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No, nothing was the matter. Mother, I have gold bath taps. I said, gold bath taps!
No, I suppose that’s nothing to cry about, Mother.
The line was bad, I could hardly make out her congratulations, her questions, her concern, but I was a little comforted when I put the receiver down.
Yet there still remained one whole hour to dinner and the whole, unimaginable desert of the rest of the evening.
The bunch of keys lay, where he had left them, on the rug before the library fire, which had warmed their metal so that they no longer felt cold to the touch but warm, almost, as my own skin. How careless I was; a maid, tending the logs, eyed me reproachfully as if I’d set a trap for her as I picked up the clinking bundle of keys, the keys to the interior doors of this lovely prison of which I was both the inmate and the mistress and had scarcely seen. When I remembered that, I felt the exhilaration of the explorer.
Lights! More lights! At the touch of a switch, the dreaming library was brilliantly illuminated. I ran crazily about the castle, switching on every light I could find—I ordered the servants to light up all their quarters, too, so the castle would shine like a seaborne birthday cake lit with a thousand candles, one for every year of its life, and everybody on shore would wonder at it. When everything was lit as brightly as the café in the Gare du Nord, the significance of the possessions implied by that bunch of keys no longer intimidated me, for I was determined, now, to search through them all for evidence of my husband’s true nature.
His office first, evidently.
A mahogany desk half a mile wide, with an impeccable blotter and a bank of telephones. I allowed myself the luxury of opening the safe that contained the jewelry and delved sufficiently among the leather boxes to find out how my marriage had given me access to a jinn’s treasury—parures, bracelets, rings. . . . While I was thus surrounded by diamonds, a maid knocked on the door and entered before I spoke; a subtle discourtesy. I would speak to my husband about it. She eyed my serge skirt superciliously; did madame plan to dress for dinner?
She made a moue of disdain when I laughed to hear that; she was far more the lady than I. But imagine—to dress up in one of my Poiret extravaganzas, with the jeweled turban and aigrette on my head, roped with pearl to the navel, to sit down all alone in the baronial dining hall at the head of that massive board at which King Mark was reputed to have fed his knights . . . I grew calmer under the cold eye of her disapproval. I adopted the crisp inflections of an officer’s daughter. No, I would not dress for dinner. Furthermore, I was not hungry enough for dinner itself. She must tell the housekeeper to cancel the dormitory feast I’d ordered. Could they leave me sandwiches and a flask of coffee in my music room? And would they all dismiss for the night?
Mais oui, madame.
I knew by her bereft intonation I had let them down again, but I did not care; I was armed against them by the brilliance of his hoard. But I would not find his heart amongst the glittering stones; as soon as she had gone, I began a systematic search of the drawers of his desk.
All was in order, so I found nothing. Not a random doodle on an old envelope, nor the faded photograph of a woman. Only the files of business correspondence, the bills from the home farms, the invoices from tailors, the billets-doux from international financiers. Nothing. And this absence of the evidence of his real life began to impress me strangely; there must, I thought, be a great deal to conceal if he takes such pains to hide it.
His office was a singularly impersonal room, facing inward, onto the courtyard, as though he wanted to turn his back on the siren sea in order to keep a clear head while he bankrupted
a small businessman in Amsterdam or—I noticed with a thrill of distaste—engaged in some business in Laos that must, from certain cryptic references to his amateur botanist’s enthusiasm for rare poppies, be to do with opium. Was he not rich enough to do without crime? Or was the crime itself his profit? And yet I saw enough to appreciate his zeal for secrecy.

Now I had ransacked his desk, I must spend a cool-headed quarter of an hour putting every last letter back where I had found it, and as I covered the traces of my visit, by some chance, as I reached inside a little drawer that had stuck fast, I must have touched a hidden spring, for a secret drawer flew open within that drawer itself; and this secret drawer contained—at last!—a file marked Personal.

I was alone, but for my reflection in the uncurtained window.

I had the brief notion that his heart, pressed flat as a flower, crimson and thin as tissue paper, lay in this file. It was a very thin one.

I could have wished, perhaps, I had not found that touching, ill-spelled note, on a paper napkin marked La Coupole, that began: “My darling, I cannot wait for the moment when you may make me yours completely.” The diva had sent him a page of the score of Tristan, the Liebestod, with the single, cryptic word “Until…” scrawled across it. But the strangest of all these love letters was a postcard with a view of a village graveyard, among mountains, where some black-coated ghoul enthusiastically dug at a grave; this little scene, executed with the lurid exuberance of Grand Guignol, was captioned: “Typical Transylvanian Scene—Midnight, All Hallows.” And on the other side, the message: “On the occasion of this marriage to the descendant of Dracula—always remember, ‘the supreme and unique pleasure of love is the certainty that one is doing evil.’ Toutes amitiés, C.”

A joke. A joke in the worst possible taste; for had he not been married to a Romanian countess? And then I remembered her pretty, witty face, and her name—Carmilla. My most recent predecessor in this castle had been, it would seem, the most sophisticated.

I put away the file, sobered. Nothing in my life of family love and music had prepared me for these grown-up games and yet these were clues to his self that showed me, at least, how much he had been loved, even if they did not reveal any good reason for it. But I wanted to know still more; and as I closed the office door and locked it, the means to discover more fell in my way.

Fell, indeed; and with the clatter of a dropped canteen of cutlery, for as I turned the slick Yale lock, I contrived, somehow, to open up the key ring itself, so that all the keys tumbled loose on the floor. And the very first key I picked out of that pile was, as luck or ill fortune had it, the key to the room he had forbidden me, the room he would keep for his own so that he could go there when he wished to feel himself once more a bachelor.

I made my decision to explore it before I felt a faint resurgence of my ill-defined fear of his waxen stillness. Perhaps I half imagined, then, that I might find his real self in his den, waiting there to see if indeed I had obeyed him; that he had sent a moving figure of himself to New York, the enigmatic, self-sustaining carapace of his public person, while the real man, whose face I had glimpsed in the storm of orgasm, occupied himself with pressing private business in the study at the foot of the west tower, behind the stillroom. Yet if that were so, it was imperative that I should find him, should know him; and I was too deluded by his apparent taste for me to think my disobedience might truly offend him.

I took the forbidden key from the heap and left the others lying there.

It was now very late and the castle was adrift, as far as it could go from the land, in the middle of the silent ocean where, at my orders, it floated, like a garland of light. And all silent,
all still, but for the murmuring of the waves.

I felt no fear, no intimation of dread. Now I walked as firmly as I had done in my mother's house.

Not a narrow, dusty little passage at all; why had he lied to me? But an ill-lit one, certainly; the electricity, for some reason, did not extend here, so I retreated to the stillroom and found a bundle of waxed tapers in a cupboard, stored there with matches to light the oak board at grand dinners. I put a match to my little taper and advanced with it in my hand, like a penitent, along the corridor hung with heavy, I think Venetian, tapestries. The flame picked out, here, the head of a man, there, the rich breast of a woman spilling through a rent in her dress—the Rape of the Sabines, perhaps? The naked swords and immolated horses suggested some grisly mythological subject. The corridor wound downward; there was an almost imperceptible ramp to the thickly carpeted floor. The heavy hangings on the wall muffled my footsteps, even my breathing. For some reason, it grew very warm; the sweat sprang out in beads on my brow. I could no longer hear the sound of the sea.

A long, a winding corridor, as if I were in the viscera of the castle; and this corridor led to a door of worm-eaten oak, low, round-topped, barred with black iron.

And still I felt no fear, no raising of the hairs on the back of the neck, no prickling of the thumbs.

The key slid into the new lock as easily as a hot knife into butter.

No fear; but a hesitation, a holding of the spiritual breath.

If I had found some traces of his heart in a file marked Personal, perhaps here, in his subterranean privacy, I might find a little of his soul. It was the consciousness of the possibility of such a discovery, of its possible strangeness, that kept me for a moment motionless, before, in the foolhardiness of my already subtly tainted innocence, I turned the key and the door creaked slowly back.

"There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer," opined my husband's favorite poet, I had learned something of the nature of that similarity on my marriage bed. And now my taper showed me the outlines of a rack. There was also a great wheel, like the ones I had seen in woodcuts of the martyrdoms of the saints, in my old nurse's little store of holy books. And—just one glimpse of it before my little flame gave in and I was left in absolute darkness—a metal figure, hinged at the side, which I knew to be spiked on the inside and to have the name: the Iron Maiden.

Absolute darkness. And about me, the instruments of mutilation.

Until that moment, this spoiled child did not know she had inherited nerves and a will from the mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indochina. My mother's spirit drove me on, into that dreadful place, in a cold ecstasy to know the very worst. I fumbled for the matches in my pocket; what a dim, lugubrious light they gave! And yet enough, oh, more than enough, to see a room designed for desecration and some dark night of unimaginable lovers whose embraces were annihilation.

The walls of this stark torture chamber were the naked rock; they gleamed as if they were sweating with fright. At the four corners of the room were funerary urns, of great antiquity, Etruscan, perhaps, and on three-legged ebony stands, the bowls of incense he had left burning which filled the room with a sacrificial reek. Wheel, rack and Iron Maiden were, I saw, displayed as grandly as if they were items of statuary and I was almost consoled then, and almost persuaded myself that I might have stumbled only upon a little museum of his perversity, that he had installed these monstrous items here only for contemplation.

Yet at the center of the room lay a catafalque, a doomed, ominous bier of Renaissance workmanship, surrounded by long-white candles, and at its foot, an armful of the same lilies with
which he had filled my bedroom, stowed in a four-foot-high jar glazed with a somber Chinese red. I scarcely dared examine this catafalque and its occupant more closely; yet I knew I must. Each time I struck a match to light those candles round her bed, it seemed a garment of that innocence of mine for which he had lusted fell away from me.

The opera singer lay, quite naked, under a thin sheet of very rare and precious linen, such as the princes of Italy used to shroud those whom they had poisoned. I touched her, very gently, on the white breast; she was cool, he had embalmed her. On her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler’s fingers. The cool, sad flame of the candles flickered on her white, closed eyelids. The worst thing was, the dead lips smiled.

Beyond the catafalque, in the middle of the shadows, a white, nacreous glimmer; as my eyes accustomed themselves to the gathering darkness, I at last—oh, horrors!—made out a skull; yes, a skull, so utterly denuded, now, of flesh that it scarcely seemed possible the stark bone had once been richly upholstered with life. And this skull was strung up by a system of unseen cords, so that it appeared to hang, disembodied, in the still, heavy air, and it had been crowned with a wreath of white roses, and a veil of lace, the final image of his bride.

Yet the skull was still so beautiful, had shaped with its sheer planes so imperiously the face that had once existed above it, that I recognized her the moment I saw her: face of the evening star walking on the rim of night. One false step, oh, my poor, dear girl, next in the fated sisterhood of his wives; one false step and into the abyss of the dark you stumbled.

And where was she the latest dead, the Romanian countess who might have thought her blood would survive his depredations? I knew she must be here, in the place that had wound me through the castle towards it on a spool of inexorability. But at first, I could see no sign of her. Then, for some reason—perhaps some change of atmosphere wrought by my presence—the metal shell of the Iron Maiden emitted a ghostly twang; my feverish imagination might have guessed its occupant was trying to clamber out, though, even in the midst of my rising hysteria, I knew she must be dead to find a home there.

With trembling fingers, I prizéd open the front of the upright coffin, with its sculpted face caught in a rictus of pain. Then, overcome, I dropped the key I still held in my other hand. It dropped into the forming pool of her blood.

She was pierced, not by one, but by a hundred spikes, this child of the land of the vampires who seemed so newly dead, so full of blood... Oh, God! How recently had he become a widower? How long had he kept her in this obscene cell? Had it been all the time he had courted me, in the clear light of Paris?

I closed the lid of her coffin very gently and burst into a tumult of sobbing that contained both pity for his other victims and also a dreadful anguish to know I, too, was one of them.

The candles flared, as if in a draft from a door to elsewhere. The light caught the fire opal on my hand so that it flashed, once, with a baleful light, as if to tell me the eye of God—his eye—was upon me. My first thought, when I saw the ring for which I had sold myself to this fate, was how to escape it.

I retained sufficient presence of mind to snuff out the candles round the bier with my fingers, to gather up my taper, to look around, although shuddering, to ensure I had left behind me no traces of my visit.

I retrieved the key from the pool of blood, wrapped it in my handkerchief to keep my hands clean, and fled the room, slamming the door behind me.

It crashed to with a juddering reverberation, like the door of hell.

I could not take refuge in my bedroom, for that retained the memory of his presence trapped in the fathomless silvering of
his mirrors. My music room seemed the safest place, although I looked at the picture of Saint Cecilia with a faint dread: what had been the nature of her martyrdom? My mind was in a tumult; schemes for flight jostled with one another. As soon as the tide receded from the causeway, I would make for the mainland—on foot, running, stumbling; I did not trust that leather-clad chauffeur, nor the well-behaved housekeeper, and I dared not take any of the pale, ghostly maids into my confidence, either, since they were all his creatures, all. Once at the village, I would fling myself directly on the mercy of the gendarmerie.

But—could I trust them, either? His forefathers had ruled this coast for eight centuries, from this castle whose moat was the Atlantic. Might not the police, the advocates, even the judge, all be in his service, turning a common blind eye to his vices since he was milord whose word must be obeyed? Who, on this distant coast, would believe the white-faced girl from Paris who came running to them with a shuddering tale of blood, of fear, of the ogre murmuring in the shadows? Or rather, they would immediately know it to be true. But were all honor-bound to let me carry it no further.

Assistance. My mother. I ran to the telephone; and the line, of course, was dead.

Dead as his wives.

A thick darkness, unlit by any star, still glared the windows. Every lamp in my room burned, to keep the dark outside, yet it seemed still to encroach on me, to be present beside me but as if masked by my lights, the night like a permeable substance that could seep into my skin. I looked at the precious little clock made from hypocritically innocent flowers long ago, in Dresden; the hands had scarcely moved one single hour forward from when I first descended to that private slaughterhouse of his. Time was his servant, too; it would trap me, here, in a night that would last until he came back to me, like a black sun on a hopeless morning.

And yet the time might still be my friend; at that hour, that very hour, he set sail for New York.

To know that in a few moments, my husband would have left France calmed my agitation a little. My reason told me I had nothing to fear; the tide that would take him away to the New World would let me out of the imprisonment of the castle. Surely I could easily evade the servants. Anybody can buy a ticket at a railway station. Yet I was still filled with unease. I opened the lid of the piano; perhaps I thought my own particular magic might help me now, that I could create a pantale out of music that would keep me from harm, for if my music had first ensnared him, then might it not also give me the power to free myself from him?

Mechanically, I began to play, but my fingers were stiff and shaking. At first, I could manage nothing better than the exercises of Czerny, but simply the act of playing soothed me and, for solace, for the sake of the harmonious rationality of its sublime mathematics, I searched among his scores until I found The Well-Tempered Clavier. I set myself the therapeutic task of playing all Bach’s equations, every one, and, I told myself, if I played them all through without a single mistake—then the morning would find me once more a virgin.

Crash of a dropped stick.

His silver-headed cane! What else? Sly, cunning, he had returned; he was waiting for me outside the door!

I rose to my feet; fear gave me strength. I flung back my head defiantly.

“Come in!” My voice astonished me by its firmness, its clarity.

The door slowly, nervously opened and I saw, not the massive, irredeemable bulk of my husband, but the slight, stooping figure of the piano tuner, and he looked far more terrified of me than my mother’s daughter would have been of the Devil himself. In the torture chamber, it seemed to me that I would never laugh again; now, helplessly, laugh I did, with relief, and after
a moment’s hesitation, the boy’s face softened and he smiled a little, almost in shame. Though they were blind, his eyes were singularly sweet.

"Forgive me," said Jean-Yves. "I know I’ve given you grounds for dismissing me, that I should be touching outside your door at midnight... but I heard you walking about, up and down—I sleep in a room at the foot of the west tower—and some intuition told me you could not sleep and might, perhaps, pass the insomniac hours at your piano. And I could not resist that. Besides, I stumbled over these—"

And he displayed the ring of keys I’d dropped outside my husband’s office door, the ring from which one key was missing. I took them from him, looked round for a place to stow them, fixed on the piano stool as if to hide them would protect me. Still he stood smiling at me. How hard it was to make everyday conversation.


But he was full of the loquacity of embarrassment, as though I would only forgive him for his impudence if he explained the cause of it thoroughly.

"When I heard you play this afternoon, I thought I’d never heard such a touch. Such technique. A treat for me, to hear a virtuoso! So I crept up to your door now, humbly as a little dog might, madame, and put my ear to the keyhole and listened, and listened—until my stick fell to the floor through a momentary clumsiness of mine, and I was discovered."

He had the most touchingly ingenuous smile.

"Perfectly in tune," I repeated. To my surprise, now I had said it, I found I could not say anything else. I could only repeat: "In tune... perfect... in tune," over and over again. I saw a dawning surprise in his face. My head throbbed. To see him, in his lovely, blind humanity, seemed to hurt me very piercingly, somewhere inside my breast; his figure blurred, the room swayed about me. After the dreadful revelation of that bloody chamber, it was his tender look that made me faint.

When I recovered consciousness, I found I was lying in the piano tuner’s arms and he was tucking the satin cushion from the piano stool under my head.

"You are in some great distress," he said. "No bride should suffer so much, so early in her marriage."

His speech had the rhythms of the countryside, the rhythms of the tides.

"Any bride brought to this castle should come ready dressed in mourning, should bring a priest and a coffin with her," I said.

"What’s this?"

It was too late to keep silent; and if he, too, was one of my husband’s creatures, then at least he had been kind to me. So I told him everything, the keys, the interdiction, my disobedience, the room, the rack, the skull, the corpses, the blood.

"I can scarcely believe it," he said, wondering. "That man... so rich; so well-born."

"Here’s proof," I said, and tumbled the fatal key out of my handkerchief onto the silken rug.

"Oh, God," he said. "I can smell the blood."

He took my hand; he pressed his arms about me. Although he was scarcely more than a boy, I felt a great strength flow into me from his touch.

"We whisper all manner of strange tales up and down the coast," he said. "There was a marquis, once, who used to hunt young girls on the mainland; he hunted them with dogs, as though they were foxes. My grandfather had it from his grandfather, how the marquis pulled a head out of his saddlebag and showed it to the blacksmith while the man was shoeing his horse. ‘A fine specimen of the genus brunette, eh, Guillaume?’ And it was the head of the blacksmith’s wife."
But in these more democratic times, my husband must travel
as far as Paris, to do his hunting in the salons. Jean-Yves knew
the moment I shuddered.

"Oh, madame! I thought all these were old wives’ tales, chattering
of fools, spooks to scare bad children into good behavior!
Yet how could you know, a stranger, that the old name for this
place is the Castle of Murder?"

How could I know, indeed? Except that, in my heart, I’d always
known its lord would be the death of me.

"Hark!" said my friend suddenly. "The sea has changed key.
It must be near morning; the tide is going down."

He helped me up. I looked from the window, towards the
mainland, along the causeway where the stones gleamed wetly
in the thin light of the end of the night, and with an almost
unimaginable horror, a horror the intensity of which I cannot
transmit to you, I saw, in the distance, still far away yet drawing
moment by moment inexorably nearer, the twin headlamps of
his great black car, gouging tunnels through the shifting
mist.

My husband had indeed returned; this time, it was no fancy.

"The key!" said Jean-Yves. "It must go back on the ring,
with the others. As though nothing had happened."

But the key was still caked with wet blood and I ran to my
bathroom and held it under the hot tap. Crimson water swirled
down the basin, but as if the key itself were hurt, the bloody
token stuck. The turquoise eyes of the dolphin taps winked at
me derisively; they knew my husband had been too clever for
me! I scrubbed the stain with my nailbrush but still it would
not budge. I thought how the car would be rolling silently to-
wards the closed courtyard gate; the more I scrubbed the key,
the more vivid grew the stain.

The bell in the gatehouse would jangle. The porter’s drowsy
son would push back the patchwork quilt, yawning, pull the shirt
over his head, thrust his feet into his sabots... slowly, slowly;
open the door for your master as slowly as you can....

And still the bloodstain mocked the fresh water that spilled
from the mouth of the leering dolphin.

"You have no more time," said Jean-Yves. "He is here. I know
it. I must stay with you."

"You shall not!" I said. "Go back to your room, now. Please."

He hesitated. I put an edge of steel in my voice, for I knew
I must meet my lord alone.

"Leave me!"

As soon as he had gone, I dealt with the keys and went to
my bedroom. The causeway was empty. Jean-Yves was correct;
my husband had already entered the castle. I pulled the curtains
close, stripped off my clothes and pulled the bedcurtains round
me as a pungent aroma of Russian leather assured me my hus-
band was once again beside me.

"Dearest!"

With the most treacherous, lascivious tenderness, he kissed
my eyes, and mimicking the new bride newly wakened, I flung
my arms around him, for on my seeming acquiescence depended
my salvation.

"Da Silva of Rio outwitted me," he said wryly. "My New York
agent telegraphed Le Havre and saved me a wasted journey.
So we may resume our interrupted pleasures, my love."

I did not believe one word of it. I knew I had behaved exactly
according to his desires; had he not bought me so that I should
do so? I had been tricked into my own betrayal to that illimitable
darkness whose source I had been compelled to seek in his ab-
sence, and now that I had met that shadowed reality of his that
came to life only in the presence of its own atrocities, I must
pay the price of my new knowledge. The secret of Pandora’s
box; but he had given me the box himself, knowing I must learn
the secret. I had played a game in which every move was gov-
erned by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself,
since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. Lost at that charade
of innocence and vice in which he had engaged me. Lost, as
the victim loses to the executioner.

His hand brushed my breast beneath the sheet. I strained
my nerves yet could not help but flinch from the intimate touch,
for it made me think of the piercing embrace of the Iron Maiden
and of his lost lovers in the vault. When he saw my reluctance,
his eyes veiled over and yet his appetite did not diminish. His
tongue ran over red lips already wet. Silent, mysterious, he
moved away from me to draw off his jacket. He took the gold
watch from his waistcoat and laid it on the dressing table, like
a good bourgeois; scooped out his ratling loose change and
now—oh, God!—makes a great play of patting his pockets offi-
ciously, puzzled lips pursed, searching for something that has
been mislaid. Then turns to me with a ghastly, a triumphant
smile.

"But of course! I gave the keys to you!"

"Your keys? Why, of course. Here, they're under the pillow;
wait a moment. What— Ah! No . . . Now, where can I have
left them? I was whiling away the evening without you at the
piano, I remember. Of course! The music room!"

Brusquely he flung my negligee of antique lace on the bed.
"Go and get them."

"Now? This moment? Can't it wait until morning, my darling?"

I forced myself to be seductive. I saw myself, pale, pliant as
a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable,
appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and I saw how he
almost failed to resist me. If he had come to me in bed, I would
have strangled him then.

But he half snarled: "No. It won't wait. Now."

The unearthly light of dawn filled the room; had only one
previous dawn broken upon me in that vile place? And there
was nothing for it but to go and fetch the keys from the music
stool and pray he would not examine them too closely, pray
to God his eyes would fail him, that he might be struck blind.

When I came back into the bedroom carrying the bunch of
keys, that jangled at every step like a curious musical instrument,
he was sitting on the bed in his immaculate shirtsleeves, his
head sunk in his hands.

And it seemed to me he was in despair.

Strange, in spite of my fear of him, that made me whiter
than my wrap, I felt there emanate from him, at that moment,
a stench of absolute despair, rank and ghastly, as if the flies
that surrounded him had all at once begun to festor, or the
Russian leather of his scent were reverting to the elements of
flayed hide and excrement of which it was composed. The
cthonic gravity of his presence exerted a tremendous pressure
on the room, so that the blood pounded in my ears as if we
had been precipitated to the bottom of the sea, beneath the
waves that pounded against the shore.

I held my life in my hands amongst those keys and, in a mo-
ment, would place it between his well-manicured fingers. The
evidence of that bloody chamber had showed me I could expect
no mercy. Yet when he raised his head and stared at me with
his blind, shuttered eyes as though he did not recognize me, I
felt a terrified pity for him, for this man who lived in such strange,
secret places that, if I loved him enough to follow him, I should
have to die.

The atrocious loneliness of that monster!

The monocle had fallen from his face. His curling mane was
disordered, as if he had run his hands through it in his distra-
tion. I saw how he had lost his impassivity and was now filled
with suppressed excitement. The hand he stretched out for those
counters in his game of love and death shook a little; the face
that turned towards me contained a somber delirium that seemed
to me compounded of a ghastly—yes—shame but also of a terri-
ble, guilty joy as he slowly ascertained how I had sinned.

That telltale stain had resolved itself into a mark the shape
and brilliance of the heart on a playing card. He disengaged
the key from the ring and looked at it for a while, solitarily, brooding.

"It is the key that leads to the kingdom of the unimaginable," he said. His voice was low and had in it the timbre of certain great cathedral organs that seem, when they are played, to be conversing with God.

I could not restrain a sob.

"Oh, my love, my little love who brought me a white gift of music," he said, almost as if grieving. "My little love, you'll never know how much I hate daylight!"

Then he sharply ordered: "Kneel!"

I knelt before him and he pressed the key lightly to my forehead, held it there for a moment. I felt a faint tingling of the skin, and when I involuntarily glanced at myself in the mirror, I saw the heart-shaped stain had transferred itself to my forehead, to the space between the eyebrows, like the caste mark of a Brahman woman. Or the mark of Cain. And now the key gleamed as freshly as if it had just been cut. He clipped it back on the ring, emitting that same, heavy sigh as he had done when I said that I would marry him.

"My virgin of the arpeggios, prepare yourself for martyrdom."

"What form shall it take?" I said.

"Decapitation," he whispered, almost voluptuously. "Go and bathe yourself; put on that white dress you wore to hear Tristan and the necklace that prefigures your end. And I shall take myself off to the armory, my dear, to sharpen my great-grandfather's ceremonial sword."

"The servants?"

"We shall have absolute privacy for our last rites; I have already dismissed them. If you look out the window you can see them going to the mainland."

It was now the full, pale light of morning. The weather was gray, indeterminate, the sea had an oily, sinister look; a gloomy day on which to die. Along the causeway I could see troupers

every maid and scullion, every potboy and panscourer, valet, laundress and vassal who worked in that great house, most on foot, a few on bicycles. The faceless housekeeper trudged along with a great basket in which, I guessed, she'd stowed as much as she could raasak from the larder. The Marquis must have given the chauffeur leave to borrow the motor for the day, for it went last of all, at a stately pace, as though the procession were a cortège and the car already bore my coffin to the mainland for burial.

But I knew no good Breton earth would cover me, like a last, faithful lover; I had another fate.

"I have given them all a day's holiday, to celebrate our wedding," he said. And smiled.

However hard I stared at the receding company, I could see no sign of Jean-Yves, our latest servant, hired but the preceding morning.

"Go, now. Bathe yourself; dress yourself. The lustratory ritual and the ceremonial robing; after that, the sacrifice. Wait in the music room until I telephone for you. No, my dear!" And he smiled as I started, recalling the line was dead. "One may call inside the castle just as much as one pleases; but outside—never."

I scrubbed my forehead with the nailbrush as I had scrubbed the key, but this red mark would not go away, either, no matter what I did, and I knew I should wear it until I died, though that would not be long. Then I went to my dressing room and put on that white muslin shift, costume of a victim of an autodafé, he had bought me to listen to the Liedestod in. Twelve young women combed out twelve listless sheaves of brown hair in the mirrors; soon there would be none. The mass of lilies that surrounded me exhaled, now, the odor of their withering. They looked like the trumpets of the angels of death.

On the dressing table, coiled like a snake about to strike, lay the ruby choker.
Already almost lifeless, cold at heart, I descended the spiraling staircase to the music room, but there I found I had not been abandoned.

“I can be of some comfort to you,” the boy said. “Though not much use.”

We pushed the piano stool in front of the open window so that, for as long as I could, I would be able to smell the ancient, reconciling smell of the sea that, in time, will cleanse everything, scour the old bones white, wash away all the stains. The last little chambermaid had trolled along the causeway long ago and now the tide, fated as I, came tumbling in, the crisp wavelets splashing on the old stones.

“You do not deserve this,” he said.

“Who can say what I deserve or no?” I said. “I’ve done nothing; but that may be sufficient reason for condemning me.”

“You disobeyed him,” he said. “That is sufficient reason for him to punish you.”

“I only did what he knew I would.”

“Like Eve,” he said.

The telephone rang a shrill imperative. Let it ring. But my lover lifted me up and set me on my feet; I knew I must answer it. The receiver felt heavy as earth.

“The courtyard. Immediately.”

My lover kissed me; he took my hand. He would come with me if I would lead him. Courage. When I thought of courage, I thought of my mother. Then I saw a muscle in my lover’s face quiver.

“Hoofbeats!” he said.

I cast one last, desperate glance from the window and, like a miracle, I saw a horse and rider galloping at a vertiginous speed along the causeway, though the waves crashed, now, high as the horse’s fetlocks. A rider, her black skirts tucked up around her waist so she could ride hard and fast, a crazy, magnificent horsewoman in widow’s weeds.

As the telephone rang again:

“Am I to wait all morning?”

Every moment, my mother drew nearer.

“She will be too late,” Jean-Yves said, and yet he could not restrain a note of hope that, though it must be so, yet it might not be so.

The third, intransigent call.

“Shall I come up to heaven to fetch you down, Saint Cecilia? You wicked woman, do you wish me to compound my crimes by desecrating the marriage bed?”

So I must go to the courtyard, where my husband waited in his London-tailored trousers and the shirt from Turnbull and Asser, beside the mounting block, with, in his hand, the sword which his great-grandfather had presented to the little corporal, in token of surrender to the Republic, before he shot himself. The heavy sword, unsheathed, gray as that November morning, sharp as childbirth, mortal.

When my husband saw my companion, he observed: “Let the blind lead the blind, eh? But does even a youth as besotted as you are think she was truly blind to her own desires when she took my ring? Give it me back, whore.”

The fires in the opal had all died down. I gladly slipped it from my finger and, even in that dolorous place, my heart was lighter for the lack of it. My husband took it lovingly and lodged it on the tip of his little finger; it would go no farther.

“It will serve me for a dozen more fiancées,” he said. “To the block, woman. No—leave the boy; I shall deal with him later, utilizing a less exalted instrument than the one with which I do my wife the honor of her immolation, for do not fear that in death you will be divided.”

Slowly, slowly, one foot before the other, I crossed the cobbles. The longer I dawdled over my execution, the more time it gave the avenging angel to descend.

“Don’t loiter, girl! Do you think I shall lose appetite for the
meal if you are so long about serving it? No, I shall grow hun-
grier, more ravenous with each moment, more cruel.... Run
to me, run! I have a place prepared for your exquisite corpse
in my display of flesh!"

He raised the sword and cut bright segments from the air
with it, but still I lingered, although my hopes, so recently raised,
now began to flag. If she is not here by now, her horse must
have stumbled on the causeway, have plunged into the sea....
One thing only made me glad; that my lover would not see
me die.

My husband laid my branded forehead on the stone and, as
he had done once before, twisted my hair into a rope and drew
it away from my neck.

"Such a pretty neck," he said with what seemed to be a genu-
ine, retrospective tenderness. "A neck like the stem of a young
plant."

I felt the silken bristle of his beard and the wet touch of his
lips as he kissed my nape. And, once again, of my apparel I
must retain only my gems; the sharp blade ripped my dress in
two and it fell from me. A little green moss, growing in the
crevices of the mounting block, would be the last thing I should
see in all the world.

The whiz of that heavy sword.

And—a great battering and pounding at the gate, the jangling
of the bell, the frenzied neighing of a horse! The unholy silence
of the place shattered in an instant. The blade did not descend,
the necklace did not sever, my head did not roll. For, for an
instant, the beast wavered in his stroke, a sufficient split second
of astonished indecision to let me spring upright and dart to
the assistance of my lover as he struggled sightlessly with the
great bolts that kept her out.

The Marquis stood transfixed, utterly dazed, at a loss. It must
have been as if he had been watching his beloved Tristan for
the twelfth, the thirteenth time and Tristan stirred, then leapt

from his bed in the last act, announced in a jaunty aria interposed
from Verdi that bygones were bygones, crying over spilled milk
did nobody any good, and as for himself, he proposed to live
happily ever after. The puppetmaster, open-mouthed, wide
eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings,
abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began
and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the
revolt of his pawns.

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized
by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her
white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts
tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing
horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver, and
behind her, the breakers of the savage, indifferent sea, like the
witnesses of a furious justice. And my husband stood stock-still,
as if she had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head
as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in
glass cases at fairs.

And then it was as though a curious child pushed his centime
into the slot and set all in motion. The heavy, bearded figure
roared out loud, praying with fury, and wielding the honorable
sword as if it were a matter of death or glory, charged us, all
three.

On her eighteenth birthday, my mother had disposed of a
man-eating tiger that had ravaged the villages in the hills north
of Hanoi. Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my
father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet
through my husband's head.

We lead a quiet life, the three of us. I inherited, of course,
immense wealth, but we have given most of it away to various
charities. The castle is now a school for the blind, though I
pray that the children who live there are not haunted by any
sad ghosts looking for, crying for, the husband who will never
return to the bloody chamber, the contents of which are buried or burned, the door sealed.

I felt I had a right to retain sufficient funds to start a little music school here, on the outskirts of Paris, and we do well enough. Sometimes we can even afford to go to the Opéra, though never to sit in a box, of course. We know we are the source of many whisperings and much gossip, but the three of us know the truth of it and mere chatter can never harm us. I can only bless the—what shall I call it?—the maternal telepathy that sent my mother running headlong from the telephone to the station after I had called her that night. I never heard you cry before, she said, by way of explanation. Not when you were happy. And who ever cried because of gold bath taps?

The night train, the one I had taken; she lay in her berth, sleepless as I had been. When she could not find a taxi at that lonely halt, she borrowed old Dobbin from a bemused farmer, for some internal urgency told her that she must reach me before the incoming tide sealed me away from her forever. My poor old nurse, left scandalized at home—what? interrupt milord on his honeymoon?—she died soon after. She had taken so much secret pleasure in the fact that her little girl had become a marquise; and now here I was, scarcely a penny the richer, widowed at seventeen in the most dubious circumstances and busily engaged in setting up house with a piano tuner. Poor thing, she passed away in a sorry state of disillusion! But I do believe my mother loves him as much as I do.

No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it—not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart—but because it spares my shame.