CHAPTER XIII

Mi-carême

"He shall drink of the brook in the way."

The foreground of life, its sins, its beauty and sorrow, the spectacular contrasts of the incidents, the actors from which one could not take one's eyes:—the reader, it is hoped, can still see Gaston through the admiration and distress, the perplexity also, excited in him as he gazes thereon, so absorbed, preoccupied in truth with its immediate effects that he finds but scant occasion for noting what at some other time might have been discernible by him in a more or less remote background, where, it must be said, the religion of his youth is now little more than a vanishing point. Its old formalities recurring to his mind, now and again, he admitted to himself, with mixed feelings, that in all probability he must have long since ceased to be in what he had been taught to identify as "a state of grace," while that little Prayer for Peace from the Roman Vespers had departed from his lips.

The misgivings which, in a nature such as his, survive of course positive belief, were apt also to accumulate upon him in the darkness, following naturally whereon mere physical daylight in its turn would dissipate them altogether for a while; and it was on a spring morning that, having left his bed earlier than was now his habit, Gaston paced the streets of Paris, to air a haunted fancy, so to speak, himself after a few moments’ exercise, all alive to the early freshness and very glad, might one say grateful? as he crosses from side to side to walk continuously in the sun, Yes! grateful, to be thus alive.

There were no signs, however, of early or late rising in the spot to which, after a while, this cheerful circuit brought him, though in one sense the most populous in Paris, the old Cemetery of the Innocents, with its milliers sur
milliers de cadavres, over which the yellow light was winning its way kindly, the lowliest graves then casting long shadows.—They haunted him everywhere still, those Innocents, the young children slain or lost: who in irony, surely, had lent their name to this most aged place, with its defiant, unashamed presentment, of mortality by day, of the misdeeds of the living by night, the thieves, the courtesans who haunted this place of ill fame, sheltered by its horrors, or relishing the better the dregs of sin amid the coarse or crude associations of death, the grave-diggers’ careless ways, the odours, the corrupt colours—
sur cette terre pestiférée du grande cimetière des Innocents, la nuit, erraient des filles, logeaient près des charniers, et faisaient l’amour sur les tombes. La belle Huissière, at least, had found a permanent lodging at last; Gaston read her epitaph on the weathered stone.—

Ce fut le plus grand jour d’esté
Que trepassa la belle Huissière—
Or doncques, Messieurs, qui avez,
Vivans, caressé cette Dame,
Dites au Ciel ce que sçavez,
Pour le salut de sa pauvre âme.

Let the reader think of what he may have seen of ancient historic grave-yards, of [Vysehrad at] Prague, the Alyscamps at Arles, St. Pancras, if he likes, as Gaston walks there amid [the tombs], with the increasing heat of the sunshine upon his pathway, upon himself, but thrust all that back, deep into the grotesque gloom of the middle age. Ah! they needed long changing there, those old soiled bodies in the dark, through these endless, unnoted mornings, and the [heavenly] ones long in making; though the earth for her part seemed anxious to give up itsragged dead already, or at least to be but a careless keeper of the bones, having made its natural use of the body’s juices. As if mistaking the jubilant sunshine of this first summer day for the resurrection morning, the occupant of a nameless old stone coffin had tumbled forth. Hanging luxuriantly in the irregularities of the wasted mouldered grey walls, an immense aubépine of immemorial age flowered above it, filling its hollows with nests of fiery crimson; had flowered, as if with a second youth of late years, miraculously, it had seemed to the crowds who had come to visit it, being arrosée, rajeunie, fortifiée, drinking strength to blossom anew from the blood of the heretic it had come by, after the carnage of Saint Bartholomew. The industrious L’Estoile has chronicled the fact, and surmise:
[Le lendemain de Saint-Barthelemy, environ midy, on vid un aubespin fleury au cimetière Saint-Innocent. Si-tost que le bruit en fut espandu par la ville, le peuple de Paris y accourust de toutes partz; on commença aussi à crier miracle et parce qu'il y avoit tout plein de catoliques qui interprétoyent le reverdissement de l'aubespin pour le reverdissement de l'estat de France, un meschant huguenot caché, composa la épigramme suyvantz:

Hinc, quàm faecundus sit cruar iste, nota!
Qui, reliquis herbis rabido morientibus aestu,
Germinat, et caelo semina digna movet.

Left to itself, the churchyard earth abounded with veritable field-flowers of the more acrid coarser kinds, with a sort of savage abundance of pollen flung around about them. As if for a parable, it sent up sparkling water too from the very midst of its defilements. And was it also by way of parable that Jean Goujon in his turn had designed this graceful fountain to utilise it for the thirsty, or to quench the bénitiers, little holy water fonts at the graves?—with just those particular imageries of youth and vigour, the nymphs you may still see amid their native reeds and water-lilies at [the Louvre]. In the low-rippling lines of the low white marble reliefs, they seem to be in motion with the water amid which they are yet so firmly, carnally, embodied. Perhaps Jean Goujon only meant to cheer the gloom of the place with these graceful creatures, though he had but emphasised it by passing contrast—what Adam of Brescia says:

[Chè l'immagine lor vie più m'asciuga
Che il male ond'io nel volto mi discarno.]

Reading the epitaphs, as he steps casually, even then for the most part formal or trivial, but with here and there a veritable cry of distress of the dead for the dead, he too comes presently as if by accident to "the brook in the way":

[Ed ecco più andar mi tolse un rio,
Che in ver sinistra con sue piccio'l'onde
Piegava l'erba che in sua ripa uscio.]

—finds it, feels those drops of water welcome in this Inferno, or Purgatorio, say, of Paris, in the sounds, the lights, which enfold him, take possession of him as he enters a certain church door at the road-side, one of those later Gothic flowery churches which then enriched Paris, and in which the last dainty arts, fittest it might seem for [courtly festivites], spent themselves on
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... divine service. The well-informed visitor to Paris will remember, perhaps, St[-Gervais], St[-Étienne], St. Médard, and take a hint from them, their dainty morsels of stained glass, the jubé, of the genius of that refined place, in which Gaston, for a moment, becomes once more the creature of the influences of his consecrated boyhood. Its builder was very happy, or very acute, for while it adapted as if under mere awkward necessity to the lines of the adjoining streets, its very enforced irregularities were full of expression. No soul of man, or thing, or place, nothing is ever like another, it seemed to say, be as formal as you will. An acute artist might have conceived just such a curious system of proportions as he was here committed to, for their own sake, or welcomed the site which enforced them on him. The more careful gaze seemed to find some special fineness of self-recollection in the lines of jubé and arch, as if the wayward free fancies of the builder had been effectually called upon to recollect themselves here,—where they were and what they were doing. And it had this effect, it gave what, for the mere formal style of the place, would otherwise have been but one sanctuary among many others not unlike it, a cachet of its own, and as regards the soul of Gaston, here to-day, the peculiarity which won him. Crowded for foot-hold, on the odd irregular space among the streets around, it went, as if one-sidedly, as best it might, but with markedly united determination, all the higher into the air above them. The light fell placidly on the remote, high stone spaces: and the windows, they were like the natural brightness of a fine day. It was like religion, like the catholic church, subduing, tempering itself with indulgence, the infinite patience of an infinite superiority, to the wayward or petulant soul.

The people of Paris, says Mérimée, were at that day horriblement fanatique: its pulpits rang just then with fanatical leagist sermons: but the movement, however, which makes fanatics of the coarse, lighting on finer souls produces there its finish of religion, its finer flowers: and that age had its revival of ritualism also, as we should call it: its curés who were miracles of personal devotion; its churches where worship was more select, careful than elsewhere; its revival of [liturgy] with a more correct consideration than had prevailed of late for sacred seasons, points of ritual, above all with a great development of such church music as lifted the age of [Palestrina]. The ritualistic Gaston, then, is reminded by the rose-purple, the "flowers of pensive hope," a certain reserved gaiety breaking through the Lenten severity, that it is the season of mi-carême, [Laetare] Sunday, with its thoughts of manna in the wilderness, of the miraculous feeding of the fainting multitudes, and yields himself, as he could do more readily than most men, to its suggestions—this lover of pensive places, of the sanctuary especially, where humanity lays aside its
vulgarity for a while—at least looks its best for a while—and if one addresses you, it is proper to reply, hush!—lingers, reaches irresistibly to look, to listen. Respiremus—let us take breath a little, recover our strength, pleads the collect. The door closes on the world behind him, but it is like coming into the open air, like leaving a mad-house: not he alone had thought of the people who gave it its colour, its character, as a sort of aveuglés or madmen, desperate, of himself as infected perhaps with their misfortune. Well! the ritual of to-day was full not of miraculous feeding only, but of the cure of the sick and the insane, of demons cast out. The Epistle, still on that peculiar line of thought, explained how Abraham had two sons—unum de ancilla, et unum de libera, and how he that was born after the flesh persecuted [him that was born after the Spirit.] And as he thus lingered, seated himself, at least to gaze as an outsider might, for half an hour, on what the accident of his morning's walk had thus presented as if generously for his refreshment, his thought takes its way back stade upon stade, the [grand passions], the [world so importunately visible], the [great ecclesiastical seasons], to descend and rest at last in the midst of his consecrated boyhood, when thoughts such as these had come so naturally to him. Decorated or soiled, as he is with, well! the vanities, that can hardly belong to a beautiful and venerable place like this, he seems to see that other world with the place he has but deserted for a time still kept for him there; as one predestined from eternity in spite of all to sit there among the elect. The Gospel for the Mass proper for the day tells of the lad and the provision he had made or induced others to make for his carnal refreshment: lifted now to so wondrous use, a service so unparalleled. A carefully sensuous boy, surely, with his loaves and fishes, yet with a hunger for eternal things which had brought him so far. What had become of him? and of this strange privilege of his early life? Had it remained as the hour of the redemption of his body and soul, or only as an almost incredible incident of a dreamy boyhood, as he looked upon which, and the sentiment it recalled, he could but exclaim: "My wickednesses are gone over my head!"

But the Mass proper to the day completed, a less graciously [cheerful] office begins. In a little while, the place transforms itself, under the hands of diligent sacristans, into a house of emphatic earthly mourning, crudely black and white, and from the depths of the great brazen serpents groan the first notes of the funeral psalm, the funeral service of a not undistinguished military officer, as the great white satin scutcheons, spread amply on the velvet pall, indicate. A little band of the soldiers of his regiment are on duty in their uniforms, form the guard of honour around the heavy coffin, and at its foot, braced stiffly also in fresh boyish uniform, stands the son of the
deceased, a lad of sixteen years perhaps, of modest yet manful bearing, such as those haunting nestlings to Gaston's fancy were now well-nigh grown to be, almost, as we know, to his bodily ear. Yes! verily it might seem; with palpable accent to his bodily ear to-day.—Why, by what ill-timed disfavour, had he roved hither this morning to be moved uselessly by another's distress; for as they lift the coffin at last awkwardly, the Mass for the Dead being now over, with a cruel hollow grating over the stones, the lad (that young Frenchman!) who had kept his footing there so manfully throughout, lost all on a sudden his forced composure, doubled himself and, his face on his sleeve, literally lifted up his voice and wept aloud.

The cry of another's grief, after all of a very youthful grief, which ere the day was to be over might in all likelihood be superseded by other thoughts comfortable enough, did but leave Gaston all the readier to follow his route further from home, as he had designed to do in fulfilment of a certain old promise to visit a friend, far beyond the gloomy boundaries of Paris, to Fontainebleau, then a favourite place of retirement of the court. He meant to leave Paris altogether soon, its close streets, its colours of decay, its sin, its nightmares, and even this temporary escape from it into the "peaceful sanctuary of his youth" was irresistibly reassuring, as the wheels passed lightly over the roads southeastwards. Even the suburban streets, as he drove away at that fresh early hour, seemed already to anticipate the country, to be full of pleasant country thoughts; a scent of watering was in the air: more and more as the prospect widens, the peace, the gaiety of the country reigns sole in his thoughts. The very work-people, the toiling travellers on foot, the very beggars, in a series of [homely] vignettes, seemed graceful, blond, well-clad, light-footed. The acacias along the road lifted their bouquets of tender verdure as high as they could into the late April sun, below them the étroits sentiers, between the vines, would take one deeper into the countryside—vines, the winding village streets of [Vitry,] of [Choisy] all but hived in them. The finger of the fresh morning breeze was restless everywhere through the dazzling symphony in white and green. Still recording the notes in it more directly congruous with his own leading sentiments, he notes a young man resting that the boy he accompanies may rest in the rare shade: they seem as gaie and babillard as the young birds, yet, as he thinks, resemble himself. As he comes towards the end of his journey, he notes the thing again for a moment as he passes, in the garden now of a riant miniature Italian villa beyond the gilt trellis ironwork, with its [wreaths of flames or flowers]: there they stand, blond, matutinal, making an idyll of the carefully kept garden beds and grass, the pathways of fine sand. And over this gentil, friendly
campagne, the forest at last with its grey rocks, its immemorial oaks and beeches of Pharamond and St. Louis, spread, moutonnés, over gentle hill and vale under universal shadowless sunlight, till the golden green stood triumphant upon the large noonday blue.

Towards evening would he care to visit, asks his hospitable friend, a rare place of which he holds the key: le cabinet des peintures du roi—of laughing Francis I. The works of [Raphael], and [Titian], and [Michelangelo], above all of the great Milanese master Léonard de Vinci hang just as he had left them, by the orders of Francis the First. It was a favourable hour for seeing them, this slanting afternoon light.

The expansion of the animal spirits in Gaston, as he passed to-day, through the light and air of his route to Fontainebleau, this white place, was like a physical parallel to the mental relief, to a certain larger and richer genial sense of things, of which this creature of the eye now became aware in himself, yielding straightway to the influence of what he saw on the walls around him. He surrendered his taste to the genial spell of Italian art, the power of Leonardo and [Michelangelo], and their peculiar reading of life. The Renaissance of Italy transferred to France, in a hundred minor ["effects"] coloring life, had, in fact, as all that is really growing will do, conformed itself to the soil [of France], allying itself to, and was become the minister of what reigned already in men's hearts or fancies there, the barren, the unkindly love, which centered in Margaret's [erotic pride], in the [boyish Raoul] broken on the wheel in the Palace de Grève. How potent had been the spell over Gaston's [fancy]. Looking to-day from the derivative to the source, or to the rock whence it was hewn, he found amid a development of form and colour and poetic suggestion, so much richer than this Northern one, a larger heart also, the genius not of an unkindly—as we call barren earth unkindly—but of a kindly love, a manifestation of nature and man, as if under the genial light of God's immediate presence. The reader may estimate for himself the significance of this discovery for one to whom art, and the sensible preferences of art, had become the substitute for conscience, dislocated or dissipated by the negative philosophy of ["indifference"]; what a force it had in the future [experiences of Gaston], colouring so to speak of his spirit: it gave a coherency to the growing suggestions of Gaston's own mind and purpose. His visit to this place actually set him on a long series of explorations among the art-treasures of Paris itself, what there might be like it there to see, to hold converse with through the eye,—a cheering resource during the remainder of the time he stayed there—and was like the later stage of a long education. Kindness, the kindness of [Cupid] to [Psyche], forgetting
itself in the love of visible beauty, the eyes, the lips kindled to the reproduction of its like, renewing the world, handing on, as a ground of love and kindness for ever, the beauty which had kindled it, the likeness of, or an improvement upon, itself, kindling a like love in turn, linking paternally, filially, age to age, the young to the old, marriage, maternity, childhood and youth,—the kindness by which [Christ] cherishes the failing heart in [his Apostle Peter]—consecrated by indefeasible union with the [Godhead], who looks favourably also on the virginity, the restraint which in fact secures the purity, the ardency therefore, of the creative flame: this was what Gaston found in those untouched revelations of the mind of [Leonardo] and [Michelangelo], those mature Italian masters, promoting still further that increasing preoccupation with the greater unchangeable interests of life with which he entered upon the coming new and later phase of his own maturer manhood. Here art, according to its proper ministry, had been at once the interpretation and an idealisation of life.