

darkness increased, it was impossible to distinguish the duck, one could only hear the rustle of their flight, like a brief wind. The evening breeze dropped, and a calm spread itself over the lake: only great black birds flew overhead, noisily crying: "Chaw! Chaw!" From time to time, in the silence of the night, could be heard the deep, lugubrious, indistinct note of the bittern.

Stars glowed overhead, and in the depths of the water--the moon would not rise for nearly another hour. I wrapped myself in my cloak, and began to ponder over those grey eyes. In the silence, which grew ever deeper, the noise of the mill and of the weir could be heard afar off; somewhere a dog barked in its kennel; from some hill, lighting the darkness, one caught the twinkle of a bright flame. The supple body, the eyes, and the laughter, the lily blossom which harmonized so well with the lake and with the green lights in the eyes, tantalized me. Now she was no longer the simple maiden, kissed by the sun and caressed by the wind; every movement, every look, had something particular about it. And also something strange.

I had never seen her when I visited the mill. I had heard of the old man's devilish niece, but I had never set eyes upon her. But now an incident recurred to my mind, to which, at the time, I had paid scant attention. On one occasion I had perceived a pair of restless eyes peeping at me through a chink in the mill bridge. Those eyes were surely hers; they sparkled so--and were so full of light and mirth. There, in the dark night, that ardent kiss seemed to burn me and I waited--I waited for something that I could not explain even to myself.

I dozed, dreaming of those grey eyes. I cannot tell--perhaps I fell asleep. I awoke in the full light of the moon which was flooding atmosphere and lake with its silver beams. The water glittered, the night was still, the mill was silent; in the distance the weir was murmuring as in a dream.

Here and there, the water rippled into circles the colour of agate; groups of duck were bathing in the moonlight. I put my hand to my gun. I raised my eyes, I was ready to pull--when I paused. A melodious song, scarcely intelligible, could be heard coming from the lake. It was a simple song, and monotonous, but its remoteness, the echo across the water, the clear light of the moon, lent it a profound charm. I immediately thought of the lady of the lake.

I placed my gun beside me and listened. It was a simple and touching melody. It had ceased for some time, but I still strained my ears; I could only catch the soft murmur of the distant weir. Time passed, and yet I still expected something to happen.

After a while I heard distinctly the soft splash of oars. I looked everywhere, I could not make out whence it came. Then, suddenly, amid the obscurity of the rushes, the gently floating boat came gliding into the sea of light with the girl reclining in the silvery beams. The lily shone in her dark hair.

I cannot tell you what I felt, for the storm of emotion cannot be expressed in words, and besides that, I was young then, and half a century has passed since my youth. I know I stood with wondering eyes and gazed like one possessed: in very truth this was the fairy of the lake!

All at once I saw a movement. The boat turned, and the oars struck the water, making great ripples of light. It was directed towards my cave. She came with wild speed, staring, her great eyes like phosphorescent stars. But when she got near, she once more let the boat glide, then turned abruptly, and laughing passed by the cave--a silvery laugh, which I have never forgotten, no, not to this day although it is so long ago. She passed by like a phantom, laughing, and her eyes shining like two stars in the night of those great eyebrows. To the right of me she rose, and threw something towards me; then, sinking down, she again took the oars, struck the water, and shot out into the open lake.