THE CHUTE

By Aleister Crowley.

I. IDLENESS.

MARK LESSING was one of nature's monsters. A shy, almost effeminate boy, he had failed to please the procrustes of public school life, and had to be passed to Oxford without that coarseness, cynicism, callousness, hidden brutality and displayed perversion which is the foundation of the Oxford manner. Six years later he was still a ne'er-do-well, wasting his time and money in the Latin Quarter, and acquiring an unsavory reputation as a painter of what his fellow-artists recognized as masterpieces. At that time his father, a distinguished civil servant, whose last years had been saddened by his only son's failure to live a decent life, took his grey hairs down in sorrow to the grave. Mark's income suddenly stopped, and he had perforce to abandon Paris for London. In Paris, he said, they knew all about pictures and bought none; in London nothing, and bought some. Unfortunately, Lessing was not at all the man to paint the picture of the year at the academy. He could only paint one thing—the nude; and of this he had so extraordinary a perception, and expressed the same with such absolute simplicity, that his work was entirely beneath the notice of those who wished to be excited by the question of whether that sweet child would live or die, whether it was the sinning wife or the faithless husband that went with the title of the picture, who was accusing who of cheating, and why, whether the girl would say yes or no, which horse would win after all, and if the lion would eat the martyr or not.

He did not understand, either, how to sell his work in private. His education had not fitted him to lackey the Johannesburg millionaire, or smirk in the drawing rooms of the "art patron." Nor had all Park Lane, with bulging manner and pocketbook, been clamoring at his door, would he have sold a picture. He objected on principle to parting with a picture at all, and as for letting it go to other than a "good home," it was unthinkable. He would almost rather have burned a work of art than see it go to America. His complete lack of all the finer feelings soured him against humanity. He hated society, preferred to smoke his pipe in a public house. His equals bored him when they did not talk art, and sickened him when they did. He could not tolerate shams of any kind. Age made him more morose than ever. He shunned all folk above the age of ten or thereabouts, with the exception of the honest old fellow with whom he worked in the evenings when it was too dark to paint, two hours of daily toil sufficing to earn enough to supply his simplicity. For the delicacy of touch which served him as a painter was also found useful by polishers of lenses. Mark Lessing could detect and correct errors of a thousandth of an inch with his eyes shut.

When he was forty, a great calamity befell him. The old man died. It had not been his own seeking, this paying work. Now it had ended, he would, of course, live on his savings, and by the sale of his pictures. Of these he had a great collection, having painted about sixty a year for twenty years, and having sold or given away not more than half. However, this was fated not to worry him, for about three months later he was knocked down by a cab and taken to the hospital, where he lay unconscious for over a week, and between life and death for six weeks more.

Before anyone could discover his identity, his landlord sold his few sticks and many canvases to pay himself the rent; and as the aforesaid canvases were distributed among poverty-stricken students to be painted over, they were not recoverable, even had Mark been able to redeem them. Being a man of spirit he would not make his case known to his friends, but bought chalks, and proceeded to decorate a pavement. The police put sudden death to that, and only his university accent saved him from a prosecution, the constable persuading himself that some nob was drawing the (haw! haw! haw! behind a glove) for a lark or a bet. So that he escaped with a few remarks, half leering and half jeering, on morality which jeopardized that constable's life—had he known it—more than many burglars. Thus baffled, the painter took to selling matches, rose by degrees to the power of purchasing paints and brushes, painted a picture and managed to sell it for a ten-pound note to the one dealer in London who would even look at his work. Restored to affluence by this stroke of luck, he was still further favored by fate, and found a job again at the lenses. He soon had a studio and began his old game of turning out three-score unsaleable pictures per annum. He became casual in the matter of lenses, was paid less, lived on mere scraps of food and kept every available shilling to pay models, and purchase materials.

"Idleness is a bitter curse" (my father used to say), "it's the mother of all ills, and there's nothing worse." At this critical point in his downward career he came face to face with vice.

II. VICE.

It was the same year in which he entered a public school that Ailsa Roberts joined her eleven brothers and sisters at the little lost vicarage in Gloucestershire. Her father, successful enough in that capacity, had failed in every other, only stumbling into a benefice as a sort of last lurch before the grave. However, her early years were peaceful enough, save that her frivolity, expressed mainly by what can be called vicissitudes of the limbs, caused frowns. When she was twelve years old her father died; the family was scattered; a wealthy aunt sent her to a convent (no place for a Christian child!) and forgot about her the next day. In the convent she still tried to dance until the nuns could think of nothing but the convulsionaries of St. Medard Exorcism proving fruitless, and punishment serving only to confirm the criminal in her crime, she was boarded out. A Russian girl from the opera passing the garden in which she disported, recognizing genius, arranged for the girl to go to Moscow to learn the ballet. Here she met Boris Michaelovitch, who was not content to teach her only dancing. At eighteen, under the name of La Koslowskaja, she was dancing in principal parts with him; at twenty she set out to conquer Paris and London, and at twenty-four succeeded. Of strong animal spirits, and weakened moral principles—a convent and a dancing school can undermine even a clergyman's daughter—she allowed herself to amass that collection of sapphires which will be remembered by connoisseurs as the marvel of the decade. She was however, not without her troubles. For instance,