

**AVATAR; OR, THE
DOUBLE
TRANSFORMATION**

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Avatar; Or, The Double Transformation by Théophile Gautier

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THÉOPHILE GAUTIER

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AVATAR;

OR,

THE DOUBLE TRANSFORMATION
(and Illusions)

BY
THEOPHILE GAUTIER

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NEW YORK
FRANK F. LOVELL & COMPANY
142 AND 144 WORTH STREET

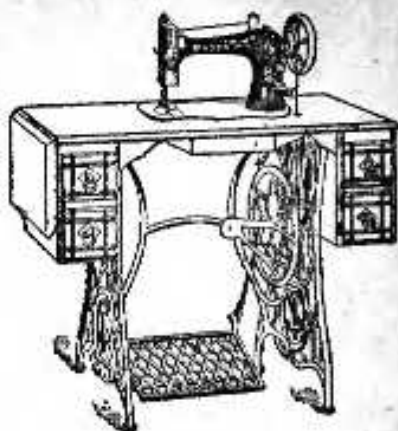
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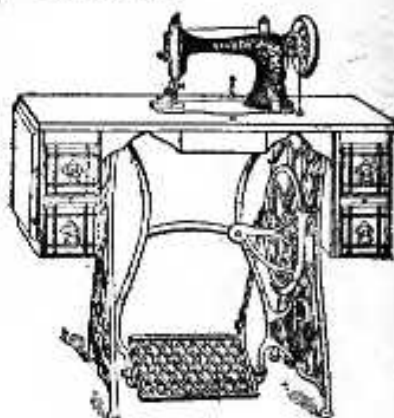
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AVATAR;

OR,

THE DOUBLE TRANSFORMATION.

CHAPTER I.

No one could understand the disease which was slowly undermining the constitution of Octave de Saville. He was not confined to his bed, but led his usual life, and never a complaint issued from his lips; yet it was obvious that he was dying. He could tell the physicians, whom the anxiety of his friends had compelled him to consult, of no particular pain or suffering, and their science could discover no alarming symptoms in him. When his chest was sounded, the result was favourable; and when the ear was applied to his heart, it could scarcely be said that its beating was either too quick or too slow. He had no cough and no fever; but his life was evidently gliding away and taking flight through one of those invisible crevices of which man, according to the saying of Terence, is full.

Sometimes a strange faintness turned him pale and chill as a statue. For a minute or two he would seem dead; then the pendulum of life, stayed for the moment by some mysterious hand, was let go again and resumed its oscilla-

tions, and Octave woke up as it were from a dream. He had been sent to the springs and baths, but the thermal nymphs could do nothing for him. A journey to Naples had had no better result. Its brilliant and so much belauded sun had seemed to him black as the one in Albert Durer's picture. The spirit, on whose ill-omened wings is written the word "Melancholy," veiled for him the bright azure of the sky with her dust-strewn pinions, and ever hovered between him and the light. He had felt himself frozen on the quay at Mergellina, where the half-naked lazzaroni lie baking in the sun till their skin becomes the colour of bronze.

He had returned to his own chambers in the Rue Saint-Lazare, and had apparently resumed his old manner of life. These chambers of his were as comfortably furnished as a bachelor's quarters could be. But, as a habitation in time assumes something of the physiognomy and, perhaps, of the mind, of him who inhabits it, Octave's chambers had, by degrees, come to have a touch of sadness about them. The damask of the curtains had faded, and the light which filtered through them looked grey and gloomy. The great bunches of peonies on the carpet lay withered against their soiled background, and the gilt frames of the few water-colours and drawings which hung on the walls were spotted and tarnished. The very fire seemed out of spirits, and was dying away, choked by its own smoke, in the midst of a pile of cinders. The old buhl clock ticked in a subdued fashion, and its bell sounded the passing hours with the hushed note of a sick-room. The doors closed silently, and the steps of Octave's infrequent visitors fell soundless upon the velvet-pile carpet.

Cheerfulness seemed naturally to suppress itself on passing the threshold of these melancholy, chill, and dim-

looking rooms ; where, however, nothing of modern luxury was wanting. Jean, Octave's servant, glided about like a shadow, a feather-brush under his arm or a tray in his hand, for under the influence of the spirit of the place, he had lost all his former loquacity. Against the walls there hung a trophy of boxing gloves, masks, and foils ; but it was very obvious that they had not been handled for a long time. Books, which had been taken up for a moment or two and then carelessly thrown down, lay scattered about on the furniture, and seemed to shew that Octave, by this mechanical and forced kind of reading, had been striving to drive out from his mind some persistent idea. A letter, of which only the first few words had been written, seemed to complain, by the dingy sallowness of its paper, of the months it had been awaiting its completion, and lay, like a mute reproach, on the middle of the desk. Although inhabited, the room still looked like a deserted one. There was no life there, and when one entered it, a puff of cold air came against one's brow similar to that which issues from a newly-opened vault.

In this mournful place, where never a woman had ventured to set the tip of her boot, Octave was more at his ease than anywhere else. The silence and sadness and loneliness harmonized with his humour. The joyful bustle of active life was distasteful to him, though he sometimes made an effort to join in it ; but he always returned in a still more gloomy frame of mind from the masquerades or excursions or supper parties at which his friends had entertained him ; so he had ceased at length to fight against this mysterious melancholy which oppressed him, and he let the days pass away with the indifference of a man who has absolutely no regard for the morrow. He made no plans, having no hope that he would ever be any better.

and he had, as it were, tacitly sent in his resignation of life to God, and was merely waiting till it should be accepted.

As to his appearance, if you were to picture to yourself a face fleshless and deep-lined, a livid complexion, nerveless and scraggy limbs, and a general look of decay and prostration, you would have a quite wrong idea. The most that could be truthfully said was, that the skin beneath his eyes was unhealthily discoloured, that the whites of his eyes were unnaturally sallow, that there was some slight show of fever in the blue veins which showed themselves prominently on his temples. The spark of life, indeed, never gleamed in his eye, from which all desire and hope seemed to have flown away. This look of death in so young a face formed a strange contrast, and produced a more painful effect upon those who saw it, than the emaciated features and fever-lighted eyes of the ordinary patient.

Before this languor had seized hold of him, Octave had been, and, indeed, he still was, a handsome young man. His abundant black hair, with its short thick curls, massed itself round his temples, soft and lustrous. His velvety almond-shaped eyes, coloured with the blue of the sky at night, and fringed round with long drooping lashes, still glittered sometimes with dimmed fires. When they were at rest, and no flow of feeling animated them with a momentary excitement, they were still noticeable from that same expression of quiet serenity which you may see in the eyes of the Orientals as they lounge about the café doors at Smyrna or Constantinople and bask in the sun, after having smoked their narghilés. His complexion had never had much colour, but exhibited, rather, those southern tints of olive-white, which are seen to advantage

only by gas-light. His hands were small and delicately made; his feet narrow and arched. He dressed well, keeping neither in advance of nor behind the fashion of the day, and he understood thoroughly how to profit the most by his personal endowments.

How came it about, you will ask, that this young man, handsome, rich, with so many reasons for being happy, was pining away so miserably? You will guess, perhaps, that Octave was worn out by dissipation, that his mind had become feeble and enervated by the absorption of unwholesome ideas from the popular romances of the day, that he had lost all belief in everything, that nothing but debts remained to him from the wreck of his youth and fortune, wasted and consumed in mad orgies of pleasure. All these suppositions, however, would be equally incorrect. Octave had never indulged more than very slightly in the pleasures of the world, and so could scarcely have been filled with the weariness of satiety. He was not splenetic, nor romantic, nor an atheist, nor a libertine, nor a spendthrift. His life, hitherto, had been shared between study and a young man's ordinary amusements. In the morning he had attended lectures at the Sorbonne, and in the evening he had taken his stand by the staircase at the opera to watch the procession of gay toilettes go by. His expenses were limited to his income, and he allowed no whims to make any inroads upon his capital. He had the respect of his solicitor; so he was, you see, a perfectly sane and respectable person, quite incapable of hurling himself from a glacier like Manfred, or of lighting the suffocating brazier of Esconsse.

What the real cause was of the singular state in which he found himself, and which escaped all the investigations of medical science, we hardly dare say, so improbable, so