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By George Sand

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By
George Sand

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
JANE MINOT SEDGWICK
AND
ELLERY SEDGWICK



WITH AN ETCHING BY E. ABOT



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THE DEVIL'S POOL

THE AUTHOR TO THE READER

A la sueur de ton visaige,
Tu gagnerais ta pauvre vie.
Après long travail et usage,
Voicy la *mort* qui te convie.^[1]

This quaint old French verse, written under one of Holbein's pictures, is profoundly melancholy. The engraving represents a laborer driving his plow through the middle of a field. Beyond him stretches a vast horizon, dotted with wretched huts; the sun is sinking behind the hill. It is the end of a hard day's work. The peasant is old, bent, and clothed in rags. He is urging onward a team of four thin and exhausted horses; the plowshare sinks into a stony and ungrateful soil. One being only is active and alert in this scene of toil and sorrow. It is a fantastic creature. A skeleton armed with a whip, who acts as plowboy to the old laborer, and running along through the furrow beside the terrified horses, goads them on. This is the specter Death, whom Holbein has introduced allegorically into that series of religious and philosophic subjects, at once melancholy and grotesque, entitled "The Dance of Death."

In this collection, or rather this mighty composition, where Death, who plays his part on every page, is the connecting link and predominating thought, Holbein has called up kings, popes, lovers, gamblers, drunkards, nuns, courtesans, thieves, warriors, monks, Jews, and travelers,—all the people of his time and our own; and everywhere the specter Death is among them, taunting, threatening, and triumphing. He is absent from one picture only, where Lazarus, lying on a dunghill at the rich man's door, declares that the specter has no terrors for him; probably because he has nothing to lose, and his existence is already a life in death.

Is there comfort in this stoical thought of the half-pagan Christianity of the Renaissance, and does it satisfy religious souls? The upstart, the rogue, the tyrant, the rake, and all those haughty sinners who make an ill use of life, and whose steps are dogged by Death, will be surely punished; but can the reflection that death is no evil make amends for the long hardships of the blind man, the beggar, the madman, and the poor peasant? No! An inexorable sadness, an appalling fatality brood over the artist's work. It is like a bitter curse, hurled against the fate of humanity.

Holbein's faithful delineation of the society in which he lived is, indeed, painful satire. His attention was engrossed by crime and calamity; but what shall we, who are artists of a later date, portray? Shall we look to find the reward of the human beings of to-day in the contemplation of death, and shall we invoke it as the penalty of unrighteousness and the compensation of suffering?

No, henceforth, our business is not with death, but with life. We believe no longer in the nothingness of the grave, nor in safety bought with the price of a forced renunciation; life must be enjoyed in order to be fruitful. Lazarus must leave his dunghill, so that the poor need no longer exult in the death of the rich. All must be made happy, that the good fortune of a few may not be a crime and a curse. As the laborer sows his wheat, he must know that he is helping forward the work of life, instead of rejoicing that Death walks at his side. We may no longer consider death as the chastisement of prosperity or the consolation of distress, for God has decreed it neither as the punishment nor the compensation of life. Life has been blessed by Him, and it is no longer permissible for us to leave the grave as the only refuge for those whom we are unwilling to make happy.

There are some artists of our own day, who, after a serious survey of their surroundings, take pleasure in painting misery, the sordidness of poverty, and the dunghill of Lazarus. This may belong to the domain of art and philosophy; but by depicting poverty as so hideous, so degraded, and sometimes so vicious and criminal, do they gain their end, and is that end as salutary as they would wish? We dare not pronounce judgment. They may answer that they terrify the unjust rich man by pointing out to him the yawning pit that lies beneath the frail covering of wealth; just as in the time of the Dance of Death, they showed him his gaping grave, and Death standing ready to fold him in an impure embrace. Now, they show him the thief breaking open his doors, and the murderer stealthily watching his sleep. We confess we cannot understand how we can reconcile

him to the human nature he despises, or make him sensible of the sufferings of the poor wretch whom he dreads, by showing him this wretch in the guise of the escaped convict or the nocturnal burglar. The hideous phantom Death, under the repulsive aspect in which he has been represented by Holbein and his predecessors, gnashing his teeth and playing the fiddle, has been powerless to convert the wicked and console their victims. And does not our literature employ the same means as the artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?

The revelers of Holbein fill their glasses in a frenzy to dispel the idea of Death, who is their cup-bearer, though they do not see him. The unjust rich of our own day demand cannon and barricades to drive out the idea of an insurrection of the people which Art shows them as slowly working in the dark, getting ready to burst upon the State. The Church of the Middle Ages met the terrors of the great of the earth with the sale of indulgences. The government of to-day soothes the uneasiness of the rich by exacting from them large sums for the support of policemen, jailors, bayonets, and prisons.

Albert Durer, Michael Angelo, Holbein, Callot, and Goya have made powerful satires on the evils of their times and countries, and their immortal works are historical documents of unquestionable value. We shall not refuse to artists the right to probe the wounds of society and lay them bare to our eyes; but is the only function of art still to threaten and appall? In the literature of the mysteries of iniquity, which talent and imagination have brought into fashion, we prefer the sweet and gentle characters, which can attempt and effect conversions, to the melodramatic villains, who inspire terror; for terror never cures selfishness, but increases it.

We believe that the mission of art is a mission of sentiment and love, that the novel of to-day should take the place of the parable and the fable of early times, and that the artist has a larger and more poetic task than that of suggesting certain prudential and conciliatory measures for the purpose of diminishing the fright caused by his pictures. His aim should be to render attractive the objects he has at heart, and, if necessary, I have no objection to his embellishing them a little. Art is not the study of positive reality, but the search for ideal truth, and the "Vicar of Wakefield" was a more useful and healthy book than the "Paysan Perversi," or the "Liaisons Dangereuses."

Forgive these reflections of mine, kind reader, and let them stand as a preface, for there will be no other to the little story I am going to relate to you. My tale is to be so short and so simple, that I felt obliged to make you my apologies for it beforehand, by telling you what I think of the literature of terror.

I have allowed myself to be drawn into this digression for the sake of a laborer; and it is the story of a laborer which I have been meaning to tell you, and which I shall now tell you at once.

FOOTNOTE:

[1]

In toil and sorrow thou shalt eat
The bitter bread of poverty.
After the burden and the heat,
Lo! it is Death who calls for thee.



I

The Tillage of the Soil

I had just been looking long and sadly at Holbein's plowman, and was walking through the fields, musing on rustic life and the destiny of the husbandman. It is certainly tragic for him to spend his days and his strength delving in the jealous earth, that so reluctantly yields up her rich treasures when a morsel of coarse black bread, at the end of the day's work, is the sole reward and profit to be reaped from such arduous toil. The wealth of the soil, the harvests, the fruits, the splendid cattle that grow sleek and fat in the luxuriant grass, are the property of the few, and but instruments of the drudgery and slavery of the many. The man of leisure seldom loves, for their own sake, the fields and meadows, the landscape, or the noble animals which are to be converted into gold for his use. He comes to the country for his health or for change of air, but goes back to town to spend the fruit of his vassal's labor.

On the other hand, the peasant is too abject, too wretched, and too fearful of the future to enjoy the beauty of the country and the charms of pastoral life. To him, also, the yellow harvest-fields, the rich meadows, the fine cattle represent bags of gold; but he knows that only an infinitesimal part of their contents, insufficient for his daily needs, will ever fall to his share. Yet year by year he must fill those accursed bags, to please his master and buy the right of living on his land in sordid wretchedness.

Yet nature is eternally young, beautiful, and generous. She pours forth poetry and beauty on all creatures and all plants that are allowed free development. She owns the secret of happiness, of which no one has ever robbed her. The happiest of men would be he who, knowing the full meaning of his labor, should, while working with his hands, find his happiness and his freedom in the exercise of his intelligence, and, having his heart in unison with his brain, should at once understand his own work and love that of God. The artist has such delights as these in contemplating and reproducing the beauties of nature; but if his heart be true and tender, his pleasure is disturbed when he sees the miseries of the men who people this paradise of earth. True happiness will be theirs when mind, heart, and hand shall work in concert in the sight of Heaven, and there shall be a sacred harmony between God's goodness and the joys of his creatures. Then, instead of the pitiable and frightful figure of Death stalking, whip in hand, across the fields, the painter of allegories may place beside the peasant a radiant angel, sowing the blessed grain broadcast in the smoking furrow.

The dream of a serene, free, poetic, laborious, and simple life for the tiller of the soil is not so impossible that we should banish it as a chimera. The sweet, sad words of Virgil: "Oh, happy the peasants of the field, if they knew their own blessings!" is a regret, but, like all regrets, it is also a prophecy. The day will come when the laborer too may be an artist, and may at least feel what is beautiful, if he cannot express it,—a matter of far less importance. Do not we know that this mysterious poetic intuition is already his, in the form of instinct and vague reverie? Among those peasants who possess some of the comforts of life, and whose moral and intellectual development is not entirely stifled by extreme wretchedness, pure happiness that can be felt and appreciated exists in the elementary stage; and, moreover, since poets have already raised their voices out of the lap of pain and of weariness, why should we say that the labor of the hands excludes the working of the soul? Without doubt this exclusion is the common result of excessive toil and of deep misery; but let it not be said that when men shall work moderately and usefully there will be nothing but bad workers and bad poets. The man who draws in noble joy from the poetic feeling is a true poet, though he has never written a verse all his life.

My thoughts had flown in this direction, without my perceiving that my confidence in the capacity of man for education was strengthened by external influences. I was walking along the edge of a field, which some peasants were preparing to sow. The space was vast as that in Holbein's picture; the landscape, too, was vast and framed in a great sweep of green, slightly reddened by the approach of autumn. Here and there in the great russet field, slender rivulets of water left in the furrows by the late rains sparkled in the sunlight like silver threads. The day was clear and mild, and the soil, freshly cleft by the plowshare, sent up a light steam. At the other extremity of the field, an old man, whose broad shoulders and stern face recalled Holbein's plowman, but whose clothes carried no suggestion of poverty, was gravely driving his plow of antique shape, drawn by two placid oxen, true patriarchs of the meadow, tall and rather thin, with pale yellow coats and long, drooping horns. They were those old workers who, through long habit, have grown to be *brothers*, as they are called in our country, and who, when one loses the other, refuse to work with a new comrade, and pine away with grief. People who are unfamiliar

with the country call the love of the ox for his yoke-fellow a fable. Let them come and see in the corner of the stable one of these poor beasts, thin and wasted, restlessly lashing his lean flanks with his tail, violently breathing with mingled terror and disdain on the food offered him, his eyes always turned toward the door, scratching with his hoof the empty place at his side, sniffing the yokes and chains which his fellow used to wear, and incessantly calling him with melancholy lowings. The ox-herd will say: "There is a pair of oxen gone; this one will work no more, for his brother is dead. We ought to fatten him for the market, but he will not eat, and will soon starve himself to death."

The old laborer worked slowly, silently, and without waste of effort His docile team were in no greater haste than he; but, thanks to the undistracted steadiness of his toil and the judicious expenditure of his strength, his furrow was as soon plowed as that of his son, who was driving, at some distance from him, four less vigorous oxen through a more stubborn and stony piece of ground.

My attention was next caught by a fine spectacle, a truly noble subject for a painter. At the other end of the field a fine-looking youth was driving a magnificent team of four pairs of young oxen, through whose somber coats glanced a ruddy, glow-like flame. They had the short, curly heads that belong to the wild bull, the same large, fierce eyes and jerky movements; they worked in an abrupt, nervous way that showed how they still rebelled against the yoke and goad, and trembled with anger as they obeyed the authority so recently imposed. They were what is called "newly yoked" oxen. The man who drove them had to clear a corner of the field that had formerly been given up to pasture, and was filled with old tree-stumps; and his youth and energy, and his eight half-broken animals, hardly sufficed for the Herculean task.

A child of six or seven years old, lovely as an angel, wearing round his shoulders, over his blouse, a sheepskin that made him look like a little Saint John the Baptist out of a Renaissance picture, was running along in the furrow beside the plow, pricking the flanks of the oxen with a long, light goad but slightly sharpened. The spirited animals quivered under the child's light touch, making their yokes and head-bands creak, and shaking the pole violently. Whenever a root stopped the advance of the plowshare, the laborer would call every animal by name in his powerful voice, trying to calm rather than to excite them; for the oxen, irritated by the sudden resistance, bounded, pawed the ground with their great cloven hoofs, and would have jumped aside and dragged the plow across the fields, if the young man had not kept the first four in order with his voice and goad, while the child controlled the four others. The little fellow shouted too, but the voice which he tried to make of terrible effect, was as sweet as his angelic face. The whole scene was beautiful in its grace and strength; the landscape, the man, the child, the oxen under the yoke; and in spite of the mighty struggle by which the earth was subdued, a deep feeling of peace and sweetness reigned over all. Each time that an obstacle was surmounted and the plow resumed its even, solemn progress, the laborer, whose pretended violence was but a trial of his strength, and an outlet for his energy, instantly regained that serenity which is the right of simple souls, and looked with fatherly pleasure toward his child, who turned to smile back at him. Then the young father would raise his manly voice in the solemn and melancholy chant that ancient tradition transmits, not indeed to all plowmen indiscriminately, but to those who are most perfect in the art of exciting and sustaining the spirit of cattle while at work. This song, which was probably sacred in its origin, and to which mysterious influences must once have been attributed, is still thought to possess the virtue of putting animals on their mettle, allaying their irritation, and of beguiling the weariness of their long, hard toil. It is not enough to guide them skilfully, to trace a perfectly straight furrow, and to lighten their labor by raising the plowshare or driving it into the earth; no man can be a consummate husbandman who does not know how to sing to his oxen, and that is an art that requires taste and especial gifts.

To tell the truth, this chant is only a recitative, broken off and taken up at pleasure. Its irregular form and its intonations that violate all the rules of musical art make it impossible to describe.

But it is none the less a noble song, and so appropriate is it to the nature of the work it accompanies, to the gait of the oxen, to the peace of the fields, and to the simplicity of the men who sing it, that no genius unfamiliar with the tillage of the earth, and no man except an accomplished laborer of our part of the country, could repeat it. At the season of the year when there is no work or stir afoot except that of the plowman, this strong, sweet refrain rises like the voice of the breeze, to which the key it is sung in gives it some resemblance. Each phrase ends with a long trill, the final note of which is held with incredible strength of breath, and rises a quarter of a tone, sharpening systematically. It is barbaric, but possesses an unspeakable charm, and anybody, once accustomed to hear it, cannot conceive of another song taking its place at the same hour and in the same place, without striking a discord.

So it was that I had before my eyes a picture the reverse of that of Holbein, although the scene was similar. Instead of a wretched old man, a young and active one; instead of a team of weary and emaciated horses, four yoke of robust and fiery oxen; instead of death, a beautiful child; instead of despair and destruction, energy and the possibility of happiness.

Then the old French verse, "*À la sueur de ton visaige,*" etc., and Virgil's "*O fortunatos . . . agricolas,*" returned to my mind, and seeing this lovely child and his father, under such poetic conditions, and with so much grace and strength, accomplish a task full of such grand and solemn suggestions, I was conscious of deep pity and involuntary respect. Happy the peasant of the fields! Yes, and so too should I be in his place, if my arm and voice could be endowed with sudden strength, and I could help to make Nature fruitful, and sing of her gifts, without ceasing to see with my eyes or understand with my brain harmonious colors and sounds, delicate shades

and graceful outlines; in short, the mysterious beauty of all things. And above all, if my heart continued to beat in concert with the divine sentiment that presided over the immortal sublimity of creation.

But, alas! this man has never understood the mystery of beauty; this child will never understand it. God forbid that I should not think them superior to the animals which are subject to them, or that they have not moments of rapturous insight that soothe their toil and lull their cares to sleep. I see the seal of the Lord upon their noble brows, for they were born to inherit the earth far more truly than those who have bought and paid for it. The proof that they feel this is that they cannot be exiled with impunity, that they love the soil they have watered with their tears, and that the true peasant dies of homesickness under the arms of a soldier far from his native field. But he lacks some of my enjoyments, those pure delights which should be his by right, as a workman in that immense temple which the sky only is vast enough to embrace. He lacks the consciousness of his sentiment. Those who condemned him to slavery from his mother's womb, being unable to rob him of his vague dreams, took away from him the power of reflection.

Yet, imperfect being that he is, sentenced to eternal childhood, he is nobler than the man in whom knowledge has stifled feeling. Do not set yourselves above him, you who believe yourselves invested with a lawful and inalienable right to rule over him, for your terrible mistake shows that your brain has destroyed your heart, and that you are the blindest and most incomplete of men! I love the simplicity of his soul more than the false lights of yours; and if I had to narrate the story of his life, the pleasure I should take in bringing out the tender and touching side of it would be greater than your merit in painting the degradation and contempt into which he is cast by your social code.

I knew the young man and the beautiful child; I knew their history, for they had a history. Everybody has his own, and could make the romance of his life interesting, if he could but understand it. Although but a peasant and a laborer, Germain had always been aware of his duties and affections. He had related them to me clearly and ingenuously, and I had listened with interest. After some time spent in watching him plow, it occurred to me that I might write his story, though that story were as simple, as straightforward, and unadorned as the furrow he was tracing.

Next year that furrow will be filled and covered by a fresh one. Thus disappear most of the footprints made by man in the field of human life. A little earth obliterates them, and the furrows we have dug succeed one another like graves in a cemetery. Is not the furrow of the laborer of as much value as that of the idler, even if that idler, by some absurd chance, have made a little noise in the world, and left behind him an abiding name?

I mean, if possible, to save from oblivion the furrow of Germain, the skilled husbandman. He will never know nor care, but I shall take pleasure in my talk.



II

Father Maurice

“**G**ermain,” said his father-in-law one day, “you must decide about marrying again. It is almost two years now since you lost my daughter, and your eldest boy is seven years old! You are almost thirty, my boy, and you know that in our country a man is considered too old to go to housekeeping again after that age; you have three nice children, and thus far they have not proved a burden to us at all. My wife and my daughter-in-law have looked after them as well as they could, and loved them as they ought. Here is Petit-Pierre almost grown up. He goads the oxen very well; he knows how to look after the cattle; and he is strong enough to drive the horses to the trough. So it is not he that worries us. But the other two, love them though we do, God knows the poor little innocents give us trouble enough this year; my daughter-in-law is about to lie in, and she has yet another baby to attend to. When the child we are expecting comes, she will not be able to look after your little Solange, and above all your Sylvain, who is not four years old, and who is never quiet day or night. He has a restless disposition like yours; that will make a good workman of him, but it makes a dreadful child, and my old wife cannot run fast enough to save him when he almost tumbles into the ditch, or when he throws himself in front of the tramping cattle. And then with this other that my daughter-in-law is going to bring into the world, for a month at least her next older child will fall on my wife’s hands. Besides, your children worry us, and give us too much to do; we hate to see children badly looked after, and when we think of the accidents that may befall them, for want of care, we cannot rest. So you need another wife, and I another daughter-in-law. Think this over, my son. I have called it to your mind before. Time flies, and the years will not wait a moment for you. It is your duty to your children and to the rest of us, who wish all well at home, to marry as soon as you can.”

“Very well, father,” answered the son-in-law, “if you really wish it, I must do as you say. But I do not wish to hide it from you that it will make me very sad, and that I hardly wish for anything but to drown myself. We know who it is we lose, we never know whom we find. I had a good wife, a pretty wife, sweet, brave, good to her father and mother, good to her husband, good to her children, good to toil in the fields and in the house, well fitted to work,—in short, good for everything; and when you had given her to me, and I took her, we did not place it among our promises that I should go and forget about her if I had the misfortune to lose her.”

“What you say shows your good heart, Germain,” answered Father Maurice. “I know that you loved my daughter and that you made her happy, and that had you been able to satisfy Death by going in her place, Catherine would be alive to-day, and you would be in the graveyard. She deserved all your love, and if you are not consoled, neither are we. But I do not speak to you of forgetting her: God wished her to leave us, and we do not let a day go by without telling him in our prayers and thoughts, and words and actions, that we keep her memory and still sorrow for her loss. But if she could speak to you from the other world, and let you know what she wishes, she would tell you to find a mother for her little orphans. So the question is to find a woman who will be worthy to take her place. It will not be easy, but it is not impossible. And when we shall find her for you, you will love her as you used to love my daughter, because you are a good man, and because you will be thankful to her for helping us and for loving your children.”

“Very well, Father Maurice, I shall do as you wish, as I have always done.”

“It is only justice, my son, to say that you have always listened to the friendly advice and good judgment of the head of the house. So let us consult about your choice of a new wife. First, I don’t advise you to take a young girl. That is not what you need. Youth is careless, and, as it is hard work to bring up three children, especially when they are of another bed, you must have a good soul, wise and gentle, and well used to work. If your wife is not about the same age as you, she will have no reason to accept such a duty. She will find you too old and your children too young. She will be complaining, and your children will suffer.”

“This is just what makes me uneasy. Suppose the poor little things should be badly treated, hated, beaten?”

“God grant not,” answered the old man. “But bad women are more rare with us than good, and we shall be stupid if we cannot pick out somebody who will suit us.”

“That is true, father. There are good girls in our village. There is Louise, Sylvaine, Claudie, Marguerite—yes, anybody you want.”

“Gently, gently, my boy. All these girls are too young, or too poor, or too pretty; for surely we must think of that too, my son. A pretty woman is not always as well behaved as another!”

"Then you wish me to take an ugly wife?" said Germain, a little uneasy.

"No, not ugly at all, for this woman will bear you other children, and there is nothing more miserable than to have children who are ugly and weak and sickly. But a woman still fresh and in good health, who is neither pretty nor ugly, would suit you exactly."

"I am quite sure," said Germain, smiling rather sadly, "that to get such a woman as you wish, you must have her made to order. All the more because you don't wish her to be poor, and the rich are not easy to get, particularly for a widower."

"And suppose she were a widow herself, Germain? A widow without children and with a good portion?"

"For the moment, I cannot think of anybody like this in our parish."

"Nor I either. But there are others elsewhere."

"You have somebody in mind, father. Then tell me, at once, who it is."



III

Germain, the Skilled Husbandman

“Yes, I have somebody in mind,” replied Father Maurice. “It is a Leonard, the widow of a Guérin. She lives at Fourche.”

“I know neither the woman nor the place,” answered Germain, resigned, but growing more and more melancholy.

“Her name is Catherine, like your dead wife’s.”

“Catherine? Yes, I shall be glad to have to pronounce that name, Catherine; and yet if I cannot love one as much as the other, it will pain me all the more. It will bring her to my mind more often.”

“I tell you, you will love her. She is a good soul, a woman with a warm heart. I have not seen her for a long time. She was not an ugly girl then. But she is no longer young. She is thirty-two. She comes of a good family, honest people all of them, and for property she has eight or ten thousand francs in land which she would sell gladly in order to invest in the place where she settles. For she, too, is thinking of marrying again, and I know that if your character pleases her, she will not be dissatisfied with your situation.”

“So you have made all the arrangements?”

“Yes, except that I have not had an opinion from either of you, and that is what you must ask each other when you meet. The woman’s father is a distant connection of mine, and he has been a good friend to me. You know Father Leonard well?”

“Yes, I have seen you two talking at the market, and at the last you lunched together. Then it was about her that he spoke to you so long?”

“Certainly. He watched you selling your cattle and saw that you drove a shrewd bargain, and that you were a good-looking fellow and appeared active and intelligent; and when I told him what a good fellow you were and how well you have behaved toward us, without one word of vexation or anger during the eight years we have been living and working together, he took it into his head to marry you to his daughter. This suits me, too, I admit, when I think of her good reputation and the honesty of her family and the prosperous condition I know her affairs are in.”

“I see, Father Maurice, that you have an eye to money.”

“Of course I do; you have, too, have you not?”

“I do look toward it, if you wish, for your sake; but you know that, for my own part, I don’t worry whether I gain or not in what we make. I don’t understand about profit-sharing; I have no head for that sort of thing. I understand the ground; I understand cattle, horses, carts, sowing, threshing, and provender. As for sheep, and vineyards, and vegetables, petty profits, and fine gardening, you know that is your son’s business. I don’t have much to do with it. As to money, my memory is short, and I should rather give up everything than fight about what is yours and what is mine. I should be afraid of making some mistake and claiming what does not belong to me, and if business were not so clear and simple I should never find my way in it.”

“So much the worse, my son; and this is the reason I wish you to have a wife with a clear head to fill my place when I am gone. You never wished to understand our accounts, and this might lead you into a quarrel with my son, when you don’t have me any longer to keep you in harmony and decide what is each one’s share.”

“May you live long, Father Maurice. But do not worry about what will happen when you die. I shall never quarrel with your son. I trust Jacques as I do you; and as I have no property of my own, and all that might accrue to me comes from your daughter and belongs to our children, I can rest easy, and you, too. Jacques would never rob his sister’s children for the sake of his own, for he loves them all equally.”

“You are right, Germain. Jacques is a good son, a good brother, and a man who loves the truth. But Jacques may die before you, before your children grow up; and in a family we must always remember never to leave children without a head to look after them and govern their disagreements; otherwise, the lawyer-people mix themselves up in it, stir them up to fight, and make them eat up everything in law-suits. So we ought not to think of bringing home another person, man or woman, without remembering that some day or other that person may have to control the behavior and business of twenty or thirty children and grandchildren, sons-in-law and

daughters-in-law. We never know how big a family can grow, and when a hive is so full that the bees must form new swarms, each one wishes to carry off her share of the honey. When I took you for my son, although my daughter was rich and you were poor, I never reproached her for choosing you. I saw that you were a hard worker, and I knew very well that the best fortune for people in such a country as ours is a pair of arms and a heart like yours. When a man brings these into a family, he brings enough. But with a woman it is different. Her work indoors saves, but it does not gain. Besides, now that you are a father, looking for a second wife, you must remember that your new children will have no claim on the property of your children by another wife; and if you should happen to die they might suffer very much—at least, if your wife had no money in her own right. And then the children which you will add to our colony will cost something to bring up. If that fell on us alone, we should surely take care of them without a word of complaint; but the comfort of everybody would suffer, and your eldest children would bear their share of hardship. When families grow too large, if money does not keep pace, misery comes, no matter how bravely you bear up. This is what I wished to say, Germain; think it over, and try to make the widow Guérin like you; for her discretion and her dollars will help us now and make us feel easy about the future.”

“That is true, Father. I shall try to please her and to like her.”

“To do that you must go to find her, and see her.”

“At her own place? At Fourche? That is a great way from here, is it not? And we scarcely have time to run off at this season of the year.”

“When it is a question of a love-match you must make up your mind to lose time, but when it is a sensible marriage of two people, who take no sudden fancies and know what they want, it is very soon decided. To-morrow is Saturday; you will make your day’s work a little shorter than usual. You must start after dinner about two o’clock. You will be at Fourche by nightfall. The moon rises early. The roads are good, and it is not more than three leagues distant. It is near Magnier. Besides, you will take the mare.”

“I had just as lief go afoot in this cool weather.”

“Yes, but the mare is pretty, and a suitor looks better when he comes well mounted. You must put on your new clothes and carry a nice present of game to Father Leonard. You will come from me and talk with him, pass all of Sunday with his daughter, and come back Monday morning with a yes or no.”

“Very well,” answered Germain calmly, and yet he did not feel very calm.

Germain had always lived soberly, as industrious peasants do. Married at twenty, he had loved but one woman in his life, and after her death, impulsive and gay as his nature was, he had never played nor trifled with another. He had borne a real sorrow faithfully in his heart, and it was not without misgiving nor without sadness that he yielded to his father-in-law; but that father had always governed the family wisely, and Germain, entirely devoted as he was to the common welfare and so, by consequence, to the head of the house, who represented it, could not understand that he might have wronged his own good sense and hurt the interests of all. Nevertheless, he was sad. Few days went by when he did not cry in secret, for his wife, and although loneliness began to weigh on him, he was more afraid of entering into a new marriage than desirous of finding a support in his sorrow. He had a vague idea that love might have consoled him by coming to him of a sudden, for this is the only way love can console. We never find it when we seek it; it comes over us unawares.

This cold-blooded scheme of marriage that Father Maurice had opened to him, this unknown woman he was to take for his bride, perhaps even all that had been said to him of her virtue and good sense, made him pause to think. And he went away musing as men do whose thoughts are too few to divide into hostile factions, not scraping up fine arguments for rebellion and selfishness but suffering from a dull grief, submissive to ills from which there is no escape.

Meanwhile, Father Maurice had returned to the farm, while Germain, between sunset and dark, spent the closing hour of the day in repairing gaps the sheep had made in the hedge of a yard near the farm-buildings. He lifted up the branches of the thorn-bushes and held them in place with clods of earth, whilst the thrushes chattered in the neighboring thicket and seemed to call to him to hurry, for they were eager to come and see his work as soon as he had gone.



IV

Mother Guillette

Father Maurice found at his house an old neighbor who had come to talk with his wife, seeking at the same time to secure a few embers to light her fire. Mother Guillette lived in a wretched hut two gunshots away from the farm. Still she was a willing and an orderly woman. Her poor dwelling was clean and neat, and the care with which her clothes were mended showed that she respected herself in the midst of her penury.

"You have come to fetch your evening fire, Mother Guillette," said the old man to her. "Is there anything else you want?"

"No, Father Maurice," answered she; "nothing for the present. I am no beggar, as you know, and I take care not to abuse the kindness of my friends."

"That is very true. Besides, your friends are always ready to do you a service."

"I was just talking to your wife, and I was asking her if Germain had finally decided to marry again."

"You are no gossip," replied Father Maurice; "we can talk in your presence without having any foolish tale-bearing to fear. So I will tell my wife and you that Germain has made up his mind absolutely. To-morrow morning he starts for the farm at Fourche."

"Good enough!" cried Mother Maurice; "poor child! God grant he may find a woman as good and true as he."

"So he is going to Fourche?" remarked Mother Guillette; "how lucky that is! It is exactly what I want. And since you were just asking me if there were anything I wished for, I am going to tell you, Father Maurice, how you can do me a service."

"Tell me what it is; we like to help you."

"I wish Germain would be so kind as to take my daughter along with him."

"Where? To Fourche?"

"No, not to Fourche, but to Ormeaux. She is to stay there the rest of the year."

"What!" exclaimed Mother Maurice, "are you going to separate from your daughter?"

"She must go out to work and earn her living. I am sorry enough, and she is too, poor soul. We could not make up our minds to part Saint John's Day, but now that Saint Martin's is upon us, she finds a good place as shepherdess at the farms at Ormeaux. On his way home from the fair the other day, the farmer passed by here. He caught sight of my little Marie tending her three sheep on the common.

"You have hardly enough to do, my little girl," said he; "three sheep are not enough for a shepherdess: would you like to take care of a hundred? I will take you along. Our shepherdess has fallen sick. She is going back to her family, and if you will be at our farm before a week is over, you shall have fifty francs for the rest of the year up to Saint John's Day."

"The child refused, but she could not help thinking it over and telling me about it, when she came home in the evening, and found me downhearted and worried about the winter, which was sure to be hard and long; for this year the cranes and wild ducks were seen crossing the sky a whole month before they generally do. We both of us cried, but after a time we took heart. We knew that we could not stay together, since it is hard enough for one person to get a living from our little patch of ground. Then since Marie is old enough,—for she is going on to sixteen,—she must do like the rest, earn her own living and help her poor mother."

"Mother Guillette," said the old laborer, "if it were only fifty francs you needed to help you out of your trouble, and save you from sending away your daughter, I should certainly find them for you, although fifty francs is no trifle for people like us. But in everything we must consult common sense as well as friendship. To be saved from want this year will not keep you from want in the future, and the longer your daughter takes to make up her mind, the harder you both will find it to part. Little Marie is growing tall and strong. She has not enough at home to keep her busy. She might get into lazy habits...."

"Oh, I am not afraid of that!" exclaimed Mother Guillette. "Marie is as active as a rich girl at the head of a large family can be. She never sits still with her arms folded for an instant, and when we have no work to do, she keeps dusting and polishing our old furniture until it shines like

a mirror. The child is worth her weight in gold, and I should much rather have her enter your service as a shepherdess than go so far away to people I don't know. You would have taken her at Saint John's Day; but now you have hired all your hands, and we cannot think of that till Saint John's Day next year."

"Yes, I consent with all my heart, Guillette. I shall be very glad to take her. But in the mean time she will do well to learn her work, and accustom herself to obey others."

"Yes, that is true, no doubt. The die is cast. The farmer at Ormeaux sent to ask about her this morning; we consented, and she must go. But the poor child does not know the way, and I should not like to send her so far alone. Since your son-in-law goes to Fourche to-morrow, perhaps he can take her. It seems that Fourche is close to her journey's end. At least, so they tell me, for I have never made the trip myself."

"It is very near indeed, and my son will show her the way. Naturally, he might even take her up behind him on the mare. That will save her shoes. Here he comes for supper. Tell me, Germain, Mother Guillette's little Marie is going to become a shepherdess at Ormeaux. Will you take her there on your horse?"

"Certainly," answered Germain, who, troubled as he was, never felt indisposed to do a kindness to his neighbor.

In our community a mother would not think of such a thing as to trust a girl of sixteen to a man of twenty-eight. For Germain was really but twenty-eight, and although according to the notions of the country people he was considered rather old to marry, he was still the best-looking man in the neighborhood. Toil had not wrinkled and worn him as it does most peasants who have passed ten years in tilling the soil. He was strong enough to labor for ten more years without showing signs of age, and the prejudices of her time must have weighed heavily on the mind of a young girl to prevent her from seeing that Germain had a fresh complexion, eyes sparkling and blue as skies in May, ruddy lips, fine teeth, and a body well shaped and lithe as a young horse that has never yet left his pasture.

But purity of manners is a sacred custom in some districts far distant from the corrupted life of great cities, and amongst all the households of Belair, the family of Maurice was known to be honest and truth-loving. Germain was on his way to find a wife. Marie was a child, too young and too poor to be thought of in this light, and unless he were a heartless and a bad man he could not entertain one evil thought concerning her. Father Maurice felt no uneasiness at seeing him take the pretty girl on the crupper. Mother Guillette would have thought herself doing him a wrong had she asked him to respect her daughter as his sister. Marie embraced her mother and her young friends twenty times, and then mounted the mare in tears. Germain, sad on his own account, felt all the more sympathy for her sorrow, and rode away with a melancholy air, while all the people of the neighborhood waved good-by to Marie without a thought of harm.



V

Petit-Pierre

The gray was young, good-looking, and strong. She carried her double burden with ease, laying back her ears and champing her bit like the high-spirited mare she was. Passing in front of the pasture, she caught sight of her mother, whose name was the Old Gray as hers was the Young Gray, and she whinnied in token of good-by. The Old Gray came nearer the hedge, and striking her shoes together she tried to gallop along the edge of the field in order to follow her daughter; then seeing her fall into a sharp trot, the mare whinnied in her turn and stood in an uneasy attitude, her nose in the air and her mouth filled with grass that she had no thought of eating.

"That poor beast always knows her offspring," said Germain, trying to keep Marie's thoughts from her troubles. "That reminds me, I never kissed Petit-Pierre before I started. The naughty boy was not there. Last night he wished to make me promise to take him along, and he wept for an hour in bed. This morning again, he tried everything to persuade me. Oh, how sly and coaxing he is! But when he saw that he could not gain his point, the young gentleman got into a temper. He went off to the fields, and I have not seen him all day."

"I have seen him," said little Marie, striving to keep back her tears; "he was running toward the clearing with Soulas' children, and I felt sure that he had been away from home a long time, for he was hungry and was eating wild plums and blackberries. I gave him the bread I had for lunch, and he said, 'Thank you, dear Marie; when you come to our house, I will give you some cake.' He is a dear little child, Germain."

"Yes, he is," answered the laborer; "and there is nothing I would not do for him. If his grandmother had not more sense than I, I could not have helped taking him with me, when I saw him crying as though his poor little heart would burst."

"Then why did you not take him, Germain? He would have been very little trouble. He is so good when you please him."

"He would probably have been in the way in the place where I am going. At least Father Maurice thought so. On the other hand, I should have thought it well to see how they received him. For no one could help being kind to such a nice child. But at home they said that I must not begin by showing off all the cares of the household. I don't know why I speak of this to you, little Marie; you can't understand."

"Oh, yes, I do; I know that you are going away to marry; my mother spoke to me about it, and told me not to mention it to a soul, either at home or at my destination, and you need not be afraid; I shall not breathe a word about it."

"You are very right. For the deed isn't done yet. Perhaps I shall not suit this woman."

"I hope you will, Germain; why should you not suit her?"

"Who knows? I have three children, and that is a heavy burden for a woman who is not their mother."

"Very true. But are not your children like other children?"

"Do you think so?"

"They are lovely as little angels, and so well brought up that you can't find better children."

"There's Sylvain. He is none too obedient."

"He is so very little. He can't help being naughty. But he is very bright."

"He is bright it is true, and very brave. He is not afraid of cows nor bulls, and if he were given his own way, he would be climbing on horseback already with his elder brother."

"Had I been in your place, I would have taken the eldest boy along. Surely people would have liked you at once for having such a pretty child."

"Yes, if a woman is fond of children. But if she is not."

"Are there women who don't love children?"

"Not many, I think, but still there are some, and that is what troubles me."

"You don't know this woman at all, then?"

"No more than you, and I fear that I shall not know her better after I have seen her. I am not suspicious. When people say nice things to me, I believe them, but more than once I have had good reason to repent, for words are not deeds."

"They say that she is a very good woman."

"Who says so? Father Maurice?"

"Yes, your father-in-law."

"That is all very well. But he knows her no more than I."

"Well, you will soon see. Pay close attention, and let us hope that you will not be deceived."

"I have it. Little Marie, I should be very much obliged if you would come into the house for a minute before you go straight on to Ormeaux. You are quick-witted; you have always shown that you are not stupid, and nothing escapes your notice. Should you see anything to rouse your suspicions, you must warn me of it very quietly."

"Oh! no, Germain, I will not do that; I should be too much afraid of making a mistake; and, besides, if a word lightly spoken were to turn you against this marriage, your family would bear me a grudge, and I have plenty of troubles now without bringing any more on my poor dear mother."

As they were talking thus, the gray pricked up her ears and shied; then returning on her steps, she approached the bushes, where she began to recognize something which had frightened her at first. Germain cast his eye over the thicket, and in a ditch, beneath the branches of a scrub-oak, still thick and green, he saw something which he took for a lamb.

"The little creature is strayed or dead, for it does not move. Perhaps some one is looking for it; we must see."

"It is not an animal," cried little Marie; "it is a sleeping child. It is your Petit-Pierre."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Germain; "see the little scamp asleep so far away from home, and in a ditch where a snake might bite him!"

He lifted up the child, who smiled as he opened his eyes and threw his arms about his father's neck, saying: "Dear little father, you are going to take me with you."

"Oh, yes; always the same tune. What were you doing there, you naughty Pierre?"

"I was waiting for my little father to go by. I was watching the road, and I watched so hard that I fell asleep."

"And if I had passed by without seeing you, you would have been out of doors all night, and a wolf would have eaten you up."

"Oh, I knew very well that you would see me," answered Petit-Pierre, confidently.

"Well, kiss me now, bid me good-by, and run back quickly to the house, unless you wish them to have supper without you."

"Are you not going to take me, then?" cried the little boy, beginning to rub his eyes to show that he was thinking of tears.

"You know very well that grandpapa and grandmama do not wish it," said Germain, fortifying himself behind the authority of his elders, like a man who distrusts his own.

The child would not listen. He began to cry with all his might, saying that as long as his father was taking little Marie, he might just as well take him too. They replied that they must pass through great woods filled with wicked beasts who eat up little children. The gray would not carry three people; she had said so when they were starting, and in the country where they were going there was no bed and no supper for little boys. All these good reasons could not persuade Petit-Pierre; he threw himself on the ground, and rolled about, shrieking that his little father did not love him any more, and that if he did not take him he would never go back to the house at all, day or night.

Germain had a father's heart, as soft and weak as a woman's. His wife's death, and the care which he had been obliged to bestow all alone on his little ones, as well as the thought that these poor motherless children needed a great deal of love, combined to make him thus. So such a sharp struggle went on within him, all the more because he was ashamed of his weakness and tried to hide his confusion from little Marie, that the sweat started out on his forehead, and his eyes grew red and almost ready to weep. At last he tried to get angry, but as he turned toward little Marie in order to let her witness his strength of mind, he saw that the good girl's face was wet with tears; all his courage forsook him and he could not keep back his own, scold and threaten as he would.

"Truly your heart is too hard," said little Marie at last, "and for myself I know that I never could refuse a child who felt so badly. Come, Germain, let's take him. Your mare is well used to carrying two people and a child, for you know that your brother-in-law and his wife, who is much heavier than I, go to market every Saturday with their boy on this good beast's back. Take him on the horse in front of you. Besides, I should rather walk on foot all alone than give this little boy so much pain."

"Never mind," answered Germain, who was dying to allow himself to give way. "The gray is strong, and could carry two more if there were room on her back. But what can we do with this child on the way? He will be cold and hungry, and who will take care of him to-night and to-

morrow, put him to bed, wash him, and dress him? I don't dare give this trouble to a woman I don't know, who will think, doubtless, that I am exceedingly free and easy with her to begin with."

"Trust me, Germain, you will know her at once by the kindness or the impatience that she shows. If she does not care to receive your Pierre, I will take charge of him myself. I will go to her house and dress him, and I will take him to the fields with me to-morrow. I will amuse him all day long, and take good care that he does not want for anything."

"He will tire you, my poor girl, and give you trouble. A whole day is a long time."

"Not at all; it will give me pleasure; he will keep me company, and that will make me less sad the first day that I must pass in a new place. I shall fancy that I am still at home."

Seeing that little Marie was pleading for her, the child seized upon her skirt and held it so tight that they must have hurt him in order to tear it away. When he perceived that his father was weakening, he took Marie's hand in both his tiny sunburned fists and kissed her, leaping for joy, and pulling her toward the mare with the burning impatience children feel in their desires.

"Come along," said the young girl, lifting him in her arms; "let us try to quiet his poor little heart. It is fluttering like a little bird; and if you feel the cold when night comes on, tell me, my Pierre, and I will wrap you in my cape. Kiss your little father, and beg his pardon for being naughty. Tell him that you will never, never be so again. Do you hear?"

"Yes, yes, provided that I always do just as he wishes. Isn't it so?" said Germain, drying the little boy's eyes with his handkerchief. "Marie, you are spoiling the little rascal. But really and truly, you are too good, little Marie. I don't know why you did not come to us as shepherdess last Saint John's Day. You would have taken care of my children, and I should much rather pay a good price for their sake than try to find a woman who will think, perhaps, she is doing me a great kindness if she does not detest them."

"You must not look on the dark side of things," answered little Marie, holding the horse's bridle while Germain placed his son in front of the big pack-saddle covered with goatskin. "If your wife does not care for children, take me into your service next year, and you may be sure I shall amuse them so well that they will not notice anything."



VI

On the Heath

“Dear me,” said Germain, after they had gone a few steps farther, “what will they think at home when they miss the little man? The family will be worried, and will be looking everywhere for him.”

“You can tell the man who is mending the road up there that you are taking him along, and ask him to speak to your people.”

“That is very true, Marie; you don’t forget anything. It never occurred to me that Jeannie must be there.”

“He lives close to the farm, and he will not fail to do your errand.”

When they had taken this precaution, Germain put the mare to a trot, and Petit-Pierre was so overjoyed that for a time he forgot that he had gone without his dinner; but the motion of the horse gave him a hollow feeling in his stomach, and at the end of a league, he began to gape and grow pale, and confessed that he was dying of hunger.

“This is the way it begins,” exclaimed Germain. “I was quite sure that we should not go far without this young gentleman crying with hunger or thirst.”

“I am thirsty, too!” said Petit-Pierre.

“Very well, then, let’s go to Mother Rebec’s tavern at Corlay, the sign of ‘The Dawn’—a pretty sign, but a poor lodging. You will take something to drink, too, will you not, Marie?”

“No, no; I don’t want anything. I will hold the mare while you go in with the child.”

“But I remember, my good girl, that this morning you gave the bread from your own breakfast to my Pierre. You have had nothing to eat. You would not take dinner with us at home; you would do nothing but cry.”

“Oh, I was not hungry; I felt too sad, and I give you my word that even now I have no desire to eat.”

“You must oblige yourself to eat, little girl, else you will fall sick. We have a long way to go, and it will not do to arrive half-starved and beg for bread before we say how d’ ye do. I shall set you a good example myself, although I am not very hungry: and I am sure that I can, for, after all, I did not eat any dinner. I saw you crying, you and your mother, and it made me feel sad. Come along. I am going to tie the gray at the door. Get down; I wish you to.”

All three entered the inn, and in less than fifteen minutes the fat, lame hostess was able to place before them a nice-looking omelette, some brown bread, and a bottle of light wine.

Peasants do not eat quickly, and little Pierre had such a good appetite that a whole hour passed before Germain could think of starting out again. At first little Marie ate in order to be obliging; then little by little she grew hungry. For, at sixteen, a girl cannot fast for long, and country air is dictatorial.

The kind words with which Germain knew how to comfort her and strengthen her courage, produced their effect. She tried hard to persuade herself that seven months would soon be over, and to think of the pleasure in store for her when she saw once more her family and her hamlet; for Father Maurice and Germain had both promised to take her into their service. But just as she began to cheer up and play with little Pierre, Germain was so unfortunate as to point out to her from the inn window the lovely view of the valley which can all be seen from this height, and which looks so happy and green and fertile.

Marie looked and asked if the houses of Belair were in sight.

“No doubt,” said Germain, “and the farm, too, and even your house—see! that tiny gray spot not far from Godard’s big poplar, below the belfry.”

“Ah, I see it,” said the little girl; and then she began to cry.

“I ought not to have made you think of it,” said Germain. “I can do nothing but stupid things today. Come along, Marie; let’s start, and in an hour, when the moon rises, it will not be hot.”

They resumed their journey across the great heath, and for fear of tiring the young girl and the child by too rapid a trot, Germain did not make the gray go very fast. The sun had set when they left the road to enter the wood.

Germain knew the way as far as Magnier, but he thought it would be shorter to avoid the Chantaloube road and descend by Presles and La Sépulture, a route he was not in the habit of taking on his way to the fair. He lost his way, and wasted more time before he reached the wood. Even then he did not enter it on the right side, although he did not perceive his mistake, so that he turned his back on Fourche, and took a direction higher up on the way to Ardente.

He was prevented still further from finding his way by a thick mist which rose as the night fell; one of those mists which come on autumn evenings when the whiteness of the moonlight renders them more undefined and more treacherous. The great pools of water scattered through the glades gave forth a vapor so dense that when the gray crossed them, their presence was known only by a splashing noise, and the difficulty with which she drew her feet from the mud.

At last they found a good straight road, and when they came to the end of it, and Germain tried to discover where he was, he saw that he was lost. For Father Maurice had told him, when he explained the way, that on leaving the wood he must descend a very steep hillside, cross a wide meadow, and ford the river twice. He had even warned him to cross this river carefully; for, early in the season, there had been great rains, and the water might still be higher than usual. Seeing neither hillside nor meadows, nor river, but a heath, level and white as a mantle of snow, Germain stopped, looked about for a house, and waited for a passer-by, but could find nothing to set him right. Then he retraced his steps and reentered the wood. But the mist thickened yet more, the moon was completely hidden, the roads were execrable, and the quagmires deep. Twice the gray almost fell. Her heavy load made her lose courage, and although she kept enough sagacity to avoid the tree-trunks, she could not prevent her riders from striking the great branches which overhung the road at the height of their heads and caused them great danger. In one of these collisions Germain lost his hat, and only recovered it after much difficulty. Petit-Pierre had fallen asleep, and, lying like a log in his father's arms, hampered him so that he could no longer hold up nor direct the horse.

"I believe we are bewitched," exclaimed Germain, stopping; "for the wood is not large enough to get lost in, if a man is not drunk, and here we have been turning round and round for two hours at least, without finding a way out. The gray has but one idea in her head, and that is to get home. It is she who is deceiving me. If we wish to go home, we have only to give her the bit. But when we are perhaps but two steps from our journey's end, it would be foolish to give up and return such a long road; and yet I am at a loss what to do. I can't see sky or earth, and I am afraid that the child will catch the fever if we remain in this cursed fog, or that he will be crushed beneath our weight if the horse falls forward."

"We must not persist longer," said little Marie. "Let's dismount, Germain. Give me the child; I can carry him perfectly well, and I know better than you how to keep the cloak from falling open and leaving him exposed. You lead the mare by her bridle. Perhaps we shall see more clearly when we are nearer the ground."

This precaution was of service only in saving them from a fall, for the fog hung low and seemed to stick to the damp earth.

Their advance was painfully slow, and they were soon so weary that they halted when they reached a dry spot beneath the great oaks.

Little Marie was in a violent sweat, but she uttered not a word of complaint, nor did she worry about anything. Thinking only of the child, she sat down on the sand and laid it upon her knees, while Germain explored the neighborhood, after having fastened the gray's reins to the branch of a tree.

But the gray was very dissatisfied with the journey. She reared suddenly, broke the reins loose, burst her girths, and giving, by way of receipt, half a dozen kicks higher than her head, she started across the clearing, showing very plainly that she needed no one to show her the way home.

"Well, here we are afoot," said Germain, after a vain attempt to catch the horse, "and it would do us no good now if we were on the good road, for we should have to ford the river on foot, and since these paths are filled with water, we may be sure that the meadow is wholly submerged. We don't know the other routes. We must wait until this fog clears. It can't last more than an hour or two; as soon as we can see clearly, we shall look about for a house, the first we come to near the edge of the wood. But for the present we can't stir from here. There is a ditch and a pond over there. Heaven knows what is in front of us, and what is behind us is more than I can say now, for I have forgotten which way we came."



VII

Underneath the Big Oaks

“Well, we must be patient, Germain,” said little Marie. “We are not badly off on this little hillock. The rain does not pierce the leaves of these big oaks, and we can light a fire, for I can feel old stumps which stir readily and are dry enough to burn. You have a light, Germain, have you not? You were smoking your pipe a few minutes ago.”

“I did have; my tinderbox was in my bag on the saddle with the game that I was bringing to my bride that is to be, but that devilish mare has run away with everything, even with my cloak, which she will lose and tear to bits on every branch she comes to.”

“No, no, Germain; saddle and cloak and bag are all there on the ground at your feet. The gray burst her girths, and threw off everything as she ran away.”

“That’s true, thank God,” exclaimed the laborer; “if we can grope about and find a little dead wood, we shall be able to dry ourselves and get warm.”

“That’s not difficult,” said little Marie; “dead wood always cracks when you step on it. But will you give me the saddle?”

“What do you want of it?”

“To make a bed for the child. No, not that way. Upside down. He will not roll off into the hollow, and it is still very warm from the horse’s back. Prop it up all around with the stones that you see there.”

“I can’t see a stone; you must have cat’s eyes.”

“There, it is all done, Germain. Hand me your cloak so that you can wrap up his little feet, and throw my cape over his body. Just see if he is not as comfortable as though he were in his own bed, and feel how warm he is.”

“You certainly know how to take care of children, Marie.”

“I need not be a witch to do that; now get your tinderbox from your bag, and I will arrange the wood.”

“This wood will never catch fire; it is too damp.”

“You are always doubting, Germain. Don’t you remember when you were a shepherd, and made big fires in the fields right in the midst of the rain?”

“Yes, that is a knack that belongs to children who take care of sheep; but I was made to drive the oxen as soon as I could walk.”

“That is what has made your arms strong and your hands quick! Here, the fire is built; you shall see whether it does not burn. Give me the light and a handful of dry ferns. That is all right. Now blow; you are not consumptive, are you?”

“Not that I know of,” said Germain, blowing like a smith’s bellows. In an instant the flame leaped up, and throwing out a red glare, it rose finally in pale blue jets under the oak branches, battling with the fog, and gradually drying the atmosphere for ten feet around.

“Now I am going to sit by the child, so that the sparks may not fall on him,” said the young girl. “Pile on the wood and stir up the fire, Germain; we shall not catch cold nor fever here, I will answer for it.”

“Upon my word, you are a clever girl,” said Germain; “and you know how to make a fire like a little fairy of the night. I feel quite revived, and my courage has come back again; for with my legs drenched up to the knees, and with the thought of staying this way till daylight, I was in a very bad temper just now.”

“And when people are in a bad temper they don’t think of anything,” answered little Marie.

“And are you never bad-tempered?”

“No, never; what is the good of it?”

“Oh, of course, there is no good; but how can you help it when you have troubles? Yet Heaven knows that you have not lacked them, my little girl; for you have not always been happy.”

“It is true that my mother and I have suffered. We have had sorrows, but we have never lost heart.”

"I should never lose heart, no matter how hard my work was," said Germain, "but poverty would make me very sad; for I have never wanted for anything. My wife made me rich, and I am rich still; I shall be so as long as I work on the farm; and that will be always, I hope. But everybody must suffer his share! I have suffered in another way."

"Yes; you have lost your wife. That is very sad."

"Isn't it?"

"Oh! Germain, I have wept for her many a time. She was so very kind! But don't let us talk about her longer, for I shall burst out crying. All my troubles are ready to come back to me today."

"It is true, she loved you dearly, little Marie. She used to make a great deal of you and your mother. Are you crying? Come, my girl, I don't want to cry...."

"But you are crying, Germain! You are crying as hard as I. Why should a man be ashamed to weep for his wife? Don't let me trouble you. That sorrow is mine as well as yours."

"You have a kind heart, Marie, and it does me good to weep with you. Put your feet nearer the fire; your skirts are all soaked, too, poor little girl. I am going to take your place by the boy. You move nearer the fire."

"I am hot enough," said Marie; "and if you wish to sit down, take a corner of the cloak. I am perfectly comfortable."

"The truth is that it is not so bad here," said Germain, as he sat down beside her. "Only I feel very hungry again. It is almost nine o'clock, and I have had such hard work in walking over these vile roads that I feel quite tired out. Are you not hungry, too, little Marie?"

"I?—not at all. I am not accustomed like you to four meals a day, and I have been to bed so often without my supper that once more does not trouble me."

"A woman like you is very convenient; she costs nothing," said Germain, smiling.

"I am not a woman," exclaimed Marie, naïvely, without perceiving the direction the husbandman's ideas had taken. "Are you dreaming?"

"Yes, I believe I must be dreaming," answered Germain. "Perhaps hunger is making my mind wander."

"How greedy you are," answered she, brightening in her turn. "Well, if you can't live five or six hours without eating, have you not game in your bag and fire to cook it?"

"By Jove, that's a good idea! But how about the present to my future father-in-law?"

"You have six partridges and a hare! I suppose you do not need all of them to satisfy your appetite."

"But how can we cook them without a spit or andirons. They will be burned to a cinder!"

"Not at all," said little Marie; "I warrant that I can cook them for you under the cinders without a taste of smoke. Have you never caught larks in the fields, and cooked them between two stones? Oh! that is true—I keep forgetting that you have never been a shepherd. Come, pluck the partridge. Not so hard! You will tear the skin."

"You might be plucking the other to show me how!"

"Then you wish to eat two? What an ogre you are! They are all plucked. I am going to cook them."

"You would make a perfect little sutler's girl, Marie, but unhappily you have no canteen, and I shall have to drink water from this pool!"

"You would like some wine, would you not? Possibly you might prefer coffee. You imagine yourself under the trees at the fair. Call out the host. Some wine for the good husbandman of Belair!"

"You little witch, you are making fun of me! Would not you drink some wine if you had it?"

"I? At Mother Rebec's, with you to-night, I drank some for the second time in my life. But if you are very good, I shall give you a bottle almost full, and excellent too."

"What? Marie, I verily believe you are a witch!"

"Were you not foolish enough to ask for two bottles of wine at the inn? You and your boy drank one, and the other you set before me. I hardly drank three drops, yet you paid for both without looking."

"What then?"

"Why, I put the full one in my basket, because I thought that you or your child would be thirsty on the journey. And here it is."

"You are the most thoughtful girl I have ever met. Although the poor child was crying when we left the inn, that did not prevent her from thinking of others more than of herself. Little Marie, the man who marries you will be no fool."

"I hope not, for I am not fond of fools. Come, eat up your partridges; they are done to a turn; and for want of bread, you must be satisfied with chestnuts."

"Where the deuce did you find chestnuts, too?"

"It is extraordinary! All along the road I picked them off the branches as we went along, and filled my pockets."

"And are they cooked, too?"

"Where would my wits have been had I not had sense enough to put the chestnuts in the fire as soon as it was lighted? That is the way we always do in the fields."

"So we are going to take supper together, little Marie. I want to drink your health and wish you a good husband, just the sort of a man that will suit you. Tell me what kind you want."

"I should find that very difficult, Germain, for I have not thought about it yet."

"What, not at all? Never?" said Germain, as he began to eat with a laborer's appetite, yet stopping to cut off the more tender morsels for his companion, who persisted in refusing them and contented herself with a few chestnuts.

"Tell me, little Marie," he went on, seeing that she had no intention of answering him, "have you never thought of marrying? Yet you are old enough?"

"Perhaps," she said, "but I am too poor. I need at least a hundred crowns to marry, and I must work five or six years to scrape them together."

"Poor girl, I wish Father Maurice were willing to give me a hundred crowns to make you a present of."

"Thank you kindly, Germain. What do you suppose people would say of me?"

"What do you wish them to say of you? They know very well that I am too old to marry you. They would never believe that I—that you—"

"Look, Germain, your child is waking up," said little Marie.



VIII

The Evening Prayer

Petit-Pierre had raised his head and was looking about him with a thoughtful air.

"Oh, that is the way he always does, whenever he hears the sound of eating," said Germain. "The explosion of a cannon would not rouse him, but if you work your jaws near him, he opens his eyes at once."

"You must have been just like him at his age," said little Marie, with a sly smile. "See! my Petit-Pierre, you are looking for your canopy. To-night it is made all of green, my child; but your father eats his supper none the less. Do you wish to sup with him? I have not eaten your share; I thought that you might claim it."

"Marie, I wish you to eat," cried the husbandman; "I shall not touch another morsel. I am a greedy glutton. You are depriving yourself for our sake. It is not fair. I am ashamed. It takes away all my appetite. I will not have my son eat his supper unless you take some too."

"Leave us alone," said little Marie; "you have not the key to our appetites. Mine is tight shut to-day, but your Pierre's is as wide open as a little wolf's. Just see how he seizes his food. He will be a strong workman too, some day!"

In truth, Petit-Pierre showed very soon whose son he was, and though scarcely awake and wholly at a loss to know where he was and how he had come there, he began to eat ravenously. As soon as his hunger was appeased, feeling excited as children do who break loose from their wonted habits, he had more wit, more curiosity, and more good sense than usual. He made them explain to him where he was, and when he found that he was in the midst of a forest, he grew a little frightened.

"Are there wicked beasts in this forest?" he demanded of his father.

"No, none at all. Don't be afraid."

"Then you told a story when you said that if I went with you into the great forest, the wolves would carry me off."

"Just see this logician," said Germain, embarrassed.

"He is right," replied little Marie. "That is what you told him. He has a good memory, and has not forgotten. But, little Pierre, you must learn that your father never tells a story. We passed through the big forest whilst you were sleeping, and now we are in the small forest where there are no wicked beasts."

"Is the little forest very far away from the big one?"

"Far enough; besides, the wolves never go out of the big forest. And then, if some of them should come here, your father would kill them."

"And you too, little Marie?"

"Yes, we, too, for you would help also, my Pierre. You are not frightened, are you? You would beat them soundly?"

"Yes, indeed, I would," said the child, proudly, as he struck a heroic attitude; "we would kill them."

"There is nobody like you for talking to children and for making them listen to reason," said Germain to little Marie. "To be sure, it is not long ago since you were a small child yourself, and you have not forgotten what your mother used to say to you. I believe that the younger one is, the better one gets on with children. I am very much afraid that a woman of thirty who does not yet know what it is to be a mother, would find it hard to prattle to children and reason with them."

"Why, Germain? I don't know why you have such a bad idea of this woman; you will change your mind."

"The devil take the woman!" exclaimed Germain. "I wish I were going away from her forever. What do I want of a wife whom I don't know?"

"Little father," said the child, "why is it that you speak so much of your wife to-day, since she is dead?"

"Then you have not forgotten your poor, dear mother?"

"No; for I saw her placed in a beautiful box of white wood, and my grandmother led me up to her to kiss her and say good-by. She was very white and very stiff, and every evening my aunt made me pray God that she might go to him in Heaven and be warm. Do you think that she is there now?"

"I hope so, my child; but you must always pray. It shows your mother that you love her."

"I am going to say my prayers," answered the boy. "I forgot them to-night. But I can't say them all alone, for I always forget something. Little Marie must help me."

"Yes, my Pierre, I will help you," said the young girl. "Come and kneel down in my lap."

The child knelt down on the girl's skirt. He clasped his little hands and began to say his prayers, at first with great care and earnestness, for he knew the beginning very well, then slowly and with more hesitation, and finally repeating word by word after Marie, when he came to that place in his prayer where sleep overtook him so invariably that he had never been able to learn the end. This time again the effort of close attention and the monotony of his own accent produced their wonted effect. He pronounced the last syllables with great difficulty, and only after they were thrice repeated.

His head grew heavy and fell on Marie's breast; his hands unclasped, divided, and fell open on his knees. By the light of the camp-fire, Germain watched his little darling hushed at the heart of the young girl, who, as she held him in her arms and warmed his fair hair with her sweet breath, had herself fallen into a holy reverie, and prayed in quiet for the soul of Catherine.

Germain was touched. He tried to express to little Marie the grateful esteem which he felt for her, but he could find no fitting words.

He approached her to kiss his son, whom she held close to her breast, and he could scarcely raise his lips from little Pierre's brow.

"You kiss too hard," said Marie, gently pushing away the husbandman's head. "You will wake him. Let me put him back to bed, for the boy has left us already for dreams of paradise."

The child allowed Marie to lay him down, but feeling the goatskin on the saddle, he asked if he were on the gray. Then opening his big blue eyes, and keeping them fixed on the branches for a minute, he seemed to be dreaming, wide-awake as he was, or to be struck with an idea which had slipped his mind during the daytime, and only assumed a distinct form at the approach of sleep.

"Little father," said he, "if you wish to give me a new mother, I hope it will be little Marie."

And without waiting for an answer, he closed his eyes and slept.



IX

Despite the Cold

Little Marie seemed to give no more heed to the child's odd words than to regard them as a proof of friendship. She wrapped him up with care, stirred the fire, and as the fog resting on the neighboring pool gave no sign of lifting, she advised Germain to lie near the fire and take a nap.

"I see that you are sleepy already," said she, "for you don't say a word and you gaze into the fire, just as your little boy was doing."

"It is you who must sleep," answered the husbandman, "and I will take care of both of you, for I have never felt less sleepy than I do now. I have fifty things to think of."

"Fifty is a great many," said the little girl, with a mocking accent. "There are lots of people who would be delighted to have one."

"Well, if I am too stupid to have fifty, I have one, at least, which has not left me for the past hour."

"And I shall tell it to you as well as I told you those you thought of before."

"Yes, do tell me if you know, Marie. Tell me yourself. I shall be glad to hear."

"An hour ago," she answered, "your idea was to eat—and now it is to sleep."

"Marie, I am only an ox-driver, but, upon my word, you take me for an ox. You are very perverse, and it is easy to see that you do not care to talk to me, so go to sleep. That will be better than to pick flaws in a man who is out of sorts."

"If you wish to talk, let's talk," said the girl, half reclining near the child and resting her head against the saddle. "You torment yourself, Germain, and you do not show much courage for a man. What wouldn't I say if I didn't do my best to fight my own troubles?"

"Yes, that's very true, and that's just what I am thinking of, my poor child. You are going to live, away from your friends, in a horrid country full of moors and fens, where you will catch the autumn fevers. Sheep do not pay well there, and this is always discouraging for a shepherdess if she means well. Then you will be surrounded by strangers who may not be kind to you and will not know how much you are worth. It makes me more sorry than I can tell you, and I have a great desire to take you home to your mother instead of going on to Fourche."

"You talk very kindly, but there is no reason for your misgivings, my poor Germain. You ought not to lose heart on your friend's account, and instead of showing me the dark side of my lot, you should show me the bright side, as you did after lunch at Rebec's."

"What can I do? That's the way it appeared to me then, and now my ideas are changed. It is best for you to take a husband."

"That cannot be, Germain, and as it is out of the question, I think no more about it."

"Yet such a thing might happen. Perhaps if you told me what kind of a man you want, I might imagine somebody."

"Imagining is not finding. For myself, I never imagine, for it does no good."

"You are not looking for a rich man?"

"Certainly not, for I am as poor as Job."

"But if he were comfortably off, you wouldn't be sorry to have a good house, and good food, and good clothes, and to live with an honest family who would allow you to help your mother."

"Oh, yes indeed! It is my own wish to help my mother."

"And if this man were to turn up, you would not be too hard to please, even if he were not so very young."

"Ah! There you must excuse me, Germain. That is just the point I insist on. I could never love an old man."

"An old man, of course not; but a man of my age, for example!"

"Your age is too old for me, Germain. I should like Bastien's age, though Bastien is not so good-looking as you."

"Should you rather have Bastien, the swineherd?" said Germain, indignantly. "A fellow with eyes shaped like those of the pigs he drives!"

"I could excuse his eyes, because he is eighteen."

Germain felt terribly jealous.

"Well," said he, "it's clear that you want Bastien, but, none the less, it's a queer idea."

"Yes, that would be a queer idea," answered little Marie, bursting into shouts of laughter, "and he would make a queer husband. You could gull him to your heart's content. For instance, the other day, I had picked up a tomato in the curate's garden. I told him that it was a fine, red apple, and he bit into it like a glutton. If you had only seen what a face he made. Heavens! how ugly he was!"

"Then you don't love him, since you are making fun of him."

"That wouldn't be a reason. But I don't like him. He is unkind to his little sister, and he is dirty."

"Don't you care for anybody else?"

"How does that concern you, Germain?"

"Not at all, except that it gives me something to talk about. I see very well, little girl, that you have a sweetheart in your mind already."

"No, Germain, you're wrong. I have no sweetheart yet. Perhaps one may come later, but since I cannot marry until I have something laid by, I am destined to marry late in life and with an old man."

"Then take an old man without delay."

"No. When I am no longer young, I shall not care; for the present, it is different."

"I see that I displease you, Marie; that's clear enough," said Germain, impatiently, and without stopping to weigh his words.

Little Marie did not answer. Germain bent over her. She was sleeping. She had fallen back, overcome, stricken down, as it were, by slumber, as children are who sleep before they cease to babble.

Germain was glad that she had not caught his last words. He felt that they were unwise, and he turned his back to distract his attention and change his thoughts.

It was all in vain. He could neither sleep nor think of anything except the words he had just spoken. He walked about the fire twenty times; he moved away; he came back. At last, feeling himself tremble as though he had swallowed gunpowder, he leaned against the tree which sheltered the two children, and watched them as they slept.

"I know not how it is," thought he; "I have never noticed that little Marie is the prettiest girl in the countryside. She has not much color, but her little face is fresh as a wild rose. What a charming mouth she has, and how pretty her little nose is! She is not large for her age, but she is formed like a little quail and is as light as a bird. I cannot understand why they made so much fuss at home over a big, fat woman with a bright red face. My wife was rather slender and pale, and she pleased me more than any one else. This girl is very frail, but she is healthy, and she is pretty to watch as a white kid. And then she has such a gentle, frank expression. You can read her good heart in her eyes even though they are closed in sleep. As to wit, I must confess she has more than ever my dear Catherine had, and she would never become wearisome. She is gay, wise, industrious, loving, and she is amusing. I don't know what more I could wish for...."

"But what is the use of thinking of all this?" Germain went on, trying to look in another direction. "My father-in-law would not hear of it, and all the family would think me mad! Besides, she would not have me herself, poor child! She thinks me too old; she told me so. She is unselfish, and does not mind poverty and worry, wearing old clothes, and suffering from hunger for two or three months every year, so long as she can satisfy her heart some day and give herself to the man she loves. She is right. I should do the same in her place, and even now, if I had my own way, instead of marrying a wife whom I don't care for, I would choose a girl after my own heart."

The more Germain tried to compose himself by reasoning, the further he was from succeeding. He walked away a dozen steps, to lose himself in the fog; then, all of a sudden, he found himself on his knees beside the two sleeping children. Once he wished to kiss Petit-Pierre, who had one arm about Marie's neck, and made such a mistake that Marie felt a breath, hot as fire, cross her lips, and awaking, looked about her with a bewildered expression, totally ignorant of all that was passing within his mind.

"I didn't see you, my poor children," said Germain, retreating rapidly. "I almost stumbled over you and hurt you."

Little Marie was so innocent that she believed him, and fell asleep again. Germain walked to the opposite side of the fire, and swore to God that he would not stir until she had waked. He kept his word, but not without a struggle. He thought that he would go mad.

At length, toward midnight, the fog lifted, and Germain could see the stars shining through the trees. The moon freed herself from the mist which had hidden her, and began to sow her diamonds over the damp moss. The trunks of the oak-trees remained in impressive darkness, but beyond, the white branches of the birch-trees seemed a long line of phantoms in their shrouds.

The fire cast its reflection in the pool; and the frogs, growing accustomed to the light, hazarded a few shrill and uneasy notes; the rugged branches of the old trees, bristling with dim-colored lichens, crossed and intertwined themselves, like great gaunt arms, above the travelers' heads. It was a lovely spot, but so lonely and so sad that Germain, unable to endure it more, began to sing and throw stones into the water to forget the dread weariness of solitude. He was anxious also to wake little Marie, and when he saw her rise and look about at the weather, he proposed that they start on their journey.

"In two hours," said he, "the approach of morning will chill the air so that we can't stay here in spite of our fire. Now we can see our way, and we shall soon find a house which will open its doors to us, or at least a barn where we can pass the rest of the night under shelter."

Marie had no will of her own, and although she was longing to sleep, she made ready to follow Germain. The husbandman took his boy in his arms without awaking him, and beckoned Marie to come nearer, in order to cover her with his cloak. For she would not take her own mantle, which was wrapped about the child.

When he felt the young girl so close to him, Germain, who for a time had succeeded in distracting his mind and raising his spirits, began to lose his head once more. Two or three times he strode ahead abruptly, leaving her to walk alone. Then seeing how hard it was for her to follow, he waited, drew her quickly to his side, and pressed her so tight that she was surprised, and even angry, though she dared not say so.

As they knew not the direction whence they had come, they had no idea of that in which they were going. So they crossed the wood once more, and found themselves afresh before the lonely moor. Then they retraced their steps, and after much turning and twisting they spied a light across the branches.

"Good enough! Here's a house," exclaimed Germain. "And the people are already astir, for the fire is lighted. It must be very late."

It was no house, but the camp-fire, which they had covered before they left, and which had sprung up in the breeze.

They had tramped for two hours, only to find themselves at the very place from which they had started.



X

Beneath the Stars

“This time I give up,” said Germain, stamping his foot. “We are bewitched, that is certain, and we shall not get away from here before broad day. The devil is in this place!”

“Well, it’s of no use to get angry,” said Marie. “We must take what is given us. Let us make a big fire. The child is so well wrapped up that he is in no danger, and we shall not die from a single night out of doors. Where have you hidden the saddle, Germain? Right in the midst of the holly-bushes,—what a goose you are! It’s very convenient to get it from there!”

“Stop, child; hold the boy while I pull his bed from the thorns. I didn’t want you to scratch your hands.”

“It’s all done. Here’s the bed, and a few scratches are not saber-cuts,” replied the brave girl.

She proceeded to put the child to bed again, and Petit-Pierre was so sound asleep this time that he knew nothing of his last journey. Germain piled so much wood on the fire that the forest all about glowed with the light.

Little Marie had come to the end of her powers, and although she did not complain, her legs would support her no longer. She was white, and her teeth chattered with cold and weakness. Germain took her in his arms to warm her. The uneasiness, the compassion, the tenderness of movement he could not repress, took possession of his heart and stilled his senses. As by a miracle his tongue was loosened, and every feeling of shame vanished.

“Marie,” said he, “I like you, and I am very sorry that you don’t like me. If you would take me for your husband, there are no fathers, nor family, nor neighbors, nor arguments which could prevent me from giving myself to you. I know how happy you would make my children, and that you would teach them to love the memory of their mother, and with a quiet conscience I could satisfy the wishes of my heart. I have always been fond of you, and now I love you so well that were you to ask me to spend all my life in doing your pleasure, I would swear to do it on the instant. Please think how much I love you, and try to forget my age. Think that it is a wrong notion to believe that a man of thirty is old. Besides, I am but twenty-eight. A young girl is afraid that people will talk about her if she takes a man ten or twelve years older than she, simply because that is not the custom in our country, but I have heard say that in other countries people don’t look at it in this light, and that they had rather allow a sensible man of approved courage to support a young girl, than trust her to a mere boy, who may go astray, and, from the honest fellow they thought him, turn into a good-for-nothing. And then years don’t always make age. That depends on the health and strength a person has. When a man is used up by overwork and poverty, or by a bad life, he is old before twenty-five. While I—but Marie, you are not listening....”

“Yes I am, Germain; I hear you perfectly,” answered little Marie, “but I am thinking over what my mother used to tell me so often: that a woman of sixty is to be pitied greatly when her husband is seventy or seventy-five and can no longer work to support her. He grows feeble, and it becomes her duty to nurse him at the very age when she begins to feel great need of care and rest herself, and so it is that the end comes in a garret.”

“Parents do well to say so, I admit,” answered Germain, “but then they would sacrifice all their youth, the best years of their life, to calculating what will become of them at the age when a person is no longer good for anything, and when it is a matter of indifference which way death comes. But I am in no danger of starving in my old age. I am even going to lay by something, since I live with my wife’s parents and spend nothing. And then, you see, I shall love you so well that I can never grow old. They say that when a man is happy he keeps sound, and I know well that in love for you, I am younger than Bastien; for he does not love you; he is too stupid, too much of a child to understand how pretty and how good you are, and how you were made for people to court. Do not hate me, Marie. I am not a bad man. I made my Catherine happy, and on her death-bed she swore before God that she had had only happiness of me, and she asked me to marry again. Her spirit must have spoken to her child to-night. Did you not hear the words he said? How his little lips quivered as his eyes stared upward, watching something that we could not see! He was surely looking at his mother, and it was she who made him say that he wished you to take her place.”

“Germain,” answered Marie, amazed and yet thoughtful, “you speak frankly, and everything that you say is true. I am sure that I should do well to love you if it did not displease your parents too much. But what can I do? My heart does not speak for you. I am very fond of you, but though

your age does not make you ugly, it makes me afraid. It seems as if you were some such relation to me, as an uncle or a godfather, that I must be respectful toward you, and that there might be moments when you would treat me like a little girl rather than like your wife and your equal. And perhaps my friends would make fun of me, and although it would be silly to give heed to that, I think that I should be a little sad on my wedding-day."

"Those are but childish reasons, Marie; you speak like a child."

"Yes, that is true; I am a child," said she, "and it is on that account I am afraid of too sensible a man. You must see that I am too young for you, since you just found fault with me for speaking foolishly. I can't have more sense than my age allows."

"O Heavens! How unlucky I am to be so clumsy and to express so ill what I think!" cried Germain. "Marie, you don't love me. That is the long and short of it. You find me too simple and too dull. If you loved me at all, you would not see my faults so clearly. But you do not love me. That is the whole story."

"That is not my fault," answered she, a little hurt that he was speaking with less tenderness. "I am doing my best to hear you, but the more I try the less I can get it into my head that we ought to be husband and wife."

Germain did not answer. His head dropped into his hands, and little Marie could not tell whether he wept or sulked or was fast asleep. She felt uneasy when she saw him so cast down, and could not guess what was passing in his mind. But she dared not speak to him more, and as she was too astonished at what had passed to have any desire to sleep, she waited impatiently for dawn, tending the fire with care and watching over the child, whose existence Germain appeared to forget. Yet Germain was not asleep. He did not mope over his lot. He made no plans to encourage himself, nor schemes to entrap the girl. He suffered; he felt a great weight of grief at his heart. He wished that he were dead. The world seemed to turn against him, and if he could have wept at all, his tears would have come in floods. But mingled with his sorrow there was a feeling of anger against himself, and he felt choked, without the power or the wish to complain.

When morning came, and the sounds of the country brought it to Germain's senses, he lifted his head from his hands and rose. He saw that little Marie had slept no more than he, but he knew no words in which to tell her of his anxiety. He was very discouraged. Hiding the gray's saddle once more in the thicket, he slung his sack over his shoulder and took his son by the hand.

"Now, Marie," said he, "we are going to try to end our journey. Do you wish me to take you to Ormeaux?"

"Let us leave the woods together," answered she, "and when we know where we are, we shall separate, and go our different ways."

Germain did not answer. He felt hurt that the girl did not ask him to take her as far as Ormeaux, and he did not notice that he had asked her in a tone well fitted to provoke a refusal.

After a few hundred steps, they met a wood-cutter, who pointed out the highroad, and told them that when they had crossed the plain, one must turn to the right, the other to the left, to gain their different destinations, which were so near together that the houses of Fourche were in plain sight from the farm of Ormeaux, and *vice versa*.

When they had thanked him and passed on, the wood-cutter called them back to ask whether they had not lost a horse.

"Yes," he said, "I found a pretty gray mare in my yard, where perhaps a wolf had driven her to seek refuge; my dogs barked the whole night long, and at daybreak I saw the mare under my shed. She is there now. Come along with me, and if you recognize her, you may take her."

When Germain had given a description of the gray, and felt convinced that it was really she, he started back to find his saddle. Little Marie offered to take his child to Ormeaux, whither he might go to get him after he had introduced himself at Fourche.

"He is rather dirty after the night that we have passed," said she. "I will brush his clothes, wash his pretty face, and comb his hair, and when he looks neat and clean, you can present him to your new family."

"Who told you that I wish to go to Fourche?" answered Germain, petulantly. "Perhaps I shall not go."

"But truly, Germain, it is your duty to go there. You will go there," replied the girl.

"You seem very anxious to have me married off, so that you may be quite sure that I shall not trouble you again?"

"Germain, you must not think of that any more. It is an idea which came to you in the night, because this unfortunate mishap took away your spirits. But now you must come to your senses. I promise you to forget everything that you said to me, and not to breathe it to a soul."

"Oh, say what you wish. It is not my custom to deny what I have spoken. What I told you was true and honest, and I shall not blush for it before anybody."

"Yes, but if your wife were to know that just before you came you were thinking of another woman, it would prejudice her against you. So take care how you speak now. Don't look at me before everybody with such a rapt expression. Think of Father Maurice, who relies on your obedience, and who would be enraged at me if I were to turn you from his will. Good-by, Germain. I take Petit-Pierre in order to force you to go to Fourche. He is a pledge which I keep on

your behalf."

"So you want to go with her?" said the husbandman to his son, seeing that the boy had clasped Marie's hands and was following her resolutely.

"Yes, father," answered the child, who had heard the conversation and understood after his own fashion the words spoken so unguardedly before him. "I am going away with my dearest little Marie. You shall come to find me when you have done marrying, but I wish Marie to be my little mother."

"You see how much he wishes it," said Germain to the girl. "Listen to me, Petit-Pierre," he added. "I wish her to be your mother and to stay with you always. It is she who does not wish to. Try to make her grant you what she has denied me."

"Don't be afraid, father, I shall make her say yes. Little Marie does everything that I wish."

He walked away with the young girl. Germain stood alone, sadder and more irresolute than ever.



XI

The Belle of the Village

And after all, when he had brushed the dust of travel from his clothes and from his horse's harness, when he had mounted the gray, and when he had learned the road, he felt that there was no retreat and that he must forget that anxious night as though it had been a dangerous dream.

He found Father Leonard seated on a trim bench of spinach-green. The six stone steps leading up to the door showed that the house had a cellar. The walls of the garden and of the hemp-field were plastered with lime and sand. It was a handsome house, and might almost have been mistaken for the dwelling of a bourgeois.

Germain's future father-in-law came forward to meet him, and having plied him, for five minutes, with questions concerning his entire family, he added that conventional phrase with which one passer-by addresses another concerning the object of his journey: "So you are taking a little trip in this part of the country?"

"I have come to see you," replied the husbandman, "to give you this little present of game with my father's compliments, and to tell you from him that you ought to know with what intentions I come to your house."

"Oh, ho!" said Father Leonard, laughing and tapping his capacious stomach, "I see, I understand, I am with you, and," he added with a wink, "you will not be the only one to pay your court, young man. There are three already in the house dancing attendance like you. I never turn anybody away, and I should find it hard to say yes or no to any of them, for they are all good matches. Yet, on account of Father Maurice and for the sake of the rich fields you till, I hope that it may be you. But my daughter is of age and mistress of her own affairs. She will do as she likes. Go in and introduce yourself. I hope that you will draw the prize."

"I beg your pardon," answered Germain, amazed to find himself an extra when he had counted on being alone in the field. "I was not aware that your daughter was supplied already with suitors, and I did not come to quarrel over her."

"If you supposed that because you were slow in coming, my daughter would be left unprovided for, you were greatly mistaken, my son," replied Father Leonard with unshaken good humor. "Catherine has the wherewithal to attract suitors, and her only difficulty lies in choosing. But come in; don't lose heart. The woman is worth a struggle."

And pushing in Germain by the shoulders with boisterous gaiety, he called to his daughter as they entered the house:

"So, Catherine, here is another!"

This cordial but unmannerly method of introduction to the widow, in the presence of her other devotees, completed Germain's distress and embarrassment. He felt the awkwardness of his position, and stood for a few moments without daring to look upon the beauty and her court.

The Widow Guérin had a good figure and did not lack freshness, but her expression and her dress displeased Germain the instant he saw her. She had a bold, self-satisfied look, and her cap, edged with three lace flounces, her silk apron, and her fichu of fine black lace were little in accord with the staid and sober widow he had pictured to himself.

Her elaborate dress and forward manners inclined Germain to judge the widow old and ugly, although she was certainly not either. He thought that such finery and playful manners might well suit little Marie's years and wit, but that the widow's fun was labored and over bold, and that she wore her fine clothes in bad taste.

The three suitors were seated at a table loaded with wines and meats which were spread out for their use throughout the Sunday morning; for Father Leonard liked to show off his wealth, and the widow was not sorry to display her pretty china and keep a table like a rich lady. Germain, simple and unsuspecting as he was, watched everything with a penetrating glance, and for the first time in his life he kept on the defensive when he drank. Father Leonard obliged him to sit down with his rivals, and taking a chair opposite he treated him with great politeness, and talked to him rather than to the others.

The present of game, despite the breach Germain had made on his own account, was still plenteous enough to produce its effect. The widow did not look unaware of its presence, and the

suitors cast disdainful glances in its direction.

Germain felt ill at ease in this company, and did not eat heartily. Father Leonard poked fun at him.

"You look very melancholy," said he, "and you are ill-using your glass. You must not allow love to spoil your appetite, for a fasting lover can make no such pretty speeches as he whose ideas are brightened with a drop of wine."

Germain was mortified at being thought already in love, and the artificial manner of the widow, who kept lowering her eyes with a smile as a woman does who is sure of her calculations, made him long to protest against his pretended surrender; but fearing to appear uncivil, he smiled and held his peace.

He thought the widow's beaux, three bumpkins. They must have been rich for her to admit of their pretensions. One was over forty, and fat as Father Leonard; another had lost an eye, and drank like a sot. The third was a young fellow, and nice-looking too; but he kept insisting on displaying his wit, and would say things so silly that they were painful to hear. Yet the widow laughed as though she admired all his foolishness, and made small proof of her good taste thereby. At first Germain thought her infatuated with him, but soon he perceived that he himself was especially encouraged, and that they wished him to make fresh advances. For this reason he felt an increasing stiffness and severity which he took no pains to conceal.

The time came for mass, and they rose from table to go thither in company. It was necessary to walk as far as Mers, a good half-league away, and Germain was so tired that he longed to take a nap before they went; but he was not in the habit of missing mass, and he started with the others.

The roads were filled with people, and the widow marched proudly along, escorted by her three suitors, taking an arm, first of one and then of another, and carrying her head high with an air of importance. She was eager to display the fourth to the eyes of the passers-by; but Germain felt so ridiculous to be dragged along in the train of a petticoat where all the world might see, that he kept at a respectable distance, chatting with Father Leonard, and succeeded in occupying his attention so well that they did not look at all as if they belonged to the party.



XII

The Master

When they reached the village, the widow halted to allow them to catch up. She was bent upon making her entry with all her train; but Germain, denying her this pleasure, deserted Father Leonard, and after conversing with several acquaintances, he entered the church by another door. The widow was vexed.

When mass was over, she made her appearance in triumph on the lawn, where dancing was going on, and she began her dance with her three lovers in turn. Germain watched her and saw that she danced well, but with affectation.

"So, you don't ask my daughter?" said Leonard, tapping him on the shoulder. "You are too easily frightened."

"I have not danced since I lost my wife," answered the husbandman.

"But now that you are looking for another, mourning's over in heart as well as in clothes."

"That's no reason, Father Leonard. Besides, I am too old and I don't care for dancing."

"Listen," said Father Leonard, drawing him toward a retired corner, "when you entered my house you were vexed to see the place already besieged, and I see that you are very proud. But that is not reasonable, my boy. My daughter is used to a great deal of attention, particularly since she left off her mourning two years ago, and it is not her place to lead you on."

"Has your daughter been thinking of marrying for two years already without making her choice?" asked Germain.

"She doesn't wish to hurry, and she is right. Although she has lively manners, and although you may not think that she reflects a great deal, she is a woman of excellent common sense, and knows very well what she is about."

"It does not appear to me so," said Germain ingenuously, "for she has three suitors in her train, and if she knew her own mind, there are two of them, at least, whom she would find superfluous and request to stay at home."

"Why, Germain, you don't understand at all. She doesn't wish the old man, nor the blind man, nor the young man, I am quite certain; yet if she were to turn them off, people would think that she wished to remain a widow, and nobody else would come."

"Oh, I see. These three are used for a guide-post."

"As you like. What is the harm if they are satisfied?"

"Every man to his taste," said Germain.

"I see that yours is different. Now supposing that you are chosen, then they would leave the coast clear."

"Yes, supposing! and meanwhile how much time should I have to whistle?"

"That depends on your persuasive tongue, I suppose. Until now, my daughter has always thought that she would pass the best part of her life while she was being courted, and she is in no hurry to become the servant of one man when she can order so many others about. So she will please herself as long as the game amuses her; but if you please her more than the game, the game will cease. Only you must not lose courage. Come back every Sunday, dance with her, let her know that you are amongst her followers, and if she finds you more agreeable and better bred than the others, some fine day she will tell you so, no doubt."

"Excuse me, Father Leonard. Your daughter has the right to do as she pleases, and it is not my business to blame her. If I were in her place, I should do differently. I should be more frank, and should not waste the time of men who have, doubtless, something better to do than dancing attendance on a woman who makes fun of them. Still, if that is what amuses her and makes her happy, it is no affair of mine. Only there is one thing I must tell you which is a little embarrassing, since you have mistaken my intentions from the start, for you are so sure of what is not so, that you have given me no chance to explain. You must know, then, that I did not come here to ask for your daughter in marriage, but merely to buy a pair of oxen which you are going to take to market next week, and which my father-in-law thinks will suit him."

"I understand, Germain," answered Leonard very calmly; "you changed your plans when you

saw my daughter with her admirers. It is as you please. It seems that what attracts some people repels others, and you are perfectly welcome to withdraw, for you have not declared your intentions. If you wish seriously to buy my cattle, come and see them in the pasture, and whether we make a bargain or not, you will come back to dinner with us before you return."

"I don't wish to trouble you," answered Germain. "Perhaps you have something to do here. I myself am tired of watching the dancing and standing idle. I will go to see your cattle, and I will soon join you at your house."

Then Germain made his escape, and walked away toward the meadows where Leonard had pointed out to him some of his cattle. It was true that Father Maurice intended to buy, and Germain thought that if he were to bring home a fine pair of oxen at a reasonable price, he might more easily receive a pardon for wilfully relinquishing the purpose of his journey. He walked rapidly, and soon found himself at some distance from Ormeaux. Then of a sudden, he felt a desire to kiss his son and to see little Marie once again, although he had lost all hope and even had chased away the thought that he might some day owe his happiness to her. Everything that he had heard and seen: this woman, flirtatious and vain; this father, at once shrewd and short-sighted, encouraging his daughter in habits of pride and untruth; this city luxury, which seemed to him a transgression against the dignity of country manners; this time wasted in foolish, empty words; this home so different from his own; and above all, that deep uneasiness which comes to a laborer of the fields when he leaves his accustomed toil: all the trouble and annoyance of the past few hours made Germain long to be with his child and with his little neighbor. Even had he not been in love, he would have sought her to divert his mind and raise his spirits to their wonted level.

But he looked in vain over the neighboring meadows. He saw neither little Marie nor little Pierre, and yet it was the hour when shepherds are in the fields. There was a large flock in a pasture. He asked of a young boy who tended them whether the sheep belonged to the farm of Ormeaux.

"Yes," said the child.

"Are you the shepherd? Do boys tend the flocks of the farm, amongst you?"

"No, I am taking care of them to-day, because the shepherdess went away. She was ill."

"But have you not a new shepherdess, who came this morning?"

"Yes, surely; but she, too, has gone already."

"What! gone? Did she not have a child with her?"

"Yes, a little boy who cried. They both went away after they had been here two hours."

"Went away! Where?"

"Where they came from, I suppose. I didn't ask them."

"But why did they go away?" asked Germain, growing more and more uneasy.

"How the deuce do I know?"

"Did they not agree about wages? Yet that must have been settled before."

"I can tell you nothing about it. I saw them come and go, nothing more."

Germain walked toward the farm and questioned the farmer. Nobody could give him an explanation; but after speaking with the farmer, he felt sure that the girl had gone without saying a word, and had taken the weeping child with her.

"Can they have been ill-treating my son?" cried Germain.

"It was your son, then? How did he happen to be with the little girl? Where do you come from, and what is your name?"

Germain, seeing that after the fashion of the country they were answering him with questions, stamped his foot impatiently, and asked to speak with the master.

The master was away. Usually, he did not spend the whole day when he came to the farm. He was on horseback, and he had ridden off to one of his other farms.

"But, honestly," said Germain, growing very anxious, "can't you tell me why this girl left?"

The farmer and his wife exchanged an odd smile. Then the former answered that he knew nothing, and that it was no business of his. All that Germain could learn was that both girl and child had started off toward Fourche. He rushed back to Fourche. The widow and her lovers were still away; so was Father Leonard. The maid told him that a girl and a child had come to ask for him, but that as she did not know them, she did not wish to let them in, and had advised them to go to Mers.

"And why did you refuse to let them in?" said Germain, angrily. "People are very suspicious in this country, where nobody opens the door to a neighbor."

"But you see," answered the maid, "in a house as rich as this, I must keep my eyes open. When the master is away, I am responsible for everything, and I cannot open the door to the first person that comes along."

"It is a bad custom," said Germain, "and I had rather be poor than to live in constant fear like that. Good-by to you, young woman, and good-by to your vile country."

He made inquiries at the neighboring house. The shepherdess and child had been seen. As the boy had left Belair suddenly, carelessly dressed, with his blouse torn, and his little lambskin over his shoulders, and as little Marie was necessarily poorly clad at all times, they had been taken for beggars. People had offered them bread. The girl had accepted a crust for the child, who was hungry, then she had walked away with him very quickly, and had entered the forest.

Germain thought a minute, then he asked whether the farmer of Ormeaux had not been at Fourche.

"Yes," they answered, "he passed on horseback a few seconds after the girl."

"Was he chasing her?"

"Oh, so you understand?" answered the village publican, with a laugh. "Certain it is that he is the devil of a fellow for running after girls. But I don't believe that he caught her; though, after all, if he had seen her—"

"That is enough, thank you!" And he flew rather than ran to Leonard's stable. Throwing the saddle on the gray's back, he leaped upon it, and set off at full gallop toward the wood of Chanteloube.

His heart beat hard with fear and anger; the sweat poured down his forehead; he spurred the mare till the blood came, though the gray needed no pressing when she felt herself on the road to her stable.



XIII

The Old Woman

Germain came soon to the spot where he had passed the night on the border of the pool. The fire was smoking still. An old woman was gathering the remnants of the wood little Marie had piled there. Germain stopped to question her. She was deaf and mistook his inquiries.

"Yes, my son," said she, "this is the Devil's Pool. It is an evil spot, and you must not approach it without throwing in three stones with your left hand, while you cross yourself with the right. That drives away the spirits. Otherwise trouble comes to those who go around it."

"I am not asking about that," said Germain, moving nearer her, and screaming at the top of his lungs. "Have you seen a girl and a child walking through the wood?"

"Yes," said the old woman, "a little child was drowned there."

Germain shook from head to foot; but happily the hag added:

"That happened a long time ago. In memory of the accident they raised a handsome cross there. But one stormy night, the bad spirits threw it into the water. You can still see one end of it. If anybody were unlucky enough to pass the night here, he could never find his way out before daylight. He must walk and walk, and though he went two hundred leagues into the forest, he must always return to the same place."

The peasant's imagination was aroused in spite of himself, and the thought of the evils that must come in order that the old woman's assertions might be vindicated, took so firm a hold of his mind that he felt chilled through and through. Hopeless of obtaining more news, he remounted, and traversed the woods afresh, calling Pierre with all his might, whistling, cracking his whip, and snapping the branches that the whole forest might reëcho with the noise of his coming; then he listened for an answering voice, but he heard no sound save the cowbells scattered through the glades, and the wild cries of the swine as they fought over the acorns.

At length Germain heard behind him the noise of a horse following in his traces, and a man of middle age, dark, sturdy, and dressed after the city fashion, called to him to stop. Germain had never seen the farmer of Ormeaux, but his instinctive rage told him at once that this was the man. He turned, and eyeing him from head to foot, waited for him to speak.

"Have not you seen a young girl of fifteen or sixteen go by with a small boy?" asked the farmer, with an assumed air of indifference, although he was evidently ill at ease.

"What do you want of her?" answered Germain, taking no pains to conceal his anger.

"I might tell you that that is none of your business, my friend. But as I have no reasons for secrecy, I shall tell you that she is a shepherdess whom I engaged for a year, before I knew her. When I saw her, she looked too young and frail to work on the farm. I thanked her, but I wished to pay the expenses of her short journey, and while my back was turned, she went off in a huff. She was in such a hurry that she forgot even some of her belongings and her purse, which has certainly not much in it, probably but a few pennies; but since I was going in this direction, I hoped to meet her, and give her back the things which she left behind, as well as what I owe her."

Germain had too honest a heart not to pause at hearing a story which, however unlikely, was not impossible. He fastened his penetrating gaze on the farmer, who submitted to the examination with a plentiful supply of impudence or of good faith.

"I wish to get at the bottom of this matter," said Germain; "and," continued he, suppressing his indignation, "the girl lives in my village. I know her. She can't be far away. Let's ride on together; we shall find her, no doubt."

"You are right," said the farmer; "let's move on; but if we do not find her before we reach the end of this road, I shall give up, for I must turn off toward Ardentes."

"Oh, oh!" thought the peasant, "I shall not part with you, even if I have to follow you around the Devil's Pool for twenty-four hours."

"Stop," said Germain suddenly, fixing his eyes on a clump of broom which waved in a peculiar manner. "Halloa! halloa! Petit Pierre, is that you, my child?"

The boy recognized his father's voice, and came out from the broom leaping like a young deer; but when he saw Germain in company with the farmer, he stopped dismayed, and stood

irresolute. "Come, my Pierre, come. It is I," cried the husbandman, as he leaped from his horse and ran toward his boy to take him in his arms; "and where is little Marie?"

"She is hiding there, because she is afraid of that dreadful black man, and so am I."

"You needn't be afraid. I am here. Marie, Marie. It is I."

Marie crept toward them, but the moment she saw Germain with the farmer close behind, she sprang forward, and throwing herself into his arms, clung to him as a daughter to her father.

"Oh, my brave Germain!" she cried, "you will defend me. I am not afraid when you are near."

Germain shuddered. He looked at Marie. She was pale; her clothes were torn by the thorns which had scratched her as she passed, rushing toward the brake like a stag chased by the hunters. But neither shame nor despair were in her face.

"Your master wishes to speak to you," said he, his eyes fixed on her features.

"My master!" she exclaimed fiercely; "that man is no master of mine, and he never shall be. You, Germain, you are my master. I want you to take me home with you. I will be your servant for nothing."

The farmer advanced, feigning impatience. "Little girl," said he, "you left something behind at the farm, which I am bringing back to you."

"No, you are not, sir," answered little Marie. "I didn't forget anything, and I have nothing to ask of you."

"Listen a moment," returned the farmer. "It's I who have something to tell you. Come with me. Don't be afraid. It's only a word or two."

"You may say them aloud. I have no secrets with you."

"At any rate, do take your money."

"My money? You owe me nothing, thank God!"

"I suspected as much," said Germain under his breath, "but I don't care, Marie. Listen to what he has to say to you, for—I am curious to know. You can tell me afterward. Go up to his horse. I shall not lose sight of you."

Marie took three steps toward the farmer. He bent over the pommel of his saddle, and lowering his voice he said:

"Little girl, here is a bright golden louis for you. Don't say anything about it; do you hear? I shall say that I found you too frail to work on my farm. There will be no more talk about that. I shall be passing by your house one of these days; and if you have not said anything, I will give you something more; and then if you are more sensible, you have only to speak. I will take you home with me, or I will come at dusk and talk with you in the meadows. What present would you like me to bring you?"

"Here, sir, is the present I have for you," answered little Marie, aloud, as she threw the golden louis in his face with all her might. "I thank you heartily, and I beg that if you come anywhere near our house, you will be good enough to let me know. All the boys in the neighborhood will go out to welcome you, because, where I live, we are very fond of gentlemen who try to make love to poor girls. You shall see. They will be on the lookout for you."

"You lie with your dirty tongue," cried the farmer, raising his stick with a dangerous air. "You wish to make people believe what is not so, but you shall never get a penny out of me. We know what kind of a girl you are."

Marie drew back, frightened, and Germain sprang to the bridle of the farmer's horse and shook it violently.

"I understand now," said he; "it is easy to see what is going on. Get down, my man, get down; I want to talk to you."

The farmer was not eager to take up the quarrel. Anxious to escape, he set spurs to his horse and tried to loosen the peasant's grasp by striking down his hands with a cane; but Germain dodged the blow, and seizing hold of his antagonist's leg, he unseated him and flung him to the earth. The farmer regained his feet, but although he defended himself vigorously, he was knocked down once more. Germain held him to the ground. Then he said:

"Poor coward, I could thrash you if I wished. But I don't want to do you an injury, and, besides, no amount of punishment would help your conscience—but you shall not stir from this spot until you beg the girl's pardon, on your knees."

The farmer understood this sort of thing, and wished to take it all as a joke. He made believe that his offense was not serious, since it lay in words alone, and protested that he was perfectly willing to ask her pardon, provided he might kiss the girl afterward. Finally, he proposed that they go and drink a pint of wine at the nearest tavern, and so part good friends.

"You are disgusting!" answered Germain, rubbing his victim's head in the dirt, "and I never wish to see your nasty face again. So blush, if you are able, and when you come to our village, you had better slink along Sneak's Alley."^[2]

He picked up the farmer's holly-stick, broke it over his knee to show the strength of his wrists, and threw away the pieces with disgust. Then giving one hand to his son and the other to little Marie, he walked away, still trembling with anger.

FOOTNOTE:

[2] This is the road, which, diverging from the principal street at the entrance of villages, makes a circuit about them. Persons who are in dread of receiving some well deserved insult, are supposed to take this route to escape attention.



XIV

The Return to the Farm

At the end of fifteen minutes they had left the heath behind them. They trotted along the highroad, and the gray whinnied at each familiar object. Petit-Pierre told his father as much as he could understand of what had passed.

"When we reached the farm," said he, "that man came to speak to my Marie in the fold where we had gone to see the pretty sheep. I had climbed into the manger to play, and that man did not see me. Then he said good morning to Marie, and he kissed her."

"You allowed him to kiss you, Marie?" said Germain, trembling with anger.

"I thought it was a civility, a custom of the place to new-comers, just as at your farm the grandmother kisses the young girls who enter her service to show that she adopts them and will be a mother to them."

"And next," went on little Pierre, who was proud to have an adventure to tell of, "*that man* told you something wicked, which you have told me never to repeat and not even remember; so I forgot it right away. Still, if father wishes, I will tell him what it was—"

"No, Pierre, I don't wish to hear, and I don't wish you ever to think of it again."

"Then I will forget it all over again," replied the child. "Next, *that man* seemed to be growing angry because Marie told him that she was going away. He told her he would give her whatever she wanted,—a hundred francs! And my Marie grew angry too. Then he came toward her as if he wished to hurt her. I was afraid, and I ran to Marie and cried. Then *that man* said: 'What's that? Where did that child come from? Put it out,' and he raised his cane to beat me. But my Marie prevented him, and she spoke to him this way: 'We will talk later, sir; now I must take this child back to Fourche, and then I shall return.' And as soon as he had left the fold, my Marie spoke to me this way: 'We must run, my Pierre; we must get away as quickly as we can, for this is a wicked man and he is trying to do us harm.' Then when we had gone back of the farm-houses, we crossed a little meadow, and we went to Fourche to find you. But you were not there, and they wouldn't let us wait. And then *that man*, riding his black horse, came behind us, and we ran on as fast as we could and hid in the woods. And then he followed us, and when we heard him coming, we hid again. And then, when he had passed, we began to run toward home, and then you came and found us, and that is how it all happened. I haven't forgotten anything, have I, my Marie?"

"No, my Pierre, that is the whole truth. Now, Germain, you must be my witness, and tell everybody in the village that if I did not stay there it was not from want of courage and industry."

"And, Marie, I want to ask of you whether a man of twenty-eight is too old when there is a woman to be defended and an insult to be revenged. I should like to know whether Bastien or any other pretty boy, ten years better off than I, would not have been knocked to pieces by *that man*, as Petit-Pierre says. What do you think?"

"I think, Germain, that you have done me a great service, and that I shall be grateful all my life."

"Is that all?"

"Little father," said the child, "I forgot to ask little Marie what I promised. I have not had time yet, but I will speak to her at home, and I will speak to my grandmother too."

The child's promise set Germain to thinking. He must explain his conduct to his family and give his objections to the widow Guam, and all the while conceal the true reasons which had made him so judicious and so decided. When a man is proud and happy, it seems an easy task to thrust his happiness upon others, but to be repulsed on one side and blamed on the other is not a very pleasant position.

Fortunately, Petit-Pierre was fast asleep when they reached the farm, and Germain put him to bed undisturbed. Then he began upon all sorts of explanations, Father Maurice, seated on a three-legged stool before the door, listened with gravity; and, although he was ill-content with the result of the journey, when Germain told him about the widow's systematic coquetry, and demanded of his father-in-law whether he had the time to go and pay his court fifty-two Sundays in the year at the risk of being dismissed in the end, the old man nodded his head in assent and answered: "You were not wrong, Germain; that could never be." And then, when Germain described how he had been obliged to bring back little Marie, with the utmost haste, in order to

protect her from the insults or perhaps from the violence of a wicked master, Father Maurice nodded approvingly again and said: "You were not wrong, Germain; that was right."

When Germain had told his story, and had set forth all his reasons, the old farmer and his wife heaved deep, simultaneous sighs of resignation, and looked at each other. Then the head of the house rose and said: "God's will be done. Love can't be made to order."

"Come to supper, Germain," said his mother-in-law. "It is unfortunate that this did not come to a better end, but, after all, it seems that God did not wish it. We must look elsewhere."

"Yes," added the old man, "as my wife says, we must look elsewhere."

There was no more noise at the house, and on the morrow, when Petit-Pierre rose with the larks at dawn, he was no longer excited by the extraordinary events of the preceding days. Like other little peasants of his age, he became indifferent, forgot everything that had been running in his head, and thought only of playing with his brothers, and of pretending to drive the horses and oxen like a man. Germain plunged into his work, and tried to forget, too; but he became so absent-minded and so sad that everybody noticed it. He never spoke to little Marie, he never even looked at her, and yet had anybody asked him in what meadow she was, or by what road she had passed, there was not a moment in the day when he could not have answered if he would. He dared not ask his family to take her in at the farm during the winter, and yet he knew well how she must suffer from want. But she did not suffer; and Mother Guillette could not understand how her little store of wood never grew less, and how her shed was full in the morning, although she had left it almost empty at night. It was the same with the wheat and potatoes. Somebody entered by the garret window, and emptied a sack on the floor without awaking a soul or leaving a trace of his coming. The widow was at once uneasy and delighted. She made her daughter promise to tell nobody, and said that were people to know of the miracle performed at her house they would take her for a witch. She felt confident that the devil had a share in it, but she was in no hurry to pick a quarrel with him by calling down the priest's exorcisms on the house. It would be time enough, she said, when Satan should come to demand her soul in return for his gifts.

Little Marie understood the truth better, but she dared not speak to Germain, for fear of seeing him return to his dreams of marriage, and, before him, she pretended to perceive nothing.



XV

Mother Maurice

One day, Mother Maurice was alone in the orchard with Germain, and spoke to him kindly:

"My poor son, I believe you are not well. You don't eat as well as usual; you never laugh; you talk less and less. Perhaps one of us, or all of us, have hurt your feelings, without knowing and without wishing it."

"No, my mother," answered Germain, "you have always been as kind to me as the mother who brought me into the world, and I should be very ungrateful if I were to complain of you or your husband, or of anybody in the household."

"Then, my child, it is the sorrow for your wife's death which comes back to you. Instead of growing lighter with time, your grief becomes worse, and as your father has said very wisely, it is absolutely necessary for you to marry again."

"Yes, my mother, that is my opinion, but the women whom you advised me to ask don't suit me. Whenever I see them, instead of forgetting my Catherine, I think of her all the more."

"Apparently that's because we have n't been able to understand your taste. You must help us by telling us the truth. There must be a woman somewhere who is made for you, for God does n't make anybody without placing his happiness in somebody else. So if you know where to find this woman whom you need, take her, and be she pretty or ugly, young or old, rich or poor, we have made up our minds, my husband and I, to give our consent, for we are tired of seeing you so sad, and we can never be happy while you are sorrowful."

"My mother, you are as kind as the kind Lord, and so is my father," answered Germain; "but your compassion brings small help to my troubles, for the girl I love doesn't care for me."

"She is too young, then? It's foolish for you to love a young girl."

"Yes, mother dear, I have been foolish enough to love a young girl, and it's my fault. I do my best to stop thinking of it, but, working or sleeping, at mass or in bed, with my children or with you, I can think of nothing else."

"Then it's like a fate cast over you, Germain. There's but one remedy, and it is that this girl must change her mind and listen to you. It's my duty to look into this, and see whether it's practicable. Tell me where she lives, and what's her name."

"Oh, my dear mother, I dare not," said Germain, "because you will make fun of me."

"I shall not make fun of you, Germain, because you are in trouble, and I don't wish to make it harder for you. Is it Fanchette?"

"No, mother, of course not."

"Or Rosette?"

"No."

"Tell me, then, for I shall never finish if I must name every girl in the countryside."

Germain bowed his head, and could not bring himself to answer.

"Very good," said Mother Maurice, "I shall let you alone for to-day; to-morrow, perhaps, you will be more confidential with me, or possibly your sister-in-law will question you more cleverly." And she picked up her basket to go and spread her linen on the bushes.

Germain acted like children who make up their minds when they see that they are no longer attracting attention. He followed his mother, and at length, trembling, he named Marie of Guillette.

Great was the surprise of Mother Maurice. Marie was the last person she would have dreamed of. But she had the delicacy not to cry out, and made her comments to herself. Then seeing that her silence hurt Germain, she stretched out her basket toward him and said:

"Is there any reason for not helping me at my work. Carry this load, and come and talk with me. Have you reflected well, Germain? Are you fully decided?"

"Alas, dear mother, you mustn't speak in that way. I should be decided if I had a chance of success, but as I could never be heard, I have only made up my mind to cure myself, if I can."

"And if you can't."

"There is an end to everything, Mother Maurice: when the horse is laden too heavily, he falls, and when the cow has nothing to eat, she dies."

"Do you mean to say that you will die, if you do not succeed. God grant not, Germain. I don't like to hear a man like you talk of those things; for what he says, he thinks. You are very brave, and weakness is dangerous for strong men. Take heart; I can't conceive that a poverty-stricken girl, whom you have honored so much as to ask her to marry you, will refuse you."

"Yet it's the truth: she does refuse me."

"And what reasons does she give you?"

"That you have always been kind to her, and that her family owes a great deal to yours, and that she doesn't wish to displease you by turning me away from a rich marriage."

"If she says that, she proves her good sense, and shows what an honest girl she is. But, Germain, she doesn't cure you; for of course she tells you that she loves you and would marry you if we were willing?"

"That's the worst part of all. She says that her heart can never be mine."

"If she says what she doesn't think in order to keep you at a safer distance, the child deserves our love, and we should pass over her youth on account of her great good sense."

"Yes," said Germain, struck by a hope he had never held before; "that would be very wise and right of her! But if she is so sensible, I am sure it is because I displease her."

"Germain," said Mother Maurice, "you must promise me not to worry for a whole week. Keep from tormenting yourself, eat, sleep, and be as gay as you used to be. For my part, I'll speak to my husband, and if I gain his consent, you shall know the girl's real feelings toward you."

Germain promised, and the week passed without a single word in private from Father Maurice, who seemed to suspect nothing. The husbandman did his best to look calm, but he grew ever paler and more troubled.



XVI

Little Marie

At length, on Sunday morning, when mass was over, his mother-in-law asked Germain what encouragement he had had from his sweetheart since the conversation in the orchard.

"Why, none at all," answered he; "I haven't spoken to her."

"How can you expect to win her if you don't speak to her?"

"I have spoken to her but once," replied Germain. "That was when we were together at Fourche, and since then I haven't said a single word. Her refusal gave me so much pain that I had rather not hear her begin again to tell me that she doesn't love me."

"But, my son, you must speak to her now; your father gives his approval. So make up your mind. I tell you to do it, and, if need be, I shall order you to do it, for you can't rest in this uncertainty."

Germain obeyed. He reached Mother Guillette's house, hanging his head with a hopeless air. Little Marie sat alone before the hearth so thoughtful that she did not hear Germain's step. When she saw him before her, she started from her chair in surprise and grew very red.

"Little Marie," said he, sitting down near her, "I come to trouble you and to give you pain. I know it very well, but the man and his wife at home [it was thus after the peasant fashion that he designated the heads of the house] wish me to speak to you, and beg you to marry me. You don't care for me. I am prepared for it."

"Germain," answered little Marie, "are you sure that you love me?"

"It pains you, I know, but it isn't my fault. If you could change your mind, I should be so very happy, and certain it is that I don't deserve it. Look at me, Marie; am I very terrible?"

"No, Germain," she answered, with a smile, "you are better looking than I."

"Don't make fun of me; look at me charitably; as yet, I have never lost a single hair nor a single tooth. My eyes tell you plainly how much I love you. Look straight into my eyes. It is written there, and every girl knows how to read that writing."

Marie looked into Germain's eyes with playful boldness; then of a sudden she turned away her head and trembled.

"Good God," exclaimed Germain, "I make you afraid; you look at me as though I were the farmer of Ormeaux. Don't be afraid of me, please don't; that hurts me too much. I shall not say any bad words to you, I shall not kiss you if you will not have me, and when you wish me to go away, you have only to show me the door. Must I go in order to stop your trembling?"

Marie held out her hand toward the husbandman, but without turning her head, which was bent on the fireplace, and without saying a word.

"I understand," said Germain. "You pity me, for you are kind; you are sorry to make me unhappy; but you can't love me."

"Why do you say these things to me, Germain?" answered little Marie, after a pause. "Do you wish to make me cry?"

"Poor little girl, you have a kind heart, I know; but you don't love me, and you are hiding your face for fear of letting me see your dislike and your repugnance. And I? I dare not even clasp your hand! In the forest, when my boy was asleep and you were sleeping too, I almost kissed you very gently. But I would have died of shame rather than ask it of you, and that night I suffered as a man burning over a slow fire. Since that time I have dreamed of you every night. Ah! how I have kissed you, Marie! Yet during all that time you have slept without a dream. And now, do you know what I think? I think that were you to turn and look at me with the eyes I have for you, and were you to move your face close to mine, I believe I should fall dead for joy. And you, you think that if such a thing were to happen, you would die of anger and shame!"

Germain spoke as in a dream, not hearing the words he said. Little Marie was trembling all the time, but he was shaking yet more and did not notice it. Of a sudden, she turned. Her eyes were filled with tears, and she looked at him reproachfully. The poor husbandman thought that this was the last blow, and without waiting for his sentence, he rose to go, but the girl stopped him, and throwing both her arms about him, she hid her face in his breast.

"Oh, Germain," she sobbed, "didn't you feel that I loved you?"

Then Germain had gone mad, if his son, who came galloping into the cottage on a stick, with his little sister on the crupper, scourging the imaginary steed with a willow branch, had not brought him to his senses. He lifted the boy and placed him in the girl's arms.

"See," said he, "by loving me, you have made more than one person happy."



APPENDIX

I

A Country Wedding

Here ends the history of Germain's marriage as he told it to me himself, good husbandman that he is. I ask your forgiveness, kind reader, that I know not how to translate it better; for it is a real translation that is needed by this old-fashioned and artless language of the peasants of the country "that I sing," as they used to say. These people speak French that is too true for us, and since Rabelais and Montaigne, the advance of the language has lost for us many of its old riches. Thus it is with every advance, and we must make the best of it. Yet it is a pleasure still to hear those picturesque idioms used in the old districts in the center of France; all the more because it is the genuine expression of the laughing, quiet, and delightfully talkative character of the people who make use of it. Touraine has preserved a certain precious number of patriarchal phrases. But Touraine was civilized greatly during the Renaissance, and since its decline she is filled with fine houses and highroads, with foreigners and traffic. Berry remained as she was, and I think that after Brittany and a few provinces in the far south of France, it is the best preserved district to be found at the present day. Some of the costumes are so strange and so curious that I hope to amuse you a few minutes more, kind reader, if you will allow me to describe to you in detail a country wedding—Germain's, for example—at which I had the pleasure of assisting several years ago.

For, alas! everything passes. During my life alone, more change has taken place in the ideas and in the customs of my village than had been seen in the centuries before the Revolution. Already half the ceremonies, Celtic, Pagan, or of the Middle Ages, that in my childhood I have seen in their full vigor, have disappeared. In a year or two more, perhaps, the railroads will lay their level tracks across our deep valleys, and will carry away, with the swiftness of lightning, all our old traditions and our wonderful legends.

It was in winter about the carnival season, the time of year when, in our country, it is fitting and proper to have weddings. In summer the time can hardly be spared, and the work of the farm cannot suffer three days' delay, not to speak of the additional days impaired to a greater or to a less degree by the moral and physical drunkenness which follows a gala-day. I was seated beneath the great mantelpiece of the old-fashioned kitchen fireplace when shots of pistols, barking of dogs, and the piercing notes of the bagpipe told me that the bridal pair were approaching. Very soon Father and Mother Maurice, Germain, and little Marie, followed by Jacques and his wife, the closer relatives, and the godfathers and godmothers of the bride and groom, all made their entry into the yard.

Little Marie had not yet received her wedding-gifts,—favors, as they call them,—and was dressed in the best of her simple clothes, a dress of dark, heavy cloth, a white fichu with great spots of brilliant color, an apron of carnation,—an Indian red much in vogue at the time, but despised nowadays,—a cap of very white muslin after that pattern, happily still preserved, which calls to mind the head-dress of Anne Boleyn and of Agnes Sorrel. She was fresh and laughing, but not at all vain, though she had good reason to be so. Beside her was Germain, serious and tender, like young Jacob greeting Rebecca at the wells of Laban. Another girl would have assumed an important air and struck an attitude of triumph, for in every rank it is something to be married for a fair face alone. Yet the girl's eyes were moist and shone with tenderness. It was plain that she was deep in love and had no time to think of the opinions of others. Her little air of determination was not absent, but everything about her denoted frankness and good-will. There was nothing impertinent in her success, nothing selfish in her sense of power. Never have I seen so lovely a bride, when she answered with frankness her young friends who asked if she were happy:

"Surely I have nothing to complain of the good Lord."

Father Maurice was spokesman. He came forward to pay his compliments, and give the customary invitations. First he fastened to the mantelpiece a branch of laurel decked out with ribbons; this is known as the *writ*—that is to say, the letter of announcement. Next he gave to every guest a tiny cross made of a bit of blue ribbon sewn to a transverse bit of pink ribbon—pink for the bride, blue for the groom. The guests of both sexes were expected to keep this badge to

adorn their caps or their button-holes on the wedding-day. This is the letter of invitation, the admission ticket.

Then Father Maurice paid his congratulations. He invited the head of the house and all his *company*,—that is to say, all his children, all his friends, and all his servants,—to the benediction, *to the feast, to the sports, to the dance, and to everything that follows*. He did not fail to say, “I have come *to do you the honor of inviting you*”; a very right manner of speech, even though it appears to us to convey the wrong meaning, for it expresses the idea of doing honor to those who seem worthy of it.

Despite the generosity of the invitation carried from house to house throughout the parish, politeness, which is very cautious amongst peasants, demands that only two persons from each family take advantage of it—one of the heads of the house, and one from the number of their children.

After the invitations were made, the betrothed couple and their families took dinner together at the farm.

Little Marie kept her three sheep on the common, and Germain tilled the soil as though nothing had happened.

About two in the afternoon before the day set for the wedding, the music came. The music means the players of the bagpipe and hurdy-gurdy, their instruments decorated with long streaming ribbons, playing an appropriate march to a measure which would have been rather slow for feet foreign to the soil, but admirably adapted to the heavy ground and hilly roads of the country.

Pistol-shots, fired by the young people and the children, announced the beginning of the wedding ceremonies. Little by little the guests assembled, and danced on the grass-plot before the house in order to enter into the spirit of the occasion. When evening was come they began strange preparations; they divided into two bands, and when night had settled down they proceeded to the ceremony of the *favours*.

All this passed at the dwelling of the bride, Mother Guillette’s cottage. Mother Guillette took with her her daughter, a dozen pretty shepherdesses, friends and relatives of her daughter, two or three respectable housewives, talkative neighbors, quick of wit and strict guardians of ancient customs. Next she chose a dozen stout fellows, her relatives and friends; and last of all the parish hemp-dresser, a garrulous old man, and as good a talker as ever there was.

The part which, in Brittany, is played by the bazvalon, the village tailor, is taken in our part of the country by the hemp-dresser and the wool-carder, two professions which are unusually combined in one. He is present at all ceremonies, sad or gay, for he is very learned and a fluent talker, and on these occasions he must always figure as spokesman, in order to fulfil with exactitude certain formalities used from time immemorial. Traveling occupations, which bring a man into the midst of other families, without allowing him to shut himself up within his own, are well fitted to make him talker, wit, storyteller, and singer.

The hemp-dresser is peculiarly skeptical. He and another village functionary, of whom we have spoken before, the grave-digger, are always the daring spirits of the neighborhood. They have talked so much about ghosts, and they know so well all the tricks of which these malicious spirits are capable, that they fear them scarcely at all. It is especially at night that all of them—grave-diggers, hemp-dressers, and ghosts—do their work. It is also at night when the hemp-dresser tells his melancholy stories. Permit me to make a digression.

When the hemp has reached the right stage, that is to say, when it has been steeped sufficiently in running water, and half dried on the bank, it is brought into the yard and arranged in little upright sheaves, which, with their stalks divided at the base, and their heads bound in balls, bear in the dusk some small resemblance to a long procession of little white phantoms, standing on their slender legs, and moving noiselessly along the wall.

It is at the end of September, when the nights are still warm, that they begin to beat it by the pale light of the moon. By day the hemp has been heated in the oven; at night they take it out to beat it while it is still hot. For this they use a kind of horse surmounted by a wooden lever which falls into grooves and breaks the plant without cutting it. It is then that you hear in the night that sudden, sharp noise of three blows in quick succession. Then there is silence; it is the movement of the arm drawing out the handful of hemp to break it in a fresh spot. The three blows begin again; the other arm works the lever, and thus it goes on until the moon is hidden by the early streaks of dawn. As the work continues but a few days in the year, the dogs are not accustomed to it, and yelp their plaintive howls toward every point of the horizon.

It is the time of unwonted and mysterious sounds in the country. The migrating cranes fly so high that by day they are scarcely visible. By night they are only heard, and their hoarse wailing voices, lost in the clouds, sound like the parting cry of souls in torment, striving to find the road to heaven, yet forced by an unconquerable fate to wander near the earth about the haunts of men; for these errant birds have strange uncertainties, and many a mysterious anxiety in the course of their airy flight. Sometimes they lose the wind when the capricious gusts battle, or come and go in the upper regions. When this confusion comes by day, you can see the leader of the file fluttering aimlessly in the air, then turn about and take his place at the tail of the triangular phalanx, while a skilful manœuver of his companions forms them soon in good order behind him. Often, after vain efforts, the exhausted leader relinquishes the guidance of the caravan; another comes forward, tries in his turn, and yields his place to a third, who finds the

breeze, and continues the march in triumph. But what cries, what reproaches, what protests, what wild curses or anxious questionings are exchanged in an unknown tongue amongst these winged pilgrims!

Sometimes, in the resonant night, you can hear these sinister noises whirling for a long time above the housetops, and as you can see nothing, you feel, despite your efforts, a kind of dread and kindred discomfort, until the sobbing multitude is lost in boundless space.

There are other noises too which belong to this time of year, and which sound usually in the orchards. Gathering the fruit is not yet over, and the thousand unaccustomed cracklings make the tree seem alive. A branch groans as it bends beneath a burden which has reached, of a sudden, the last stage of growth; or perhaps an apple breaks from the twig, and falls on the damp earth at your feet with a dull sound. Then you hear rush by, brushing the branches and the grass, a creature you cannot see; it is the peasant's dog, that prowling and uneasy rover, at once impudent and cowardly, always wandering, never sleeping, ever seeking you know not what, spying upon you, hiding in the brush, and taking flight at the sound of a falling apple, which he thinks a stone that you are throwing at him.

It is during those nights, nights misty and gray, that the hemp-dresser tells his weird stories of will-o'-the-wisps and milk-white hares, of souls in torment and wizards changed to wolves, of witches' vigils at the cross-roads, and screech-owls, prophetesses of the graveyard. I remember passing the early hours of such a night while the hemp-dressing was going on, and the pitiless strokes, interrupting the dresser's story at its most awful place, sent icy shivers through our veins. And often too the good man continued his story as he worked, and four or five words were lost, terrible words, no doubt, which we dared not make him repeat, and whose omission added a mystery yet more fearful to the dark mysteries of the story which had gone before. It was in vain the servants warned us that it was too late to stay without doors, and that bedtime had sounded for us long since; they too were dying to hear more; and then with what terror we crossed the hamlet on our way home! How deep did the church porch appear to us, and how thick and black the shadows of the old trees! The graveyard we dared not see; we shut our eyes tight as we passed it.

But no more than the sacristan is the hemp-dresser gifted solely with the desire of frightening; he loves to make people laugh; he is sarcastic and sentimental at need, when love and marriage are to be sung. It is he who collects and keeps stored in his memory the oldest songs, and who transmits them to posterity. And so it is he who acts at weddings the part we shall see him play at the presentation of little Marie's favors.



II

The Wedding Favors

When all the guests were met together in the house, the doors and windows were closed with the utmost care; even the garret window was barricaded; boards and benches, logs and tables were placed behind every entrance, just as if the inhabitants were making ready to sustain a siege; and within these fortifications solemn stillness prevailed until at a distance were heard songs and laughter and the sounds of rustic music. It was the band of the bridegroom, Germain at the head, followed by his most trusty companions and by the grave-digger, relatives, friends, and servants, who formed a compact and merry train. Meanwhile, as they came nearer the house they slackened their pace, held a council of war, and became silent. The girls, shut up in the house, had arranged little loop-holes at the windows by which they could see the enemy approach and deploy in battle array. A fine, cold rain was falling, which added zest to the situation, while a great fire blazed on the hearth within. Marie wished to cut short the inevitable slowness of this well-ordered siege; she had no desire to see her lover catch cold, but not being in authority she had to take an ostensible share in the mischievous cruelty of her companions.

When the two armies met, a discharge of firearms on the part of the besiegers set all the dogs in the neighborhood to barking. Those within the house dashed at the door with loud yelps, thinking that the attack was in earnest, and the children, little reassured by the efforts of their mothers, began to weep and to tremble. The whole scene was played so well that a stranger would have been deceived, and would have made his preparations to fight a band of brigands. Then the grave-digger, bard and orator of the groom, took his stand before the door, and with a rueful voice, exchanged the following dialogue with the hemp-dresser, who was stationed above the same door:

The Grave-digger: "Ah, my good people, my fellow-townsmen, for the love of Heaven, open the door."

The Hemp-dresser: "Who are you, and what right have you to call us your dear fellow-townsmen? We don't know you."

The Grave-digger: "We are worthy folk in great distress. Don't be afraid of us, my friends. Extend us your hospitality. Sleet is falling; our poor feet are frozen, and our journey home has been so long that our sabots are split."

The Hemp-dresser: "If your sabots are split, you can look on the ground; you will find very soon a sprig of willow to make some *arcelets* [small curved blades of iron which are fastened on split sabots to hold them together]."

The Grave-digger: "Willow *arcelets* are scarcely strong enough. You are making fun of us, good people, and you would do better to open your doors. We can see a splendid fire blazing in your dwelling. The spit must be turning, and we can make merry with you, heart and belly. So open your doors to poor pilgrims who will die on the threshold if you are not merciful."

The Hemp-dresser: "Ah ha! so you are pilgrims? You never told us that. And what pilgrimage do you come from, may I ask?"

The Grave-digger: "We shall tell you that when you open the door, for we come from so far that you would never believe it."

The Hemp-dresser: "Open the door to you? I rather think not. We can't trust you. Tell us, is it from Saint Sylvain of Pouligny that you come?"

The Grave-digger: "We have been at Saint Sylvain of Pouligny, but we have been farther still."

The Hemp-dresser: "Then you have been as far as Saint Solange?"

The Grave-digger: "At Saint Solange we have been, sure enough, but we have been farther yet."

The Hemp-dresser: "You are lying. You have never been as far as Saint Solange."

The Grave-digger: "We have been farther, for now we are come from Saint Jacques of Compostelle."

The Hemp-dresser: "What absurdity are you telling us? We don't know that parish. We can easily see that you are bad people, brigands, nobodies, and liars. Go away with your nonsense. We are on our guard. You can't come in."

The Grave-digger: "Ah, my poor fellow, take pity on us. We are not pilgrims, as you have guessed, but we are unlucky poachers pursued by the keepers. Even the police are after us, and if you don't hide us in your hay-loft, we shall be taken and led off to prison."

The Hemp-dresser: "And who will prove you are what you say you are, this time? For you have told us one lie already that you can't maintain."

The Grave-digger: "If you will let us in, we shall show you a pretty piece of game we have killed."

The Hemp-dresser: "Show it right away, for we have our suspicions."

The Grave-digger: "All right, open the door or a window to let us pass the creature in."

The Hemp-dresser: "Oh, no, not quite so foolish. I am looking at you through a little chink, and I can see neither hunters nor game amongst you."

Here an ox-driver, a thick-set fellow of herculean strength, detached himself from a group where he had stood unperceived, and raised toward the window a plucked goose, spitted on a strong iron bar decorated with tufts of straw and ribbons.

"Ho, ho!" cried the hemp-dresser, after cautiously extending an arm to feel the roast. "That isn't a quail nor a partridge; it isn't a hare nor a rabbit; it's something like a goose or a turkey. Upon my word, you're clever hunters, and that game didn't make you run very far. Move on, you rogues; we know all your lies, and you had best go home and cook your supper. You are not going to eat ours."

The Grave-digger: "O Heavens, where can we go to cook our game? It is very little for so many as we, and, besides, we have neither place nor fire. At this time every door is closed, and every soul asleep. You are the only people who are celebrating a wedding at home, and you must be hardhearted indeed to let us freeze outside. Once again, good people, open the door; we shall not cost you anything. You can see that we bring our own meat; only a little room at your hearth, a little blaze to cook with, and we shall go on our way rejoicing."

The Hemp-dresser: "Do you suppose that we have too much room here, and that wood is bought for nothing?"

The Grave-digger: "We have here a small bundle of hay to make the fire. We shall be satisfied with that; only grant us leave to place the spit across your fireplace."

The Hemp-dresser: "That will never do. We are disgusted, and don't pity you at all. It is my opinion that you are drunk, that you need nothing, and that you only wish to come in and steal away our fire and our daughters."

The Grave-digger: "Since you won't listen to reason, we shall make our way in by force."

The Hemp-dresser: "Try, if you want; we are shut in well enough to have no fear of you, and since you are impudent fellows, we shall not answer you again."

Thereupon the hemp-dresser shut the garret window with a bang, and came down into the room below by a step-ladder. Then he took the bride by the hand, the young people of both sexes followed, and they all began to sing and chatter merrily, while the matrons sang in piercing voices, and shrieked with laughter in derision and bravado at those without who were attempting an attack.

The besiegers, on their side, made a great hubbub. They discharged their pistols at the doors, made the dogs growl, whacked the walls, shook the blinds, and uttered frightful shrieks. In short, there was such a pandemonium that nobody could hear, and such a cloud of dust that nobody could see.

And yet this attack was all a sham. The time had not come for breaking through the etiquette. If, in prowling about, anybody were to find an unguarded aperture, or any opening whatsoever, he might try to slip in unobserved, and then, if the carrier of the spit succeeded in placing his roast before the fire, and thus prove the capture of the hearth, the comedy was over and the bridegroom had conquered.

The entrances of the house, however, were not numerous enough for any to be neglected in the customary precautions, and nobody might use violence before the moment fixed for the struggle.

When they were weary of dancing and screams, the hemp-dresser began to think of capitulation. He went up to his window, opened it with precaution, and greeted the baffled assailants with a burst of laughter.

"Well, my boys," said he, "you look very sheep-faced. You thought there was nothing easier than to come in, and you see that our defense is good. But we are beginning to have pity on you, if you will submit and accept our conditions."

The Grave-digger: "Speak, good people. Tell us what we must do to approach your hearth."

The Hemp-dresser: "You must sing, my friends; but sing a song we don't know,—one that we can't answer by a better."

"That's not hard to do," answered the grave-digger, and he thundered in a powerful voice:

"Six months ago, 'twas in the spring...."

"I wandered through the sprouting grass,"

answered the hemp-dresser in a slightly hoarse but terrible voice. "You must be jesting, my poor

friends, singing us such time-worn songs. You see very well that we can stop you at the first word."

"She was a prince's daughter...."

"Right gladly would she wed,"

answered the hemp-dresser. "Come, move on to the next; we know that a little too well."

The Grave-digger: "How do you like this one?"—

"As I was journeying home from Nantes."

The Hemp-dresser:

"Weary, oh, weary, was I, was I."

"That dates from my grandmother's time. Let's have another."

The Grave-digger:

"One day I went a-walking...."

The Hemp-dresser:

"Along a lovely wood!"

"That one is too stupid! Our little children wouldn't take the trouble to answer you. What! Are these all you know?"

The Grave-digger: "Oh, we shall sing you so many that you will never be able to hear them all."

In this way a full hour passed. As the two antagonists were champions of the country round in the matter of songs, and as their store seemed inexhaustible, the contest might last all night with ease, all the more because the hemp-dresser, with a touch of malice, allowed several ballads of ten, twenty, or thirty couplets to be sung through, feigning by his silence to admit his defeat. Then the bridegroom's camp rejoiced and sang aloud in chorus, and thought that this time the foe was worsted; but at the first line of the last couplet, they heard the hoarse croaking of the old hemp-dresser bellow forth the second rhyme. Then he cried:

"You need not tire yourselves by singing such a long one, my children—we know that one to our finger-tips."

Once or twice, however, the hemp-dresser made a wry face, contracted his brow, and turned toward the expectant housewives with a baffled air. The grave-digger was singing something so old that his adversary had forgotten it, or perhaps had never even heard it; but instantly the good gossips chanted the victorious refrain through their noses with voices shrill as a sea-mew's, and the grave-digger, forced to surrender, went on to fresh attempts.

It would have taken too long to wait for a decision of the victory. The bride's party declared itself disposed to be merciful, provided that the bride were given a present worthy of her.

Then began the song of the favors to a tune solemn as a church chant.

The men without sang together in bass voices:

"Open the door, true love,
Open the door;
I have presents for you, love,
Oh, say not adieu, love."

To this the women answered from within in falsetto, with mournful voices:

"My father is sorry, my mother is sad,
And I am a maiden too kind by far
At such an hour my gate to unbar."

The men took up the first verse as far as the fourth line and modified it thus:

"And a handkerchief new, love."

But, on behalf of the bride, the women answered in the same way as at first.

For twenty couplets, at least, the men enumerated all the wedding-presents, always mentioning something new in the last line: a handsome apron, pretty ribbons, a cloth dress, laces, a golden cross, and even a hundred pins to complete the modest list of wedding-presents. The refusal of the women could not be shaken, but at length the men decided to speak of

"A good husband, too, love."

And the women answered, turning toward the bride and singing in unison with the men:

"Open the door, true love,
Open the door;
Here's a sweetheart for you, love,
Pray let us enter, too, love."



III

The Wedding

Immediately the hemp-dresser drew back the wooden bolt which barred the door within. At this time it was still the only fastening known in most of the dwellings of our hamlet. The groom's band burst into the bride's house, but not without a struggle; for the young men quartered within, and even the old hemp-dresser and the gossips, made it their duty to defend the hearth. The spit-bearer, upheld by his supporters, had to plant the roast before the fireplace. It was a regular battle, although people abstained from striking, and there was no anger shown in this struggle. But everybody was pushing and shoving so hard, and there was so much playful pride in this display of muscular strength, that the results might well have been serious, although they did not appear so across the laughs and songs. The poor old hemp-dresser, fighting like a lion, was pinned to the wall and squeezed by the crowd until his breath almost left him. More than one champion was upset and trodden under foot involuntarily; more than one hand, jammed against the spit, was covered with blood. These games are dangerous, and latterly the accidents have been so severe that our peasants have determined to allow the ceremony of the favors to fall into disuse; I believe we saw the last at the marriage of François Meillant, although there was no real struggle on that occasion.

The battle was earnest enough, however, at Germain's wedding. It was a point of honor on one side to invade, on the other to defend, Mother Guillette's hearth. The great spit was twisted like a screw beneath the strong fists which fought for it. A pistol-shot set fire to a small quantity of hemp arranged in sheaves and laid on a wicker shelf near the ceiling. This incident created a diversion, and while some of the company crowded about to extinguish the sparks, the grave-digger, who had climbed unbeknown into the garret, came down the chimney and seized the spit, at the very moment when the ox-driver, who was defending it near the hearth, raised it above his head to prevent it from being torn away. Some time before the attack, the women had taken the precaution to put out the fire lest in the struggle somebody should fall in and get burned. The jocular grave-digger, in league with the ox-driver, grasped the trophy and tossed it easily across the andirons. It was done! Nobody might interfere. The grave-digger sprang to the middle of the room and lighted a few wisps of straw, which he placed about the spit under pretense of cooking the roast, for the goose was in pieces and the floor was strewn with its scattered fragments.

Then there was a great deal of laughter and much boastful dispute. Everybody showed the marks of the blows he had received, and as it was often a friend's hand that had struck them, there was no word of complaint nor of quarreling. The hemp-dresser, half flattened out, kept rubbing the small of his back and saying that, although it made small difference to him, he protested against the ruse of his friend, the grave-digger, and that if he had not been half dead, the hearth had never been captured so easily. The women swept the floor and order was restored. The table was covered with jugs of new wine. When the contestants had drunk together and taken breath, the bridegroom was led to the middle of the chamber, and, armed with a wand, he was obliged to submit to a fresh trial.

During the struggle, the bride and three of her companions had been hidden by her mother, godmother, and aunts, who had made the four girls sit down in a remote corner of the room while they covered them with a large white cloth. Three friends of Marie's height, with caps of a uniform size, were chosen, so that when they were enveloped from head to toe by the cloth it was impossible to tell them apart.

The bridegroom might not touch them, except with the tip of his staff, and then merely to designate which he thought to be his wife. They allowed him time enough to make an examination with no other help than his eyes afforded, and the women, placed on either side, kept zealous watch lest cheating should occur. Should he guess wrong, he might not dance with his bride, but only with her he had chosen by mistake.

When Germain stood in front of these ghosts wrapped in the same shroud, he feared he should make a wrong choice; and, in truth, that had happened to many another, so carefully and conscientiously were the precautions made. His heart beat loud. Little Marie did her best to breathe hard and shake the cloth a little, but her malicious companions followed her example, and kept poking the cloth with their fingers, so that there were as many mysterious signals as there were girls beneath the canopy. The square head-dresses upheld the cloth so evenly that it was impossible to discern the contour of a brow outlined by its folds.

After ten minutes' hesitation, Germain shut his eyes, commended his soul to God, and stretched

out the wand at random. It touched the forehead of little Marie, who cast the cloth from her, and shouted with triumph. Then it was his right to kiss her, and lifting her in his strong arms, he bore her to the middle of the room, where together they opened the dance, which lasted until two in the morning. The company separated to meet again at eight. As many people had come from the country round, and as there were not beds enough for everybody, each of the village maidens took to her bed two or three other girls, while the men spread themselves pell-mell on the hay in the barn-loft. You can imagine well that they had little sleep, for they did nothing but wrestle and joke, and tell foolish stories. Properly, there were three sleepless nights at weddings, and these we cannot regret.

At the time appointed for departure, when they had partaken of milk-soup, seasoned with a strong dose of pepper to stimulate the appetite,—for the wedding-feast gave promise of great bounty,—the guests assembled in the farm-yard. Since our parish had been abolished, we had to go half a league from home to receive the marriage blessing. It was cool and pleasant weather, but the roads were in such wretched condition that everybody was on horseback, and each man took a companion on his crupper, whether she were young or old. Germain started on the gray, and the mare, well-groomed, freshly shod, and decked out with ribbons, pranced about and snorted fire from her nostrils. The husbandman went to the cottage for his bride in company with his brother-in-law, Jacques, who rode the old gray, and carried Mother Guillette on the crupper, while Germain returned to the farm-yard in triumph, holding his dear little wife before him.

Then the merry cavalcade set out, escorted by the children, who ran ahead and fired off their pistols to make the horses jump. Mother Maurice was seated in a small cart, with Germain's three children and the fiddlers. They led the march to the sound of their instruments. Petit-Pierre was so handsome that his old grandmother was proud of herself. But the eager child did not stay long at her side. During a moment's halt made on the journey, before passing through a difficult piece of road, he slipped away and ran to beg his father to carry him in front on the gray.

"No, no," replied Germain, "that will call forth some disagreeable joke; we mustn't do it."

"It's little that I care what the people of Saint Chartier say," said little Marie. "Take him up, Germain, please do; I shall be prouder of him than I am of my wedding-gown."

Germain yielded, and the pretty trio darted into the crowd borne by the triumphant gallop of the gray.

And so it was; the people of Saint Chartier, although they were very sarcastic, and somewhat disdainful of the neighboring parishes which had been annexed to theirs, never thought of laughing when they saw such a handsome husband, such a lovely wife, and a child that a king's wife might court. Petit-Pierre was all dressed in light blue cloth, with a smart red waistcoat so short that it descended scarcely below his chin. The village tailor had fitted his armholes so tight that he could not bring his two little hands together. But, oh, how proud he was! He wore a round hat, with a black-and-gold cord, and a peacock's plume which stuck out proudly from a tuft of guinea feathers. A bunch of flowers, bigger than his head, covered his shoulder, and ribbons fluttered to his feet. The hemp-dresser, who was also the barber and hair-dresser of the district, had cut his hair evenly, by covering his head with a bowl, and clipping off the protruding locks, an infallible method for guiding the shears. Thus arrayed, the poor child was less poetic, certainly, than with his curls streaming in the wind, and his Saint John Baptist's sheepskin about him; but he knew nothing of this, and everybody admired him and said that he had quite the air of a little man. His beauty triumphed over everything, for what is there over which the exceeding beauty of childhood could not triumph?

His little sister, Solange, had, for the first time in her life, a peasant's cap in place of the calico hood which little girls wear until they are two or three years old. And what a cap it was! Longer and larger than the poor little thing's whole body. How beautiful she thought it! She dared not even turn her head; so she kept quite still and thought the people would take her for the bride.

As for little Sylvain, he was still in long clothes, and, fast asleep on his grandmother's knees, he did not even know what a wedding was.

Germain looked at his children tenderly, and when they reached the town hall, he said to his bride:

"Marie, I have come here with a happier heart than I had the day when I brought you home from the forest of Chanteloube, thinking that you could never love me. I took you in my arms to put you on the ground as I do here; but I thought that never again should we be mounted on the good gray with the child on our knees. I love you so dearly, I love these little creatures so dearly, I am so happy that you love me and that you love them, and that my family love you, and I love your mother so well and all my friends so well, and everybody else so well to-day, that I wish I had three or four hearts to fill all of them; for surely one is too small to hold so much love and so much happiness. It almost makes my stomach ache."

There was a crowd at the door of the town hall and another at the church to see the pretty bride. Why should we not tell about her dress? it became her so well. Her muslin cap, without spot and covered with embroidery, had lappets trimmed with lace. At that time peasant women never allowed a single lock to be seen, and, although they conceal beneath their caps splendid coils of hair tied up with tape to hold the coif in place, even to-day it would be thought a scandal and a shame for them to show themselves bareheaded to men. Nowadays, however, they allow a slender braid to appear over their foreheads, and this improves their appearance very much. Yet I regret the classic head-dress of my time; its spotless laces next the bare skin gave an effect of pristine purity which seemed to me very solemn; and when a face looked beautiful thus it was

with a beauty of which nothing can express the charm and unaffected majesty.

Little Marie wore her cap thus, and her forehead was so white and so pure that it defied the whiteness of linen to cast it in the shade. Although she had not closed an eye the night before, the morning air and, yet more, the joy within of a soul pure as the heaven, and, more than all, a small secret flame guarded with the modesty of girlhood, caused a bloom to mount to her cheeks delicate as the peach-blossom in the first beams of an April sun.

Her white scarf, modestly crossed over her breast, left visible only the soft curves of a neck rounded like a turtle-dove's; her home-made cloth gown of myrtle-green outlined her pretty figure, which looked already perfect, yet which must still grow and develop, for she was but seventeen. She wore an apron of violet silk with the bib our peasant women were so foolish as to suppress, which added so much elegance and decency to the breast. Nowadays they display their scarfs more proudly, but there is no longer in their dress that delicate flower of the purity of long ago, which made them look like Holbein's virgins. They are more forward and more profuse in their courtesies. The good old custom used to be a kind of staid reserve which made their rare smile deeper and more ideal.

During the offertory, after the fashion of the day, Germain placed the "thirteen"—that is to say, thirteen pieces of silver—in his bride's hand. He slipped over her finger a silver ring of a form unchanged for centuries, but which is replaced for henceforth by the golden wedding-ring. As they walked out of church, Marie said in a low voice:

"Is this really the ring I wanted? Is it the one I asked you for, Germain?"

"Yes," answered he, "my Catherine wore it on her finger when she died. There is but one ring for both my weddings."

"Thank you, Germain," said the young woman, in a serious and impressive tone. "I shall die with it on, and if I go before you, you must keep it for the marriage of your little Solange."



IV

The Cabbage

They mounted and returned very quickly to Belair. The feast was bountiful, and, mingled with songs and dances, it lasted until midnight. For fourteen hours the old people did not leave the table. The grave-digger did the cooking, and did it very well. He was celebrated for this, and he would leave his fire to come in and dance and sing before and after every course. And yet this poor Father Bontemps was epileptic. Who would have thought it? He was fresh and strong, and merry as a young man. One day we found him in a ditch, struck down by his malady at nightfall. We carried him home with us, in a wheelbarrow, and we spent all night in caring for him. Three days afterward, he was at a wedding, singing like a thrush, jumping like a kid, and bustling about after his old fashion. When he left a marriage, he would go to dig a grave, and nail up a coffin. Then he would become very grave, and though nothing of this appeared in his gay humor, it left a melancholy impression which hastened the return of his attacks. His wife was paralyzed, and had not stirred from her chair for twenty years. His mother is living yet, at a hundred and forty, but he, poor man, so happy and good and amusing, was killed last year by falling from his loft to the sidewalk. Doubtless he died a victim to a fatal attack of his disease, and, as was his habit, had hidden in the hay, so as not to frighten and distress his family. In this tragic manner he ended a life strange as his disposition—a medley of things sad and mad, awful and gay; and, in the midst of all, his heart was ever good and his nature kind.

Now we come to the third day of the wedding, the most curious of all, which is kept to-day in all its vigor. We shall not speak of the roast which they carry to the bridal bed; it is a very silly custom, and hurts the self-respect of the bride, while it tends to ruin the modesty of the attendant girls. Besides, I believe that it is practised in all the provinces, and does not belong peculiarly to our own.

Just as the ceremony of the wedding favors is a symbol that the heart and home of the bride are won, that of the cabbage is a symbol of the fruitfulness of marriage. When breakfast is over on the day after the wedding, this fantastic representation begins. Originally of Gallic derivation, it has passed through primitive Christianity, and little by little it has become a kind of mystery, or droll morality-play of the Middle Ages.

Two boys, the merriest and most intelligent of the company, disappear from breakfast, and after costuming themselves, return escorted by dogs, children, and pistol-shots. They represent a pair of beggars—husband and wife—dressed in rags. The husband is the filthier of the two; it is vice which has brought him so low; the wife is unhappy and degraded only through the misdeeds of her husband.

They are called the gardener and the gardener's wife, and they pretend it is their duty to guard and care for the sacred cabbage. The husband has several names, each with a meaning. Sometimes they call him the "scarecrow," because his head is covered with straw or hemp, and because his legs and a portion of his body are surrounded with straw to hide his nakedness, ill concealed by his rags. He has also a great belly, or hump, constructed of straw or hay underneath his blouse. Then he is known as the "ragamuffin," on account of his covering of rags. Lastly he is termed the "infidel," and this is most significant of all, because by his cynicism and his debauchery he is supposed to typify the opposite of every Christian virtue.

He comes with his face all smeared with soot and the lees of wine, and sometimes made yet more hideous by a grotesque mask. An earthenware cup, notched and broken, or an old sabot attached to his girdle by a cord, shows that he has come to beg for alms of wine. Nobody refuses him, and he pretends to drink; then he pours the wine on the ground by way of libation. At every step he falls, rolls in the mud, and feigns to be a prey to the most shameful drunkenness. His poor wife runs after him, picks him up, calls for help, arranges his hempen locks, which straggle forth in unkempt wisps from beneath his filthy hat, sheds tears over her husband's degradation, and pours forth pathetic reproaches.

"Wretched man," she cries, "see the misery to which your wickedness has brought us. I have to spend all my time sewing and working for you, mending your clothes. You tear and bedraggle yourself incessantly. You have eaten up all my little property; our six children lie on straw, and we are living in a stable with the beasts. Here we are forced to beg for alms, and, besides, you are so ugly and vile and despicable that very soon they will be tossing us bread as if we were dogs. Ah, my poor people, take pity on us! Take pity on me! I haven't deserved my lot, and never had woman a more dirty and detestable husband. Help me to pick him up, else the wagons will

run over him as they run over broken bottles, and I shall be a widow, and that will end by killing me with grief, though all the world says it would be an excellent riddance for me." Such is the part of the gardener's wife, and her continued lamentations last during the entire play. For it is a genuine spontaneous comedy acted on the spur of the moment in the open air, along the roads and across the fields, aided by every chance occurrence that presents itself. Everybody shares in the acting, people within the wedding-party and people without, wayfarers and dwellers in houses, for three or four hours of the day, as we shall see. The theme is always the same, but the variations are infinite; and it is here that we can see the instinct of mimicry, the abundance of droll ideas, the fluency, the wit at repartee, and even the natural eloquence of our peasants.

The rôle of gardener's wife is intrusted commonly to a slender man, beardless and fresh of face, who can give a great appearance of truth to his personification and plays the burlesque despair naturally enough to make people sad and glad at once, as they are in real life. These thin, beardless men are not rare among us, and, strangely enough, they are sometimes most remarkable for their muscular strength.

When the wife's misfortunes have been explained, the young men of the company try to persuade her to leave her drunken husband and to amuse herself with them. They offer her their arms and drag her away. Little by little she gives way; her spirits rise, and she begins to run about, first with one and then with another, and grows more scandalous in her behavior: a fresh "morality"; the ill-conduct of the husband excites and aggravates the evil in the wife.

Then the "infidel" wakes from his drunkenness. He looks about for his companion, arms himself with a rope and a stick and rushes after her. They make him run, they hide, they pass the wife from one to another, they try to divert her attention and to deceive her jealous spouse. His friends try to get him drunk. At length he catches his unfaithful wife, and wishes to beat her. What is truest and most carefully portrayed in this play is that the jealous husband never attacks the men who carry off his wife. He is very polite and prudent with them, and wishes only to take vengeance on the sinning woman, because she is supposed to be too feeble to offer resistance.

At the moment, however, when he raises his stick and prepares his cord to strike the delinquent, all the men in the party interpose and throw themselves between husband and wife.

"Don't strike her! Never strike your wife," is the formula repeated to satiety during these scenes. They disarm the husband, and force him to pardon and to kiss his wife, and soon he pretends to love her better than ever. He walks along, his arm linked in hers, singing and dancing until, in a new access of drunkenness, he rolls upon the ground, and then begin all over again the lamentations of the wife, her discouragements, her pretended unfaithfulness, her husband's jealousy, the interference of the neighbors, and the reconciliation. In all this there is a simple and even coarse lesson, which, though it savors strongly of its Middle-Age origin, does not fail to fix its impression if not on the married folk, who are too loving or too sensible to have need of it, at least upon the children and the young people. The "infidel," racing after young girls and pretending to wish to kiss them, frightens and disgusts them to such a degree that they fly in unaffected terror. His dirty face and his great stick, harmless as it is, make the children shriek aloud. It is the comedy of customs in their most elementary but their most striking state.

When this farce is well under way, people make ready to hunt for the cabbage. They bring a stretcher and place upon it the "infidel," armed with a spade, a cord, and a large basket. Four powerful men raise him on their shoulders. His wife follows on foot, and after her come the "elders" in a body with serious and thoughtful looks; then the wedding-march begins by couples to a step tuned to music. Pistol-shots begin anew, and dogs bark louder than ever at the sight of the filthy "infidel" borne aloft in triumph. The children swing incense in derision with sabots fastened at the end of a cord.

But why this ovation to an object so repulsive? They are marching to the capture of the sacred cabbage, emblem of the fruitfulness of marriage, and it is this drunkard alone who can bear the symbolic plant in his hand. Doubtless, there is in it a pre-Christian mystery which recalls the Saturnalian feasts or some rout of the Bacchanals. Perhaps this "infidel," who is, at the same time, preeminently a gardener, is none other than Priapus himself, god of gardens and of drunkenness, a divinity who must have been pure and serious in his origin as is the mystery of birth, but who has been degraded bit by bit through license of manners and distraction of thought.

However this may be, the triumphal procession arrives at the bride's house, and enters the garden. Then they select the choicest cabbage, and this is not done very quickly, for the old people keep consulting and disputing interminably, each one pleading for the cabbage he thinks most suitable. They put it to vote, and when the choice is made the gardener fastens his cord to the stalk, and moves away as far as the size of the garden permits. The gardener's wife takes care that the sacred vegetable shall not be hurt in its fall. The wits of the wedding, the hemp-dresser, the grave-digger, the carpenter, and the sabot-maker, form a ring about the cabbage, for men who do not till the soil, but pass their lives in other people's houses, are thought to be, and are really, wittier and more talkative than simple farmhands. One digs, with a spade, a ditch deep enough to uproot an oak. Another places on his nose a pair of wooden or cardboard spectacles. He fulfils the duties of "engineer," walks up and down, constructs a plan, stares at the workmen through his glasses, plays the pedant, cries out that everything will be spoiled, has the work stopped and begun afresh as his fancy directs, and makes the whole performance as long and ridiculous as he can. This is an addition to the formula of an ancient ceremony held in mockery of theorists in general, for peasants despise them royally, or from hatred of the surveyors who decide boundaries and regulate taxes, or of the workmen employed on bridges and causeways,

who transform commons into highways, and suppress old abuses which the peasants love. Be this as it may, this character in the comedy is called the "geometrician," and does his best to make himself unbearable to those who are toiling with pickaxe and shovel.

After a quarter of an hour spent in mummery, and difficulties raised in order to avoid cutting the roots, and to transplant the cabbage without injury, while shovelfuls of dirt are tossed into the faces of the onlookers,—so much the worse for him who does not retreat in time, for were he bishop or prince he must receive the baptism of earth,—the "infidel" pulls the rope, the "infidel's wife" holds her apron, and the cabbage falls majestically amidst the applause of the spectators. Then a basket is brought, and the "infidel" pair plant the cabbage therein with every care and precaution. They surround it with fresh earth, and support it with sticks and strings, such as city florists use for their splendid potted camellias; they fix red apples to the points of the sticks, and twist sprigs of thyme, sage, and laurel all about them; they bedeck the whole with ribbons and streamers; they place the trophy upon the stretcher with the "infidel," whose duty it is to maintain its equilibrium and preserve it from harm; and, at length, they move away from the garden in good order and in marching step.

But when they are about to pass the gate, and again when they enter the yard of the bridegroom's house, an imaginary obstacle blocks the way. The bearers of the burden stagger, utter loud cries, retreat, advance once more, and, as though crushed by a resistless force, they pretend to sink beneath its weight. While this is going on, the bystanders shout loudly, exciting and steadying this human team.

"Slowly, slowly, my child. There, there, courage! Look out! Be patient! Lower your head; the door is too low! Close up; it's too narrow! A little more to the left; now to the right; on with you; don't be afraid; you're almost there."

Thus it is that in years of plentiful harvest, the ox-cart, loaded to overflowing with hay or corn, is too broad or too high to enter the barn door. Thus it is that the driver shouts at the strong beasts, to restrain them or to urge them on; thus it is that with skill and mighty efforts they force this mountain of riches beneath the rustic arch of triumph. It is, above all, the last load, called "the cart of sheaves," which requires these precautions, for this is a rural festival, and the last sheaf lifted from the last furrow is placed on the top of the cart-load ornamented with ribbons and flowers, while the foreheads of the oxen and the whip of the driver are decorated also. The triumphant and toilsome entry of the cabbage into the house is a symbol of the prosperity and fruitfulness it represents.

Safe within the bridegroom's yard, the cabbage is taken from its stretcher and borne to the topmost peak of the house or barn. Whether it be a chimney, a gable, or a dove-cote that crowns the roof, the burden must, at any risk, be carried to the very highest point of the building. The "infidel" accompanies it as far as this, sets it down securely, and waters it with a great pitcher of wine, while a salvo of pistol-shots and demonstrations of joy from the "infidel's wife" proclaim its inauguration.

Without delay, the same ceremony is repeated all over again. Another cabbage is dug from the garden of the husband and is carried with the same formalities and laid upon the roof which his wife has deserted to follow him. These trophies remain in their places until the wind and the rain destroy the baskets and carry away the cabbage. Yet their lives are long enough to give some chance of fulfilment to the prophecies which the old men and women make with bows and courtesies.

"Beautiful cabbage," they say, "live and flourish that our young bride may have a fine baby before a year is over; for if you die too quickly it is a sign of barrenness, and you will stick up there like an ill omen."

The day is already far gone when all these things are accomplished. All that remains undone is to take home the godfathers and godmothers of the newly married couple. When the so-called parents dwell at a distance, they are accompanied by the music and the whole wedding procession as far as the limits of the parish; there they dance anew on the highroad, and everybody kisses them good-by. The "infidel" and his wife are then washed and dressed decently, if the fatigue of their parts has not already driven them away to take a nap.

Everybody was still dancing and singing and eating in the Town Hall of Belair at midnight on this third day of the wedding when Germain was married. The old men at table could not stir, and for good reason. They recovered neither their legs nor their wits until dawn on the morrow. While they were regaining their dwellings, silently and with uncertain steps, Germain, proud and active, went out to hitch his oxen, leaving his young wife to slumber until daylight. The lark, caroling as it mounted to the skies, seemed to him the voice of his heart returning thanks to Providence. The hoar-frost, sparkling on the leafless bushes, seemed to him the whiteness of April flowers that comes before the budding leaves. Everything in nature was laughing and happy for him. Little Pierre had laughed and jumped so much the evening before that he did not come to help lead his oxen; but Germain was glad to be alone. He fell on his knees in the furrow he was about to plow afresh, and said his morning prayer with such a burst of feeling that two tears rolled down his cheeks, still moist with sweat.

Afar off he heard the songs of the boys from neighboring villages, who were starting on their return home, singing again in their hoarse voices the happy tunes of the night before.

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