

CHAPTER IX

THE PASTEUR CONQUERS

Meanwhile, following a short cut through the snowy woods that ran over the shoulder of the intervening hill, the pair were wending their way towards Lucerne. Godfrey, a fixed and vacant look upon his face, went first; the Pasteur clinging to his arm like a limpet to a rock, puffed along beside him.

"Heaven!" he gasped, "but this attraction of yours must be strong that it makes you walk so fast immediately after dinner."

"It is, it is!" said Godfrey, in a kind of agony. "I feel as though my inside were being drawn out, and I must follow it. Please hold my arm tight or I shall run."

"Ah! the witch. The great witch!" puffed the Pasteur, "and up this hill too, over snow. Well, it will be better on the down grade. Give me your hand, my boy, for your coat is slipping, and if once you got away how should I catch you?"

They accomplished the walk into Lucerne in absolutely record time. Fortunately, at this after-dinner hour few people were about, but some of those whom they met stared at them, and one called:

"Do you take him to the police-station? Shall I summon the gens-d'arme?"

"No, no," replied the Pasteur, "he goes to keep an assignation, and is in a hurry."

"Then why does he take you with him? Surely a clergyman will make a bad third at such an affair?" ejaculated an outspoken lady who was standing at her house door.

"Where is the street? I do not know it," asked the Pasteur.

"Nor do I," answered Godfrey, "but we shall come there all right. To the left now."

"Oh! the influence! The strong influence!" muttered Monsieur Boiset.

"Behold! it leads him."

Truly it did lead him. Round corners and across squares they went into an old part of the town with which neither of them was acquainted, till at length Godfrey, diving beneath an archway, pulled up in front of an antique doorway, saying:

"I think this is the place."

"Look at the writing and make sure," said the Pasteur, "for it seems

ridiculous----"

At that moment the door opened mysteriously, and Godfrey disappeared into the passage beyond. Scarcely had the Pasteur time to follow him when it shut again, although he could see no concierge.

"Doubtless it is one of those that works with a wire," he thought to himself, but he had no time to stop to look, for already Godfrey was climbing the stairs. Up he went, three floors, and up after him scrambled the Pasteur. Suddenly Godfrey stopped at a door and not waiting to ring the bell, knocked with his hand. Immediately it opened and Godfrey, with his companion, passed into a very dark hall round which were several other doors. Here in the gloom the Pasteur lost him. Godfrey had gone through one of the doors, but which he could not see. He stood still, listening, and presently heard a deep peculiar voice speaking English with a very foreign accent, say:

"So you have come to see your godmamma, my dear little clever boy. Well, I thought you would, and last night I sent you a pretty messenger to give you remembrance."

Then the Pasteur found the handle of the door and entered the room. It was a curious place draped, not without taste of a bizarre kind, in vivid colours, wherein purple dominated, and it gave an idea of mingled magnificence and squalor. Some of the furniture was very good, as were one or two of the pictures, though all of it was of an odd and unusual

make. Thus, the sideboard was shaped like a sarcophagus, and supported on solid sphinxes with gilded faces. In a corner of the room also stood an unwrapped mummy in a glass case.

In the midst of all this stood a common deal table, whereon were a black bottle, and the remains of Madame's meal, which seemed to have consisted of large supplies of underdone meat. In front of the fire was a large, well-worn couch, and by it a small stout table such as spiritualists use, on which gleamed a ball of glass or crystal. On this couch was seated Madame clad in a kind of black dressing-gown and a wide gold scarf tied about her ample waist. Her fat, massive face was painted and powdered; on her head she wore a kind of mantilla also gold-coloured, and about her neck a string of old Egyptian amulets. Anything more unwholesome or uncanny than were her general appearance and surroundings as the bright flames of the fire showed them in this stuffy, shadowed room, it would be impossible to imagine.

"Sit down here by my side, my little son in the speerit, where I have made a place ready for you, and let me hold your hand while you tell me all that you have been doing and if you have been thinking much of me and that beautiful Eleanor whom I sent to see you last night," went on Madame Riennes in her ogreish, purring voice, patting the sofa.

Just then she looked up and caught sight of the Pasteur standing in the shadow. Staring at him with her fierce, prominent eyes, she started violently as though at last she had seen something of which she was

afraid.

"Say, my Godfrey," she exclaimed in a rather doubtful voice, "what is this that you have brought with you? Is it a scarecrow from the fields? Or is it a speerit of your own? If so, I should have thought that a young man would have liked better the lovely Eleanor than this old devil."

"Yes, Madame Jezebel," said the Pasteur striding forward, speaking in a loud, high voice and waving a large umbrella, which had come partly unfolded in his hurried walk. "It is a scarecrow--one that scares the crows of hell who seek to pick out the souls of the innocent, like you, Madame Jezebel."

Madame uttered a voluminous oath in some strange tongue, and sprang to her feet with an agility surprising in one so stout.

"Say, who are you?" she ejaculated in French, confronting him.

"I am the Pasteur Boiset who accompany my ward to pay this little call, Madame."

"Oh! indeed. That thief of a clergyman, who got his finger into the pie of dead Mademoiselle, eh? Well, there are no more pickings here, Pasteur, but perhaps you come to have your fortune told. Shall I look in the crystal for you and tell you nice things about--what shall we

say? About the past of that handsome Madame of yours, for instance? Oh! I will do it for love, yes, for love. Or shall I make that mummy speak for you? I can, for once I lived in that body of hers--it was a gay life," and she stopped, gasping.

"Hearken, woman," said the Pasteur, "and do not think to frighten me. I know all about my wife, and, if once she was foolish, what of it in a world where none are altogether wise? If you do not wish to visit the police cell, you will do well to leave her alone. As for your tricks of chicanery, I want none of them. What I want is that you take off the spell which you have laid upon this poor boy, as Satan your master has given you the power to do. Now, obey me--or----"

"Or? Or what, you old paid advocate of God?"

"That is a good term. If I am an advocate, I know my Employer's mind, I, who have taken His fee, and am therefore in honour bound to serve Him faithfully. Now I will tell you His mind about you. It is that unless you change your ways and repent, soon you will go to hell. Yes, quite soon, I think, for one so fat cannot be very strong in the heart. Do what I bid you, Madame, or I, the advocate of God, having His authority, will curse you in the Name of God, and in the ancient form of which you may have heard."

"Bah! would you frighten me, the great Madame Riennes who have spirits at my command and who, as you admit, can lay on spells and take them

off. A flea for you and your God!"

"Spirits at your command! Yes, some of them in there, I think," and he pointed to the black bottle on the table, "and others too, perhaps; I will not deny it. Well, let them advance, and we will see who is on the top of the mountain, I, the old paid advocate of God, or you and your spirits, Madame," and hooking the handle of the big umbrella over his wrist, he folded his arms and stared at her through the blue spectacles.

Madame Riennes gibbered some invocation, but nothing happened.

"I await your spirits. They cannot have gone to bed so early," remarked the Pasteur like a new Elijah.

Then, also like Elijah, to use a vulgarism, he "sailed in" after a way which even the terrified Godfrey, who was crouching against one of the purple curtains, felt to be really magnificent with such artistic sense as remained to him. In his mediæval Latin which, spoken with a foreign accent, Godfrey, although a good scholar, could scarcely follow save for certain holy names, he cursed Madame Riennes in some archaic but most effective fashion. He consigned, this much Godfrey made out, her soul to hell and her body to a number of the most uncomfortable experiences. He trailed her in the dust at the rear of his theological chariot; he descended from the chariot, so to speak, and jumped upon her as he had done upon the beetle; he tossed up her mangled remains as the holy bull, Apis of the Egyptians, might have done with those of a

Greek blasphemer. Then, like a triumphant pugilist, metaphorically he stood over her and asked her if she wanted any more.

For a little while Madame Riennes was crushed, also very evidently frightened, for those who deal in the supernatural are afraid of the supernatural. Indeed, none of us welcome the curse even of a malignant and disappointed beggar, or of the venomous gipsy angered by this or that, and much less that of a righteous man inspired by just and holy indignation. Madame Riennes, an expert in the trade, a dealer in maledictions, was not exempt from this common prejudice. As she would have expressed it, she felt that he had the Power on his side.

But Madame was no common charlatan; she had strength of a sort, though where it came from who could say? Moreover, for all kinds of secret reasons of her own, she desired to keep in her grip this boy Godfrey, who had shown himself to be so wonderful a medium or clairvoyant. To her he meant strength and fortune; also for him she had conceived some kind of unholy liking in the recesses of her dark soul. Therefore, she was not prepared to give him up without a struggle.

Presently Madame seemed to cast off the influences with which the Pasteur had overwhelmed her. While his maledictions were in full flow she sank in a huddled heap upon the couch. Of a sudden she revived; she sprang up; notwithstanding her bulk she leapt into the air like a ballet-dancer. She tore the golden mantilla from her head, letting down a flood of raven hair, streaked with grey, and waved it round her. She

called upon the names of spirits or demons, long, resounding names with an Eastern ring about them, to come to her aid. Then she pranced into the centre of the room, crying:

"Dog of a clergyman, I defy you and will overcome you. That boy's soul is mine, not yours. I am the greatest mesmerist in the world and he is in my net. I will show you!"

She turned towards the shrivelled, almost naked mummy in the case, and addressed it:

"O Nofri," she said, "Priestess of Set, great seeress and magician of the old world in whom once my spirit dwelt, send forth your Ka, your everlasting Emanation, to help me. Crush this black hound. Come forth, come forth!"

As she spoke the fearful Godfrey in his corner saw the door of the glass case fly open, also as he thought, probably erroneously, that he saw the mummy move, lifting its stiff legs and champing its iron jaws so that the yellow, ancient teeth caught the light as they moved. Then he heard and saw something else. Suddenly the Pasteur in tones that rang like a trumpet, cried out:

"She seems to hesitate, this mummy of yours, Madame. Let me be polite and help her."

With a single bound he was in front of the case. With the hook of his big umbrella he caught the shrivelled thing round the neck; with his long thin arm he gripped it about the middle, just like somebody leading a lady to the dance, thought Godfrey. Then he bent himself and pulled. Out flew the age-withered corpse. The head came off, the body broke above the hips and fell upon the floor, leaving the legs standing in the case, a ghastly spectacle. On to this severed trunk the Pasteur leapt, again as he had done upon the black beetle. It crunched and crumbled, filling the air with a pungent, resinous dust. Then he stood amidst the débris, and placing his right foot upon what had been the mummy's nose, said mildly:

"Now, Madame, what next? This lady is finished?"

Madame Riennes uttered a stifled scream, more she could not do for rage choked her. Her big eyes rolled, she clenched and unclenched her hands, and bent forward as though she were about to fly at the Pasteur like a wild cat. Still poised upon the fragments of the mummy he lifted the point of the umbrella to receive the charge as it came, and taking advantage of Madame's temporary paralysis of speech, went on:

"Hearken! daughter of Beelzebub. You have the curse and it shall work upon your soul, but, yes, it shall work well. Still your body remains, and of that too I would say something. Know that I have heard much of you--oh! the quiet old Pasteur hears many things, especially if he has members of the secret police among his flock. I think that yonder in an

office there is a dossier, yes, an official record concerning you and your doings both in this country and in other lands. It has been allowed to sleep, but it can wake again; if it wakes--well, there is the penitentiary for such as you."

Madame gasped and turned green. If Monsieur had drawn a bow at a venture, evidently that chance arrow had found the bull's-eye, for now she truly was frightened.

"What would you have me do?" she asked in a choking voice.

"Free this youth from your influence, as you can if you will."

"My influence! If I had any with him would not that bald skull of yours by now have been shattered like an egg, seeing that he is strong and holds a stick?"

"I have no time to waste, Madame. The Police Office closes early on Sundays."

Then she gave in.

"Come here," she said sullenly to Godfrey, still speaking in French.

He came and stood before her sneezing, for the pungent dust of the smashed mummy, which the Pasteur still ground beneath his large boots,

had floated up his nose.

"Cease that noise, little fool, and look at me."

Godfrey obeyed, but did not stop sneezing, because the mixture of spices and organic matter would not allow him to do so. She stared at him very evilly, muttered some more words, and made mystic upward passes with her hands.

"There now," she said, "you are free, so far as I am concerned. But I do not think that you are done with spirits, since they are guests which once entertained to breakfast, stop to luncheon and to dinner; yes, and pass the night when they are merriest. I think you will see many spirits before you die, and afterwards--ah! who knows, little pig? Put your string about his leg and take your little pig home, Pasteur. He will not be drawn to come here again."

"Good, Madame, for remember, if he does I shall be drawn to call at the Police Office. If Madame will take my advice she will try change of air. Lucerne is cold in the winter, especially for those whose hearts are not too strong. Is it finished?"

"Quite, for my part, but for you, interfering humbug, I do not know. Get out of my room, both of you."

The Pasteur bowed with an old-fashioned politeness, and herding Godfrey

in front of him, turned to go. As he passed through the door something hard hit him violently in the back, so that he nearly fell. It was the head of the mummy, which Madame had hurled at him. It fell to the floor, and striking against a chair leg, recoiled through the doorway. Godfrey saw it, and an impulse seized him. Lifting that head, he turned. Madame was standing in the middle of the room with her back to the deal table, uttering short little howls of fury.

Godfrey advanced very politely and saying, "I believe this is your property, Madame," placed the battered remnant of humanity upon the table beside the black bottle. As he did so, he glanced at the mesmerist, then turned and fled, for her face was like to that of a devil.

"Monsieur Boiset," he said, when they reached the street, "something has happened to me. I am quite changed. Not for all the world would I go near Madame Riennes again. Indeed, now I feel as though I wished to run away from her."

"That is good!" said the Pasteur. "Oh! I thought it would be so, for I know how to deal with such witches. But not too fast, not too fast, my Godfrey. I wonder what the old Egyptians put into the heads of their mummies to make them so heavy."

"Bitumen," answered Godfrey, and proceeded in a cheerful voice to give an account of the Egyptian process of mummification to his tutor, which

Isobel and he had acquired in the course of their miscellaneous reading at Monk's Acre. Indeed, as he had said, whatever the reason, he was changed and prepared to talk cheerfully about anything. A great burden was lifted from his soul.

From that day forward Godfrey became what a youth of his years and race should be, a high-spirited, athletic, and active young man. Madame Riennes and her visions passed from him like a bad dream. Thoughtful he remained always, for that was his nature; sometimes sad also, when he thought of Isobel, who seemed to have disappeared quite out of his life. But as was natural at his age, this mood weakened by degrees. She was always there in the background, but she ceased to obscure the landscape as she had done before, and was to do in his after life. Had she been a girl of the common type, attractive only because she was a young and vivacious woman, doubtless the eclipse would have been complete. Occasionally, indeed, men do love fools in an enduring fashion, which is perhaps the most evil fate that can be laid upon them. For what can be worse than to waste what is deep and real upon a thing of flesh without a soul, an empty, painted bubble, which evades the hand, or bursts if it is grasped? Those are the real unfortunates, who have sold themselves for a mess of potage, that for the most part they are never even allowed to eat, since before the bell rings it has probably been deposited by heaven knows what hand of Circumstance in someone else's plate, or gone stale and been thrown away.

Godfrey was not one of these, because the hand of Circumstance had managed his affairs otherwise. Isobel was no mess of potage, but with all her faults and failings, a fair and great inheritance for him who could take seisin of her. Still, as he believed, she had first treated him badly, then utterly neglected him whose pride she had outraged, by not even taking the trouble to write him a letter, and finally, had vanished away. And he was young, with manhood advancing in his veins, like the pulse of spring, and women are many in the world, some of whom have pretty faces and proper figures. Also, although the fact is overlooked by convention, it has pleased Nature to make man polygamous in his instincts, though where those instincts end and what is called love begins, is a thing almost impossible to define. Probably in truth the limit lies beyond the borders of sex.

So Isobel's grey eyes faded into the background of Godfrey's mental vision, while the violet eyes of Juliette drew ever nearer to his physical perceptions. And here, to save trouble, it may be said at once, that he never cared in the least for Juliette, except as a male creature cares for a pretty female creature, and that Juliette never cared in the least for him, except as a young woman cares in general for a handsome and attractive young man--with prospects. Indeed, she found him too serious for her taste. She did not understand him, as, for his part, in her he found nothing to understand.

After all, ruling out the primary impulses which would make a scullery

maid congenial to a genius upon a desert isle, what was there in a Juliette to appeal to a Godfrey? And, with the same qualification, what was there in a Godfrey to appeal to a Juliette? As once, with an accidental touch of poetry, she said to her mother, when at his side she felt as though she were walking over a snow-covered crevasse in the surrounding Alps. All seemed firm beneath her feet, but she never knew when the crust would break, and he would vanish into unfathomed depths, perchance dragging her with him. Or, feeling her danger she might run from him on to safer ground, where she knew herself to be on good, common rock or soil, and no strange, hollow echoes struck her ears, leaving him to pursue his perilous journey alone.

Her mother laughed, and falling into her humour, answered, that beyond the crevasse and at the foot of the further slope lay the warm and merry human town, the best house of which--not unlike the Villa Ogilvy--could be reached in no other way, and that with such a home waiting to receive her, it was worth while to take a little risk.

Thereon Juliette shrugged her white shoulders, and in the intervals of one of the French chansonettes which she was very fond of warbling in her gay voice, remarked that she preferred to make journeys, safe or perilous, in the company of a singing-bird in the sunlight, rather than in that of an owl in the dusk, who always reminded her of the advancing darkness.

At least, that was the substance of what she said, although she did not put it quite so neatly. Then, as though by an afterthought, she asked

when her cousin Jules, a young notary of Berne, was coming to stay with them.

The winter wore away, the spring came, and after spring, summer, with its greenery and flowers. Godfrey was happy enough during this time. To begin with, the place suited him. He was very well now, and grew enormously in that pure and trenchant air, broadening as well as lengthening, till, notwithstanding his slimness, he gave promise of becoming a large, athletic man.

Madame Riennes too and her unholy terrors had faded into the background. He no longer thought of spirits, although, it is true that a sense of the immanence and reality of the Unseen was always with him; indeed, as time went on, it increased rather than lessened. Partly, this was owing to the character and natural tendencies of his mind, partly also, without doubt, to the fact that his recent experiences had, as it were, opened a door to him between the Seen and the Hidden, or rather burst a breach in the dividing wall that never was built up again. Also his astronomical studies certainly gave an impetus to thoughts and speculations such as were always present with him. Only now these were of a wholesome and reverent nature, tending towards those ends which are advanced by religion in its truest sense.

He worked hard, too, under the gentle guidance of the learned Pasteur, at the classics, literature, and other subjects, while in French he could not fail to become proficient in the company of the talkative

Madame and the sprightly Juliette. Nor did he want for relaxation. There were great woods on the hills behind the Maison Blanche, and in these he obtained leave to shoot rabbits, and, horrible to say, foxes. Juliette and he would set out together towards evening, accompanied by a clever cur which belonged to Jean, the factotum of the house.

They would post themselves at some convenient spot, while the instructed hound ranged the woods above. Then would appear perhaps a rabbit, perhaps a hare, though these in that land of poaching were not common, or occasionally a great, red, stealthy fox. At first, with his English traditions, Godfrey shrank from shooting the last, which he had been taught ought to die in one way only, namely, by being torn to pieces in the jaws of the hounds.

Juliette, however, mocked at him, volubly reciting Reynard's many misdeeds--how he stole chickens; how he tore out the throats of lambs, and, according to local report, was not even above killing a baby if he found that innocent alone. So it came about next time the excited yapping of the cur-dog was heard on the slopes above them, followed by stealthy movements among the fallen pine needles, and at length by the appearance of the beautiful red creature slyly slinking away to shelter, not twenty yards from where they stood behind a tree-trunk, that Juliette whispered:

"Tirez! Tirez!" and he lifted the gun, an old-fashioned, single-barrelled piece, aimed and fired.

Then followed a horrid scene. The big shot with which he had loaded, mortally wounded but did not kill the fox, that with its forepaws broken, rolled, and bit, and made dreadful noises in its agony, its beautiful fur all stained with blood. Godfrey did not know what to do; it was too big and strong to kill with Juliette's little stick, so he tried to batter it to death with the stock of the gun, but without success, and at last withdrew, looking at it horrified.

"What shall I do?" he asked faintly of Juliette.

"Load the gun and shoot it again," replied that practical young woman.

So with some mistakes, for the emergency made him nervous, such as the dropping of the cap among the pine needles, he obeyed. At last the poor beast lay dead, a very disagreeable spectacle, with the cur-dog that had arrived, biting joyously at its quivering form.

Godfrey put down the gun and retired behind a tree, whence presently he emerged, looking very pale, for to tell the truth, he had been ill.

"I do not think I like shooting foxes," he said.

"How strange you are," answered Juliette. "Quite unlike other men. Now my Cousin Jules, there is nothing that he loves better. Go now and cut off his tail, to hang upon the wall. It is beautiful."

"I can't," said Godfrey still more faintly.

"Then give me the knife, for I can."

And she did!

Had Madame but known it, that fox did not die unavenged upon her family, for with it departed from the world all hopes of the alliance which she desired so earnestly.