caught sight of himself in it,—his dark handsome face, rendered darker by the contrasting whiteness of his hair,—his full black eyes,−his fine but disdainful mouth,—all looked back at him with the scornful reflex of his own scornful regard.

He laughed a little bitterly.

"There you are, El−Râmi Zarânos!" he murmured half aloud. "Scoffer and scientist,—master of a few common magnetic secrets such as the priests of ancient Egypt made sport of, though in these modern days of 'culture,' they are sufficient to make most men your tools! What now? Is there no rest for the inner calculations of your mind? Plan and work and live for ever? Well, why not? Could I fathom the secrets of a thousand universes, would that suffice me? No! I should seek for the solving of a thousand more!"

He gave a parting glance round the room,—at the fair tranced form on the couch, at the placid Zaroba slumbering in a corner, at the whole effect of the sumptuous apartment, with its purple and gold, its roses, its crystal and ivory adornments,—then he passed out, drawing to the velvet curtains noiselessly behind him. In the small anteroom, he took up the slate and wrote upon it—

"I shall not return hither for forty−eight hours. During this interval admit as much full daylight as possible. Observe the strictest silence, and do not touch her.

"EL−RÂMI."

Having thus set down his instructions he descended the stairs to his own room, where, extinguishing the electric light, he threw himself on his hard camp−bedstead and was soon sound asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

"*I DO* not believe in a future state. I am very much distressed about it."

The speaker was a stoutish, able−bodied individual in clerical dress, with rather a handsome face and an easy agreeable manner. He addressed himself to El−Râmi, who, seated at his writing−table, observed him with something of a satirical air.

"You wrote me this letter?" queried El−Râmi, selecting one from a heap beside him. The clergyman bent forward to look, and recognising his own handwriting, smiled a bland assent.

"You are the Rev. Francis Anstruther, Vicar of Laneck,—a great favourite with the Bishop of your diocese, I understand?"

The gentleman bowed blandly again,— then assumed a meek and chastened expression.

"That is, I **was** a favourite of the Bishop's at one time"—he murmured regretfully−"and I suppose I am now, only I fear that this matter of conscience—"

"Oh, it **is** a matter of conscience?" said El−Râmi slowly—"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure of that!" and the Reverend Francis Anstruther sighed profoundly.

"'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all—'"

"I beg your pardon?" and the clergyman opened his eyes a little.

"Nay, I beg yours!—I was quoting 'Hamlet.'"

"Oh!"

There was a silence. El−Râmi bent his dark flashing eyes on his visitor, who seemed a little confused by the close scrutiny. It was the morning after the circumstances narrated in the previous chapter,—the clock marked ten minutes to noon,—the weather was brilliant and sunshiny, and the temperature warm for the uncertain English month of May. El−Râmi rose suddenly and threw open the window nearest him, as if he found the air oppressive.

"Why did you seek me out?" he demanded, turning towards the reverend gentleman once more.

"Well, it was really the merest accident—"

"It always is!" said El−Râmi with a slight dubious smile.

"I was at Lady Melthorpe's the other day, and I told her my difficulty. She spoke of you, and said she felt certain you would be able to clear up my doubts—"

"Not at all. I am too busy clearing up my own," said El−Râmi brusquely.

The clergyman looked surprised.

"Dear me!—I thought, from what her ladyship said, that you were scientifically certain of—"

"Of what?" interrupted El−Râmi—"Of myself? Nothing more uncertain in the world than my own humour, I assure you! Of others? I am not a student of human caprice. Of life?—of death? Neither. I am simply trying to prove the existence of a 'something after death'—but I am certain of nothing, and I believe in nothing, unless proved."

"But," said Mr. Anstruther anxiously—"you will, I hope, allow me to explain that you leave a very different impression on the minds of those to whom you speak, than the one you now suggest. Lady Melthorpe, for instance,—"

"Lady Melthorpe believes what it pleases her to believe,"—said El−Râmi quietly—"All pretty, sensitive, imaginative women do. That accounts for the immense success of Roman Catholicism with women. It is a graceful, pleasing, comforting religion,—moreover it is really becoming to a woman,—she looks charming with a rosary in her hand, or a quaint old missal,—and she knows it. Lady Melthorpe is a believer in ideals,—well, there is no harm in ideals,—long may she be able to indulge in them."

"But Lady Melthorpe declares that you are able to tell the past and the future," persisted the clergyman—"And that you can also read the present;—if that is so, you must surely possess visionary power?"

El−Râmi looked at him stedfastly.

"I can tell you the past;"—he said—"And I can read your present;—and from the two portions of your life I can calculate the last addition, the Future,—but my calculation may be wrong. I mean wrong as regards coming events;—past and present I can never be mistaken in, because there exists a natural law, by which you are bound to reveal yourself to me."

The Reverend Francis Anstruther moved uneasily in his chair, but managed to convey into his countenance the proper expression of politely incredulous astonishment.

"This natural law," went on El−Râmi, laying one hand on the celestial globe as he spoke, "has been in existence ever since man's formation, but we are only just now beginning to discover it, or rather re−discover it, since it was tolerably well−known to the priests of ancient Egypt. You see this sphere;"—and he moved the celestial globe round slowly—"It represents the pattern of the heavens according to our solar system. Now a Persian poet of old time, declared in at few wild verses, that solar systems taken in a mass, could be considered the brain of heaven, the stars being the thinking, moving molecules of that brain. A sweeping idea,—what your line−and−pattern critics would call 'far−fetched'—but it will serve me just now for an illustration of my meaning. Taking this 'brain of heaven' by way of simile then, it is evident we—we human pigmies,—are, notwithstanding our ridiculous littleness and inferiority, able to penetrate correctly enough into some of the mysteries of that star−teeming intelligence,—we can even take patterns of its shifting molecules"—and again he touched the globe beside him,—"we can watch its modes of thought—and calculate when certain planets will rise and set,—and when we cannot see its action, we can get its vibrations of light, to the marvellous extent of being able to photograph the moon of Neptune, which remains invisible to the eye even with the assistance of a telescope. You wonder what all this tends to?—well,—I speak of vibrations of light from the brain of heaven,—vibrations which we know are existent; and which we prove by means of photography; and because we **see** the results in black and white, we believe in them. But there are other vibrations in the Universe, which cannot be photographed,—the vibrations of the human brain, which like those emanating from the 'brain of heaven' are full of light and fire, and convey distinct impressions or patterns of thought. People speak of 'thought−transference' from one subject to another as if it were a remarkable coincidence,—whereas you cannot put a stop to the transference of thought,—it is in the very air, like the germs of disease or health,—and nothing can do away with it."

"I do not exactly understand"—murmured the clergyman with some bewilderment.

"Ah, you want a practical demonstration of what seems a merely abstract theory? Nothing easier!"—and moving again to the table he sat down, fixing his dark eyes keenly on his visitor—"As the stars pattern heaven in various shapes, like the constellation Lyra, or Orion, so you have patterned your brain with pictures or photographs of your past and your present. **All** your past, every scene of it, is impressed in the curious little brain−particles that lie in their various cells,— you have forgotten some incidents, but they would all come back to you if you were drowning or being hung;—because suffocation or strangulation would force up every infinitesimal atom of brain−matter into extraordinary prominence for the moment. Naturally your present existence is the most vivid picture with you, therefore perhaps you would like me to begin with that?"

"Begin?—how?" asked Mr. Anstruther, still in amazement.

"Why,—let me take the impression of your brain upon my own. It is quite simple, and quite scientific. Consider yourself the photographic negative, and me the sensitive paper to receive the impression! I may offer you a blurred picture, but I do not think it likely. Only if you wish to hide anything from me I would advise you not to try the experiment."

"Really, sir,—this is very extraordinary!—I am at a loss to comprehend—"

"Oh, I will make it quite plain to you—" said El−Râmi with a slight smile—"There is no witchcraft in it—no trickery,—nothing but the commonest A B C science. Will you try?—or would you prefer to leave the matter alone? My demonstration will not convince you of a 'future state,' which was the subject you first spoke to me about,—it will only prove to you the physiological phenomena surrounding your present constitution and condition."

The Reverend Francis Anstruther hesitated. He was a little startled by the cold and convincing manner with which El−Râmi spoke,—at the same time he did not believe in his words, and his own incredulity inclined him to see the "experiment," whatever it was. It would be all hocus−pocus, of course,—this Oriental fellow could know nothing about him,—he had never seen him before, and must therefore be totally ignorant of his private life and affairs. Considering this for a moment, he looked up and smiled.

"I shall be most interested and delighted,"—he said—"to make the trial you suggest. I am really curious. As for the present picture or photograph on my brain, I think it will only show you my perplexity as to my position with the Bishop in my wavering state of mind—"

"Or conscience—" suggested El−Râmi—"You said it was a matter of conscience."

"Quite so—quite so! And conscience is the most powerful motor of a man's actions Mr.—Mr. El−Râmi! It is indeed the voice of God!"

"That depends on what it says, and how we hear it—" said El−Râmi rather dryly—"Now if we are to make this 'demonstration,' will you put your left hand here, in my left hand? So,—your left palm must press closely upon my left palm,—yes—that will do. Observe the position, please;—you see that my left fingers rest on your left wrist, and are therefore directly touching the nerves and arteries running through your heart from your brain. By this, you are, to use my former simile, pressing me, the sensitive paper, to your photographic negative—and I make no doubt we shall get a fair impression. But to prevent any interruption to the brainwave rushing from you to me, we will add this little trifle," and he dexterously slipped a steel band over his hand and that of his visitor as they rested thus together on the table, and snapt it to,—"a sort of handcuff, as you perceive. It has nothing in the world to do with our experiment. It is simply placed there to prevent your moving your hand away from mine, which would be your natural impulse if I should happen to say anything disagreeably true. And to do so, would of course cut the ethereal thread of contact between us. Now, are you ready?"

The clergyman grew a shade paler. El−Râmi seemed so very sure of the result of this singular trial, that it was a little bit disagreeable. But having consented to the experiment, he felt he was compelled to go through with it, so he bowed a nervous assent. Whereupon El−Râmi closed his brilliant eyes, and sat for one or two minutes silent and immovable. A curious fidgetiness began to trouble the Reverend Francis Anstruther,—he tried to think of something ridiculous, something altogether apart from himself, but in vain,—his own personality, his own life, his own secret aims seemed all to weigh upon him like a sudden incubus. Presently tingling sensations pricked his arm as with burning needles,—the hand that was fettered to that of El−Râmi felt as hot as though it were being held to a fire. All at once El−Râmi spoke in a low tone, without opening his eyes—

"The shadow−impression of a woman. Brown−haired, dark−eyed,—of a full, luscious beauty, and a violent, unbridled, ill−balanced will. Mindless, but physically attractive. She dominates your thought."

A quiver ran through the clergyman's frame,—if he could only have snatched away his hand he would have done it then.

"She is not your wife—" went on El−Râmi—"she is the wife of your wealthiest neighbour. You have a wife,—an invalid,—you have also eight children,—but these are not prominent in the picture at present. The woman with the dark eyes and hair is the chief figure. Your plans are made for her—"

He paused, and again the wretched Mr. Anstruther shuddered.

"Wait—wait!" exclaimed El−Râmi suddenly in a tone of animation—"Now it comes clearly. You have decided to leave the Church, not because you do not believe in a future state,—for this you never have believed at any time—but because you wish to rid yourself of all moral and religious responsibility. Your scheme is perfectly distinct. You will make out a 'case of conscience' to your authorities, and resign your living,—you will then desert your wife and children,—you will leave your country in the company of the woman whose secret lover you are—"

"Stop!" cried the Reverend Mr. Anstruther, savagely endeavouring to wrench away his hand from the binding fetter which held it remorselessly to the hand of El−Râmi—"Stop! You are telling me a pack of lies!"

El−Râmi opened his great flashing orbs and surveyed him first in surprise, then with a deep unutterable contempt. Unclasping the steel band that bound their two hands together, he flung it by, and rose to his feet.

"Lies?" he echoed indignantly. "Your whole life is a lie, and both Nature and Science are bound to give the reflex of it. What! would you play a double part with the Eternal Forces and think to succeed in such desperate fooling? Do you imagine you can deceive supreme Omniscience, which holds every star and every infinitesimal atom of life in a network of such instant vibrating consciousness and contact, that in terrible truth there are and can be 'no secrets hid'? You may if you like act out the wretched comedy of feigning to deceive **your** God—the God of the Churches,—but beware of trifling with the **real** God,—the absolute EGO SUM of the Universe."

His voice rang out passionately upon the stillness,—the clergyman had also risen from his chair, and stood, nervously fumbling with his gloves, not venturing to raise his eyes.

"I have told you the truth of yourself,"—continued El−Râmi more quietly—"You know I have. Why then do you accuse me of telling you lies? Why did you seek me out at all if you wished to conceal yourself and your intentions from me? Can you deny the testimony of your own brain reflected on mine? Come, confess! be honest for once,—**do** you deny it?"

"I deny everything;"—replied the clergyman,—but his accents were husky and indistinct.

"So be it!"—and El−Râmi gave a short laugh of scorn. "Your 'case of conscience' is evidently very pressing! Go to your Bishop—and tell him you cannot believe in a future state,—I certainly cannot help you to prove **that** mystery. Besides, you would rather there were no future state,—a 'something after death' must needs be an unpleasant point of meditation for such as you. Oh yes!—you will get your freedom;—you will get all you are scheming for, and you will be quite a notorious person for awhile on account of the delicacy of your sense of honour and the rectitude of your principles. Exactly!—and then your final *coup*,—your running away with your neighbour's wife will make you notorious again—in quite another sort of fashion. Ah!—every man is bound to weave the threads of his own destiny, and you are weaving yours;—do not be surprised if you find you have made of them a net wherein to become hopelessly caught, tied and strangled. It is no doubt unpleasant for you to hear these things,—what a pity you came to me!"

The Reverend Francis Anstruther buttoned his glove carefully.

"Oh, I do not regret it," he said. "Any other man might perhaps feel himself insulted, but—"

"But you are too much of a 'Christian' to take offence—yes, I dare say!" interposed El−Râmi satirically,—"I thank you for your amiable forbearance! Allow me to close this interview"—and he was about to ring the bell, when his visitor said hastily and with an effort at appearing unconcerned—

"I suppose I may rely on your secrecy respecting what has passed?"

"Secrecy?" and El−Râmi raised his black eyebrows disdainfully—"What you call secrecy I know not. But if you mean that I shall speak of you and your affairs,—why, make yourself quite easy on that score. I shall not even think of you after you have left this room. Do not attach too much importance to yourself, reverend sir,—true, your name will soon be mentioned in the newspapers, but this should not excite you to an undue vanity. As for me, I have other things to occupy me, and clerical 'cases of conscience' such as yours, fail to attract either my wonder or admiration!" Here he touched the bell.—"Féraz!" this, as his young brother instantly appeared—"The door!"

The Reverend Francis Anstruther took up his hat, looked into it, glanced nervously round at the picturesque form of the silent Féraz, then with a sudden access of courage, looked at El−Râmi. That handsome Oriental's fiery eyes were fixed upon him,—the superb head, the dignified figure, the stately manner, all combined to make him feel uncomfortable and awkward; but he forced a faint smile—it was evident he must say something.

"You are a very remarkable man, Mr. ... El−Râmi"—he stammered.... "It has been a most interesting ... and ... instructive morning!"

El−Râmi made no response other than a slight frigid bow.

The clergyman again peered into the depths of his hat.

"I will not go so far as to say you were correct in anything you said"—he went on—"but there was a little truth in some of your allusions,—they really applied, or might be made to apply to past events,—by−gone circumstances ... you understand? .."

El−Râmi took one step towards him.

"No more lies in Heaven's name!" he said in a stern whisper. "The air is poisoned enough for to−day. Go!"

Such a terrible earnestness marked his face and voice that the Reverend Francis retreated abruptly in alarm, and stumbling out of the room hastily, soon found himself in the open street with the great oaken door of El−Râmi's house shut upon him. He paused a moment, glanced at the sky, then at the pavement, shook his head, drew a long breath, and seemed on the verge of hesitation; then he looked at his watch,—smiled a bland smile, and hailing a cab, was driven to lunch at the Criterion, where a handsome woman with dark hair and eyes, met him with mingled flattery and upbraiding, and gave herself pouting and capricious airs of offence, because he had kept her ten minutes waiting.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT afternoon El−Râmi prepared to go out as was his usual custom, immediately after the mid−day meal, which was served to him by Féraz, who stood behind his chair like a slave all the time he ate and drank, attending to his needs with the utmost devotion and assiduity. Féraz indeed was his brother's only domestic,—Zaroba's duties being entirely confined to the mysterious apartments upstairs and their still more mysterious occupant. El−Râmi was in a taciturn mood,—the visit of the Reverend Francis Anstruther seemed to have put him out, and he scarcely spoke, save in monosyllables. Before leaving the house, however, his humour suddenly softened, and noting the wistful and timorous gaze with which Féraz regarded him, he laughed outright.

"You are very patient with me, Féraz!" he said—"And I know I am as sullen as a bear."

"You think too much;"—replied Féraz gently—"And you work too hard."

"Both thought and labour are necessary," said El−Râmi—"You would not have me live a life of merely bovine repose?"

Féraz gave a deprecating gesture.

"Nay—but surely rest is needful. To be happy, God Himself must sometimes sleep."

"You think so?" and El−Râmi smiled—"Then it must be during His hours of repose and oblivion that the business of life goes wrong, and Darkness and the Spirit of Confusion walk abroad. The Creator should never sleep."

"Why not, if He has dreams?" asked Féraz—"For if Eternal Thought becomes Substance, so a God's Dream may become Life."

"Poetic as usual, my Féraz"—replied his brother—"and yet perhaps you are not so far wrong in your ideas. That Thought becomes substance, even with man's limited powers, is true enough;—the thought of a perfect, form grows up embodied in the weight and Substance of marble, with the sculptor,—the vague fancies of a poet, being set in ink on paper, become Substance in book−shape, solid enough to pass from one hand to the other;—even so may a God's mere Thought of a world create a Planet. It is my own impression that thoughts, like atoms, are imperishable, and that even dreams, being forms of thought, never die. But I must not stay here talking,—adieu! Do not sit up for me to−night—I shall not return,—I am going down to the coast."

"To Ilfracombe?" questioned Féraz—"So long a journey, and all to see that poor mad soul?"

El−Râmi looked at him stedfastly.

"No more 'mad,' Féraz, than you are with your notions about your native star! Why should a scientist who amuses himself with the reflections on a Disc of magnetic crystal be deemed 'mad'? Fifty years ago the electric inventions of Edison would have been called 'impossible,'—and he, the in− ventor, considered hopelessly insane. But now we know these seeming 'miracles' are facts, we cease to wonder at them. And my poor friend with his Disc is a harmless creature;—his 'craze,' if it be a craze, is as innocent as yours."

"But I have no craze"—said Féraz composedly,—"all that I know and see, lives in my brain like music,—and though I remember it perfectly, I trouble no one with the story of my past."

"And he troubles no one with what he deems may be the story of the future"—said El−Râmi—"Call no one 'mad' because he happens to have a new idea—for time may prove such 'madness' a merely perfected method of reason. I must hasten, or I shall lose my train."

"If it is the 2.40 from Waterloo, you have time," said Féraz—"It is not yet two o'clock. Do you leave any message for Zaroba?"

"None. She has my orders."

Féraz looked full at his brother, and a warm flush coloured his handsome face.

"Shall I never be worthy of your con− fidence?" he asked in a low voice—"Can you never trust **me** with your great secret, as well as Zaroba?"

El−Râmi frowned darkly.

"Again, this vulgar vice of curiosity? I thought you were exempt from it by this time."

"Nay, but hear me, El−Râmi"—said Féraz eagerly, distressed at the anger in his brother's eyes—"It is not curiosity,—it is something else,—something that I can hardly explain, except.... Oh, you will only laugh at me if I tell you ... but yet—"

"But what?" demanded El−Râmi sternly.

"It is as if a voice called me,"—answered Féraz dreamily—"a voice from those upper chambers, which you keep closed, and of which only Zaroba has the care—a voice that asks for freedom and for peace. It is such a sorrowful voice,—but sweet,—more sweet than any singing. True, I hear it but seldom,—only when I do, it haunts me for hours and hours. I know you are at some great work up there,—but can you make such voices ring from a merely scientific laboratory? Now you are angered!"

His large soft brilliant eyes rested appealingly upon his brother, whose features had grown pale and rigid.

"Angered!" he echoed, speaking as it seemed with some effort,—"Am I ever angered at your—your fancies? For fancies they are, Féraz,—the voice you hear is like the imagined home in that distant star you speak of,—an image and an echo on your brain—no more. My 'great work,' as you call it, would have no interest for you;—it is nothing but a test−experiment, which, if it fails, then I fail with it, and am no more El−Râmi−Zarânos, but the merest fool that ever clamoured for the moon." He said this more to himself than to his brother, and seemed for the moment to have forgotten where he was,—till suddenly rousing himself with a start, he forced a smile.

"Farewell for the present, gentle visionary!" he said kindly,—"You are happier with your dreams than I with my facts,—do not seek out sorrow for yourself by rash and idle questioning."

With a parting nod he went out, and Féraz, closing the door after him, remained in the hall for a few moments in a sort of vague reverie. How silent the house seemed, he thought with a half−sigh. The very atmosphere of it was depressing, and even his favourite occupation, music, had just now no attraction for him. He turned listlessly into his brother's study,—he determined to read for an hour or so, and looked about in search of some entertaining volume. On the table he found a book open,—a manuscript, written on vellum in Arabic, with curious uncanny figures and allegorical designs on the headings and margins. El−Râmi had left it there by mistake,—it was a particularly valuable treasure which he generally kept under lock and key. Féraz sat down in front of it, and resting his head on his two hands, began to read at the page where it lay open. Arabic was his native tongue,—yet he had some difficulty in making out this especial specimen of the language, because the writing was anything but distinct, and some of the letters had a very odd way of vanishing before his eyes, just as he had fixed them on at word. This was puzzling as well as irritating,—he must have something the matter with his sight or his brain, he concluded, as these vanishing letters always came into position again after a little. Worried by the phenomenon, he seized the book and carried it to the full light of the open window, and there succeeded in making out the meaning of one passage which was quite sufficient to set him thinking. It ran as follows:

* "Wherefore, touching illusions and impressions, as also strong emotions of love, hatred, jealousy or revenge, these nerve and brain sensations are easily conveyed from one human subject to another by Suggestion. The first process is to numb the optic nerve. This is done in two ways—I. By causing the subject to fix his eyes steadily on a round shining case containing a magnet, while you shall count two hundred beats of time. II. By wilfully making your own eyes the magnet, and fixing your subject thereto. Either of these operations will temporarily paralyze the optic nerves, and arrest the motion of the blood in the vessels pertaining. Thus the brain becomes insensible to

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*** From "The Natural Law of Miracles," written in Arabic 400 B.C.**

external impressions, and is only awake to internal suggestions, which you may make as many and as devious as you please. Your subject will see exactly what you choose him to see, hear what you wish him to hear, do what you bid him do, so long as you hold him by your power, which if you understand the laws of light, sound, and air−vibrations, you may be able to retain for an indefinite period. The same force applies to the magnetising of a multitude as of a single individual."

Féraz read this over and over again,—then returning to the table, laid the book upon it with a deeply engrossed air. It had given him unpleasant matter for reflection.

"A dreamer—a visionary, he calls me—" he mused, his thoughts reverting to his absent brother—"Full of fancies poetic and musical,—now can it be that I owe my very dreams to his dominance? Does he **make** me subservient to him, as I am, or is my submission to his will, my **own** desire? Is my 'madness' or 'craze,' or whatever he calls it, of **his** working? and should I be more like other men if I were separated from him? And yet

what has he ever done to me, save make me happy? Has he placed me under the influence of any magnet such as this book describes? Certainly not that I am aware of. He has made my inward spirit clearer of comprehension, so that I hear him call me even by a thought,—I see and know beautiful things of which grosser souls have no perception,—and am I not content?—Yes, surely I am!—surely I should be,—though at times there seems a something missing,—a something to which I cannot give a name."

He sighed,—and again buried his head between his hands,—he was conscious of a dreary sensation, unusual to his bright and fervid nature,—the very sunshine streaming through the window seemed to lack true brilliancy. Suddenly a hand was laid upon his shoulder,—he started and rose to his feet with a bewildered air,—then smiled, as he saw that the intruder was only Zaroba.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONLY Zaroba,—gaunt, grim, fierce−eyed Zaroba, old and unlovely, yet possessing withal an air of savage dignity, as she stood erect, her amber−coloured robe bound about her with a scarlet girdle, and her gray hair gathered closely under a small coif of the same vivid hue. Her wrinkled visage had more animation in it than on the previous night, and her harsh voice grew soft as she looked at the picturesque glowing beauty of the young man beside her, and addressed him.

"El−Râmi has gone?" she asked.

Féraz nodded. He generally made her understand him either by signs, or the use of the finger−alphabet, at which he was very dexterous.

"On what quest?" she demanded.

Féraz explained rapidly and mutely that he had gone to visit a friend residing at a distance from town.

"Then he will not return to−night;"—muttered Zaroba thoughtfully—"He will not return to−night."

She sat down, and clasping her hands across her knees, rocked herself to and fro for some minutes in silence. Then she spoke, more to herself than to her listener.

"He is an angel or a fiend," she said in low meditative accents. "Or maybe he is both in one. He saved me from death once—I shall never forget that. And by his power he sent me back to my native land last night—I bound my black tresses with pearl and gold, and laughed and sang,—I was young again!"—and with a sudden cry she raised her hands above her head and clapped them fiercely together, so that the silver bangles on her arms jangled like bells;—"As God liveth, I was young! **You** know what it is to be young"—and she turned her dark orbs half enviously upon Féraz, who, leaning against his brother's writing−table, regarded her with interest and something of awe—"or you **should** know it! To feel the blood leap in the veins, while the happy heart keeps time like the beat of a joyous cymbal,—to catch the breath and tremble with ecstasy as the eyes one loves best in the world flash lightning−passion into your own,—to make companions of the roses, and feel the pulses quicken at the songs of birds,—to tread the ground so lightly as to scarcely know whether it is earth or air—this is to be young!—young!—and I was young last night. My love was with me,—my love, my more than lover—'Zaroba, beautiful Zaroba!' he said, and his kisses were as honey on my lips—'Zaroba, pearl of passion! fountain of sweetness in a desert land!—thine eyes are fire in which I burn my soul,—thy round arms the prison in which I lock my heart! Zaroba, beautiful Zaroba!'—Beautiful! Ay!—through the power of El−Râmi I was fair to see—last night! ... only last night!"

Her voice sank down into a feeble wailing, and Féraz gazed at her compassionately and in a little wonder,—he was accustomed to see her in various strange and incomprehensible moods, but she was seldom so excited as now.

"Why do you not laugh?" she asked suddenly and with a touch of defiance—"Why do you not laugh at me?—at me, the wretched Zaroba,—old and unsightly—bent and wrinkled!—that I should dare to say I was once beautiful!—It is a thing to make sport of—an old forsaken woman's dream of her dead youth."

With an impulsive movement that was as graceful as it was becoming, Féraz, for sole reply, dropped on one knee beside her, and taking her wrinkled hand, touched it lightly but reverently with his lips. She trembled, and great tears rose in her eyes.

"Poor boy!" she muttered—"Poor child!—a child to me, and yet a man! As God liveth, a man!" She looked at him with a curious stedfastness. "Good Féraz, forgive me—I did you wrong—I know you would not mock the aged, or make wanton sport of their incurable woes,—you are too gentle. I would in truth you were less mild of spirit—less womanish of heart!"

"Womanish!" and Féraz leaped up, stung by the word, he knew not why. His heart beat strangely—his blood tingled,—it seemed to him that if he had possessed a weapon, his instinct would have been to draw it then. Never had he looked so handsome; and Zaroba, watching his expression, clapped her withered hands in a sort of witch−like triumph.

"Ha!"—she cried—"The man's mettle speaks! There is something more than the dreamer in you then—something that will help you to explain the mystery of your existence—something that says—'Féraz, you are the slave of destiny—up! be its master! Féraz, you sleep—awake!'" and Zaroba stood up tall and imposing,

with the air of an inspired sorceress delivering a prophecy—"Féraz, you have manhood—prove it! Féraz, you have missed the one joy of life—LOVE!—Win it!"

Féraz stared at her amazed. Her words were such as she had never addressed to him before, and yet they moved him with a singular uneasiness. Love? Surely he knew the meaning of love? It was an ideal passion, like the lifting−up of life in prayer. Had not his brother told him that perfect love was unattainable on this planet?—and was it not a word the very suggestions of which could only be expressed in music? These thoughts ran through his mind while he stood inert and wondering,—then rousing himself a little from the effects of Zaroba's outburst, he sat down at the table, and taking up a pencil, wrote as follows—

"You talk wildly, Zaroba—you cannot be well. Let me hear no more—you disturb my peace. I know what love is—I know what life is. But the best part of my life and love is not here,—but elsewhere."

Zaroba took the paper from his hand, read it, and tore it to bits in a rage.

"O foolish youth!" she exclaimed—"Your love is the love of a Dream,—your life is the life of a Dream! You see with another's eyes—you think through another's brain. You are a mere machine, played upon by another's will! But not forever shall you be deceived—not forever,—" here she gave a slight start and looked around her nervously as though she expected someone to enter the room suddenly—"Listen! Come to me to−night,—to−night when all is dark and silent,—when every sound in the outside street is stilled,—come to me—and I will show you a marvel of the world!—one who, like you, is the victim of a Dream!" She broke off abruptly and glanced from right to left in evident alarm,—then with a fresh impetus of courage, she bent towards her companion again and whispered in his ear—"Come!"

"But where?" asked Féraz in the language of signs.

"Up yonder!" said Zaroba firmly, regardless of the utter amazement with which Féraz greeted this answer—"Up, where El−Râmi hides his great secret. Yes—I know he has forbidden you to venture there,—even so has he forbidden me to speak of what he cherishes so closely,—but are we slaves, you and I? Do you purpose always to obey him? So be it, an you will! But if I were you,—a **man**—I would defy both gods and fiends if they opposed my liberty of action. Do as it pleases you,—I, Zaroba, have given, you the choice,—stay and dream of life—or come and live it! Till to−night—farewell!"

She had reached the door and vanished through it, before Féraz could demand more of her meaning,—and he was left alone, a prey to the most torturing emotions. "The vulgar vice of curiosity!" That was the phrase his brother had used to him scarcely an hour agone,—and yet, here he was, yielding to a fresh fit of the intolerable desire that had possessed him for years to know El−Râmi's great secret. He dropped wearily into a chair and thought all the circumstances over. They were as follows,—

In the first place he had never known any other protector or friend than his brother, who, being several years older than himself, had taken sole charge of him after the almost simultaneous death of their father and mother, an event which he knew had occurred somewhere in the East, but how or when, he could not exactly remember, nor had he ever been told much about it. He had always been very happy in El−Râmi's companionship, and had travelled with him nearly all over the world,—and though they had never been rich, they had always had sufficient wherewith to live comfortably, though how even this small competence was gained, Féraz never knew. There had been no particular mystery about his brother's life, however, till on one occasion, when they were travelling together across the Syrian desert, where they had come upon a caravan of half−starved Arab wanderers in dire distress from want and sickness. Among them was an elderly woman at the extreme point of death, and an orphan child named Lilith, who was also dying. El−Râmi had suddenly, for no special reason, save kindness of heart and compassion, offered his services as physician to the stricken little party, and had restored the elderly woman, a widow, almost miraculously to health and strength in a day or two. This woman was no other than Zaroba. The sick child however, a girl of about twelve years old, died. And here began the puzzle. On the day of this girl's death, El−Râmi, with sudden and inexplicable haste, had sent his young brother on to Alexandria, bidding him there take ship immediately for the Island of Cyprus, and carry to a certain monastery some miles from Famagousta, a packet of documents, which he stated were of the most extraordinary value and importance. Féraz had obeyed, and according to further instructions, had remained as a visitor in that Cyprian religious retreat, among monks unlike any other monks he had ever seen or heard of, till he was sent for, whereupon, according to command, he rejoined El−Râmi in London. He found him, somewhat to his surprise, installed in the small house where they now were,—with the woman Zaroba, whose presence was another cause of blank astonishment,

especially as she seemed to have nothing to do but keep certain rooms upstairs in order. But all the questions Féraz poured out respecting her, and everything that had happened since their parting in the Syrian desert, were met by equivocal replies or absolute silence on his brother's part, and by−and−bye the young man grew accustomed to his position. Day by day he became more and more subservient to El−Râmi's will, though he could never quite comprehend why he was so willingly submissive. Of course he knew that his brother was gifted with certain powers of physical magnetism,—because he had allowed himself to be practised upon, and he took a certain interest in the scientific development of those powers, this being, as he quite comprehended, one of the branches of study on which El−Râmi was engaged. He knew that his brother could compel response to thought from a distance,—but, as there were others of his race who could do the same thing, and as that sort of mild hypnotism was largely practised in the East, where he was born, he attached no special importance to it. Endowed with various gifts of genius such as music and poetry, and a quick perception of everything beautiful and artistic, Féraz lived in a tranquil little Eden of his own,—and the only serpent in it that now and then lifted its head to hiss doubt and perplexity was the inexplicable mystery of those upstair rooms over which Zaroba had guardianship. The merest allusion to the subject excited El−Râmi's displeasure; and during the whole time they had lived together in that house, now nearly six years, he had not dared to speak of it more than a very few times, while Zaroba, on her part, had faithfully preserved the utmost secrecy. Now, she seemed disposed to break the long−kept rules,—and Féraz knew not what to think of it.

"Is everything destiny, as El−Râmi says?" he mused—"Or shall I follow my own desires in the face of destiny? Shall I yield to temptation—or shall I overcome it? Shall I break his command,—lose his affection and be a free man,—or shall I obey him still, and be his slave? And what should I do with my liberty if I had it, I wonder? Womanish! What a word! **Am** I womanish?" He paced up and down the room in sudden irritation and haughtiness;—the piano stood open, but its ivory keys failed to attract him,—his brain was full of other suggestions than the making of sweet harmony.

"Do not seek out sorrow for yourself by rash and idle questioning."

So his brother had said at parting. And the words rang in his ears as he walked to and fro restlessly, thinking, wondering, and worrying his mind with vague wishes and foreboding anxieties, till the shining afternoon wore away and darkness fell.

CHAPTER IX.

A ROUGH night at sea,—but the skies were clear, and the great worlds of God which we call stars, throbbed in the heavens like lustrous lamps, all the more brilliantly for there being no moon to eclipse their glory. A high gale was blowing, and the waves dashed up on the coast of Ilfracombe with an organ−like thud and roar as they broke in high jets of spray, and then ran swiftly back again with a soft swish and ripple suggestive of the downward chromatic scale played rapidly on well−attuned strings. There was freshness and life in the dancing wind;—the world seemed well in motion;—and, standing aloft among the rocks, and looking down at the tossing sea, one could realize completely the continuous whirl of the globe beneath one's feet, and the perpetual movement of the planet−studded heavens. High above the shore, on a bare jutting promontory, a solitary house faced seaward;—it was squarely built and surmounted with a tower, wherein one light burned fitfully, its pale sparkle seeming to quiver with fear as the wild wind fled past joyously, with a swirl and cry like some huge sea−bird on the wing. It looked a dismal residence at its best, even when the sun was shining,—but at night its aspect was infinitely more dreary. It was an old house, and it enjoyed the reputation of being haunted,—a circumstance which had enabled its present owner to purchase the lease of it for a very moderate sum. He it was who had built the tower, and whether because of this piece of extravagance or for other unexplained reasons, he had won for himself personally, almost as uncanny a reputation as the house had possessed before he occupied it. A man who lived the life of a recluse,—who seemed to have no relations with the outside world at all,—who had only one servant, (a young German whom the shrewder gossips declared was his "keeper")—who lived on such simple fare as certainly would never have contented a modern Hodge earning twelve shillings a week, and who seemed to purchase nothing but strange astronomical and geometrical instruments,—surely such a queer personage must either be mad, or in league with some evil "secret society,"—the more especially that he had had that tower erected, into which, after it was finished, no one but himself ever entered so far as the people of the neighbourhood could tell. Under all these suspicious circumstances, it was natural he should be avoided; and avoided he was by the good folk of Ilfracombe, in that pleasantly diverting fashion which causes provincial respectability to shudder away from the merest suggestion of superior intelligence.

And yet poor old Dr. Kremlin was a being not altogether to be despised. His appearance was perhaps against him, inasmuch as his clothes were shabby, and his eyes rather wild,—but the expression of his meagre face was kind and gentle, and a perpetual compassion for everything and everybody, seemed to vibrate in his voice and reflect itself in his melancholy smile. He was deeply occupied—so he told a few friends in Russia, where he was born,—in serious scientific investigations,—but the "friends," deeming him mad, held aloof till those investigations should become results. If the results proved disappointing, there would be no need to notice him any more,—if successful, why then, by a mystic process known only to themselves, the "friends" would so increase and multiply that he would be quite inconveniently surrounded by them. In the meantime, nobody wrote to him, or came to see him, except El−Râmi; and it was El−Râmi now, who, towards ten o'clock in the evening, knocked at the door of his lonely habitation and was at once admitted with every sign of deference and pleasure by the servant Karl.

"I'm glad you've come, sir,"—said this individual cheerfully,—"The Herr Doctor has not been out all day, and he eats less than ever. It will do him good to see you."

"He is in the tower as usual, at work?" enquired El−Râmi, throwing off his coat.

Karl assented, with rather a doleful look,— and opening the door of a small dining−room, showed the supper−table laid for two.

El−Râmi smiled.

"It's no good, Karl!" he said kindly—"It's very well meant on your part, but it's no good at all. You will never persuade your master to eat at this time of night, or me either. Clear all these things away,—and make your mind easy,—go to bed and sleep. To−morrow morning prepare as excellent a breakfast as you please—I promise you we'll do justice to it! Don't look so discontented—don't you know that over−feeding kills the working capacity?"

"And over−starving kills the man,—working−capacity and all"—responded Karl lugubriously—"However, I suppose you know best, sir!"

"In this case I do"—replied El−Râmi—"Your master expects me?"

Karl nodded,—and El−Râmi, with a brief "good−night," ascended the staircase rapidly and soon disappeared. A door banged aloft—then all was still. Karl sighed profoundly, and slowly cleared away the useless supper.

"Well! How wise men can bear to starve themselves just for the sake of teaching fools, is more than I shall ever understand!" he said half aloud—"But then I shall never be wise—I am an ass and always was. A good dinner and a glass of good wine have always seemed to me better than all the science going,—there's a shameful confession of ignorance and brutality together, if you like. 'Where do you think you will go to when you die, Karl?' says the poor old Herr Doctor. And what do **I** say? I say—'I don't know, **mein Herr**—and I don't care. This world is good enough for me so long as I live in it.' 'But afterwards Karl,—afterwards!' he says, with his gray head shaking. And what do **I** say? Why, I say—'I can't tell, **mein Herr!** but whoever sent me Here will surely have sense enough to look after me There!' And he laughs, and his head shakes worse than ever. Ah! Nothing can ever make me clever, and I'm very glad of it!"

He whistled a lively tune softly, as he went to bed in his little side−room off the passage, and wondered again, as he had wondered hundreds of times before, what caused that solemn low humming noise that throbbed so incessantly through the house, and seemed so loud when everything else was still. It was a grave sound,—suggestive of a long−sustained organ−note held by the pedal−bass;—the murmuring of seas and rivers seemed in it, as well as the rush of the wind. Karl had grown accustomed to it, though he did not know what it meant,—and he listened to it, till drowsiness made him fancy it was the hum of his mother's spinning wheel, at home in his native German village among the pine−forests, and so he fell happily asleep.

Meanwhile El−Râmi, ascending to the tower, knocked sharply at a small nail−studded door in the wall. The mysterious murmuring noise was now louder than ever,—and the knock had to be repeated three or four times before it was attended to. Then the door was cautiously opened, and the "Herr Doctor" himself looked out, his wizened, aged, meditative face illumined like a Rembrandt picture by the small hand−lamp he held in his hand.

"Ah!—El−Râmi!" he said in slow yet pleased tones—"I thought it might be you. And like 'Bernardo'—you 'come most carefully upon your hour.'"

He smiled, as one well satisfied to have made an apt quotation, and opened the door more widely to admit his visitor.

"Come in quickly,"—he said—"The great window is open to the skies, and the wind is high,—I fear some damage from the draught,—come in—come in!"

His voice became suddenly testy and querulous,—and El−Râmi stepped in at once without reply. Dr. Kremlin shut to the door carefully and bolted it—then he turned the light of the lamp he carried, full on the dark handsome face and dignified figure of his companion.

"You are looking well—well,"—he muttered—"Not a shade older—always sound and strong! Just Heavens!—if I had your physique, I think with Archimedes, that I could lift the world! But I am getting very old,—the life in me is ebbing fast,—and I have not done my work—.... God! ... God! I have not done my work!"

He clenched his hands, and his voice quavered down into a sound that was almost a groan. EI−Râmi's black beaming eyes rested on him compassionately.

"You are worn out, my dear Kremlin,"—he said gently—"worn out and exhausted with long toil. You shall sleep to−night. I have come according to my promise, and I will do what I can for you. Trust me—you shall not lose the reward of your life's work by want of time. You shall have time,−even leisure to complete your labours,—I will give you 'length of days'!"

The elder man sank into a chair trembling, and rested his head wearily on one hand.

"You cannot;"—he said faintly−"you cannot stop the advance of death, my friend! You are a very clever man—you have a far−reaching subtlety of brain,—but your learning and wisdom must pause **there** —there at the boundary−line of the grave. You cannot overstep it or penetrate beyond it—you cannot slacken the pace of the on−rushing years;—no, no! I shall be forced to depart with half my discovery uncompleted."

El−Râmi smiled,—a slightly derisive smile.

"You, who have faith in so much that cannot be proved, are singularly incredulous of a fact that **can** be proved;"—he said—"Anyway, whatever you choose to think, here I am in answer to your rather sudden summons—and here is your saving remedy;—" and he placed a gold−stoppered flask on the table near which they sat—"It is, or might be called, a veritable distilled essence of time,—for it will do what they say God cannot do, make the days spin backward!"

Dr. Kremlin took up the flask curiously.

"You are so positive of its action?"

"Positive. I have kept one human creature alive and in perfect health for six years on that vital fluid alone."

"Wonderful!—wonderful!"—and the old scientist held it close to the light, where it seemed to flash like a diamond,—then he smiled dubiously—"Am I the new Faust, and you Mephisto?"

"Bah!" and El−Râmi shrugged his shoulders carelessly—"An old nurse's tale!—yet, like all old nurses' tales and legends of every sort under the sun, it is not without its grain of truth. As I have often told you, there is really nothing imagined by

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the human brain that is not possible of realization, either here or hereafter. It would be a false note and a useless calculation to allow thought to dwell on what cannot be,—hence our airiest visions are bound to become facts in time. All the same, I am not of such superhuman ability that I can make you change your skin like a serpent, and blossom into youth and the common vulgar lusts of life, which to the thinker must be valueless. No. What you hold there, will simply renew the tissues, and gradually enrich the blood with fresh globules—nothing more,—but that is all you need. Plainly and practically speaking, as long as the tissues and the blood continue to renew themselves, you cannot die except by violence."

"Cannot die!" echoed Kremlin, in stupefied wonder—"Cannot die?"

"Except by violence—" repeated El−Râmi with emphasis—"Well!—and what now? There is nothing really astonishing in the statement. Death by violence is the only death possible to anyone familiar with the secrets of Nature, and there is more than one lesson to be learned from the old story of Cain and Abel. The first death in the world, according to that legend, was death by violence. Without violence, life should be immortal, or at least renewable at pleasure."

"Immortal!" muttered Dr. Kremlin—"Immortal! Renewable at pleasure! My God!—then I have time before me—plenty of time!"

"You have, if you care for it—" said El−Râmi with a tinge of melancholy in his accents—"and if you continue to care for it. Few do, nowadays."

But his companion scarcely heard him. He was balancing the little flask in his hand in wonderment and awe.

"Death by violence?"—he repeated slowly. "But, my friend, may not God Himself use violence towards us? May He not snatch the unwilling soul from its earthly tenement at an unexpected moment,—and so, all the scheming and labour and patient calculation of years be ended in one flash of time?"

"God—if there be a God, which some are fain to believe there is,—uses no violence—" replied El−Râmi—"Deaths by violence are due to the ignorance, or brutality, or long−inherited fool−hardiness and interference of man alone."

"What of shipwreck?—storm?—lightning?"—queried Dr. Kremlin, still playing with the flask he held.

"You are not going to sea, are you?" asked El−Râmi, smiling—"And surely you, of all men, should know that even shipwrecks are clue to a lack of mathematical balance in ship−building. One little trifle of exactitude, which is always missing, unfortunately,—one little delicate scientific adjustment, and the fiercest storm and wind could not prevail against the properly poised vessel. As for lightning—of course people are killed by it if they persist in maintaining an erect position like a lightning−rod or conductor, while the electrical currents are in full play. If they were to lie flat down, as savages do, they could not attract the descending force. But who, among arrogant stupid men, cares to adopt such simple precautions? Any way, I do not see that you need fear any of these disasters."

"No no,"—said the old man meditatively, "I need not fear,—no, no! I have nothing to fear."

His voice sank into silence. He and El−Râmi were sitting in a small square chamber of the tower,—very narrow, with only space enough for the one tiny table and two chairs which furnished it,—the walls were covered with very curious maps, composed of lines and curves and zig−zag patterns, meaningless to all except Kremlin himself, whose dreamy gaze wandered to them between−whiles with an ardent yearning and anxiety. And ever that strange deep, monotonous humming noise surged through the tower as of a mighty wheel at work, the vibration of the sound seeming almost to shake the solid masonry, while mingling with it now and again came the wild sea−bird cry of the wind. El−Râmi listened.

"And still it moves?" he queried softly, using almost the words of Galileo,—"*e pur, si muove*."

Dr. Kremlin looked up, his pale eyes full of a sudden fire and animation.

"Ay!—still it moves!" he responded with a touch of eager triumph in his tone—"Still it moves—and still it sounds! The music of the Earth, my friend!—the dominant note of all Nature's melody! Hear it!—round, full, grand and perfect!—one tone in the ascending scale of the planets,—the song of **one** Star,—our Star—as it rolls on its predestined way! Come!—come with me!" and he sprang up excitedly—"It is a night for work;—the heavens are clear as a mirror,—come and see my Dial of the Fates,—you have seen it before, I know, but there are new reflexes upon it now,—new lines of light and colour,—ah, my good El−Râmi, if you could solve **my** Problem, you would be soon wiser than you are! Your gift of long life would be almost valueless compared to my proof of what is beyond life—"

"Yes—if the proof could be obtained—" interposed El−Râmi.

"It shall be obtained!" cried Kremlin wildly—"It shall! I will not die till the secret is won. I will wrench it out from the Holy of Holies—I will pluck it from the very thoughts of God!"

He trembled with the violence of his own emotions,—then passing his hand across his forehead, he relapsed into sudden calm, and smiling gently, said again—

"Come!"

El−Râmi rose at once in obedience to this request,—and the old man preceded him to a high narrow door which looked like a slit in the wall, and which he unbarred and opened with an almost jealous care. A brisk puff of wind blew in their faces through the aperture, but this subsided into mere cool freshness of air, as they entered and stood together within the great central chamber of the tower,—a lofty apartment, where the strange work of Kremlin's life was displayed in all its marvellous complexity,—a work such as no human being had ever attempted before, or would be likely to attempt again.

CHAPTER X.

THE singular object that at once caught and fixed the eye in fascinated amazement and something of terror, was a huge Disc, suspended between ceiling and floor by an apparently inextricable mesh and tangle of wires. It was made of some smooth glittering substance like crystal, and seemed from its great height and circumference to occupy nearly the whole of the lofty tower−room. It appeared to be lightly poised and balanced on a long steel rod,—a sort of gigantic needle which hung from the very top of the tower. The entire surface of the Disc was a subdued blaze of light,—light which fluctuated in waves and lines, and zig−zag patterns like a kaleidoscope, as the enormous thing circled round and round, as it did, with a sort of measured motion, and a sustained solemn buzzing sound. Here was the explanation of the mysterious noise that vibrated throughout the house,—it was simply the movement of this round shield−like mass among its wonderful network of rods and wires. Dr. Kremlin called it his "crystal" Disc,—but it was utterly unlike ordinary crystal, for it not only shone with a transparent watery clearness, but possessed the scintillating lustre of a fine diamond cut into numerous prisms, so that El−Râmi shaded his eyes from the flash of it as he stood contemplating it in silence. It swirled round and round steadily; facing it, a large casement window, about the size of half the wall, was thrown open to the night, and through this could be seen a myriad sparkling stars. The wind blew in, but not fiercely now, for part of the wrath of the gale was past,—and the wash of the sea on the beach below had exactly the same tone in it as the monotonous hum of the Disc as it moved. At one side of the open window a fine telescope mounted on a high stand, pointed out towards the heavens,—there were numerous other scientific implements in the room, but it was impossible to take much notice of anything but the Disc itself, with its majestic motion and the solemn sound to which it swung. Dr. Kremlin seemed to have almost forgotten El−Râmi's presence,—going up to the window, he sat down on a low bench in the corner, and folding his arms across his breast gazed at his strange invention with a fixed, wondering, and appealing stare.

"How to unravel the meaning—how to decipher the message!" he muttered—"Sphinx of my brain, tell me, is there No answer? Shall the actual offspring of my thought refuse to clear up the riddle I propound? Nay, is it possible the creature should baffle the creator? See! the lines change again—the vibrations are altered,—the circle is ever the circle, but the reflexes differ,—how can one separate or classify them—how?"

Thus far his half−whispered words were audible,—when El−Râmi came and stood beside him. Then he seemed to suddenly recollect himself, and looking up, he rose to his feet and spoke in a perfectly calm and collected manner.

"You see"—he said, pointing to the Disc with the air of a lecturer illustrating his discourse—"To begin with, there is the fine hair's−breadth balance of matter which gives perpetual motion. Nothing can stop that movement save the destruction of the whole piece of mechanism. By some such subtly delicate balance as that, the Universe moves,—and nothing can stop it save the destruction of the Universe. Is not that fairly reasoned?"

"Perfectly," replied El−Râmi, who was listening with profound attention.

"Surely that of itself,—the secret of perpetual motion,—is a great discovery, is it not?" questioned Kremlin eagerly.

El−Râmi hesitated.

"It is," he said at last. "Forgive me if I paused a moment before replying,—the reason of my doing so was this. You cannot claim to yourself any actual discovery of perpetual motion, because that is Nature's own particular mystery. Perhaps I do not explain myself with sufficient clearness,—well, what I mean to imply is this—namely, that your wonderful dial there would not revolve as it does, if the Earth on which we stand were not also revolving. If we could imagine our planet stopping suddenly in its course, your Disc would stop also,—is not that correct?"

"Why, naturally!" assented Kremlin impatiently. "Its movement is mathematically calculated to follow, in a slower degree, but with rhythmical exactitude, the Earth's own movement, and is so balanced as to be absolutely accurate to the very half−quarter of a hair's−breadth."

"Yes,—and there is the chief wonder of your invention," said El−Râmi quietly. "It is that peculiarly precise calculation of yours that is so marvellous, in that it enables you **to follow the course of perpetual motion.** With perpetual motion itself you have nothing to do,—you cannot find its why or its when or its how,—it is eternal as

Eternity. Things must move,—and we all move with them—your Disc included."

"But the moving things are balanced—so!" said Kremlin, pointing triumphantly to his work—"On one point—one pivot!"

"And that point—?" queried El−Râmi dubiously.

"Is a Central Universe"—responded Kremlin—"where God abides."

El−Râmi looked at him with dark, dilating, burning eyes.

"Suppose," he said suddenly—"suppose—for the sake of argument—that this Central Universe you imagine exists, were but the outer covering or shell of another Central Universe, and so on through innumerable Central Universes for ever and ever and ever, and no point or pivot reachable!"

Kremlin uttered a cry, and clasped his hands with a gesture of terror.

"Stop—stop!" he gasped—"Such an idea is frightful!—horrible! Would you drive me mad?—mad, I tell you? No human brain could steadily contemplate the thought of such pitiless infinity!"

He sank back on the seat and rocked himself to and fro like a person in physical pain, the while he stared at El−Râmi's majestic figure and dark meditative face as though he saw some demon in a dream. El−Râmi met his gaze with a compassionate glance in his own eyes.

"You are narrow, my friend,"—he observed —"as narrow of outward and onward conception as most scientists are. I grant you the human brain has limits; but the human Soul has none! There is no 'pitiless infinity' to the Soul's aspirations,—it is never contented,—but eternally ambitious, eternally enquiring, eternally young, it is ready to scale heights and depths without end, unconscious of fatigue or satiety. What of a million million Universes? I—even I—can contemplate them without dismay,—the brain may totter and reel at the multiplicity of them,—but the SOUL would absorb them all and yet seek space for more!"

His rich, deep tranquil voice had the effect of calming Kremlin's excited nerves. He paused in his uneasy rocking to and fro, and listened as though he heard music.

"You are a bold man, El−Râmi," he said slowly—"I have always said it,—bold even to rashness. Yet with all your large ideas I find you inconsistent; for example, you talk of the Soul now, as if you believed in it,—but there are times when you declare yourself doubtful of its existence."

"It is necessary to split hairs of argument with you, I see"—returned El−Râmi with a slight smile,—"Can you not understand that I may **believe** in the Soul without being sure of it? It is the natural instinct of every man to credit himself with immortality, because this life is so short and unsatisfactory,—the notion may be a fault of heritage perhaps, still it is implanted in us all the same. And I do believe in the Soul,—but I require certainty to make my mere belief an undeniable Fact. And the whole business of my life is to establish that fact provably, and beyond any sort of doubt whatever,—what inconsistency do you find there?"

"None—none—" said Kremlin hastily—"But you will not succeed,—yours is too daring an attempt,—too arrogant and audacious a demand upon the Unknown Forces."

"And what of the daring and arrogance displayed here?" asked El−Râmi, with a wave of his hand towards the glittering Disc in front of them.

Kremlin jumped up excitedly.

"No, no!—you cannot call the mere scien− tific investigation of natural objects arrogant," he said—"Besides, the whole thing is so very simple after all. It is well known that every star in the heavens sends forth perpetual radiations of light; which radiations in a given number of minutes, days, months or years, reach our Earth. It depends of course on the distance between the particular star and our planet, as to how long these light−vibrations take to arrive here. One ray from some stars will occupy thousands of years in its course,—in fact, the original planet from which it fell, may be swept out of existence before it has time to penetrate our atmosphere. All this is in the lesson−books of children, and is familiar to every beginner in the rudiments of astronomy. But apart from time and distance, there is **no cessation** to these light−beats or vibrations; they keep on arriving for ever, without an instant's pause. Now, my great idea, was, as you know, to catch these reflexes on a mirror or dial of magnetic spar,—and you see for yourself that this thing, which seemed impossible, is to a certain extent done. Magnetic spar is not a new substance to you, any more than it was to the Egyptian priests of old—and the quality it has, of attracting light in its exact lines wherever light falls, is no surprise to you, though it might seem a marvel to the ignorant. Every little zigzag or circular flash on that Disc, is a vibration of light from some star,—but what puzzles and confounds my skill is this;—That there is a Meaning in those lines—a distinct Meaning which asks to

be interpreted,—a picture which is ever on the point of declaring itself, and is never declared. Mine is the torture of a Tantalus watching night after night that mystic Dial!"

He went close up to the Disc, and pointed out one particular spot on its surface where at that moment there was a glittering tangle of little prismatic tints.

"Observe this with me—" he said, and El−Râmi approached him—"Here is a perfect cluster of light−vibrations,—in two minutes by my watch they will be here no longer,—and a year or more may pass before they appear again. From what stars they fall, and why they have deeper colours than most of the reflexes, I cannot tell. There— see!" and he looked round with an air of melancholy triumph mingled with wonder, as the little spot of brilliant colour suddenly disappeared like the moisture of breath from a mirror—"They are gone! I have seen them four times only since the Disc was balanced twelve years ago,—and I have tried in every way to trace their origin—in vain—all, all in vain! If I could only decipher the Meaning!—for as sure as God lives there is a Meaning there."

El−Râmi was silent, and Dr. Kremlin went on.

"The air is a conveyer of Sound—" he said meditatively—"The light is a conveyer of Scenes. Mark that well. The light may be said to create landscape and generate Colour. Reflexes of light make pictures,—witness the instantaneous flash, which with the aid of chemistry, will give you a photograph in a second. I firmly believe that all reflexes of light are so many letters of a marvellous alphabet, which if we could only read it, would enable us to grasp the highest secrets of creation. The seven tones of music, for example, are in Nature;—in any ordinary storm, where there is wind and rain and the rustle of leaves, you can hear the complete scale on which every atom of musical composition has ever been written. Yet what ages it took us to reduce that scale to a visible tangible form,—and even now we have not mastered the **quarter−tones** heard in the songs of birds. And just as the whole realm of music is in seven tones of natural Sound, so the whole realm of light is in a pictured Language of Design, Colour, and Method, with an intention and a message, which **we**—we human beings—are intended to discover. Yet with all these great mysteries waiting to be solved, the most of us are content to eat and drink and sleep and breed and die, like the lowest cattle, in brutish ignorance of more than half our intellectual privileges. I tell you, El−Râmi, if I could only find out and place correctly **one** of those light−vibrations, the rest might be easy."

He heaved a profound sigh,—and the great Disc, circling steadily with its grave monotonous hum, might have passed for the wheel of Fate which he, poor mortal, was powerless to stop though it should grind him to atoms.

El−Râmi watched him with interest and something of compassion for a minute or two,—then he touched his arm gently.

"Kremlin, is it not time for you to rest?" he asked kindly—"You have not slept well for many nights,—you are tired out,—why not sleep now, and gather strength for future labours?"

The old man started, and a slight shiver ran through him.

"You mean—?" he began.

"I mean to do for you what I promised—" replied El−Râmi—"You asked me for this—" and he held up the gold−stoppered flask he had brought in with him from the next room—"It is all ready prepared for you—drink it, and to−morrow you will find yourself a new man."

Dr. Kremlin looked at him suspiciously—and then began to laugh with a sort of hysterical nervousness.

"I believe—" he murmured indistinctly and with affected jocularity—"I believe that you want to poison me! Yes—yes!—to poison me and take all my discoveries for yourself! You want to solve the great Star− problem and take all the glory and rob me—yes, rob me of my hard−earned fame!—yes—it is poison—poison!"

And he chuckled feebly, and hid his face between his hands.

El−Râmi heard him with an expression of pain and pity in his fine eyes.

"My poor old friend—" he said gently—"You are wearied to death—so I pardon you your sudden distrust of me. As for poison—see!" and he lifted the flask he held to his lips and drank a few drops—"Have no fear! Your Star−problem is your own,—and I desire that you should live long enough to read its great mystery. As for me, I have other labours;—to me stars, solar systems, aye! whole Universes are nothing,—my business is with the Spirit that dominates Matter—not with Matter itself. Enough; will you live or will you die? It rests with yourself to choose—for you are ill, Kremlin—very ill,—your brain is fagged and weak—you cannot go on much longer like this. Why did you send for me if you do not believe in me?"

The old Doctor tottered to the window− bench and sat down,—then looking up, he forced a smile.

"Don't you see for yourself what a coward I have become?" he said—"I tell you I am afraid of everything;—of you—of myself—and worst of all, of **that**—" and he pointed to the Disc—"which lately seems to have grown stronger than I am." He paused a moment—then went on with an effort—"I had a strange idea the other night,—I thought, suppose God, in the beginning, created the Universe simply to divert Himself—just as I created my Dial there;—and suppose it had happened that instead of being His servant as He originally intended, it had become His master?—that He actually had no more power over it? Suppose He were **dead?** We see that the works of men live ages after their death,—why not the works of God? Horrible—horrible! Death is horrible! I do not want to die, El−Râmi!" and his faint voice rose to a querulous wail—"Not yet—not yet! I cannot!—I must finish my work—I must know—I must live—"

"You shall live," interrupted El−Râmi. "Trust me—there is no death in **this!**"

He held up the mysterious flask again. Kremlin stared at it, shaking all over with nervousness—then on a sudden impulse clutched it.

"Am I to drink it all?" he asked faintly.

El−Râmi bent his head in assent.

Kremlin hesitated a moment longer—then with the air of one who takes a sudden desperate resolve, he gave one eager yearning look at the huge revolving Disc, and putting the flask to his lips, drained its contents. He had scarcely swallowed the last drop, when he sprang to his feet, uttered a smothered cry, staggered, and fell on the floor motionless. El−Râmi caught him up at once, and lifted him easily in his strong arms on to the window−seat, where he laid him down gently, placing coverings over him and a pillow under his head. The old man's face was white and rigid as the face of a corpse, but he breathed easily and quietly, and El−Râmi, knowing the action of the draught he had administered, saw there was no cause for anxiety in his condition. He himself leaned on the sill of the great open window and looked out at the starlit sky for some minutes, and listened to the sonorous plashing of the waves on the shore below. Now and then he glanced back over his shoulder at the great Dial and its shining star−patterns.

"Only Lilith could decipher the meaning of it all," he mused. "Perhaps,—some day—it might be possible to ask her. But then, do I in truth believe what she tells me?−would **he** believe? The transcendentally uplifted soul of a woman!—ought we to credit the message obtained through so ethereal a means? I doubt it. We men are composed of such stuff that we must convince ourselves of a fact by every known test before we finally accept it,—like St. Thomas, unless we put our rough hand into the wounded side of Christ, and thrust our fingers into the nail−prints, we will not believe. And I shall never resolve myself as to which is the wisest course,—to accept everything with the faith of a child, or dispute everything with the arguments of a controversialist. The child is happiest; but then the question arises—Were we meant to be happy? I think not,—since there is nothing that can make us so for long."

His brow clouded and he stood absorbed, looking at the stars, yet scarcely conscious of beholding them. Happiness! It had a sweet sound,—an exquisite suggestion; and his thoughts clung round it persistently as bees round honey. Happiness!—What could engender it? The answer came unbidden to his brain—"Love!" He gave an involuntary gesture of irritation, as though someone had spoken the word in his ear.

"Love!" he exclaimed half aloud. "There is no such thing—not on earth. There is Desire,—the animal attraction of one body for another, which ends in disgust and satiety. Love should have no touch of coarseness in it,—and can anything be coarser than the marriage−tie?—the bond which compels a man and woman to live together in daily partnership of bed and board, and reproduce their kind like pigs, or other common cattle. To call that **love** is a sacrilege to the very name,—for Love is a divine emotion, and demands divinest comprehension."

He went up to where Kremlin lay reclined, —the old man slept profoundly and peacefully,—his face had gained colour and seemed less pinched and meagre in outline. EI−Râmi felt his pulse,—it beat regularly and calmly. Satisfied with his examination, he wheeled away the great telescope into a corner, and shut the window against the night air,—then he lay down himself on the floor, with his coat rolled under him for a pillow, and composed himself to sleep till morning.

CHAPTER XI.

THE next day dawned in brilliant sunshine; the sea was as smooth as a lake, and the air pleasantly warm and still. Dr. Kremlin's servant Karl got up in a very excellent humour,—he had slept well, and he awoke with the comfortable certainty of finding his eccentric master in better health and spirits, as this was always the case after one of El−Râmi's rare visits. And Karl, though he did not much appreciate learning, especially when the pursuit of it induced people, as he said, to starve themselves for the sake of acquiring wisdom, did feel in his own heart that there was something about El−Râmi that was not precisely like other men, and he had accordingly for him not only a great attraction, but a profound respect.

"If anybody can do the Herr Doctor good, he can—" he thought, as he laid the breakfast−table in the little dining−room whose French windows opened out to a tiny green lawn fronting the sea,—"Certainly one can never cure old age,—that is an ailment for which there is no remedy; but however old we are bound to get, I don't see why we should not be merry over it and enjoy our meals to the last. Now let me see—what have I to get ready—" and he enumerated on his fingers—"Coffee—toast—rolls,—butter—eggs—fish,—I think that will do;—and if I just put these few roses in the middle of the table to tempt the eye a bit,"—and he suited the action to the word—"There now!—if the Herr Doctor can be pleased at all—"

"Breakfast, Karl! breakfast!" interrupted a clear cheerful voice, the sound of which made Karl start with nervous astonishment. "Make haste, my good fellow! My friend here has to catch an early train."

Karl turned round, stared, and stood motionless, open−mouthed, and struck dumb with sheer surprise. Could it be the old Doctor who spoke? Was it his master at all,—this hale, upright, fresh−faced individual who stood before him, smiling pleasantly and giving his orders with such a brisk air of authority? Bewildered and half afraid, he cast a desperate glance at El−Râmi, who had also entered the room, and who, seeing his confusion, made him a quick secret sign.

"Yes—be as quick as you can, Karl," he said. "Your master has had a good night, and is much better, as you see. We shall be glad of our breakfast; I told you we should, last night. Don't keep us waiting!"

"Yes, sir—no, sir!" stammered Karl, trying to collect his scattered senses and staring again at Dr. Kremlin,—then, scarcely knowing whether he was on his head or his heels, he scrambled out of the room into the passage, where he stood for a minute stupefied and inert.

"It must be devil's work!" he ejaculated amazedly. "Who but the devil could make a man look twenty years younger in a single night? Yes—twenty years younger,—he looks that, if he looks a day. God have mercy on us!—what will happen next—what sort of a service have I got into?—Oh, my poor mother!"

This last was Karl's supremest adjuration,—when he could find nothing else to say, the phrase "Oh, my poor mother!" came as naturally to his lips as the familiar "D—n it!" from the mouth of an old swaggerer in the army or navy. He meant nothing by it, except perhaps a vague allusion to the innocent days of his childhood, when he was ignorant of the wicked ways of the wicked world, and when "Oh, my poor mother!" had not the most distant idea as to what was going to become of her hopeful first−born.

Meantime, while he went down into the kitchen and bustled about there, getting the coffee, frying the fish, boiling the eggs, and cogitating with his own surprised and half−terrified self, Dr. Kremlin and his guest had stepped out into the little garden together, and they now stood there on the grass−plot surveying the glittering wide expanse of ocean before them. They spoke not a word for some minutes,—then, all at once, Kremlin turned round and caught both El−Râmi's hands in his own and pressed them fervently—there were tears in his eyes.

"What can I say to you?" he murmured in a voice broken by strong emotion—"How can I thank you? You have been as a god to me;—I live again,—I breathe again,—this morning the world seems new to my eyes,—as new as though I had never seen it before. I have left a whole cycle of years, with all their suffering and bitterness, behind me, and I am ready now to commence life afresh."

"That is well!" said El−Râmi gently, cordially returning the pressure of his hands. "That is as it should be. To see your strength and vitality thus renewed, is more than enough reward for me."

"And do I really **look** younger?—am I actually changed in appearance?" asked Kremlin eagerly.

El−Râmi smiled. "Well, you saw poor Karl's amazement"—he replied. "He was afraid of you, I think—and also of me. Yes, you are changed, though not miraculously so. Your hair is as gray as ever,—the same furrows of

thought are on your face;—all that has occurred is the simple renewal of the tissues, and revivifying of the blood,—and this gives you the look of vigour and heartiness you have this morning."

"But will it last?—will it last?" queried Kremlin anxiously.

"If you follow my instructions, of course it will—" returned El−Râmi—"I will see to that. I have left with you a certain quantity of the vital fluid,—all you have to do is to take ten drops every third night, or inject it into your veins if you prefer that method;—then,—as I told you,—you cannot die, except by violence."

"And no violence comes here"—said Kremlin with a smile, glancing round at the barren yet picturesque scene—"I am as lonely as an unmated eagle on a rock,—and the greater my solitude the happier I am. The world is very beautiful—that I grant,—but the beings that inhabit it spoil it for me, albeit I am one of them. And so I cannot die, except by violence? Almost I touch immortality! Marvellous El−Râmi! You should be a king of nations!"

"Too low a destiny!" replied El−Râmi—"I had rather be a ruler of planets."

"Ah, there is your stumbling−block!" said Kremlin, with sudden seriousness,—"You soar too high—you are never contented."

"Content is impossible to the Soul," returned El−Râmi,—"Nothing is too high or too low for its investigation. And whatever **can** be done, **should** be done, in order that the whole gamut of life may be properly understood by those who are forced to live it."

"And do not you understand it?"

"In part—yes. But not wholly. It is not sufficient to have traced the ripple of a brain−wave through the air and followed its action and result with exactitude,—nor is it entirely satisfactory to have all the secrets of physical and mental magnetism, and attraction between bodies and minds, made clear and easy without knowing the **reason** of these things. It is like the light−vibrations on your Disc,—they come—and go; but one needs to know why and whence they come and go. I know much—but I would fain know more."

"But is not the pursuit of knowledge infinite?"

"It may be—**if** infinity exists. Infinity is possible—and I believe in it,—all the same I must prove it."

"You will need a thousand life−times to fulfil such works as you attempt!" exclaimed Kremlin.

"And I will live them all;"—responded El−Râmi composedly—"I have sworn to let nothing baffle me, and nothing shall!"

Dr. Kremlin looked at him in vague awe,—the dark haughty handsome face spoke more resolvedly than words.

"Pardon me, El−Râmi"—he said with a little diffidence—"It seems a very personal question to put, and possibly you may resent it, still I have often thought of asking it. You are a very handsome and very fascinating man—you would be a fool if you were not perfectly aware of your own attractiveness,—well, now tell me—have you never loved anybody?—any woman?"

The sleepy brilliancy of El−Râmi's fine eyes lightened with sudden laughter.

"Loved a woman?—**I?**" he exclaimed—"The Fates forbid! What should I do with the gazelles and kittens and toys of life, such as women are? Of all animals on earth, they have the least attraction for me. I would rather stroke a bird's wings than a woman's hair, and the fragrance of a rose pressed against my lips is sweeter and more sincere than any woman's kisses. As the females of the race, women are useful in their way, but not interesting at any time—at least, not to me."

"Do you not believe in love then?" asked Kremlin.

"No. Do you?"

"Yes,"—and Kremlin's voice was very tender and impressive—"I believe it is the only thing of God in an almost godless world."

El−Râmi shrugged his shoulders.

"You talk like a poet. I, who am not poetical, cannot so idealize the physical attraction between male and female, which is nothing but a law of nature, and is shared by us in common with the beasts of the field."

"I think your wisdom is in error there"—said Kremlin slowly—"Physical attraction there is, no doubt—but there is something else—something more subtle and delicate, which escapes the analysis of both philosopher and scientist. Moreover it is an imperative spiritual sense, as well as a material craving,—the soul can no more be satisfied without love than the body."

"That is your opinion—" and El−Râmi smiled again,—"But you see a contradiction of it in me. **I** am satisfied to be without love,—and certainly I never look upon the ordinary woman of the day, without the disagreeable consciousness that I am beholding the living essence of sensualism and folly."

"You are very bitter," said Kremlin wonderingly—"Of course no 'ordinary' woman could impress you,—but there are remarkable women,—women of power and genius and lofty ambition."

"Les femmes incomprises—oh yes, I know!" laughed El−Râmi—"Troublesome creatures all, both to themselves and others. Why do you talk on these subjects, my dear Kremlin?—Is it the effect of your rejuvenated condition? I am sure there are many more interesting matters worthy of discussion. I shall never love—not in this planet; in some other state of existence I may experience the 'divine' emotion. But the meannesses, vanities, contemptible jealousies, and low spites of women such as inhabit this earth fill me with disgust and repulsion,—besides, women are treacherous,—and I loathe treachery."

At that moment Karl appeared at the dining−room window as a sign that breakfast was served, and they turned to go indoors.

"All the same, El−Râmi—" persisted Kremlin, laying one hand on his friend's arm—"Do not count on being able to escape the fate to which all humanity must succumb—"

"Death?" interposed El−Râmi lightly—"I have almost conquered that!"

"Aye, but you cannot conquer Love!" said Kremlin impressively—"Love is stronger than Death."

El−Râmi made no answer,—and they went in to breakfast. They did full justice to the meal, much to Karl's satisfaction, though he could not help stealing covert glances at his master's changed countenance, which had become so much fresher and younger since the previous day. How such a change had been effected he could not imagine, but on the whole he was disposed to be content with the evident improvement.

"Even if he is the devil himself—" he considered, his thoughts reverting to El−Râmi—"I am bound to say that the devil is a kind−hearted fellow. There's no doubt about that. I suppose I am an abandoned sinner only fit for the burning—but if God insists on making us old and sick and miserable, and the devil is able to make us young and strong and jolly, why let us be friends with the devil, say I! Oh my poor mother!"

With such curious emotions as these in his mind, it was rather difficult to maintain a composed face, and wait upon the two gentlemen with that grave deportment which it is the duty of every well−trained attendant to assume,—however, he managed fairly well, and got accustomed at last to hand his master a cup of coffee without staring at him till his eyes almost projected out of his head.

El−Râmi took his departure soon after breakfast, with a few recommendations to his friend not to work too hard on the problems suggested by the Disc.

"Ah, but I have now found a new clue;" said Kremlin triumphantly—"I found it in sleep. I shall work it out in the course of a few weeks, I dare say—and I will let you know if the result is successful. You see, thanks to you, my friend, I have time now,—there is no need to toil with feverish haste and anxiety—death that seemed so near, is thrust back in the distance—"

"Even so!" said El−Râmi with a strange smile—"In the far, far distance,—baffled and kept at bay. Oddly enough, there are some who say there is no death—"

"But there is—there must be!—" exclaimed Kremlin quickly.

El−Râmi raised his hand with a slight commanding gesture.

"It is not a certainty—" he said—"inasmuch as there is NO certainty. And there is no 'Must−Be,'—there is only the Soul's 'Shall−Be'!"

And with these somewhat enigmatical words, he bade his friend farewell, and went his way.

CHAPTER XII.

IT was yet early in the afternoon when he arrived back in London. He went straight home to his own house, letting himself in as usual with his latch−key. In the hall he paused, listening. He half expected to hear Féraz playing one of his delicious dreamy improvisations,—but there was not a sound anywhere, and the deep silence touched him with an odd sense of disappointment and vague foreboding. His study door stood slightly ajar,—he pushed it wider open very noiselessly and looked in. His young brother was there, seated in a chair near the window, reading. El−Râmi gazed at him dubiously, with a slowly dawning sense that there was some alteration in his appearance which he could not all at once comprehend. Presently he realized that Féraz had evidently yielded to some overwhelming suggestion of personal vanity, which had induced him to put on more brilliant attire. He had changed his plain white linen garb for one of richer material, composed in the same Eastern fashion,—he wore a finely−chased gold belt, from which a gold−sheathed dagger depended,—and a few gold ornaments gleamed here and there among the drawn silken folds of his upper vest. He looked handsome enough for a new Agathon as he sat there apparently absorbed in study,—the big volume he perused resting partly on his knee,—but El−Râmi's brow contracted with sudden anger as he observed him from the half−open doorway where he stood, himself unseen,—and his dark face grew very pale. He threw the door back on its hinges with a clattering sound and entered the room.

"Féraz!"

Féraz looked up, lifting his eyelids indifferently and smiling coldly.

"What, El−Râmi! Back so early? I did not expect you till nightfall."

"Did you not?" said his brother, advancing slowly—"Pray how was that? You know I generally return after a night's absence early in the next day. Where is your usual word of welcome? What ails you? You seem in a very odd humour!"

"Do I?"—and Féraz stretched himself a little,—rose, yawning, and laid down the volume he held on the table—"I am not aware of it myself, I assure you. How did you find your old madman? And did you tell him you were nearly as mad as he?"

El−Râmi's eyes flashed indignant amazement and wrath.

"Féraz!—What do you mean?"

With a fierce impulsive movement Féraz turned and fully faced him,—all his forced and feigned calmness gone to the winds,—a glowing picture of youth and beauty and rage commingled.

"What do I mean?" he cried—"I mean this! That I am tired of being your slave−your 'subject' for conjurer's tricks of mesmerism,—that from henceforth I resist your power,—that I will not serve you—will not obey you—will not yield—no!—not an inch of my liberty—to your influence,—that I am a free man, as you are, and that I will have the full rights of both my freedom and manhood. You shall play no more with me; I refuse to be your dupe as I have been. This is what I mean!—and as I will have no deception or subterfuge between us,—for I scorn a lie,—hear the truth from me at once;—I know your secret—I have seen Her!"

El−Râmi stood erect,—immovable;—he was very pale; his breath came and went quickly—once his hand clenched, but he said nothing.

"I have seen Her!" cried Féraz again, flinging up his arms with an ecstatic wild gesture—"A creature fairer than any vision!—and you—you have the heart to bind her fast in darkness and in nothingness,—you it is who have shut her sight to the world,—you have made for her, through your horrible skill, a living death in which she knows nothing, feels nothing, sees nothing, loves nothing! I tell you it is a cursed deed you are doing,—a deed worse than murder—I would not have believed it of you! I thought your experiments were all for good,—I never would have deemed you capable of cruelty to a helpless woman! But I will release her from your spells,—she is too beautiful to be made her own living monument,—Zaroba is right—she needs life—joy—love!—she shall have them all;—through **me!**"

He paused, out of breath with the heat and violence of his own emotions;—El−Râmi stood, still immovably regarding him.

"You may be as angered as you please"—went on Féraz with sullen passion—"I care nothing now. It was Zaroba who bade me go up yonder and see her where she slept; ... it was Zaroba—"

"'The woman tempted me and I did eat—'" quoted El−Râmi coldly,—"Of course it was Zaroba. No other than a woman could thus break a sworn word. Naturally it was Zaroba,—the paid and kept slave of my service, who owes to me her very existence,—who persuaded my brother to dishonour."

"Dishonour!" and Féraz laid his hand with a quick, almost savage gesture on the hilt of the dagger at his belt. El−Râmi's dark eyes blazed upon him scornfully.

"So soon a braggart of the knife?" he said. "What theatrical show is this? You—you—the poet, the dreamer, the musician—the gentle lad whose life was one of peaceful and innocent reverie—are you so soon changed to the mere swaggering puppy of manhood who pranks himself out in gaudy clothing, and thinks by vulgar threatening to overawe his betters? If so, 'tis a pity—but I shall not waste time in deploring it. Hear me, Féraz—I said 'dishonour,'—swallow the word as best you may, it is the only one that fits the act of prying into secrets not your own. But I am not angered,—the mischief wrought is not beyond remedy, and if it were there would be still less use in bewailing it. What is done cannot be undone. Now tell me,—you say you have seen Her. **Whom** have you seen?"

Féraz regarded him amazedly.

"Whom have I seen?" he echoed—"Whom should I see, if not the girl you keep locked in those upper rooms,—a beautiful maiden, sleeping her life away, in cruel darkness and ignorance of all things true and fair!"

"An enchanted princess, to your fancy—" said El−Râmi derisively. "Well, if you thought so, and if you believed yourself to be a new sort of Prince Charming, why, if she were only sleeping, did you not wake her?"

"Wake her?" exclaimed Féraz excitedly,—"Oh, I would have given my life to see those fringed lids uplift and show the wonders of the eyes beneath! I called her by every endearing name—I took her hands and warmed them in my own—I would have kissed her lips—"

"You dared not!" cried El−Râmi, fired beyond his own control, and making a fierce bound towards him—"You dared not pollute her by your touch!"

Féraz recoiled,—a sudden chill ran through his blood. His brother was transformed with the passion that surged through him,—his eyes flashed—his lips quivered—his very form seemed to tower up and tremble and dilate with rage.

"El−Râmi!" he stammered nervously, feeling all his newly−born defiance and bravado oozing away under the terrible magnetism of this man, whose fury was nearly as electric as that of a sudden thunderstorm,—"El−Râmi, I did no harm,—Zaroba was there beside me—"

"Zaroba!" echoed El−Râmi furiously—"Zaroba would stand by and see an angel violated, and think it the greatest happiness that could befall her sanctity! To be of common clay, with household joys and kitchen griefs, is Zaroba's idea of noble living. Oh rash unhappy Féraz! you say you know my secret—you do not know it—you cannot guess it! Foolish, ignorant boy!—did you think yourself a new Christ with power to raise the Dead?"

"The dead?" muttered Féraz, with white lips—"The dead? She—the girl I saw—lives and breathes..."

"By **my** will alone!" said El−Râmi—"By my force—by my knowledge—by my constant watchful care,—by my control over the subtle threads that connect Spirit with Matter. Otherwise, according to all the laws of ordinary nature, that girl is **dead**—she died in the Syrian desert six years ago!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AT these words, pronounced slowly and with emphatic distinctness, Féraz staggered back dizzily and sank into a chair,—drops of perspiration bedewed his forehead, and a sick faint feeling overcame him. He said nothing,—he could find no words in which to express his mingled horror and amazement. El−Râmi watched him keenly,—and presently Féraz, looking up, caught the calm, full and fiery regard of his brother's eyes. With a smothered cry, he raised his hands as though to shield himself from a blow.

"I will not have it;"—he muttered faintly—"You shall not force my thoughts,—I will believe nothing against my own will. You shall no longer delude my eyes and ears—I have read—I know,—I know how such trickery is done!"

El−Râmi uttered an impatient exclamation, and paced once or twice up and down the room.

"See here, Féraz;"—he said, suddenly stopping before the chair in which his brother sat,−"I swear to you that I am not exercising one iota of my influence upon you. When I do, I will tell you, that you may be prepared to resist me if you choose. I am using no power of any kind upon you—be satisfied of that. But, as you have forced your way into the difficult labyrinth of my life's work, it is as well that you should have an explanation of what seems to you full of mysterious evil and black magic. You accuse me of wickedness,—you tell me I am guilty of a deed worse than murder. Now this is mere rant and nonsense,—you speak in such utter ignorance of the facts, that I forgive you, as one is bound to forgive all faults committed through sheer want of instruction. I do not think I am a wicked man"—he paused, with an earnest, almost pathetic expression on his face—"at least I strive not to be. I am ambitious and sceptical—and I am not altogether convinced of there being any real intention of ultimate good in the arrangements of this world as they at present exist,—but I work without any malicious intention; and without undue boasting I believe I am as honest and conscientious as the best of my kind. But that is neither here nor there,—as I said before, you have broken into a secret not intended for your knowledge—and that you may not misunderstand me yet more thoroughly than you seem to do, I will tell you what I never wished to bother your brains with. For you have been very happy till now, Féraz—happy in the beautiful simplicity of the life you led—the life of a poet and dreamer,—the happiest life in the world!"

He broke off, with a short sigh of mingled vexation and regret—then he seated himself immediately opposite his brother and went on—

"You were too young to understand the loss it was to us both when our parents died,—or to know the immense reputation our father Nadir Zarânos had won throughout the East for his marvellous skill in natural science and medicine. He died in the prime of his life,—our mother followed him within a month,—and you were left to my charge,—you a child then, and I almost a man. Our father's small but rare library came into my possession, together with his own manuscripts treating of the scientific and spiritual organization of Nature in all its branches,—and these opened such extraordinary vistas of possibility to me as to what might be done if such and such theories could be practically carried out and acted upon, that I became fired with the ardour of discovery. The more I studied, the more convinced and eager I became in the pursuit of such knowledge as is generally deemed supernatural, and beyond the reach of all human inquiry. One or two delicate experiments in chemistry of a rare and subtle nature were entirely successful,—and by−and−bye I began to look about for a subject on whom I could practise the power I had attained. There was no one whom I could personally watch and surround with my hourly influence except yourself,—therefore I made my first great trial upon **you**."

Féraz moved uneasily in his chair,—his face wore a doubtful, half−sullen expression, but he listened to El−Râmi's every word with vivid and almost painful interest.

"At that time you were a mere boy—" pursued El−Râmi—"but strong and vigorous, and full of the mischievous pranks and sports customary to healthy boyhood. I began by slow degrees to educate you—not with the aid of schools or tutors—but simply by my Will. You had a singularly unretentive brain,—you were never fond of music—you would never read,—you had no taste for study. Your delight was to ride—to swim like a fish,—to handle a gun—to race, to leap,—to play practical jokes on other boys of your own age and fight them if they resented it;—all very amusing performances no doubt, but totally devoid of intelligence. Judging you dispassionately, I found that you were a very charming gamesome animal,—physically perfect—with a Mind somewhere if one could only discover it, and a Soul or Spirit behind the Mind—if one could only discover that

also. I set myself the task of finding out both these hidden portions of your composition—and of not only finding them, but moulding and influencing them according to my desire and plan."

A faint tremor shook the younger man's frame—but he said nothing.

"You are attending to me closely, I hope?" said El−Râmi pointedly—"because you must distinctly understand that this conversation is the first and last we shall have on the matter. After to−day, the subject must drop between us forever, and I shall refuse to answer any more questions. You hear?"

Féraz bent his head.

"I hear—" he answered with an effort—"And what I hear seems strange and terrible!"

"Strange and terrible?" echoed El−Râmi. "How so? What is there strange or terrible in the pursuit of Wisdom? Yet—perhaps you are right, and the blank ignorance of a young child is best,—for there **is** something appalling in the infinitude of knowledge—an infinitude which must remain infinite, if it be true that there is a God who is forever thinking, and whose thoughts become realities."

He paused, with a rapt look,—then resumed in the same even tone,—

"When I had made up my mind to experimentalize upon you, I lost no time in commencing my work. One of my chief desires was to avoid the least risk of endangering your health—your physical condition was admirable, and I resolved to keep it so. In this I succeeded. I made life a joy to you—the mere act of breathing a pleasure—you grew up before my eyes like the vigorous sapling of an oak that rejoices in the mere expansion of its leaves to the fresh air. The other and more subtle task was harder,—it needed all my patience—all my skill,−but I was at last rewarded. Through my concentrated influence, which surrounded you as with an atmosphere in which you moved, and slept, and woke again, and which forced every fibre of your brain to respond to mine, the animal faculties which were strongest in you, became subdued and tamed,—and the mental slowly asserted themselves. I resolved you should be a poet and musician—you became both;—you developed an ardent love of study, and every few months that passed gave richer promise of your ripening intelligence. Moreover, you were happy,— happy in everything—happiest perhaps in your music, which became your leading passion. Having thus, unconsciously to yourself, fostered your mind by the silent workings of my own, and trained it to grow up like a flower to the light, I thought I might make my next attempt, which was to probe for that subtle essence we call the Soul—the large wings that are hidden in the moth's chrysalis;—and influence that too;—but there—there by some inexplicable opposition of forces, I was baffled."

Féraz raised himself half out of his chair, his lips parted in breathless eagerness—his eyes dilated and sparkling.

"Baffled?" he repeated hurriedly—"How do you mean?—in what way?"

"Oh, in various ways—" replied El−Râmi, looking at him with a somewhat melancholy expression—"Ways that I myself am not able to comprehend. I found I could influence your Inner Self to obey me,—but only to a very limited extent, and in mere trifles,—for example, as you yourself know, I could compel you to come to me from a certain distance in response to my thought, —but in higher things you escaped me. You became subject to long trances,—this I was prepared for, as it was partially my work,—and during these times of physical unconsciousness, it was evident that your Soul enjoyed a life and liberty superior to anything these earth−regions can offer. But you could never remember all you saw in these absences,—indeed, the only suggestions you seem to have brought away from that other state of existence are the strange melodies you play sometimes, and that idea you have about your native Star."

A curious expression flitted across Féraz's face as he heard—and his lips parted in a slight smile, but he said nothing.

"Therefore,"—pursued his brother meditatively—"as I could get no clear exposition of other worlds from you, as I had hoped to do, I knew I had failed to command you in a spiritual sense. But my dominance over your Mind continued; it continues still,—nay, my good Féraz!"—this, as Féraz seemed about to utter some impetuous word—"Pray that you may never be able to shake off my force entirely,—for if you do, you will lose what the people of a grander and poetic day called Genius—and what the miserable Dry−as−Dusts of our modern era call Madness—the only gift of the gods that has ever served to enlighten and purify the world. But **your** genius, Féraz, belongs to **me;**—I gave it to you, and I can take it back again if I so choose;—and leave you as you originally were—a handsome animal with no more true conception of art or beauty than my Lord Melthorpe, or his spendthrift young cousin Vaughan."

Féraz had listened thus far in silence,—but now he sprang out of his chair with a reckless gesture.

"I cannot bear it!" he said—"I cannot bear it! El−Râmi, I cannot—I will not!"

"Cannot bear what?" inquired his brother with a touch of satire in his tone—"Pray be calm!—there is no necessity for such melodramatic excitement. Cannot bear what?"

"I will not owe everything to you!" went on Féraz, passionately—"How can I endure to know that my very thoughts are not my own, but emanate from you?—that my music has been instilled into me by you?—that you possess me by your power, body and brain,—great Heaven! it is awful—intolerable—impossible!"

El−Râmi rose and laid one hand gently on his shoulder—he recoiled shudderingly—and the elder man sighed heavily.

"You tremble at my touch,—" he said sadly—"the touch of a hand that has never wilfully wrought you harm, but has always striven to make life beautiful to you? Well!—be it so!—you have only to say the word, Féraz, and you shall owe me nothing. I will undo all I have done,—and you shall reassume the existence for which Nature originally made you—an idle voluptuous wasting of time in sensualism and folly. And even **that** form of life you must owe to Someone,—even that you must account for—to God!"

The young man's head drooped,—a faint sense of shame stirred in him, but he was still resentful and sullen.

"What have I done to you," went on El−Râmi, "that you should turn from me thus, all because you have seen a dead woman's face for an hour? I have made your thoughts harmonious—I have given you pleasure such as the world's ways cannot give—your mind has been as a clear mirror in which only the fairest visions of life were reflected. You would alter this?—then do so, if you decide thereon,—but weigh the matter well and long, before you shake off my touch, my tenderness, my care."

His voice faltered a little—but he quickly controlled his emotion, and continued—

"I must ask you to sit down again and hear me out patiently to the end of my story. At present I have only told you what concerns yourself—and how the failure of my experiment upon the spiritual part of your nature, obliged me to seek for another subject on whom to continue my investigations. As far as you are personally concerned, no failure is apparent—for your spirit is allowed frequent intervals of supernatural freedom, in which you have experiences that give you peculiar pleasure, though you are unable to impart them to me with positive lucidity. You visit a Star—so you say—with which you really seem to have some home connection—but you never get beyond this, so that it would appear that any higher insight is denied you. Now what I needed to obtain, was not only a higher insight, but the highest knowledge that could possibly be procured through a mingled combination of material and spiritual essences, and it was many a long and weary day before I found what I sought. At last my hour came—as it comes to all who have the patience and fortitude to wait for it."

He paused a moment—then went on more quickly—

"You remember of course that occasion of which we chanced upon a party of Arab wanderers who were journeying across the Syrian desert?—all poor and ailing, and almost destitute of food or water?"

"I remember it perfectly!" and Féraz, seating himself opposite his brother again, listened with renewed interest and attention.

"They had two dying persons with them," continued El−Râmi—"An elderly woman—a widow, known as Zaroba,—the other an orphan girl of about twelve years of age named Lilith. Both were perishing of fever and famine. I came to the rescue. I saved Zaroba,—and she, with the passionate im− pulsiveness of her race, threw herself in gratitude at my feet, and swore by all her most sacred beliefs that she would be my slave from henceforth as long as she lived. All her people were dead, she told me—she was alone in the world—she prayed me to let her be my faithful servant. And truly, her fidelity has never failed—till now. But of that hereafter. The child Lilith, more fragile of frame and weakened to the last extremity of exhaustion—in spite of my unremitting care—died. Do you thoroughly understand me—she **died** ."

"She died!" repeated Féraz slowly—"Well—what then?"

"I was supporting her in my arms"—said El−Râmi, the ardour of his description growing upon him, and his black eyes dilating and burning like great jewels under the darkness of his brows—"when she drew her last breath and sank back—a corpse. But before her flesh had time to stiffen,—before the warmth had gone out of her blood,—an idea, wild and daring, flashed across my mind. 'If this child has a Soul,' I said to myself—'I will stay it in its flight from hence! It shall become the new Ariel of my wish and will—and not till it has performed my bidding to the utmost extent will I, like another Prospero, give it its true liberty. And I will preserve the body, its

mortal shell, by artificial means, that through its medium I may receive the messages of the Spirit in mortal language such as I am able to understand.' No sooner had I conceived my bold project than I proceeded to carry it into execution. I injected into the still warm veins of the dead girl a certain fluid whose properties I alone know the working of—and then I sought and readily obtained permission from the Arabs to bury her in the desert, while they went on their way. They were in haste to continue their journey, and were grateful to me for taking this office off their hands. That very day—the day the girl died—I sent **you** from me, as you know, bidding you make all possible speed, on an errand which I easily invented, to the Brethren of the Cross in the Island of Cyprus,—you went obediently enough,—surprised perhaps, but suspecting nothing. That same evening when the heats abated and the moon rose, the caravan re− sumed its pilgrimage, leaving Lilith's dead body with me, and also the woman Zaroba, who volunteered to remain and serve me in my tent, an offer which I accepted, seeing that it was her own desire, and that she would be useful to me. She, poor silly soul, took me then for a sort of god, because she was unable to understand the miracle of her own recovery from imminent death, and I felt certain I could rely upon her fidelity. Part of my plan I told her,—she heard with mingled fear and reverence,—the magic of the East was in her blood, however, and she had a superstitious belief that a truly 'wise man' could do anything. So, for several days we stayed encamped in the desert—I passing all my hours beside the dead Lilith,—dead, but to a certain extent living through artificial means. As soon as I received proof positive that my experiment was likely to be successful, I procured means to continue my journey on to Alexandria, and thence to England. To all enquirers I said the girl was a patient of mine who was suffering from epileptic trances, and the presence of Zaroba, who filled her post admirably as nurse and attendant, was sufficient to stop the mouths of would−be scandal−mongers. I chose my residence in London, because it is the largest city in the world, and the one most suited to pursue a course of study in, without one's motives becoming generally known. One can be more alone in London than in a desert if one chooses. Now, you know all. You have seen the dead Lilith,—the human chrysalis of the moth,—but there is a living Lilith too—the Soul of Lilith, which is partly free and partly captive, but in both conditions is always the servant of my Will!"

Féraz looked at him in mingled awe and fear.

"El−Râmi,"—he said tremulously—"What you tell me is wonderful—terrible—almost beyond belief,—but, I know something of your power and I must believe you. Only—surely you are in error when you say that Lilith is dead? How can she be dead, if you have given her life?"

"Can you call that life which sleeps perpetually and will not wake?" demanded El−Râmi.

"Would you have her wake?" asked Féraz, his heart beating quickly.

El−Râmi bent his burning gaze upon him.

"Not so,—for if she wakes, in the usual sense of waking—she dies a second death from which there can be no recall. There is the terror of the thing. Zaroba's foolish teaching, and your misguided yielding to her temptation, might have resulted in the fatal end to my life's best and grandest work. But—I forgive you;—you did not know,—and she—she did not wake."

"She did not wake," echoed Féraz softly. "No—but—she smiled!"

El−Râmi still kept his eyes fixed upon him,—there was an odd sense of irritation in his usually calm and coldly balanced organization—a feeling he strove in vain to subdue. She smiled!—the exquisite Lilith—the life−in−death Lilith smiled, because Féraz had called her by some endearing name! Surely it could not be!—and smothering his annoyance, he turned towards the writing−table and feigned to arrange some books and papers there.

"El−Râmi—" murmured Féraz again, but timidly—"If she was a child when she died as you say—how is it she has grown to womanhood?"

"By artificial vitality,"—said El−Râmi—"As a flower is forced under a hot−house,—and with no more trouble, and less consciousness of effort than a rose under a glass dome."

"Then she lives,—" declared Féraz impetuously. "She lives,—artificial or natural, she **has** vitality. Through your power she exists, and if you chose, oh, if you chose, El−Râmi, you could wake her to the fullest life—to perfect consciousness,—to joy—to love!—Oh, she is in a blessed trance—you cannot call her **dead!**"

El−Râmi turned upon him abruptly.

"Be silent!" he said sternly—"I read your thoughts,—control them, if you are wise! You echo Zaroba's prating—Zaroba's teaching. Lilith is dead, I tell you,—dead to you,—and, in the sense **you** mean—dead to me."

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER this, a long silence fell between them. Féraz sat moodily in his chair, conscious of a certain faint sense of shame. He was sorry that he had wilfully trespassed upon his brother's great secret,—and yet there was an angry pride in him,—a vague resentment at having been kept so long in ignorance of this wonderful story of Lilith,—which made him reluctant to acknowledge himself in the wrong. Moreover, his mind was possessed and haunted by Lilith's face,—the radiant face that looked like that of an angel sleeping,—and perplexedly thinking over all he had heard, he wondered if he would ever again have the opportunity of beholding what had seemed to him the incarnation of ideal loveliness. Surely yes!—Zaroba would be his friend,—Zaroba would let him gaze his fill on that exquisite form—would let him touch that little, ethereally delicate hand, as soft as velvet and as white as snow! Absorbed in these reflections, he scarcely noticed that El−Râmi had moved away from him to the writing−table, and that he now sat there in his ebony chair, turning over the leaves of the curious Arabic volume which Féraz had had such trouble in deciphering on the previous day. The silence in the room continued; outside there was the perpetual sullen roar of raging restless London,—now and again the sharp chirruping of contentious sparrows, arguing over a crumb of food as parliamentary agitators chatter over a crumb of difference, stirred the quiet air. Féraz stretched himself and yawned,—he was getting sleepy, and as he realized this fact, he nervously attributed it to his brother's influence, and sprang up abruptly, rubbing his eyes and pushing his thick hair from his brows. At his hasty movement, El−Râmi turned slowly towards him with a grave yet kindly smile.

"Well, Féraz"—he said—"Do you still think me 'wicked' now you know all? Speak frankly—do not be afraid."

Féraz paused, irresolute.

"I do not know what to think—" he answered hesitatingly,—"Your experiment is of course wonderful,—but—as I said before—to me, it seems terrible."

"Life is terrible—" said El−Râmi—"Death is terrible,—Love is terrible,—God is terrible. All Nature's pulses beat to the note of Terror,—terror of the Unknown that May Be,—terror of the Known that Is!"

His deep voice rang with impressive solemnity through the room,—his eyes were full of that strange lurid gleam which gave them the appearance of having a flame behind them.

"Come here, Féraz," he continued—"Why do you stand at so cautious a distance from me? With that brave show−dagger at your belt, are you a coward? Silly lad!—I swear to you my influence shall not touch you unless I warn you of it beforehand. Come!"

Féraz obeyed, but slowly and with an uncertain step. His brother looked at him attentively as he came,—then, with a gesture indicating the volume before him, he said—"You found this book on my table yesterday and tried to read it,—is it not so?"

"I did."

"Well, and have you learnt anything from it?" pursued El−Râmi with a strange smile.

"Yes. I learnt how the senses may be deceived by trickery—" retorted Féraz with some heat and quickness—"and how a clever magnetizer—like yourself—may fool the eye and delude the ear with sights and sounds that have no existence."

"Precisely. Listen to this passage;"—and El−Râmi read aloud—'"The King when he had any affair, assembled the Priests without the City Memphis, and the People met together in the streets of the said City. Then they (the Priests) made their entrance one after another in order, the drum beating before them to bring the people together; and every−one made some miraculous discovery of his Magick and Wisdom. One had, **to their thinking who looked on him**, his face surrounded with a light like that of the Sun, so that none could look earnestly upon him. Another seemed clad with a Robe beset with precious stones of divers colours, green, red, or yellow, or wrought with gold. Another came mounted on a Lion compassed with Serpents like Girdles. Another came in covered with a canopy or pavilion of Light. Another appeared surrounded with Fire turning about him, so as that nobody durst come near him. Another was seen with dreadful birds perching about his head and shaking their wings like black eagles and vultures. In fine, everyone did what was taught him;—**yet all was but Apparition and Illusion without any reality,** insomuch that when they came up to the King they spake thus to him:—**You imagined that it was so−and−so,—but the truth is that it was such or such a thing.** '* The A B C of magnetism is contained in the last words—" continued El−Râmi lifting his eyes from the book,—"The merest tyro in the science

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*** This remarkable passage on the admitted effects of hypnotism as practised by the priests of ancient Egypt, will be found in an old history of the building of the Pyramids entitled—"The Egyptian Account of the Pyramids"—Written in the Arabic by Murtadi the son of Gaphiphus—date about 1400.**

knows that; and also realizes that the Imagination is the centre of both physical and bodily health or disease. And did you learn nothing more?"

Féraz made a half−angry gesture in the negative.

"What a pity!"—and his brother surveyed him with good−humoured compassion—"To know how a 'miracle' is done is one thing—but to do it is quite another matter. Now let me recall to your mind what I previously told you—that from this day henceforth, I forbid you to make any allusion to the subject of my work. I forbid you to mention the name of Lilith,—and I forbid you to approach or to enter the room where her body lies. You understand me?—I forbid you!"

Féraz's eyes flashed angry opposition, and he drew himself up with a haughty self−assertiveness.

"You forbid me!" he echoed proudly—"What right have you to forbid me anything? And how if I refuse to obey?"

El−Râmi rose and confronted him, one hand resting on the big Arabic volume.

"You will not refuse—" he said—"because I will take no refusal. You will obey, because I exact your obedience. Moreover, you will swear by the Most Holy Name of God, that you will never, either to me, or to any other living soul, speak a syllable concerning my life's greatest experiment,—you will swear that the name of Lilith shall never pass your lips—"

But here Féraz interrupted him.

"El−Râmi, I will **not** swear!" he cried desperately—"The name of Lilith is sweet to me!—why should I not utter it,—why should I not sing of it—why should I not even remember it in my prayers?"

A terrible look darkened El−Râmi's countenance; his brows contracted darkly, and his lips drew together in a close resolute line.

"There are a thousand reasons why—" he said in low fierce accents,—"One is, that the soul of Lilith and the body of Lilith are **mine**, and that you have no share in their possession. She does not need your songs—still less has she need of your prayers. Rash fool!—you shall forget the name of Lilith—and you **shall** swear, as I command you. Resist my will if you can,—now!—I warn you in time!"

He seemed to grow in height as he spoke,—his eyes blazed ominously, and Féraz, meeting that lightning−like glance, knew how hopeless it would be for him to attempt to oppose such an intense force as was contained in this man's mysterious organization. He tried his best,—but in vain,—with every second he felt his strength oozing out of him—his power of resistance growing less and less.

"Swear!" said El−Râmi imperatively—"Swear in God's Name to keep my secret—swear by Christ's Death!—swear on **this!**"

And he held out a small golden crucifix.

Mechanically, but still devoutly, Féraz instantly dropped on one knee, and kissed the holy emblem.

"I swear!" he said—but as he spoke, the rising tears were in his throat, and he murmured—"Forget the name of Lilith!—never!"

"In God's Name!" said El−Râmi.

"In God's Name!"

"By Christ's Death!"

Féraz trembled. In the particular form of religion professed by himself and his brother, this was the most solemn and binding vow that could be taken. And his voice was faint and unsteady as he repeated it—

"By Christ's Death!"

El−Râmi put aside the crucifix.

"That is well;—" he said, in mild accents which contrasted agreeably with his previous angry tone—"Such oaths are chronicled in heaven, remember,—and whoever breaks his sworn word is accursed of the gods. But

you,—you will keep your vow, Féraz,—and ... you will also forget the name of Lilith,—if I choose!"

Féraz stood mute and motionless,—he would have said something, but somehow words failed him to express what was in his mind. He was angry, he said to himself,—he had sworn a foolish oath against his will, and he had every right to be angry—very angry, but with whom? Surely not with his brother—his friend,—his protector for so many years? As he thought of this, shame and penitence and old affection grew stronger and welled up in his heart, and he moved slowly towards El−Râmi, with hands outstretched.

"Forgive me;"—he said humbly. "I have offended you—I am sorry. I will show my repentance in whatever way you please,—but do not, El−Râmi—do not ask me, do not force me to forget the name of Lilith,—it is like a note in music, and it cannot do you harm that I should think of it sometimes. For the rest I will obey you faithfully,—and for what is past, I ask your pardon."

El−Râmi took his hands and pressed them affectionately in his own.

"No sooner asked than granted—" he said—"You are young, Féraz,—and I am not so harsh as you perhaps imagine. The impulsiveness of youth should always be quickly pardoned—seeing how gracious a thing youth is, and how short a time it lasts. Keep your poetic dreams and fancies—take the sweetness of thought without its bitterness,—and if you are content to have it so, let me still help to guide your fate. If not, why, nothing is easier than to part company, part as good friends and brethren always,—you on your chosen road and I on mine,—who knows but that after all you might not be happier so?"

Féraz lifted his dark eyes, heavy with unshed tears.

"Would you send me from you?" he asked falteringly.

"Not I! I would not send you,—but you might wish to go."

"Never!" said Féraz resolutely—"I feel that I must stay with you—till the end."

He uttered the last words with a sigh, and El−Râmi looked at him curiously.

"Till the end?"—he repeated—"What end?"

"Oh, the end of life or death or anything;" replied Féraz with forced lightness—"There must surely be an end somewhere, as there was a beginning."

"That is rather a doubtful problem!" said El−Râmi—"The great question is, was there ever a Beginning? and will there ever be an End?"

Féraz gave a languid gesture.

"You inquire too far,"—he said wearily— "I always think you inquire too far. I cannot follow you—I am tired. Do you want anything?—can I do anything? or may I go to my room? I want to be alone for a little while, just to consider quietly what my life is, and what I can make of it."

"A truly wise and philosophical subject of meditation!" observed El−Râmi, and he smiled kindly and held out his hand. Féraz laid his own slender fingers somewhat listlessly in that firm warm palm;—then—with a sudden start, looked eagerly around him. The air seemed to have grown denser,—there was a delicious scent of roses in the room, and hush! ... What entrancing voices were those that sang in the distance? He listened absorbed;—the harmonies were very sweet and perfect—almost he thought he could distinguish words. Loosening his hand from his brother's clasp, the melody seemed to grow fainter and fainter,—recognising this, he roused himself with a quick movement, his eyes flashing with a sudden gleam of defiance.

"More magic music!" he said—"I hear the sound of singing, and you **know** that I hear it! I understand!—it is **imagined** music—your work, El−Râmi,—your skill. It is wonderful, beautiful,—and you are the most marvellous man on earth!—you should have been a priest of old Egypt! Yes—I am tired—I will rest;—I will accept the dreams you offer me for what they are worth,—but I must remember that there are realities as well as dreams,—and I shall not forget the name of—Lilith!"

He smiled audaciously, looking as graceful as a pictured Adonis in the careless yet proud attitude he had unconsciously assumed,—then with a playful yet affectionate salutation he moved to the doorway.

"Call me if you want me," he said.

"I shall not want you;"—replied his brother, regarding him steadily.

The door opened and closed again,—Féraz was gone.

Shutting up the great volume in front of him, El−Râmi rested his arms upon it, and stared into vacancy with darkly−knitted brows.

"What premonition of evil is there in the air?" he muttered—"What restless emotion is at work within me? Are

the Fates turning against me?—and am I after all nothing but the merest composition of vulgar matter—a weak human wretch capable of being swayed by changeful passions? What is it? What am I that I should vex my spirit thus—all because Lilith smiled at the sound of a voice that was not mine!"

CHAPTER XV.

JUST then there came a light tap at his door. He opened it,—and Zaroba stood before him. No repentance for her fault of disobedience and betrayal of trust, clouded that withered old face of hers,—her deep−set dark eyes glittered with triumph, and her whole aspect was one of commanding, and almost imperious dignity. In fact, she made such an ostentatious show of her own self−importance in her look and manner that El−Râmi stared at her for a moment in haughty amazement at what he considered her effrontery in thus boldly facing him after her direct violation of his commands. He eyed her up and down—she returned him glance for glance unquailingly.

"Let me come in—" she said in her strong harsh voice—"I make no doubt but that the poor lad Féraz has told you his story—now, as God liveth, you must hear mine."

El−Râmi turned upon his heel with a contemptuous movement, and went back to his own chair by the writing−table. Zaroba, paying no heed to the wrath conveyed by this mute action, stalked in also, and shutting the door after her, came and stood close beside him.

"Write down what you think of me—" she said, pointing with her yellow forefinger at the pens and paper—"Write the worst. I have betrayed my trust. That is true. I have disobeyed your commands after keeping them for six long years. True again. What else?"

El−Râmi fixed his eyes upon her, a world of indignation and reproach in their brilliant depths, and snatching up a pencil he wrote on a slip of paper rapidly—

"Nothing else—nothing more than treachery! You are unworthy of your sacred task you are false to your sworn fidelity."

Zaroba read the lines as quickly as he wrote them, but when she came to the last words she made a swift gesture of denial and drew herself up haughtily.

"No—not false!" she said passionately—"Not false to **you**, El−Râmi, I swear! I would slay myself rather than do you wrong. You saved my life, though my life was not worth saving, and for that gentle deed I would pour out every drop of my blood to requite you. No, no! Zaroba is not false—she is true!"

She tossed up her arms wildly,—then suddenly folding them tight across her chest, she dropped her voice to a gentler and more appealing tone.

"Hear me, El−Râmi!—Hear me, wise man and Master of the magic of the East!—I have done well for you;—well! I have disobeyed you for your own sake,—I have betrayed my trust that you may discover how and where you may find your best reward. I have sinned with the resolved intent to make you happy,—as God liveth, I speak truth from my heart and soul!"

El−Râmi turned towards her, his face expressing curiosity in spite of himself. He was very pale, and outwardly he was calm enough—but his nerves were on the rack of suspense—he wondered what sudden frenzied idea had possessed this woman that she should comport herself as though she held some strange secret of which the very utterance might move heaven and earth to wonderment. Controlling his feelings with an effort, he wrote again—

"There exists no reason for disloyalty. Your excuses avail nothing—let me hear no more of them. Tell me of Lilith—what news?"

"News!" repeated Zaroba scornfully—"What news should there be? She breathes and sleeps as she has breathed and slept always—she has not stirred. There is no harm done by my bidding Féraz look on her,—no change is wrought except in **you**, El−Râmi!—except in you!"

Half springing from his chair he confronted her—then recollecting her deafness, he bit his lips angrily and sank back again with an assumed air of indifference.

"You have heard Féraz—" pursued Zaroba, with that indescribable triumph of hers lighting up her strong old face—"You must now hear me. I thank the gods that my ears are closed to the sound of human voices, and that neither reproach nor curse can move me to dismay. And I am ignorant of **your** magic, El−Râmi,—the magic that chills the blood and sends the spirit flitting through the land of dreams,—the only magic **I** know is the magic of the heart—of the passions,—a natural witchcraft that conquers the world!"

She waved her arms to and fro—then crossing them on her bosom, she made a profound half−mocking salutation.

"Wise El−Râmi Zarânos!" she said. "Proud ruler of the arts and sciences that govern Nature,—have you ever,

with all your learning, taken the measure of your own passions, and slain them so utterly that they shall never rise up again? They sleep at times, like the serpents of the desert, coiled up in many a secret place,—but at the touch of some unwary heel, some casual falling pebble, they unwind their lengths−they raise their glittering heads, and sting! I, Zaroba, have felt them here"—and she pressed her hands more closely on her breast—"I have felt their poison in my blood—sweet poison, sweeter than life!—their stings have given me all the joy my days have ever known. But it is not of myself that I should speak—it is of you—of you, whose life is lonely, and for whom the coming years hold forth no prospect of delight. When I lay dying in the desert and you restored me to strength again, I swore to serve you with fidelity. As God liveth, El−Râmi, I have kept my vow,—and in return for the life you gave me I bid you take what is yours to claim—the love of Lilith!"

El−Râmi rose out of his chair, white to the lips, and his hand shook. If he could have concentrated his inward forces at that moment, he would have struck Zaroba dumb by one effort of his will, and so put an end to her undesired eloquence,—but something, he knew not what, disturbed the centre of his self−control, and his thoughts were in a whirl. He despised himself for the unusual emotion which seized him—inwardly he was furious with the garrulous old woman,—but outwardly he could only make her an angry imperative sign to be silent.

"Nay, I will not cease from speaking—" said Zaroba imperturbably—"for all has to be said now, or never. The love of Lilith! imagine it, El−Râmi!—the clinging of her young white arms—the kisses of her sweet red mouth,—the open glances of her innocent eyes—all this is yours, if you but say the word. Listen! For six and more long years I have watched her,—and I have watched **you** . She has slept the sleep of death−in−life, for you have willed it so,—and in that sleep, she has imperceptibly passed from childhood to womanhood. You—cold as a man of bronze or marble,—have made of her nothing but a 'subject' for your science,—and never a breath of love or longing on your part, or even admiration for her beauty, has stirred the virgin−trance in which she lies. And I have marvelled at it—I have thought—and I have prayed;—the gods have answered me, and now I know!"

She clapped her hands ecstatically, and then went on.

"The child Lilith died,—but you, El−Râmi, you caused her to live again. And she lives still—yes, though it may suit your fancy to declare her dead. She is a woman—you are a man;—you dare not keep her longer in that living death—you dare not doom her to perpetual darkness!—the gods would curse you for such cruelty, and who may abide their curse? I, Zaroba, have sworn it—Lilith shall know the joys of love!—and you, El−Râmi Zarânos, shall be her lover!—and for this holy end I have employed the talisman which alone sets fire to the sleeping passions..." and she craned her neck forward and almost hissed the word in his ear—'Jealousy!'"

El−Râmi smiled—a cold derisive smile, which implied the most utter contempt for the whole of Zaroba's wild harangue. She, however, went on undismayed, and with increasing excitement—

"Jealousy!" she cried—"The little asp is in your soul already, proud El−Râmi Zarânos, and why? Because another's eyes have looked on Lilith! This was my work! It was I who led Féraz into her chamber,—it was I who bade him kneel beside her as she slept,—it was I who let him touch her hand, —and though I could not hear his voice I know he called upon her to awaken. In vain!—he might as well have called the dead—I knew she would not stir for him—her very breath belongs to you. But I—I let him gaze upon her beauty and worship it,—all his young soul was in his eyes—he looked and looked again and **loved** what he beheld! And mark me yet further, El−Râmi,—I saw her smile when Féraz took her hand,—so, though she did not move, she **felt;** she felt a touch that was not yours,—not yours, El−Râmi!—as God liveth, she is not quite so much your own as once she was!"

As she said this and laughed in that triumphant way, El−Râmi advanced one step towards her with a fierce movement as though he would have thrust her from the room,—checking himself, however, he seized the pencil again and wrote—

"I have listened to you with more patience than you deserve. You are an ignorant woman and foolish—your fancies have no foundation whatever in fact. Your disobedience might have ruined my life's work,—as it is, I dare say some mischief has been done. Return to your duties, and take heed how you trespass against my command in future. If you dare to speak to me on this subject again I will have you shipped back to your own land and left there, as friendless and as unprovided for as you were when I saved you from death by famine. Go—and let me hear no more foolishness."

Zaroba read, and her face darkened and grew weary—but the pride and obstinacy of her own convictions remained written on every line of her features. She bowed her head resignedly, however, and said in slow even tones—

"El−Râmi Zarânos is wise,—El−Râmi Zarânos is master. But let him remember the words of Zaroba. Zaroba is also skilled in the ways and the arts of the East,—and the voice of Fate speaks sometimes to the lowest as well as to the highest. There are the laws of Life and the laws of Death—but there are also the laws of Love. Without the laws of Love, the Universe would cease to be,—it is for El−Râmi Zarânos to prove himself stronger than the Universe,—if he can!"

She made the usual obsequious "salaam" common to Eastern races, and then with a swift, silent movement left the room, closing the door noiselessly behind her. El−Râmi stood where she had left him, idly tearing up the scraps of paper on which he had written his part of the conversation,—he was hardly conscious of thought, so great were his emotions of surprise and self−contempt.

"'O what a rogue and peasant−slave am I!'" he muttered, quoting his favourite "Hamlet"—"Why did I not paralyze her tongue before she spoke? Where had fled my force,—what became of my skill? Surely I could have struck her down before me with the speed of a lightning−flash—only−she is a woman—and old. Strange how these feminine animals always harp on the subject of love, as though it were the Be−all and End−all of everything. The love of Lilith! Oh fool! The love of a corpse kept breathing by artificial means! And what of the Soul of Lilith? Can It love? Can It hate? Can It even feel? Surely not. It is an ethereal transparency,—a delicate film which takes upon itself the reflex of all existing things without experiencing personal emotion. Such is the Soul, as I believe in it—an immortal Essence, in itself formless, yet capable of taking all forms,—ignorant of the joys or pains of feeling, yet reflecting all shades of sensation as a crystal reflects all colours in the prism. This, and no more."

He paced up and down the room—and a deep involuntary sigh escaped him.

"No—" he murmured, as though answering some inward query—"No, I will not go to her now—not till the appointed time. I resolved on an absence of forty−eight hours, and forty−eight hours it shall be. Then I will go,—and she will tell me all—I shall know the full extent of the mischief done. And so Féraz 'looked and looked again, and **loved** what he beheld!' Love! The very word seems like a desecrating blot on the virgin soul of Lilith!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FÉRAZ meanwhile was fast asleep in his own room. He had sought to be alone for the purpose of thinking quietly and connectedly over all he had heard,—but no sooner had he obtained the desired solitude than a sudden and heavy drowsiness overcame him, such as he was unable to resist, and throwing himself on his bed, he dropped into a profound slumber, which deepened as the minutes crept on. The afternoon wore slowly away,—sunset came and passed,—the coming shadows lengthened, and just as the first faint star peeped out in the darkening skies he awoke, startled to find it so late. He sprang from his couch, bewildered and vexed with himself,—it was time for supper, he thought, and El−Râmi must be waiting. He hastened to the study, and there he found his brother conversing with a gentleman,—no other than Lord Melthorpe, who was talking in a loud cheerful voice, which contrasted oddly with El−Râmi's slow musical accents, that ever had a note of sadness in them. When Féraz made his hurried entrance, his eyes humid with sleep, yet dewily brilliant,—his thick dark hair tangled in rough curls above his brows, Lord Melthorpe stared at him in honestly undisguised admiration, and then glanced at El−Râmi inquiringly.

"My brother, Féraz Zarânos—" said El−Râmi, readily performing the ceremony of introduction—"Féraz, this is Lord Melthorpe,—you have heard me speak of him."

Féraz bowed with his usual perfect grace, and Lord Melthorpe shook hands with him.

"Upon my word!", he said good−humouredly, "this young gentleman reminds one of the 'Arabian Nights,' El−Râmi! He looks like one of those amazing fellows who always had remarkable adventures; Prince Ahmed, or the son of a king, or something—don't you know?"

El−Râmi smiled gravely.

"The Eastern dress is responsible for that idea in your mind, no doubt—" he replied—"Féraz wears it in the house, because he moves more easily and is more comfortable in it than in the regulation British attire, which really is the most hideous mode of garb in the world. Englishmen are among the finest types of the human race, but their dress does them scant justice."

"You are right—we're all on the same tailor's pattern—and a frightful pattern it is!" and his lordship put up his eyeglass to survey Féraz once more, the while he thought—"Devilish handsome fellow!—would make quite a sensation in the room—new sort of craze for my lady." Aloud he said—"Pray bring your brother with you on Tuesday evening—my wife will be charmed."

"Féraz never goes into society—" replied El−Râmi—"But of course, if you insist—"

"Oh, I never insist—" declared Lord Melthorpe, laughing—"**You** are the man for insisting, not I. But I shall take it as a favour if he will accompany you."

"You hear, Féraz—" and El−Râmi looked at his brother inquiringly—"Lord Melthorpe invites you to a great reception next Tuesday evening. Would you like to go?"

Féraz glanced from one to the other half smilingly, half doubtfully.

"Yes, I should like it," he said at last.

"Then we shall expect you,—" and Lord Melthorpe rose to take his leave,—"It's a sort of diplomatic and official affair—fellows will look in either before or after the Foreign Office crush, which is on the same evening, and orders and decorations will be in full force, I believe. Oh, by the way, Lady Melthorpe begged me to ask you most particularly to wear Oriental dress."

"I shall obey her ladyship;"—and El−Râmi smiled a little satirically—the character of the lady in question was one that always vaguely amused him.

"And your brother will do the same, I hope?"

"Assuredly!" and El−Râmi shook hands with his visitor, bidding Féraz escort him to the door. When he had gone, Féraz sprang into the study again with all the eager impetuosity of a boy.

"What is it like—a reception in England?" he asked—"And why does Lord Melthorpe ask me?"

"I cannot imagine!" returned his brother dryly—"Why do you want to go?"

"I should like to see life;"—said Féraz.

"See life!" echoed El−Râmi somewhat disdainfully—"What do you mean? Don't you 'see life' as it is?"

"No!" answered Féraz quickly—"I see men and women—but I don't know how they live, and I don't know

what they do."

"They live in a perpetual effort to outreach and injure one another"—said El−Râmi, "and all their forces are concentrated on bringing themselves into notice. That is how they live,—that is what they do. It is not a dignified or noble way of living, but it is all they care about. You will see illustrations of this at Lord Melthorpe's reception. You will find the woman with the most diamonds giving herself peacock−like airs over the woman who has fewest,—you will see the snob−millionaire treated with greater consideration by everyone than the born gentleman who happens to have little of this world's wealth. You will find that no one thinks of putting himself out to give personal pleasure to another,—you will hear the same commonplace observations from every mouth,—you will discover a lack of wit, a dearth of kindness, a scarcity of cheerfulness, and a most desperate want of tact in every member of the whole fashionable assemblage. And so you shall 'see life'—if you think you can discern it there. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof!—meanwhile let us have supper,—time flies, and I have work to do to−night that must be done."

Féraz busied himself nimbly about his usual duties—the frugal meal was soon prepared and soon dispensed with, and at its close, the brothers sat in silence, El−Râmi watching Féraz with a curious intentness, because he felt for the first time in his life that he was not quite master of the young man's thoughts. Did he still remember the name of Lilith? El−Râmi had willed that every trace of it should vanish from his memory during that long afternoon sleep in which the lad had indulged himself unresistingly,—but the question was now—Had that force of will gained the victory? He, El−Râmi, could not tell—not yet—but he turned the problem over and over in his mind with sombre irritation and restlessness. Presently Féraz broke the silence. Drawing from his vest−pocket a small manuscript book, and raising his eyes, he said—

"Do you mind hearing something I wrote last night? I don't quite know how it came to me—I think I must have been dreaming—"

"Read on;"—said El−Râmi—"If it be poesy, then its origin cannot be explained. Were you able to explain it, it would become prose."

"I dare say the lines are not very good,"—went on Féraz diffidently—"yet they are the true expression of a thought that is in me. And whether I owe it to you, or to my own temperament, I have visions now and then—visions not only of love, but of fame—strange glories that I almost realize, yet cannot grasp. And there is a sadness and futility in it all that grieves me ... everything is so vague and swift and fleeting. Yet if love, as you say, be a mere chimera,—surely there is such a thing as Fame?"

"There is—" and El−Râmi's eyes flashed, then darkened again—"There is the applause of this world, which may mean the derision of the next. Read on!"

Féraz obeyed. "I call it for the present 'The Star of Destiny'"—he said; and then his mellifluous voice, rich and well modulated, gave flowing musical enunciation to the following lines:

The soft low plash of waves upon the shore,
  Mariners' voices singing out at sea,
The sighing of the wind that evermore
  Chants to my spirit mystic melody,—
These are the mingling sounds I vaguely hear
  As o'er the darkening misty main I gaze,
Where one fair planet, warmly bright and clear
  Pours from its heart a rain of silver rays.

O patient Star of Love! in yon pale sky
  What absolute serenity is thine!
Beneath thy stedfast, half−reproachful eye
  Large Ocean chafes,—and white with bitter brine,
Heaves restlessly, and ripples from the light
  To darker shadows,—ev'n as noble thought

Recoils from human passion, to a night
Of splendid gloom by its own mystery wrought.

"What made you think of the sea?" interrupted El−Râmi.
Féraz looked up dreamily.
"I don't know,"—he said.
"Well!—go on!"
Féraz continued,—

O searching Star, I bring my grief to thee,—
Regard it, Thou, as pitying angels may
Regard a tortured saint,—and, down to me
Send one bright glance, one heart−assuring ray
From that high throne where thou in sheeny state
Dost hang, thought−pensive, 'twixt the heaven and earth;
Thou, sure, dost know the secret of my Fate,
For thou did'st shine upon my hour of birth.

O Star, from whom the clouds asunder roll,
Tell this poor spirit pent in dying flesh,
This fighting, working, praying, prisoned soul.
Why it is trapped and strangled in the mesh
Of foolish Life and Time? Its wild young voice
Calls for release, unanswered and unstilled,
It sought not out this world,—it had no choice
Of other worlds where glory is fulfilled.

How hard to live at all, if living be
The thing it seems to us!—the few brief years
Made up of toil and sorrow, where we see
No joy without companionship of tears,—
What is the artist's fame?—the golden chords
Of rapt musician? or the poet's themes?
All incomplete!—the nailed down coffin boards
Are mocking sequels to the grandest dreams.

"That is not your creed,"—said El−Râmi with a searching look.

Féraz sighed. "No—it is not my actual creed—but it is my frequent thought."

"A thought unworthy of you,"—said his brother—"There is nothing left 'incomplete' in the whole Universe—and there is no sequel possible to Creation."

"Perhaps not,—but again perhaps there may be a sequel beyond all imagination or comprehension. And surely you must admit that some things are left distressingly incomplete. Shelley's 'Fragments' for instance, Keats's 'Hyperion'—Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony—"

"Incomplete **here**—yes—;" agreed El−Râmi—"But—finished elsewhere, as surely as day is day, and night is night. There is nothing lost,—no, not so much as the lightest flicker of a thought in a man's brain,—nothing wasted or forgotten,—not even so much as an idle word. **We** forget—but the forces of Nature are non−oblivious. All is chronicled and registered—all is scientifically set down in plain figures that no mistake may be made in the

final reckoning."

"You really think that?—you really believe that?" asked Féraz, his eyes dilating eagerly.

"I do, most positively;"—said El−Râmi—"It is a Fact which Nature most potently sets forth, and insists upon. But is there no more of your verse?"

"Yes—" and Féraz read on—

O, we are sorrowful, my Soul and I:
  We war together fondly—yet we pray
For separate roads,—the Body fain would die
  And sleep i' the ground, low−hidden from the day—
The Soul erect, its large wings cramped for room,
  Doth pantingly and passionately rebel,
Against this strange, uncomprehended doom
  Called Life, where nothing is, or shall be well.

"Good!"—murmured El−Râmi softly—"Good—and true!"

Hear me, my Star!—star of my natal hour,
  Thou calm unmoved one amid all clouds!
Give me my birth−right,—the imperial sway
  Of Thought supreme above the common crowds,—
O let me feel thy swift compelling beam
  Drawing me upwards to a goal divine;
Fulfil thy promise, O thou glittering Dream,
  And let one crown of victory be mine;

Let me behold this world recede and pass
  Like shifting mist upon a stormy coast
Or vision in a necromancer's glass;—
  For I, 'mid perishable earth can boast
Of proven Immortality,—can reach
  Glories ungrasped by minds of lower tone;—
Thus, in a silence vaster than all speech,
  I follow thee, my Star of Love, alone!

He ceased. El−Râmi, who had listened attentively, resting his head on one hand, now lifted his eyes and looked at his young brother with an expression of mingled curiosity and compassion.

"The verses are good;"—he said at last—"good and perfectly rhythmical, but surely they have a touch of arrogance?—

"I 'mid perishable earth can boast
Of proven Immortality."

What do you mean by 'proven' Immortality? Where are your proofs?"

"I have them in my inner consciousness;" replied Féraz slowly—"But to put them into the limited language spoken by mortals is impossible. There are existing emotions—existing facts, which can never be rendered into common speech. God is a Fact—but He cannot be explained or described."

El−Râmi was silent,—a slight frown contracted his dark even brows.

"You are beginning to think too much"—he observed, rising from his chair as he spoke—"Do not analyse yourself, Féraz, ... self−analysis is the temper of the age, but it engenders distrust and sorrow. Your poem is excellent, but it breathes of sadness,—I prefer your 'star' songs which are so full of joy. To be wise is to be happy,—to be happy is to be wise—"

A loud rat−tat at the street−door interrupted him. Féraz sprang up to answer the imperative summons, and returned with a telegram. El−Râmi opened and read it with astonished eyes, his face growing suddenly pale.

"He will be here to−morrow night!" he ejaculated in a whisper—"To−morrow night! He, the saint—the king—here to−morrow night! Why should he come?—What would he have with me?"

His expression was one of dazed bewilderment, and Féraz looked at him inquiringly.

"Any bad news?" he asked—"Who is it that is coming?"

El−Râmi recollected himself, and folding up the telegram, thrust it in his breast−pocket.

"A poor monk who is travelling hither on a secret mission solicits my hospitality for the night"—he replied hurriedly—"That is all. He will be here to−morrow."

Féraz stood silent, an incredulous smile in his fine eyes.

"Why should you stoop to deceive me, El−Râmi my brother?" he said gently at last—"Surely it is not one of your ways to perfection? Why try to disguise the truth from me?—I am not of a treacherous nature. If I guess rightly, this 'poor monk' is the Supreme Head of the Brethren of the Cross, from whose mystic band you were dismissed for a breach of discipline. What harm is there in my knowing of this?"

El−Râmi's hand clenched, and his eyes had that dark and terrible look in them that Féraz had learned to fear, but his voice was very calm.

"Who told you?" he asked.

"One of the monks at Cyprus long ago, when I went on your errand"—replied Féraz; "He spoke of your wisdom, your power, your brilliant faculties, in genuine regret that all for some slight matter in which you would not bend your pride, you had lost touch with their various centres of action in all parts of the globe. He said no more than this,—and no more than this I know."

"You know quite enough,"—said El−Râmi quietly—"If I **have** lost touch with their modes of work, I have gained insight beyond their reach. And,—I am sorry I did not at once say the truth to you—it **is** their chief leader who comes here to−morrow. No doubt,"—and he smiled with a sense of triumph—"no doubt he seeks for fresh knowledge, such as I alone can give him."

"I thought," said Féraz in a low half−awed tone—"that he was one of those who are wise with the wisdom of the angels?"

"If there **are** angels!" said El−Râmi with a touch of scorn—"He is wise in faith alone—he believes and he imagines,—and there is no question as to the strange power he has obtained through the simplest means,—but I—I have no faith!—I seek to **prove** —I work to **know**,—and my power is as great as his, though it is won in a different way."

Féraz said nothing, but sat down to the piano, allowing his hands to wander over the keys in a dreamy fashion that sounded like the far−off echo of a rippling mountain stream. El−Râmi waited a moment, listening,—then glanced at his watch—it was growing late.

"Good−night, Féraz;"—he said in gentle accents—"I shall want nothing more this evening. I am going to my work."

"Good−night,"—answered Féraz with equal gentleness, as he went on playing. His brother opened and closed the door softly;—he was gone.

As soon as he found himself alone, Féraz pressed the pedal of his instrument so that the music pealed through the room in rich salvos of sound—chord after chord rolled grandly forth, and sweet ringing notes came throbbing from under his agile finger−tips, the while he said aloud, with a mingling of triumph and tenderness—

"Forget! I shall never forget! Does one forget the flowers, the birds, the moonlight, the sound of a sweet song?

Is the world so fair, that I should blot from my mind the fairest thing in it? Not so! My memory may fail me in a thousand things—but let me be tortured, harassed, perplexed with dreams, persuaded by fantasies, I shall never forget the name of—"

He stopped abruptly—a look of pain and terror and effort flashed into his eyes,—his hands fell on the keys of the piano with a discordant jangle,—he stared about him, wondering and afraid.

"The name—the name!" he muttered hoarsely—"A flower's name—an angel's name—the sweetest name I ever heard! How is this?—Am I mad that my lips refuse to utter it? The name—the name of ... My God! my God! I **have** forgotten it!"

And springing from his chair he stood for one instant in mute wrath, incredulity and bewilderment,—then throwing himself down again, he buried his face in his hands, his whole frame trembling with mingled terror and awe at the mystic power of El−Râmi's indomitable Will, which had, he knew, forced him to forget what most he desired to remember.

CHAPTER XVII.

WITHIN the chamber of Lilith all was very still. Zaroba sat there, crouched down in what seemed to be her favourite and accustomed corner, busy with the intricate threadwork which she wove with so much celerity;—the lamp burned brightly,—there were odours of frankincense and roses in the air,—and not so much as the sound of a suppressed sigh or soft breath stirred the deep and almost sacred quiet of the room. The tranced Lilith herself, pale but beautiful, lay calm and still as ever among the glistening satin cushions of her costly couch, and just above her, the purple draperies that covered the walls and ceiling were drawn aside to admit of the opening of a previously−concealed window, through which one or two stars could be seen dimly sparkling in the skies. A white moth, attracted by the light, had flown in by way of this aperture, and was now fluttering heedlessly and aimlessly round the lamp,—but by−and−bye it took a lower and less hazardous course, and finally settled on a shining corner of the cushion that supported Lilith's head. There the fragile insect rested,—now expanding its velvety white wings, now folding them close and extending its delicate feelers to touch and test the glittering fabric on which it found itself at ease,—but never moving from the spot it had evidently chosen for its night's repose. Suddenly, and without sound, El−Râmi entered. He advanced close up to the couch, and looked upon the sleeping girl with an eager, almost passionate intentness. His heart beat quickly;—a singular excitement possessed him, and for once he was unable to analyze his own sensations. Closer and closer he bent over Lilith's exquisite form,—doubtfully and with a certain scorn of himself, he took up a shining tress of her glorious hair and looked at it curiously as though it were something new, strange or unnatural. The little moth, disturbed, flew off the pillow and fluttered about his head in wild alarm, and El−Râmi watched its reckless flight as it made off towards the fatally−attractive lamp again, with meditative eyes, still mechanically stroking that soft lock of Lilith's hair which he held between his fingers.

"Into the light!" he murmured—"Into the very heart of the light!—into the very core of the Fire! That is the end of all ambition—to take wings and plunge so—into the glowing, burning molten Creative Centre—and die for our foolhardiness? Is that all?—or is there more behind? It is a question,—who may answer it?"

He sighed heavily, and leaned more closely over the couch, till the soft scarcely perceptible breath from Lilith's lips touched his cheek warmly like a caress. Observantly, as one might study the parts of a bird or a flower, he noted those lips, how delicately curved, how coral−red they were,—and what a soft rose−tint, like the flush of a pink sunrise on white flowers, was the hue which spread itself waveringly over her cheeks,—till there,—there where the long eyelashes curled up− wards, there were fine shadows,—shadows which suggested light,—such light as must be burning in those sweetly−closed eyes. Then there was the pure, smooth brow, over which little vine−like tendrils of hair caught and clung amorously,—and then—that wondrous wealth of the hair itself which like twin showers of gold, shed light on either side. It was all beautiful,—a wonderful gem of Nature's handiwork,—a masterpiece of form and colour which, but for him, El−Râmi, would long ere this have mouldered away to unsightly ash and bone, in a lonely grave dug hurriedly among the sands of the Syrian desert. He was almost, if not quite, the author of that warm if unnatural vitality that flowed through those azure veins and branching arteries,—he, like the Christ of Galilee, had raised the dead to life,—aye, if he chose, he could say as the Master said to the daughter of Jairus, "Maiden, arise!" and she would obey him—would rise and walk, and smile and speak, and look upon the world,—if he chose! The arrogance of Will burned in his brain;—the pride of power, the majesty of conscious strength made his pulses beat high with triumph beyond that of any king or emperor,—and he gazed down upon the tranced fair form, himself entranced, and all unconscious that Zaroba had come out of her corner, and that she now stood beside him, watching his face with passionate and inquisitive eagerness. Just as he reluctantly lifted himself up from his leaning position he saw her staring at him, and a frown darkened his brows. He made his usual imperative sign to her to leave the room,—a sign she was accustomed to understand and to obey—but this time she remained motionless, fixing her eyes steadily upon him.

"The conqueror shall be conquered, El−Râmi Zarânos—" she said slowly, pointing to the sleeping Lilith—"The victorious master over the forces unutterable, shall yet be overthrown! The work has begun,—the small seed has been sown—the great harvest shall be reaped. For in the history of Heaven itself, certain proud angels rose up and fought for the possession of supreme majesty and power—and they fell,—down−beaten to the darkness,—unforgiven; and are they not in darkness still? Even so must the haughty spirit fall that contends

against God and the Universal Law."

She spoke impressively, and with a certain dignity of manner that gave an added force to her words,—but El−Râmi's impassive countenance showed no sign of having either heard or understood her. He merely repeated his gesture of dismissal, and this time Zaroba obeyed it. Wrapping her flowing robe closely about her, she withdrew, but with evident reluctance, letting the velvet portière fall only by slow degrees behind her, and to the last keeping her dark deep−set eyes fixed on El−Râmi's face. As soon as she had disappeared, he sprang to where the dividing−curtain hid a massive door between the one room and the antechamber,—this door he shut and locked,—then he returned to the couch, and proceeded according to his usual method, to will the wandering spirit of his "subject" into speech.

"Lilith! Lilith!"

As before, he had to wait ere any reply was vouchsafed to him. Impatiently he glanced at the clock, and counted slowly a hundred beats.

"Lilith!"

She turned round towards him, smiled, and murmured something—her lips moved, but whatever they uttered did not reach his ear.

"Lilith! Where are you?"

This time, her voice, though soft, was perfectly distinct.

"Here. Close to you, with your hand on mine."

El−Râmi was puzzled. True, he held her left hand in his own, but she had never described any actual sensation of human touch before.

"Then,—can you see me?" he asked somewhat anxiously.

The answer came sadly.

"No. Bright air surrounds me, and the colours of the air—nothing more."

"You are alone, Lilith?"

Oh, what a sigh came heaving from her breast!

"I am always alone!"

Half remorseful, he heard her. She had complained of solitude before,—and it was a thought he did not wish her to dwell upon. He made haste to speak again.

"Tell me,"—he said—"Where have you been Lilith, and what have you seen?"

There was silence for a minute or two, and she moved restlessly.

"You bade me seek out Hell for you"—she murmured at last—"I have searched but I cannot find it."

Another pause, and she went on.

"You spoke of a strange thing," she said—"A place of punishment, of torture, of darkness, of horror and despair,—there is no such dreary blot on all God's fair Creation. In all the golden spaces of the furthest stars I find no punishment, no pain, no darkness. I can discover nothing save beauty, light, and—Love!"

The last word was uttered softly, and sounded like a note of music, sweet but distant.

El−Râmi listened, bewildered, and in a manner disappointed.

"O Lilith, take heed what you say!" he exclaimed with some passion—"No pain?—no punishment? no darkness? Then this world is Hell and you know naught of it!"

As he said this, she moved uneasily among her pillows,—then, to his amazement, she suddenly sat up of her own accord, and went on speaking, enunciating her words with singular clearness and emphasis, always keeping her eyes closed and allowing her left hand to remain in his.

"I am bound to tell you what I know;"—she said—"But I am unable to tell you what is not true. In God's design I find no evil—no punishment, no death. If there are such things, they must be in your world alone,—they must be Man's work and Man's imaginng."

"Man's work—Man's imagining?" repeated El−Râmi—"And what is Man?"

"God's angel," replied Lilith quickly—"With God's own attribute of Free−Will. He, like his Maker, doth create,—he also doth destroy,—what he elects to do, God will not prevent. Therefore if Man makes Evil, Evil must exist till Man himself destroys it."

This was a deep and strange saying, and El−Râmi pondered over it without speaking.

"In the spaces where I roam," went on Lilith softly—"there is no evil. Those who are the Makers of Life in

yonder fair regions, seek only what is pure. Why should pain exist, or sin be known? I do not understand."

"No"—said El−Râmi bitterly—"You do not understand, because you are yourself too happy,—happiness sees no fault in anything. Oh, you have wandered too far from earth and you forget! The tie that binds you to this planet is over−fragile,—you have lost touch with pain. I would that I could make you feel my thoughts!—for, Lilith, God is cruel, not kind, ... upon God, and God alone, rests the weight of woe that burdens the universe, and for the eternal sorrow of things there is neither reason nor remedy."

Lilith sank back again in a recumbent posture, a smile upon her lips.

"O poor blind eyes!" she murmured—"Sad eyes that are so tired—too tired to bear the light!"

Her voice was so exquisitely pathetic that he was startled by its very gentleness,—his heart gave one fierce bound against his side, and then seemed almost to stand still.

"You pity me?" he asked tremulously.

She sighed. "I pity you"—she answered—"I pity myself."

Almost breathlessly he asked "Why?"

"Because I cannot see you—because you cannot see me. If I could see you—if you could see me as I am, you would know all—you would understand all."

"I do see you, Lilith" he said—"I hold your hand."

"No—not my real hand"—she said—"Only its shadow."

Instinctively he looked at the delicate fingers that lay in his palm—so rosy−tipped and warm. Only the "shadow" of a hand! Then where was its substance?

"It will pass away"—went on Lilith−"like all shadows—but **I** shall remain—not here, not here,—but elsewhere. When will you let me go?"

"Where do you wish to go?" he asked.

"To my friends," she answered swiftly and with eagerness—"They call me often—I hear their voices singing 'Lilith! Lilith!' and sometimes I see them beckoning me—but I cannot reach them. It is cruel, for they love me and you do not,—why will you keep me here unloved so long?"

He trembled and hesitated, fixing his dark eyes on the fair face, which, in spite of its beauty, was to him but as the image of a Sphinx that forever refused to give up its riddle.

"Is love your craving, Lilith?" he asked slowly—"And what is your thought—or dream—of love?"

"Love is no dream;"—she responded—"Love is reality—Love is Life. I am not fully living yet—I hover in the Realms Between, where spirits wait in silence and alone."

He sighed. "Then you are sad, Lilith?"

"No. I am never sad. There is light within my solitude, and the glory of God's beauty everywhere."

El−Râmi gazed down upon her, an expression very like despair shadowing his own features.

"Too far, too far she wends her flight;"—he muttered to himself wearily. "How can I argue on these vague and sublimated utterances! I cannot understand her joy—she cannot understand my pain. Evidently Heaven's language is incomprehensible to mortal ears. And yet;—Lilith!" he called again almost imperiously. "You talk of God as if you knew Him. But I—I know Him not—I have not proved Him,—tell me of His Shape, His Seeming,—if indeed you have the power."

She was silent. He studied her tranquil face intently,—the smile upon it was in very truth divine.

"No answer!" he said with some derision. "Of course,—what answer should there be! What Shape or Seeming should there be to a mere huge blind Force that creates without reason, and destroys without necessity!"

As he thus soliloquized, Lilith stirred, and flung her white arms upward as though in ecstasy, letting them fall slowly afterwards in a folded position behind her head.

"To the Seven declared tones of Music, add seventy million more,"—she said—"and let them ring their sweetest cadence, they shall make but a feeble echo of the music of God's voice. To all the shades of radiant colour, to all the lines of noblest form, add the splendour of eternal youth, eternal goodness, eternal joy, eternal power, and yet we shall not render into speech or song the beauty of our God! From His glance flows Light—from His presence rushes Harmony,—as He moves through Space great worlds are born; and at His bidding planets grow within the air like flowers. Oh to see Him passing 'mid the stars!—"

She broke off suddenly and drew a long deep breath, as of sheer delight,—but the shadow on El−Râmi's features darkened wearily.

"You teach me nothing, Lilith"—he said sadly and somewhat sternly—"You speak of what you see—or what you think you see—but you cannot convince me of its truth."

Her face grew paler,—the smile vanished from her lips, and all her delicate beauty seemed to freeze into a cold and grave rigidity.

"Love begets faith;"—she said—"Where we do not love, we doubt. Doubt breeds Evil, and Evil knows not God."

"Platitudes, upon my life!—mere plati− tudes!" exclaimed El−Râmi bitterly—"If this half−released spirit can do no more than prate of the same old laws and duties our preachers teach us, then indeed my service is vain. But she shall not baffle me thus;"—and bending over Lilith's figure, he unwound her arms from the indolent position in which they were folded, took her hands roughly in his own, and sitting on the edge of her couch, fixed his burning eyes upon her as though he sought to pierce her to the heart's core with their ardent, almost cruel lustre.

"Lilith!" he commanded—"Speak plainly, that I may fully understand your words. You say there is no hell?"

The answer came steadily.

"None."

"Then must evil go unpunished?"

"Evil wreaks punishment upon itself. Evil destroys itself. That is the Law."

"And the Prophets!" muttered El−Râmi scornfully—"Well! Go on, strange sprite! Why—for such things are known—why does goodness suffer for being good?"

"That never is. That is impossible."

"Impossible?" queried El−Râmi incredulously.

"Impossible,"—repeated the soft voice firmly. "Goodness **seems** to suffer, but it does not. Evil **seems** to prosper, but it does not."

"And God exists?"

"God exists."

"And what of Heaven?"

"Which heaven?" asked Lilith—"There are a million million heavens."

El−Râmi stopped—thinking,—then finally said—

"God's Heaven."

"You would say God's World;"—returned Lilith tranquilly—"Nay, you will not let me reach that centre. I see it; I feel it afar off—but your will binds me—you will not let me go."

"If I were to let you go what would you do?" asked El−Râmi—"Would you return to me?"

"Never! Those who enter the Perfect Glory, return no more to an imperfect light."

El−Râmi paused—he was arranging other questions to ask, when her next words startled him—

"Someone called me by my name,"—she said—"Tenderly and softly, as though it were a name beloved. I heard the voice—I could not answer—but I heard it—and I know that someone loves me. The sense of love is sweet, and makes your dreary world seem fair!"

El−Râmi's heart began to beat violently—the voice of Féraz had reached her in her trance then after all! And she remembered it!—more than this—it had carried a vague emotion of love to that vagrant and ethereal essence which he called her "soul" but which he had his doubts of all the while. For he was unable to convince himself positively of any such thing as "Soul;"—all emotions, even of the most divinely transcendent nature, he was disposed to set down to the action of brain merely. But he was scientist enough to know that the brain must gather its ideas from **something**,—something either external or internal,—even such a vague thing as an Idea cannot spring out of blank Chaos. And this was what especially puzzled him in his experiment with the girl Lilith—for, ever since he had placed her in the "life−in−death" condition she was, he had been careful to avoid impressing any of his own thoughts or ideas upon her. And, as a matter of fact, all she said about God, or about a present or a future state, was precisely the reverse of what he himself argued;—the question therefore remained—From Where and How did she get her knowledge? She had been a mere pretty, ignorant, half−barbaric Arab child, when she **died** (according to natural law), and, during the six years she had **lived** (by scientific law) in her strange trance, her brain had been absolutely unconscious of all external impressions, while of internal she could have none, beyond the memories of her childhood. Yet,—she had grown beautiful beyond the beauty of mortals, and she spoke of things beyond all mortal comprehension. The riddle of her physical and mental development seemed

unanswerable,—it was the wonder, the puzzle, the difficulty, the delight of all El−Râmi's hours. But now there was mischief done. She spoke of love,—not divine impersonal love, as was her wont,—but love that touched her own existence with a vaguely pleasing emotion. A voice had reached her that never should have been allowed to penetrate her spiritual solitude, and realizing this, a sullen anger smouldered in El−Râmi's mind. He strove to consider Zaroba's fault and Féraz's folly with all the leniency, forbearance and forgiveness possible, and yet the strange restlessness within him gave him no peace. What should be done? What could be answered to those wistful words—"The sense of love is sweet, and makes your dreary world seem fair"?

He pondered on the matter, vaguely uneasy and dissatisfied. He, and he alone, was the master of Lilith,—he commanded and she obeyed,—but would it be always thus? The doubt turned his blood cold,—suppose she escaped him now, after all his studies and calculations! He resolved he would ask her no more questions that night, and very gently he released the little slender hands he held.

"Go, Lilith!" he said softly—"This world, as you say, is dreary—I will not keep you longer in its gloom—go hence and rest."

"Rest?" sighed Lilith inquiringly—"Where?"

He bent above her, and touched her loose gold locks almost caressingly.

"Where you choose!"

"Nay, that I may not!" murmured Lilith sadly. "I have no choice—I must obey the Master's will."

El−Râmi's heart beat high with triumph at these words.

"**My** will!" he said, more to himself than to her—"The force of it!—the marvel of it!−**my** will!"

Lilith heard,—a strange glory seemed to shine round her, like a halo round a pictured saint, and the voice that came from her lips rang out with singularly sweet clearness.

"Your will!" she echoed—"Your will—and also—God's will!"

He started, amazed and irresolute. The words were not what he expected, and he would have questioned their meaning, but that he saw on the girl's lovely features a certain pale composed look which he recognised as the look that meant silence.

"Lilith!" he whispered.

No answer. He stood looking down upon her, his face seeming sterner and darker than usual by reason of the intense, passionate anxiety in his burning eyes.

"God's will!" he echoed with some disdain—"God's will would have annihilated her very existence long ago out in the desert;—what should God do with her now that I have not done?"

His arrogance seemed to him perfectly justifiable; and yet he very well knew that, strictly speaking, there was no such thing as "annihilation" possible to any atom in the universe. Moreover, he did not choose to analyze the mystical reasons as to **why** he had been permitted by Fate or Chance to obtain such mastery over one human soul,—he preferred to attribute it all to his own discoveries in science,—his own patient and untiring skill,—his own studious comprehension of the forces of Nature,—and he was nearly, if not quite oblivious of the fact, that there is a Something **behind** natural forces, which knows and sees, controls and commands, and against which, if he places himself in opposition, Man is but the puniest, most wretched straw that was ever tossed or split by a whirlwind. As a rule, men of science work not for God so much as against Him, wherefore their most brilliant researches stop short of the goal. Great intellects are seldom devout,—for brilliant culture begets pride—and pride is incompatible with faith or worship. Perfect science, combined with perfect selflessness, would give us what we need,—a purified and reasoning Religion. But El−Râmi's chief characteristic was pride,—and he saw no mischief in it. Strong in his knowledge,—defiant of evil in the consciousness he possessed of his own extraordinary physical and mental endowments, he saw no reason why he should bow down in humiliated abasement before forces, either natural or spiritual, which he deemed himself able to control. And his brow cleared, as he once more bent over his tranced "subject" and with all the methodical precaution of a physician, felt her pulse, took note of her temperature and judged that for the present she needed no more of that strange Elixir which kept her veins aglow with such inexplicably beauteous vitality. Then—his ex− amination done—he left the room; and as he drew the velvet portière behind him, the little white moth that had flown in for a night's shelter, fluttered down from the golden lamp like a falling leaf, and dropped on the couch of Lilith, shrivelled and dead.

CHAPTER XVIII.

T*HE* next day was very wet and stormy. From morning to night the rain fell in torrents, and a cold wind blew. El−Râmi stayed indoors, reading, writing, and answering a few of his more urgent correspondents, a great number of whom were total strangers to him, and who nevertheless wrote to him out of the sheer curiosity excited in them by the perusal of a certain book to which his name was appended as author. This book was a very original literary production,—the critics were angry with it, because it was so unlike anything else that ever was written. According to the theories set forth in its pages, Man the poor and finite, was proved to be a creature of superhuman and almost god−like attributes,—a "flattering unction" indeed, which when laid to the souls of commonplace egoists, had the effect of making them consider El−Râmi Zarânos a very wonderful person, and themselves more wonderful still. Only the truly great mind is humble enough to appreciate greatness, and of great minds there is a great scarcity. Most of El−Râmi's correspondents were of that lower order of intelligence which blandly accepts every fresh truth discovered as specially intended for themselves, and not at all for the world, as though indeed they were some particular and removed class of superior beings who alone were capable of understanding true wisdom. "Your work has appealed to **me**"—wrote one, "as it will not appeal to all, because I am able to enter into the divine spirit of things as the **vulgar herd** cannot do!" This, as if the "vulgar herd" were not also part of the "divine spirit of things"!

"I have delighted in your book"—wrote another, "because I am a poet, and the world, with its low aims and lower desires I abhor and despise!"

The absurdity of a man presuming to call himself a poet, and in the same breath declaring he "despises" the world,—the world which supports his life and provides him with all his needs,—never seems to occur to the minds of these poor boasters of a petty vanity. El−Râmi looked weary enough as he glanced quickly through a heap of such ill−judged and egotistical epistles, and threw them aside to be forever left unanswered. To him there was something truly horrible and discouraging in the contemplation of the hopeless, helpless, absolute stupidity of the majority of mankind. The teachings of Mother Nature being always straight and plain, it is remarkable what devious turnings and dark winding ways we prefer to stumble into rather than take the fair and open course. For example Nature says to us—"My children, Truth is simple,—and I am bound by all my forces to assist its manifestation. A Lie is difficult—I can have none of it—it needs other lies to keep it going,—its ways are full of complexity and puzzle,—why then, O foolish ones, will you choose the Lie and avoid the Truth? For, work as you may, the Truth must out, and not all the uproar of opposing multitudes can still its thunderous tongue." Thus Nature;—but we heed her not,—we go on lying stedfastly, in a strange delusion that thereby may deceive Eternal Justice. But Eternal Justice never is deceived,—never is obscured even, save for a moment, as a passing cloud obscures the sun.

"How easy after all to avoid mischief of any kind," mused El−Râmi now, as he put by his papers and drew two or three old reference volumes towards him—"How easy to live happily, free from care, free from sickness, free from every external or internal wretchedness, if we could but practise the one rule—Self−abnegation. It is all there,—and the ethereal Lilith may be right in her assurance as to the non−existence of Evil unless we ourselves create it. At least one half the trouble in the world might be avoided if we chose. Debt, for example,—that carking trouble always arises from living beyond one's means,—therefore **why** live beyond one's means? What for? Show? Vulgar ostentation? Luxury? Idleness? All these are things against which Heaven raises its eternal ban. Then take physical pain and sickness,—here Self is to blame again,—self−indulgence in the pleasures of the table,—sensual craving,—the marriage of weakly or ill−conditioned persons,—all simple causes from which spring incalculable evils. Avoid the causes and we escape the evils. The arrangements of Nature are all so clear and explicit, and yet we are forever going out of our way to find or invent difficulties. The farmer grumbles and writes letters to the newspapers if his turnip−fields are invaded by what he deems a 'destructive pest' in the way of moth or caterpillar, and utterly ignores the fact that these insects always appear for some wise reason or other, which he, absorbed in his own immediate petty interests, fails to appreciate. His turnips are eaten,—that is all he thinks or cares about,—but if he knew that those same turnips contain a particular microbe poisonous to human life, a germ of typhoid, cholera or the like, drawn up from the soil and ready to fructify in the blood of cattle or of men, and that these insects of which he complains are the scavengers sent by Nature to utterly destroy the Plague

in embryo, he might pause in his grumbling to wonder at so much precaution taken by the elements for the preservation of his unworthy and ignorant being. Perplexing and at times maddening is this our curse of Ignorance,—but that the 'sins of the fathers are visited on the children' is a true saying is evident—for the faults of generations are still bred in our blood and bone."

He turned over the first volume before him listlessly,—his mind was not set upon study, and his attention wandered. He was thinking of Féraz, with whom he had scarcely exchanged a word all day. He had lacked nothing in the way of service, for swift and courteous obedience to his brother's wishes had characterized Féraz in every simple action, but there was a constraint between the two that had not previously existed. Féraz bore himself with a stately yet sad hauteur,—he had the air of a proud prince in chains who, being captive, performed his prison−work with exactitude and resignation as a matter of discipline and duty. It was curious that El−Râmi, who had steeled him− self as he imagined against every tender sentiment, should now feel the want of the impetuous confidence and grace of manner with which his young brother had formerly treated him.

"Everything changes—" he mused gloomily, "Everything **must** change, of course; and nothing is so fluctuating as the humour of a boy who is not yet a man, but is on the verge of manhood. And with Féraz my power has reached its limit,—I know exactly what I can do, and what I can **not** do with him,—it is a case of 'Thus far and no further.' Well,—he must choose his own way of life,—only let him not presume to set himself in **my** way, or interfere in **my** work! Ye gods!—there is nothing I would not do—"

He paused, ashamed; the blood flushed his face darkly and his hand clenched itself involuntarily. Conscious of the thought that had arisen within him, he felt a moment's shuddering horror of himself. He knew that in the very depths of his nature there was enough untamed savagery to make him capable of crushing his young brother's life out of him, should he dare to obstruct his path or oppose him in his labours. Realizing this, a cold dew broke out on his forehead and he trembled.

"O Soul of Lilith that cannot understand Evil!" he exclaimed—"Whence came this evil thought in me? Does the evil in myself engender it?—and does the same bitter gall that stirred the blood of Cain lurk in the depths of my being, till Opportunity strikes the wicked hour? *Retro me, Sathanas*! After all, there was something in the old beliefs—the pious horror of a devil,—for a devil there is that walks the world, and his name is Man!"

He rose and paced the room impatiently,—what a long day it seemed, and with what dreary persistence the rain washed against the windows! He looked out into the street,—there was not a passenger to be seen,—a wet dingy grayness pervaded the atmosphere and made everything ugly and cheerless. He went back to his books, and presently began to turn over the pages of the quaint Arabic volume into which Féraz had unwisely dipped, gathering therefrom a crumb of knowledge, which, like all scrappy information, had only led him to discontent.

"All these old experiments of the Egyptian priests were simple enough—" he murmured as he read,—"They had one substratum of science,—the art of bringing the countless atoms that fill the air into temporary shape. The trick is so easy and natural, that I fancy there must have been a certain condition of the atmosphere in earlier ages which **of itself** shaped the atoms,—hence the ideas of nymphs, dryads, fauns and watersprites; these temporary shapes which dazzled for some fleeting moments the astonished human eye and so gave rise to all the legends. To shape the atoms as a sculptor shapes clay, is but a phase of chemistry,—a pretty experiment—yet what a miracle it would always seem to the uninstructed multitude!"

He unlocked a drawer in his desk, and took from it a box full of red powder, and two small flasks, one containing minute globules of a glittering green colour like tiny emeralds,—the other full of a pale amber liquid. He smiled as he looked at these ingredients,—and then he gave a glance out through the window at the dark and rainy afternoon.

"To pass the time, why not?" he queried half aloud. "One needs a little diversion sometimes even in science."

Whereupon he placed some of the red powder in a small bronze vessel and set fire to it. A thick smoke arose at once and filled the room with cloud that emitted a pungent perfume, and in which his own figure was scarcely discernible. He cast five or six of the little green globules into this smoke; they dissolved in their course and melted within it,—and finally he threw aloft a few drops of the amber liquid. The effect was extraordinary, and would have seemed incredible to any onlooker, for through the cloud a roseate Shape made itself slowly visible,—a Shape that was surrounded with streaks of light and rainbow flame as with a garland. Vague at first, but soon growing more distinct, it gathered itself into seeming substance, and floated nearly to the ground,—then rising again, balanced itself lightly like a blown feather sideways upon the dense mist that filled the air. In form

this " cor− ruscation of atoms" as El−Râmi called it, resembled a maiden in the bloom of youth,—her flowing hair, her sparkling eyes, her smiling lips, were all plainly discernible;—but, that she was a mere phantasm and creature of the cloud was soon made plain, for scarcely had she declared herself in all her rounded laughing loveliness, than she melted away and passed into nothingness like a dream. The cloud of smoke grew thinner and thinner, till it vanished also so completely that there was no more left of it than a pale blue ring such as might have been puffed from a stray cigar. El−Râmi, leaning lazily back in his chair, had watched the whole development and finish of his "experiment" with indolent interest and amusement.

"How admirably the lines of beauty are always kept in these effects,"—he said to himself when it was over,—"and what a fortune I could make with that one example of the concentration of atoms if I chose to pass as a Miracle−maker. Moses was an adept at this kind of thing; so also was a certain Egyptian priest named Borsa of Memphis, who just for that same graceful piece of chemistry was judged by the people as divine,—made king,—and loaded with wealth and honour;—excellent and most cunning Borsa! But we—we do not judge anyone 'divine' in these days of ours, not even God,—for He is supposed to be simply the lump of leaven working through the loaf of matter,—though it will always remain a question as to why there is any leaven or any loaf at all existing."

He fell into a train of meditation, which caused him presently to take up his pen and write busily many pages of close manuscript. Féraz came in at the usual hour with supper,—and then only he ceased working, and shared the meal with his young brother, talking cheerfully, though saying little but commonplaces, and skilfully steering off any allusion to subjects which might tend to increase Féraz's evident melancholy. Once he asked him rather abruptly why he had not played any music that day.

"I do not know"—answered the young man coldly—"I seem to have forgotten music—with other things."

He spoke meaningly;—El−Râmi laughed; relieved and light at heart. Those "other things" meant the name of Lilith, which his will had succeeded in erasing from his brother's memory. His eyes sparkled, and his voice gathered new richness and warmth of feeling as he said kindly—

"I think not, Féraz,—I think you cannot have forgotten music. Surely it is no extraneous thing, but part of you,—a lovely portion of your life which you would be loth to miss. Here is your little neglected friend,"—and, rising, he took out of its case an exquisitely shaped mandolin inlaid with pearl—"The dear old lute,—for lute it is, though modernized,—the same shaped instrument on which the rose and fuchsia−crowned youths of old Pompeii played the accompaniment to their love−songs; the same, the very same on which the long−haired, dusky−skinned maids of Thebes and Memphis thrummed their strange uncouth ditties to their black−browed warrior kings. I like it better than the violin—its form is far more pleasing—we can see Apollo with a lute, but it is difficult to fancy the Sun−god fitting his graceful arm to the contorted positions of a fiddle. Play something, Féraz"—and he smiled winningly as he gave the mandolin into his brother's hands—"Here,"—and he detached the *plectrum* from its place under the strings—"With this little piece of oval tortoiseshell, you can set the nerves of music quivering,—those silver wires will answer to your touch like the fibres of the human heart struck by the *tremolo* of passion."

He paused,—his eyes were full of an ardent light, and Féraz looked at him wonderingly. What a voice he had!—how eloquently he spoke!—how noble and thoughtful were his features!—and what an air of almost pathetic dignity was given to his face by that curiously snow−white hair of his, which so incongruously suggested age in youth! Poor Féraz!—his heart swelled within him; love and secret admiration for his brother contended with a sense of outraged pride in himself,—and yet—he felt his sullen *amour−propre*, his instinct of rebellion, and his distrustful reserve all oozing away under the spell of El−Râmi's persuasive tongue and fascinating manner,—and to escape from his own feelings, he bent over the mandolin and tried its chords with a trembling hand and downcast eyes.

"You speak of passion," he said in a low voice—"but you have never known it."

"Oh, have I not!" and El−Râmi laughed lightly as he resumed his seat—"Nay, if I had not I should be more than man. The lightning has flashed across my path, Féraz, I assure you, only it has not killed me; and I have been ready to shed my blood drop by drop, for so slight and imperfect a production of Nature as—a woman! A thing of white flesh and soft curves, and long hair and large eyes, and a laugh like the tinkle of a fountain in our Eastern courts,—a thing with less mind than a kitten, and less fidelity than a hound. Of course there are clever women and faithful women,—but then we men seldom choose these; we are fools, and we pay for our folly. And I also have

been a fool in my time,—why should you imagine I have not? It is flattering to me, but why?"

Féraz looked at him again, and in spite of himself smiled, though reluctantly.

"You always seem to treat all earthly emotions with scorn—" he replied evasively, "And once you told me there was no such thing in the world as love."

"Nor is there—" said El−Râmi quickly—"Not ideal love—not everlasting love. Love in its highest, purest sense, belongs to other planets—in this its golden wings are clipped, and it becomes nothing more than a common and vulgar physical attraction."

Féraz thrummed his mandolin softly.

"I saw two lovers the other day—" he said—"They seemed divinely happy."

"Where did you see them?"

"Not here. In the land I know best—my Star."

El−Râmi looked at him curiously, but forbore to speak.

"They were beautiful—" went on Féraz. "They were resting together on a bank of flowers, in a little nook of that lovely forest where there are thousands of song−birds sweeter than nightingales. Music filled the air,—a rosy glory filled the sky,—their arms were twined around each other,—their lips met, and then—oh, then their joy smote me with fear, because,—because **I** was alone—and they were—together!"

His voice trembled. El−Râmi's smile had in it something of compassion.

"Love in your Star is a dream, Féraz—" he said gently—"But love here—here in this phase of things we call Reality,—means,—do you know what it means?"

Féraz shook his head,

"It means Money. It means lands, and houses and a big balance at the bank. Lovers do not subsist here on flowers and music,—they have rather more vulgar and substantial appetites. Love here is the disillusion of Love—there, in the region you speak of, it may perchance be perfect—"

A sudden rush of rain battering at the windows, accompanied by a gust of wind, interrupted him.

"What a storm!" exclaimed Féraz, looking up—"And you are expecting—"

A measured rat−tat−tat at the door came at that moment, and El−Râmi sprang to his feet. Féraz rose also, and set aside his mandolin. Another gust of wind whistled by, bringing with it a sweeping torrent of hail.

"Quick!" said El−Râmi, in a somewhat agitated voice—"It is—you know who it is. Give him reverent greeting, Féraz—and show him at once in here."

Féraz withdrew,—and when he had disappeared, El−Râmi looked about him vaguely with the bewildered air of a man who would fain escape from some difficult position, could he but discover an egress,—a slight shudder ran through his frame, and he heaved a deep sigh.

"Why has he come to me!" he muttered, "Why—after all these years of absolute silence and indifference to my work, does he seek me now?"

CHAPTER XIX.

STANDING in an attitude more of resignation than expectancy, he waited, listening. He heard the street−door open and shut again,—then came a brief pause, followed by the sound of a firm step in the outer hall,—and Féraz reappeared, ushering in with grave respect a man of stately height and majestic demeanour, cloaked in a heavy travelling ulster, the hood of which was pulled cowl−like over his head and almost concealed his features.

"Greeting to El−Râmi Zarânos—" said a rich mellow voice—"And so this is the weather provided by an English month of May! Well, it might be worse,—certes, also, it might be better. I should have disburdened myself of these 'lendings' in the hall, but that I knew not whether you were quite alone—" and, as he spoke, he threw off his cloak, which dripped with rain, and handed it to Féraz, disclosing himself in the dress of a Carthusian monk, all save the disfiguring tonsure. "I was not certain," he continued cheerfully—"whether you might be ready or willing to receive me."

"I am always ready for such a visitor—" said El−Râmi, advancing hesitatingly, and with a curious diffidence in his manner—"And more than willing. Your presence honours this poor house and brings with it a certain benediction."

"Gracefully said, El−Râmi!" exclaimed the monk with a keen flash of his deep−set blue eyes—"Where did you learn to make pretty speeches? I remember you of old time as brusque of tongue and obstinate of humour,—and even now humility sits ill upon you,—'tis not your favourite practised household virtue."

El−Râmi flushed, but made no reply. He seemed all at once to have become even to himself the merest foolish nobody before this his remarkable−looking visitor with the brow and eyes of an inspired evangelist, and the splendid lines of thought, aspiration and endeavour marking the already noble countenance with an expression seldom seen on features of mortal mould. Féraz now came forward to proffer wine and sundry other refreshments, all of which were courteously refused.

"This lad has grown, El−Râmi—" said the stranger, surveying Féraz with much interest and kindliness,—"since he stayed with us in Cyprus and studied our views of poesy and song. A promising youth he seems,—and still your slave?"

El−Râmi gave a gesture of deprecation.

"You mistake—" he replied curtly—"He is my brother and my friend,—as such he cannot be my slave. He is as free as air."

"Or as an eagle that ever flies back to its eyrie in the rocks out of sheer habit—" observed the monk with a smile—"In this case you are the eyrie, and the eagle is never absent long! Well—what now, pretty lad?" this, as Féraz, moved by a sudden instinct which he could not explain to himself, dropped reverently on one knee.

"Your blessing—" he murmured timidly. "I have heard it said that your touch brings peace,—and I—I am not at peace."

The monk looked at him benignly.

"We live in a world of storm, my boy—" he said gently—"where there is no peace but the peace of the inner spirit. That, with your youth and joyous nature, you should surely possess,—and if you have it not, may God grant it you! 'Tis the best blessing I can devise."

And he signed the Cross on the young man's forehead with a gentle lingering touch,—a touch under which Féraz trembled and sighed for pleasure, conscious of the delicious restfulness and ease that seemed suddenly to pervade his being.

"What a child he is still, this brother of yours!" then said the monk, turning abruptly towards El−Râmi—"He craves a blessing,—while you have progressed beyond all such need!"

El−Râmi raised his dark eyes,—eyes full of a burning pain and pride,—but made no answer. The monk looked at him steadily—and heaved a quick sigh.

"*Vigilate et orate ut non intretis in tentationem!*" he murmured,—"Truly, to forgive is easy—but to forget is difficult. I have much to say to you, El−Râmi,—for this is the last time I shall meet you 'before I go hence and be no more seen.'"

Féraz uttered an involuntary exclamation.

"You do not mean," he said almost breathlessly—"that you are going to die?"

"Assuredly not!" replied the monk with a smile—"I am going to live. Some people call it dying—but we know better,—we know we cannot die."

"We are not sure—" began El−Râmi.

"Speak for yourself, my friend!" said the monk cheerily—"**I** am sure,—and so are those who labour with me. I am not made of perishable composition any more than the dust is perishable. Every grain of dust contains a germ of life—I am co−equal with the dust, and I contain my germ also, of life that is capable of infinite reproduction."

El−Râmi looked at him dubiously yet wonderingly. He seemed the very embodiment of physical strength and vitality, yet he only compared himself to a grain of dust. And the very dust held the seeds of life!—true!—then, after all, was there anything in the universe, however small and slight, that could die **utterly?** And was Lilith right when she said there was **no** death? Wearily and impatiently El−Râmi pondered the question,—and he almost started with nervous irritation when the slight noise of the door shutting, told him that Féraz had retired, leaving him and his mysterious visitant alone together.

Some minutes passed in silence. The monk sat quietly in El−Râmi's own chair, and El−Râmi himself stood close by, waiting, as it seemed, for something; with an air of mingled defiance and appeal. Outside, the rain and wind continued their gusty altercation;—inside, the lamp burned brightly, shedding warmth and lustre on the student−like simplicity of the room. It was the monk himself who at last broke the spell of the absolute stillness.

"You wonder," he said slowly—"at the reason of my coming here,—to you, who are a recreant from the mystic tie of our brother− hood,—to you, who have employed the most sacred and venerable secrets of our Order, to wrest from Life and Nature the material for your own self−interested labours. You think I come for information—you think I wish to hear from your own lips the results of your scientific scheme of supernatural ambition,—alas, El−Râmi Zarânos!—how little you know me! Prayer has taught me more science than Science will ever grasp,—there is nothing in all the catalogue of your labours that I do not understand, and you can give me no new message from lands beyond the sun. I have come to you out of simple pity,—to warn you and if possible to save."

El−Râmi's dark eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"To warn me?" he echoed—"To save? From what?—Such a mission to me is incomprehensible."

"Incomprehensible to your stubborn spirit,—yes, no doubt it is—" said the monk, with a touch of stern reproach in his accents,—"For you will not see that the Veil of the Eternal, though it may lift itself for you a little from other men's lives, hangs dark across your own, and is impervious to your gaze. You will not grasp the fact that though it may be given to you to read other men's passions, you cannot read your own. You have begun at the wrong end of the mystery, El−Râmi,—you should have mastered yourself first before seeking to master others. And now there is danger ahead of you—be wise in time,—accept the truth before it is too late."

El−Râmi listened, impatient and incredulous.

"Accept what truth?" he asked somewhat bitterly—"Am I not searching for truth everywhere? and seeking to prove it? Give me any sort of truth to hold, and I will grasp it as a drowning sailor grasps the rope of rescue!"

The monk's eyes rested on him in mingled compassion and sorrow.

"After all these years—" he said—"are you still asking Pilate's question?"

"Yes—I am still asking Pilate's question!" retorted El−Râmi with sudden passion—"See you—I know who you are,—great and wise, a master of the arts and sciences, and with all your stores of learning, still a servant of Christ, which to me, is the wildest, maddest incongruity. I grant you that Christ was the holiest man that ever lived on earth,—and if I swear a thing in His name, I swear an oath that shall not be broken. But in His Divinity, I cannot, I may not, I dare not believe!—except in so far that there is divinity in all of us. One man, born of woman, destined to regenerate the world!—the idea is stupendous,—but impossible to reason!"

He paced the room impatiently.

"If I could believe it—I say 'if,'"—he continued, "I should still think it a clumsy scheme. For every human creature living should be a reformer and regenerator of his race."

"Like yourself?" queried the monk calmly. "What have **you** done, for example?"

El−Râmi stopped in his walk to and fro.

"What have I done?" he repeated—"Why—nothing! You deem me proud and ambitious,—but I am humble enough to know how little I know. And as to proofs,—well, it is the same story—I have proved nothing."

"So! Then are your labours wasted?"

"Nothing is wasted,—according to **your** theories even. Your theories—many of them—are beautiful and soul−satisfying, and this one of there being no waste in the economy of the universe is, I believe, true. But I cannot accept all you teach. I broke my connection with you because I could not bend my spirit to the level of the patience you enjoined. It was not rebellion,—no! for I loved and honoured you—and I still revere you more than any man alive, but I cannot bow my neck to the yoke you consider so necessary. To begin all work by first admitting one's weakness!—no!—Power is gained by never−resting ambition, not by a merely laborious humility."

"Opinions differ on that point"—said the monk quietly—"I never sought to check your ambition—I simply said—Take God with you. Do not leave Him out. He IS. Therefore His existence must be included in everything, even in the scientific examination of a drop of dew. Without Him you grope in the dark—you lack the key to the mystery. As an example of this, you are yourself battering against a shut door, and fighting with a Force too strong for you."

"I must have proofs of God!" said El−Râmi very deliberately—"Nature proves her existence; let God prove His!"

"And does He not prove it?" inquired the monk with mingled passion and solemnity—"Have you to go further than the commonest flower to find Him?"

El−Râmi shrugged his shoulders with an air of light disdain.

"Nature is Nature,"—he said—"God—an there be a God—is God. If God works through Nature He arranges things very curiously on a system of mutual destruction. You talk of flowers,—they contain both poisonous and healing properties,—and the poor human race has to study and toil for years before finding out which is which. Is that just of Nature—or God? Children never know at all,—and the poor little wretches die often through eating poison−berries of whose deadly nature they were not aware. That is what I complain of—we are not aware of evil, and we are not made aware. We have to find it out for ourselves. And I maintain that it is wanton cruelty on the part of the Divine Element to punish us for ignorance which we cannot help. And so the plan of mutual destructiveness goes on, with the most admirable persistency; the eater is in turn eaten, and as far as I can make out, this seems to be the one Everlasting Law. Surely it is an odd and inconsequential arrangement? As for the business of creation, that is easy, if once we grant the existence of certain component parts of space. Look at this, for example"—and he took from a corner a thin steel rod about the size of an ordinary walking cane—"If I use this magnet, and these few crystals"—and he opened a box on the table, containing some sparkling powder like diamond dust, a pinch of which he threw up into the air—"and play with them thus, you see what happens!"

And with a dexterous steady motion, he waved the steel rod rapidly round and round in the apparently empty space where he had tossed aloft the pinch of powder, and gradually there grew into shape out of the seeming nothingness, a round large brilliant globe of prismatic tints, like an enormously magnified soap−bubble, which followed the movement of the steel magnet rapidly and accurately. The monk lifted himself a little in his chair and watched the operation with interest and curiosity—till presently El−Râmi dropped the steel rod from sheer fatigue of arm. But the globe went on revolving steadily by itself for a time, and El−Râmi pointed to it with a smile—

"If I had the skill to send that bubble−sphere out into space, solidify it, and keep it perpetually rolling," he said lightly, "it would in time exhale its own atmosphere and produce life, and I should be a very passable imitation of the Creator."

At that moment, the globe broke and vanished like a melting snowflake, leaving no trace of its existence but a little white dust which fell in a round circle on the carpet. After this display, El−Râmi waited for his guest to speak, but the monk said nothing.

"You see," continued El−Râmi—"it requires a great deal to satisfy **me** with proofs. I must have tangible Fact, not vague Imagining."

The monk raised his eyes,—what searching calm eyes they were!—and fixed them full on the speaker.

"Your Sphere was a Fact,"—he said quietly—"Visible to the eye, it glittered and whirled—but it was not tangible, and it had no life in it. It is a fair example of other Facts,—so−called. And you could not have created so much as that perishable bubble, had not God placed the materials in your hands. It is odd you seem to forget that. No one can work without the materials for working,—the question remains, from Whence came those materials?"

El−Râmi smiled with a touch of scorn.

"Rightly are you called Supreme Master!" he said—"for your faith is marvellous—your ideas of life both here and hereafter, beautiful. I wish I could accept them. But I cannot. Your way does not seem to me clear or reasonable,—and I have thought it out in every direction. Take the doctrine of original sin for example—what is original sin, and why should it exist?"

"It does not exist—" said the monk quickly—"except in so far that **we** have created it. It is we, therefore, who must destroy it."

El−Râmi paused, thinking. This was the same lesson Lilith had taught.

"If we created it—" he said at last, "and there is a God who is omnipotent, why were we **allowed** to create it?"

The monk turned round in his chair with ever so slight a gesture of impatience.

"How often have I told you, El−Râmi Zarânos," he said,—"of the gift and responsibility bestowed on every human unit—Free−Will. You, who seek for proofs of the Divine, should realize that this is the only proof we have in ourselves, of our close relation to 'the image of God.' God's Laws exist,—and it is our first business in life to know and understand these—afterwards, our fate is in our own hands,—if we transgress law, or if we fulfil law, we know, or ought to know, the results. If we choose to make evil, it exists till we destroy it—good we cannot **make**, because it is the very breath of the Universe, but we can choose to breathe **in** it and **with** it. I have so often gone over this ground with you, that it seems mere waste of words to go over it again,—and if you cannot, will not see that you are creating your own destiny and shaping it to your own will, apart from anything that human or divine experience can teach you, then you are blind indeed. But time wears on apace,—and I must speak of other things;—one message I have for you that will doubtless cause you pain." He waited a moment−then went on slowly and sadly—"Yes,—the pain will be bitter and the suffering long,—but the fiat has gone forth, and ere long, you will be called upon to render up the Soul of Lilith."

El−Râmi started violently,—flushed a deep red, and then grew deadly pale.

"You speak in enigmas—" he said huskily and with an effort—"What do you know—how have you heard—"

He broke off,—his voice failed him, and the monk looked at him compassionately.

"Judge not the power of God, El−Râmi Zarânos!" he said solemnly—"for it seems you cannot even measure the power of man. What!—did you think your secret experiment safely hid from all knowledge save your own?—nay! you mistake. I have watched your progress step by step—your proud march onward through such mysteries as never mortal mind dared penetrate before,—but even these wonders have their limits—and those limits are, for you, nearly reached. You must set your captive free!"

"Never!" exclaimed El−Râmi passionately. "Never, while I live! I defy the heavens to rob me of her!—by every law in nature, she is mine!"

"Peace!" said the monk sternly—"Nothing is yours,—except the fate you have made for yourself. **That** is yours; and that must and will be fulfilled. That, in its own appointed time, will deprive you of Lilith."

El−Râmi's eyes flashed wrath and pain.

"What have you to do with my fate?" he demanded—"How should you know what is in store for me? You are judged to have a marvellous insight into spiritual things, but it is not insight after all so much as imagination and instinct. These may lead you wrong,—you have gained them, as you yourself admit, through nothing but inward concentration and prayer—**my** discoveries are the result of scientific exploration,—there is no science in prayer!"

"Is there not?"—and the monk, rising from his chair, confronted El−Râmi with the reproachful majesty of a king who faces some recreant vassal—"Then with all your wisdom you are ignorant,—ignorant of the commonest laws of simple Sound. Do you not yet know—have you not yet learned that Sound vibrates in a million million tones through every nook and corner of the Universe? Not a whisper, not a cry from human lips is lost—not even the trill of a bird or the rustle of a leaf. All is heard,—all is kept,—all is reproduced at will forever and ever. What is the use of your modern toys, the phonograph and the telephone, if they do not teach you the fundamental and external law by which these adjuncts to civilization are governed? God—the great, patient loving God—hears the huge sounding−board of space re−echo again and yet again with rough curses on His Name,—with groans and wailings; shouts, tears and laughter send shuddering discord through His Everlasting Vastness, but amid it all there is a steady strain of music,—full, sweet and pure—the music of perpetual prayer. No science in prayer! Such science there is, that by its power the very ether parts asunder as by a lightning−stroke—the highest golden gateways are unbarred,—and the connecting−link 'twixt God and Man, stretches itself through Space, between and round all worlds, defying any force to break the current of its messages."

He spoke with fervour and passion,—El−Râmi listened silent and unconvinced.

"I waste my words, I know—" continued the monk—"For you, Yourself suffices. What your brain dares devise,—what your hand dares attempt, that you will do, unadvisedly, sure of your success without the help of God or man. Nevertheless—you may not keep the Soul of Lilith."

His voice was very solemn yet sweet; El−Râmi, lifting his head, looked full at him, wonderingly, earnestly, and as one in doubt. Then his mind seemed to grasp more completely his visitor's splendid presence,—the noble face, the soft commanding eyes,—and instinctively he bent his proud head with a sudden reverence.

"Truly you are a god−like man—" he said slowly—"God−like in strength, and pure−hearted as a child. I would trust you in many things, if not in all. Therefore,—as by some strange means you have possessed yourself of my secret,—come with me,—and I will show you the chiefest marvel of my science—the life I claim—the spirit I dominate. Your warning I cannot accept, because you warn me of what is impossible. Impossible—I say, impossible!—for the human Lilith, God's Lilith, **died**—according to God's will; **my** Lilith lives, according to My will. Come and see,—then perhaps you will understand how it is that I—I, and not God any longer,—claim and possess the Soul I saved!"

With these words, uttered in a thrilling tone of pride and passion, he opened the study door and with a mute inviting gesture, led the way out. In silence and with a pensive step, the monk slowly followed.

END OF VOL. I.