recommended her to do the same; at the same time, on the opposite side, that is towards Edward's room, Valentine fancied that she heard the creaking of the floor; she listened attentively, holding her breath till she was nearly suffocated; the lock turned, and the door slowly opened. Valentine had raised herself upon her elbow, and had scarcely time to throw herself down on the bed and shade her eyes with her arm; then, trembling, agitated, and her heart beating with indescribable terror, she awaited the event.

Someone approached the bed and drew back the curtains. Valentine summoned every effort, and breathed with that regular respiration which announces tranquil sleep.

'Valentine!' said a low voice.

The girl shuddered to the heart but did not reply.

'Valentine,' repeated the same voice.

Still silent: Valentine had promised not to wake. Then everything was still, excepting that Valentine heard the almost noiseless sound of some liquid being poured into the glass she had just emptied. Then she ventured to open her eyelids, and glance over her extended arm. She saw a woman in a white dressing-gown pouring a liquor from a phial into her glass. During this short time Valentine must have held her breath, or moved in some slight degree, for the woman, disturbed, stopped and leaned over the bed, in order the better to ascertain whether Valentine slept: it was Madame de Villefort.

On recognizing her step-mother, Valentine could not repress a shudder, which caused a vibration in the bed. Madame de Villefort instantly stepped back close to the wall, and there, shaded by the bed-curtains, she silently and attentively watched the slightest movement of Valentine. The latter recollected the terrible caution of Monte Cristo; she fancied that the hand not holding the phial clasped a long sharp knife. Then collecting all her remaining strength, she forced herself to close her eyes; but this simple operation upon the most delicate organs of our frame, generally so easy to accomplish, became almost impossible at this moment, so much did curiosity struggle to retain the eyelid open and learn the truth. Madame de Villefort, however, reassured by the silence, which was alone disturbed by the regular breathing of Valentine, again extended her hand, and half hidden by the curtains succeeded in emptying the contents of the phial

into the glass. Then she retired so gently that Valentine did not know she had left the room. She only witnessed the withdrawal of the arm—the fair round arm of a woman but twenty-five years old, and who yet spread death around her. It is impossible to describe the sensations experienced by Valentine during the minute and a half Madame de Villefort remained in the room.

The grating against the library-door aroused the young girl from the stupor in which she was plunged, and which almost amounted to insensibility. She raised her head with an effort. The noiseless door again turned on its hinges, and the Count of Monte Cristo reappeared.

'Well,' said he, 'do you still doubt?'

'Oh,' murmured the young girl.

'Have you seen?'

'Alas!'

'Did you recognize?' Valentine groaned.

'Oh, yes;' she said, 'I saw, but I cannot believe!'

'Would you rather die, then, and cause Maximilian's death?'

'Oh,' repeated the young girl, almost bewildered, 'can I not leave the house?—can I not escape?'

'Valentine, the hand which now threatens you will pursue you everywhere; your servants will be seduced with gold, and death will be offered to you disguised in every shape. You will find it in the water you drink from the spring, in the fruit you pluck from the tree.'

'But did you not say that my kind grandfather's precaution had neutralized the poison?'

'Yes, but not against a strong dose; the poison will be changed, and the quantity increased.' He took the glass and raised it to his lips. 'It is already done,' he said; 'brucine is no longer employed, but a simple narcotic! I can recognize the flavour of the alcohol in which it has been dissolved. If you had taken what Madame de Villefort has poured into your glass, Valentine—Valentine—you would have been doomed!'

'But,' exclaimed the young girl, 'why am I thus pursued?'

'Why?—are you so kind—so good—so unsuspicious of ill, that you cannot understand, Valentine?'

'No, I have never injured her.'

'But you are rich, Valentine; you have 200,000 livres a year, and you prevent her son from enjoying these 200,000 livres.'

'How so? The fortune is not her gift, but is inherited from my relations.'

'Certainly; and that is why M. and Madame de Saint-Méran have died; that is why M. Noirtier was sentenced the day he made you his heir; that is why you, in your turn, are to die—it is because your father would inherit your property, and your brother, his only son, succeed to his.'

'Edward? Poor child! Are all these crimes committed on his account?'

'Ah, then you at length understand?'

'Heaven grant that this may not be visited upon him!'

'Valentine, you are an angel!'

'But why is my grandfather allowed to live?'

'It was considered, that you dead, the fortune would naturally revert to your brother, unless he were disinherited; and besides, the crime appearing useless, it would be folly to commit it.'

'And is it possible that this frightful combination of crimes has been invented by a woman?'

'Do you recollect in the arbour of the Hôtel des Postes, at Perugia, seeing a man in a brown cloak, whom your stepmother was questioning upon *aqua tofana*? Well, ever since then, the infernal project has been ripening in her brain.'

'Ah, then, indeed, sir,' said the sweet girl, bathed in tears, 'I see that I am condemned to die!'

'No, Valentine, for I have foreseen all their plots; no, your enemy is conquered since we know her, and you will live, Valentine—live to be happy yourself, and to confer happiness upon a noble heart; but to insure this you must rely on me.'

'Command me, sir—what am I to do?'

'You must blindly take what I give you.'

'Alas, were it only for my own sake, I should prefer to die!'

'You must not confide in anyone—not even in your father.'

'My father is not engaged in this fearful plot, is he, sir?' asked Valentine, clasping her hands.

'No; and yet your father, a man accustomed to judicial accusations, ought to have known that all these deaths have not happened naturally; it

Chapter CI

Locusta

VALENTINE was alone; two other clocks, slower than that of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule, struck the hour of midnight from different directions, and excepting the rumbling of a few carriages all was silent. Then Valentine's attention was engrossed by the clock in her room, which marked the seconds. She began counting them, remarking that they were much slower than the beatings of her heart; and still she doubted,—the inoffensive Valentine could not imagine that anyone should desire her death. Why should they? To what end? What had she done to excite the malice of an enemy?

There was no fear of her falling asleep. One terrible idea pressed upon her mind,—that someone existed in the world who had attempted to assassinate her, and who was about to endeavour to do so again. Supposing this person, wearied at the inefficacy of the poison, should, as Monte Cristo intimated, have recourse to steel!—What if the count should have no time to run to her rescue!—What if her last moments were approaching, and she should never again see Morrel!

When this terrible chain of ideas presented itself, Valentine was nearly persuaded to ring the bell, and call for help. But through the door she fancied she saw the luminous eye of the count—that eye which lived in her memory, and the recollection overwhelmed her with so much shame that she asked herself whether any amount of gratitude could ever repay his adventurous and devoted friendship.

Twenty minutes, twenty tedious minutes, passed thus, then ten more, and at last the clock struck the half-hour.

Just then the sound of finger-nails slightly grating against the door of the library informed Valentine that the count was still watching, and

is he who should have watched over you—he should have occupied my place—he should have emptied that glass—he should have risen against the assassin. Spectre against spectre!' he murmured in a low voice, as he concluded his sentence.

'Sir,' said Valentine, 'I will do all I can to live, for there are two beings who love me and will die if I die—my grandfather and Maximilian.'

'I will watch over them as I have over you.'

'Well, sir, do as you will with me;' and then she added, in a low voice, 'oh, heavens, what will befall me?'

'Whatever may happen, Valentine, do not be alarmed; though you suffer; though you lose sight, hearing, consciousness, fear nothing; though you should awake and be ignorant where you are, still do not fear; even though you should find yourself in a sepulchral vault or coffin. Reassure yourself, then, and say to yourself: "At this moment, a friend, a father, who lives for my happiness and that of Maximilian, watches over me!"'

'Alas, alas, what a fearful extremity!'

'Valentine, would you rather denounce your stepmother?'

'I would rather die a hundred times—oh, yes, die!'

'No, you will not die; but will you promise me, whatever happens, that you will not complain, but hope?'

'I will think of Maximilian!'

'You are my own darling child, Valentine! I alone can save you, and I will.'

Valentine in the extremity of her terror joined her hands,—for she felt that the moment had arrived to ask for courage,—and began to pray, and while uttering little more than incoherent words, she forgot that her white shoulders had no other covering than her long hair, and that the pulsations of her heart could be seen through the lace of her nightdress. Monte Cristo gently laid his hand on the young girl's arm, drew the velvet coverlet close to her throat, and said with a paternal smile:

'My child, believe in my devotion to you as you believe in the goodness of Providence and the love of Maximilian.' Valentine gave him a look full of gratitude, and remained as docile as a child.

Then he drew from his waistcoat-pocket the little emerald box, raised the golden lid, and took from it a pastille about the size of a pea, which he placed in her hand. She took it, and looked attentively on the count; there

was an expression on the face of her intrepid protector which commanded her veneration. She evidently interrogated him by her look.

'Yes,' said he.

Valentine carried the pastille to her mouth, and swallowed it.

'And now, my dear child, adieu for the present. I will try and gain a little sleep, for you are saved.'

'Go,' said Valentine, 'whatever happens, I promise you not to fear.'

Monte Cristo for some time kept his eyes fixed on the young girl, who gradually fell asleep, yielding to the effects of the narcotic the count had given her. Then he took the glass, emptied three parts of the contents in the fireplace, that it might be supposed Valentine had taken it, and replaced it on the table; then he disappeared, after throwing a farewell glance on Valentine, who slept with the confidence and innocence of an angel at the feet of the Lord.

'How do you mean?' said Valentine, looking anxiously around.

'Because you are not feverish or delirious tonight, but thoroughly awake; midnight is striking, which is the hour murderers choose.'

'Oh, heavens,' exclaimed Valentine, wiping off the drops which ran down her forehead. Midnight struck slowly and sadly; every hour seemed to strike with leaden weight upon the heart of the poor girl.

'Valentine,' said the count, 'summon up all your courage; still the beatings of your heart; do not let a sound escape you, and feign to be asleep; then you will see.'

Valentine seized the count's hand. 'I think I hear a noise,' she said; 'leave me.'

'Good-bye, for the present,' replied the count, walking upon tiptoe towards the library door, and smiling with an expression so sad and paternal that the young girl's heart was filled with gratitude.

Before closing the door he turned around once more, and said, 'Not a movement—not a word; let them think you asleep, or perhaps you may be killed before I have the power of helping you.'

And with this fearful injunction the count disappeared through the door, which noiselessly closed after him.

Valentine raised herself in bed, and drew over her chest, which appeared whiter than snow, the embroidered cambric, still moist with the cold dews of delirium, to which were now added those of terror. 'You saw the person?' repeated the young girl.

'Yes,' repeated the count.

'What you tell me is horrible, sir. You wish to make me believe something too dreadful. What?—attempt to murder me in my father's house, in my room, on my bed of sickness? Oh, leave me, sir; you are tempting me—you make me doubt the goodness of Providence—it is impossible, it cannot be!'

'Are you the first that this hand has stricken? Have you not seen M. de Saint-Méran, Madame de Saint-Méran, Barrois, all fall? Would not M. Noirtier also have fallen a victim, had not the treatment he has been pursuing for the last three years neutralized the effects of the poison?'

'Oh, Heaven,' said Valentine; 'is this the reason why grandpapa has made me share all his beverages during the last month?'

'And have they all tasted of a slightly bitter flavour, like that of dried orange-peel?'

'Oh, yes, yes!'

'Then that explains all,' said Monte Cristo. 'Your grandfather knows, then, that a poisoner lives here; perhaps he even suspects the person. He has been fortifying you, his beloved child, against the fatal effects of the poison, which has failed because your system was already impregnated with it. But even this would have availed little against a more deadly medium of death employed four days ago, which is generally but too fatal.'

'But who, then, is this assassin, this murderer?'

'Let me also ask you a question. Have you never seen anyone enter your room at night?'

'Oh, yes; I have frequently seen shadows pass close to me, approach, and disappear; but I took them for visions raised by my feverish imagination, and indeed when you entered I thought I was under the influence of delirium.'

'Then you do not know who it is that attempts your life?'

'No,' said Valentine; 'who could desire my death?'

'You shall know it now, then,' said Monte Cristo, listening.

Chapter CII

Valentine

The night-light continued to burn on the chimney-piece, exhausting the last drops of oil which floated on the surface of the water. The globe of the lamp appeared of a reddish hue, and the flame, brightening before it expired, threw out the last flickerings which in an inanimate object have been so often compared with the convulsions of a human creature in its final agonies. A dull and dismal light was shed over the bedclothes and curtains surrounding the young girl. All noise in the streets had ceased, and the silence was frightful.

It was then that the door of Edward's room opened, and a head we have before noticed appeared in the glass opposite; it was Madame de Villefort, who came to witness the effects of the drink she had prepared. She stopped in the doorway, listened for a moment to the flickering of the lamp, the only sound in that deserted room, and then advanced to the table to see if Valentine's glass were empty. It was still about a quarter full, as we before stated. Madame de Villefort emptied the contents into the ashes, which she disturbed that they might the more readily absorb the liquid; then she carefully rinsed the glass, and wiping it with her handkerchief replaced it on the table.

If anyone could have looked into the room just then he would have noticed the hesitation with which Madame de Villefort approached the bed and looked fixedly on Valentine. The dim light, the profound silence, and the gloomy thoughts inspired by the hour, and still more by her own conscience, all combined to produce a sensation of fear; the poisoner was terrified at the contemplation of her own work.

At length she rallied, drew aside the curtain, and leaning over the pillow gazed intently on Valentine. The young girl no longer breathed, no breath

issued through the half-closed teeth; the white lips no longer quivered—the eyes were suffused with a bluish vapor, and the long black lashes rested on a cheek white as wax. Madame de Villefort gazed upon the face so expressive even in its stillness; then she ventured to raise the coverlet and press her hand upon the young girl's heart. It was cold and motionless. She only felt the pulsation in her own fingers, and withdrew her hand with a shudder. One arm was hanging out of the bed; from shoulder to elbow it was moulded after the arms of Germain Pillon's 'Graces,'[1] but the fore-arm seemed to be slightly distorted by convulsion, and the hand, so delicately formed, was resting with stiff outstretched fingers on the framework of the bed. The nails, too, were turning blue.

Madame de Villefort had no longer any doubt; all was over—she had consummated the last terrible work she had to accomplish. There was no more to do in the room, so the poisoner retired stealthily, as though fearing to hear the sound of her own footsteps; but as she withdrew she still held aside the curtain, absorbed in the irresistible attraction always exerted by the picture of death, so long as it is merely mysterious and does not excite disgust.

The minutes passed; Madame de Villefort could not drop the curtain which she held like a funeral pall over the head of Valentine. She was lost in reverie, and the reverie of crime is remorse.

Just then the lamp again flickered; the noise startled Madame de Villefort, who shuddered and dropped the curtain. Immediately afterwards the light expired, and the room was plunged in frightful obscurity, while the clock at that minute struck half-past four.

Overpowered with agitation, the poisoner succeeded in groping her way to the door, and reached her room in an agony of fear. The darkness lasted two hours longer; then by degrees a cold light crept through the Venetian blinds, until at length it revealed the objects in the room.

About this time the nurse's cough was heard on the stairs and the woman entered the room with a cup in her hand. To the tender eye of a father or a lover, the first glance would have sufficed to reveal Valentine's condition; but to this hireling, Valentine only appeared to sleep.

[1]Germain Pillon was a famous French sculptor (1535-1598). His best known work is 'The Three Graces,' now in the Louvre.

The count extended his hand towards the library.

'I was hidden behind that door,' he said, 'which leads into the next house, which I have rented.'

Valentine turned her eyes away, and, with an indignant expression of pride and modest fear, exclaimed:

'Sir, I think you have been guilty of an unparalleled intrusion, and that what you call protection is more like an insult.'

'Valentine,' he answered, 'during my long watch over you, all I have observed has been what people visited you, what nourishment was prepared, and what beverage was served; then, when the latter appeared dangerous to me, I entered, as I have now done, and substituted, in the place of the poison, a healthful draught; which, instead of producing the death intended, caused life to circulate in your veins.'

'Poison—death!' exclaimed Valentine, half believing herself under the influence of some feverish hallucination; 'what are you saying, sir?'

'Hush, my child,' said Monte Cristo, again placing his finger upon her lips, 'I did say poison and death. But drink some of this;' and the count took a bottle from his pocket, containing a red liquid, of which he poured a few drops into the glass. 'Drink this, and then take nothing more tonight.'

Valentine stretched out her hand, but scarcely had she touched the glass when she drew back in fear. Monte Cristo took the glass, drank half its contents, and then presented it to Valentine, who smiled and swallowed the rest.

'Oh, yes,' she exclaimed, 'I recognize the flavour of my nocturnal beverage which refreshed me so much, and seemed to ease my aching brain. Thank you, sir, thank you!'

'This is how you have lived during the last four nights, Valentine,' said the count. 'But, oh, how I passed that time! Oh, the wretched hours I have endured—the torture to which I have submitted when I saw the deadly poison poured into your glass, and how I trembled lest you should drink it before I could find time to throw it away!'

'Sir,' said Valentine, at the height of her terror, 'you say you endured tortures when you saw the deadly poison poured into my glass; but if you saw this, you must also have seen the person who poured it?'

'Yes.'

Valentine shuddered. It was the first time one of these visions had ever addressed her in a living voice, and she was about to utter an exclamation. The man placed his finger on her lips.

'The Count of Monte Cristo!' she murmured.

It was easy to see that no doubt now remained in the young girl's mind as to the reality of the scene; her eyes started with terror, her hands trembled, and she rapidly drew the bedclothes closer to her. Still, the presence of Monte Cristo at such an hour, his mysterious, fanciful, and extraordinary entrance into her room through the wall, might well seem impossibilities to her shattered reason.

'Do not call anyone—do not be alarmed,' said the count; 'do not let a shade of suspicion or uneasiness remain in your breast; the man standing before you, Valentine (for this time it is no ghost), is nothing more than the tenderest father and the most respectful friend you could dream of.'

Valentine could not reply; the voice which indicated the real presence of a being in the room, alarmed her so much that she feared to utter a syllable; still the expression of her eyes seemed to inquire, 'If your intentions are pure, why are you here?' The count's marvellous sagacity understood all that was passing in the young girl's mind.

'Listen to me,' he said, 'or, rather, look upon me; look at my face, paler even than usual, and my eyes, red with weariness—for four days I have not closed them, for I have been constantly watching you, to protect and preserve you for Maximilian.'

The blood mounted rapidly to the cheeks of Valentine, for the name just announced by the count dispelled all the fear with which his presence had inspired her.

'Maximilian!' she exclaimed, and so sweet did the sound appear to her, that she repeated it—'Maximilian!—has he then owned all to you?'

'Everything. He told me your life was his, and I have promised him that you shall live.'

'You have promised him that I shall live?'

'Yes.'

'But, sir, you spoke of vigilance and protection. Are you a doctor?'

'Yes; the best you could have at the present time, believe me.'

'But you say you have watched?' said Valentine uneasily; 'where have you been?—I have not seen you.'

'Good,' she exclaimed, approaching the table, 'she has taken part of her draught; the glass is three-quarters empty.'

Then she went to the fireplace and lit the fire, and although she had just left her bed, she could not resist the temptation offered by Valentine's sleep, so she threw herself into an armchair to snatch a little more rest. The clock striking eight awoke her. Astonished at the prolonged slumber of the patient, and frightened to see that the arm was still hanging out of the bed, she advanced towards Valentine, and for the first time noticed the white lips. She tried to replace the arm, but it moved with a frightful rigidity which could not deceive a sick-nurse. She screamed aloud; then running to the door exclaimed:

'Help, help!'

'What is the matter?' asked M. d'Avrigny, at the foot of the stairs, it being the hour he usually visited her.

'What is it?' asked Villefort, rushing from his room. 'Doctor, do you hear them call for help?'

'Yes, yes; let us hasten up; it was in Valentine's room.'

But before the doctor and the father could reach the room, the servants who were on the same floor had entered, and seeing Valentine pale and motionless on her bed, they lifted up their hands towards heaven and stood transfixed, as though struck by lightening.

'Call Madame de Villefort!—Wake Madame de Villefort!' cried the procureur from the door of his chamber, which apparently he scarcely dared to leave. But instead of obeying him, the servants stood watching M. d'Avrigny, who ran to Valentine, and raised her in his arms.

'What?—this one, too?' he exclaimed. 'Oh, where will be the end?'

Villefort rushed into the room.

'What are you saying, doctor?' he exclaimed, raising his hands to heaven.

'I say that Valentine is dead!' replied d'Avrigny, in a voice terrible in its solemn calmness. M. de Villefort staggered and buried his head in the bed. On the exclamation of the doctor and the cry of the father, the servants all fled with muttered imprecations; they were heard running down the stairs and through the long passages, then there was a rush in the court, afterwards all was still; they had, one and all, deserted the accursed house.

Just then, Madame de Villefort, in the act of slipping on her dressing-gown, threw aside the drapery and for a moment stood motionless, as though interrogating the occupants of the room, while she endeavoured to call up some rebellious tears. On a sudden she stepped, or rather bounded, with outstretched arms, towards the table. She saw d'Avrigny curiously examining the glass, which she felt certain of having emptied during the night. It was now a third full, just as it was when she threw the contents into the ashes. The spectre of Valentine rising before the poisoner would have alarmed her less. It was, indeed, the same colour as the draught she had poured into the glass, and which Valentine had drunk; it was indeed the poison, which could not deceive M. d'Avrigny, which he now examined so closely; it was doubtless a miracle from heaven, that, notwithstanding her precautions, there should be some trace, some proof remaining to reveal the crime.

While Madame de Villefort remained rooted to the spot like a statue of terror, and Villefort, with his head hidden in the bedclothes, saw nothing around him, d'Avrigny approached the window, that he might the better examine the contents of the glass, and dipping the tip of his finger in, tasted it.

'Ah,' he exclaimed, 'it is no longer brucine that is used; let me see what it is!'

Then he ran to one of the cupboards in Valentine's room, which had been transformed into a medicine closet, and taking from its silver case a small bottle of nitric acid, dropped a little of it into the liquor, which immediately changed to a blood-red colour.

'Ah,' exclaimed d'Avrigny, in a voice in which the horror of a judge unveiling the truth was mingled with the delight of a student making a discovery.

Madame de Villefort was overpowered; her eyes first flashed and then swam, she staggered towards the door and disappeared. Directly afterwards the distant sound of a heavy weight falling on the ground was heard, but no one paid any attention to it; the nurse was engaged in watching the chemical analysis, and Villefort was still absorbed in grief. M. d'Avrigny alone had followed Madame de Villefort with his eyes, and watched her hurried retreat. He lifted up the drapery over the entrance to Edward's

At any other time Valentine would have seized the silken bell-pull and summoned assistance, but nothing astonished her in her present situation. Her reason told her that all the visions she beheld were but the children of her imagination, and the conviction was strengthened by the fact that in the morning no traces remained of the nocturnal phantoms, who disappeared with the coming of daylight.

From behind the door a human figure appeared, but the girl was too familiar with such apparitions to be alarmed, and therefore only stared, hoping to recognize Morrel. The figure advanced towards the bed and appeared to listen with profound attention. At this moment a ray of light glanced across the face of the midnight visitor.

'It is not he,' she murmured, and waited, in the assurance that this was but a dream, for the man to disappear or assume some other form. Still, she felt her pulse, and finding it throb violently she remembered that the best method of dispelling such illusions was to drink, for a draught of the beverage prepared by the doctor to allay her fever seemed to cause a reaction of the brain, and for a short time she suffered less. Valentine therefore reached her hand towards the glass, but as soon as her trembling arm left the bed the apparition advanced more quickly towards her, and approached the young girl so closely that she fancied she heard his breath, and felt the pressure of his hand.

This time the illusion, or rather the reality, surpassed anything Valentine had before experienced; she began to believe herself really alive and awake, and the belief that her reason was this time not deceived made her shudder. The pressure she felt was evidently intended to arrest her arm, and she slowly withdrew it. Then the figure, from whom she could not detach her eyes, and who appeared more protecting than menacing, took the glass, and walking towards the night-light held it up, as if to test its transparency. This did not seem sufficient; the man, or rather the ghost—for he trod so softly that no sound was heard—then poured out about a spoonful into the glass, and drank it.

Valentine witnessed this scene with a sentiment of stupefaction. Every minute she had expected that it would vanish and give place to another vision; but the man, instead of dissolving like a shadow, again approached her, and said in an agitated voice, 'Now you may drink.'