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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

O T H M A R.

BY

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O T H M A R.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN Othmar returned to Paris he paid Rösselin a visit.

“You have been to Chevreuse?” asked Rösselin. “No?”

“No,” said Othmar with sincerity and some annoyance, “I am still at Amyôt. I only come to Paris occasionally. Is she well? Are you satisfied?”

“She is quite well,” replied Rösselin. “The answer to the other question is less simple. I am satisfied with her talent, not with her character.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing that is her fault. I merely mean that she is, as Madame la Comtesse once said, ‘*une sensitive.*’ Such people have no business in public careers. You do not make street-posts out of the stems of a sensitive-plant. The Latins gave the statues that were destined to stand in thoroughfares brass discs to protect them. If you have not the brass

disc you must not stand even in the peristyle of a theatre."

"I do not think she is weak. Had she been weak she would not have left the island as she did."

"Who is talking of weakness? I mean that she is not of a temper for the coarse career of the stage, which is always passed in the press and glare of a stormy crowd. She would play *Dona Sol* divinely to an audience of poets on your terraces at Amyôt under a midsummer moon. But it is unfortunately not a question of playing it so, but on the stages of public theatres, where very often the coarse applause of the friendly ignorant is still more offensive than the envenomed vituperation of the hostile critic. I dare say we can make her fit for this. We can give her the brass disc, but it will spoil the fine white marble when we fasten it to it. My dear Count Othmar, you know what the life of a great actress in Paris is; you know what it will be for her. We need not spend words on details. Is it a good action that we do when we encourage her to qualify herself for it, or is it a bad one?"

Othmar heard him with distress. He was always haunted by the memory that his wife, by a few careless words, had broken up for ever that simple, peaceful, healthful, flower-like life which Damaris Bérarde had led in Bonaventure. The power of all the kings of the earth could not have replaced her in it.

"It is her choice," he said, after a silence of some moments.

"Is fate ever wholly choice?" said Rosselin. "And when a child says he will be a soldier, what does he know of war, of wounds, of the sickening stench of the rotting dead, of the maladies which kill men in hundreds like murrained cattle? Nothing: he thinks it all *tambour et trompette* and *Væ Victis!* Your friend at Chevreuse knows no more of what the life of the theatre is than the child knows of war, and I for one have not the courage to enlighten her. Have you? She dreams of all kinds of glories; she does not see the rouge-pot, the white powder, the claque, the press, the lovers, the diamonds, the ugliness, the vulgarity, the money-bags, the whole *ronde du diable*. She thinks she will be Dona Sol, be Esther, be Rosalind, off the stage as well as on it. Who is to tell her the mistake she makes?"

"Surely you can, if anyone?"

"No, I cannot. You cannot make a mind conceive a thing wholly inconceivable to it. I can say a certain number of words certainly to her; produce a certain effect; suggest some images to her which will be painful and revolting. But when I have done that I shall not have done much; I shall not have produced any real impression on her, because the advice which I mean will not in itself be intelligible to her. I may talk as I will of war to the child; but I shall never be