

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 36

# Spring in Geneva

by  
Sylvia Kelso





Published by Aqueduct Press  
PO Box 95787  
Seattle, WA 98145-2787  
[www.aqueductpress.com](http://www.aqueductpress.com)

Copyright © 2013 by Sylvia Kelso  
All rights reserved. First Edition, October 2013  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
ISBN: 978-1-61976-044-8

Cover illustration acknowledgments: Lightning photo from NOAA public domain; photo of Mont Blanc by Alexandre Buisse, under Creative Commons ShareAlike 3.0 License.

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:  
[www.writersmugs.com](http://www.writersmugs.com)

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

To

*The original "Mrs. Godstone"*

*This volume is respectfully inscribed*

By

*The Author*

## Acknowledgments

This novella grew from Sarah Zettel's founding idea for the Bookview Café *Shadow Conspiracy* anthologies, that *Frankenstein* was actually an account of a true event. I would also like to thank Gillian Barrett, Lois McMaster Bujold, Lillian Stewart Carl, Rosaleen Love, Vreni Murphy, Caroline Stevermer, and Jacqueline Stockdale, my work in progress readers, for much time, more patience, invaluable feedback, and even more invaluable enthusiasm.

*Mme Desiré Rosch,  
House of Clerval and Rosch  
Geneva*

*Ma chère Didi,*

*Most irritating yet most sapient one, you were precisely correct.  
Grand-père's youth did indeed include more than he ever told us.  
I was engaged in the melancholy task of turning out those books  
he left me, when I shook this document from between the pages of  
Chapter Five in his copy of the English novel Frankenstein.*

*Your nonetheless fond brother,*

*Pierre*

*House of Clerval and Rosch  
Calais  
June 30th 1868*



M. Pierre Rosch,  
House of Clerval and Rosch,  
Calais

My dear Pierre,

Your letter has come at last; and after such aid as yours, in such an enterprise as this has proved, how can I not fulfill my promise? I write then to inform you, fully and frankly, "what it was all about."

Anticipating your command, I begin at my own beginning: that first glimpse of the Promethean, one bitter cold morning in the Parc des Bastions, attempting, as I thought, to eat the hyacinths.

At first glance I assumed this was yet another unfortunate mendicant, cast abroad in the second season of famines after the summerless year. Drawing closer, I felt in a pocket and suggested, "If you wish, I will give you a franc; then you need not eat the flowers."

The figure turned, and rose. It went on rising until I recoiled a pace, for its full height must be over seven English feet. The nether limbs were imperfectly concealed by the tatters of an ordinary man's breeches; the body was wrapped in some kind of cloak. The feet were enormous, and bare. On discerning the features I recoiled again, for the lividly hued visage, the watery eyes, the strangely blackened lips within a straggling beard all spoke the victim of famine, if not disease. Then the figure inclined its thatch of filthy black hair, and spoke.

"Sir, I truly thank you." The voice was indeed masculine, very deep, the French bearing a slight accent, although the speech of an educated man. "I did not wish to eat these—flowers, do you say? Only to examine

them.” He returned his eyes earthward. “I have never seen such—flowers—before.”

He spoke with such wonder, indeed such delight, that I was astonished twice over: first, at such an emotion from such a source, and then, upon reflection, in wonder of my own. How could a person of such apparent maturity never have seen hyacinths bloom?

Though curious to the point of impetuosity, I did limit myself to, “You are not from these parts?”

He had turned his eyes back to the one blossom that lay like a scrap of silk in his huge palm. He seemed discomposed; employing my own wits, I ventured, “You are from Spain, perhaps? Or even Africa?”

He hesitated. One might have said, he fidgeted. “No,” he said at last. “I am—I first came from South America.”

“Indeed?” You know, Pierre, that I dreamed once of traveling so far; before the outcome of Gabriele’s final enthusiasm. “Forgive me, sir, but from what part of that most interesting continent? The northern jungles?” How else could he have failed to encounter hyacinths? “Perhaps from the waters of the actual Amazon?”

He answered at length, with every appearance of reluctance, “I grieve to disappoint you, sir. I am a native of—of—Tierra del Fuego. The extreme cold of those mountains has enabled me to tolerate your winters without—” He shuffled the grass with his enormous feet. “Without the usual habiliments—”

“The mountains of Tierra del Fuego do not support hyacinths?”

He inclined his head toward the flower he held. “Is that the name?” He seemed to feel a curiosity equal to mine, but the question had disconcerted him further.

“The—the mountains of Tierra del Fuego, sir. I fear they seldom support anything. Least of all ‘hyacinths.’”

“You astonish me,” I answered honestly. “Tell me, then, how do your people live?”

This time I was not vouchsafed a reply. Voices came from behind us, others descending the Rue de la Croix Rouge from Old Town. My interlocutor flung up his head, much in the manner of a startled deer. Then in one motion he swept his outer garment round him, in three enormous bounds reached the lower wall, swung himself over with the spring of an East Indian orangutan, and vanished. All that remained was the flower, a spot of purple, darker than blood upon sere winter grass.



Picture, my friend, the speculation, the conjecture, the excitement generated in me by this interlude. Three times that day did uncle Laurent have to chide me, even to cry laughingly, “Fie, Anton, do you fancy yourself back at University? The house heir blotting his ledger like a callow clerk? For shame!”

My internal ferment had hardly subsided before, next day being Sunday, some friends had proposed a walk in the Plainpalais. It was a clear afternoon at last, the trees finally leafing, and a mere brisk breeze. As I approached our rendezvous, motion in the nearest copse caught my eye. Something large and dark had bobbed up and hastily down again. In a moment my eye distinguished, amid the birch-boughs and rhododendron bushes, the unmistakable form of my acquaintance from the Parc des Bastions.

“Sir!” I hailed him, turning aside. “Monsieur del Fuego!” What other appellation could I use? “How do you, sir?”



Recognition seemed to deter him from what had promised to become open flight. While he wavered, I drew near enough to make such escape rank discourtesy. "You too are enjoying this fine day?"

He nodded and mumbled something, but this time I was determined to assuage my curiosity by whatever unmannerly means. "You are staying in Geneva? Or along the lake, perhaps?"

Before he could reply a woman cried behind me, "William! William! What are you *doing*?"

She came running up to us, quick, slender, slight in stature, her grey eyes and high forehead the most prominent features of a fine oval face. Her dark brown, simply parted hair was mostly concealed by the hood of a coarse black cloak, yet despite this garb of a poor relation or upper servant, her French was pure as my own.

"Sir, my friend is a stranger in Geneva, and has lost his way." Against his bulk she truly resembled one of those fairies imagined by the English Shakespeare. "Pray forgive us for troubling you."

She seized a handful of his outer garment as if to draw him away. I said hastily, "There has been no trouble, mam'zelle, for it was I who accosted him. We met briefly in the park the other morning. I wished to ask a little more about his native land."

Her delicate but pale cheek seemed to grow a shade paler. "It is true that William comes from, from Scotland." She tightened her grasp. "And I am sure you would find his conversation interesting—"

"But," I exclaimed, "he said he comes from South America!"

They exchanged one glance of consternation, plain even on William's alarming countenance. Then both stood mute, wearing expressions of guilt, nay, of open fear.

Driven beyond curiosity, I discarded all thought of reticence. "Mam'zelle, M'sieur William, my name is Anton Zyli. I am a member of Zyli and Zyli, the private bank in Rue Beauregard. Enquire anywhere within Geneva of our repute. Meanwhile, I pray you, consider me at your service. This—confusion—your mutual distress—makes me feel that, in whatever small way, you may have occasion for it."

They glanced first at me, with doubt, anxiety and trepidation; then at each other, with concern where, in William's look at least, I read a glimmering of hope.

"If no more," said I, "might I assist M'sieur William to obtain some—improved—clothes?"

William appeared astonished, but then looked quickly to the woman, or girl as I now estimated her, surprising me again with the discovery that he judged the decision hers. She in turn seemed newly alarmed; but he gave her a meaningful glance, and swept his eyes around the glades and copses and levels of the Plainpalais.

She started. Then she made a movement of her hand and spoke very rapidly. It was English, but I am sufficiently skilled in English conversation to make out the sense.

"Go, yes, make haste," she said. "I will speak to him. You must not come here again by daylight. If they were to see—! I will leave a note when I can. Go, please go!"

On the word William darted away, with all the speed he had shown in the Parc des Bastions. How someone of his size could vanish almost before my eyes I cannot explain, but in a moment he was gone.

In French the girl said quickly, "M'sieur Zyli, let us not linger here."

Suppressing such questions as, *You wish to avoid attention to William, or to yourself?* And, *Who are "they?"* I offered my arm. She hesitated, then allowed me to guide us away from the direction of my own rendezvous.

Yes, Pierre, my tongue truly burned with questions, but I contained them all. Too clearly, I would lose both old and new acquaintance if she were not allowed to explain, at her leisure, as much or as little as she would.

Having rounded the copse, I had my reward. She observed, still sounding reluctant, "If you could assist William...but, sir, how is it possible?"

"Mam'zelle, I have a tailor in the Rue Maurice. I have but to tell him of an acquaintance, too ill to go outdoors, in too straitened circumstances, this moment, to order for himself."

She cast me a startled look, less at the offer than at my ready invention, I think. Her eyes were very fine, though slightly hooded in the sun.

"But the measurements, the—the shape?"

"It is my tailor's business to make, not to question. And I can estimate M'sieur William's height and breadth, I think, against my own."

Her alarm nearly overset my restraint. Again I had to remind myself severely that one must never press, never over-question a client. But when her mien warned she was about to take fright in earnest I had to throw for double or quits.

"Mam'zelle, is there some way I can inform you when the clothes are ready? A note? A signal of some sort?"

Her hand relaxed a little, and she advanced another ten paces. At length she said, "M'sieur Zyli, you are more than kind."

"I should count it an honor to serve you, mam'zelle."

Ah, Pierre, already it was very true. The briefest side-long glances had told me that though her features were delicate, she was neither a beauty nor vivacious, indeed seeming somewhat reserved. Yet great sweetness informed her expression; and beneath its hint of melancholy I seemed to glimpse some lingering sorrow, born with resolve and patience, yet too great for her years.

*Anton, Anton, I hear you saying. You are still as much a romantic as when we studied at Montpellier! Nay, you are worse than your brother Gabriele. You have become an enthusiast!*

At least, my friend, I retained sense enough to remain silent, when my declaration evoked neither confusion nor schoolgirl blushes, but the wariness of one already schooled in the deceits and disappointments of men.

When I stole my next look that at least had faded. She was biting lightly at her lower lip and watching her feet. I had the notion, then or later, that despite her clumsy shoes she seemed almost to flit over the grass.

Presently she said, "I have heard of your bank, M'sieur. It was founded last century." I refrained from specifying, in 1747. "It has never been known, they say, to default on a bond." I bowed. "It is now headed by Messieurs Laurent and Rafael Zyli. They say M'sieur Rafael had the misfortune, in Napoleon's Russian campaign, to lose his eldest son."

"They' say a good deal, Mam'zelle."

She glanced up. "Forgive me, sir. We—someone of my acquaintance was inquiring for a reputable bank in Geneva. The tale has stayed with me." Her eyes

sank again. "For a reason—M'sieur Rafael enlisted my sympathy."

And no, Pierre, I did not ask about *that*. I did say, "You are correct in your surmise, Mam'zelle. I am now M'sieur Rafael's heir."

She was biting her lip again, and nearly frowning at the adjacent copse. I have encountered sufficient clients to recognize a moment of decision, and suffer it to be made.

Her fingers tightened slightly on my arm. "Sir, if we accept your help, if only in the matter of William's garb—it will be necessary, it is but justice—that you should know more about this matter. Perhaps, for your own safety as well."

I had the wit to eschew flowery protestations and touch the main point. "Mam'zelle, above all else, our house has always honored the confidences of a client."

Her fingers relaxed again, and we skirted the copse, discovering a fine prospect south to the sparkling snows and brooding precipices of Mont Blanc. As she lifted her eyes thither the depths of her reserve parted, and I glimpsed remembrance, melancholy, open grief.

Then she said abruptly, "Know then, sir, that in almost every respect, I am the widow of an English gentleman; a person of surpassing cordiality to all he encountered, yet of most superior intellect. And a poet. A poet of genius."

Her voice, which had faltered, became wholly suspended. I averted my eyes.

In a moment she resumed, "We came to Geneva two years ago, planning to stay the summer. An English friend, a fellow poet, had hired a villa along the lake."

"You do not mean the English milor? The one who stayed at Coligny?"

“You know of him?” She stopped short. “You *know*? Was there, is there talk—?”

“Mam’zelle—Madame—the English émigrés here, many of them bank with us. An English milor, a poet, of such—fame—there was gossip, naturally.”

This time she had truly paled, but she spoke steadily. “Scandal, you mean. Lord Byron has attracted much ill-repute. What was said of him at Cologny?”

“Very little, Madame. He stayed at the Villa Belverive—” she looked puzzled—“or as he called it, the Villa Diodati.” Her frown smoothed out. “He was then greatly interested in chemistry, and it is said one of those with him conducted experiments. Or perhaps built chemical machines.”

Despite her pallor she was breathing rapidly. “That was all?”

“There was some talk of revelry; noises at night, such things. It seemed mere rumor, as might be said of anyone.”

“With such a reputation?” She folded her lips, then remembered herself. We moved forward again. “It is true, Lord Byron has sometimes behaved less than reputably, but he is a great poet. More, he is a lofty thinker, learned, enquiring, not limited by fear or prejudice. When he and Percy spoke together, it was to meet thunder and lightning in a single room.”

We were nearing the confines of Plainpalais, and by mutual consent turned our steps from the southern prospect and Mont Blanc, back toward the city, with the crests of the Jura frowning beyond.

“My dear Percy was also a thinker, ardent in the cause of bettering man. Percy held that the noblest form of such improvement would come through poets: he called

them the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. Byron was much taken with the idea, and at the time, after the prior experiments—Galvani, Aldini, the explorations of electricity—we all thought chemistry would prove the key to unlock Nature’s secrets; the material foundation of such change.

“And there were indeed experiments at Cologny, and machines, and then—ah, M’sieur Zyli, then my beloved Percy’s ardor bore him to lengths I could not go. There were plans, between him and Byron, that I could not condone. I nerved myself to protest: you may conceive how difficult, against such visions, such intellects. When protest failed, I forced myself to act.”

She took her hand quickly from my arm and drew out a handkerchief. I paced beside her, managing not to exceed my position as mere listener, until she recovered herself.

“Then—I was forced to depart, in haste, and to choose between discovery, outcry, wrath—perhaps, retribution—and my child.”

Her voice broke. Never, Pierre, had I desired anything more than the right to comfort her. But I could only keep silent: banker’s silence, that offers, if nothing else, a secret’s safe repository.

“My boy, my own William—he was then scarce five months old. I fled, where is no matter. But I dared not seek news of Cologny anywhere. My friends are all held in common with Percy. My family is—estranged. What had befallen everyone, above all my William, I could only discover by returning, secretly, to ask for myself.”

“And you found, Madame?”

“With summer past, I found the villa empty, the—our circle gone. Some thought, my—that Percy had gone to Italy with—some of those present. But William—William—”

This time I did dare to take her hand and lay it on my arm, pressing my own over it. "Surely, Madame, surely, your son lives?"

She freed her hand, if gently, to wipe her eyes again. "Lives, yes, and in Geneva. At first, Percy was obliged to find him a wet-nurse. Now William boards with her sister's family. Oh, M'sieur Zyli, I have hardly seen him, and he is two years old!"

"But, Madame," I said, when the handkerchief was at last replaced, and by a mighty effort, I had limited myself to reclaiming the single hand, securing it on my arm. "Today, you are in Geneva. Your son is in Geneva. What could be easier than to visit? To name, if not to regain your own?"

She averted her face. "Indeed, it would seem so." She broke off, and resumed with difficulty. "But I am constrained, M'sieur. I think, that I am sought for. I know not who, or how; I do know nothing is likelier, after what I did. I have hidden, within and without Geneva. Here, I teach English to the daughters of a burgess family. Two streets from William's house. I dare not go there. I can only hope to encounter the children when we walk. The Plainpalais—the Jardin Anglais—the Parc des Bassions—I have glimpsed William in them all."

"Ah, Madame." Truly, Pierre, it wrung my heart. What can wound a mother deeper than to be driven from her child? "But this pursuit continues? After two whole years?"

Her fingers closed tightly on my arm. She spoke as softly as one left breathless, or silenced by fear.

"I fear it not only continues but is drawing closer, M'sieur. On first finding employment, I would watch in the street, among neighbors' servants, for anyone, any-



thing—unsure. That year passed safely. The second also. But since late winter...I cannot say surely, There. This carriage that passes too often, that person seen today, yesterday, the day before, yet not living in this street... But I feel a regard, a watching. An awareness at my back.”

I could not forebear glancing round. The city was rising before us, and the Jura had begun to veil itself again in cloud, but here the sun still illumined new foliage, and those abroad wore the brighter hues of spring. None among them seemed to show the slightest interest in us.

“I do not imagine this, M’sieur.”

“Be sure, I do not doubt you, Madame.” Hunted creatures, the deer, the rabbit, acquire an instinct for pursuit. “If only there were something I could do!”

But at this my companion visibly rallied herself, going so far as to attempt a smile. “M’sieur, you have already ‘done something.’ Here, today, I have at last dared acquaint someone with what happened, how I am situated. Above all, what I fear.” She actually went so far as for a moment to link both hands on my arm. “If you can provide clothes for William, you will have our undying gratitude.”

“M’sieur William.” I recalled him with something of a start. “What is his part in this?”

At this the reserve wakened, slight but visible as the Jura’s clouds. “I think, sir, that ‘M’sieur’ William’s story must be his to tell.” She withdrew her hand, this time with finality. “M’sieur Zyli, however I regret it, I must not claim your escort further. We should not leave the Plainpalais together. It is too dangerous.”

*Danger, I hear you ask, in a park, in Geneva, on a Sunday afternoon?* My reason concurred. The back of my neck prickled, more primitive and wiser, warning otherwise.

“We must part, then, Madame.” I endeavored to hide my reluctance. “But the clothes, M’sieur William’s clothes: how shall I advise you? Is there a place I can deliver them?”

She was retiring with that quick nervous step toward the nearest copse, which would obscure her from the gates. She half-turned and spoke swiftly as her retreat. “Write a note, if you please, M’sieur Zyli. Address it to Mrs. Godstone, to be called for at your bank.” A motion that might have been a suppressed wave of the hand, and almost as rapidly as William, she was gone.



You may conceive of my emotions over the next week. Never has my unfortunate Maître Bosch been harassed to work so swiftly, with such a vaguely outlined goal. And I? I could hardly work at all. It would have been so easy to discover her: a question, a few hours’ search. I could have rushed out to scour Old Town for a family possessing educable daughters and an English teacher, a dozen times a day.

With the suit finished, the shirt and small clothes ordered, temptation worsened. Once my letter was posted I need only go downstairs to the Poste Restante; ask Jean about the letter for Mrs. Godstone; nay, haunt the foyer on the chance of seeing her pass. Resolution and prudence alike might have succumbed were they not reinforced. Like Mrs. Godstone, I lacked tangible proof, yet the back of my neck assured me that I was under observation, and by no-one who wished me good.

By Thursday my letter was ready. On Friday evening I had given up hope of a reply, and just drawn on my overcoat when Jean came running from the Poste, calling, “M’sieur Anton! A note for you!”

The pointed writing almost scrawled, its lines slanting slightly down to the right, the hand of an accustomed and hurried scribe. It said, "M'sieur Zyli, will you be ascending Mont Salève on Sunday afternoon?"

There was no signature, and the back of my neck endorsed common prudence. I did not attempt to send a reply.

How often have we ascended Salève, my friend? Tracing the paths as schoolboys, a whooping troop of savages, straying the foothills on family excursions, or as young men, ardent for the broad dome of summit and the vista of lake and city and mountains, that for all its scale could hardly match our dreams? Yet I have never risen so early, commanded a horse with such urgency, mustered provisions, fetched out my traveling cape, with such eagerness. Certainly, for such an excursion, I never before loaded those pistols we bought in our rash youth and holstered them at my saddle-bow.

Before nine o'clock I was trotting briskly through Carouge. By eleven, I had tethered my father's hack at the old forest hut and chosen the quickest upward path. Instinct bade me beware the leafy passages, though I half-expected William to materialize there, and was on edge lest I mistake friend for foe; but I was nearing the woods' edge, the skyline of the summit already visible, when the boscage stirred and he stepped into my path.

He appeared so swiftly I could hardly master my recoil, and he drew back a step, with an expression on that fearsome visage that almost seemed regret. But as I quickly bowed and murmured, "M'sieur William, well met," he inclined his head, parted the bushes, and gestured me through.

In the deeper shadow of the wood I swung off my pack to extract the parcel from Maître Bosch. Can you conceive, Pierre, what it is to watch delight, and wonder, dawn again in such a face, and know that this time it is by your agency?

At last he refolded the coat, and smiled. An unguarded smile from William is a fearsome thing, yet I felt no affright. He said, "For these, I must bathe first. M'sieur Zyli—" But there he stopped, and shook his shaggy head.

"None but my benefactress," he said, "ever gifted me."

How does, how could one answer that? But before curiosity expelled compunction and wholly overset me, I recalled the other contents of my pack. "We always bring a loaf when we ascend Salève," I told him, "with apples, and cheese. I would be honored to have them shared."

His face brightened further, but then he glanced up, and it fell again. As the first drops came splattering through the leaves, a roll of thunder announced one of the new little spring storms. William grimaced—a spectacle truly grim—then suddenly beckoned. "I have a place," he said.

We had to slip sidelong quite a way through the woods, then into one of the limestone ravines, and hence to a recess almost at the mountain's face. Though hardly large enough to designate a cave, it had a striking prospect over Geneva, it was mostly dry, and the pile of boughs, the ring of rough stones and charcoal within, spoke for themselves.

Noting William's constraint, I avoided even a guest's thanks. The trust he had bestowed in sharing what might be his principal dwelling, and which must surely still be secret, forbade any words that might touch on its meagerness. We sat upon the boughs and ate, while thunder

cracked and ever and anon lightning struck white over the lake, half-lost in veils of rain.

At first William was silent, though he ate with such speed that I left him three quarters of the loaf. But finishing my apple, I felt his regard. Presently he said, on a note of renewed wonder, "You are truly a kind man, M'sieur Zyli."

I murmured a disclaimer.

"No man," observed William, with deepening wonder, "ever ate with me before."

I could not help myself. I turned about and stared. "Forgive me, M'sieur William, but whether you come from Scotland or from South America, you have surely engaged in human commerce? You had a father, a mother? Brothers? Kinfolk? Or if an orphan, the merest acquaintances at an inn table...?"

Silently, he shook his head.

Curiosity, Pierre. Since this affair began, curiosity has been my besetting sin. "M'sieur William," I broke out, "kind I may be, but you are fast proving a torturer. Scotland or South America, orphan or stolen child, I care not. But I will burst if you do not explain!"

William laughed. If educated speech from such a face and form was a marvel, what shall I say of his mirth? "I crave your pardon," he said, smiling still. "M'sieur Zyli—"

"Call me Anton, if you please. And no further complaints, I beg you, of none saying such ere this. Where is this desert that nurtured you? At the least, where were you born?"

He turned his face to the rain, sluicing down beyond the ingenious rim of stones that turned it from the cave. "I was not born," he said. "I was made."

"I beg your pardon?"

“M’sieur—Anton—when I discovered myself a breathing, living being, I was already a grown man’s size. And I am but two years old.”

Do you wonder, Pierre, that I was deprived of speech?

Thunder rattled the limestone bastions, but now the lightning seemed to dart within my own skull, illuminating, tracing, fusing connections that took my breath.

“Two years ago,” I said with difficulty, “the English lord Byron stayed at Cogny. Making, they say, chemical experiments.”

Lightning slashed white before us and thunder cracked right overhead. William sat immobile, eyes fixed on the rain.

“My benefactress has told me,” he said, “that I was one such experiment. I was made with a—machine.” He winced. “Lacking knowledge, they found a baby’s form too delicate, so they manufactured a grown human body; of whatever elements they could obtain.”

Without turning he held out his arm, and I perceived red marks circling the wrist, like scars from a manacle. “My hands, from someone. My arms and body, found elsewhere. My legs—from the shins down—elsewhere again.”

I would have shrunk in horror, but horror had frozen me where I sat.

“My benefactress says, when the machine woke me, and they saw—this visage—they fled their handiwork. Afterward, she found me cowering in the—experiment room.”

He shuddered suddenly. It was as if an earthquake assumed flesh. When he did not resume, I ventured, “The experiment room?”

“With the furnace. The steam-retort. The”— This time he quaked from head to toe. “The machine.”

I found I had licked my own lips. I almost whispered, “The machine?”

“The—the—ah, do not ask me! Do not speak of it!”

He leapt to his feet and I feared he would flee the cave. I dared not question, soothe, let alone remonstrate. I could only wait, while the rain sluiced down, and William trembled, a living monolith wracked with tremors I feared would shatter him, at the cavern’s brink.

At long last, the spasm eased. Presently, he sank down in his place. At last, endeavoring to reach composure, he resumed.

“It was she—Mrs. Godstone—who succored me. She brought garments, and gave me food, then led me from the villa, bidding me flee in my turn. I fled.”

More steadily, he went on. “Of that time I have a beast’s memories: hunger, wet, cold. Terror, confusion, pain. Trees, brooks, stones, all of which punished me; the mountain, my sanctuary. As an infant must, I learnt at last to distinguish myself from the world about me. From water, I learned my appearance. From encounters in the woods, I learned to evade the fear of humankind.

“Needing that lesson more than twice, I might not have survived. I grew that first year, I think a foot and more, as if I truly were a child; perhaps it was some effect of the machine. And though I ate berries and stole cats’ milk, I learnt also that this altered frame bears privation, can achieve feats of strength, beyond its elements’ scope. Otherwise, again, in that famine year I might well have expired. But by autumn’s end starvation drove even me from the mountain, and straying toward Cologny,

outside the villa garden, I recognized my benefactress, knowingly, for the first time.”

He turned toward me at last, and the sepulchral tone lightened in his voice. “Even then she was not afraid. She coaxed me when I would have fled. Through that winter, whenever she might, she brought me food. More precious by far, she showed me the beginnings of speech. She termed me a Promethean, because they had thought to produce a new race of men, and she bade me, like a true man, choose a name.” He paused, and I wondered if the name’s choice had been a delicate compliment, or an unspoken wish. “Then she gave me books and showed me how to read; the most precious gift of all.

“So I learnt speech by mimicry and reading from a child’s primer, then books taught me the geography of the world, the manners and customs of men. That morning, Anton, when you offered me a franc? That was the first trial of my knowledge with a living man.”

Is it not the most fantastic of tales, Pierre? From the instant I saw him, I felt that only the most impossible fantasia would explain such a being. And yet, such had I found his nature, so moving his narration, that I discovered myself vowing to forget the hideous secrets of his creation, to regard him still as an unfortunately favored fugitive, whose plight demanded both pity and help.

Then a higher order asserted itself: an experiment, he had termed himself, as a new race of men he had been intended, sentient, he certainly was. Yet how could a being assembled from bodily fragments and animated on a machine be deemed human? How could he have a soul?

I shivered where I sat on his humble bed, while rain pelted and thunder cracked over us like the wrath of the Almighty himself.