

The Fair Imperia Married

Honore de Balzac

I. How Madame Imperia was Caught by the Very Net She was Accustomed to Spread for Her Love-Birds

The lovely lady Imperia, who gloriously opens these tales, because she was the glory of her time, was compelled to come into the town of Rome, after the holding of the council, for the cardinal of Ragusa loved her more than his cardinal's hat, and wished to have her near him. This rascal was so magnificent, that he presented her with the beautiful palace that he had in the Papal capital. About this time she had the misfortune to find herself in an interesting condition by this cardinal. As everyone knows, this pregnancy finished with a fine little daughter, concerning whom the Pope said jokingly that she should be named Theodora, as if to say The Gift Of God. The girl was thus named, and was exquisitely lovely. The cardinal left his inheritance to this Theodora, whom the fair Imperia established in her hotel, for she was flying from Rome as from a pernicious place, where children were begotten, and where she had nearly spoiled her beautiful figure, her celebrated perfections, lines of the body, curves of the back, delicious breasts, and Serpentine charms which placed her as much above the other women of Christendom as the Holy Father was above all other Christians. But all her lovers knew that with the assistance of eleven doctors of Padua, seven master surgeons of Pavia, and five surgeons come from all parts, who assisted at her confinement, she was preserved from all injury. Some go so far as to say that she gained therein superfineness and whiteness of skin. A famous man, of the school of Salerno, wrote a book on the subject, to show the value of a confinement for the freshness, health, preservation, and beauty of women. In this very learned book it was clearly proved to readers that that which was beautiful to see in Imperia, was that which it was permissible for lovers alone to behold; a rare case then, for she did not disarrange her attire for the petty German princes whom she called her margraves, burgraves, electors, and dukes, just as a captain ranks his soldiers.

Everyone knows that when she was eighteen years of age, the lovely Theodora, to atone for her mother's gay life, wished to retire into the bosom of the Church. With this idea she placed herself in the hands of a cardinal, in order that he might instruct her in the duties of the devout. This wicked shepherd found the lamb so magnificently beautiful that he attempted to debauch her. Theodora instantly stabbed herself with a stiletto, in order not to be contaminated by the evil-minded priest. This adventure, which was consigned to the history of the period, made a great commotion in Rome, and was deplored by everyone, so much was the daughter of Imperia beloved.

Then this noble courtesan, much afflicted, returned to Rome, there to weep for her poor daughter. She set out in the thirty-ninth year of her age, which was, according to some authors, the summer of her magnificent beauty, because then she had obtained the acme of perfection, like ripe fruit. Sorrow made her haughty and hard with those who spoke to her of love, in order to dry her tears. The pope himself visited her in her palace, and gave her certain words of admonition. But she refused to be comforted, saying that she would henceforth devote herself to God, because she had never yet been satisfied by any man, although she had ardently desired it; and all of them, even a little priest, whom she had

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adored like a saint's shrine, had deceived her. God, she was sure, would not do so.

This resolution disconcerted many, for she was the joy of a vast number of lords. So that people ran about the streets of Rome crying out, "Where is Madame Imperia? Is she going to deprive the world of love?" Some of the ambassadors wrote to their masters on the subject. The Emperor of the Romans was much cut up about it, because he had loved her to distraction for eleven weeks; had left her only to go to the wars, and loved her still as much as his most precious member, which according to his own statement, was his eye, for that alone embraced the whole of his dear Imperia. In this extremity the Pope sent for a Spanish physician, and conducted him to the beautiful creature, to whom he proved, by various arguments, adorned with Latin and Greek quotations, that beauty is impaired by tears and tribulation, and that through sorrow's door wrinkles step in. This proposition, confirmed by the doctors of the Holy College in controversy, had the effect of opening the doors of the palace that same evening. The young cardinals, the foreign envoys, the wealthy inhabitants, and the principal men of the town of Rome came, crowded the rooms, and held a joyous festival; the common people made grand illuminations, and thus the whole population celebrated the return of the Queen of Pleasure to her occupation, for she was at that time the presiding deity of Love. The experts in all the arts loved her much, because she spent considerable sums of money improving the Church in Rome, which contained poor Theodora's tomb, which was destroyed during that pillage of Rome in which perished the traitorous constable of Bourbon, for this holy maiden was placed therein in a massive coffin of gold and silver, which the cursed soldiers were anxious to obtain. The basilic cost, it is said, more than the pyramid erected by the Lady Rhodepa, an Egyptian courtesan, eighteen hundred years before the coming of our divine Saviour, which proves the antiquity of this pleasant occupation, the extravagant prices which the wise Egyptians paid for their pleasures, and how things deteriorate, seeing that now for a trifle you can have a chemise full of female loveliness in the Rue du Petit-Heulen, at Paris. Is it not abomination?

Never had Madame Imperia appeared so lovely as at this first gala after her mourning. All the princes, cardinals, and others declared that she was worthy the homage of the whole world, which was there represented by a noble from every known land, and thus was it amply demonstrated that beauty was in every place queen of everything.

The envoy of the King of France, who was a cadet of the house of l'Ile Adam, arrived late, although he had never yet seen Imperia, and was most anxious to do so. He was a handsome young knight, much in favour with his sovereign, in whose court he had a mistress, whom he loved with infinite tenderness, and who was the daughter of Monsieur de Montmorency, a lord whose domains bordered upon those of the house of l'Ile Adam. To this penniless cadet the king had given certain missions to the duchy of Milan, of which he had acquitted himself so well that he was sent to Rome to advance the negotiations concerning which historians have written so much in their books. Now if he had nothing of his own, poor little l'Ile Adam relied upon so good a beginning. He was slightly built, but upright as a column, dark, with black, glistening eyes; and a man not easily taken in; but concealing his finesse, he had the air of an innocent child, which made him gentle and amiable as a laughing maiden. Directly this gentleman joined her circle, and her eyes had rested upon him, Madame Imperia felt herself bitten by a strong desire, which stretched the harp strings of her nature, and produced therefrom a sound she had not heard for many a day. She was seized with such a vertigo of true love at the sight of this freshness of youth, that but for her imperial dignity she would have kissed the good cheeks which shone like little apples.

Now take note of this; that so called modest women, and ladies whose skirts bear their armorial bearings, are thoroughly ignorant of the nature of man, because they keep to one alone, like the Queen of France who believed all men had ulcers in the nose because the king had; but a great courtesan, like Madame Imperia, knew man to his core, because she had handled a great many. In her retreat, everyone came out in his true colours, and concealed nothing, thinking to himself that he would not be long with her. Having often deplored this subjection, sometimes she would remark that she suffered from pleasure more than she suffered from pain. There was the dark shadow of her life. You may be sure that a lover was often compelled to part with a nice little heap of crowns in order to pass the night with her, and was reduced to desperation by a refusal. Now for her it was a joyful thing to feel a youthful desire, like that she had for the little priest, whose story commences this collection; but because she was older than in those merry days, love was more fully established in her, and she soon perceived that it was of a fiery nature when it began to make itself felt; indeed, she suffered in her skin like a cat that is being scorched, and so much so that she had an intense longing to spring upon this gentleman, and bear him in triumph to her nest, as a kite does its prey, but with great difficulty she restrained herself. When he came and bowed to her, she threw back her head, and assumed a most dignified attitude, as do those who have a love infatuation in their hearts. The gravity of her demeanour to the young ambassador caused many to think that she had work in store for him; equivocating on the word, after the custom of the time.

L'Ile Adam, knowing himself to be dearly loved by his mistress, troubled himself but little about Madame Imperia, grave or gay, and frisked about like a goat let loose. The courtesan, terribly annoyed at this, changed her tone, from being sulky became gay and lively, came to him, softened her voice, sharpened her glance, gracefully inclined her head, rubbed against him with her sleeve, and called him Monsieur, embraced him with the loving words, trifled with his hand, and finished by smiling at him most affably. He, not imagining that so unprofitable a lover would suit her, for he was as poor as a church mouse, and did not know that his beauty was the equal in her eyes to all the treasures of the world, was not taken in her trap, but continued to ride the high horse with his hand on his hips. This disdain of her passion irritated Madame to the heart, which by this spark was set in flame. If you doubt this, it is because you know nothing of the profession of the Madame Imperia, who by reason of it might be compared to a chimney, in which a great number of fires have been lighted, which had filled it with soot; in this state a match was sufficient to burn everything there, where a hundred fagots has smoked comfortably. She burned within from top to toe in a horrible manner, and could not be extinguished save with the water of love. The cadet of l'Ile Adam left the room without noticing this ardour.

Madame, disconsolate at his departure, lost her senses from her head to her feet, and so thoroughly that she sent a messenger to him on the galleries, begging him to pass the night with her. On no other occasion of her life had she had this cowardice, either for king, pope, or emperor, since the high price of her favours came from the bondage in which she held her admirers, whom the more she humbled the more she raised herself. The disdainful hero of this history was informed by the head chamber-women, who was a clever jade, that in all probability a great treat awaited him, for most certainly Madame would regale him with her most delicate inventions of love. L'Ile Adam returned to the salons, delighted at this lucky chance. Directly the envoy of France reappeared, as everyone had seen Imperia turn pale at his departure, the general joy knew no bounds, because everyone was delighted to see her

return to her old life of love. An English cardinal, who had drained more than one big-bellied flagon, and wished to taste Imperia, went to l'Île Adam and whispered to him, "Hold her fast, so that she shall never again escape us."

The story of this remark was told to the pope at his levee, and caused him to remark, / *Laetamini, gentes, quoniam surrexit Dominus*/. A quotation which the old cardinals abominated as a profanation of sacred texts. Seeing which, the pope reprimanded them severely, and took occasion to lecture them, telling them that if they were good Christians they were bad politicians. Indeed, he relied upon the fair Imperia to reclaim the emperor, and with this idea he syringed her well with flattery.

The lights of the palace being extinguished, the golden flagons on the floor, and the servants drunk and stretched about on the carpets, Madame entered her bedchamber, leading by the hand her dear lover-elect; and she was well pleased, and has since confessed that so strongly was she bitten with love, she could hardly restrain herself from rolling at his feet like a beast of the field, begging him to crush her beneath him if he could. L'Île Adam slipped off his garments, and tumbled into bed as if he were in his own house. Seeing which, Madame hastened her preparations, and sprang into her lover's arms with a frenzy that astonished her women, who knew her to be ordinarily one of the most modest of women on these occasions. The astonishment became general throughout the country, for the pair remained in bed for nine days, eating, drinking, and embracing in a marvellous and most masterly manner. Madame told her women that at last she had placed her hand on a phoenix of love, since he revived from every attack. Nothing was talked of in Rome and Italy but the victory that had been gained over Imperia, who had boasted that she would yield to no man, and spat upon all of them, even the dukes. As to the aforesaid margraves and burgraves, she gave them the tail of her dress to hold, and said that if she did not tread them under foot, they would trample upon her. Madame confessed to her servants that, differently to all other men she had had to put up with, the more she fondled this child of love, the more she desired to do so, and that she would never be able to part with him; nor his splendid eyes, which blinded her; nor his branch of coral, that she always hungered after. She further declared that if such were his desire, she would let him suck her blood, eat her breasts--which were the most lovely in the world--and cut her tresses, of which she had only given a single one to the Emperor of the Romans, who kept it in his breast, like a precious relic; finally, she confessed that on that night only had life begun for her, because the embrace of Villiers de l'Île Adam sent the blood to her in three bounds and in a brace of shakes.

These expressions becoming known, made everyone very miserable. Directly she went out, Imperia told the ladies of Rome that she should die if she were deserted by this gentleman, and would cause herself, like Queen Cleopatra, to be bitten by an asp. She declared openly that she had bidden an eternal adieu to her former gay life, and would show the whole world what virtue was by abandoning her empire for this Villiers de l'Île Adam, whose servant she would rather be than reign of Christendom. The English cardinal remonstrated with the pope that this love for one, in the heart of a woman who was the joy of all, was an infamous depravity, and that he ought with a brief /*in partibus*/, to annul this marriage, which robbed the fashionable world of its principal attraction. But the love of this poor woman, who had confessed the miseries of her life, was so sweet a thing, and so moved the most dissipated heart, that she silenced all clamour, and everyone forgave her her happiness. One day, during Lent, Imperia made her people fast, and ordered them to go

and confess, and return to God. She herself went and fell at the pope's feet, and there showed such penitence, that she obtained from him remission of all her sins, believing that the absolution of the pope would communicate to her soul that virginity which she was grieved at being unable to offer her lover. It is impossible to help thinking that there was some virtue in the ecclesiastical piscina, for the poor cadet was so smothered with love that he fancied himself in Paradise, and left the negotiations of the King of France, left his love for Mademoiselle de Montmorency--in fact, left everything to marry Madame Imperia, in order that he might live and die with her. Such was the effect of the learned ways of this great lady of pleasure directly she turned her science to the root of a virtuous love. Imperia bade adieu to her admirers at a royal feast, given in honour of her wedding, which was a wonderful ceremony, at which all the Italian princes were present. She had, it is said, a million gold crowns; in spite of the vastness of this sum, every one far from blaming L'Ile Adam, paid him many compliments, because it was evident that neither Madame Imperia nor her young husband thought of anything but one. The pope blessed their marriage, and said that it was a fine thing to see the foolish virgin returning to God by the road of marriage.

But during that last night in which it would be permissible for all to behold the Queen of Beauty, who was about to become a simple chatelaine of the kingdom of France, there were a great number of men who mourned for the merry nights, the suppers, the masked balls, the joyous games, and the melting hours, when each one emptied his heart to her. Everyone regretted the ease and freedom which had always been found in the residence of this lovely creature, who now appeared more tempting than she had ever done in her life, for the fervid heat of her great love made her glisten like a summer sun. Much did they lament the fact that she had had the sad fantasy to become a respectable woman. To these Madame de l'Ile Adam answered jestingly, that after twenty-four years passed in the service of the public, she had a right to retire. Others said to her, that however distant the sun was, people could warm themselves in it, while she would show herself no more. To these she replied that she would still have smiles to bestow upon those lords who would come and see how she played the role of a virtuous woman. To this the English envoy answered, he believed her capable of pushing virtue to its extreme point. She gave a present to each of her friends, and large sums to the poor and suffering of Rome; besides this, she left to the convent where her daughter was to have been, and to the church she had built, the wealth she had inherited from Theodora, which came from the cardinal of Ragusa.

When the two spouses set out they were accompanied a long way by knights in mourning, and even by the common people, who wished them every happiness, because Madame Imperia had been hard on the rich only, and had always been kind and gentle with the poor. This lovely queen of love was hailed with acclamations throughout the journey in all the towns of Italy where the report of her conversion had spread, and where everyone was curious to see pass, a case so rare as two such spouses. Several princes received this handsome couple at their courts, saying it was but right to show honour to this woman who had the courage to renounce her empire over the world of fashion, to become a virtuous woman. But there was an evil-minded fellow, one my lord Duke of Ferrara, who said to l'Ile Adam that his great fortune had not cost him much. At this first offence Madame Imperia showed what a good heart she had, for she gave up all the money she had received from her lovers, to ornament the dome of St. Maria del Fiore, in the town of Florence, which turned the laugh against the Sire d'Este, who boasted that he had built a church in spite of the empty condition of his purse. You may be sure he was reprimanded for this joke by his

brother the cardinal.

The fair Imperia only kept her own wealth and that which the Emperor had bestowed upon her out of pure friendship since his departure, the amount of which was however, considerable. The cadet of l'Ile Adam had a duel with the duke, in which he wounded him. Thus neither Madame de l'Ile Adam, nor her husband could be in any way reproached. This piece of chivalry caused her to be gloriously received in all places she passed through, especially in Piedmont, where the fetes were splendid. Verses which the poet then composed, such as sonnets, epithalamias, and odes, have been given in certain collections; but all poetry was weak in comparison with her, who was, according to an expression of Monsieur Boccaccio, poetry herself.

The prize in this tourney of fetes and gallantry must be awarded to the good Emperor of the Romans, who, knowing of the misbehaviour of the Duke of Ferrara, dispatched an envoy to his old flame, charged with Latin manuscripts, in which he told her that he loved her so much for herself, that he was delighted to know that she was happy, but grieved to know that all her happiness was not derived from him; that he had lost his right to make her presents, but that, if the king of France received her coldly, he would think it an honour to acquire a Villiers to the holy empire, and would give him such principalities as he might choose from his domains. The fair Imperia replied that she was extremely obliged to the Emperor, but that had she to suffer contumely upon contumely in France, she still intended there to finish her days.

II. How This Marriage Ended

Not knowing if it she would be received or not, the lady of l'Ile Adam would not go to court, but lived in the country, where her husband made a fine establishment, purchasing the manor of Beaumont-le- Vicomte, which gave rise to the equivoque upon his name, made by our well-beloved Rabelais, in his most magnificent book. He acquired also the domain of Nointel, the forest of Carenelle, St. Martin, and other places in the neighbourhood of the l'Ile Adam, where his brother Villiers resided. These said acquisitions made him the most powerful lord in the l'Ile de France and county of Paris. He built a wonderful castle near Beaumont, which was afterwards ruined by the English, and adorned it with the furniture, foreign tapestries, chests, pictures, statues, and curiosities, of his wife, who was a great connoisseur, which made this place equal to the most magnificent castles known.

The happy pair led a life so envied by all, that nothing was talked about in Paris and at Court but this marriage, the good fortune of the Sire de Beaumont, and, above all, of the perfect, loyal, gracious, and religious life of his wife, who from habit many still called Madame Imperia; who was no longer proud and sharp as steel, but had the virtues and qualities of a respectable woman, and was an example in many things to a queen. She was much beloved by the Church on account of her great religion, for she had never once forgotten God, having, as she once said, spent much of her time with churchmen, abbots, bishops, and cardinals, who had sprinkled her well with holy water, and under the curtains worked her eternal salvation.

The praises sung in honour of this lady had such an effect, that the king came to Beauvoisis to gaze upon this wonder, and did the sire the honour to sleep at Beaumont, remained there

three days, and had a royal hunt there with the queen and the whole Court. You may be sure that he was surprised, as were also the queen, the ladies, and the Court, at the manners of this superb creature, who was proclaimed a lady of courtesy and beauty. The king first, then the queen, and afterwards every individual member of the company, complemented l'Ile Adam on having chosen such a wife. The modesty of the chatelaine did more than pride would have accomplished; for she was invited to court, and everywhere, so imperious was her great heart, so tyrannic her violent love for her husband. You may be sure that her charms, hidden under the garments of virtue, were none the less exquisite. The king gave the vacant post of lieutenant of the Ile de France and provost of Paris to his ancient ambassador, giving him the title of Viscount of Beaumont, which established him as governor of the whole province, and put him on an excellent footing at court. But this was the cause of a great wound in Madame's heart, because a wretch, jealous of this unclouded happiness, asked her, playfully, if Beaumont had ever spoken to her of his first love, Mademoiselle de Montmorency, who at that time was twenty-two years of age, as she was sixteen at the time the marriage took place in Rome--the which young lady loved l'Ile Adam so much that she remained a maiden, would listen to no proposals of marriage, and was dying of a broken heart, unable to banish her perfidious lover from her remembrance and was desirous of entering the convent of Chelles. Madame Imperia, during the six years of her marriage, had never heard this name, and was sure from this fact that she was indeed beloved. You can imagine that this time had been passed as a single day, that both believed that they had only been married the evening before, and that each night was as a wedding night, and that if business took the knight out of doors, he was quite melancholy, being unwilling ever to have her out of his sight, and she was the same with him.

The king, who was very partial to the viscount, also made a remark to him which stung him to the quick, when he said, "You have no children?"

To which Beaumont replied, with the face of a man whose raw place you have touched with your finger, "Monsieur, my brother has; thus our line is safe."

Now it happened that his brother's two children died suddenly--one from a fall from his horse at a tournament and the other from illness. Monsieur l'Ile Adam the elder was so stricken with grief at these two deaths that he expired soon after, so much did he love his two sons. By this means the manor of Beaumont, the property at Carenelle, St. Martin, Nointel, and the surrounding domains, were reunited to the manor of l'Ile Adam, and the neighbouring forests, and the cadet became the head of the house. At this time Madame was forty-five, and was still fit to bear children; but alas! she conceived not. As soon as she saw the lineage of l'Ile Adam destroyed, she was anxious to obtain offspring.

Now, as during the seven years which had elapsed she had never once had the slightest hint of pregnancy, she believed, according to the statement of a clever physician whom she sent for from Paris, that this barrenness proceeded from the fact, that both she and her husband, always more lovers than spouses, allowed pleasure to interfere with business, and by this means engendering was prevented. Then she endeavoured to restrain her impetuosity, and to take things coolly, because the physician had explained to her that in a state of nature animals never failed to breed, because the females employed none of those artifices, tricks, and hanky-pankies with which women accommodate the olives of Poissy, and for this reason they thoroughly deserved the title of beasts. She promised him no longer to play with such a serious affair, and to forget all the ingenious devices in which she had been so fertile.

But, alas! although she kept as quiet as that German woman who lay so still that her husband embraced her to death, and then went, poor baron, to obtain absolution from the pope, who delivered his celebrated brief, in which he requested the ladies of Franconia to be a little more lively, and prevent a repetition of such a crime. Madame de l'Ile Adam did not conceive, and fell into a state of great melancholy.

Then she began to notice how thoughtful had become her husband, l'Ile Adam, whom she watched when he thought she was not looking, and who wept that he had no fruit of his great love. Soon this pair mingled their tears, for everything was common to the two in this fine household, and as they never left the other, the thought of the one was necessarily the thought of the other. When Madame beheld a poor person's child she nearly died of grief, and it took her a whole day to recover. Seeing this great sorrow, l'Ile Adam ordered all children to be kept out of his wife's sight, and said soothing things to her, such as that children often turned out badly; to which she replied, that a child made by those who loved so passionately would be the finest child in the world. He told her that her sons might perish, like those of his poor brother; to which she replied, that she would not let them stir further from her petticoats than a hen allows her chickens. In fact, she had an answer for everything.

Madame caused a woman to be sent for who dealt in magic, and who was supposed to be learned in these mysteries, who told her that she had often seen women unable to conceive in spite of every effort, but yet they had succeeded by studying the manners and customs of animals. Madame took the beasts of the fields for her preceptors, but she did not increase in size; her flesh still remained firm and white as marble. She returned to the physical science of the master doctors of Paris, and sent for a celebrated Arabian physician, who had just arrived in France with a new science. Then this savant, brought up in the school of one Sieur Averroes, entered into certain medical details, and declared that the loose life she had formerly led had for ever ruined her chance of obtaining offspring. The physical reasons which he assigned were so contrary to the teaching of the holy books which establish the majesty of man, made in the image of his creator, and so contrary to the system upheld by sound sense and good doctrine, that the doctors of Paris laughed them to scorn. The Arabian physician left the school where his master, the Sieur Averroes, was unknown.

The doctors told Madame, who had come to Paris, that she was to keep on as usual, since she had had during her gay life the lovely Theodora, by the cardinal of Ragusa, and that the right of having children remained with women as long as their blood circulated, and all that she had to do was to multiply the chances of conception. This advice appeared to her so good that she multiplied her victories, but it was only multiplying her defeats, since she obtained the flowers of love without its fruits.

The poor afflicted woman wrote then to the pope, who loved her much, and told him of her sorrows. The good pope replied to her with a gracious homily, written with his own hand, in which he told her that when human science and things terrestrial had failed, we should turn to Heaven and implore the grace of God. Then she determined to go with naked feet, accompanied by her husband, to Notre Dame de Liesse, celebrated for her intervention in similar cases, and made a vow to build a magnificent cathedral in gratitude for the child. But she bruised and injured her pretty feet, and conceived nothing but a violent grief, which was so great that some of her lovely tresses fell off and some turned white.

At last the faculty of making children was taken from her, which brought on the vapours consequent upon hypochondria, and caused her skin to turn yellow. She was then forty-nine years of age, and lived in her castle of l'Ile Adam, where she grew as thin as a leper in a lazar-house. The poor creature was all the more wretched because l'Ile Adam was still amorous, and as good as gold to her, who failed in her duty, because she had formerly been too free with the men, and was now, according to her own disdainful remark, only a cauldron to cook chitterlings.

"Ha!" said she, one evening when these thoughts were tormenting her. "In spite of the Church, in spite of the king, in spite of everything, Madame de l'Ile Adam is still the wicked Imperia!"

She fell into a violent passion when she saw this handsome gentleman have everything a man can desire, great wealth, royal favour, unequalled love, matchless wife, pleasure such as none other could produce, and yet fail in that which is dearest to the head of the house--namely, lineage. With this idea in her head, she wished to die, thinking how good and noble he had been to her, and how much she failed in her duty in not giving him children, and in being henceforward unable to do so. She hid her sorrow in the secret recesses of her heart, and conceived a devotion worthy her great love. To put into practice this heroic design she became still more amorous, took extreme care of her charms, and made use of learned precepts to maintain her bodily perfection, which threw out an incredible lustre.

About this time the Sieur de Montmorency conquered the repulsion his daughter entertained for marriage, and her alliance with one Sieur de Chatillon was much talked about. Madame Imperia, who lived only three leagues distant from Montmorency, one day sent her husband out hunting in the forests, and set out towards the castle where the young lady lived. Arrived in the grounds she walked about there, telling a servant to inform her mistress that a lady had a most important communication to make to her, and that she had come to request an audience. Much interested by the account which she received by the beauty, courtesy, and manners of the unknown lady, Mademoiselle de Montmorency went in great haste into the gardens, and there met her rival, whom she did not know.

"My dear," said the poor woman, weeping to find the young maiden as beautiful as herself, "I know that they are trying to force you into a marriage with Monsieur de Chatillon, although you still love Monsieur de l'Ile Adam. Have confidence in the prophecy that I here make you, that he whom you have loved, and who only was false to you through a snare into which an angel might have fallen, will be free from the burden of his old wife before the leaves fall. Thus the constancy of your love will have its crown of flowers. Now have the courage to refuse this marriage they are arranging for you, and you may yet clasp your first and only love. Pledge me your word to love and cherish l'Ile Adam, who is the kindest of men; never to cause him a moment's anguish, and tell him to reveal to you all the secrets of love invented by Madame Imperia, because, in practicing them, being young, you will be easily able to obliterate the remembrance of her from his mind."

Mademoiselle de Montmorency was so astonished that she could make no answer, and let this queen of beauty depart, and believed her to be a fairy, until a workman told her that the fairy was Madame de l'Ile Adam. Although the adventure was inexplicable, she told her father that she would not give her consent to the proposed marriage until after the autumn, so much is it in the nature of Love to ally itself with Hope, in spite of the bitter pills which

this deceitful and gracious, companion gives her to swallow like bull's eyes. During the months when the grapes are gathered, Imperia would not let l'Ile Adam leave her, and was so amorous that one would have imagined she wished to kill him, since l'Ile Adam felt as though he had a fresh bride in his arms every night. The next morning the good woman requested him to keep the remembrance of these joys in his heart.

Then, to know what her lover's real thoughts on the subject were she said to him, "Poor l'Ile Adam, we were very silly to marry--a lad like you, with your twenty-three years, and an old woman close to 40."

He answered her, that his happiness was such that he was the envy of every one, that at her age her equal did not exist among the younger women, and that if ever she grew old he would love her wrinkles, believing that even in the tomb she would be lovely, and her skeleton lovable.

To these answers, which brought the tears into her eyes, she one morning answered maliciously, that Mademoiselle de Montmorency was very lovely and very faithful. This speech forced l'Ile Adam to tell her that she pained him by telling him of the only wrong he had ever committed in his life--the breaking of the troth pledged to his first sweetheart, all love for whom he had since effaced from his heart. This candid speech made her seize him and clasp him to her heart, affected at the loyalty of his discourse on a subject from which many would have shrunk.

"My dear love," said she, "for a long time past I have been suffering from a retraction of the heart, which has always since my youth been dangerous to my life, and in this opinion the Arabian physician coincides. If I die, I wish you to make the most binding oath a knight can make, to wed Mademoiselle Montmorency. I am so certain of dying, that I leave my property to you only on condition that this marriage takes place."

Hearing this, l'Ile Adam turned pale, and felt faint at the mere thought of an eternal separation from his good wife.

"Yes, dear treasure of love," continued she. "I am punished by God there where my sins were committed, for the great joys that I feel dilate my heart, and have, according to the Arabian doctor, weakened the vessels which in a moment of excitement will burst; but I have always implored God to take my life at the age in which I now am, because I would not see my charms marred by the ravages of time."

This great and noble woman saw then how well she was beloved. This is how she obtained the greatest sacrifice of love that ever was made upon this earth. She alone knew what a charm existed in the embraces, fondlings, and raptures of the conjugal bed, which were such that poor l'Ile Adam would rather have died than allow himself to be deprived of the amorous delicacies she knew so well how to prepare. At this confession made by her that, in the excitement of love her heart would burst, the chevalier cast himself at her knees, and declared that to preserve her life he would never ask her for love, but would live contented to see her only at his side, happy at being able to touch but the hem of her garment.

She replied, bursting into tears, "that she would rather die than lose one iota of his love; that she would die as she had lived, since luckily she could make a man embrace her when such

was her desire without having to put her request into words."

Here it must be stated that the cardinal of Ragusa had given her as a present an article, which this holy joker called /in articulo mortis/. It was a tiny glass bottle, no bigger than a bean, made at Venice, and containing a poison so subtle that by breaking it between the teeth death came instantly and painlessly. He had received it from Signora Tophana, the celebrated maker of poisons of the town of Rome.

Now this tiny bottle was under the bezel of a ring, preserved from all objects that could break it by certain plates of gold. Poor Imperia put it into her mouth several times without being able to make up her mind to bite it, so much pleasure did she take in the moment that she believed to be her last. Then she would pass before her in mental review all her methods of enjoyment before breaking the glass, and determined that when she felt the most perfect of all joys she would bite the bottle.

The poor creature departed this life on the night on the first day of October. Then was there heard a great clamour in the forests and in the clouds, as if the loves had cried aloud, "The great Noc is dead!" in imitation of the pagan gods who, at the coming of the Saviour of men, fled into the skies, saying, "the great Pan is slain!" A cry which was heard by some persons navigating the Eubean Sea, and preserved by a Father of the Church.

Madame Imperia died without being spoiled in shape, so much had God made her the irreproachable model of a woman. She had, it was said, a magnificent tint upon her flesh, caused by the proximity of the flaming wings of Pleasure, who cried and groaned over her corpse. Her husband mourned for her most bitterly, never suspecting that she had died to deliver him from a childless wife, for the doctor who embalmed her said not a word concerning the cause of her death. This great sacrifice was discovered six years after marriage of l'Ile Adam with Mademoiselle de Montmorency, because she told him all about the visit of Madame Imperia. The poor gentleman immediately fell into a state of great melancholy and finished by dying, being unable to banish the remembrance of those joys of love which it was beyond the power of a novice to restore to him; thereby did he prove the truth of that which was said at that time, that this woman would never die in a heart where she had once reigned.

This teaches us that virtue is well understood by those who have practised vice; for among the most modest women few would thus have sacrificed life, in whatever high state of religion you look for them.

Epilogue

Oh! mad little one, thou whose business it is to make the house merry, again hast thou been wallowing, in spite of a thousand prohibitions, in that slough of melancholy, whence thou hast already fished out Bertha, and come back with thy tresses dishevelled, like a girl who has been ill-treated by a regiment of soldiers! Where are thy golden aiglets and bells, thy filigree flowers of fantastic design? Where hast thou left thy crimson head-dress, ornamented with precious gewgaws that cost a minot of pearls?

Why spoil with pernicious tears thy black eyes, so pleasant when therein sparkles the wit of a tale, that popes pardon thee thy sayings for the sake of thy merry laughter, feel their souls

caught between the ivory of thy teeth, have their hearts drawn by the rose point of thy sweet tongue, and would barter the holy slipper for a hundred of the smiles that hover round thy vermilion lips? Laughing lassie, if thou wouldst remain always fresh and young, weep no more; think of riding the brideless fleas, of bridling with the golden clouds thy chameleon chimeras, of metamorphosing the realities of life into figures clothed with the rainbow, caparisoned with roseate dreams, and mantled with wings blue as the eyes of the partridge. By the Body and the Blood, by the Censer and the Seal, by the Book and the Sword, by the Rag and the Gold, by the Sound and the Colour, if thou does but return once into that hovel of elegies where eunuchs find ugly women for imbecile sultans, I'll curse thee; I'll rave at thee; I'll make thee fast from roguery and love; I'll--

Phist! Here she is astride a sunbeam with a volume that is ready to burst with merry meteors! She plays in their prisms, tearing about so madly, so wildly, so boldly, so contrary to good sense, so contrary to good manners, so contrary to everything, that one has to touch her with long feathers, to follow her siren's tail in the golden facets which trifle among the artifices of these new pearls of laughter. Ye gods! but she is sporting herself in them like a hundred schoolboys in a hedge full of blackberries, after vespers. To the devil with the magister! The volume is finished! Out upon work! What ho! my jovial friends; this way!

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