VOLUME II

CHAPTER 12

> "HAMLET.—You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass, and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak."
>
> —*Hamlet.*

"WELL, Cousin Dorothy," said Miss Davoren after the departure of Mr. Hogan, "shall we go back to the other room. Perhaps I ought to go up and see if mamma is awake."

"Never mind, my dear, yet a bit. And so that is your friend Mr. Hogan? Quite a nice, gentlemanlike man." And the veteran turned round her wide grey eyes full on Miss Nellie's ingenuous countenance. "Diana Bursford,—what was she saying? She's met him, I know, somewhere."

"He knows Miss Bursford. I heard he was seen walking with her the other day." This was ungenerously said; but when an ostrich is minded to stick its head in the sand it is never too particular.

"Humph! walking with her indeed! Diana really goes to the fair with absurdity now-a-days. Surely she knows the man is a Romanist. Absurd!—and she is ten years older than him. Where did you meet him?"

"I told you, Cousin Dorothy: at the Raffertys' ball."

"Oh, ah! last November. Dicky or you were telling me. I know now, to be sure; that Saltasche man has brought him out."

"That Saltasche man" was one of Miss O'Hegarty's pet aversions. When she took a dislike to any one she was sure to make the fact known

by the very way she pronounced their name; and as the disagreeable cognomen passed her lips now, her thin nostrils curled, and her under-lip shaped the word ominously. "Depend upon it they are chums—birds of a feather. I never could endure these mere adventurers."

"Adventurers, Cousin Dorothy!" Nellie's eyes opened wide. "Why, Mr. Saltasche owns a splendid place just behind us; and I have heard papa say he was worth fifty thousand pounds. To be sure, he is not Irish—or at least, he is only a half foreigner? And surely you do not consider Mr. Hogan that? You don't include him?"

"Tush! my dear, you don't understand. Of course Mr. Hogan is not one in the sense that Mr. Saltasche is; and, indeed, if he is an adventurer in any other sense, it is quite as much other people's faults as his own."

Miss Nellie, indeed, was far from following the working of her relative's mind; and she was content to leave the speech a mystery, and not to beat her brains over the solution. She quite understood Miss Dorothy's carpings at Diana—their bearing was plain enough; but the criticisms on Hogan were surely uncalled for. She saw no flaw in him.

"I forgot to mention that Dermot Blake, my nephew—has been heard of. He has been away since he was a lad; travelling ever since he left college. Did you ever see him, Nellie?"

"No I think I heard you speak of him, and that he was to be home when he was five-and-twenty."

"Yes; though indeed it's ten years now since he was five-and-twenty. I never was on terms with the Blakes; however, he'll be home next year. That will be a catch for somebody: three thousand a year! He's at the Cape now."

But Nellie was staring into the fire, thinking of some one who was far from Dermot Blake and the Cape, and wondering should she see him again, and when. How she wished Dorothy would go up to her mother's room, so that she might think over his coming, and the manner of it, and everything, quietly by the fireside! Dorothy had been so stiff and so sarcastic; but what was the use of thinking of that? It was always her way.

"Dermot is like the Blakes," Dorothy talked away: "tall and brown—fine man, and such a good, warm-hearted fellow! Who will he marry? The accumulations—at least, the accumulations there ought to be," she added in a dubious tone, "would clear off the estate entirely. He ought to marry money. Yes, he ought to marry money."

"Ought he?" repeated Miss Nellie, dreaming still, and seeing in the wood-ashes in the grate a droll likeness of Mr. Hogan in his barrister's wig.

"Run away, and see if your mother be awake, child; I must be going," said Cousin Dorothy, pulling out the great diamond-set watch that had belonged to Desmond O'Hegarty, the last of the family. "Dear bless us!—a quarter to six. I'll be half an hour late for my dinner; and that Peter like a fiend already. I declare: the martyrdom I undergo with that creature! There, the other day, I told him to go and get himself a new hat; and just as he always does when I desire him to buy himself any new things, he comes and asks me, '*Will I get a hat to fit meself or to fit anybody, marm?*'—as if he was thinking of leaving, you know. So says I, 'Oh, you'd better get a hat to fit *anybody*, Peter,'—never meaning him to take me up; and the ojous old wretch goes and buys a hat as big as a wheelbarrow, just to spite me: so he did. To see him yesterday, with it rattling about on his head, it would vex a saint, it would. Talk of Job, indeed! I'd like to have set Job up with a couple of family servants of the real old style! Dermot Blake, now, he and Peter always got on together; perhaps when he settles down he'd take Peter off my hands. You have no idea how smart Peter can be! I declare now, I don't know anybody would suit Dermot's house so well."

"That Saltasche man," as Miss O'Hegarty scornfully styled him, had not been idle since we last saw him. He had skilfully extracted the somewhat biassed, if comprehensive, history of her relatives the Poignardes from Mrs. Grey. They were not relatives in the strict sense of the word—merely connections. Poignarde, indeed, was scarcely a creditable appendage to any family; and his strange wife, however beautiful and talented, was so cold and reserved and odd, that the clergyman's wife, busy and worn with her large and troublesome family, had neither time nor inclination to make friends with her. Mr. Saltasche had managed very cleverly, as he did always, to impress Mrs. Grey with the belief that he was desirous to secure the services of Mrs. Poignarde as *pianiste* for the concert in which she had a particular interest; and he sent his sister, a lady somewhat older than himself, who managed his house and always lived with him, to call on Mrs. Poignarde with Mrs. Grey. This point secured, he devoted himself, heart and soul, to make the charitable undertaking, as it was called, a social success. Mr. Saltasche set great store on popularity, and prided himself on holding the most amicable relations with everybody, irrespective of creed or class. He had all that

off-handed, ready way of talking and giving, that goes so far with the lower orders of Irish people; and the labourers and poor folks of Green Lanes exalted him to the very highest pitch. If his swarthy countenance appeared in the window of a train, every porter made a dash at the door of his carriage. His parcels found a score of bearers to fight for the honour of carrying them; and the jarveys could see no one else beckon until Mr. Saltasche had selected his conveyance. His dinners were pronounced to be the acme of perfection; and the company was always as well assorted and selected as the menu. Strange to say, nevertheless, it was in his own immediate neighbourhood, precisely where he expended his best efforts and a vast income to attain the good-will of every one, that his enemies were keenest. There was a class of Protestants—not the best set, nor the second set, but still a very respectable and old-established faction—who stoutly denied Saltasche's supremacy, and would have none of him. "A half-foreigner," "a fellow come from God knows where," "a mongrel": they even declared him to be a free-thinker. And one gentleman, who, on the strength of avowed atheism, had acquired a sort of reputation for general information, if not erudition, imparted, under the seal of secrecy, to his most particular friends his opinion that Saltasche was a Comtist.

Whatever he was, he was able to snap his fingers at the clique the night of the concert, when the schoolroom, hung with red cloth and decorated with splendid exotics from his own hothouses, was crowded with the *élite* of his friends—Lord Brayhead, the Bragintons, Bursfords, Hepenstalls, Wyldoates—military men innumerable—in attendance on the pretty O'Haras and Dillons. Everybody was in full dress; and the best amateurs in Dublin had been secured as performers. The prime mover, although ostensibly only one of the committee, Mr. Saltasche was everywhere at once. He received Lord Brayhead at the door, and conducted him to the place of honour—a red velvet chair on a raised step beneath the platform, oppressively close to the singers and musicians, but still in sight of all the audience and most conspicuous in every way. Beside his lordship were chairs occupied by his relatives the Misses Braginton and the rest of the dais company. A glass door led to a room where the performers were congregated together. A singing doctor, high in favour at the vice-regal court, and a lawyer who had "fiddled himself" (so the story went) into a fine position in the law courts; a tenor captain, and a basso major, both from the Linenhall barracks; a buffo singer of rare excellence, by profession an attorney; and a number of ladies all

congregated together, talking, humming airs, and otherwise killing time until the bell rang for the commencement. Such was the assemblage that greeted Mr. Saltasche's pleased eyes as he dived through the glass door to muster his company.

"Everybody's in now. Stukely, my dear boy, you lead off. Chorus! everything's ready. Where's Mrs. Poignarde? Is she here?" His eyes had already satisfied themselves that she was not.

"Mrs. Poignarde has not appeared," said Diana Bursford; "but I think I heard some one come into the outer hall just now."

Mr. Saltasche sent off the first detachment to sing a glee, and passed quietly out by the side-door to see if Mrs. Poignarde had come. In the dressing-room he heard a stir, and tapped at the door gently.

No answer. He turned the handle and looked in cautiously: the gas was half turned down, and the brilliant well-piled fire filled the room with a mellow, fitful light. On a foot-stool drawn close to the grate he saw a slender figure crouched, holding out both white-gloved hands to shield her face from the glare. A long wave of white froth-like texture streamed backwards. She looked like some fairy visitor in the ugly room, with its prosaic rows of benches and map-hung walls.

She never moved. He bent forward, and then closing the door, advanced quietly.

"Mrs. Poignarde! I half imagined you were deserting us at the last moment."

"Ah! did you?" and she stood in a moment erect before him. "No, no; I came with Miss Saltasche. But why did you think that? Because I am not there? I don't want to go with them. To play well I need to be quiet—to think; so I stayed here until my turn came. Do you mind? tell me: do you? Tell me: do you?" she repeated, in a sweet half-tone, lowering her voice almost caressingly, and looking at him from beneath the drooped white eyelids. There was a charming dependingness and timidity in the tone and look—something so different from the reserved coldness of her usual manner—that it went straight through him like a flash. A bright light came in his eyes, fixed on hers searchingly and triumphantly.

"You will do as you please. You know very well it is for you to command us all." And he leaned forward and touched the gas jets above their heads, letting a broad glare of light fall upon the slender figure beside

him. She looked exquisitely lovely—so white and graceful: the long robes falling in soft wreaths behind her gave a look of height and dignity to her figure. A narrow gold collar clasped with a diamond circled her throat; and the soft plaits of her hair, dressed in defiance of the fashion, hung low on her neck, contrasting with its ivory whiteness.

He longed for the moment to come when he should walk out past the crowd with her on his arm, and appropriate to himself all the praise and delighted raptures of the audience. She was his property, a gem of his discovery; and they were indebted to him for the treat. He would take her, after her first piece, to Lord Brayhead, and present her to him as a personal friend of his own and a distinguished *artiste*, needing only his lordship's approval to stamp her as one of the first stars of the firmament. The Bragintons would patronize her, or try to do so, and burn their fingers in the process; and every one would be on the *qui vive* to know who she was.

She did not seem to hear what he said; she had turned aside, and was thoughtfully looking into the fire, remembering half-sorrowfully, half-bitterly, the last time she had played before an audience, at the breaking-up of the school in Kensington. It seemed only yesterday: the hot July afternoon, the trees waving outside; the close room, and all the people; and Eric Poignarde, then a dragoon officer, bowing before her, the South American heiress. That was a fatal day indeed!

The transient flush of excitement that had come upon her when Mr. Saltasche entered the room had died away; and the old bitter, constrained mood, like an ever-present sense of soreness, returned. She repented her promise, and wished herself, were it possible, back in the dingy lodging at Inchicore. What had she to do among these staring strangers—curious and indifferent, if not scornful? She hated them already. Stupid, cold wretches: what were they to her? And she turned round impatiently, only to meet the ardent eyes of Saltasche still fixed upon her. Suddenly he remembered himself, and looking at his watch, said,

"Tell me, Mrs. Poignarde: what would you like to do—to remain here alone, until I come for you? or will you join the performers?"

"I shall remain here," said she decisively, "if it is possible; pray don't let me keep you." She spoke petulantly, and he had no choice but to go.

In a few minutes he was back: it was her turn to play; and taking his arm, she passed out of the glass-door and up the steps into the concert-room.

A buzz ran round immediately, and curious heads were bent forward. Opera-glasses were in requisition. "Is it Miss Bursford? No! no! A mysterious *prima donna*, imported by that Monte Christo of a Saltasche specially for the occasion. Foreign, of course. Jewess. The colour is Jewish—that dead white, you know."

So the knots of men leaning against the door and the walls murmured to each other, until the musician, seating herself at the piano, struck into one of Liszt's most masterly compositions. Saltasche had taken care that the instrument should not be unworthy of the performer. The extraordinary difficulties of the composition seemed nothing to the lissom white fingers, that flew over the keys and produced such wonderful depths of tone with so little apparent effort. The charm of the instrument and a sense of her own power, produced in her an unwonted exhilaration; and she played with a fire and spirit that astonished even herself. Saltasche was in an ecstasy. He refused to allow her to play an *encore*, and led her up to the noble patron to present her to him before the whole room. Sundry spiteful tongues were silenced by this planned manœuvre. A chair was forthcoming beside one of the Bragintons; who immediately commenced, after polite and approving thanks, a characteristic conversation.

"How *enormously* you must have practised! You do play so exquisitely: quite as well as Lady St. Elmo. Don't you think Mrs. Poignarde plays quite as well as Lady St.——"

"Oh dear, yes; quite," returned the lady addressed, who had never heard the performer in question in her life. "Exquisite touch, and such—such—ah—*expression*, you know! How you *must* have practised, Mrs. Poignarde! All day long, no doubt?"

They all dwelt upon the same theme, so anxious were they to depreciate the too obvious merits of her achievements. By making it appear that she owed her proficiency merely to time and study, it would seem to prove that the same efforts on their part would have brought them up to her level. That was all that was necessary, of course.

"Oh yes," she answered, frankly; "I should be quite ashamed to tell you how much I practise." She read their thoughts perfectly, and flashed

an amused look at her mentor, standing near. He appreciated the situation, and said, approvingly,—

"Spoken like an *artiste*, Mrs. Poignarde; the general thing with ordinary performers is to try and make us believe that they never touch the piano at all. I never could see how the value of their music was affected by the statement."

"Never believe them," she said: "I know better; there is nothing in the world that requires more work than—playing,"—and she looked at the ladies with a smile at her own quip.

His lordship put on a solemn visage. He loved music no better than did the great lexicographer; he was old-fashioned, too, and had serious doubts as to the becomingness of ladies excelling in anything. It was not quite consistent with his prejudices; he had a dim idea that these sort of things were marketable commodities, bought and paid for, and that it was *infra dig*. for a lady or gentleman, as such, to meddle with professional pursuits. Although he had written a polemical work himself, he considered writing scarcely allowable; however, the appearance of certain of the nobility in print had of recent years rather unsettled his convictions on the subject. Then he was not sure who the musician was. She might have been a governess, or some "person" obliged to support herself. So he deemed it right to qualify his approval.

"Do you consider that music in itself repays or justifies the expenditure of so large a portion of our allotted time?"—and the long sheep's-face inclined sideways towards her. "Is it not open to question whether we are justified in encouraging trivialities that pass with time itself?"

Mrs. Poignarde looked at him, opening her wide brown eyes in genuine astonishment. She understood not one word of what he had said; but she divined in some way its import, from the edified expressions assumed by the women—the Bragintons especially. Miss Blanche seemed to be offering internally a thanksgiving that she, too, was not a musician, Mrs. Bursford came to the rescue.

"Do not overlook the parable of the talents, my lord," she said with her sweetest smile; and a graceful gesture of the woman of the world towards Adelaide Poignarde implied a patronizing compliment to her, and at the same time showed that she meant the discussion to be closed.

Scriptural allusions of this kind were perfectly admissible, and, indeed, were the predominant tone of the conversations of his lordship's *entourage*.

Some sudden thought made Saltasche watch the expression of his protégée; and he could have shouted with laughter on reading, clear as print, on her candid brow, utter unconsciousness of Mrs. Bursford's allusion. A song now occupied the attention of the circle; and Mrs. Poignarde had time to make up her mind as to her surroundings. What did they mean? That stupid old creature!—she felt sure she could not sit patiently in the room with him and these women. She understood them a little better, and determined to disobey her mentor and play encores for spite. She looked critically at them: Mrs. Bursford and Mrs. Hepenstall were neutrals; the little yellow-haired lady making such *moues* and *œillades* at the men, whom she was plainly keeping by main force around her, need not be counted either, although she did look vicious when she found her attendants' eyes wandering to the strange lady in white. The Bragintons looked mischievous. Old?—yes, they were old, and made up very palpably indeed: rice-powdered, and with stippled-up eyebrows. And she ran her eye critically over those points, unnoticed; for their cousin, Diana Bursford, was singing in a quartette, and they could not spare a look, so eagerly were they listening for a flaw in the performance. She saw them exchange a smile and a glance at a badly-executed shake; and when the singers had retired, she said, tentatively,—

"Very nice song. I admire Mendelssohn so much: that lady in blue has the best voice there—so well trained!"

"Indeed! You think so?" The speaker was clearly disappointed. "The lady in blue will be glad to hear *your* opinion."

"Mrs. Poignarde," said Mr. Saltasche, "now, your turn will come again directly. Let's see: what is it? 'Woelfl's *Ne Plus Ultra* sonata,'" he read from the programme. "Very fine: but what do you say to substitute something lighter? What do you think? Come; you have a large *répertoire*, you know."

This proposal fell in with her humour completely; and she played a set of German waltzes so as to call down a storm of applause. She played three pieces before she left the piano,—finishing with a transcription of the "Flying Dutchman," by Liszt. Saltasche led her back to the waiting-room, amid a storm of applause.

"Give me my cloak: I am going," she said, peremptorily.

"Oh no! Surely not yet. You will play in the second part? Please tell me what has annoyed you,"—and he looked at her searchingly. She answered his eyes, as usual, listlessly and indifferently; the flush of excitement was gone.

"Nothing has annoyed me. I'm tired of it—that's all; and I hate those people. I don't want to see them again, any of them. Now let me go home."

He took her hand in his, and bent forward as if she were some wayward child.

"I only want to please you. You will do exactly what you like. Command me: but will you not tell me who has offended you?" He came nearer still, and looked entreatingly at her.

"I'll tell you about it another time, if you'll only let me go now. I am stifled in this place. No; I won't let you send for the brougham, or disturb your sister. I'll slip up to Vevey House by the side-door. I'll find it easily enough,—we came out that way."

When she got out into the night air, she drew a long breath of relief. It was bright and clear, and she could see far up the road under the dark lattice of the branches. She glided quietly along under the windows, through which came the voices of the singers distinctly; and passed unobserved through the groups outside. A dark hood and cloak covered her dress; and rejoicing in her escape, she walked quickly up the side lane leading to the garden door of Saltasche's residence.

She found the entrance without difficulty: a green door half hidden in the ivy, which grew luxuriantly all over the walls, and formed a winter shelter for innumerable birds. As she shut the door behind her, a couple of the feathered inhabitants, awakened, fluttered out helplessly, for a moment, in the darkness, but quickly returned to their resting-place. There was not a creature in the grounds, and the house could not be seen for the evergreen trees and shrubs of the plantation. The green-houses had a cold, ghostly look in the moon-light; and a tiny breeze swept the dead leaves on the hedges with a shadowy rustle. She felt uncertain which way she should take, and she stood still for a moment, fancying that some sound might guide her to the house. She heard none; and as she looked around, her eyes fell on a rustic seat under an ash tree, whose long dry stems swept the ground. The whim entered her head to seat

herself there for a few minutes. It was opposite the door, and there was every probability that some of the people of the house would pass. So she picked her way across the turf, and sat down to rest under the weeping ash. It was not cold—the night was only refreshingly cool; and everything round was clear and distinct as in the daylight. She threw back her hood, and let the breeze play on her brow, heated still, and drew long breaths of the night air. She leaned back in the seat, and recalled the concert-room she had just quitted, and the applause she had won. A vision of another concert-room, and another concert—that for which she was always preparing, in the theatre of Rio—rose before her mind's eye. One more year, and she would be ready. If she could only get to Paris, to study a little under the great masters there! How these creatures applauded! but they were no test; and her lip curled scornfully. She longed to try her powers among the acknowledged stars of the musical world.

"Nearly as well as Lady who? That woman was talking of some player." She thought over the names of all the musicians she knew. She surpassed all the private ones she had ever met; but her experience was limited—as limited as her ambition was boundless. Now she heard steps in the lane without; in a moment the latchet clicked, and the unmistakable figure of Mr. Saltasche presented itself at the door. She never moved, in the hope that he would pass on unheeding. Not so: he perceived her almost instantaneously, and crossed the grass.

"How imprudent of you! I half feared you would do this. Why not have gone into the house?" He seated himself beside her. "Every one is speaking of you. Your playing is the most wonderful ever heard; and I have been credited with bringing over a pupil of Rubinstein or Von Bülow."

"What! do they not know who I am?" And she turned sharp questioning eyes upon him. "Is it possible? I thought from the manner of those ladies—"

She had betrayed herself; and he was quick to seize his opportunity.

"What could you think? They don't know you at all. And moreover, they need never. Mrs. Grey——"

"Ah! then *you* know my history," she cried impulsively. "Mrs. Grey has told you all. Be it so, then!" And she rose to go: indignant and angry. All her blood revolted at the idea that the history of her early years was

in the mouths of the women whose cold, envious eyes she now saw bent in scorn upon her. She was nervous and sensitive to a degree. She inherited, with her French blood, a morbid dread of ridicule, among other less questionable endowments; and the knowledge of her own fatal mistake was an ever-present torment to her. To get away from it was her dream—the hope of her life. Everything that could remind her of it she banished out of sight; and yet it seemed to dog her footsteps everywhere. She bitterly regretted having yielded to the entreaties of Saltasche and Mrs. Grey, and vowed in her own mind that she never would see either of them again.

"Dear Mrs. Poignarde, listen to me for one moment. You mistake; you do indeed wrong me. See: let me explain."

He took her hand entreatingly; and she, but with a bad grace, consented to sit down. Watching her closely, he went on.

"You cannot have imagined me capable of intruding without a particular motive into your affairs. You blame Mrs. Grey wrongly—believe me. I do know your history, but not from her. Your husband and I have had business relations together; and long before I had seen you I had learned from his connections in London Captain Poignarde's history. It was necessary. Mrs. Grey has said—will say—nothing. Believe me, Mrs. Poignarde, you attach a foolish importance to mere trifles."

She did not reply. Her face was pale, and a strange contracted look came about her mouth. As he finished, she raised her eyes and looked at him with a wondering, mournful gaze.

"Trifles!—mere trifles! Ah! that is all you know."

She clasped her hands together, and a shudder passed over her frame. The momentary weakness passed away; and she rose again to her feet, possessed now of but one idea—to make her escape, and never return. He, reading every thought, stood before her and barred the way.

"I tell you, Mrs. Poignarde, I know all,—all; believe me, for Heaven's sake! I am indeed your truest friend. Do you imagine me ignorant of your sufferings, your aspirations? I can help you, and I will. Let me."

She looked at him in amazement and distrust, and a wild hope shining in her eyes.

"Listen," Saltasche went on rapidly. "Your husband is on the brink of ruin. What are you to do when the crash comes? I know what you would do; but without assistance you are powerless. Is it not so? You have no friends, and his people take part against you?"

A mute gesture of despairing assent was the reply.

"Trust to me, Mrs. Poignarde; let me be your friend, your guide. We are of the same race; my father was a Brazilian. I will stand by you if you will only trust me, believe in me. A new life will open its doors to you, and all the past will be blotted out. Adelaide, speak!"

She did not reply, but she did not try to remove her hands from his grasp. Everything had become dark suddenly, and she felt a cold chill creep over her. The bare arms of the trees tossed menacingly in the breeze, and the rustle of the evergreens seemed so loud as to drown his words. He picked up her hooded cloak, and wrapped it round her. His hands were trembling, and his eyes met hers with a troubled, wild look: taking her hand, he placed it in his arm, and they walked a few steps onward, neither knowing where, in silence. He stopped suddenly, and faced her.

"Before returning I must know your decision. Will you accept my offer? Adelaide, poor child, will you refuse to let me help you? Look at me, Adelaide! Say only one word."

She placed her hand, cold and trembling, in his; and the two stood for a moment immovable and silent under the shadow of the beeches. Saltasche could not speak; his face was as pale as hers, and his heart beat so as almost to choke him. He drew her hand again beneath his arm, and holding it still, they reached the green gate.

"I must go back: I shall be missed. And do you return to the dressing-room, to the fireside there. If you do not wish to play again, you need not: It must be quite time I were back. You are content now? you accept my guidance?" And he looked into her beautiful eyes eagerly and triumphantly.

"Yes, I am content, if you will help me—to go home."

He raised her fingers to his lips, and pressing a kiss on them, left her abruptly and returned to the front hall. He gave his coat and hat to a servant of his own who was standing at the main door; and entering quietly and unobserved, joined a knot of talkers at the side for a moment or

two. By degrees he made his way up to the top, and to his own seat near Lord Brayhead.

"You have been away, Mr. Saltasche,—out?" said some one, inquisitively.

"I have," he answered, composedly. "I was called away a little while ago. I see I didn't lose much time, though. You have not told me how you liked the *pianiste*, ladies."

He was instantly overwhelmed with opinions.

"Peculiar-looking little person—quite foreign style. Foreign style of playing, too," said Mrs. de Lancier, meaning thereby to convey a depreciation.

"So *very* good-natured; gives any amount of *encores*," sneered another, who, had the musician refused *encores*, would have declared her to have but a limited stock.

"Is she professional?" inquired the noble patron.

"Dear, no! an officer's wife, and belonging to a noble Brazilian family. Noble, I assure you. She was at one time reputed heiress to a couple of millions!"

So Mr. Saltasche enhanced the rarity of his black swan. The gentlemen were less critical, and their admiration was hearty and sincere. Several pressed for introductions; but he refused them, saying that Mrs. Poignarde had declined positively—in fact, had stipulated that she was not to have her privacy intruded upon. She in fact declined all society. So he managed to put them off. Everything went off well. Lord Brayhead expressed himself delighted with the performance; and Saltasche, after accompanying his friends to the railway station, to see them off by the last train, returned home feeling that he had accomplished a good evening's work. The Fates had surely been propitious to him; and he trusted that, now the foundations of his plans were so well laid, no awkward hindrance would intervene to frustrate their success.

He lay for an hour in a comfortable easy-chair by his dressing-room fire, dreaming over his interview in the pleasure-grounds with Mrs. Poignarde. Rousing himself at last, he was about to go to bed, when a ring at the front door startled him. He guessed its import, and hurried down. At the door stood his confidential clerk Johns.

"A telegram, sir; and delayed by some accident nearly two hours. I brought it on, for fear anything might be wrong."

Saltasche had mastered its contents before the clerk had finished speaking. They ran as follows,—the message being from Dicky Davoren at Peatstown:—

"Poll declared. Hogan eight fifty-seven, Wyldoates two thirty-one. Everything right. Coming up to-morrow."