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Title: Pride: One of the Seven Cardinal Sins

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Release Date: November 16, 2010 [EBook #34345]

Language: English

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"'Here Is a Very Important Letter'"

Pride
One of the Seven Cardinal Sins
By Eugene Sue

Illustrated with Etchings by Adrian Marcel

In Two Volumes

Dana Estes & Company Publishers
Boston

THE SEVEN CARDINAL SINS
PRIDE

Contents Volume I.
List of Illustrations Volume I.
Contents Volume II.
List of Illustrations Volume II.

CONTENTS

VOLUME I.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

PRIDE.

Vol. I.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD COMMANDER.

Elle avait un vice, l'orgueil, qui lui tenait lieu de toutes les qualités.[A]

[A] She had one fault, pride, which, in her, answered in place of all the virtues.

Commander Bernard, a resident of Paris, after having served under the Empire in the Marine Corps, and under the Restoration as a lieutenant in the navy, was retired about the year 1830, with the brevet rank of captain.

Honourably mentioned again and again for his daring exploits in the maritime engagements of the East Indian war, and subsequently recognised as one of the bravest soldiers in the Russian campaign, M. Bernard, the most unassuming and upright of men, with the kindest heart in the world, lived quietly and frugally upon his modest pension, in a little apartment on one of the least frequented streets of the Batignolles.

An elderly woman, named Madame Barbançon, had kept house for him ten years or more, and, though really very fond of him, led him a rather hard life at times, for the worthy female, who had an extremely high temper and a very despotic disposition, was very fond of reminding her employer that she had sacrificed an enviable social position to serve him.

The real truth was, Madame Barbançon had long acted as assistant in the establishment of a well-known midwife, —an experience which furnished her with material for an inexhaustible stock of marvellous stories, her great

favourite being her adventure with a masked lady who, with her assistance, had brought a lovely girl baby into the world, a child Madame Barbançon had taken care of for two years, but which had been claimed by a stranger at the expiration of that time.

Four or five years after this memorable event, Madame Barbançon decided to resign her practice and assume the twofold functions of nurse and housekeeper.

About this time Commander Bernard, who was suffering greatly from the reopening of several old wounds, needed a nurse, and was so well pleased with Madame Barbançon's skill that he asked her to enter his service.

"You will have a pretty easy time of it, Mother Barbançon," the veteran said to her. "I am not hard to live with, and we shall get along comfortably together."

Madame Barbançon promptly accepted the offer, elevated herself forthwith to the position of Commander Bernard's *dame de confiance*, and slowly but surely became a veritable servant-mistress. Indeed, seeing the angelic patience with which the commander endured this domestic tyranny, one would have taken the old naval officer for some meek-spirited *rentier*, instead of one of the bravest soldiers of the Empire.

Commander Bernard was passionately fond of gardening, and lavished any amount of care and attention upon a little arbour, constructed by his own hands and covered with clematis, hop-vines, and honeysuckle, where he loved to sit after his frugal dinner and smoke his pipe and think of his campaigns and his former companions in arms. This arbour marked the limits of the commander's landed possessions, for though very small, the garden was divided into two parts. The portion claimed by Madame Barbançon aspired only to be useful; the other, of which the veteran took entire charge, was intended to please the eye only.

The precise boundaries of these two plats of ground had been, and were still, the cause of a quiet but determined struggle between the commander and his housekeeper.

Never did two nations, anxious to extend their frontiers, each at the expense of the other, resort to more trickery or display greater cleverness and perseverance in concealing and maintaining their mutual attempts at invasion.

We must do the commander the justice to say that he fought only for his rights, having no desire to extend, but merely to preserve his territory intact,—territory upon which the bold and insatiable housekeeper was ever trying to encroach by establishing her thyme, savory, parsley, and camomile beds among her employer's roses, tulips, and peonies.

Another cause of heated controversy between the commander and Madame Barbançon was the implacable hatred the latter felt for Napoleon, whom she had never forgiven for the death of a young soldier,—the only lover she had ever been able to boast of, probably. She carried this rancour so far, in fact, as to style the Emperor that "Corsican ogre," and even to deny him the possession of any military genius, an asseveration that amused the veteran immensely.

Nevertheless, in spite of these diverse political sentiments, and the ever recurring and annoying question of the boundaries of the two gardens, Madame Barbançon was, at heart, sincerely devoted to her employer, and attended assiduously to his every want, while the veteran, for his part, would have sorely missed his irascible housekeeper's care and attentions.

The spring of 1844 was fast drawing to a close. The May verdure was shining in all its freshness; three o'clock in the afternoon had just sounded; and though the day was warm, and the sun's rays ardent, the pleasant scent of freshly watered earth, combined with the fragrant odour of several small clumps of lilacs and syringas, testified to the faithful care the commander bestowed upon his garden, for from a frequently and laboriously filled wash-tub sunk in the earth, and dignified with the name of reservoir, the veteran had just treated his little domain to a refreshing shower; nor had he, in his generous impartiality, excluded his housekeeper's vegetable beds and kitchen herbs from the benefits of his ministrations.

The veteran, in his gardening costume of gray linen jacket and big straw hat, was now resting from his labours in the arbour, already nearly covered with a vigorous growth of clematis and honeysuckle. His sunburned features were characterised by an expression of unusual frankness and kindness, though a heavy moustache, as white as his bristling white hair, imparted a decidedly martial air to his physiognomy.

After wiping the sweat from his forehead with a blue checked handkerchief and returning it to his pocket, the veteran picked up his pipe from a table in the arbour, filled and lighted it, then, establishing himself in an old cane-bottomed armchair, began to smoke and enjoy the beauty of the day, the stillness of which was broken only by the occasional twitter of a few birds and the humming of Madame Barbançon, who was engaged in gathering some lettuce and parsley for the supper salad. If the veteran had not been blessed with nerves of steel, his *dolce far niente* would have been sadly disturbed by the monotonous refrain of the old-fashioned love song entitled "Poor Jacques," which the worthy woman was murdering in the most atrocious manner.

"Mais à présent que je suis loin de toi,
Je mange de tout sur la terre,"[B]

she sang in a voice as false as it was nasal, and the lugubrious, heart-broken expression she gave to the words, shaking her head sadly the while, made the whole thing extremely ludicrous.

[B] Instead of "Je manque de tout sur la terre."

For ten years Commander Bernard had endured this travesty without a murmur, and without taking the slightest notice of the ridiculous meaning Madame Barbançon gave to the last line of the chorus.

It is quite possible that to-day the meaning of the words struck him more forcibly, and that a desire to devour everything upon the surface of the earth did not seem to him to be the natural consequence of separation from one's

beloved, for, after having lent an impartial and attentive ear a second time to his housekeeper's doleful ditty, he exclaimed, laying his pipe on the table:

"What the devil is that nonsense you are singing, Madame Barbançon?"

"It is a very pretty love song called 'Poor Jacques,'" snapped Madame Barbançon, straightening herself up. "Every one to his taste, you know, monsieur, and you have a perfect right to make fun of it, if you choose, of course. This isn't the first time you have heard me sing it, though."

"No, no, you're quite right about that!" responded the commander, satirically.

"I learned the song," resumed the housekeeper, sighing heavily, "in days—in days—but enough!" she exclaimed, burying her regrets in her capacious bosom. "I sang it, I remember, to that masked lady who came—"

"I'd rather hear the song," hastily exclaimed the veteran, seeing himself threatened with the same tiresome story. "Yes, I much prefer the song to the story. It isn't so long, but the deuce take me if I understand you when you say:

"'Mais à présent que je suis loin de toi,
Je mange de tout sur la terre.'"

"What, monsieur, you don't understand?"

"No, I don't."

"It is very plain it seems to me, but soldiers are so unfeeling."

"But think a moment, Mother Barbançon; here is a girl who, in her despair at poor Jacques's absence, sets about eating everything on the face of the earth."

"Of course, monsieur, any child could understand that."

"But I do not, I must confess."

"What! you can't understand that this unfortunate young girl is so heart-broken, after her lover's departure, that she is ready to eat anything and everything—even poison, poor thing! Her life is of so little value to her,—she is so wretched that she doesn't even know what she is doing, and so eats everything that happens to be within reach—and yet, her misery doesn't move you in the least."

The veteran listened attentively to this explanation, which did not seem to him so entirely devoid of reason, now, after all.

"Yes, yes, I understand," he responded, nodding his head; "but it is like all love songs—extremely far-fetched."

"'Poor Jacques' far-fetched? The idea!" cried Madame Barbançon, indignantly.

"'Every one to his taste,' as you remarked a moment ago," answered the veteran. "I like our old sea songs very much better. A man knows what he is singing about when he sings them."

And in a voice as powerful as it was discordant, the old captain began to sing:

"Pour aller à Lorient pêcher des sardines,
Pour aller à Lorient pêcher des harengs—"

"Monsieur!" exclaimed Madame Barbançon, interrupting her employer, with a highly incensed and prudish air, for she knew the end of the ditty, "you forget there are ladies present."

"Is that so?" demanded the veteran, straining his neck to see outside of the arbour.

"There is no need to make such an effort as that, it seems to me," remarked the housekeeper, with great dignity. "You can see me easy enough, I should think."

"That is true, Mother Barbançon. I always forget that you belong to the other sex, but for all that I like my song much better than I do yours. It was a great favourite on the *Armide*, the frigate on which I shipped when I was only fourteen, and afterwards we sang it many a time on dry land when I was in the Marine Corps. Oh, those were happy days! I was young then."

"Yes, and then Bû-û-onaparte"—it is absolutely necessary to spell and accent the word in this way, to give the reader any idea of the disdainful and sneering manner in which Mother Barbançon uttered the name of the great man who had been the cause of her brave soldier boy's death—"Bû-û-onaparte was your leader."

"Yes, the Emperor, that 'Corsican ogre,' the Emperor you revile so, wasn't far off, I admit."

"Yes, monsieur, your Emperor was an ogre, and worse than an ogre."

"What! worse than an ogre?"

"Yes, yes, laugh as much as you like, but he was. Do you know, monsieur, that when that Corsican ogre had the Pope in his power at Fontainebleau, do you know how grossly he insulted our Holy Father, your beast of a Bû-û-onaparte?"

"No, Mother Barbançon, I never heard of it, upon my word of honour."

"It is of no use for you to deny it; I heard it from a young man in the guards—"

"Who must be a pretty old customer by this time, but let us hear the story."

"Ah, well, monsieur, your Bû-û-onaparte was mean enough, in his longing to humiliate the Pope, to harness him to the little King of Rome's carriage, then get into it and make the poor Holy Father drag him across the park at Fontainebleau, in order that he might go in this fashion to announce his divorce to the Empress Josephine—that poor, dear, good woman!"

"What, Mother Barbançon," exclaimed the old sailor, almost choking with laughter, "that scoundrel of an Emperor made the Pope drag him across the park in the King of Rome's carriage to tell the Empress Josephine of his divorce?"

"Yes, monsieur, in order to torment her on account of her religion, just as he forced her to eat a big ham every Good Friday in the presence of Roustan, that dreadful mameluke of his, who used to boast of being a Mussulman and talk about his harem before the priests, just to insult the clergy, until they blushed with shame. There is nothing to laugh at in all this, monsieur. At one time, everybody knew and talked about it, even—"

But, unfortunately, the housekeeper was unable to continue her tirade. Her recriminations were just then interrupted by a vigorous peal of the bell, and she hurried off to open the door.

A few words of explanation are necessary before the introduction of a new character, Olivier Raymond, Commander Bernard's nephew.

The veteran's sister had married a copyist in the Interior Department, and after several years of wedded life the clerk died, leaving a widow and one son, then about eight years of age; after which several friends of the deceased interested themselves in the fatherless boy's behalf, and secured him a scholarship in a fairly good school.

The widow, left entirely without means, and having no right to a pension, endeavoured to support herself by her needle, but after a few years of pinched and laborious existence she left her son an orphan. His uncle Bernard, his sole relative, was then a lieutenant in command of a schooner attached to one of our naval stations in the Southern Pacific. Upon his return to France, the captain found that his nephew's last year in college was nearing an end. Olivier, though his college course had been marked by no particularly brilliant triumphs, had at least thoroughly profited by his gratuitous education, but unfortunately, this education being, as is often the case, far from practical, his future on leaving college was by no means assured.

After having reflected long and seriously upon his nephew's precarious position, and being unable to give him any pecuniary assistance by reason of the smallness of his own pay, Commander Bernard said to Olivier:

"My poor boy, there is but one thing for you to do. You are strong, brave, and intelligent. You have received an education which renders you superior to most of the poor young men who enlist in the army. The conscription is almost sure to catch you next year. Get ahead of it. Enlist. In that case, you will at least be able to select the branch of the service you will enter. There is fighting in Africa, and in five or six years you are likely to be made an officer. This will give you some chance of a career. Still, if the idea of a military life is distasteful to you, my dear boy, we will try to think of something else. We can get along on my pay, as a retired officer, until something else offers. Now think the matter over."

Olivier was not long in making up his mind. Three months afterward he enlisted, on condition that he should be assigned to the African Chasseurs. A year later he was a quartermaster's sergeant; one year afterward a quartermaster. Attacked with one of those stubborn fevers, which a return to a European climate alone can cure, Olivier, unfortunately, was obliged to leave Africa just as he had every reason to expect an officer's epaulettes. After his recovery he was assigned to a regiment of hussars, and, after eighteen months' service in that, he had recently come to spend a six months' furlough in Paris, with his uncle.

The old sailor's flat consisted of a tiny kitchen, into which Madame Barbançon's room opened, of a sort of hall-way, which served as a dining-room, and another considerably larger room, in which the commander and his nephew slept. Olivier, knowing how little his uncle had to live on, would not consent to remain idle. He wrote a remarkably good hand, and this, together with the knowledge of accounts acquired while acting as quartermaster, enabled him to secure several sets of books to keep among the petty merchants in the neighbourhood; so, instead of being a burden upon the veteran, the young officer, with Madame Barbançon's connivance, secretly added his mite to the forty-eight francs' pay the commander received each month, besides treating his uncle now and then to agreeable surprises, which both delighted and annoyed the worthy man, knowing, as he did, the assiduous labour Olivier imposed upon himself to earn this money.

Accustomed from childhood to privations of every kind, first by his experience as a charity pupil, and subsequently by the vicissitudes of army life in Africa, kind-hearted, genial, enthusiastic, and brave, Olivier had but one fault, that is, if an excessive delicacy in all money matters, great and small, can be called a fault. As a common soldier, he even carried his scruples so far that he would refuse the slightest invitation from his comrades, if he was not allowed to pay his own score. This extreme sensitiveness having been at first ridiculed and considered mere affectation, two duels, in which Olivier quite covered himself with glory, caused this peculiarity in the character of the young soldier to be both accepted and respected.

Olivier, cheerful, obliging, quick-witted, and delighted with everything, enlivened his uncle's modest home immensely by his gay spirits. In his rare moments of leisure the young man cultivated his taste by reading the great poets, or else he spaded and watered and gardened with his uncle, after which they smoked their pipes, and talked of foreign lands and of war. At other times, calling into play the culinary knowledge acquired in African camps, Olivier initiated Madame Barbançon into the mysteries of *brochettes de mouton* and other viands, the cooking lessons being enlivened with jokes and all sorts of teasing remarks about Bû-û-onaparte, though the housekeeper scolded and snubbed Olivier none the less because she loved him with her whole heart. In short, the young man's presence had cheered the monotonous existence of the veteran and his housekeeper so much that their hearts quite failed them when they recollected that two months of Olivier's leave had already expired.

CHAPTER II.

THE BRAVE DUKE.

OLIVIER RAYMOND was not more than twenty-four years of age, and possessed a singularly expressive and attractive face. His short, white hussar jacket, trimmed with red and decorated with yellow frogs, his well-cut, light blue trousers, that fitted his well-formed supple limbs perfectly, and his blue kepi, perched upon one side of a head covered with hair of the same bright chestnut hue as his moustache, imparted an extremely dashing and martial air to his appearance, only, instead of a sabre, Olivier carried that day under his left arm a big roll of papers, and in his right hand a formidable bundle of pens.

As the young man deposited these eminently peaceful implements upon a table, he turned, and exclaimed gaily, "How are you, Mamma Barbançon?"

In fact, he even had the audacity to put his long arms about the housekeeper's bony waist, and give her a slight squeeze as he spoke.

"Will you never have done with your nonsense, you rascal?" snapped the delighted housekeeper.

"Oh, this is only the beginning. I've got to make a complete conquest of you, Mamma Barbançon."

"Of me?"

"Unquestionably. It is absolutely necessary. I'm compelled to do it."

"And why?"

"In order to induce you to grant me a favour."

"We'll see about that. What is it?"

"Tell me first where my uncle is."

"Smoking his pipe out under the arbour."

"All right! Wait for me here, Mamma Barbançon, and prepare your mind for something startling."

"Something startling, M. Olivier?"

"Yes, something monstrous—unheard-of—impossible!"

"Monstrous—unheard-of—" repeated Madame Barbançon, wonderingly, as she watched the young soldier dash off in pursuit of his uncle.

"How are you, my lad? I didn't expect you so early," said the old captain, holding out his hand to his nephew in pleased surprise. "Home so soon! But so much the better!"

"So much the better!" retorted Olivier, gaily. "On the contrary, you little know what is in store for you. Courage, uncle, courage!"

"Stop your nonsense, you young scoundrel!"

"Close your eyes, and now, 'forward march!'"

"Forward march? Against whom?"

"Against Mother Barbançon, my brave uncle."

"But why?"

"To break the news that—that—that I have invited—some one to dinner."

"The devil!" exclaimed the veteran, recoiling a step or two in evident dismay.

"To dinner—to-day," continued the young lieutenant.

"The devil!" reiterated the veteran, recoiling three steps this time.

"Moreover, my guest—is a duke," continued Olivier.

"A duke! We are lost!" faltered the veteran.

And this time he entirely vanished from sight in his verdant refuge, where he seemed as resolved to maintain his stand as if in some impregnable fortress. "May the devil and all his imps seize me if I undertake to announce any such fact as this to Mother Barbançon!"

"What, uncle,—an officer of marines—afraid?"

"But you've no idea what a scrape you've got yourself into, young man! It's a desperate case, I tell you. You don't know Madame Barbançon. But, good heavens, here she comes now!"

"Our retreat is cut off, uncle," laughed the young man, as Madame Barbançon, whose curiosity had been excited to such a degree that she could wait no longer, appeared in the entrance to the arbour. "My guest will be here in an hour at the very latest, and we needs must conquer or perish of hunger,—you and I and my guest, whose name, I ought to tell you, is the Duc de Senneterre."

"It's no affair of mine, unhappy boy," responded the commander. "Tell her yourself; here she is."

But Olivier only laughed, and, turning to the dreaded housekeeper, exclaimed:

"My uncle has something to tell you, Madame Barbançon."

"There's not a word of truth in what he says," protested the veteran, wiping the sweat from his brow with his checked handkerchief. "It is Olivier who has something to tell you."

"Come, come, uncle, Mother Barbançon is not as dangerous as she looks. Make a clean breast of it."

"It is your affair, my boy. Get out of the scrape as best you can."

The housekeeper, after having glanced first at the uncle and then at the nephew with mingled curiosity and anxiety, at last asked, turning to her employer:

"What is it, monsieur?"

"Ask Olivier, my dear woman. As for me, I've nothing whatever to do with it; I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"Ah, well, Mamma Barbançon," said the young soldier, bravely, "you are to lay three covers instead of two at dinner, that is all."

"Three covers, M. Olivier, and why?"

"Because I have invited a former comrade to dine with us."

"*Bon Dieu!*" exclaimed the housekeeper, evidently more terrified than angry, "a guest, and this is not even *pot au feu* day. We have only an onion soup, a vinaigrette made out of yesterday's beef, and a salad."

"And what more could you possibly want, Mamma Barbançon?" cried Olivier, joyously, for he had not expected to find the larder nearly so well supplied. "An onion soup concocted by you, a vinaigrette and a salad seasoned by you, make a banquet for the gods, and my comrade, Gerald, will dine like a king. Take notice that I do not say like an emperor, Mamma Barbançon."

But this delicate allusion to madame's anti-Bonapartist opinions passed unnoticed. For the moment the worshipper of the departed guardsman was lost in the anxious housewife.

"To think that you couldn't have selected a *pot au feu* day when it would have been such an easy matter, M. Olivier," she exclaimed, reproachfully.

"It was not I but my comrade who chose the day, Mamma Barbançon."

"But in polite society, M. Olivier, it is a very common thing to say plainly: 'Don't come to-day; come to-morrow. We shall have the *pot au feu* then.' But, after all, I don't suppose we've got dukes and peers to deal with."

Olivier was strongly tempted to excite the worthy housewife's perturbation to the highest pitch by telling her that it was indeed a duke that was coming to eat her vinaigrette, but scarcely daring to subject Madame Barbançon's culinary self-love to this severe test, he contented himself with saying:

"The mischief is done, Mamma Barbançon, so all I ask is that you will not put me to shame in the presence of an old African comrade."

"Great heavens! Is it possible you fear that, M. Olivier? Put you to shame—I? Quite the contrary, for I would like—"

"It is getting late," said Olivier, "and my friend will soon be here, as hungry as a wolf, so, Mamma Barbançon, take pity on us!"

"True, I haven't a minute to lose."

And the worthy woman bustled away, repeating dolefully, "To think he couldn't have chosen *pot au feu* day."

"Well, she took it much better than I expected," remarked the veteran. "It is evident that she is very fond of you. But now, between ourselves, my dear nephew, you ought to have warned me of your intentions, so your friend might have found, at least, a passable dinner, but you just ask him to come and take pot-luck; and he is a duke into the bargain. But, tell me, how the deuce did you happen to have a duke for a comrade in the African Chasseurs?"

"I'll explain, my dear uncle, for I'm sure you'll take a great fancy to my friend Gerald. There are not many of his stamp to be found nowadays, I assure you. We were classmates at the college of Louis le Grand. I left for Africa. Six months afterward my friend Gerald was in the ranks beside me."

"A private?"

"Yes."

"But why didn't he enter the army by way of St. Cyr? It was merely a whim or caprice on his part, I suppose, this enlisting?"

"No, uncle; on the contrary, Gerald's conduct in the matter has been the result of profound reflection. He is a grand seigneur by birth, being, as I told you just now, the Duc de Senneterre."

"That is a name that has figured prominently in the history of France," remarked the old sailor.

"Yes, the house of Senneterre is as ancient as it is illustrious, uncle, but Gerald's family has lost the greater part of the immense fortune it once possessed. There remains now, I think, an income of barely forty thousand francs a year. That is a good deal of money for the generality of people, but not for persons of noble birth; besides, Gerald has two

sisters who must be provided with dowries."

"But tell me how and why your young duke happened to join the army as a private?"

"In the first place, my friend Gerald is very original in his ideas, and has all kinds of odd notions about life. When he found himself within the conscription age, on leaving college, his father—he had a father then—remarked one day, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that arrangements must be made to secure a substitute if any such contingency should arise, and do you know what this peculiar friend of mine replied?"

"Tell me."

"'Father,' said Gerald, 'this is a duty that every right-minded man owes to his country. It is an obligation of race, particularly when a war is actually going on, and I consider it an ignoble act to endeavour to escape the dangers of war by hiring some poor devil to leave his farm or work-bench and go and run the risk of being killed in your stead. To do this is to confess oneself a coward, and, as I am not desirous of such a reputation, I shall serve, if my name is drawn.'"

"Zounds! I'm in love with your young duke, already!" exclaimed the veteran.

"He stated the case pretty correctly, didn't he?" replied Olivier, with friendly complacency. "Though this resolution seemed very strange to his father, that gentleman had too keen a sense of honour to oppose it. Gerald's name was drawn, and that is the way he happened to be a private in the African Chasseurs, currying his horse, doing his share of the stable and kitchen work like the rest of us, and even going to the guard-house without a word of complaint if he absented himself without permission. In short, there wasn't a better soldier in the regiment."

"Nor a braver, too, I'll be bound," said the veteran, more and more interested.

"Brave as a lion, and so gay and enthusiastic when he charged upon the enemy that he would have fired the hearts of a whole battalion!"

"But with his name and connections, I should think he would soon have been made an officer."

"And so he would, doubtless, though he cared nothing about it, for when his term of service expired, and he had paid his debt to his country, as he expressed it, he said he wanted to return and again enjoy the pleasures of Paris life of which he was passionately fond. After three years of service Gerald had become a quartermaster like myself. About this time he was severely wounded in the shoulder during a bold charge upon quite a large body of Arabs. Fortunately, I was able to extricate him and carry him off the field,—lifeless to all appearance,—on my horse. The result was he was furloughed, and on leaving the service he went back to Paris. We had become quite intimate, and after his return to France we kept up quite a brisk correspondence. I hoped to meet him again upon my arrival here, but I learned that he was travelling in England. This morning, as I was walking along the boulevard, I heard some one call me at the top of his voice, and, turning, I saw Gerald jump out of a handsome cabriolet, and a second later we were embracing each other as two friends embrace each other on the battlefield after a warm engagement."

"'We must dine and spend the evening together,' he said.' Where are you staying?'

"'With my uncle,' I replied.' I have told him about you a hundred times, and he loves you almost as much as I do.'

"'Very well, then I will come and take dinner with you,' said Gerald. 'I want to see your uncle. I have a thousand things to say to him.'

"And knowing what a kind-hearted, unassuming fellow Gerald is, I assented to his proposal, warning him, however, that I should be obliged to leave him at seven o'clock, exactly as if I were clerk of the court, or was obliged to return to quarters," concluded Olivier, gaily.

"Good lad that you are!" said the commander, affectionately.

"It will give me great pleasure to introduce Gerald to you, uncle, for I know that you will feel at ease with him at once; besides," continued the young soldier, colouring a little, "Gerald is rich, I am poor. He knows my scruples, and as he is aware that I could not afford to pay my share of the bill at any fashionable restaurant, he preferred to invite himself here."

"I understand," said the veteran, "and your young duke shows both delicacy of feeling and kindness of heart in acting thus. Let us at least hope that Madame Barbançon's vinaigrette won't disagree with him," added the commander, laughing.

He had scarcely given utterance to this philanthropical wish when the door-bell gave another loud peal, and a moment afterwards the uncle and nephew saw the young Duc de Senneterre coming down the garden walk preceded by Madame Barbançon, who was in such a state of mental perturbation that she had entirely forgotten to remove her big kitchen apron.

CHAPTER III.

THE DINNER IN THE ARBOUR.

The Duc de Senneterre, who was about Olivier Raymond's age, had a distinguished bearing, and an exceedingly handsome and attractive face, with black hair and moustache, and eyes of a deep rich blue. His attire was marked with an elegant simplicity.

"Uncle, this is Gerald, my best friend, of whom I have so often spoken," said Olivier.

"I am delighted to see you, monsieur," said the veteran, cordially offering his hand to his nephew's friend.

"And I, commander," rejoined Gerald, with that deference to age which is imbibed from prolonged military service, "am sincerely glad to have the honour of pressing your hand. I know all your goodness to Olivier, and as I regard him almost as a brother, you must understand how thoroughly I have always appreciated your devotion to him."

"Gentlemen, will you have your soup in the house or under the arbour, as you usually do when the weather is fine?" inquired Madame Barbançon.

"We will dine in the arbour—if the commander approves, my dear Madame Barbançon," responded Gerald; "it will be charming; the afternoon is perfect."

"Monsieur knows me?" exclaimed the housekeeper, looking first at Olivier, and then at the duke, in great astonishment.

"Know you, Madame Barbançon?" exclaimed Gerald, gaily. "Why, hasn't Olivier spoken of you a hundred times while we were in camp, and haven't we had more than one quarrel all on your account?"

"On my account?"

"Most assuredly. That rascal of an Olivier is a great Bonapartist, you know. He cannot forgive any one for detesting that odious tyrant, and I took your part, for I, too, abhor the tyrant—that vile Corsican ogre!"

"Corsican ogre! You are a man after my own heart, monsieur. Let us shake hands—we understand each other," cried the housekeeper, triumphantly.

And she extended her bony hand to Gerald, who shook it heartily, at the same time remarking to the commander:

"Upon my word, sir, you had better take care, and you, too, Olivier, will have to look out now. Madame Barbançon had no one to help her before, now she will have a sturdy auxiliary in me."

"Look here, Madame Barbançon," exclaimed Olivier, coming to the rescue of his friend whom the housekeeper seemed inclined to monopolise, "Gerald must be nearly famished, you forget that. Come, I'll help you bring the table out here."

"True, I had forgotten all about dinner," cried the housekeeper, hastening towards the house.

Seeing Olivier start after her, as if to aid her, Gerald said:

"Wait a moment, my dear fellow, do you suppose I'm going to leave all the work to you?"

Then turning to the commander:

"You don't object, I trust, commander. I am making very free, I know, but when we were in the army together Olivier and I set the mess-table more than once, so you will find that I'm not as awkward as you might suppose."

It was a pleasure to see how cleverly and adroitly and gaily Gerald assisted his former comrade in setting the table under the arbour. The task was accomplished so quickly and neatly that one would have supposed that the young duke, like his friend, must have been used to poverty all his life.

To please his friend, Gerald, in half an hour, made a complete conquest of the veteran and his housekeeper, who was delighted beyond expression to see her anti-Bonapartist ally partake with great apparent enjoyment of her onion soup, salad, and vinaigrette, to which Gerald even asked to be helped twice.

It is needless to say that, during this cheerful repast, the veteran, delicately led on by Gerald, was induced to talk of his campaigns; then, this tribute of respect paid to their companion's superior years, the two young men related all sorts of episodes of their college and army life.

The veteran had lighted his pipe, and Gerald and Olivier their cigars, when the latter happened to inquire of his friend:

"By the way, what has become of that scoundrel, Macreuse, who used to play the spy on us at college? You remember him?—a big, light-haired fellow, who used to cuff us soundly as he passed, just because he dared to, being twice as big as we were."

At the name of Macreuse, Gerald's face took on an expression of mingled contempt and aversion, and he replied:

"You speak rather slightingly,—M. Célestin de Macreuse, it seems to me."

"*De* Macreuse!" cried Olivier. "He must have treated himself to the *de* since we knew him, then. In those days his origin was shrouded in mystery. Nobody knew anything about his parents. He was so poor that he once ate half a dozen wood-lice to earn a sou."

"And then he was so horribly cruel," added Gerald; "do you remember his putting those little birds' eyes out with a pin to see if they would fly afterwards?"

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed the indignant commander. "Such a man as that ought to be flayed alive."

"It would rejoice my heart to see your prediction fulfilled, commander," said Gerald, laughing. Then, turning to

Olivier, he continued: "It will surprise you very much, I think, when I tell you what I know of M. Célestin de Macreuse. I have told you, I believe, how very exclusive the society is in which my mother has always moved, so you can judge of my astonishment when one evening, shortly after my return to Paris, I heard the name of M. de Macreuse announced in my mother's drawing-room. It was the very man. I had retained such an unpleasant recollection of the fellow, that I went to my mother and said:

"'Why do you receive that man who just spoke to you,—that big, light-haired, sallow man?'

"'Why, that is M. de Macreuse,' my mother replied, in tones indicative of the profoundest respect.

"'And who is M. de Macreuse, my dear mother? I never saw him in your house before.'

"'No, for he has just returned from his travels,' she answered. 'He is a very distinguished and highly exemplary young man,—the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission.'

"'The deuce! And what is the St. Polycarpe Mission, my dear mother?'

"'It is a society that strives to make the poor resigned to their misery by teaching them that the more they suffer here, the happier they will be hereafter.'

"'*Se non è vero, è ben trovato*,' I laughingly remarked. 'But it seems to me that this fellow has a very plump face to be advocating the good effects of starvation.'

"'My son, I meant every word that I just said to you,' replied my mother, gravely. 'Many highly esteemed persons have connected themselves with M. de Macreuse's work,—a work to which he devotes himself with truly evangelical zeal. But here he comes. I would like to introduce you to him.'

"'Pray do nothing of the kind, mother,' I retorted, quickly. 'I am sure to be impolite; I do not like the gentleman's looks; besides, what I already know of him makes my antipathy to his acquaintance insurmountable. We were at college together, and—'

"But I was unable to say any more; Macreuse was now close to my mother, and I was standing beside her. 'My dear M. de Macreuse,' she said to her protégé, in the most amiable manner, after casting a withering look at me, 'I wish to introduce my son, one of your former classmates, who will be charmed to renew his acquaintance with you.'

"Macreuse bowed profoundly, then said, in a rather condescending way, 'I have been absent from Paris some time, monsieur, and was consequently ignorant of your return to France, so I did not expect to have the honour of meeting you at your mother's house this evening. We were at college together, and—'

"'That is true,' I interrupted, 'and I recollect perfectly well how you played the spy on us to ingratiate yourself with the teachers; how you would stoop to any dirty trick to make a penny; and how you put out the eyes of little birds with pins. Possibly this last was in the charitable hope that their sufferings here would profit them hereafter.'"

"A clever thrust that!" exclaimed the commander, with a hearty laugh.

"And what did Macreuse say?" asked Olivier.

"The scoundrel's big moon face turned scarlet. He tried to smile and stammer out a few words, but suddenly my mother, looking at me with a reproachful air, rose, and to rescue our friend from his embarrassment, I suppose, said, 'M. de Macreuse, may I ask you to take me to get a cup of tea?'"

"But how did this man gain an entrance into such an exclusive circle as that of the Faubourg St Germain?" inquired Olivier.

"Nobody knows exactly," replied Gerald. "This much is true, however. If one door in our circle opens, all the others soon do the same. But this first door is hard to open, and who opened it for Macreuse nobody knows, though some persons seem to think that it was Abbé Ledoux, a favourite spiritual director in our set. This seems quite probable, and I have taken almost as strong a dislike to the abbé as to Macreuse. If this dislike needed any justification, it would have it, so far as I am concerned, in the estimate of Macreuse's character formed by a singular man who is rarely deceived in his judgment of persons."

"And who is this infallible man, pray?" inquired Olivier, smiling.

"A hunchback no taller than that," replied Gerald, indicating with his hand a height of about four and a half feet.

"A hunchback?" repeated Olivier, greatly surprised.

"Yes, a hunchback, as quick-witted and determined as his satanic majesty himself,—stiff as an iron bar to those whom he dislikes and despises, but full of affection and devotion to those whom he honours—though such persons, I am forced to admit, are rare—and never making the slightest attempt to conceal from any individual the liking or aversion he or she inspires."

"It is fortunate for him that his infirmity gives him this privilege of plain speaking," remarked the commander. "But for that, your hunchback would be likely to have a hard time of it."

"His infirmity?" said Gerald, laughing. "Though a hunchback, the Marquis de Maillefort is, I assure you—"

"He is a marquis?" interrupted Olivier.

"Yes, a marquis, and an aristocrat of the old school. He is a scion of the ducal house of Haut-martel, the head of which has resided in Germany since 1830. But though he is a hunchback, M. de Maillefort, as I was about to remark before, is as alert and vigorous as any young man, in spite of his forty-five years. And, by the way, you and I consider ourselves pretty good swordsmen, do we not?"

"Well, yes."

"Very well; the marquis could touch us eight times out of twelve. He rivals the incomparable Bertrand. His movements are as light as a bird's, and as swift as lightning itself."

"This brave little hunchback interests me very much," said the veteran. "If he has fought any duels his adversaries must have cut strange figures."

"The marquis has fought several duels, in all of which he evinced the greatest coolness and courage, at least so my father, who was a personal friend of the marquis, once told me."

"And he goes into society in spite of his infirmity?" inquired Olivier.

"Sometimes he frequents it assiduously; then absents himself for months at a time. His is a very peculiar nature. My father told me that for many years the marquis seemed to be in a state of profound melancholy, but I have never seen him other than gay and amusing."

"But with his courage, his skill in the use of weapons, and his quick wit, he is certainly a man to be feared."

"Yes, and you can easily imagine how greatly his presence disquiets certain persons whom society continues to receive on account of their birth, in spite of their notorious villainies. Macreuse, for instance, as soon as he sees the marquis enter by one door, makes his escape by another."

The conversation was here interrupted by an incident which would have been unworthy even of comment in some parts of the town, but rare enough in the Batignolles.

The arbour in which the little party had dined skirted the garden wall, and at the farther end of it was a latticed gate, which afforded the occupants a view of the street beyond. A handsome carriage, drawn by two superb horses stopped exactly in front of this gate.

This carriage was empty.

The footman on the box beside the driver, and, like him, dressed in rich livery, descended from his seat, and drawing from his pocket a letter that evidently bore an address, looked from side to side as if in search of a number, then disappeared, after motioning the coachman to follow him.

"This is the first vehicle of that kind I've seen in the Batignolles in ten years," remarked the old sailor. "It is very flattering to the neighbourhood."

"I never saw finer horses," said Olivier, with the air of a connoisseur. "Do they belong to you, Gerald?"

"Do you take me for a millionaire?" responded the young duke, gaily. "I keep a saddle-horse, and I put one of my mother's horses in my cabriolet, when she is not using them. That is my stable. This does not prevent me from loving horses, or from being something of a sporting man. But, speaking of horses, do you remember that dunce, Mornand, another of our college mates?"

"And still another of our mutual antipathies,—of course I do. What has become of him?"

"He is quite a distinguished personage now."

"He! Nonsense!"

"But I tell you he is. He is a member of the Chamber of Peers. He discourses at length, there. People even listen to him. In short, he is a minister in embryo."

"De Mornand?"

"Yes, my worthy friend. He is as dull as ever, and twice as arrogant and self-complacent. He doubts everything except his own merit. He possesses an insatiable ambition, and he belongs to a coterie of jealous and spiteful individuals,—spiteful because they are mediocre, or, rather, mediocre because they are spiteful. Such men rise in the world with, marvellous rapidity, though Mornand has a broad back and supple loins,—he will succeed, one aiding the other."

Just then the footman who had disappeared with the carriage returned, and, seeing through the latticed gate the little party in the arbour, approached, and, raising his hand to his hat, said:

"Gentlemen, will you be so kind as to tell me if this garden belongs to No. 7?"

"Yes," replied the commander.

"And to the apartment on the ground floor of that house?"

"Yes."

"I rang that bell three times, but no one answered it."

"I occupy that apartment," said the commander, greatly surprised. "What do you want?"

"Here is a very important letter for a Madame Barbançon, who, I am told, lives here."

"Yes, she does live here," replied the veteran, more and more surprised.

Then, seeing the housekeeper at the other end of the garden, he called out to her:

"Mother Barbançon, the door-bell has rung three times, unanswered, while you've been trespassing upon my preserves. Come quick! Here is a letter for you."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DUCHESS.

Madame Barbançon promptly responded to this peremptory summons, and, after a hasty apology to her employer, said to the waiting servant:

"You have a letter for me? From whom?"

"From the Comtesse de Beaumesnil, madame," replied the man, handing Madame Barbançon the letter through the lattice.

"Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil?" exclaimed the astonished housekeeper; "I do not know her. I not only don't know her, but I haven't the slightest idea who she is—not the slightest," the worthy woman repeated, as she opened the letter.

"The Comtesse de Beaumesnil?" inquired Gerald, evidently much interested.

"Do you know her?" asked Olivier.

"I met her two or three years ago," replied Gerald. "She was wonderfully beautiful, then, but the poor woman has not left her bed for a year. I understand that hers is a hopeless case. Worse still, M. de Beaumesnil, who had gone to Italy with their only child, a daughter, who was ordered south by the physicians,—M. de Beaumesnil died quite recently in Naples, in consequence of having been thrown from his horse, so if Madame de Beaumesnil dies, as they apprehend, her daughter will be left an orphan at the age of fifteen or sixteen years."

"Poor child! This is really very sad," said the commander, sympathisingly.

"Nevertheless, Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a brilliant future before her," continued Gerald, "for she will be the richest heiress in France. The Beaumesnil property yields an income of over three million francs!"

"Three million francs!" exclaimed Olivier, laughing. "Can it be that there are people who really have an income of three million francs? Do such people come and go, and move about and talk, just like other people? I should certainly like to be brought face to face with one of these wonderful creatures, Gerald."

"I'll do my best to gratify you, but I warn you that as a general thing they are not pleasant to contemplate. I am not referring to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, however; she may be as beautiful as her mother."

"I should like very much to know how one can spend such an income as that," said the commander, in all sincerity, emptying the ashes from his pipe.

"Great Heavens! is it possible?" exclaimed Madame Barbançon, who, in the meantime, had read the letter handed to her. "I am to go in a carriage—in a carriage like that?"

"What is the matter, Mother Barbançon?" inquired the veteran.

"I must ask you to let me go away for a little while."

"Certainly, but where are you going, may I ask?"

"To the house of Madame de Beaumesnil," replied the good woman, in a very important tone. "She desires some information which I alone can give, it seems. May I turn Bonapartist if I know what to make of all this!"

But the next instant the former midwife uttered an exclamation, as if a new and startling idea had just occurred to her, and, turning to her employer, she said:

"Monsieur, will you step out into the garden a moment with me? I want to say a word to you in private."

"Oh," replied the veteran, following the lady out of the arbour, "it is an important matter, it seems. Go on; I am listening, Madame Barbançon."

The housekeeper, having led her employer a short distance from the arbour, turned to him and said, with a mysterious air:

"Monsieur, do you know Madame Herbaut, who lives on the second floor and has two daughters? The lady to whom I introduced M. Olivier about a fortnight ago, you recollect."

"I don't know her, but you have often spoken to me about her. Well, what of it?"

"I recollect now that one of her particular friends, Madame Laîné, is now in Italy, acting as governess to the daughter of a countess whose name sounds something like Beaumesnil. In fact, it may be this very same countess."

"It may be, I admit, Mother Barbançon. Well, go on."

"And she may have heard about me through Madame Laîné, whom I have met at Madame Herbaut's."

"That, too, is very possible, Madame Barbançon. You will soon know for a certainty, however, as you are going to Madame Beaumesnil's."

"*Mon Dieu!* monsieur, another idea has just occurred to me."

"Let us hear it," said the veteran, with infinite patience.

"I have told you about that masked lady who—"

"You're not going to tell that story again, surely!" cried the commander, with the evident intention of beating a retreat.

"No, monsieur, but what if all this should have some connection with that young lady?"

"The quickest way to ascertain, Mother Barbançon, is to get off as soon as possible. We shall both be the gainers by it."

"You are right, monsieur. I will go at once."

And following her employer, who had returned to his guests in the arbour, the housekeeper said to the footman, who was still standing a few feet from the gate:

"Young man, as soon as I can get my bonnet and shawl on I shall be at your service."

And a few minutes afterwards Madame Barbançon, triumphantly passing the gate in her carriage, felt that the deference due her employer made it incumbent upon her to rise to her feet in the vehicle, and bow low to the commander and his guests.

Just then the clock in a neighbouring church struck seven.

"Seven o'clock!" exclaimed Olivier, evidently much annoyed. "I am very sorry, my dear Gerald, but I shall have to leave you."

"Already! And why?"

"I promised a worthy mason in the neighbourhood that I would go over his accounts with him this evening, and you have no idea what a task it is to straighten out books like his!"

"True, you did warn me that you would only be at liberty until seven o'clock," replied Gerald. "I had forgotten the fact, I was enjoying my visit so much."

"Olivier," remarked the veteran, whose spirits seemed to have undergone a sudden decline since his nephew's allusion to the work to which he intended to devote his evening, "Olivier, as Madame Barbançon is absent, will you do me the favour to bring from the cellar the last bottle of that Cyprian wine I brought from the Levant? M. Gerald must take a glass of it with us before we separate. The mason's accounts won't suffer if they do have to wait half an hour."

"An excellent idea, uncle, for I do not have to be as punctual now as if it were the week before pay-day. I'll get the wine at once. Gerald shall taste your nectar, uncle."

And Olivier hastened away.

"M. Gerald," began the commander, with no little embarrassment, "it was not merely to give you a taste of my Cyprian wine that I sent Olivier away. It was in order that I might be able to speak to you, his best friend, very plainly in regard to him, and to tell you how kind and thoughtful and generous he is."

"I know all that, commander. I know it well, but I like to hear it from your lips,—the lips of one who knows and loves Olivier."

"No, M. Gerald, no, you do not know all. You have no idea of the arduous, distasteful labour the poor boy imposes upon himself, not only that he may be no expense to me during his furlough, but that he may be able to make me little presents now and then, which I dare not refuse for fear of paining him. This handsome pipe, it was he who gave it to me. I am very fond of roses. He has just presented me with two superb new varieties. I had long wanted a big easy chair, for when my wounds reopen, which happens only too often, I am sometimes obliged to sit up several nights in succession. But a large armchair cost too much. Still, about a week ago, what should I see some men bringing in but that much desired article of furniture! I might have known it, for Olivier had spent I don't know how many nights in copying documents. Excuse these confidential disclosures on the part of poor but honest people, M. Gerald," said the old sailor, in a voice that trembled with emotion, while a tear stole down his cheek, "but my heart is full. I must open it to some one, and it is a twofold pleasure to be able to tell all this to you."

Gerald seemed about to speak, but the commander interrupted him.

"Pardon me, M. Gerald, you will think me too garrulous, I fear, but Olivier will be here in a minute, and I have a favour to ask of you. By reason of your exalted position, you must have many grand acquaintances, M. Gerald. My poor Olivier has no influence, and yet his services, his education, and his conduct alike entitle him to promotion. But he has never been willing, or he has never dared to approach any of his superiors on this subject. I can understand it, for if I had been a 'hustler'—as you call it—I should hold a much higher rank to-day. It seems to be a family failing. Olivier is like me. We both do our best, but when it is a question of asking favours our tongues cleave to the roof of our mouths, and we're ashamed to look anybody in the face. But take care! Here comes Olivier," hastily exclaimed the old sailor, picking up his pipe and beginning to puff at it with all his might; "try to look unconcerned, M. Gerald, for heaven's sake try to look unconcerned, or Olivier will suspect something."

"Olivier must be a lieutenant before his leave expires, commander, and I believe he will be," said Gerald, deeply touched by these revelations on the part of the veteran. "I have very little influence myself, but I will speak to the Marquis de Maillefort. His word carries great weight everywhere, and strongly urged by him, Olivier's promotion—which is only just and right—is assured. I will attend to the matter. You need give yourself no further anxiety on the subject."

"Ah, M. Gerald, I was not mistaken in you, I see," said the commander, hurriedly. "You are kind as a brother to my poor boy—but here he is—don't let him suspect anything."

And the good man began to smoke his pipe with the most unconcerned air imaginable, though he was obliged

furtively to dash a tear from out the corner of his eye, while Gerald to divert his former comrade's suspicions still more effectually, cried:

"So you've got here at last, slow-coach! I'm strongly inclined to think you must have fallen in with some pretty barmaid like that handsome Jewess at Oran. Do you remember her, you gay Lothario?"

"She was a beauty, that's a fact," replied the young soldier, smiling at the recollection thus evoked, "but she couldn't hold a candle to the young girl I just met in the courtyard," replied Olivier, setting the dusty bottle of Cyprian wine carefully on the table.

"Ah, your prolonged stay is easily explained now!" retorted Gerald.

"Just hear the coxcomb," chimed in the veteran. "And who is this beauty?"

"Yes, yes, do give us the particulars of your conquest."

"She would suit you wonderfully well, M. le duc," laughed Olivier, "wonderfully well, for she is a duchess."

"A duchess?" queried Gerald.

"A duchess here!" exclaimed the commander. "The locality is indeed honoured, to-day. This is something new."

"I was only trying to gratify your vanity a little,—the vanity of a Batignollais, you know. My conquest, as that harebrained Gerald is pleased to call it, is no conquest at all; besides, the lady in question is not really a duchess, though people call her so."

"And why, pray?" inquired Gerald.

"Because they say she is as proud and beautiful as any duchess."

"But who is she? In my character of duke, my curiosity on this point should be gratified," insisted Gerald.

"She is a music teacher," replied Olivier. "She is degrading herself terribly, you see."

"Say rather the piano is becoming ennobled by the touch of her taper fingers,—for she must have the hands of a duchess, of course. Come now, tell us all about it. If you're in love, whom should you take into your confidence if not your uncle and your former comrade?"

"I sincerely wish I had the right to take you into my confidence," said Olivier, laughing; "but to tell the truth, this is the first time I ever saw the young girl."

"But tell us all you know about her."

"There is a Madame Herbaut who has rooms on the second floor of the house," replied Olivier, "and every Sunday this excellent woman invites a number of young girls, friends of her daughters, to spend the evening with her. Some are bookkeepers or shop girls, others are drawing teachers, or music teachers, like the duchess. There are several very charming girls among them, I assure you, though they work hard all day to earn an honest living. And how intensely they enjoy their Sunday with kind Madame Herbaut! They play games, and dance to the music of the piano. It is very amusing to watch them, and twice when Madame Barbançon took me up to Madame Herbaut's rooms—"

"I demand an introduction to Madame Herbaut,—an immediate introduction, do you hear?" cried the young duke.

"You demand—you demand. So you think you have only to ask, I suppose," retorted Olivier, gaily. "Understand, once for all, that the Batignolles are quite as exclusive as the Faubourg St. Germain."

"Ah, you are jealous! You make a great mistake, though, for real or supposed duchesses have very little charm for me. One doesn't come to the Batignolles to fall in love with a duchess, so you need have no fears on that score; besides, if you refuse my request, I'm on the best possible terms with Mother Barbançon, and I'll ask her to introduce me to Madame Herbaut."

"Try it, and see if you succeed in securing admittance," responded Olivier, with a laughable air of importance. "But to return to the subject of the duchess," he continued, "Madame Herbaut, who is evidently devoted to her, remarked to me the other day, when I was going into ecstasies over this company of charming young girls: 'Ah, what would you say if you could see the duchess? Unfortunately, she has failed us these last two Sundays, and we miss her terribly, for all the other girls simply worship her; but some time ago she was summoned to the bedside of a very wealthy lady who is extremely ill, and whose sufferings are so intense, as well as so peculiar in character, that her physician, at his wit's end, conceived the idea that soft and gentle music might assuage her agony at least to some extent.'"

"How singular!" exclaimed Gerald. "This invalid, whose sufferings they are endeavouring to mitigate in every conceivable way, and to whom your duchess must have been summoned, is Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"The same lady who just sent for Madame Barbançon?" inquired the veteran.

"Yes, monsieur, for I had heard before of this musical remedy resorted to in the hope of assuaging that lady's terrible sufferings."

"A strange idea," said Olivier, "but one that has not proved entirely futile, I should judge, as the duchess, who is a fine musician, goes to the house of Madame de Beaumesnil every evening. That is the reason I did not see her at either of Madame Herbaut's soirées. She had just been calling on that lady, probably, when I met her just now. Struck by her regal bearing and her extraordinary beauty, I asked the porter if he knew who she was. 'It was the duchess I'm sure, M. Olivier,' he answered."

"This is all very interesting and charming, but it is rather too melancholy to suit my taste," said Gerald. "I prefer those pretty and lively girls who grace Madame Herbaut's entertainments. If you don't take me to one, you're an

ingrate. Remember that pretty shop-girl in Algiers, who had an equally pretty sister!"

"What!" exclaimed the veteran, "I thought you were talking a moment ago of a pretty Jewess at Oran!"

"But, uncle, when one is at Oran one's sweetheart is at Oran. When one is at Algiers, one's sweetheart is there."

"So you're trying to outdo Don Juan, you naughty boy!" cried the veteran, evidently much flattered by his nephew's popularity with the fair sex.

"But what else could you expect, commander?" asked Gerald. "It is not a matter of inconstancy, you see, but simply of following one's regiment, that is all. That is the reason Olivier and I were obliged to desert the beauties of Oran for the pretty shop-girls of Algiers."

"Just as a change of station compelled us to desert the bronze-cheeked maidens of Martinique for the fisher maids of St. Pierre Miquelon," remarked the old sailor, who was becoming rather lively under the influence of the Cyprian wine which had been circulating freely during the conversation.

"A very sudden change of zone, commander," remarked Gerald, nudging the veteran with his elbow. "It must have been leaving fire for ice."

"No, no, you're very much mistaken there," protested the veteran, vehemently. "I don't know what to make of it, but those fisher maidens, fair as albinos, had the very deuce in them. There was one little roly-poly with white lashes, particularly, whom they called the Whaler—"

"About the temperature of Senegambia, eh, uncle?"

"I should say so," ejaculated the veteran. And as he replaced his glass upon the table, he made a clucking sound with his tongue, but it was hard to say whether this significant sound had reference to his recollection of the fair Whaler or to the pleasant flavour of the Cyprian wine. Then suddenly recollecting himself, the worthy man exclaimed:

"Well, well, what am I thinking of? It ill becomes an old fellow like me to be talking on such subjects to youths like you! Go on, talk of your Jewesses and your duchesses as much as you please, boys. It suits your years."

"Very well, then, I insist that Olivier shall take me to Madame Herbaut's," said the persistent Gerald.

"See the result of satiety. You go in the most fashionable and aristocratic society, and yet envy us our poor little Batignollais entertainments."

"Fashionable society is not at all amusing," said Gerald. "I frequent it merely to please my mother. To-morrow, for example, will be a particularly trying day to me, for my mother gives an afternoon dance. By the way, why can't you come, Olivier?"

"Come where?"

"Why, to this dance my mother gives."

"I?"

"Yes, you! Why not?"

"I, Olivier Raymond, a private in the hussars, attend a dance given in the Faubourg St. Germain!"

"It would be very strange if I could not take my dearest friend to my mother's house merely because he has the honour to be one of the bravest soldiers in the French army. Olivier, you must come. I insist upon it."

"In jacket and kepi, I suppose," said Olivier, smilingly, referring to his poverty, which did not permit him to indulge in citizen's clothing.

Knowing how this worthy fellow spent the proceeds of his arduous toil, and knowing, too, his extreme sensitiveness in money matters, Gerald could only say in reply:

"True, I did not think of that. It is a pity, for we might have had a very pleasant time together. I could have shown you some of our fashionable beauties, though I feel sure that, so far as young and pretty faces are concerned, Madame Herbaut's entertainments have the advantage."

"Do you see, uncle, how cleverly he returns to the charge?"

The clock in the neighbouring steeple struck eight.

"Eight o'clock!" cried Olivier. "The deuce! My master mason has been waiting for me for an hour. I've got to go, Gerald. I promised to be punctual,—an hour late is a good deal. Good night, uncle."

"You're going to work half the night, again," remarked the veteran, casting a meaning look at Gerald. "I shall wait up for you, though."

"No, no, uncle, go to bed. Tell Madame Barbançon to leave the key with the porter, and some matches in the kitchen. I won't wake you, I'll come in quietly."

"Good-bye, M. Gerald," said the veteran, taking the young duke's hand, and pressing it in a very significant manner, as if to remind him of his promise in regard to Olivier's promotion.

"Good-bye, commander," said Gerald, returning the pressure, and indicating by a gesture that he read the veteran's thought. "You will permit me to come and see you again, will you not?"

"It would give me great pleasure, you may be sure of that, M. Gerald."

"Yes, commander, for I judge you by myself. Good-bye. Come, Olivier, I will accompany you to the door of your master mason."

"I shall have the pleasure of your company a quarter of an hour longer, then. Good night, uncle."

"Good night, my dear boy."

And Olivier, taking up his bundle of papers and pens, left the house arm in arm with Gerald. At the master mason's door they separated, promising to see each other again at an early day.

About an hour after Olivier left his uncle, Madame Barbançon was brought back to the Batignolles in Madame de Beaumesnil's carriage.

The veteran, amazed at the silence of his housekeeper, and at the gloomy expression of her face, addressed her several times in vain, and finally begged her to help herself to the small portion of Cyprian wine that remained. Madame Barbançon took the bottle and started towards the door, then stopped short and crossed her arms with a meditative air, a movement that caused the wine-bottle to fall with a crash upon the floor.

"The deuce take you!" cried the veteran. "Look at the Cyprian wine you've wasted."

"True, I've broken the bottle," replied the housekeeper, with the air of a person just waking from a dream. "It is not surprising. Since I saw and heard Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil,—for I have just seen her, and in such a pitiable state, poor woman!—I have been racking my brain to remember something I can not remember, and I know very well that I shall be absolutely good for nothing for a long time."

"It is a good thing to know this in advance," replied the veteran, with his usual placidity of manner on seeing Madame Barbançon again relapse into a deeply preoccupied frame of mind.

CHAPTER V.

THE LION OF THE BALL.

On the day following Olivier Raymond's chance meeting with Gerald, the mother of the latter gave a dancing party.

The Duchesse de Senneterre, both by birth and by marriage, was connected with the oldest and most illustrious families of France, and though her fortune was insignificant and her house small, she gave every year four or five small but extremely elegant and exclusive dancing receptions, of which she and her two young daughters did the honours with perfect grace. The Duc de Senneterre, dead for two years, had held a high office under the Restoration.

The three windows of the salon where the guests danced opened into a very pretty garden, and the day being superb, many ladies and gentlemen stepped out for a chat or a stroll through the paths bordered with flowering shrubs during the intervals between the dances.

Four or five men, chancing to meet near a big clump of lilacs, had paused to exchange the airy nothings that generally compose the conversation at such a gathering.

Among this group were two men that merit attention. One, a man about thirty-five years of age, but already obese, with an extremely pompous, indolent, and supercilious manner and a lack-lustre eye, was the Comte de Mornand, the same man who had been mentioned at Commander Bernard's the evening before, when Olivier and Gerald were comparing their reminiscences of college life.

M. de Mornand occupied a hereditary seat in the Chamber of Peers.

The other, an intimate friend of the count, was a man of about the same age,—tall, slim, angular, a trifle round-shouldered, and also a little bald,—whose flat head, prominent and rather bloodshot eyes imparted an essentially reptilian character to his visage. This was the Baron de Ravil. Though his means of support were problematical in the extreme when compared with his luxurious style of living, the baron was still received in the aristocratic society in which his birth entitled him to a place, but never did any intriguer—we use the word in its lowest, most audacious sense—display more brazen effrontry or daring impudence.

"Have you seen the lion of the ball?" inquired one of the men of the party, addressing M. de Mornand.

"I have but just arrived, and have no idea to whom you refer," replied the count.

"Why, the Marquis de Maillefort."

"That cursed hunchback!" exclaimed M. de Ravil; "it is all his fault that this affair seems so unconscionably dull. His hideous presence is enough to cast a damper over any festivity."

"How strange it is that the marquis appears in society for a few weeks, now and then, and then suddenly disappears again," remarked another member of the group.

"I believe he is a manufacturer of counterfeit money and emerges from his seclusion, now and then, to put his spurious coin in circulation," remarked M. de Ravil. "This much is certain—incomprehensible as it appears—he

actually loaned me a thousand franc note, which I shall never return, the other night, at the card-table. And what do you suppose the impertinent creature said as he handed it to me? 'It will afford me so much amusement to dun you for it, baron.' He need have no fears. He will amuse himself in that way a long time."

"But all jesting aside, this marquis is a very peculiar man," remarked another member of the party. "His mother, the old Marquise de Maillefort, left him a very handsome fortune, but no one can imagine what he does with his money, for he lives very modestly."

"I used to meet him quite frequently at poor Madame de Beaumesnil's."

"By the way, do you know they say she is said to be lying at the point of death?"

"Madame de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes; she is about to receive the last sacrament. At least that is what they told Madame de Mirecourt, who stopped to inquire for her on her way here."

"Her case must, indeed, have been incurable, then, for her physician is that famous Doctor Gasterini, who is as great a savant as he is a gourmand, which is certainly saying a good deal."

"Poor woman! she is young to die."

"And what an immense fortune her daughter will have," exclaimed M. de Mornand. "She will be the richest heiress in France, and an orphan besides. What a rare titbit for a fortune-hunter!"

As he uttered these words, M. de Mornand's eyes encountered those of his friend Ravil.

Both started slightly, as if the same idea had suddenly occurred to both of them. With a single look they must have read each other's thoughts.

"The richest heiress in France!"

"And an orphan!"

"And an immense landed property besides!" exclaimed the three other men in accents of undisguised covetousness.

After which, one of them, without noticing the interchange of glances between M. de Mornand and his friend, continued:

"And how old is this Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Not over fifteen," replied M. de Ravil, "and exceedingly unprepossessing in appearance, sickly and positively insignificant looking, in fact."

"Sickly,—that is not objectionable, by any means, quite the contrary," said one of the party, reflectively.

"And homely?" remarked another, turning to Ravil. "You have seen her, then?"

"Not I, but one of my aunts saw the girl at the Convent of the Sacred Heart before Beaumesnil took her to Italy by the physician's order."

"Poor Beaumesnil, to die in Naples from a fall from his horse!"

"And you say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is very homely?" he continued, while M. de Mornand seemed to grow more and more thoughtful.

"Hideous! I think it more than likely that she's going into a decline, too, from what I hear," responded Ravil, disparagingly; "for, after Beaumesnil's death, the physician who had accompanied them to Naples declared that he would not be responsible for the result if Mlle. de Beaumesnil returned to France. She is a consumptive, I tell you, a hopeless consumptive."

"A consumptive heiress!" exclaimed another man ecstatically. "Can any one conceive of a more delightful combination!"

"Ah, yes, I understand," laughed Ravil, "but it is absolutely necessary that the girl should live long enough for a man to marry her, which Mlle. de Beaumesnil is not likely to do. She is doomed. I heard this through M. de la Rochaiguë, her nearest relative. And he ought to know, as the property comes to him at her death, if she doesn't marry. Perhaps that accounts for his being so sanguine."

"What a lucky thing it would be for Madame de la Rochaiguë, who is so fond of luxury and society!"

"Yes, in other people's houses."

"It is very strange, but it seems to me I have heard that Mlle. de Beaumesnil strongly resembles her mother, who used to be one of the prettiest women in Paris," remarked another gentleman.

"This girl is atrociously ugly, I tell you," said M. de Ravil. "In fact, I'm not sure that she isn't deformed as well."

"Yes," remarked M. de Mornand, awakening from his reverie, "several other persons have said the very same thing about the girl that Ravil does."

"But why didn't her mother accompany her to Italy?"

"Because the poor woman had already been attacked by the strange malady to which she is about to succumb, it seems. People say that it was a terrible disappointment to her because she could not follow her daughter to Naples,

and that this disappointment has contributed not a little to her present hopeless state."

"It would seem, then, that Doctor Dupont's musical cure has proved a failure."

"What musical cure?"

"Knowing Madame de Beaumesnil's passionate love of music, the doctor, to mitigate his patient's sufferings and arouse her from her langour, ordered that soft and soothing music should be played or sung to her."

"Not a bad idea, though revived from the times of Saul and David," commented Ravil.

"Well, what was the result?"

"Madame de Beaumesnil seemed benefited at first, they say, but her malady soon regained the ascendency."

"I have heard that poor Beaumesnil's sudden death was a terrible shock to her."

"Bah!" exclaimed M. de Mornand, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, "she never cared a straw for Beaumesnil. She only married him for his millions of millions. Besides, as a young girl she had any number of lovers. In short," continued M. de Mornand, puffing out his cheeks with an air of supercilious dignity, "Madame de Beaumesnil is really a woman of no reputation whatever, and, in spite of the enormous fortune she will leave, no honourable man would ever be willing to marry the daughter of such a mother."

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed a voice which seemed to respond indignantly to M. de Mornand's last words from behind the clump of lilacs.

There was a moment of amazed silence; then M. de Mornand, purple with anger, made a hasty circuit of the clump of shrubbery. He found no one there, however. The path at this place making an abrupt turn, the person who uttered the opprobrious epithet could make his escape with comparative ease.

"There are no more infamous scoundrels than the persons who insult others without daring to show themselves," cried M. de Mornand, in a loud voice.

This strange incident had scarcely taken place before the sound of the orchestra drew the promenaders back to the salon.

M. de Mornand being left alone with Ravil, the latter said to him:

"Somebody who dared not show himself called you a scoundrel. We had better say no more about it. But did you understand me?"

"Perfectly. The same idea suddenly, I might almost say simultaneously, occurred to me, and for an instant I was dazzled—even dazed by it."

"An income of over three millions! What an incorruptible minister you will be, eh?"

"Hush! It is enough to turn one's brain."

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a third party, who, addressing M. de Mornand, said, with the most scrupulous politeness:

"Monsieur, will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis?"

M. de Mornand's surprise was so great that he started back without uttering a word on hearing this request, for the person who had just made it was no other than the Marquis de Maillefort, the singular hunchback, of whom frequent mention has already been made in these pages.

There was also another feeling that prevented M. de Mornand from immediately replying to this strange proposition, for, in the full, vibrating voice of the speaker, M. de Mornand fancied, for an instant, that he recognised the voice of the unseen person who had called him a scoundrel when he spoke in such disparaging terms of Madame de Beaumesnil.

The Marquis de Maillefort, pretending not to notice the air of displeased surprise with which M. de Mornand had greeted the proposal, repeated in the same tone of scrupulous politeness:

"Monsieur, will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis in the next quadrille?"

On hearing this request on the part of the deformed man thus reiterated, M. de Mornand, without concealing his desire to laugh, exclaimed:

"Act as your vis-à-vis,—yours, monsieur?"

"Yes, monsieur," replied the marquis, with the most innocent air imaginable.

"But,—but what you ask is—is—permit me to say—very remarkable."

"And very dangerous, my dear marquis," added the Baron de Ravil, with his usual sneer.

"As for you, baron, I might put a no less offensive and, perhaps, even more dangerous question to you," retorted the marquis, smiling. "When will you return the thousand francs I had the pleasure of loaning to you the other evening?"

"You are too inquisitive, marquis."

"Come, come, baron, don't treat M. de Talleyrand's *bon mots* as you treat thousand franc notes."

"What do you mean by that, marquis?"

"I mean that it costs you no more to put one in circulation than the other."

M. de Ravil bit his lip.

"This explanation is not altogether satisfactory, M. le marquis," he said, coldly.

"You have an unquestionable right to be very exacting in the matter of explanations, baron," retorted the marquis, in the same tone of contemptuous persiflage; "but you have no right to be indiscreet, as you certainly are at this moment. I had the honour to address M. de Mornand, and you intrude yourself into our conversation, which is exceedingly annoying to me."

Then, turning to M. de Mornand, the hunchback continued:

"You did me the honour, just now, to say that my request that you would act as my vis-à-vis was very remarkable, I believe."

"Yes, monsieur," replied M. de Mornand, quite gravely this time, for he began to suspect that this singular proposal was only a pretext, and the longer he listened to the voice, the more certain he became that it was the same which had styled him a scoundrel. "Yes, monsieur," he continued, with mingled hauteur and assurance, "I did say, and I repeat it, that this request to act as your vis-à-vis was very remarkable on your part."

"And why, may I ask, if you do not think me too inquisitive?"

"Because—why—because it is—it is, I think, very singular that—"

Then as M. de Mornand did not finish the sentence:

"I have a rather peculiar habit, monsieur," the marquis said, lightly.

"What is it, monsieur?"

"Having the misfortune to be a hunchback and consequently an object of ridicule, I have reserved for myself the exclusive right to ridicule my deformity, and as I flatter myself I do that to the satisfaction of people in general—excuse my conceit, monsieur, I beg—I do not permit any one to do badly what I do so well myself."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed M. de Mornand, vehemently.

"Permit me to give you an example," continued the marquis in the same airy tone, "I just asked you to do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis. Ah, well, instead of answering, 'Yes, monsieur,' or 'No, monsieur,' in a polite manner, you respond in a voice choked with laughter, 'Your request for me to act as your vis-à-vis is very remarkable.' And when I ask you to finish the sentence, you hesitate and stammer and say nothing."

"But, monsieur—"

"But, monsieur," hastily exclaimed the hunchback, interrupting his companion afresh; "if, instead of being polite, you are disposed to enjoy yourself at my expense, you ought to say something decidedly impertinent, as, for example: 'M. de Maillefort, I have a horror of deformities and really cannot bear the idea of seeing you dance;' or 'Really, M. de Maillefort, I have too much pride to show myself in the back to back figure with you.' So you see, my dear M. de Mornand," continued the hunchback, with increasing jovialness, "that, as I can ridicule myself better than any one else can, I am perfectly right not to allow any one else to do clumsily what I can do so admirably myself."

"You say that you will not allow," began M. de Mornand, impatiently—

"Come, come, Mornand, this is all nonsense," exclaimed Ravil. "And, you, marquis, are much too sensible a man—"

"That is not the question," replied Mornand, hotly. "This gentleman says he will not allow—"

"Any person to ridicule me," interrupted the marquis. "No, I will not tolerate it for a single instant; I repeat it."

"But Mornand certainly never thought for a single instant of ridiculing you, I am sure, marquis," cried Ravil.

"Is that true, baron?"

"Yes, certainly, certainly."

"Then the gentleman will do me the favour to explain what he meant by his reply."

"That is very simple. I will volunteer—"

"My dear Ravil," interposed M. de Mornand, firmly, "you are going entirely too far. As M. de Maillefort descends to sarcasm and threats, I deem it proper to refuse him any explanation whatever, and M. de Maillefort is at perfect liberty to impute any meaning he pleases to my words."

"Impute any meaning to your words?" exclaimed the hunchback, laughing. "Really, I could not take any such task as that upon myself. That is the business of your honourable colleagues in the Chamber of Peers when you treat them to one of those superb speeches—which you alone have the ability to understand—"

"Let us put an end to this," exclaimed M. de Mornand, exasperated beyond endurance. "Consider my words as insulting as any words could possibly be, monsieur."

"You are mad," cried Ravil. "All this is, or will be, supremely ridiculous if taken seriously."

"You are right, my poor baron," said the marquis, with a contrite air; "it will become supremely ridiculous as you say, but, monsieur, see what a good fellow I am, I will be content with the following apology made verbally by M. de

Mornand in the presence of three or four witnesses of my own choosing: 'M. le Marquis de Maillefort, I very humbly and contritely ask your pardon for having dared—'"

"Enough, monsieur!" exclaimed M. de Mornand. "You must believe me either a coward or an egregious fool."

"So you refuse the reparation I demand?" asked the marquis; "you refuse it, absolutely?"

"Absolutely, monsieur, absolutely."

"Then I feel obliged to terminate this interview as I began it, by again having the honour to say to you: 'Will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis?'"

"What, monsieur, as your vis-à-vis?" repeated M. de Mornand, in profound astonishment.

"My vis-à-vis in a *danse à deux*," added the hunchback, with a meaning gesture. "Do you understand me?"

"A duel—with you?" cried M. de Mornand, who, in his first transport of anger, had forgotten the high social position of the hunchback, and the ridicule which would be heaped upon him if he engaged in a personal encounter with such an adversary. "A duel with you, monsieur? Really—"

"Are you going to plead as an excuse that such a position would be too—too remarkable or too dangerous, as your friend Ravil would say?"

"No, monsieur, I do not consider it too dangerous—but too ridiculous."

"Yes, frightfully ridiculous to you, as I remarked to your honest friend here a moment ago."

"Really, gentlemen," exclaimed Ravil, "I will never permit—"

Then seeing Gerald de Senneterre passing through the garden, he added:

"Here comes the Duc de Senneterre, the son of the house. I shall ask him to assist me in putting a stop to this foolish quarrel."

"Yes, gentlemen, the duke's coming is most opportune," replied the hunchback. And turning towards the young man, he called out:

"Gerald, my friend, we need your assistance."

"What is the matter, marquis?" asked Gerald, in a manner that was both deferential and affectionate.

"Have you any cigars?"

"Plenty of them, marquis."

"Well, my dear Gerald, these gentlemen and I are dying to smoke. Won't you take us up to your rooms?"

"Certainly," replied Gerald, gaily. "I have no engagement for this dance, so I have a quarter of an hour at my disposal."

"That is all the time we shall need," said the hunchback, with a meaning look at Mornand and Ravil. "Come, gentlemen," he added, taking Gerald's arm and walking on ahead of the future minister and his friend.

A minute or two afterwards the four gentlemen reached Gerald's apartments, which consisted of three rooms,—one, extremely large, on the third floor of the house.

The young duke having politely begged Messieurs de Mornand and de Ravil to pass in first, M. de Maillefort, locking the door and slipping the key in his pocket, remarked to Gerald:

"Allow me, my friend."

"But why do you lock the door, M. le marquis," asked Gerald, greatly surprised.

"So we shall not be disturbed," answered the hunchback, "but be able to smoke in peace."

"You are certainly a very cautious man, M. le marquis," said Gerald, laughing, as he ushered the party into the furthermost room, which, being much larger than the others, served both as a sitting-room and study for the young duke.

Upon one of the panels in this room hung a large shield covered with crimson velvet, on which quite a number of weapons were displayed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DUEL.

On seeing the Marquis de Maillefort lock the door of the apartment, M. de Mornand partially divined the hunchback's intentions, and any lingering doubts he may have felt were promptly dispelled when the marquis untied

his cravat and hastily divested himself of both coat and waistcoat, to the great astonishment of Gerald, who had just turned to approach him with an open box of cigars in his hand.

Almost at the same instant, the marquis, pointing to two swords hanging with the other weapons on the shield, said to the young man:

"My dear Gerald, have the goodness to measure those swords with M. de Ravil, and give the longest to my adversary if there is any difference in them. You know the proverb, 'Hunchbacks have long arms.'"

"What!" exclaimed Gerald, in profound astonishment, "those swords?"

"Certainly, my friend. This is the situation in two words. That gentleman (pointing to Mornand) has just been extremely impertinent to me. He refused to apologise, and the time has now passed when I would accept any apology, even if he would consent to make it. There is consequently nothing for us to do but fight. You will act as my second; M. de Ravil will act in the same capacity for M. de Mornand, and we will settle our differences here and now."

Then, turning to his antagonist, the marquis added:

"Come, monsieur, off with your coat. Gerald has only a quarter of an hour to spare, and we must make the most of it."

"What a pity Olivier could not witness this scene!" thought Gerald, who had recovered from his astonishment, and who now began to regard the adventure as extremely piquant, the more so as he had very little sympathy for Messieurs Mornand and Ravil, and a very warm affection for the marquis.

But though the hunchback had made this open declaration of war, M. de Ravil turned to Gerald, and said, in a tone of profound conviction:

"You must feel that such a duel as this is entirely out of the question, M. le duc?"

"And why, monsieur?" inquired Gerald, dryly.

"Thanks, Gerald," exclaimed the marquis. "The swords, my friend, quick, the swords!"

"But think of permitting such an encounter in your mother's house! It must not be, M. le duc. Think of it, a duel, in a room in your house, and for the most trivial cause," insisted Ravil, as he saw Gerald walk to the panel and take down the swords.

"I consider myself the sole judge of the propriety of what occurs in my apartments," retorted Gerald. "There are numerous instances of similar duels, are there not, M. de Mornand?"

"Any place is suitable for avenging an affront, M. le duc," was the prompt and angry reply.

"Bravo! the Cid never made a better retort!" exclaimed the hunchback. "Come, my dear M. de Mornand, off with your coat! It is hardly fair that I, who am not exactly modelled after the Apollo Belvedere, should be the first to strip."

M. de Mornand, at his wit's end, pulled off his coat.

"I absolutely refuse to act as second in such a duel," shouted M. de Ravil.

"You can do as you please about that," responded the hunchback. "I have the key of the door in my pocket, but you can look out of the window, or beat a tattoo upon the pane, if you prefer. That little act of bravado might have a good effect on M. de Mornand, perhaps."

"De Ravil, measure the swords, I beg of you," cried the other principal in the affair.

"You insist?"

"I do."

"So be it,—but you are mad."

Then, turning to Gerald, he added, "You are taking a great responsibility upon yourself, monsieur."

"That will do, monsieur," replied Gerald, coldly.

The proverb the marquis had quoted seemed a true one, for, when that gentleman rolled his shirt-sleeve up above his elbow, there was disclosed to view a long, thin, but sinewy arm, upon which the muscles stood out like whipcords, while his opponent's arm was plump and soft.

The outcome of the encounter was apparent from the manner in which the antagonists fell into position, and in which they crossed blades, when Gerald, after having exchanged glances with Ravil, gave the signal for the combat to begin.

Not that M. de Mornand evinced any signs of cowardice! On the contrary, he manifested the courage which any well-bred man is almost sure to display, but he was unmistakably nervous, and, though he showed a fair knowledge of fencing, his play was characterised by excessive prudence. He held himself out of reach as much as possible, and always upon the defensive, parrying his antagonist's thrusts skilfully enough, but never attacking.

"Ran His Blade Through His Antagonist's Right Arm"

For a single instant Ravil, and even Gerald, were terrified at the expression of ferocious hatred that overspread the features of the marquis when he confronted his adversary, but, suddenly recovering himself, he became the same gay, mocking cynic as at the beginning of this strange scene, and, as the look of sullen rage he had concentrated upon M. de Mornand softened, his thrusts became less violent and murderous, and, at last, wishing doubtless to end the affair, he made a feint. M. de Mornand responded ingenuously, whereupon his opponent, with a quick, upward thrust, ran his blade through his antagonist's right arm.

At the sight of blood, Gerald and Ravil both sprang forward, exclaiming:

"Enough, gentlemen, enough!"

Both men lowered their swords on hearing this exclamation, and the marquis said, in a clear voice:

"I declare myself satisfied; I will even humbly beg your pardon—for being a hunchback, M. de Mornand. It is the only excuse I can reasonably offer you."

"It is sufficient, monsieur," said M. de Mornand, with a bitter smile, while Gerald and De Ravil bound up the wounded arm with the aid of a handkerchief.

This done, the two men re-dressed themselves, after which M. de Maillefort said to M. de Mornand:

"Will you grant me the favour of a moment's conversation in another room?"

"I am at your service."

"Will you permit it, Gerald?"

"Certainly," replied the young duke.

The two gentlemen having stepped into Gerald's bedroom, the hunchback said, in his usual mocking way:

"Though it may be in very poor taste to speak of one's generosity, my dear sir, I am obliged to admit that for a minute or two I felt strongly inclined to kill you, and that it would have been a very easy matter for me to do it."

"You should have availed yourself of the opportunity, monsieur."

"But I reflected—"

"And with what object?"

"You will excuse me, I am sure, for not opening my whole heart to you, but permit me to beg that you will consider the slight wound you have just received merely an aid to memory."

"I do not understand you in the least, monsieur."

"You know, of course, that one often places a bit of paper in one's snuff-box, or ties a knot in the corner of one's handkerchief, to remind one of a rendezvous or a promise."

"Yes, monsieur; and what of it, may I ask?"

"I am strongly in hopes that the slight wound which I have just given you in the arm will serve as such an effectual reminder that the date of this little episode will never be effaced from your memory."

"And why are you so desirous that this date should be indelibly engraved upon my memory?"

"The explanation is very simple. I wish to fix the date in your memory in an ineffaceable manner,—because it is quite possible that I shall some time have occasion to remind you of *all you have said* this afternoon."

"Remind me of all I have said this afternoon?"

"Yes, monsieur, and in the presence of irrefutable witnesses that I shall summon in case of need."

"I understand you less and less, monsieur."

"I see no particular advantage in your understanding me any better just at this time, my dear sir, so you must permit me to take leave of you, and go and bid my friend Gerald good-bye."

It is easy to comprehend that the real cause of M. de Maillefort's challenge to M. de Mornand was the insulting manner in which that gentleman had spoken of Madame de Beaumesnil, for the latter's suspicions were correct, and it was the hunchback who, unseen, had cried, "Scoundrel!" on hearing M. de Mornand's coarse words.

But why had M. de Maillefort, who was usually so frank and outspoken, taken this roundabout way to secure a pretext for avenging the insult offered to Madame de Beaumesnil? And what could be his object in wishing to remind M. de Mornand of this special day, and in perhaps calling him to account for all he had just said in the presence of reliable witnesses?

These questions will be satisfactorily answered as the story proceeds.

The Marquis de Maillefort had just bidden Gerald good-bye, when one of the servants brought the young duke the following letter, written by Olivier that same morning.

"My good Gerald:—'Man proposes and God disposes,' and last night, Providence, in the shape of my worthy master mason, decided that I must absent myself from Paris for a fortnight or three weeks, and I am truly sorry, for there can be no repetition of our pleasant dinner-party of yesterday for a long time to come.

"The fact is, my master mason is a very poor arithmetician, and he has become so mixed up in his specifications for some work he is to do in a château near Luzarches that it is impossible for me to make head or tail of his figures. For me to be able to cast any light on this portentous gloom, I shall be obliged to go through a host of measurements which I shall have to take myself, if I would avoid more puzzles, and this will necessitate a prolonged absence, I fear. I never told you, did I? that my master mason was formerly a sergeant in the engineer corps, a brave, honest, plain, kind-hearted man, and you know that life with people of that sort is easy and pleasant. One of my chief reasons, too, for going to his assistance is that, so far as I am able to judge, he is cheating himself badly,—such a rare thing in these days that I shall not be sorry to verify the fact.

"I leave my uncle—what a heart of gold he has, hasn't he?—with no little anxiety. Ever since Madame Barbançon was brought back to us in Madame de Beaumesnil's superb equipage she has been in a truly alarming frame of mind, and I tremble for my uncle's digestion. She has not so much as mentioned Bonaparte's name, and seems to be in a brown study all the time,—pauses thoughtfully in the garden, and every now and then stands stock-still in her kitchen with eyes fixed upon vacancy. She gave us sour milk this morning, and the eggs were like leather. So take heed, my dear Gerald, if you should happen to drop in at meal-time. It is evident, too, that Madame Barbançon is burning with a desire to be questioned concerning the particulars of her recent visit, but very naturally my uncle and I avoid the subject, as there is really something strange and even incomprehensible about the affair.

"If you have time, drop in and see my uncle. It would please him very much, for he will miss me sadly, I fear, and he has taken a great fancy to you. What ineffable kindness of heart and unswerving uprightness of soul are concealed beneath his plain exterior! Ah, my dear Gerald, I have never craved wealth for myself, but I tremble to think that, at his age and with his infirmities, my uncle will have more and more difficulty in living on his modest pay, in spite of all the little privations he endures so courageously. And if he should become really ill,—for two of his wounds reopen frequently,—sickness is so hard upon the poor? Ah, Gerald, the thought is a cruel one to me.

"Forgive me, my friend and brother. I began this letter cheerfully, and it has become really funereal in tone. Good-bye, Gerald, good-bye. Write me at Luzarches.

"Yours devotedly,
"Olivier Raymond."

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRETTY MUSICIAN.

About seven o'clock on the evening of the same day on which M. de Maillefort's duel took place, and just as the sun was beginning to vanish from sight in a bank of dark clouds that indicated a stormy night,—for occasional big drops of rain were already falling,—a young girl was crossing the Place de la Concorde, in the direction of the Faubourg Ste. Honoré.

This girl carried under her left arm two large music books whose shabby bindings attested to long and faithful service; in her right hand she held a small umbrella. Her attire, which was modest in the extreme, consisted of a plain black silk dress with a small mantle of the same material, and, though the spring was already far advanced, she wore on her head a gray felt hat tied under the chin with broad ribbons of the same quiet hue. A few soft, curling tresses of golden hair, which the wind had loosened from their confinement, caressed her low, broad forehead, and made a lovely frame for her sweet, youthful face, which wore an expression of profound sadness, but which was also instinct with refinement, modesty, and quiet dignity. This same natural dignity manifested itself in the thoughtful and rather proud expression of the girl's large blue eyes. Her bearing was graceful and distinguished, and though her mantle concealed her figure, one instinctively felt that it was not only lithe, but perfect in contour, for her garments were worn with such an air of distinction that one forgot their shabbiness.

As she lifted her dress slightly in crossing a gutter, a pretty foot, clad in a neat, well-fitting, though rather thick-soled shoe, was disclosed to view, and one also caught a glimpse of a petticoat of dazzling whiteness, edged with a narrow lace-trimmed ruffle.

At the corner of the Rue des Champs Élysées, a beggar woman, with a child in her arms, addressed a few words to her in an imploring voice, whereupon the girl paused, and after a moment's embarrassment,—for having both hands occupied, one with her music books and the other with her umbrella, she could not get at her pocket,—she solved the difficulty by confiding the music books temporarily to the poor woman's care, and transferring her umbrella to her other hand. This done, the girl drew out her purse, which contained barely four francs in small change, and, taking from it a two sous piece, said hurriedly, but in tones of entrancing sweetness:

"Forgive me, good mother, forgive me for being unable to offer you more."

Then, with a compassionate glance at the pale face of the infant which the woman was pressing to her breast, she added:

"Poor little thing! May God preserve it to you!" Then resuming possession of her music books, and casting another glance of tender commiseration on the poor creatures, she continued on her way down the Champs Élysées.

We have dwelt upon the apparently trivial details of this act of charity, merely because they seem to us so significant. The gift, though trifling in value, had not been given haughtily or thoughtlessly; nor was the young girl content with dropping a bit of money into the outstretched hand. There was also another circumstance which, though trivial, was highly significant: the young girl had removed her glove before proffering her alms—as she would have done before touching the hand of a friend and equal.

It so happened that M. de Ravil, who had just escorted his wounded friend to his home on the Rue de Madeleine, met the young girl on the pavement of the Rue des Champs Élysées, and, struck by her beauty and by the distinguished bearing which contrasted so strongly with the excessive plainness of her attire, he paused a moment directly in front of her and eyed her cynically, then, as she walked quickly on, he turned and followed her.

As she turned into the Rue de l'Arcade, a street little frequented at that hour of the day, he quickened his pace, and, overtaking the fair unknown, said, insolently:

"Mademoiselle gives music lessons, I judge? Will she be kind enough to come and give me one—at my house?"

As he spoke he laid his hand upon the arm of the girl, who turned quickly with a faint cry; then, though her cheeks were crimson with terror and emotion, she cast such a look of withering scorn on Ravil that, in spite of his natural impudence, his eyes fell, and bowing low before the unknown with an air of ironical deference, he said:

"Pardon me, madame la princesse, I was mistaken in the person."

The girl continued on her way, forcing herself to walk quietly in spite of her painful anxiety, for the house to which she going was only a short distance off now.

"All the same, I intend to follow her and see who this shabbily dressed girl who gives herself the airs of a duchess is," Ravil said to himself.

The comparison was an eminently just one, though he did not know it, for Herminie—that was the girl's name; in fact, being a foundling, she had no other—for Herminie was indeed a duchess, if one means by that word a charming combination of beauty, grace, and natural refinement, accompanied by that indomitable pride which is inherent in every fastidious and sensitive nature.

It has been truly said that many duchesses, both as regards appearance and instincts, were born *lorettes*; while, on the other hand, many poor creatures of the most obscure origin were born duchesses.

Herminie herself was certainly a living example of the truth of this assertion, for the friends she had made in her humble rôle of singing and piano teacher always called her the duchess,—a few from jealousy, for even the most generous and unassuming of people have their detractors, others, on the contrary, because the term best expressed the impression Herminie's manner and appearance made upon them. It is hardly necessary to say that the young lady in question was no other than the duchess of whom Olivier had made frequent mention during the dinner at

Commander Bernard's house.

Herminie, still closely followed by Ravil, soon left the Rue de l'Arcade for the Rue d'Anjou, where she entered an imposing mansion, thus escaping the annoying pursuit of that cynical personage.

"How strange!" he exclaimed, pausing a few yards off. "Why the devil is that girl going into the Hôtel de Beaumesnil with her music books under her arm. She certainly cannot live there."

Then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "But now I think of it, this must be the female David who is trying to assuage Madame de Beaumesnil's sufferings by the charm of her music. That lady might well be likened to good King Saul by reason of her great wealth, which will all go to that young girl in whom my friend Mornand already feels such an interest. As for me, that pretty musician who has just entered the home of the countess suits my fancy. I mean to wait until she comes out, for I must find out where she lives."

The expression of melancholy on Herminie's charming face deepened as she crossed the threshold, and, passing the porter without speaking, as any member of the household might have done, entered the magnificent hall of this sumptuous abode.

It was still daylight, but the entire lower floor was brilliantly lighted. As she noted this fact, her surprise changed to anguish, which increased when she saw none of the footmen who were usually in attendance.

A profound stillness pervaded the mansion as the young girl, with her heart throbbing almost to bursting, mounted the handsome stairway to a broad landing, which commanded a view of a long line of large and magnificently furnished apartments.

These rooms, too, were brilliantly lighted but also deserted, and the pale light of the candles, contending with the glowing rays of the setting sun, produced a very strange and most unnatural effect.

Herminie, unable to account for the poignant anxiety to which she was a prey, hurried breathlessly on through several rooms, then paused suddenly.

It seemed to her that she could hear stifled sobs in the distance.

At last she reached a door leading into a long picture-gallery, and at the farther end of this gallery Herminie saw all the inmates of the mansion kneeling just outside the threshold of an open door.

A terrible presentiment seized the young girl. When she left Madame de Beaumesnil the evening before, that lady was alarmingly, though not hopelessly ill; but now, these lights, this lugubrious silence, broken only by smothered sobs, indicated beyond a doubt that Madame de Beaumesnil was receiving the last sacrament.

The young girl, overcome with grief and terror, felt that her strength was deserting her, and instinctively clutched at one of the consoles for support; then, endeavouring to conceal her emotion and her tears, again hastened on with tottering steps towards the group of servants in the open doorway of Madame de Beaumesnil's chamber, and knelt there in the midst of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE UNHAPPY SECRET.

Through the open doorway before which Herminie had just knelt, she could see by the wan light of an alabaster lamp Madame de Beaumesnil, a woman only about thirty-eight years of age, but frightfully pale and emaciated. The countess, who was sitting up in bed, supported by pillows, had her hands clasped devoutly. Her features, once of rare beauty, were drawn and haggard, her large eyes, formerly of a clear, bright blue, had lost their lustre, though they were riveted with mingled anxiety and anguish upon the face of Abbé Ledoux, her parish priest, who had just administered the last sacrament.

A minute before Herminie's arrival, Madame de Beaumesnil, lowering her voice still more, though weakness and suffering had already reduced it to little more than a faint whisper, had said to the priest:

"Ah, my father, forgive me, but even at this solemn hour I cannot help thinking with even more bitterness of heart of that poor child,—my other daughter,—the unhappy fruit of a sin which has burdened my life with the most poignant remorse."

"Hush, madame," replied the priest, who, as he cast a furtive glance at the kneeling servants, had just seen Herminie take her place in their midst; "hush, madame, she is here."

"She is?"

"Yes, she came in a moment ago, and is now kneeling with your people."

As he spoke, the priest turned and walked towards the door to close it, after having first intimated by a gesture that the sad ceremony was over.

"I remember now—that yesterday—when Herminie left me—I begged her to return to-day at this very hour. The

physician was right,—the angelic voice of the dear child, her tender melodies, have often assuaged my sufferings."

"Take care, madame. Be more prudent, I beg of you," pleaded the priest, alone now with the invalid.

"Oh, I am. My daughter suspects nothing," answered Madame de Beaumesnil, with a bitter smile.

"That is quite probable," said the priest, "for it was only chance, or, rather, the inscrutable will of Providence, that brought this young woman to your notice a short time ago. Doubtless it is the Saviour's will that you should be subjected to a still harder test."

"Hard, indeed, my father, since I shall be obliged to depart from this life without ever having said 'my daughter' to this unfortunate girl. Alas! I shall carry my wretched secret with me to the grave."

"Your vow imposes this sacrifice upon you, madame. It is a sacred obligation," said the priest, severely. "To break your vow, to thus perjure yourself, would be sacrilege."

"I have never thought of perjuring myself, my father," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, despondently; "but God is punishing me cruelly. I am dying, and yet I am forced to treat as a stranger my own child,—who is there—only a few feet from me, kneeling among my people, and who must never know that I am her mother."

"Your sin was great, madame. The expiation must be correspondingly great."

"But how long it has lasted for me, my father. Faithful to my vow, I never even tried to discover what had become of my unfortunate child. Alas! but for the chance which brought her to my notice a few days ago, I should have died without having seen her for seventeen years."

"These thoughts are very sinful, my daughter," said the priest, sternly. "They caused you to take a most imprudent step yesterday."

"Have no fears, my father. It is impossible that the woman I sent for yesterday, openly, in order to avert any suspicion, should suspect my motive in asking for information which she alone could give."

"And this information?"

"Confirmed—as I anticipated—in the most irrefutable manner—what I already knew—that Herminie is my daughter."

"But why do you feel so sure of this woman's discretion?"

"Because she lost all trace of my daughter after their separation sixteen years ago."

"But are you sure this woman did not recognise you?"

"I confessed to you, my father, that I had a mask on my face when I brought Herminie into the world with this woman's aid, and yesterday, in my interview with her, I found it easy to convince her that the mother of the child I was inquiring about had been dead for several years."

"It is necessary that I should grant you absolution for this act of deception," answered Abbé Ledoux, with great severity. "You can see now the fatal consequences of your criminal solicitude for a person who, after your vow, should always have remained a stranger to you."

"Ah, that oath which remorse and gratitude for the most generous forgiveness extorted from me! I have often cursed it,—but I have always kept it, my father."

"And yet, my sister, even at such an hour as this, your every thought is given to that young girl."

"No, not my every thought, my father, for I have another child. But alas! I cannot prevent my heart from throbbing faster at the approach of Herminie, who is also my daughter. Can I prevent my heart from going out to her? I may have courage to control my lips, to guard my eyes, and to conceal my feelings when Herminie is with me, but I cannot prevent myself from feeling a mother's tenderness for her."

"Then you must forbid the girl the house," said the priest, sternly. "You can easily invent a plausible pretext for that, I am sure. Thank her for her services, and—"

"No, no, I should never have the courage to do that," said the countess, quickly. "Is it not hard enough for me that my other daughter, whose affection would have been so consoling in this trying hour, is in a foreign land, mourning the loss of the father of whom she was so suddenly bereft? And who knows, perhaps Ernestine, too, is dying as I am. Poor child! She was so weak and frail when she went away! Oh, was there ever a mother as much to be pitied as I am?"

And two burning tears fell from Madame de Beaumesnil's eyes.

"Calm yourself, my sister," said the abbé, soothingly; "do not grieve so. Put your trust in Heaven. Our Saviour's mercy is great. He has sustained you through this solemn ceremony, which was, as I told you, merely a precaution, for, God be praised! your condition, though alarming, is by no means hopeless."

Madame de Beaumesnil shook her head sadly, as she replied:

"I am growing weaker fast, my father, but now that my last duties are performed I feel much calmer. Ah, if I did not have my children to think of, I could die in peace."

"I understand you, my sister," said the priest, soothingly. Then watching Madame de Beaumesnil's face closely all the while, he continued:

"I understand you, my sister. The future of your child, your legitimate child,—I cannot and must not speak of the

other,—her future excites your liveliest apprehensions—and you are right—an orphan—and so young, poor child!"

"Alas! yes, a mother's place can never be filled."

"Then why do you hesitate, my sister?" said the abbé, slowly and impressively, "why do you hesitate to assure this beloved daughter's future happiness? Why have you never permitted me—though I have long desired the favour—to introduce to you that good and devout young man, that model of wisdom and virtue, of whom I have so often spoken. Your mother's heart would long since have appreciated this paragon of Christian virtues; and sure, in advance, of your daughter's obedience to your last wishes, you could have recommended him to her by a few lines, which I myself would have delivered to the poor child. You could easily have advised her to take for her husband M. Célestin de Macreuse. Your daughter would then be sure of a most estimable and devout husband, for—"

"My father," interrupted Madame de Beaumesnil, without making any effort to conceal the painful feelings that this conversation was awakening. "I have told you that I do not doubt the great worth of this gentleman you have so often mentioned to me, but my daughter Ernestine is not sixteen yet, and I am not willing to insist upon her marrying a man she does not even know, for the dear child has so much affection for me that she would be quite capable of sacrificing herself to please me."

"We will say no more about it, then, my dear sister," said the abbé, with a contrite air. "In calling your attention to M. Célestin de Macreuse, I had but one object in view. That was to save you from the slightest anxiety concerning your dear Ernestine's future. You speak of sacrifices, my sister, but permit me to say that the great danger is that your poor child will be sacrificed some day to some man who is unworthy of her,—to some irreligious, dissipated spendthrift. You are unwilling to influence your daughter in her choice of a husband, you say. But alas! who will guide her in her choice if she has the misfortune to lose you? Will it be her selfish, worldly relatives, or will your too artless and credulous child blindly yield to the promptings of her heart. Ah, my sister, think of the dangers and the deception to which she will inevitably be exposed! Think of the crowd of suitors which her immense fortune is sure to attract! Ah, believe me, my sister, it would be wiser to save her from these perils in advance by a prudent and sensible choice."

"Forgive me, my father," said Madame de Beaumesnil, greatly agitated, and evidently desirous of putting an end to this painful conversation; "but I am feeling very weak and tired. I appreciate and am truly grateful for the interest you take in my daughter. I shall do my duty faithfully by her so long as I am spared. Your words will not be forgotten, I assure you, my father, and may Heaven give me the strength and the time to act."

Too shrewd and crafty to press the claims of his protégé further, Abbé Ledoux said, benignly:

"May Heaven inspire you, my sister. I doubt not that our gracious Lord will make your duty as a mother clear to you. Courage, my sister, courage. And now farewell until to-morrow."

"The morrow belongs to God."

"I can at least implore him to prolong your days, my sister," answered the priest, bowing low.

He left the room.

The door had scarcely closed behind him before the countess rang for one of her attendants.

"Is Mlle. Herminie here?" she asked.

"Yes, madame la comtesse."

"Ask her to come in. I wish to see her."

"Yes, madame la comtesse," replied the maid, hastening off to fulfil her employer's instructions.

A few minutes afterwards, Herminie, pale and sad, though apparently calm, entered Madame de Beaumesnil's chamber, with her music books in her hand.

"I was told that madame la comtesse wished to see me," she said, with marked deference.

"Yes, mademoiselle. I have—I have a favour to ask of you," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, who was racking her brain to devise some way of bringing her daughter closer to her.

"I am entirely at madame's service," Herminie answered, promptly but quietly.

"I have a letter to write, mademoiselle,—only a few lines, but I am not sure that I shall have the strength to write it. There is no one here that I can ask to do it in my stead. Should it be necessary, would you be willing to act as my secretary?"

"With the greatest pleasure, madame," was the ready response.

"I thank you for your willingness to oblige me."

"Does madame la comtesse wish me to get the necessary writing materials for her?"

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle," replied the poor mother, though she longed to accept her daughter's offer so she might keep her with her as long as possible. "I will ring for some one. I am loath to give you so much trouble."

"It is no trouble to me, madame. I will gladly get the necessary materials if you will tell me where to find them."

"Over there, on that table near the piano, mademoiselle. I must also ask you to have the goodness to light a candle,—the light from the lamp is not enough. But really I am trespassing entirely too much upon your good nature," added Madame de Beaumesnil, as her daughter lighted a candle and brought the necessary writing materials to the

bedside.

The countess having taken a sheet of paper and laid it upon a blotting-case placed upon her knees, accepted a pen from the hand of Herminie, who was holding the candle in the other.

Madame de Beaumesnil tried to write a few words, but her extreme weakness, together with her failing sight, compelled her to desist from her efforts; the pen dropped from her trembling fingers, and, sinking back upon her pillows, the countess said to Herminie, with a forced smile:

"I am not as strong as I thought, so I shall be obliged to accept your kind offer, mademoiselle."

"Madame la comtesse has been in bed so long that she should not be surprised to find herself a little weak," responded Herminie, anxious to reassure Madame de Beaumesnil and herself as well.

"You are right, mademoiselle. It was very foolish in me to try to write. I will dictate to you, if you have no objections."

Herminie had not felt at liberty to remove her hat, and the countess, from whom the brim concealed a part of her child's face, said, with some embarrassment:

"If you would take off your hat, mademoiselle, you would find it more convenient to write, I think."

Herminie removed her hat, and the countess, who was fairly devouring the girl with her eyes, had an opportunity to admire at her ease, with true maternal pride, the charming face and golden tresses of her child.

"I am at your service now, madame la comtesse," said Herminie, seating herself at a table.

"Then will you kindly write this." And the countess proceeded to dictate as follows:

"Madame de Beaumesnil would be greatly obliged to M. le Marquis de Maillefort if he would come to her house as soon as possible, even should that be at a late hour of the night.

"Madame de Beaumesnil, being very weak, is obliged to have recourse to the hand of another person in order to write to M. de Maillefort, to whom she reiterates the assurance of her very highest regard."

As Madame de Beaumesnil dictated this note she was assailed by one of those puerile, but no less poignant, fears that only a mother can understand.

Delighted by the refinement of manner and language she noticed in her daughter, and aware that she was a musical artiste of a high order, the countess asked herself, with a mother's jealous solicitude, if Herminie's education was all it should be, and if her child's great musical talent might not have been cultivated at the expense of other and less showy accomplishments.

And strange as it may seem,—so important are the merest trifles to a mother's pride,—at that moment, and in spite of all her grave anxieties, Madame de Beaumesnil was saying to herself:

"What if my daughter did not spell well? What if her handwriting should prove execrable?"

This fear was so keen that for a minute or two the countess dared not ask Herminie to show her the letter she had written, but, finally, unable to endure the suspense any longer, she asked:

"Have you finished, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, madame la comtesse."

"Then will you have the goodness to hand me the letter so—so I can see if M. de Maillefort's name is spelled correctly. I neglected to tell you how it was spelled," added the countess, unable to invent any better excuse for her curiosity.

Herminie placed the letter in Madame de Beaumesnil's hand. And how proud and delighted that lady was when she saw that the spelling was not only absolutely perfect, but that the chirography was both graceful and distinguished.

"Wonderful! I never saw more beautiful writing!" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, hastily.

Then, fearing her companion would notice her emotion, she added, more calmly:

"Will you kindly address the letter now, mademoiselle, to—

"*M. le Marquis de Maillefort,*
"No. 45 Rue des Martyrs."

Madame de Beaumesnil then summoned a trusty maid who waited upon her exclusively, and as soon as she came in, said to her:

"Madame Dupont, you will take a carriage and deliver this letter yourself to the person to whom it is addressed. In case M. de Maillefort is not at home, you are to wait for him."

"But what if madame la comtesse should need anything during my absence?" said the maid, evidently much surprised at this order.

"Attend to my commission," replied Madame de Beaumesnil. "Mademoiselle here will, I am sure, be kind enough to perform any service I may require."

Herminie bowed her assent.

The countess proceeded to repeat her instructions to her attendant, and while she was thus engaged, Herminie feeling comparatively safe from observation, gazed at Madame de Beaumesnil with a world of love and anxiety in her eyes, saying to herself the while, with touching resignation:

"I dare not gaze at her except by stealth, and yet she is my mother. Ah, may she never suspect that I know the unhappy secret of my birth."

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRIVATE INTERVIEW.

It was with an expression of almost triumphant satisfaction that Mme. de Beaumesnil watched her maid depart.

The poor mother felt sure now of at least an hour alone with her daughter.

Thanks to this happiness, a faint flush overspread her pallid cheeks, her dim eyes began to sparkle with a feverish light, and the intense prostration gave place to an unnatural excitement, for the countess was making an almost superhuman effort to profit by this opportunity to talk with her daughter alone.

The door had scarcely closed upon the attendant when Madame de Beaumesnil said:

"Mademoiselle, will you have the goodness to pour into a cup five or six spoonfuls of that cordial there on the mantel?"

"But, madame, you forget that the physician ordered you to take this medicine only in small doses," protested Herminie, anxiously. "At least, it seems to me I heard him give those directions yesterday."

"Yes, but I am feeling much better now, and this potion will do me a wonderful amount of good, I think—will give me new strength, in fact."

"Madame la comtesse is really feeling better?" asked Herminie, divided between a desire to believe Madame de Beaumesnil and a fear of seeing her deceived as to the gravity of her situation.

"You can scarcely credit the improvement I speak of, perhaps. The sad rites you witnessed a few minutes ago frightened you, I suppose, and very naturally. But it was only a precaution on my part, for the consciousness of having fulfilled my religious duties, and of being ready to appear before God, gives me a serenity of soul to which the improved condition of which I speak is doubtless due, at least in some measure. I feel sure, too, that the cordial I asked you for just now, but which you refuse to give me," added Madame de Beaumesnil, smiling, "would do me a great deal of good, and enable me to listen once again to one of the songs which have so often assuaged my sufferings."

"As madame insists, I will give her the cordial," said Herminie.

And the young girl, reflecting that a larger or smaller dose of the cordial would probably make very little difference, after all, poured four spoonfuls into a cup and handed it to Madame de Beaumesnil.

The countess, as she took the cup from Herminie, managed to touch her hand, then, rejoiced to have her daughter so near her, sipped the cordial very slowly and then gave such a sigh of weariness as to almost compel Herminie to ask:

"Is madame la comtesse fatigued?"

"Rather. It seems to me that if I could sit bolt upright for a little while I should be more comfortable, but I am hardly strong enough to do that."

"If madame la comtesse would—would lean upon me," said the young girl, hesitatingly, "it might rest her a little."

"I would accept your offer if I did not feel that I was imposing upon your kindness," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, delighted at the success of her little ruse.

Herminie's heart swelled almost to bursting as she seated herself upon the side of the bed and pillowed the invalid's head upon her daughter's bosom.

As they found themselves for the first time in each others' arms, so to speak, the mother and daughter both trembled with emotion. Their position prevented them from seeing each others' faces; but for that Mme. de Beaumesnil, in spite of her vow, might not have been able to guard her secret any longer.

"No, no, there must be no guilty weakness on my part," thought Madame de Beaumesnil. "My poor child shall never know this sad secret, I have sworn it. Is it not a piece of unlooked-for good fortune for me to be the recipient of her affectionate care, which I owe to her kindness of heart rather than to filial instinct, of course?"

"Oh, I would rather die than allow my mother to suspect that I know I am her daughter," thought Herminie, in her turn. "Possibly she is ignorant of the fact herself. Perhaps it was chance, and chance alone, that brought about my present relations with Madame de Beaumesnil; perhaps I am really only a stranger in her eyes."

"I thank you, mademoiselle," said Madame de Beaumesnil, after a while, but without venturing a glance at Herminie. "I feel more comfortable, now."

"Will madame la comtesse allow me to arrange her pillows for her before she lies down again?"

"If you will be so good," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, for would not this little service keep her daughter beside her a few seconds longer?

Mademoiselle and madame la comtesse! If one could but have heard the tone in which the mother and daughter interchanged these cold and ceremonious appellations which had never before seemed so icy in character!

"I have to thank you once again, mademoiselle," said the countess, after she had lain down. "I find myself more and more comfortable, thanks to your kind attentions. The cordial, too, seems to have done me good, and I feel sure that I shall have a very comfortable night."

Herminie glanced dubiously at her hat and mantle. She feared that she would be dismissed on the maid's return, for it was quite likely that Madame de Beaumesnil would not care to hear any music that evening.

Unwilling to renounce her last hope, the young girl said, timidly:

"Madame la comtesse asked me to bring some selections from 'Oberon' this evening, but perhaps she does not care to listen to them."

"Quite the contrary, mademoiselle," said Madame de Beaumesnil, quickly. "You know how often your singing has mitigated my sufferings, and this evening I am feeling so well that music will prove, not an anodyne, but a genuine pleasure."

Herminie cast a quick glance at Madame de Beaumesnil, and was struck by the change in that lady's usually drawn and pallid countenance. A slight colour tinged her cheeks now, and her expression was calm, even smiling.

On beholding this metamorphosis, the girl's gloomy presentiments vanished. Hope revived in her heart, and she almost believed that her mother had been saved by one of those sudden changes so common in nervous maladies.

So inexpressibly pleased and relieved, Herminie took her music and walked to the piano.

Directly over the instrument hung a portrait of a little girl five or six years of age, playing with a magnificent greyhound. She was not pretty, but the childish face had a remarkably sweet and ingenuous expression. This portrait, painted about ten years before, was that of Ernestine de Beaumesnil, the Comtesse de Beaumesnil's legitimate child.

Herminie had not needed to ask who the original of this portrait was, and more than once she had cast a timid, loving glance at this little sister whom she did not know, and whom she would never know, perhaps.

On seeing this portrait now, Herminie, still under the influence of her late emotion, felt even more deeply moved than usual, and for a minute or two she could not take her eyes off the picture. Meanwhile, Madame de Beaumesnil was tenderly watching the girl's every movement, and noted her contemplation of Ernestine's portrait with keen delight.

"Poor Herminie!" thought the countess. "She has a mother and a sister, and yet she will never know the sweetness of those words: my sister—my mother."

And furtively wiping away a tear, Madame de Beaumesnil said aloud to Herminie, whose eyes were still riveted upon the portrait:

"That is my daughter. She has a sweet face, has she not?"

Herminie started as if she had been detected in some grievous crime, and blushed deeply as she timidly replied:

"Pardon me, madame; I—I—"

"Oh, look at it, look at it all you please," exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, hastily. "Though she is nearly grown now, and has changed very much in some respects, she still retains that same sweet, ingenuous expression. She is not nearly as handsome as you are," said the poor mother, with secret pride, and well pleased to be able to thus unite her two daughters in the same comparison, "but Ernestine's face, like yours, possesses a wonderful charm."

Then, fearing she had gone too far, Madame de Beaumesnil added, sadly:

"Poor child! Heaven grant she may be better now!"

"Are you really very anxious about her health, madame la comtesse?"

"She has not been at all well for some months past. She grew so rapidly that we were very anxious about her. The physicians advised us to take her to Italy, but my own health would not permit me to accompany her. Fortunately, the latest reports from her are very encouraging. Poor, dear child! She writes every day a sort of journal for me. You can not imagine anything more touching than her artless confessions. I will let you read some extracts from these letters. You will love Ernestine, then; you could not help loving her."

"I am sure of that, madame, and I thank you a thousand times for your promise," said Herminie. "As the last news received from your daughter is so reassuring, pray do not worry any more about her. Youth has so many chances in its favour anywhere, and under the beautiful skies of Italy she is sure to recover her health."

A bitter thought flitted through Madame de Beaumesnil's mind.

Remembering the expensive journey, the constant care, and the heavy outlay Ernestine's feeble health had necessitated, the countess asked herself with something closely akin to terror what Herminie would have done—

poor, deserted creature that she was!—if she had found herself in Ernestine's position, and if her life could have been saved only by the assiduous care and expensive travel which the wealthy alone can command.

This thought excited in Madame de Beaumesnil's breast a still keener desire to know how Herminie had overcome the many difficulties of her precarious position, for the countess had known absolutely nothing in regard to the girl's life up to the time when a mere chance had brought the mother and daughter together.

But how could she solicit these revelations without betraying herself? To what agony she might subject herself by asking her daughter for the story of her life!

This reflection had always prevented Madame de Beaumesnil from questioning Herminie, heretofore, but that evening, either because the countess felt that the apparent improvement in her condition was a precursor of the end, or because a feeling of tenderness, increased by the events of the evening, proved too strong for her powers of resistance, Madame de Beaumesnil resolved to question Herminie.

CHAPTER X.

REVELATIONS.

While Madame de Beaumesnil was silently revolving in her mind the surest means of inducing Herminie to tell the story of her past life, the girl stood turning the pages of her music book, waiting for the countess to ask her to begin.

"You will think me very changeable, I fear, mademoiselle," said the countess, at last; "but if it is all the same to you, I would prefer to postpone the music until about ten o'clock. That is usually my worst time, though perhaps I shall escape it to-night. If I do not, I should regret having exhausted a resource which has so often relieved me. Nor is this all; after having admitted that I am whimsical, I fear that you will now accuse me of having entirely too much curiosity."

"And why, madame?"

"Come and seat yourself here beside me," said the countess, affectionately, "and tell me how it is that you who can not be more than seventeen or eighteen years of age—"

"Eighteen years and six months, madame la comtesse."

"Well, then, how it is that you are such an accomplished musician at your age?"

"Madame la comtesse judges me too flatteringly. I have always had a great love for music, and I had very little trouble in learning it."

"But who was your instructor? Where did you learn music?"

"I was taught in the school I attended, madame la comtesse."

"In Paris, then, I suppose?"

"No; I have attended school in other places besides Paris."

"Where?"

"In Beauvais. I lived there until I was ten years old."

"And after that?"

"I was placed in a Parisian school."

"And how long did you remain there?"

"Until I was sixteen and a half."

"And after that?"

"I left school and began to give lessons in singing and on the piano."

"And ever since that time you have—?"

Madame de Beaumesnil hastily checked herself, then added, with no little embarrassment:

"I am really ashamed of my inquisitiveness—nothing but the deep interest I take in you could excuse it, mademoiselle."

"The questions madame la comtesse deigns to address to me are evidently so kindly meant that I am only too glad to answer them in all sincerity."

"Well, then, with whom did you make your home after leaving school?"

"With whom did I make my home, madame?"

"Yes; I mean with what persons?"

"I had no one to go to, madame."

"No one?" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, with truly heroic courage. "You had no relatives? No family?"

"I have no relatives, madame la comtesse," replied Herminie, with a courage equal to that of her mother. "I have no relatives."

"I am sure now that she does not know that I am her daughter," Herminie said to herself. "If she did, she certainly would not have had the courage to ask me such a question."

"Then with whom have you lived since that time?" asked the countess.

"I have lived alone."

"Entirely alone?"

"Yes, madame."

"Forgive me this one more question, for at your age—such a position is so unusual—and so very interesting—have you always had scholars enough to support you?"

"Oh, yes, madame la comtesse," replied poor Herminie, bravely.

"And you live entirely alone, though you are so young?"

"What else could I do, madame? One can not choose one's lot; one can only accept it, and by the aid of industry and courage try to make one's existence, if not brilliant, at least happy."

"Happy!" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, in accents of irrepressible delight; "you are really happy?"

As she uttered these words her countenance, as well as her voice, betrayed such intense joy and relief that Herminie's doubts returned, and she said to herself:

"Perhaps she does know that I am her daughter. If she does not, why should she be so pleased to learn that I am happy. It matters little, however. If she does know that I am her daughter, I must reassure her so as to save her from vain regrets, and perhaps remorse. If I am a stranger to her, it is no less necessary for me to reassure her, else she may think I wish to excite her commiseration, and my pride revolts at the idea of that."

Meanwhile, Madame de Beaumesnil, longing to hear Herminie repeat an assurance so precious to a mother's heart, exclaimed:

"And you say you are happy—really and truly happy?"

"Yes, madame," answered Herminie, almost gaily, "very happy."

Seeing her daughter's charming face thus radiant with innocent joy and youthful beauty, the countess was obliged to make a violent effort to keep from betraying herself, and it was with a fair imitation of Herminie's gaiety that she replied:

"Don't laugh at my question, mademoiselle, but to us, who are unfortunately accustomed to all the luxuries and superfluities of wealth, there are many things that seem incomprehensible. When you left school, however modest your wants may have been, how did you manage to supply them?"

"Oh, I was rich, then, madame la comtesse," said Herminie, smiling.

"How was that?"

"Two years after I was placed at a Parisian school, the remittances which had, up to that time, been received for my schooling ceased. I was then twelve years old, and the principal of the school was very fond of me. 'My child,' she said to me one day, 'your friends have ceased to pay for you, but that makes no difference; you shall stay on just the same.'"

"Noble woman!"

"She was the best woman that ever lived, madame la comtesse, but, unfortunately, she is dead now," said Herminie, sadly.

Then, unwilling to leave the countess under a painful impression, she added, smilingly:

"But the kind-hearted woman had not taken my greatest fault into consideration in making these plans. For, as you ask me to be perfectly frank with you, madame, I am forced to admit that I have one great and deplorable fault."

"And what is it, may I ask?"

"Alas! madame, it is *pride*."

"Pride?"

"Yes; so when our kind-hearted principal offered to keep me out of charity, my pride revolted, and I told her I would accept her offer only upon condition that I was allowed to pay by my work for what she offered me gratuitously."

"You said that at the age of twelve. What a little braggart she must have thought you. And how did you propose to pay her, pray?"

"By superintending the practising of the younger music pupils, for I was very far advanced for my age, having always had a passion for music."

"And did she accept your proposal?"

"Gladly, madame la comtesse. My determination to be independent seemed to touch her deeply."

"I can readily understand that."

"Thanks to her, I soon had a large number of pupils, several of them much older than myself,—my pride is continually cropping out, you see, madame. In this way, what was at first child's play became a vocation, and, later on, a valuable resource. At the age of fourteen, I was the second piano teacher, with a salary of twelve hundred francs, so you can form some estimate of the wealth I must have amassed at the age of sixteen and a half."

"Poor child! So young, and yet so full of indomitable energy and noble pride!" exclaimed the countess, unable to restrain her tears.

"Then why did you leave the school?" she continued, after she had conquered her emotion.

"Our noble-hearted principal died, and another lady—who unfortunately did not resemble my benefactress in the least—took her place. The newcomer, however, proposed that I should remain in the institution upon the same terms. I accepted her offer, but, at the end of two months, my great fault—and my hot head—caused me to sever my connection with the school."

"And why?"

"My new employer was as hard and tyrannical as the other had been kind and affectionate, and one day—"

Herminie's beautiful face turned a vivid scarlet at the recollection, and she hesitated a moment.

"One day," she continued, at last, "this lady made a remark to me that cut me to the quick."

"What did the wicked creature say to you?" demanded Madame de Beaumesnil, for Herminie had paused again, unwilling to wound the countess by repeating the insulting and heartless words:

"You are very proud for a bastard that was reared by charity in this very house."

"What did that wicked woman say to you?" insisted Madame de Beaumesnil.

"I beg that you will not insist upon my repeating her heartless words," replied Herminie. "Though I have not forgotten, I have at least forgiven them. But the very next day I left the house with my little savings. With these I fitted up my modest *ménage*, for since that time I have lived alone, in a home of my own."

Herminie uttered the words, "in a home of my own," with such a proud and satisfied air, that Madame de Beaumesnil, with tears in her eyes, despite the smile upon her lips, pressed the young girl's hand affectionately, and said:

"I am sure this home of yours must be charming."

"Oh, yes, madame, there is nothing too elegant for me."

"Come, tell me all about it. How many rooms are there in your apartment?"

"Only one, besides a tiny hall; but it is on the ground floor, and looks out upon a garden. The room is small, so I could afford a pretty carpet and curtains. I have only one armchair, but that is velvet. I have but little furniture, it is true, but that little is in very good taste, I think. There is one thing more that I aspire to, however, and that ambition will soon be realised."

"And what is that?"

"It is to have a little maid,—a child thirteen or fourteen years of age, whom I shall rescue from misery and want, and who will be as happy as the day is long with me. I have heard of an orphan girl, about twelve years old, a dear, obedient, affectionate child, they say, so you can judge how pleased I shall be when I am able to take her into my service. It will not be a useless expense, either, madame la comtesse, for then I shall not be obliged to go out alone to give my lessons,—and that is so unpleasant, for, as you must know, madame, a young girl who is obliged to go out alone—"

Herminie's voice faltered, and tears of shame filled her eyes as she thought of the insult she had just received from M. de Ravil, as well as other annoyances of a like nature to which she had often been subjected in spite of her modest and dignified bearing.

"I understand, my child, and I approve your plan," said Madame de Beaumesnil, more and more deeply touched. "But your pupils—who procures them for you? And do you always have as many as you need?"

"Generally, madame la comtesse. In summer, when several of my pupils go to the country, I follow other pursuits. I can embroider very well; sometimes I copy music—I have even composed several pieces. I have maintained friendly relations, too, with several of my former schoolmates, and it was through one of them that I was recommended to the wife of your physician, who was looking for a young person, a good musician, to play and sing for you."

Herminie, who had begun her story seated in an armchair near the bedside, now found herself half reclining on the bed, clasped in her mother's arms.

Both had unconsciously yielded to the promptings of filial and maternal love, for Madame de Beaumesnil, after placing Herminie near her, had ventured to retain one of her daughter's hands during the narration of this simple yet touching story, and as Herminie recounted the principal incidents of her past life to her mother, she felt Madame de

Beaumesnil's hand draw her closer and closer, until she found herself leaning over the bed with her mother's arms around her neck.

Then seized with a sort of maternal frenzy, Madame de Beaumesnil, instead of continuing the conversation and answering her daughter, seized Herminie's lovely face in her two hands, and, without uttering a word, covered it with tears and impassioned kisses, after which the mother and daughter remained for several minutes clasped in a convulsive embrace. It is well-nigh certain that the secret which it had been so difficult to guard, and which had more than once been upon their lips, would have escaped them this time if they had not been suddenly recalled to consciousness by a knock at the door.

Madame de Beaumesnil, terrified at the thought of the act of perjury she had been on the verge of committing, but unable to explain this wild transport of tenderness on her part, exclaimed incoherently, as she gently released Herminie from her embrace:

"Forgive me, forgive me, my child! I am a mother,—my own child is far away—and her absence causes me the deepest regret. My poor brain is so weak—now—and for a moment—I laboured under the delusion—the strange delusion that it was—that it was my absent daughter I was pressing to my heart. Pardon the strange hallucination—you cannot but pity a poor mother who realises that she is dying without being able to embrace her child for the last time."

"Dying!" exclaimed the girl, raising her tear-stained face and gazing wildly at her mother.

But hearing the knock repeated, Herminie hastily dried her tears, and, forcing herself to appear calm, said to her mother:

"This is the second time some one has knocked, madame la comtesse."

"Admit the person," murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, faintly, quite overcome by the painful scene. It proved to be the confidential maid of the countess. She entered, and said:

"I went to M. le Marquis de Maillefort as madame directed."

"Well?" demanded Madame de Beaumesnil, eagerly.

"And M. le marquis is waiting below until madame la comtesse is ready to see him."

"Heaven be praised!" murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, fervently. "God is rewarding me for having had the strength to keep my vow!"

Then, turning to the maid, she added:

"Bring M. de Maillefort here at once."

Herminie, quite overcome by so many conflicting emotions, and feeling that her presence was no longer desired, took her hat and mantle with the intention of departing at once.

The countess never took her eyes from the young girl's face. She was gazing at her daughter for the last time, perhaps, for the poor mother felt her life was nearly over now. Nevertheless she had the courage to say to Herminie in an almost unconcerned voice in order to deceive the girl as to her real condition:

"We will have our selections from 'Oberon' to-morrow, mademoiselle. You will have the goodness to come early, will you not?"

"Yes, madame la comtesse," replied Herminie.

"Show mademoiselle out, Madame Dupont, and then bring M. de Maillefort," the countess said to her maid. But as she watched her daughter move towards the door she could not help saying to her for the last time:

"Farewell, mademoiselle."

"Farewell, madame la comtesse," answered Herminie.

And it was in these formal words that these two poor, heart-broken creatures gave vent to their grief and despair at this final hour of parting.

Madame Dupont showed Herminie to the street door without taking her past the drawing-room in which M. de Maillefort was waiting. Just as the young girl was leaving, Madame Dupont said, kindly:

"You have forgotten your umbrella, mademoiselle, and you will need it, for it is a dreadful night. The rain is falling in torrents."

"Thank you, madame," said Herminie, recollecting now that she had left her umbrella just outside the door of the reception-room, and hastening back for it.

It was indeed, raining in torrents, but Herminie, absorbed in grief, did not even notice that the night was dark and stormy as she left the Hôtel de Beaumesnil, and wended her solitary way homeward.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PURSE OF MONEY.

M. de Maillefort was waiting alone in one of the drawing-rooms when Madame Dupont came to conduct him into Madame de Beaumesnil's presence.

The hunchback's countenance had lost its usual expression of cynical raillery. Profound sadness, mingled with an intense anxiety and surprise, could be easily discerned upon his features.

Standing with one elbow resting on the mantel, and his head supported on his hand, the marquis seemed lost in thought. One might almost have fancied that he was seeking the solution of some difficult enigma; but now and then he would wake from his reverie and gaze around him with eyes glittering with tears, then hurriedly passing his hand across his forehead, as if to drive away painful thoughts, he began to pace the room with hasty strides.

Only a few minutes had elapsed, however, when Madame Dupont came to say:

"If M. le marquis will be kind enough to follow me, madame la comtesse will see him now."

Stepping in front of the marquis, Madame Dupont opened the door leading into Madame de Beaumesnil's apartment and announced:

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort!"

The countess had made an invalid's toilet. Her blonde hair, somewhat dishevelled by the passionate embraces bestowed upon her daughter, had been smoothed afresh, a dainty cap of Valenciennes lace surmounted the pale face, from which every tinge of colour had now fled. Her eyes, so brilliant with maternal tenderness a few moments before, had lost their lustre, and the hands that burned so feverishly when they pressed Herminie's were fast growing cold.

Noting the appalling change in the features of the countess, whom he had seen but a comparatively short time before radiant with youth and beauty, M. de Maillefort started violently, then paused a moment in spite of himself.

"You find me greatly changed, do you not, M. de Maillefort?" asked Madame de Beaumesnil, with a sad smile.

The hunchback made no reply. His head drooped, and when he raised it again, after a minute or two, he was as pale as death.

Madame de Beaumesnil motioned the marquis to seat himself in an armchair near the bedside, saying as she did so, in a grave but affectionate voice:

"I fear my moments even are numbered, M. de Maillefort, and I shall therefore endeavour to make this interview as brief as possible."

The marquis silently took the seat designated by the countess, who added:

"My note must have surprised you."

"Yes, madame."

"But kind and generous as ever, you hastened to comply with my request."

The marquis bowed, and, in a voice full of emotion, the countess went on:

"M. de Maillefort, you have loved me devotedly," she said.

The hunchback started visibly, and gazed at the countess with mingled dismay and astonishment.

"Do not be surprised that I should have discovered a secret that no one else has even suspected," continued the countess, "for love, true love, always betrays itself to the person loved."

"So you knew," stammered the hunchback.

"I knew all," replied the countess, extending her ice-cold hand to M. de Maillefort, who pressed it reverently, while tears which he could no longer repress streamed down his cheeks.

"Yes, I knew all," continued the countess, "your noble, though carefully concealed, devotion, and the suffering so heroically endured."

"You knew all?" repeated M. de Maillefort, hesitatingly; "you knew all, and yet your greeting was always kind and gracious when we chanced to meet. You knew all, and yet I never detected a mocking smile upon your lips or a gleam of disdainful pity in your eye."

"M. de Maillefort," the countess answered, with touching dignity, "it is in the name of the love you have borne me, it is in the name of the affectionate esteem with which your character has always inspired me, that I now, at the hour of death, beg that you will allow me to entrust to your keeping the interests I hold most dear."

"Forgive me, madame, forgive me," said the marquis, with even greater emotion, "for having even for an instant fancied that a heart like yours could scorn or ridicule an unconquerable but carefully concealed love. Speak on, madame, I believe I am worthy of the confidence you show in me."

"M. de Maillefort, this night will be my last."

"Madame!"

"I am not deceiving myself. It is only by a strong effort of will and a powerful stimulant that I have managed to hold death at bay for several hours past. Listen, then, for, as I just told you, my moments are numbered."

The hunchback dried his tears and listened with breathless attention.

"You have heard of the frightful accident of which M. de Beaumesnil was the victim. By reason of his death—and mine—my daughter Ernestine will soon be an orphan in a strange land, with no one to care for her but a governess. Nor is this all. Ernestine is an angel of goodness and ingenuousness, but she is exceedingly timid. Tenderly guarded both by her father and myself, she is as ignorant of the world as only a sixteen-year-old girl who has been jealously watched over by her parents, and who naturally prefers quiet and simplicity, can be. On some accounts one might suppose that I need feel no anxiety in regard to her future, for she will be the richest heiress in France, but I cannot overcome my uneasiness when I think of the persons who will probably have charge of my daughter when I am gone, for it is M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë who, as her nearest relatives, will doubtless be selected as her guardians. This being the case, you can easily understand my apprehensions, I think."

"It would, indeed, be desirable that your daughter should have more judicious guardians, but Mlle. de Beaumesnil is sixteen. Her minority will not last long; besides, the persons to whom you allude are erratic and ridiculous rather than dangerous."

"I know that, still, Ernestine's hand will be so strongly coveted—I have already had convincing proofs of that"—added Madame de Beaumesnil, remembering her confessor's persistent efforts in M. de Macreuse's behalf, "the poor child will be the victim of such persecution that I shall not feel entirely reassured unless she has a faithful and devoted friend of superior character, willing and capable of guiding her in her choice. Will you be this faithful friend to my child, M. de Maillefort? Consent, I beseech you, and I shall leave the world satisfied that my daughter's lot in life will be as happy as it will be brilliant."

"I will endeavour to be such a friend to your daughter, madame. Everything that I can do for her, I will do."

"Ah, I can breath freely now, I no longer feel any anxiety in regard to Ernestine. I know what such a promise means from you, M. de Maillefort," exclaimed the countess, her face beaming with hope and serenity.

But almost immediately a consciousness of increasing weakness, together with other unfavourable symptoms, convinced Madame de Beaumesnil that her end was fast approaching. Her countenance, which had beamed for a moment with the hope and serenity M. de Maillefort's promise had inspired, became troubled again, and in a hurried, almost entreating voice, she continued:

"But this is not all, M. de Maillefort, I have a still greater favour to ask of you. Aided by your counsels, my daughter Ernestine will be as happy as she is rich. Her future is as bright and as well assured as any person's can be, but it is very different concerning the future of a poor but noble-hearted creature, whom—I—I wish that you—"

Madame de Beaumesnil paused. Say more she dared not—could not.

Though she had resolved to tell M. de Maillefort the secret of Herminie's birth, in the hope of ensuring her child the protection of this generous man, she shrank from the shame of such a confession,—a confession which would also have been a violation of the solemn oath she had taken years before, and faithfully kept.

The marquis, seeing her hesitate, said, gently:

"What is it, madame? Will you not be kind enough to tell me what other service I can render you? Do you not know that you can depend upon me as one of the most devoted of your friends?"

"I know that! I know that!" gasped Madame de Beaumesnil, "but I dare not—I am afraid—"

The marquis, deeply touched by her distress, endeavoured to make it easier for her to prefer her request by saying:

"When you checked yourself just now, madame, you were speaking, I think, of the uncertain future of a poor but noble-hearted creature. Who is she? And in what way can I be of service to her?"

Overcome with grief and increasing weakness, Madame de Beaumesnil buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears; then, after a brief silence, riveting her weeping eyes on the marquis, and endeavouring to appear more calm, she said, brokenly:

"Yes, you might be of the greatest possible service to a poor girl—worthy in every respect—of your interest, for she, too, is an orphan—a most unfortunate orphan,—for she is both friendless and penniless, but, oh, so brave, and so proud! In short, she is an angel," cried the countess, with a vehemence at which M. de Maillefort marvelled greatly. "Yes," continued Madame de Beaumesnil, sobbing violently, "Yes, she is an angel of courage and of virtue, and it is for this angel that I ask the same fatherly interest I asked for my daughter Ernestine. Oh, M. de Maillefort, do not refuse my request, I beseech you!"

The excitement and embarrassment Madame de Beaumesnil manifested in speaking of this orphan, together with the almost frenzied appeal in her behalf, excited the Marquis de Maillefort's profound astonishment.

For a moment he was too amazed to speak; then, all of a sudden, he started violently, for a terrible suspicion darted through his mind. He recollected some of the scandalous (up to this time he had always styled them infamous) reports, which had been rife in former years, concerning Madame de Beaumesnil, and which he had avenged by challenging M. de Mornand that very day.

Could it be that there had really been a foundation for these rumours? Was this orphan, in whom Madame de Beaumesnil seemed to take such a profound interest, bound to the countess by a secret tie? Was she, indeed, the child of her shame?

But almost immediately the marquis, full of confidence in Madame de Beaumesnil's virtue, drove away these odious suspicions, and bitterly reproached himself for having entertained them even for a moment.

The countess, terrified by the hunchback's silence, said to him, in trembling tones:

"Forgive me, M. de Maillefort. I see that I have presumed too much upon your generous kindness. Not content with having secured your fatherly protection for my daughter, Ernestine, I must needs seek to interest you in an unfortunate stranger. Pardon me, I beseech you."

The tone in which Madame de Beaumesnil uttered these words was so heart-broken and full of despair that M. de Maillefort's suspicions revived. One of his dearest illusions was being ruthlessly destroyed. Madame de Beaumesnil was no longer the ideal woman he had so long adored.

But taking pity on this unhappy mother, and understanding how terribly she must suffer, M. de Maillefort felt his eyes fill with tears, and it was in an agitated voice that he replied:

"You need have no fears, madame, I shall keep my promise, and the orphan girl you commend to my care will be as dear to me as Mlle. de Beaumesnil. I shall have two daughters instead of one."

And he pressed the hand of Madame de Beaumesnil affectionately, as if to seal his promise.

"Now I can die in peace!" exclaimed the countess. And before the marquis could prevent it, she had pressed her cold lips upon the hand he had offered her; and, from this manifestation of ineffable gratitude, M. de Maillefort was convinced that the person in question was indeed Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

All at once, either because so much violent emotion had exhausted the invalid's strength, or because her malady—concealed for a time by an apparent improvement in the sufferer's condition—had attained its height, Madame de Beaumesnil made a sudden movement, at the same time uttering a cry of agony.

"Good God, madame, what is it?" cried the marquis, terrified at the sudden alteration in Madame de Beaumesnil's features.

"It is nothing," she answered, heroically, "a slight pain, that is all. But here, take this key,—quick, I beg of you," she added, drawing out a key from under her pillow and handing it to him.

"Open—that—secretary," she gasped.

The marquis obeyed.

"There is a purse in the middle drawer. Do you see it?"

"Yes, here it is."

"Keep it, I beg of you. It contains a sum of money which I have a perfect right to dispose of. It will at least save the young girl I commended to your care from want. Only promise me," continued the poor mother, her voice becoming more and more feeble each moment,—"promise me that you will never mention my name to—to this orphan—nor tell her who it was that asked you to place this money in her hands. But tell her, oh, tell this unfortunate child that she was tenderly loved until the last, and that—that it was absolutely necessary—"

The countess was so weak now that the conclusion of the sentence was inaudible.

"But this purse—to whom am I to give it, madame? Where shall I find this young girl, and what is her name?" exclaimed M. de Maillefort, alarmed by the sudden change in Madame de Beaumesnil's condition, and by her laboured breathing.

But instead of answering M. de Maillefort's question Madame de Beaumesnil sank back on her pillows with a despairing moan, and clasped her hands upon her breast.

"Speak to me, madame," cried the marquis, bending over the countess in the utmost terror and alarm. "This young girl, tell me where I can find her, and who she is."

"I am dying—dying—" murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, lifting her eyes heavenward.

Then with a last supreme effort, she faltered:

"Don't forget—your promise—my child—the orphan!"

In another moment the countess was no more; and M. de Maillefort, overcome with grief and chagrin, could no longer doubt that this orphan, whose name and place of abode were alike unknown to him, was Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

The funeral rites of Madame de Beaumesnil were conducted with great splendour.

The Baron de la Rochaiguë acted as chief mourner. M. de Maillefort, invited by letter to take part in the ceremonial, joined the funeral cortége.

In an obscure corner of the church, kneeling as if crushed by the weight of her despair, a young girl prayed and sobbed, unheeded by any one.

It was Herminie.

CHAPTER XII.

A VAIN INTERVIEW.

Several days after Madame de Beaumesnil's funeral, M. de Maillefort, arousing himself from the gloomy lethargy into which the death of the countess had plunged him, resolved to carry out that unfortunate lady's last wishes in regard to the unknown orphan, though he fully realised all the difficulties of the mission intrusted to him.

How should he go to work to find the young girl whom Madame de Beaumesnil had so urgently commended to his care?

To whom could he apply for information that would give him the necessary clue to her identity?

Above all, how could he secure this information without compromising Madame de Beaumesnil's good name and the secrecy with which she had wished him to carry out her intentions with regard to this mysterious daughter,—her illegitimate child, as M. de Maillefort could no longer doubt.

The hunchback recollected that on the evening of her death the countess had sent a confidential servant to beg him to come to the Hôtel de Beaumesnil without delay.

"This woman has been in Madame de Beaumesnil's service a long time," thought the marquis. "She may be able to give me some information."

So M. de Maillefort's valet, a trustworthy and devoted man, was sent to bring Madame Dupont to the house of the marquis.

"I know how devotedly you were attached to your mistress, my dear Madame Dupont," the marquis began.

"Ah, monsieur, madame la comtesse was so good and kind!" exclaimed Madame Dupont, bursting into tears. "How could one help being devoted to her in life and in death?"

"It is because I am so sure of this devotion, as well as of your respect for the memory of your deceased mistress, that I requested you to come to my house, my dear Madame Dupont. I wish to speak to you on a very delicate subject."

"I am listening, M. le marquis."

"The proof of confidence which Madame de Beaumesnil gave by sending for me just before her death must convince you that any questions I may put to you are of an almost sacred nature, so I can safely count upon your frankness and discretion."

"You can, indeed, M. le marquis."

"I am sure of it. Now the state of affairs is just this: Madame de Beaumesnil has for a long time, as nearly as I can learn,—at the request of a friend,—taken charge of a young orphan girl who, by the death of her protectress, is now deprived of the means of support. I am ignorant of this young girl's name, as well as of her place of residence, and I am anxious to ascertain both as soon as possible. Can you give me any information on the subject?"

"A young orphan girl?" repeated Madame Dupont, thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"During the ten years I have been in the service of madame la comtesse, I have never known any young girl who came regularly to the house or who seemed to be a protégée of hers."

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure, M. le marquis."

"And Madame de Beaumesnil never entrusted you with any commission in connection with the young girl of whom I speak?"

"Never, M. le marquis. Many persons applied to madame for aid, for she was very liberal, but I never noticed that she gave any particular person the preference or interested herself any more in one person than in another, and I feel sure that if madame had wished any confidential mission performed, she would certainly have entrusted it to me."

"That is exactly what I thought, and it was for that very reason I felt confident of securing some information from you. Come now, try and think if you can not remember some young girl in whom Madame de Beaumesnil has seemed to take a special interest for some time past."

"I can remember no one, absolutely no one," answered Madame Dupont after several minutes of profound reflection.

The thought of Herminie did occur to her, but was instantly dismissed, for there had been nothing in Madame de Beaumesnil's manner towards the young musician that indicated any special interest; besides, she and the countess had met for the first time less than a fortnight before the latter's death, while the marquis declared that the young girl of whom he was in search had been under Madame de Beaumesnil's protection for a long time.

"Then I must endeavour to secure my information elsewhere," said the marquis, with a sigh.

"Wait a moment, M. le marquis," exclaimed Madame Dupont. "What I am going to tell you may have no connection with the young girl of whom you speak, but it will do no harm to mention it."

"Let me hear what it is."

"The day before her death, madame la comtesse sent for me, and said: 'Take a cab and carry this letter to a woman who lives in the Batignolles. Do not tell her who sent you, but bring her back with you, and show her up to my room immediately upon her arrival.'"

"And this woman's name?"

"Was a very peculiar one, M. le marquis, and I have not forgotten it. She is called Madame Barbançon."

"Was she a frequent visitor at Madame de Beaumesnil's house?"

"She was never there except that once."

"And did you bring this woman to Madame de Beaumesnil's?"

"I did not."

"How was that?"

"After giving me the order I just spoke of, madame seemed to change her mind, for she said to me: 'All things considered, Madame Dupont, you had better not take a cab. It would give the affair an air of mystery. Order out the carriage, give this letter to the footman, and tell him to deliver it to the person to whom it is addressed.'"

"And he found the woman?"

"Yes, M. le marquis."

"And did Madame de Beaumesnil have a conversation with her?"

"The interview lasted at least two hours, M. le marquis."

"How old was this woman?"

"Fifty years of age at the very least, and a very ordinary person."

"And after her interview with the countess?"

"She was taken back to her home in madame's carriage."

"And you say she has never been at the Hôtel de Beaumesnil since?"

"No, M. le marquis."

After remaining silent for some time, the hunchback turned to Madame Dupont, and asked:

"What did you say this woman's name was?"

"Madame Barbançon."

The hunchback wrote down the name in his note-book, then asked:

"And she lives where?"

"In the Batignolles."

"The street and number, if you please."

"I do not know, M. le marquis. I only remember that the footman told us that the house where she lived was in a very quiet street, and that there was a garden, into which one could look through a small latticed gate."

The hunchback, after jotting down these items in his note-book, said:

"I thank you very much for this information, though it may be of little or no assistance to me in my search. If you should at any time recall other facts which you think may be of service, I hope you will notify me at once."

"I will not fail to do so, M. le marquis."

M. de Maillefort, having rewarded Madame Dupont handsomely, called a cab and ordered the coachman to drive him to the Batignolles.

After two hours of persistent inquiry and assiduous search the marquis at last discovered Commander Bernard's house, where he found only Madame Barbançon at home.

Olivier had left Paris several days before in company with his master mason, and the veteran had just gone out for his daily walk.

The housekeeper on opening the door was so unpleasantly impressed by the visitor's deformity, that, instead of inviting him in, she remained standing upon the threshold, thus barring M. de Maillefort's passage.

That gentleman, noting the unfavourable impression he was making upon the housekeeper, bowed very politely, and said:

"Have I the honour of speaking to Madame Barbançon?"

"Yes, monsieur; and what do you want of Madame Barbançon?"

"I am desirous that you should grant me the honour of a few minutes' conversation."

"And why, monsieur?" demanded the housekeeper, eyeing the stranger distrustfully.

"I wish to confer with you, madame, on a very important matter."

"But I do not even know you."

"I have the advantage of knowing you, though only by name, it is true."

"A fine story that! I, too, know the Grand Turk by name."

"My dear Madame Barbançon, will you permit me to say that we could talk very much more at our ease inside, than out here on the doorstep."

"I only care to be at ease with persons I like, monsieur," retorted the housekeeper, tartly.

"I can understand your distrust, my dear madame," replied the marquis, concealing his impatience, "so I will vouch for myself by a name that is not entirely unknown to you."

"What name is that?"

"That of Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"Do you come at her request, monsieur?" asked the housekeeper, quickly.

"At her request? No, madame," sadly replied the hunchback, shaking his head, "Madame de Beaumesnil is dead."

"Dead! And when did the poor, dear lady die?"

"Let us step inside and I will then answer your question," said the marquis, in an authoritative manner that rather awed Madame Barbançon; besides, she was very anxious to hear the particulars of Madame de Beaumesnil's death.

"And you say that Madame de Beaumesnil is dead?" exclaimed the housekeeper, as soon as they had entered the house.

"She died several days ago—the very next day after her interview with you."

"What, monsieur, you know?"

"I know that Madame de Beaumesnil had a long conversation with you, and I am fulfilling her last wishes in asking you to accept these twenty-five napoleons from her."

And the hunchback showed Madame Barbançon a small silk purse filled with shining gold.

The words "twenty-five napoleons" grievously offended the housekeeper's ears. Had the marquis said twenty-five louis the effect would probably have been entirely different.

So instead of taking the proffered gold, Madame Barbançon, feeling all her former doubts revive, answered majestically, as she waved aside the purse with an expression of superb disdain:

"I do not accept napoleons," accenting the detested name strongly; "no, I do not accept napoleons from the first person that happens to come along—without knowing—do you understand, monsieur?"

"Without knowing what, my dear madame?"

"Without knowing who these people are who say napoleons as if it would scorch their mouths if they should utter the word louis. But it is all plain enough now," she added, sardonically. "Tell me who you go with and I will tell you who you are. Now what do you want with me? I have my soup pot to watch."

"As I told you before, madame, I came to bring you a slight token of Madame de Beaumesnil's gratitude for the discretion and reserve you displayed in a certain affair."

"What affair?"

"You know very well."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you mean."

"Come, come, my dear Madame Barbançon, why will you not be perfectly frank with me? I was one of Madame de Beaumesnil's most intimate friends, and I know all about that orphan—you know—that orphan."

"That orphan?"

"Yes, that young girl, I need say no more. You see I know all about it."

"Then if you know all about it, why do you come here to question me?"

"I come in the interest of the young girl—you know who I mean—to ask you to give me her address, as I have a very important communication to make to her."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well, well, did anybody ever hear the equal of that?" snorted the housekeeper, indignantly.

"But my dear Madame Barbançon, what is there so very extraordinary in what I am saying to you?"

"This," yelled the housekeeper, "this—that you are nothing more or less than a miserable old roué!"

"I?"

"Yes, a miserable scoundrel who is trying to bribe me, and make me blab all I know by promises of gold."

"But, my dear madame, I assure you—"

"But understand me once for all: if that hump of yours was stuffed with napoleons, and you authorised me to help myself to all I wanted, I wouldn't tell you a word more than I chose to. That is the kind of a woman I am!"

"But, Madame Barbançon, do pray listen to me. You are a worthy and honest woman."

"Yes, I flatter myself that I am."

"And very justly, I am sure. That being the case, if you would only hear me to the end you would answer very differently, I am sure, for—"

"I should do nothing of the kind. Oh, I understand, you came here intending to pump me and get all you could out of me, but, thank Heaven, I was smart enough to see through you from the very first, and now I tell you once for all you had better let me alone."

"But one word, I beg, my dear friend," pleaded the marquis, trying to take his irascible companion's hand.

"Don't touch me, you vile libertine," shrieked the housekeeper, springing back in prudish terror. "I know you now for the serpent that you are! First it was 'madame,' and then 'my dear madame,' and now 'my dear friend,' and you'll wind up with 'my treasure,' I suppose!"

"But Madame Barbançon, I do assure you—"

"I have always heard it said that humpbacked people were worse than monkeys," exclaimed the housekeeper, recoiling still further. "If you don't take yourself off, sir, and at once, I'll call the neighbours; I'll yell for the police; I'll cry fire!"

"You must be crazy, woman," exclaimed the marquis, exasperated by the complete failure of his efforts so far as Madame Barbançon was concerned. "What the devil do you mean by all this pretended indignation and prudery? You are very nearly as ugly as I am, and we are not calculated to tempt each other. I say once more, and for the last time, and you had better weigh my words well, I came here in the hope of being of assistance to a poor and worthy young girl whom you must know. And if you do know her, you are doing her an irreparable wrong—do you understand me?—by refusing to tell me where she is and to assist me in finding her. Consider well—the future of this young girl is in your hands, and I am sure you are really too kind-hearted to wish to injure a worthy girl who has never harmed you."

M. de Maillefort spoke with so much feeling, his tone was so earnest and sincere, that Madame Barbançon began to feel that there was really no just cause for her distrust, after all.

"Well, monsieur, I may have been mistaken in thinking that you were trying to make love to me," she began.

"You certainly were."

"But as for telling you anything I oughtn't to tell you, you won't make me do that, however hard you may try. It is quite possible that you're a respectable man, and that your intentions are good, but I'm an honest woman, too, and I know what I ought and what I ought not to tell; so, though you might cut me in pieces, you wouldn't get a treacherous word out of me. That is the kind of a woman I am!"

"Where the devil can one hope to find a woman of sense?" M. de Maillefort said to himself as he left Madame Barbançon, quite despairing of getting any information out of the worthy housekeeper, and realising only too well the futility of his first efforts to discover Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNEXPECTED CONSOLATION.

Two months had elapsed since the death of Madame de Beaumesnil, and great activity reigned in the house of M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë, who had been appointed guardian of Ernestine de Beaumesnil at a family council convoked shortly after the demise of the countess.

The servants of the household were hurrying to and fro arranging articles of furniture, under the superintendence of the baron, his wife, and his sister, Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë, an old maid about forty-five years of age, whose plain black dress, downcast eyes, white, pinched face, and severely arranged white hair made her look very much like a *religieuse*, though she had never taken monastic vows.

M. de la Rochaiguë, a very tall, thin man, between sixty and seventy years of age, was quite bald. He had a receding forehead and chin, prominent blue eyes, and a long nose. His lips were wreathed in a perpetual smile, which displayed exceedingly white, but unusually long, teeth, that imparted a decidedly sheep-like character to his physiognomy. He had an excellent figure, and by holding himself rigidly erect and buttoning his long black coat straight up to his white cravat, he managed to make himself a living copy of the portrait of Canning, "the perfect

type of a gentleman statesman," as the baron often remarked.

M. de la Rochaiguë was not a statesman, however, though he had long aspired to become one. In fact, this ambition had developed into a sort of mania with him. Believing himself an unknown Canning, and being unable to air his eloquence in the councils of the nation, he took advantage of each and every opportunity to make a speech, and always assumed a parliamentary tone and attitude in discussing the most trivial matter.

One of the most salient characteristics of the baron's oratory was a redundancy of adjectives and adverbs, which seemed to him to treble the effect of his finest thoughts, though if we might venture to adopt the baron's phraseology, we could truly say that nothing could be more insignificant, more commonplace, and more void of meaning than what he styled his thoughts.

Madame de la Rochaiguë, who was now about forty-five, had been extremely pretty, coquettish, and charming. Her figure was still slender and graceful, but the youthfulness and elaborateness of her toilets seemed ill-suited to one of her mature years.

The baroness was passionately fond of luxury and display. There was nothing that she loved better than to organise and preside at magnificent entertainments, but unfortunately, her fortune, though considerable, did not correspond with her very expensive tastes. Besides, she had no intention of impoverishing herself; so being an extremely shrewd and economical woman, she managed to enjoy the prestige which lavish expenditure imparts to one by frequently acting as the patroness of the many obscure but enormously rich foreigners or provincials—meteors—who, after dazzling Paris a few years, vanish for ever in darkness and oblivion.

Madame de la Rochaiguë in such cases did not allow her protégés the slightest liberty, even in the selection of their guests. She gave them a list of the persons they were to entertain, not even granting them permission to invite such of their friends or compatriots as she did not consider worthy to appear in aristocratic society.

The baroness, holding a high social position herself, could easily launch her clients in the best society, but in the meantime she was really the mistress of their house. It was she alone who planned their entertainments, and it was to her that persons applied for a place on the list of guests bidden to these sumptuous and exclusive reunions.

It is needless to say that she considered a box at the opera and other fashionable places of amusement an absolute necessity, and, in this box, the best seat was always reserved for her. It was the same at the races, and in the frequent visits to the seashore and other fashionable watering-places. Her protégés rented a house, and sent down chefs, servants, and horses and carriages, and in these admirably appointed establishments Madame de la Rochaiguë kept open house for her friends.

So insatiable is the longing for pleasure in society, even the most fashionable society, that, instead of revolting at the idea of a woman of noble birth devoting herself to the shameful robbing of these unfortunate people whose foolish vanity was leading them on to ruin, society flattered Madame de la Rochaiguë, the dispenser of all this lavish hospitality, and the lady herself was not a little proud of the advantages she derived from her patronage; besides being clever, witty, shrewd, and remarkably self-possessed, Madame de la Rochaiguë was one of the seven or eight brilliant women who exerted a real influence over what is known as Parisian society.

The three persons above referred to were engaged in adding the finishing touches to a spacious suite of superbly appointed apartments that occupied the entire first floor of a mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain.

M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë had relinquished these rooms and established themselves on the second floor, a part of which was occupied by Mlle. de la Rochaiguë, while the rest had heretofore served as quarters for the baron's daughter and son-in-law, when they left their estates, where they resided most of the year, for a two months' sojourn in Paris.

These formerly rather dilapidated and very parsimoniously furnished apartments had been entirely renovated and superbly decorated for Mlle. Ernestine de Beaumesnil, whose health had become sufficiently restored to admit of her return to France, and who was expected to arrive from Italy that very day, accompanied by her governess, and a sort of steward or courier whom M. de la Rochaiguë had despatched to Naples to bring the orphan home.

The extreme care which the baron and his wife and sister were bestowing on the arrangement of the rooms was almost ludicrous, so plainly did it show the intense eagerness and obsequiousness with which Mlle. de Beaumesnil was awaited, though there was something almost depressing in the thought that all this splendour was for a mere child of sixteen, who seemed likely to be almost lost in these immense rooms.

After a final survey of the apartments, M. de la Rochaiguë summoned all the servants, and, seeing a fine opportunity for a speech, uttered the following memorable words with all his wonted majesty of demeanour:

"I here assemble my people together, to say, declare, and signify to them that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, my cousin and ward, is expected to arrive this evening. I desire also to say to them that Madame de la Rochaiguë and myself intend, desire, and wish that our people should obey Mlle. de Beaumesnil's orders even more scrupulously than our own. In other words, I desire to say to our people that anything and everything Mlle. de Beaumesnil may say, order, or command, they are to obey as implicitly, unhesitatingly, and blindly as if the order had been given by Madame de la Rochaiguë or myself. I count upon the zeal, intelligence, and exactitude of my people in this particular, and we shall reward handsomely all who manifest hearty good-will, solicitude, and unremitting zeal in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's service."

After this eloquent adjuration the servants were dismissed, and the cooks were ordered to have everything in readiness to serve either a hot or cold repast in case Mlle. de Beaumesnil should desire something to eat on her arrival.

These preparations concluded, Madame de la Rochaiguë suggested to her husband that they go up to their own apartments.

"I was about to make the same proposition to you," responded M. de la Rochaiguë, smiling, and showing his long teeth with the most affable air imaginable.

As the baron and baroness and Mlle. de la Rochaiguë were leaving the apartment, a servant stepped up to M. de la Rochaiguë, and said:

"There is a young woman here who wishes to speak with madame."

"Who is she?"

"She did not give her name. She came to return something belonging to the late Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"Admit her," said the baroness.

Then, turning to her husband and sister-in-law, she said:

"I wonder who it can be?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but we shall soon know."

"Some claim on the estate, probably," remarked the baroness. "It should have been sent to the notary."

Almost at the same instant the servant opened the door, and announced:

"Mademoiselle Herminie."

Though beautiful under any and all circumstances, the lovely face of the "duchess," wan from the profound grief caused by the death of her mother, wore an expression of intense sadness. Her lovely golden hair, which she usually wore in long curls, was wound smoothly around her head, for, in her bitter sorrow, the poor child for the last two months had entirely forgotten the innocent vanities of youth. Another trivial but highly significant detail,—Herminie's white and beautifully shaped hands were bare; the shabby little gloves so often and carefully mended were no longer wearable, and her increasing poverty would not permit her to purchase others.

Yes, her poverty, for, wounded to the heart by her mother's death, and dangerously ill for six weeks, the young girl had been unable to give the music lessons which were her only means of support, and her little store of savings had been swallowed up in the expenses of her illness, so, while waiting for the pay for the lessons resumed only a few days before, Herminie had been obliged to pawn some silver purchased in an hour of affluence, and on the paltry sum thus obtained she was now living with a parsimony which want alone can teach.

On seeing this pale but beautiful girl, whose clothing indicated extreme poverty, in spite of its scrupulous neatness, the baron and his wife exchanged glances of surprise.

"I am Madame de la Rochaiguë, mademoiselle," said the baroness. "What can I do for you?"

"I came, madame, to rectify a mistake," replied Herminie, blushing deeply, "and return this five hundred franc note which was sent to me by—by the late Madame de Beaumesnil's notary."

In spite of her courage, Herminie felt the tears rush to her eyes on uttering her mother's name, but making a violent effort to conquer her emotion, she held out the bank-note enclosed in an envelope, bearing this address:

For Mlle. Herminie,
Singing Teacher.

"She Held Out the Bank-note"

"Ah, yes, it was you, mademoiselle, who used to play and sing for Madame de Beaumesnil."

"Yes, madame."

"I recollect now that the family council decided that five hundred francs should be sent to you for your services. It was considered that this amount—"

"Would be a suitable, sufficient, and satisfactory remuneration," added the baron, sententiously.

"And if it is not, the complaint should be made to the notary, not to us," added the baroness.

"I have come, madame," said Herminie, gently but proudly, "to return the money. I have been paid."

No one present realised or could realise the bitter sorrow hidden in these words:

"I have been paid."

But Herminie's dignity and disinterestedness, a disinterestedness which the shabby garments of the young girl rendered the more remarkable, made a deep impression on Madame de la Rochaiguë, and she said:

"Really, mademoiselle, I can not praise too highly this delicacy and keen sense of honour on your part. The family did not know that you had been paid, but," added the baroness, hesitatingly, for Herminie's air of quiet dignity impressed her not a little,—"but I—I feel that I may, in the name of the family, beg you to keep this five hundred francs—as—as a gift."

And the baroness held out the bank-note to the young girl, casting another quick glance at her shabby garments as she did so.

Again a blush of wounded pride mounted to Herminie's brow, but it is impossible to describe the perfect courtesy and proud simplicity with which the girl replied:

"Will you, madame, kindly reserve this generous gift for the many persons who must appeal to you for charity."

Then, without another word, Herminie bowed to Madame de la Rochaiguë, and turned towards the door.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," cried the baroness, "one word more, just one."

The young girl, unable to entirely conceal the tears of humiliation repressed with such difficulty until now, turned, and said to Madame de la Rochaiguë, who seemed to have been suddenly struck with a new idea:

"What do you wish, madame?"

"I must ask you first to pardon an insistence which seems to have wounded your delicacy, and made you think,

perhaps, that I wished to humiliate you, but I assure you—"

"I never suppose that any one desires to humiliate me, madame," replied Herminie, gently and firmly, but without allowing Madame de la Rochaiguë to finish her sentence.

"And you are right, mademoiselle," responded the baroness, "for it is an entirely different sentiment that you inspire. Now, I have a service, I might even say a favour, to ask of you."

"Of me?"

"Do you still give piano lessons, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, madame."

"M. de la Rochaiguë," said the baroness, pointing to her husband, who was smiling according to his custom, "is the guardian of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who is expected to arrive here this evening."

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil!" exclaimed Herminie, with a violent start; "she is coming here—to-day?"

"As madame has just had the honour to say to you, we expect Mlle. de Beaumesnil, my much loved cousin and ward, will arrive this evening," said the baron. "These apartments are intended for her," he added, casting a complacent glance around the magnificent room, "apartments worthy in every respect of the richest heiress in France, for whom nothing is too good—"

But the baroness, unceremoniously interrupting her husband, said to Herminie:

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil is only sixteen, and her education is not yet entirely completed. She will need instruction in several branches, and if you can make it convenient to give Mlle. de Beaumesnil lessons in music we should be delighted to entrust her to you."

Though the possibility of such an offer had gradually dawned upon Herminie's mind as the baroness proceeded, the thought that a most lucky chance was about to bring her in contact with her sister so overcame her that she would doubtless have betrayed herself if the baron, eager to improve this fresh opportunity to pose as an orator, had not slipped his left hand in the breast of his tightly buttoned coat, and, with his right hand oscillating like a pendulum, said:

"Mademoiselle, though we feel it a sacred duty to select our dear ward's instructors with the most scrupulous care, it is also an infinite satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness to us to occasionally meet persons, who, like yourself, are endowed with all the necessary attributes for the noble vocation to which they have dedicated themselves in the sacred interest of education."

This speech, or rather this tirade, which the baron uttered in a single breath, fortunately afforded Herminie time to recover her composure, and it was with comparative calmness that she turned to Madame de la Rochaiguë, and said:

"I am deeply touched, madame, by the confidence you manifest in me. I shall try to prove that I am worthy of it."

"Very well, mademoiselle, as you accept my offer I will notify you as soon as Mlle. de Beaumesnil is ready to begin her lessons, for she will probably need several days in which to recover from the fatigue of her journey."

"I will wait, then, until I hear from you before coming to Mlle. de Beaumesnil," said Herminie. Then she bowed and withdrew.

It was in an ecstasy of delight that the girl returned to her humble home.

Delicacy, a truly laudable pride, and filial love of the purest and most elevated kind would prevent Herminie from ever revealing to her sister the bond of union between them, even as these same sentiments had given her strength to keep silence before Madame de Beaumesnil; but the prospect of this speedy meeting plunged the young artiste into a transport of delight, and brought her the most unexpected consolation.

Moreover, her natural sagacity, together with a vague distrust of both M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë, whom she had just seen for the first time, told Herminie that this child of sixteen summers, this sister whom she loved without even knowing her, should have been entrusted to the care of very different persons; and if her expectations did not deceive her, the affection she hoped to arouse in her sister's heart might be made to exert a very beneficial influence.

It is almost unnecessary to say that, in spite of her very straitened circumstances, it never once occurred to Herminie to compare the almost fabulous wealth of her sister with her own condition, which was that of a poor artiste exposed to all the trying vicissitudes of sickness and poverty.

Proud and generous natures diffuse around them a radiance which not unfrequently melts even the thick ice of selfishness and egotism, as in the preceding interview, when Herminie's dignity, exquisite grace, and simplicity of manner had awakened so much interest and extorted such respect from M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë,—worldly-minded and unsympathising though they were,—that they had entirely of their own accord made the young girl the offer that so rejoiced her heart.

The baron and his wife and sister, left alone after Herminie's departure, went up to their own apartments to hold a conference on the subject of Ernestine de Beaumesnil's arrival and the tactics that should be pursued.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SOLEMN COMPACT.

They had scarcely reached the drawing-room on the floor above before Helena de la Rochaiguë, who had seemed very thoughtful ever since Herminie's arrival, remarked to the baroness:

"I think, sister, that you did wrong to select that girl for Ernestine's music-teacher."

"Wrong? And why?" demanded the baroness.

"The girl seems to me to be very proud," replied Helena, placidly. "Did you notice how haughtily she returned that bank-note, though the shabbiness of her clothing showed conclusively that she was in great need?"

"It was that very thing that influenced me," answered the baroness. "There is something so interesting in such a proud refusal on the part of a poor person; besides, this young girl had such a charming dignity of manner that I was forced, even against my better judgment, to make her the offer you censure, my dear sister."

"Pride should never be considered other than reprehensible," said Helena, sanctimoniously. "It is the worst of the seven great sins. Pride is the exact opposite of Christian humility, without which there is no salvation," she added, "and I fear this girl will exert a most pernicious influence over Ernestine de Beaumesnil."

Madame de la Rochaiguë smiled faintly as she stole a furtive glance at her husband, who gave a slight shrug of the shoulders, which indicated pretty plainly how little respect he felt for Helena's opinions.

Long accustomed to regard this devotee as a nonentity, the baron and his wife never for a moment supposed that this narrow-minded, bigoted old maid, who never lost her temper, no matter how great the provocation might be, and who did not utter a dozen words in the course of a day, could ever have a thought beyond those connected with the performance of her religious duties.

"We will think over your suggestion, my dear sister," said the baroness, suavely. "After all, we have made no binding contract with this young person. Your remarks, however, seem to form a natural introduction to the subject of this conference."

Instantly the baron sprang up, and turned his chair around so he could rest his hands upon the back of it, and also ensure himself the ample space which his parliamentary attitudes and oratorical gestures demanded. Already, slipping his hand in the breast of his coat, and swaying his right arm to and fro, he was preparing to speak, when his wife said, impatiently:

"Pardon me, M. de la Rochaiguë, but you must really do me the favour to let your chair alone and sit down. You can express your opinion without any flights of oratory. It will be much better to talk this matter over in a plain matter-of-fact way without indulging in any perorations. Reserve your oratorical powers for the tribune which you are sure to reach sooner or later, and resign yourself to-day to talking like a man of tact and common sense. If you do not, I shall interrupt you every other minute."

The baron knew by experience how deeply his wife loathed a speech, so he turned his chair around again and subsided into it with a sigh.

"Ernestine will arrive this evening, so we must decide upon the course we are to pursue," began the baroness.

"Yes, that is absolutely necessary," replied the baron, "for everything depends upon our harmonious action. We must have the blindest, most entire, most implicit confidence in each other."

"Otherwise we shall lose all the advantages we ought to derive from this guardianship," added the baroness.

"For of course one does not act as guardian merely for the pleasure of it," interpolated the baron.

"On the contrary, we ought to derive both pleasure and profit from the connection," said the baroness.

"That is precisely what I meant," retorted the baron.

"I do not doubt it," replied the baroness. Then she added: "Let us agree in the first place that, in all matters relating to Ernestine, we will never act without a full understanding with one another."

"That resolution is adopted!" cried the baron.

"And is eminently just," remarked Helena.

"As we long ago broke off all connection with the Comtesse de Beaumesnil,—a woman I never could tolerate,"—continued the baroness, "we know absolutely nothing about Ernestine's character, but fortunately she is barely sixteen, and in a couple of days we shall be able to read her like a book."

"You may trust to my sagacity for that," said the baron, with a truly Machiavelian air.

"I shall trust to your penetration, of course, but just a little to my own as well," responded the baroness. "But whatever kind of a girl Ernestine may be, there is but one course for us to pursue. We must lavish every attention upon her, gratify her slightest wish, try to ascertain her tastes; in short, flatter her, satisfy her every whim, please her in every possible way. We must do all this if we would succeed. As for the means, they will be found when we become acquainted with Ernestine's habits and tastes."

"The sum and substance of the whole matter is this," began the baron, rising majestically from his chair.

But at a glance from his wife, he reseated himself, and continued, much more modestly:

"Ernestine must think and see and act only through us. That is the main thing."

"The end justifies the means," added Helena, devoutly.

"We are perfectly agreed upon the proper course of action," remarked the baroness. "Ernestine cannot but feel grateful to us for going up-stairs and giving her possession of the entire lower floor, which it has cost nearly fifty thousand francs to renovate, decorate, and furnish for her use."

"And the improvements and furniture will revert to us, of course, as the house is ours," added the baron; "and you know it was decided in the family council that the richest heiress in France must be suitably housed."

"But a much more important and delicate question remains to be discussed," continued the baroness, "the question as to what is to be done in regard to the suitors who are sure to spring up on every side."

"Certain to," said the baron, avoiding his wife's eye.

Helena said never a word, but listened with all her ears.

"Ernestine is sixteen, nearly old enough to be married," continued the baroness, "so the relation we hold to her will give us a prodigious amount of influence, for people will think—and rightly—that we shall virtually decide her in her choice of a husband. This fact is already apparent, for, since you were appointed guardian to Ernestine, any number of persons of high position and noble birth have made, and are still making, all sorts of advances and friendly overtures to me in order to get into my good graces, as the saying is."

"And I, too, have noticed that people I haven't seen for ages, and with whom I was never on particularly friendly terms, are endeavouring to renew their acquaintance. The other day, at Madame de Mirecourt's, I had a crowd around me, I was literally surrounded, beset on every side," said the baron, complacently.

"And even the Marquis de Maillefort, whom I have always hated, is no exception to the rule," added the baroness.

"And you are right," exclaimed the baron. "There is no one in the whole world I hate as I hate that infernal hunchback!"

"I have seen him twice," Helena said, piously, in her turn. "Every vice seems to be written on his face. He looks like Satan himself."

"Well, one day this Satan suddenly dropped down from the clouds, as cool as you please, though he hadn't set foot in my house for five or six years, and he has called several times since."

"If he has taken to flattering you and paying court to you it can hardly be on his own account."

"Evidently not, so I am convinced that M. de Maillefort has some ulterior motive, and I am resolved to discover this motive."

"I'm sorry to learn that he's coming here again," said M. de la Rochaiguë. "He is my greatest antipathy, my *bête noire*."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense," exclaimed the baroness, impatiently; "we have got to put up with the marquis, there's no help for it. Besides, if a man of his position makes such advances to you, how will it be with others? This is an incontestable proof of our influence. Let us endeavour to profit by it in every possible way, and by and by, when the girl is ready to settle down, we shall be stupid indeed if we cannot induce her to make a choice that will be very advantageous to us."

"You state the case admirably, my dear," said the baron, apparently much impressed, while Helena, who was evidently no less deeply interested, drew her chair closer to that of her brother and his wife.

"And now had we better hasten or retard the moment when Ernestine makes her choice?" asked the baroness.

"A very important question," said the baron.

"My advice would be to defer any decision upon this subject for six months," said the baroness.

"That is my opinion, too," exclaimed the baron, as if this statement of his wife's views had given him great inward satisfaction.

"I agree with you perfectly, my brother, and with you, my sister," said Helena, who had listened silently and with downcast eyes to every word of the conversation.

"Very well," said the baroness, evidently well pleased with this harmony of feeling. "And now there can be no doubt that we shall be able to conduct the affair to a successful termination, for we will all take a solemn oath, by all we hold most dear, to accept no suitor for Ernestine's hand, without warning and consulting one another."

"To act alone or secretly would be an act of infamous, shameless, and horrible treachery," exclaimed the baron, as if shocked at the mere idea of such an atrocity.

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured Helena, clasping her hands. "Who could ever think of acting such a treacherous part?"

"It would be an infamous act," said the baroness, in her turn, "and worse,—it would be a fatal blunder. We shall be strong if we act in unison, but weak, if we act independently of one another."

"In union there is strength!" said the baron, sententiously.

"So, unless we mutually agree upon a change of plan, we will defer all action on the subject of Ernestine's marriage for six months, in order that we may have time to strengthen our influence over her."

"This question decided, there is another important matter to be considered," continued the baroness. "Is Ernestine to be allowed to retain her governess or not? This Madame Laîné, as nearly as I can ascertain, is only a little above the ordinary maid. She has been with Ernestine two years, though, and must, consequently, have some influence over her."

"In that case, we had better oust the governess, or prejudice Ernestine against her," volunteered the baron, with an air of profound wisdom. "That would be the thing to do."

"A very silly thing," retorted the baroness.

"But, my dear—"

"The only sensible thing to do in such a contingency is to win the governess over to our side, and then see that she acts according to our instructions. In that case, this woman's influence, instead of being dangerous, would prove of the greatest possible service to us."

"That is true," said Helena.

"Yes, considered from this point of view, the governess might be very useful, very serviceable, and very advantageous," said the baron, thoughtfully; "but if she should refuse to ally herself with our interests,—if our attempts to conciliate this woman should excite Ernestine's suspicions, what then?"

"We must first see what can be done, and I'll attend to that," said the baroness. "If we find that the woman cannot be won over, then we will adopt M. de la Rochaiguë's first suggestion, and get rid of the governess."

The conference was here interrupted by a servant, who came to announce that the courier who preceded Mlle. de Beaumesnil's carriage had just ridden into the courtyard, and said that he was but a half hour in advance of the others.

"Quick—quick—to our toilets," said the baroness, as soon as the servant left the room. Then she added, as if the thought had just occurred to her:

"But, now I think of it, being cousins, we wore mourning six weeks for the countess. It would be a good idea, perhaps, to put it on again. All Ernestine's servants are in black, and by our order her carriages will be draped in black. Don't you think that if I should be dressed in colours the first time she sees me, the child would think hard of it?"

"You are right, my dear," said the baron. "Resume your mourning, if only for a fortnight."

"I hate the idea," said the baroness, "for black is frightfully unbecoming to me. But this is one of the many sacrifices a person is obliged to make. Now, as to our compact," added the baroness. "No secret or independent step is to be taken in regard to Ernestine. We will all make a solemn promise to that effect. I, for one, swear it."

"And I," said the baron.

"And I," murmured Helena.

All three then hurried off to dress for the evening.

The baroness had no sooner locked herself in her own room, however, than she seated herself at her desk, and hastily penned the following note:

"My Dearest Julie:—The child arrives this evening. I shall be at your house to-morrow morning at ten o'clock. We haven't a minute to lose. Notify a certain person at once. We must come to a full understanding without delay. Silence and prudence,

"L. DE L. R."

The baroness addressed this note to—

Madame la Vicomtesse de Mirecourt.

Then, calling her maid, and handing her the missive, she said:

"While we are at table you must take this to Madame de Mirecourt. You will take a box with you when you go out, as if you were going on an errand."

Almost at the same moment the baron was affixing his signature to the following note:

"M. de la Rochaiguë begs that M. le Baron de Ravil will see him to-morrow at his house between one and two o'clock in the afternoon. The matter is urgent.

"M. de la Rochaiguë counts upon seeing M. de Ravil at the time and place named, and assures him of his most distinguished consideration."

The baron addressed this note to—

M. le Baron de Ravil,
No. 7 Rue Godot-de-Mauroy.

Then he said to his valet:

"Call some one to post this letter at once."

And last, but not least, Mlle. Helena, after taking the same precautions as the baron and baroness, penned the following note:

"MY DEAR ABBÉ:—Do not fail to call to-morrow morning at ten o'clock.

"May God be with you. The hour has come.

"Pray for me as I pray for you.

"H. DE L. R."

This note Helena addressed to—

M. l' Abbé Ledoux,
Rue de la Plaushe.

CHAPTER XV.

A GLORIOUS DREAM.

On the day following this conference in the Rochaiguë family, three important scenes took place in the homes of as many different persons.

The first occurred in the house of Abbé Ledoux, the priest we saw administering the last sacrament to Madame de Beaumesnil.

The abbé was a small man, with an insinuating smile, a sharp, penetrating eye, ruddy complexion, and gray hair.

He was pacing his bedroom in a restless, agitated manner, glancing every now and then at the clock, and seemed to be waiting for some one.

Suddenly the sound of the door-bell was heard; the door opened, and a servant, who looked very much like a sacristan, announced:

"M. Célestin de Macreuse."

This pious founder of the St. Polycarpe mission was a tall, rather stout young man with excellent manners, rather faded light hair, regular features, and fine complexion. In fact, he might easily have passed for a handsome man, had it not been for the expression of treacherous sweetness and extreme self-complacency that characterised his countenance.

When he entered the room M. de Macreuse kissed Abbé Ledoux in a Christianlike manner on both cheeks, and the abbé returned the salute in the same apostolic fashion.

"You have no idea how impatiently I have been waiting for you, my dear Célestin," he said.

"There was a meeting at the mission to-day, M. l'abbé, and a very stormy meeting it was. You cannot conceive what a blind spirit of rebellion those miserable creatures display. Ah, how much suffering is needed to make these coarse natures understand how essential to their salvation is the poverty in which they are now living! But no, instead of being content with a chance of salvation, instead of living with their gaze directed heavenward, they persist in keeping their eyes on their earthly surroundings, in comparing their condition with that of more favoured mortals, and in prating of their right to employment and to happiness. To happiness! What heresy! It is truly disheartening!"

The abbé listened to Célestin's tirade with a half smile, thinking the while of the pleasant surprise he had in store for his visitor.

"And what do you suppose has been going on while you were talking wisdom to those miserable wretches down there, my dear Célestin?" asked the abbé. "I have been talking to Mlle. de la Rochaiguë about you. Another subject of conversation, too, was the arrival of the little Beaumesnil."

"What!" exclaimed M. de Macreuse, colouring with surprise and delight, "do you mean to say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil—"

"Returned to Paris last evening."

"And Mlle. de la Rochaiguë?"

"Is still of the same mind in regard to you,—ready to do anything, in fact, to prevent this immense fortune from falling into evil hands. I saw the dear lady this morning; we have decided upon our course of action, and it will be no fault of ours if you do not marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Ah, if that glorious dream is ever realised it will be to you that I shall owe this immense, this incalculable fortune!" exclaimed M. de Macreuse, seizing the abbé's hands and pressing them fervently.

"It is thus that pious young men who are living examples of all the Christian virtues are rewarded in this day and generation," answered the abbé, jovially.

"And such a fortune! Such a golden future! Is it not enough to dazzle any one?" cried Célestin, with an expression of intense cupidity on his face.

"How ardently the dear boy loves money," said the abbé, with a paternal air, pinching Célestin's plump cheek as he spoke. "Well, we must do our very best to secure it for him, then. Unfortunately, I could not persuade that hard-headed Madame de Beaumesnil to make a will designating you as her daughter's future husband. If she had done that we should not have had the slightest trouble. Armed with this request of a dying mother, Mlle. de la Rochaiguë and I could have appealed to the girl, who would have consented to anything out of respect for her mother's memory. It would have been a fine thing; besides, there could have been no opposition then, you see, but of course that is not to be thought of now."

"And why is it not to be thought of?" asked M. de Macreuse, with some hesitation, but looking the abbé straight in the eye.

That gentleman returned the gaze with the same intentness.

Célestin averted his eyes, but it was with a faint smile that he replied:

"When I said that it might not be absolutely necessary for us to renounce the assistance of such a statement of Madame de Beaumesnil's wishes—"

"In writing?" demanded the abbé, casting down his eyes in his turn, before the bold assent Célestin's look conveyed.

There was a moment's silence, after which the abbé said, as calmly as if no such incident had interrupted the conversation:

"Consequently, we must begin a new campaign, Circumstances favour us; besides, we are the first in the field, the baron and his wife having no one in view as yet; at least, Mlle. de Rochaiguë, who is entirely devoted to us, says so. As for her brother and his wife, they are extremely selfish and avaricious persons, so it is quite possible that, if we seem likely to succeed, they will side with us, that is, if they feel that it will be to their interest to do so. But we must first place ourselves in a position that will enable us to make our own terms."

"And when, and in what way, am I to make Mlle. de Beaumesnil's acquaintance, my dear abbé?"

"We have not yet decided that very important question. A formal introduction is evidently out of the question, as the baron and his wife would be sure to suspect our intentions. Besides, a slight air of mystery and secrecy would be much more likely to excite Mlle. de Beaumesnil's curiosity and interest. It is necessary, too, if we wish to produce the best possible effect, that this introduction should be managed with an eye to the young girl's character."

Célestin cast a glance of mingled surprise and inquiry at his companion.

"So you had better allow us to attend to all that," continued the abbé, in a tone of affectionate superiority. "We understand human nature thoroughly. From what I have been able to learn, the little Beaumesnil must be exceedingly religious and devout. It is also an excellent thing to know that Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a decided preference for the altar of Mary—a very natural predilection in a young girl."

"Permit me to interrupt you an instant, my dear abbé," said Célestin, hastily.

"What is it, my dear boy?"

"M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë are not very regular in the performance of their religious duties, but Mlle. Helena never misses a service."

"That is true."

"It will be only natural, then, that she should take Mlle. de Beaumesnil to the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin, that being the church she always attends."

"Evidently."

"It would be well, then, for her to perform her devotions at the altar of the Virgin, where she will also conduct her young friend to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. I would also suggest that the ladies take their places to the left of the altar."

"To the left of the altar! and why, Célestin?"

"Because I shall be performing my devotions at the same altar."

"Excellent!" cried the abbé, "no better plan could be devised. Mlle. Helena shall call the girl's attention to you, and you will make an admirable impression from the very first. A very clever idea, my dear Célestin, a very clever idea!"

"Don't give me the credit of it, my dear abbé," replied Célestin, with ironical modesty. "Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's."

"And to what Cæsar am I to attribute this admirable idea for a first interview?"

"To the author of these lines, my dear abbé." And in a sardonic tone, M. de Macreuse repeated:

"'Ah, if you had but seen him as I first saw him,
You would feel for him the same fondness that I feel.

Each day to church he came with gentle air,
To kneel devoutly right before me,
And attracted the gaze of all assembled there,
By the sincerity and ardour of his prayer.'

"You see everything has been planned for me, even to offering the holy water on leaving the church," added Macreuse. "And yet, people persist in declaring that the writings of this impious playwright are immoral and reprehensible."

"That's pretty good, upon my word!" cried the abbé, laughing heartily. "Well, Heaven speed the good cause, whatever may be the weapons used! You have everything to hope for, my dear Célestin. You are clever and persevering, and more likely to make a favourable impression on the orphan than any one I know. I would advise, however, that you be extremely careful about your dress. Let it be rich, but not gaudy, and characterised always by that elegant simplicity which is the perfection of good taste. Let me look at you a minute, Yes," continued the abbé, after scrutinising the young man closely for a moment, "you had better give a slight wave to your hair instead of wearing it smooth. It takes something more than fine talk to captivate a young girl's fancy."

"Oh, you need feel no uneasiness, my dear abbé, I understand all those little matters. I know, too, that the greatest victories are often won by trivial means. And success in this instance means the most delightful and blissful future of which man ever dreamed," exclaimed Célestin, his eyes sparkling joyously.

"And you will attain this success, for all the resources at our disposal—and they are immense—will be employed, if need be."

"Ah, my indebtedness to you will be immeasurable."

"And your success will not benefit you alone!"

"What do you mean by that, my dear abbé?"

"I mean that your success will have an enormous, an incalculable influence. Yes, all those fine young gentlemen who pose as freethinkers, all the lukewarm, all the indifferent, who uphold us but weakly, will see what one gains by being with us, for us, and of us. These advantages have also been demonstrated to some extent, I think, by the very enviable position—especially for one of your years and of—of your—obscure birth—" added the abbé, blushing a little, and Célestin somehow seemed to share this embarrassment.

"So, my dear Célestin," the priest continued, "while envious and insolent aristocrats squander their wealth and their health in vile orgies and senseless dissipation, you, my dear child,—come from nobody knows where, aided and pushed forward by nobody knows whom,—will quietly make your way in the world, and soon every one will be petrified with amazement at your marvellous good fortune."

"Ah, my dear abbé, you may rest assured that my gratitude—"

But the abbé again interrupted him by saying, with a peculiar smile:

"Do not persist in talking of your gratitude. No one has a chance to be ungrateful to us. We are not children; we take our precautions; besides, our best guarantee is the love and good-will of those who are indebted to us."

And the abbé, again pinching the young man's ear in a paternal way, continued:

"Now let me mention another no less important matter. You know the saying, 'He who hears only one bell hears but one note.' You may rest assured that Mlle. Helena will descant eloquently upon your many virtues to the little Beaumesnil. Your goodness, your piety, the angelic sweetness of your face, the dignified modesty of your demeanour, will be her constant theme. She will do everything she can to make the girl fall madly in love with you; but it would be an excellent thing if these praises were echoed by somebody else, and particularly if they were repeated by persons of such prominence that the words would exert a great influence upon the mind of the little Beaumesnil."

"That would be a great help, I admit, my dear abbé."

"Let us see, then, my dear Célestin. Among your fashionable friends is there no lady who could be entrusted with this delicate mission? How about Madame de Francville?"

"She is too silly."

"Madame de Bonrepos, then?"

"She is too indiscreet and too garrulous."

"Madame Lefébure?"

"She is too much of a plebeian. There is but one lady upon whose friendship and discretion I can rely sufficiently to make such a request," continued Célestin, after quite a long pause. "That is Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre."

"And you couldn't possibly do better, for the duchess has an immense amount of influence in society," said the abbé, thoughtfully. "I think, too, that you are not mistaken in your assertion, for I have heard her praise you very warmly on several occasions, and have even heard her express great regret that her son Gerald was not more like you."

On hearing Gerald's name, M. de Macreuse's face darkened ominously, and it was in a tone of positive hatred that he exclaimed:

"That man insulted me before everybody not very long ago. I will have my revenge, you may be sure of that."

"My dear boy, did you never hear the Roman proverb, 'Vengeance should be eaten cold.' It is a true one. My advice to you is to remember—and wait. Haven't you a good deal of influence over his mother already?"

"Yes," replied Célestin, "and the longer I think about it, the more convinced I am that it is to Madame de Senneterre that I ought to apply in this matter. I have had convincing proof of the interest she takes in me more than once; and the confidence I now show in her will please her, I am sure. I will consult with her, too, I think, as to the best means of establishing friendly relations between her and Mlle. de Beaumesnil. That will be a comparatively easy matter, I think."

"In that case, you had better see the duchess as soon as possible," replied the abbé.

"It is only half past twelve," said Célestin, glancing at the clock, "and Madame de Senneterre is generally at home to her intimate friends from one to two o'clock. I will go there at once."

"On your way you had better consider well if any inconveniences are likely to result from these overtures on your part. I can see only advantages."

"It is the same with me. Nevertheless, I will think the matter over. As for the rest, that is decided, you know. To-morrow morning at nine o'clock, a little to the left of the altar, in the Chapel of the Virgin, in the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin, remember."

"That is understood," answered the abbé. "I will go and inform Mlle. Helena of our arrangements. She will be at the chapel with Mlle. de Beaumesnil to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. I can vouch for that. Now go at once to Madame de Senneterre's. You have no time to lose."

So, after an affectionate leave-taking, Célestin hastened to the Hôtel de Senneterre.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE REFUSAL.

On the morning of the same day on which the foregoing conversation between Abbé Ledoux and M. de Macreuse took place, Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre, having received an important letter, went out at ten o'clock, as usual. On her return, at half past eleven, she immediately asked for her son Gerald; but that young gentleman's valet reported to madame's maid that M. le duc had not slept at home the night before.

About noon there came another and very peremptory message from the duchess, but her son had not yet returned. At last, about half past twelve, Gerald entered his mother's room, and was about to embrace her with affectionate gaiety, when the duchess, pushing him away, said, reproachfully:

"This is the third time I have sent for you, my son."

"I have but just returned home, and here I am! What do you wish, my dear mother?"

"You have but just returned home at this hour? What scandalous behaviour!"

"What scandalous behaviour?"

"Listen to me, my son: there are some things I will not discuss; but do not mistake my aversion to speaking of them for either tolerance or blindness."

"My dear mother," said Gerald, firmly, but deferentially, "you have always found me, and you will always find me, the most affectionate and respectful of sons; and it is hardly necessary for me to add that my name, which is also yours, shall be always and everywhere honoured and worthy of honour. But what else can you expect? I am twenty-four, and I live and amuse myself like a man of twenty-four."

"But, Gerald, you know that the life you are leading has troubled me very much for a long time, both on your account and my own. You shun society, though your name and talents entitle you to a distinguished place in its ranks, and you keep very bad company."

"Well, so far as women are concerned, I am forced to say that what you call bad company is the best, in my opinion. Come, come, mother, don't be angry! You know I'm still a soldier, so far as plain speaking is concerned. I consequently admit that I have a slight weakness for pretty girls in the lower walks of life. So far as men are concerned, I have friends of whom any man might be proud; but one of the dearest among them is a former soldier in my regiment. If you knew him, mother, you would have a better opinion of me," added Gerald, smiling, "for you judge a man by his friends, you know."

"Is there anybody in the world but you who chooses his intimate friends from among common soldiers?" exclaimed the duchess, shrugging her shoulders disdainfully.

"I think so, my dear mother, though it isn't everybody who has a chance to select his friends on the battle-field."

"But I am not talking of your relations with men, my son, I am reproaching you for compromising yourself as you do with those common girls."

"But they are so amusing."

"My son!"

"Pardon me, my dear mother," said Gerald, kissing his mother in spite of her strenuous efforts to prevent it. "I was wrong, yes, I was wrong. The truth is, though,—but, oh, dear! what shall I say? I don't want to horrify you again—but really, mother, vestal virgins are not to my taste, and you surely wouldn't like to see me carrying ruin and desolation into happy households, would you, mother?" he continued, in half tragic tones. "Besides, the truth is,—for virtue's sake, perhaps,—I like girls of the people better. The sanctity of marriage isn't outraged, you see, and then, as I said before, they're infinitely more amusing."

"You will excuse me from expressing any opinion on your choice of mistresses," retorted the duchess, angrily; "but it is certainly my duty to censure in the severest manner the strange frivolity of your conduct. You do not realise how you are injuring yourself."

"In what way?"

"Do you suppose that if the question of a marriage was broached—"

"A marriage?" cried Gerald; "but I've no intention of marrying, not the slightest."

"You will do me the favour to listen to me, I hope."

"I am listening."

"You know Madame de Mirecourt?"

"Yes; but fortunately she is married, so you can't offer me to her. I'm glad of it, for she's the worst plotter and schemer on earth."

"Possibly she is, but she is an intimate friend of Madame de la Rochaiguë, who is also one of my friends."

"How long since, may I ask? Haven't I often heard you say that that woman was the very personification of meanness?"

"That is neither here nor there," said the duchess, hastily interrupting him, "Madame de la Rochaiguë has now for a ward Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the richest heiress in France."

"Who is now in Italy."

"Who is now in Paris."

"She has returned?"

"Yes, last evening; and this morning, at ten o'clock, I had a long and very satisfactory interview with Madame de Rochaiguë at Madame de Mirecourt's house. I have been devoting my time and attention to a certain matter for nearly a month, but knowing your habitual levity, I would not say a word about it to you. Fortunately, everything has been kept such a close secret between Madame de la Rochaiguë, Madame de Mirecourt, and myself, that we are very hopeful—"

"Hopeful of what?"

"Why, of bringing about a marriage between Mlle. de Beaumesnil and yourself."

"A marriage!" cried Gerald, bounding out of his chair.

"Yes, a marriage—with the richest heiress in France," replied Madame de Senneterre.

Then, without making any effort to conceal her uneasiness, she continued:

"If it were not for your conduct, we should have every chance in our favour, though suitors and rivals will soon be pouring in on every side. There will be a hard struggle for the prize, and Heaven knows even the truth will be terribly damaging to you. Ah, if with your name, your talents, and your face you were a model of virtue and propriety like that excellent M. de Macreuse, for example—"

"But are you really thinking seriously of this marriage, mother?" asked Gerald, more and more astonished.

"Am I thinking of it seriously? You ask me that?"

"My dear mother, I am infinitely grateful to you for your kind intentions, but I repeat that I have no desire to marry."

"What is that you say?"

"I say, my dear mother, that I have no intention of marrying anybody."

"*Mon Dieu!* he is mad!" cried Madame de Senneterre. "He refuses the richest heiress in France!"

"Listen, mother," said Gerald, gravely, but tenderly; "I am an honest man, and being such, I confess that I love pleasure above all things, consequently I should make a detestable husband, even for the richest heiress in France."

"A colossal fortune—an unheard-of fortune!" faltered Madame de Senneterre, stupefied by this refusal on the part of her son. "An income of over three million francs! Think of it!"

"But I love pleasure and my liberty more!"

"What you say is abominable!" cried Madame de Senneterre, almost beside herself. "Why, you are an idiot, and

worse than an idiot!"

"But, my dear mother, I love independence, and gay suppers and good times, generally,—in short, the life of a bachelor. I still have six years of such joyous existence before me, and I wouldn't sacrifice them for all the money in the world; besides," added Gerald, more seriously, "I really couldn't be mean enough to make a poor girl I had married for her money as miserable as she was ridiculous. Besides, mother, you know very well that I absolutely refused to buy a substitute to go and be killed in my stead, so you can not wonder that I refuse to sell myself for any woman's millions."

"But, my son—"

"My dear mother, it is just this. Your M. de Macreuse,—and if you really have any regard for him, don't hold him up to me again as a model, or I shall break all the canes I possess over his back,—your M. de Macreuse, who is so devout, would probably not have the same scruples that I, a mere pagan, have. But such as I am, such I shall remain, and love you even more than ever, my dear mother," added Gerald, kissing the hand of the duchess respectfully.

There are strange coincidences in this life of ours.

Gerald had scarcely uttered M. de Macreuse's name before a servant rapped at the door, and, on being told to enter, announced that M. de Macreuse wished to see the duchess in regard to a very important matter.

"Did you tell him that I was at home?" asked Madame de Senneterre.

"Madame la duchesse gave no order to the contrary."

"Very well,—ask M. de Macreuse to wait a moment."

Then turning to her son, she said, no longer with severity, but with deep sadness:

"Your incomprehensible refusal grieves and disappoints me more than I can express, so I beg and implore that you will remain here. I will return almost immediately. Ah, my son, my dear son, you can not imagine the terrible chagrin you are causing me."

"Pray, mother, do not say that," pleaded Gerald, touched by his mother's grief. "You know how much I love you."

"You are always saying that, Gerald. I wish I could believe it."

"Then send that brute of a Macreuse away, and let me try to convince you that my conduct is at least loyal and honest. What, you insist upon going?" he added, seeing his mother moving towards the door.

"M. de Macreuse is waiting for me," replied the duchess.

"Then let me send him word to take himself off. There is no necessity of bothering with him."

But as M. de Senneterre started towards the bell with the evident intention of giving the order, his mother checked him by saying:

"Really, Gerald, another of my great annoyances is the intense aversion—I will not say jealousy—you seem to entertain for a worthy young man whose exemplary life, modesty, and piety ought to be an example to you. Ah, would to Heaven that you had his principles and virtues! If that were the case, you would not prefer low company and a life of dissipation to a brilliant marriage which would assure your happiness and mine."

With this parting thrust Madame de Senneterre went to join M. de Macreuse, leaving her son alone, but not without making him promise that he would wait for her return.

CHAPTER XVII.

PRESUMPTION AND INDIGNATION.

When the duchess returned to her son, her cheeks were flushed, and intense indignation was depicted on her visage.

"Who ever would have believed it? Did any one ever hear of such audacity?" she exclaimed, on entering the room.

"What is the matter, mother?"

"M. de Macreuse is a scoundrel,—a vile scoundrel!" cried Madame de Senneterre, in a tempest of wrath.

Gerald could not help bursting into a hearty laugh, despite his mother's agitation; then, regretting this unseemly hilarity, he said:

"Forgive me, mother, but this revulsion of feeling is so sudden and so very remarkable! But tell me, has this man failed in respect to you?" demanded Gerald, very seriously, this time.

"Such a person as he is never forgets his manners," answered the duchess, spitefully.

"Then what is the meaning of this anger? You were swearing by your M. de Macreuse a minute ago!"

"Don't call him my M. de Macreuse, if you please," cried Madame de Senneterre, interrupting her son, impetuously. "Do you know the object of his visit? He came to ask me to say all I could in his praise,—in his praise, indeed!"

"But to whom, and for what purpose?"

"Did any one ever hear of such audacity!"

"But tell me his object in making this request, mother."

"His object! Why, the man wants to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil!"

"He!"

"Did any one ever hear of such presumption?"

"Macreuse?"

"A mere nobody! A common vagrant!" cried the duchess. "Really, it is hard to imagine who could have had the audacity to introduce a creature like that into our circle."

"But how did he happen to reveal his projects to you?"

"Because I have always treated him with consideration, I suppose; because, like so many other fools I took him up, without knowing why, until the fellow thought he had a right to come and say to me that, by reason of the friendly interest I had always taken in him, and the eulogiums I had lavished upon him, he really felt it his duty to confide to me, under the pledge of secrecy, his intentions with regard to Mlle. de Beaumesnil; not doubting, he had the audacity to remark that I would say a few words in his favour to that young lady, adding that he would trust to—to my friendly interest. I do believe he had the impudence to say—to find an opportunity to do him this favour at the earliest possible moment. Really, effrontery is no name for assurance like his!"

"But really, my dear mother, you must confess that it is your own fault. Haven't I heard you praise and flatter this Macreuse in the most outrageous manner, again and again?"

"Praise him—flatter him!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, naïvely. "Did I suppose then that he would have the impudence to take it into his head to marry the richest heiress in France, or to think of such a thing as competing with my son? Besides, with all his boasted shrewdness, the man is nothing more or less than a fool to apply to me for assistance in his schemes! He will be surprised when he finds out how I will serve his interests. His pretensions are ridiculous, positively ridiculous! He is an adventurer, a scoundrel! He hasn't even a name, and looks like a sacristan who has just been to dine with his parish priest. He is a hypocrite, a pedant, and a most unmitigated bore, with all his pretended virtues. Besides, he hasn't the slightest chance, for, from what Madame de la Rochaiguë tells me, Mlle. de Beaumesnil would be delighted to become a duchess. Quite a woman of the world, though so young, she has a full appreciation of all the pleasures and advantages which a large fortune combined with a high social position gives, and it certainly is not a plebeian like M. de Macreuse who can give her this high social position."

"And what reply did you make to his request?"

"Enraged at his audacity, I was on the point of telling him that his pretensions were as absurd as they were insolent, and of forbidding him to ever set foot in my house again; but I reflected that I might be able to circumvent him most successfully by pretending that I was willing to assist him, so I promised that I would speak of him, as he deserved—and I certainly shall not fail to do so. Oh, I will urge his claims in an effectual manner, I'll vouch for that."

"Do you know, my dear mother, that it is not at all unlikely that Macreuse will attain his end?"

"He marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense! Are you, too, mad?"

"Don't deceive yourself, mother. The coterie that sustains him is all-powerful. He has on his side,—I don't mind telling you now you detest him so thoroughly,—he has on his side all the women who have become bigots, because they are old, all the young women who are prudes, because they are ugly, all the male devotees, because they make capital out of their religion, and all the serious-minded men, because they are so stupid; so you see the name of his supporters is legion."

"But with my social standing, my opinion will have some weight, I think," retorted the duchess.

"But you have been one of his warmest champions and admirers up to the present time, and no one will be able to explain your sudden change of feeling, or, rather, every one will be able to explain it; and, instead of injuring Macreuse, the war you wage against him will aid him. The fellow is an unmitigated scoundrel and arrant hypocrite. You have no idea with whom you have to deal, my dear mother."

"Really, you take this very calmly—with truly heroic self-abnegation, I might say," exclaimed the duchess, bitterly.

"No, I assure you, his presumption excites my deepest indignation. A fellow like Macreuse to have such pretensions and perhaps be able to realise them, a man who from my school-days has always inspired me with both loathing and aversion! And this poor Mlle. de Beaumesnil whom I do not even know, but who becomes interesting in my eyes the minute she is in danger of becoming the wife of that rascal,—really I have half a mind to marry her myself, if only to spoil Macreuse's plans and save the poor little thing from that villain's clutches."

"Oh, Gerald, my son," cried the duchess, "your marriage would make me the happiest of mothers!"

"But—my liberty—my precious liberty!"

"But, Gerald, think of it,—with one of the most illustrious names in France, and then to become the richest and greatest landowner in France! Think of the power this immense fortune will give combined with a position like yours, my dear Gerald."

"Yes, that is so," answered Gerald, reflectively, "but think of me, too, condemned to a life of ennui, and silk hose every evening henceforth and for ever. Besides, remember those dear girls who love me so devotedly; for, having the good fortune to be young and poor, I am forced to believe that their love is entirely disinterested."

"But, my dear," insisted the duchess, urged on in spite of herself by her ambition to see her son make this wealthy marriage, "perhaps you exaggerate the requirements of duty too much. Because you are married is no reason—"

"Oh, mother, mother, to think I should ever hear you recommending laxity of morals after marriage!"

"You misunderstand my meaning entirely, my son," replied Madame de Senneterre, considerably embarrassed. "I didn't say anything of the kind. If I insist, it is not only to inspire you with a desire to supplant this abominable man, but also for humanity's sake, so to speak."

"Humanity's sake?"

"Certainly, that poor little Mlle. de Beaumesnil would positively die of grief and despair if she is forced to live with such a monster. It would be a most generous and commendable act to save her from him."

"Really, mother, I expect to hear you say in a minute or two that I shall deserve the Monthyon prize, if I contract this marriage."

"Yes, if the Monthyon prize is to be awarded to the son who makes his mother the happiest of women," replied Madame de Senneterre, looking up at Gerald with eyes full of tears.

Gerald loved his mother so devotedly that the emotion she manifested touched the young duke deeply, and he said, with a smile:

"Ah, what a dangerous thing a mother is! She seems to be quite capable of marrying you to the heiress of millions, even against your will, especially when there is danger that a scoundrel like Macreuse may be converted into a millionaire. The fact is, the more I think of it the more pleased I am at the idea of circumventing this hypocrite. What a blow it would be to him! But there is one difficulty, my dear mother, and it strikes me that I am a little late in thinking of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I am by no means sure that I should please Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"You will only have to try to succeed in doing it, I am sure, my dear Gerald."

"A true mother's view of the matter."

"I know you better than most people, perhaps."

"You are not capable of giving an opinion on the matter, I see. Your affection blinds you, but I forgive you."

"Leave the matter to me, Gerald. Only consent to be guided by me, and see if I don't conduct the affair to a successful termination."

"Do you know that one would take you for an inveterate match-maker if one didn't know you," said Gerald, gaily. "But all mothers are alike in one respect, when their children's interests are at stake they become positive tigresses and lionesses. Very well, whatever your will may be I resign myself to it blindly."

"My dear, good Gerald," cried the delighted duchess, positively weeping with joy; "you cannot imagine how happy you have made me. That wretched Macreuse will die of spite."

"That is so, mother. I shall give him the jaundice instead of the sword-thrust he would have declined to take."

"Now, Gerald, let us talk the matter over sensibly."

"So be it. I am listening."

"As you have made up your mind, it is of the utmost importance that you should see Mlle. de Beaumesnil as soon as possible."

"Very well."

"This first interview, you must understand, is of great importance."

"Unquestionably."

"The fact is so apparent that I had a long talk with Mesdames de Mirecourt and de la Rochaiguë upon the subject this morning. From what the latter lady is able to judge of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's character, this is the plan we think most expedient; but you shall judge for yourself, Gerald."

"Very well, let me hear it."

"We recognised from the first the impossibility of representing you as a serious-minded and settled man—"

"And you showed your good sense, for I should have proved you a set of base deceivers only too soon," retorted Gerald, laughing.

"Of course there is no hope of avoiding the many censorious remarks which the frivolity of your conduct seems to

justify, my poor Gerald, so the best thing we can do is to make everything that is said against you redound to your credit as much as possible."

"Only mothers could show themselves such clever diplomatists as that."

"Fortunately, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, judging from what Madame de la Rochaiguë says,—she talked with the girl awhile last evening, and the mind of a child of sixteen is not difficult to read,—fortunately, Ernestine de Beaumesnil seems to be very fond of luxury, splendour, and display, so we think it advisable that you should first appear before her in the character of one of the most elegant young men in Paris."

"If you are clever enough to find such an opportunity, I consent, I am sure."

"It is to-morrow afternoon, is it not, that you are to take part in that race in the Bois de Boulogne?"

"Yes, I promised that ninny, De Courville, who has a number of fine horses he is afraid to mount himself, that I would ride his horse, 'Young Emperor,' in the hurdle race."

"Capital! Madame de la Rochaiguë shall take Mlle. de Beaumesnil to the race. They will call for me, and as soon as we reach the Bois it will seem the most natural thing in the world that you should come up and talk with us before the racing begins. Your jockey costume of orange satin with black velvet trimmings is extremely becoming to you."

"One word, if you please, my dear mother."

"Let me finish, please. Mlle. de Beaumesnil will see you among a crowd of fashionable young men, in which you shine preëminent, every one must admit. And, then, I don't doubt that you will win the race. It is absolutely necessary that you should win it, Gerald."

"It is the general opinion, mother, that the 'Young Emperor' and I will come out ahead, but—"

"You certainly ride superbly," said the duchess, again interrupting her son; "and when Ernestine sees you excelling your competitors in the midst of frantic applause, there can be very little doubt that, upon one with the tastes and character she seems to have, the impression produced will be excellent; and if, after this first meeting, you make yourself as agreeable as you can be when you choose, that impudent Macreuse will appear odious in her eyes even if he should have the audacity to enter the lists."

"May I be allowed to say a word now, my dear mother?"

"Certainly."

"I see no objection to being introduced by you to Mlle. de Beaumesnil at a race in the Bois de Boulogne; but do you really think it advisable that the presentation should take place on a day that I am arrayed in the garb of a jockey?"

"But why not? I am sure the costume is extremely becoming to you."

"It seems to me to savour too much of an actor."

"Really, Gerald, you have the most peculiar ideas."

"No, no, my dear mother, it is you who have such ideas, without suspecting it. But, seriously, you can present me to Mlle. de Beaumesnil where you please, when you please, and as you please, either afoot or on horseback,—you are at liberty to choose, you see. But I will not have recourse to the fascinations of a jockey's costume. I don't need them," added Gerald, with a comical affectation of extreme complacency. "I shall dazzle and fascinate Mlle. de Beaumesnil by a host of admirable moral and conjugal qualities."

"Really, Gerald, you are incorrigible. You can not treat even the most important things seriously."

"What does that matter, provided the things are accomplished?"

The conversation between the duchess and her son was interrupted a second time by a valet who announced that the Baron de Ravil wished to see M. le duc on very important business, and that he was now waiting in the apartments of M. le duc.

"Very well," said Gerald, though he was greatly surprised at this visit.

After the valet withdrew, the duchess said to her son:

"What business can you have with M. de Ravil? I can not bear the man. He is received everywhere, though, and I must confess that I set the example as much as any one, without really knowing why I do it."

"The explanation is very simple. His father was a very popular man. He introduced his son into the same social circle in which he himself moved, and, once admitted, Ravil, the younger, continued to be received. I, too, dislike him thoroughly. I have not seen him since the day of that strange duel between the marquis and M. de Mornand, and I have no idea what he can want with me. By the way, I heard an anecdote yesterday that shows his real character, perfectly. A poor fellow who is not very well off in this world's goods obligingly opened his purse to Ravil, and this is the way Ravil repaid him for his kindness: 'Where the devil did the fool steal that two hundred louis he loaned to me?' he exclaimed in the presence of a number of acquaintances afterward."

"How shameful!" cried the duchess.

"I will go and see what he has to say," remarked Gerald. "The man always seems to know everything that is going on. Wait for me, though, my dear mother. In a few minutes I may return as enthusiastic in regard to this cynical personage as you were exasperated against Macreuse."

"That is very ungenerous in you, Gerald."

"Well, at least admit that you and I are not very fortunate in our callers, this morning, my dear mother."

And M. de Senneterre hurried off to join the baron.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PURELY BUSINESS TRANSACTION.

Gerald greeted M. de Ravil with a cold politeness which did not disconcert his guest in the least, however.

"To what am I to attribute the honour of your visit?" asked Gerald, dryly, without sitting down himself or requesting his visitor to be seated.

The baron, apparently entirely indifferent to this cool reception, replied:

"M. le duc, I came to call your attention to a very promising business matter."

"I am not in business."

"Would you like to marry, M. le duc?"

"Monsieur," said Gerald, haughtily, "this question—"

"Excuse me, M. le duc, I called here in your interest, and necessarily, also, in my own. Will you consequently have the kindness to listen to me? What do you risk by doing so? I ask only ten minutes."

"I am listening, monsieur," replied Gerald, whose curiosity had been aroused by the baron's question.

"I ask once more, then, M. le duc: 'Would you like to marry?' I must have a reply before continuing the conversation."

"But monsieur, I—"

"Pardon me, I did not make my question explicit enough. Would you like to make a fabulously rich marriage, M. le duc?"

"Has M. de Ravil any particular person in view?"

"Possibly."

"But you are a bachelor and a society man. Why do you not marry the lady yourself?"

"I have no fortune, monsieur; my name is comparatively insignificant; my appearance by no means prepossessing. In short, there isn't the slightest chance of my making such a marriage, so I thought of you, M. le duc."

"I am greatly obliged to you for your generosity, monsieur, but before we go any further, permit me to ask you a rather delicate question. I would not like to wound your feelings, you know, but—"

"I'm not at all sensitive."

"I thought as much. Ah, well, what remuneration do you expect for your generous interest?"

"I ask one and a half per cent. of the dowry," answered the cynic, boldly.

And perceiving the disgust and contempt which his words had excited, the baron said, coolly:

"I thought I gave you clearly to understand that it was a purely business transaction."

"That is true, monsieur."

"Then what is the use of mincing matters?"

"None at all," replied Gerald, controlling himself; "so I will say very plainly that this charge of one and a half per cent. of the dowry seems to me quite reasonable."

"Yes, isn't it?"

"Certainly, but I must know to whom you think of marrying me, and how you will manage to bring the match about."

"You are very fond of hunting, I believe, M. le duc."

"Yes."

"And you are an adept at it, I am told."

"Yes."

"Well, when your pointer or your setter have made a sure stand, they have done their duty, have they not? The rest

depends upon the accuracy of your aim and the quickness of your fire."

"If you mean by that, monsieur, that, when you have once told me there is a rich heiress in the market, your one and a half per cent. is earned, I—"

"Pardon me, M. le duc, I am too good a business man to come to you with any such proposition as that. In short, I stand ready to place you in a position which is not only admirable in every respect, but entirely inaccessible to any other person. Your own personal attractions and your illustrious name will easily do the rest."

"And this position?"

"You must know, M. le duc, that I am not green enough to tell you my secret before you have given me your word as a gentleman that—"

"M. de Ravil," said Gerald, interrupting the scoundrel whom he was strongly tempted to kick out of the house, "this jesting has lasted quite long enough."

"What jesting, M. le duc?"

"You must understand that I cannot consider such a proposition seriously. Wed under your auspices,—that would be a little too ridiculous."

"You refuse, then!"

"I have that honour."

"Reflect, M. le duc. Remember that saying of Talleyrand—"

"You quote Talleyrand very often."

"He is my teacher, M. le duc."

"And you do him honour. But to what saying of the great diplomatist do you refer?"

"This, M. le duc: 'One should always distrust one's first impulse, because it is usually a good one.' The saying is a wise one. Profit by it."

"Ah, monsieur, you little know how much truth there is in what you say, and how extremely apropos it is, so far as you are concerned."

"Indeed?"

"I accepted your counsel in advance, for if I had yielded to the first impulse which your proposition inspired, I—I should have—"

"Should have done what, M. le duc?"

"You are too shrewd not to suspect what it was, my dear baron, and I am too polite—to tell you—in my own house."

"Pardon me, M. le duc, but I have no time to waste in guessing riddles. So you refuse my offer?"

"Yes."

"One word more, M. le duc. I feel it my duty to warn you that to-night it will be too late,—in case you should change your mind,—for I have somebody else to put in your place. I will even admit that I thought of this other person first, but, upon reflection, I decided that you would have a much better chance of success than the other man. To make the match and get my one and a half per cent. is what I am after, so if you decline my offer, I shall return to my first combination."

"You are certainly a very cautious man, my dear baron, and it is a relief to know I shall not have the chagrin of seeing you lose, by reason of my refusal—for I still refuse—the honest gains you are endeavouring to secure by such honourable means. But are you not afraid that I may be so indiscreet as to noise your new industry abroad?"

"I should be only too delighted, M. le duc. Such a revelation would be a splendid advertisement for me, and bring me hosts of clients. *Au revoir*, then, M. le duc. I shall be none the less at your service another time."

With a low bow to Gerald, the baron left the room as cool and unconcerned as he had entered it, and wended his way towards the Rue de la Madeleine, where his friend, Mornand, lived.

"This dukeling, doubtless, suspected that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is the lady in question, and means to rob me of my profits by winning the prize without my assistance," the cynic said to himself as he walked along. "It is contemptible in him, but he hasn't got her yet, and he won't get her without a pretty hard fight, that is certain. But it is a great pity! The fellow is a duke, and handsome and clever, too. I was sure of success with him, and now I've got to fall back on that ass, Mornand. I was wise not to say anything about my intentions in relation to the Duc de Senneterre, to that old sneak, Rochaiguë. There was plenty of time to do that, if this handsome gosling responded to my call, as well as to take back all I had said in Mornand's favour, and give the necessary instructions to that old female rake of a Laîné, the governess. Whatever I want done, she will do, and she can be of incalculable assistance to me—self-interest will ensure her devotion and prudence. Fortunately, too, I have managed to get on the right side of Rochaiguë, so now I have nothing to do but state the case to Mornand, who must be waiting very impatiently to hear the result of my interview with the baron."

Pursuing this train of thought, M. de Ravil had reached the corner of the Rue Champs Élysées, where he had first met Herminie when the latter was on her way to the house of Madame de Beaumesnil.

"It was here I met that young girl on the day of Mornand's duel with the hunchback," Ravil said to himself. "She

spent the night at the Hôtel de Beaumesnil, and the next day I ascertained from the servants that she was a singing teacher, and lived on the Rue de Monceau in the Batignolles. I've haunted that locality, but have never been able to catch a glimpse of her. Why the devil that pretty blonde took such a hold on me I can't imagine! If I had my percentage of the little Beaumesnil's dowry I would certainly gratify my fancy for that pretty musician, who carries herself like a duchess, in spite of her shabby attire. I am quite sure she wouldn't decline my offer of a neat little establishment, for she must be nearly starving on her music lessons. Now I must set to work to stir up Mornand. He is stupid, but perseveres when you once get him started. Rochaiguë is all right, so our chances are good."

And Ravil entered the abode of his intimate friend.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN M. DE MORNAND'S STUDY.

"Well!" exclaimed M. de Mornand, as soon as he saw Ravil enter his modest study filled with huge piles of printed reports and all sorts of communications from members of the Chamber of Deputies; "well, have you seen M. de Rochaiguë?"

"Yes, I have seen him, and everything looks very promising."

"You may rest assured that I shall never forget your kindness in the matter. It is evident that it is quite as much a matter of friendship as of money with you, and I am all the more grateful from the fact that your heart is not supposed to be particularly vulnerable."

"It is vulnerable enough to you, and that is all that is necessary in the present instance."

"And the governess, have you spoken to her?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because several little matters must be settled between us. I'll explain what they are presently; besides, there is no hurry. Madame Laîné, the governess, will do whatever I wish, and whenever I wish it done."

"Whatever did Rochaiguë say? Is he satisfied with the information he has secured in regard to me. Have my colleagues and political supporters spoken a good word for me? Do you think—?"

"You give me no chance to answer any of your questions."

"But you see ever since the possibility of this marriage first occurred to me—and I have good reason to remember the date, for that ridiculous duel with that miserable hunchback will always remind me of it," added M. de Mornand, with a bitter smile—"ever since the possibility first occurred to me, as I said before, this marriage has been a fixed idea with me. Situated as I am, it means more than wealth to me,—power—the highest diplomatic positions—will all be within my reach."

"Have you finished?"

"Yes, yes, I am listening."

"That is fortunate. Very well, all the information M. de la Rochaiguë has received corroborates what I had already told him. He is firmly convinced that you will attain the position of minister or ambassador sooner or later, but that the time would be greatly hastened by your marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, for men who are immensely rich are preferred for such positions, their wealth being considered a guarantee against all sorts of villainies. The good man is also certain that, if he brings about your marriage with his ward, you will as soon as you rise to power have him made a peer of France, for if persons who are hung could be restored to life, this man would willingly be hung to secure a seat in the Luxembourg. It is an infirmity, a positive mania with him, and you may rest assured that I have made the most of it."

"If he brings about the marriage, his elevation to the peerage is assured. He has been president of one of the commissions for years, and I will nominate him at once."

"He hasn't the slightest doubt of it, and, being an old-fashioned sort of a man, he relies upon your promise, and is willing to do anything in his power to further your interests with his ward at once."

"Bravo! and Mlle. de Beaumesnil, what does he say about her? Being so young and so entirely alone in the world, she isn't likely to offer much opposition, so I should think he would feel pretty confident of success."

"He never saw her until last evening, you recollect, but, thanks to a few judicious questions, he fancies he has been able to discover that this young woman is strongly inclined to be ambitious, and that her head would be quite turned by the prospect of marrying a future minister or ambassador, so she could have a crowd of other women under her feet."

"That is truly providential!" cried M. de Mornand, almost beside himself with joy. "And when can I see her?"

"I have an idea about that, but I concluded to say nothing to Rochaiguë on the subject until after I had spoken to you."

"Well, well, let us hear the idea!" said M. de Mornand, rubbing his hands, jubilantly.

"In the first place, you must understand that you are not handsome, that you are much too fat, that you have entirely too large an abdomen, and anything but a distinguished air. Pardon my sincerity, it is a friend who speaks."

"That is all right!" responded Mornand, trying hard to conceal the annoyance which his friend's plain speaking caused. "Between friends one can say and hear anything."

"That is an excellent maxim. I will therefore add that you are neither attractive, clever, nor good-tempered, but fortunately you have, or seem to have, a very considerable amount of political tact. You have made a careful study of the best means of corrupting consciences; you were born a corrupter as one is born a singer. Moreover, you are endowed with an eloquence of the continuous flow sort, capable of extinguishing and bewildering the best orators—on the other side. In a drawing-room you are heavy, clumsy, and awkward, like all big men; but in the tribune, with the railing concealing your abdomen, and your chest swelling out majestically under your embroidered coat, you are quite imposing, and can even be said to have some pretensions to good looks."

"Of what earthly use is all this?" retorted Mornand, impatiently; "you know very well that we politicians, we men of mark, care nothing in the world about being considered handsome."

"Oh, that is all nonsense! Don't interrupt me. I was about to say that so much depends upon a first impression that it is by all means advisable that you should appear before Mlle. de Beaumesnil in your most attractive guise, so you may fascinate and magnetise her, so to speak. Do you understand?"

"That is an excellent idea, but how is it to be managed?"

"You are to make a speech three days hence in the Chamber, are you not?"

"Yes, upon the cod fisheries,—a speech full of dry statistics."

"Ah, well, you must be flowery, poetical, pathetic, pastoral, anything but statistical, and this is an easy matter if you will only confine yourself to one side of the question. You can talk of the fishermen and their interesting families, the surf that breaks in thunder upon the beach, the pale moonlight on the dunes, our gallant navy, and all that kind of stuff."

"But I have considered the question from a purely financial point of view."

"Then tear up that speech and write another, for you must devote all the powers of your eloquence to dazzling the little Beaumesnil."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Listen to me, innocent! Rochaiguë shall be notified, and day after to-morrow the young lady will hear everybody around her saying: 'On Thursday the eloquent M. Mornand, the future minister, is to speak in the House of Peers. All Paris will be there. They are issuing tickets of admission, for when M. de Mornand speaks it is an event!'"

"I understand. You are certainly nothing more or less than a genius, Ravil!" exclaimed M. de Mornand.

"M. de la Rochaiguë will naturally inquire if Mlle. de Beaumesnil would not like to attend the session, and we will arrange it so that Rochaiguë will amuse the girl with things outside until the time comes for you to ascend the tribune and unloose the fountains of your eloquence. I will then run out and warn the guardian, who will come in with his ward to witness your triumph."

"Admirably planned!"

"And if you can organise a claque from among your colleagues to interlard your speech with exclamations of 'Good! Bravo! Admirable!' our success is assured."

"The plan is admirable, as I said before. There is but one thing that worries me."

"And what is that?"

"Why, as soon as my speech is ended that fool Montdidier will begin to contradict all I said. He isn't much of a politician, and he is not at all practical, but he's as witty and sarcastic as the devil, and doesn't hesitate to say aloud what other people scarcely dare to think in their most secret hearts. If he should begin that before Mlle. de Beaumesnil—"

"Oh, you need have no fears on that score. As soon as you have finished your speech, and while you are receiving the congratulations of your colleagues, we will exclaim: 'A magnificent effort, truly! He is a Mirabeau, a Fox, a Sheridan, a Canning! It is not worth while to remain any longer. There will be nothing worth listening to after that!' So we will hurry out with the girl, after which Montdidier can ascend the tribune and tear you to pieces and ridicule you as much as he likes. But there is another means which I have not mentioned before,—an effectual means which I have reserved until the last, but which will not only win you the prize, but make it possible for you to retire from political life if you like, and also to tell Rochaiguë in so many words that you cannot make him a peer of France, for, thanks to a brilliant idea that has occurred to me, the baron will not only do everything in his power to further your marriage, but you will also have Madame de la Rochaiguë and her sister-in-law on your side, though the most we can hope for now is that they will remain neutral."

"Then why do you not employ this means, and at once?"

"I have hazarded a few words, thrown out a few hints, but I have ventured nothing decisive."

"And why not?"

"You see I am not positive that—that you will like it. You might have scruples—and yet the most honest and highly respected men, even kings themselves—"

"Kings themselves? May I be hanged if I have the slightest idea what you are driving at."

"But men are sometimes so absurdly sensitive on the subject."

"Sensitive?"

"Still, one is not responsible for it. Can one fight against nature?"

"Against nature? Really, Ravil, you must be losing your wits. What do you mean by all this?"

"You are fortunate, too, inasmuch as appearances are in your favour. You are stout, you have rather a shrill voice, and scarcely any beard—"

"And what of that?"

"You don't understand me?"

"No."

"And he calls himself a politician?"

"What the devil do you mean by prating about my shrill voice, my sparse beard, and my political astuteness?"

"Mornand, you make me doubt your sagacity. Think, what did you say to me only day before yesterday concerning the marriage of the young Queen of Spain?"

"Day before yesterday?"

"Yes, that state secret, you know."

"Hush, hush!"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid,—I shall be as silent as the grave. Do you recollect now?"

"Yes, I told you that if we could only marry a French prince to the sister of the Queen of Spain, it would be one of the most brilliant of diplomatic triumphs to give the aforesaid queen, for a husband, a prince who offered sufficient guarantees—through his antecedents—that the queen would never have any children. The throne would then pass eventually into the possession of her sister's children, that is to say, into the possession of French princes. A magnificent combination," added the future minister, enthusiastically. "It would be a continuation of the policy of the Great Monarch!"

"Well, the illustration is apt. Profit by it," retorted Ravil, shrugging his shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"Answer me this: Who are Mlle. de Beaumesnil's only remaining relatives?"

"M. de la Rochaiguë, his sister, and, after them, M. de la Rochaiguë's daughter, who is married and resides in the provinces."

"Exactly; so if Mlle. de Beaumesnil should die without issue—?"

"It is the Rochaiguë family that would inherit the fortune. That is as plain as daylight. But what the devil are you driving at?"

"Wait; now suppose that the Rochaiguë family can persuade Mlle. de Beaumesnil to marry a man who can furnish those same guarantees,—those same reassuring antecedents you spoke of as desirable in the Queen of Spain's husband? Would not the Rochaiguës find it greatly to their interest to bring about a marriage that would ensure them the possession of their young relative's wealth at some future day?"

"I understand, Ravil," said M. de Mornand, thoughtfully, and as if deeply impressed by the grandeur of the scheme.

"Tell me, then, are you willing that I should pose you before the eyes of the Rochaiguës as a man (except for royal lineage) perfectly adapted to be the husband of a Queen of Spain who has a French prince for a brother-in-law? It will ensure you the support of the baron's wife and sister, remember."

After a prolonged silence, the Comte de Mornand said, with a both diplomatic and majestic air:

"De Ravil,—I give you *carte blanche*."

CHAPTER XX.

ATTENTIONS TO THE HEIRESS.

Near the close of the day in which Ernestine de Beaumesnil had unconsciously been the object of so much avaricious envy, and of so many more or less perfidious machinations, the young girl was alone in one of her sumptuous apartments, awaiting the dinner hour.

The richest heiress in France was far from being beautiful or even pretty. Her high forehead, prominent cheekbones, and rather long chin imparted considerable irregularity to her features, but this was soon forgotten in the charm of the young girl's face and expression; for the forehead, fair as alabaster, and surrounded with a wealth of rich chestnut hair, surmounted blue eyes of infinite sweetness, while rich scarlet lips, pearl white teeth, and a smile that was both ingenuous and melancholy seemed to implore forgiveness for the imperfections of the face.

Ernestine de Beaumesnil, who was now only sixteen, had grown very rapidly, so, although her tall figure was perfectly straight and symmetrical, the young girl, who had but just regained her health, still held herself slightly bent, an attitude which made the graceful lines of her remarkably beautiful throat all the more noticeable.

In short, antiquated and common as the comparison is, the expression, a lily bending upon its stem, described Ernestine de Beaumesnil's appearance exactly.

Poor orphan, crushed by the sorrow which her mother's death had caused her!

Poor child, overwhelmed by the, to her, crushing weight of her colossal wealth!

Strange contrast, indeed! It was pity, an even tender pity which the face and eyes and attitude of this heiress of almost royal wealth seemed to invoke!

The plain black dress which Ernestine wore enhanced the remarkable brilliancy of her complexion; but as she sat there with her hands folded upon her knees, and her head bowed upon her breast, the young orphan looked very sad and thoughtful.

It was half past five when the girl's governess stole softly into the room and said:

"Will mademoiselle see Mlle. de la Rochaiguë?"

"Certainly, my good Laîné," replied the girl, startled out of her reverie. "Why doesn't Mlle. de la Rochaiguë come in?"

The governess went out and returned almost immediately, followed by Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë, who made two profound and very ceremonious bows, which the poor child instantly returned, surprised and pained to see a woman of Mlle. Helena's age approach her with such obsequiousness.

"I thank Mlle. de Beaumesnil for having kindly granted me a moment's conversation," said Mlle. Helena, in a formal but extremely deferential tone, making another low bow, which Ernestine returned as before, after which she said, with evident embarrassment:

"I, too, have a favour to ask of you, Mlle. Helena."

"Of me? How glad I am!" exclaimed M. Macreuse's protectress, quickly.

"I beg you will have the goodness to call me Ernestine instead of Mlle. de Beaumesnil. If you knew how it overawes me, mademoiselle."

"I feared I should displease you, mademoiselle, by being more familiar."

"Once more I beseech you to say 'Ernestine' and not mademoiselle. Are we not relatives? And after a little, if you find I am deserving of your love, you will say 'My dear Ernestine,' will you not?"

"Ah, my affection was won the moment I saw you, my dear Ernestine," replied Helena, with effusion. "I could see that all the Christian graces, so adorable in one of your years, flourished in your heart. I will not speak of your beauty, though it is so charmingly spirituelle in its type, for you look like one of Raphael's madonnas. Beauty," continued the devotee, casting down her eyes, "beauty is a fleeting gift and valueless in the eyes of the Saviour, while the noble qualities with which you are endowed will ensure your eternal salvation."

Overwhelmed by this avalanche of extravagant praise, the orphan did not know what to say in reply, and could only stammer a feeble protest:

"I do not deserve such praise, mademoiselle," she said, "and—and—"

Then, well pleased to discover a means of escaping this flattery which made a singularly unpleasant impression upon her in spite of her inexperience, she added:

"But you said you wished to ask me something, did you not, mademoiselle?"

"Yes," responded Helena, "I came to ask your wishes in regard to service to-morrow."

"What service, mademoiselle?"

"Why, the holy office we attend every day."

Then, seeing that Ernestine evinced some surprise, Mlle. Helena added, sanctimoniously:

"We go every day to pray an hour for the souls of your father and mother."

Until then the young girl had never had any fixed hour to pray for her father and mother. The orphan prayed nearly all day; that is to say, almost every minute she was thinking with pious respect and ineffable tenderness of the

parents whose loss she so deeply deplored. Now, scarcely daring to decline mademoiselle's invitation, Ernestine sadly replied:

"I thank you for the kind thought, mademoiselle. I will accompany you, of course."

"The nine o'clock mass would be most suitable, I think," said the devotee, "and that is said in the Chapel of the Virgin, for whom you have a special preference, I think you remarked last evening, Ernestine."

"Yes, mademoiselle, every Sunday in Italy I attended mass in the Chapel of the Madonna. She, too, was a mother, so it seemed most fitting that I should address my prayers for my mother to her."

"They will certainly prove efficacious, Ernestine, and as you have commenced your devotions under the invocation of the mother of our blessed Saviour, it would be well to continue them under the same protection, so we will perform our devotions in the Chapel of the Virgin every morning at nine o'clock."

"I will be ready, mademoiselle."

"Then will you authorise me to give the necessary orders so your carriage and servants will be ready at that hour?"

"My carriage,—my servants?"

"Certainly," said the devotee, with emphasis. "Your carriage, with your own coat of arms emblazoned upon it, and draped in mourning. One of the footmen will follow us into the church, carrying a black velvet bag containing our prayer-books. You know, of course, that is the custom followed by all people of fashion and position."

"Forgive me, mademoiselle, but I really do not see the use of so much pomp. I go to church only to pray, so can we not go afoot? The weather is so delightful at this season of the year."

"What an admirable example of modesty in the midst of opulence, and simplicity in the midst of grandeur!" cried the devotee. "Ah, Ernestine, you have indeed been blessed by the Saviour. Not a single virtue is lacking. You possess the rarest of all, saintly, divine humility,—you who are, nevertheless, the richest heiress in France."

Ernestine gazed at Mlle. Helena with increasing astonishment.

The artless girl did not feel that she was expressing any remarkably laudable sentiments in saying that she preferred to walk to church on a delightful summer morning; so her surprise increased on hearing the devotee continue to laud her to the skies in almost ecstatic tones.

"The grace of Heaven has indeed touched your heart, my dear Ernestine," she exclaimed. "Yes, yes, everything indicates beyond a doubt that the Saviour has blessed you by inspiring you with the most profoundly religious sentiments, by giving you a taste for an exemplary life, spent in the exercise of a piety which does not forbid those harmless diversions which may be found in society. May God protect and watch over you, my dear Ernestine, and soon, perhaps, he will give you a still more unmistakable sign of his all-powerful protection."

The loquacity of the usually silent and reserved devotee was interrupted by the appearance of Madame de la Rochaiguë, who, less discreet than her sister-in-law, entered unannounced.

The baroness, greatly surprised to find Ernestine tête-à-tête with Helena, eyed the latter rather suspiciously, but the devotee assumed such a vacant and sanctimonious expression that the lady's suspicions were instantly dispelled.

The orphan rose and advanced to meet Madame de la Rochaiguë who, bustling in, bright and sparkling and smiling, said to the girl in the tenderest manner, seizing both her hands:

"My dearest child, I have come—if you will permit me—to keep you company until the dinner hour, for I am really jealous of my dear sister-in-law's good fortune."

"How very kind you all are to me, madame!" replied Ernestine, grateful for the kind attentions of the baroness.

Helena rose to go, and, with the intention of anticipating any possible question Madame de la Rochaiguë's curiosity might prompt, said to the young girl:

"To-morrow morning at nine o'clock, that is understood, is it not?"

Then, after an affectionate nod of the head to the baroness, Helena departed, escorted to the door by Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

As she was returning to Madame de la Rochaiguë, that lady drew back a few steps in proportion as Ernestine approached, and said to her, in tones of tender reproach:

"Ah, my dear, sweet child, you are incorrigible!"

"And why, madame, do you say that?"

"I am terribly, pitilessly, brutally plain-spoken as I have told you. It is one of my greatest faults, so I shall scold you, scold you every day of your life, if you don't hold yourself straighter."

"It is true, madame, though I certainly try my best not to bend over so."

"But I shall not allow it, my darling child. I shall show you no mercy. What is the use of having such a lovely figure if you do not show it off any better? What is the use of having such a charming face, with such delicate features, and such an air of distinction, if you keep your head always bowed?"

"But, madame!" exclaimed the orphan, no less embarrassed by these worldly eulogiums than by those which the devotee had lavished upon her.

"Nor is this all," continued Madame de la Rochaiguë, with affectionate gaiety. "I have a good scolding in store for that excellent Madame Laîné. You have beautiful hair, and you would look a thousand times better if you wore it in curls. The carriage of your head is naturally so graceful and distinguished,—when you hold yourself erect, I mean of course,—that long curls would be wonderfully becoming to you."

"I have always worn my hair in this way, madame, and have never thought of changing my style of coiffure, it being, I confess, a matter of very little consequence to me."

"And that is very wrong in you, my dearest, for I want you to be attractive, very attractive. I am so proud of my charming ward that I want her to outshine everybody, even our greatest beauties."

"I could never hope to do that, madame," replied Ernestine, with a gentle smile.

"But you must and shall, mademoiselle," laughingly replied the baroness. "I want you to understand, once for all, that my ambition for you knows no bounds. In short, I mean that you shall be considered the prettiest and most charming of young girls, as you will by and by be known as the most elegant of women. It is true I saw you first only yesterday, but from certain traits and tendencies which I have noticed in you, I am sure, as I remarked just now, that you were born to be a brilliant star in the fashionable world."

"I, madame?" exclaimed the orphan, wonderingly.

"Yes, I am positive of it, for to be the rage it is not absolutely necessary to possess beauty or wealth or aristocratic lineage, or to be a marquise or a duchess, though it must be admitted that this last title aids one very materially. No, no, the one essential, I assure you, is a certain *je ne sais quoi!* You have it; it is the easiest thing in the world to discern it in you."

"Really, madame, you amaze me," exclaimed the poor child, utterly abashed.

"That is very natural, for you, of course, cannot understand this, my dear child; but I, who am studying you with the proud but jealous eye of a mother, do understand it. I can foresee what you will become, and I rejoice at it. No life can be half as delightful as that of one of society's favourites. Queen of every fête, her life is a continual enchantment. And, now I think of it, to give you some idea of the world of fashion over which you are certainly destined to reign some day, I will take you to the races in the Bois de Boulogne, where you will see the *crême de la crême* of Parisian society. It is a diversion entirely compatible with your mourning."

"Excuse me, madame, but such crowds always frighten me, and—and—"

"My darling child!" exclaimed the baroness, interrupting her ward, "it is useless to oppose me. I am the most obstinate creature in the world. Besides, I insist upon being treated as well as my good sister-in-law. By the way, my dear, tell me right here and now what you two have been plotting to do so early to-morrow morning."

"Mlle. Helena wishes to take me with her to church, madame."

"She is right, my dearest child. One should never neglect one's religious duties; but nine o'clock—that is frightfully early. Women of fashion never go before noon; then one at least has time to make a handsome morning toilet, and one also meets many of one's acquaintances there."

"I am in the habit of rising early, madame, and as Mlle. Helena seemed to prefer going at nine o'clock, it made no difference to me."

"My dear child, I told you a little while ago that I should be appallingly frank with you."

"And I shall thank you very much for it, madame."

"Of course, you ought not to be proud and arrogant because you are the richest heiress in France, but though you should not abuse your power to impose your wishes and caprices upon others, there is certainly no need of your going so far as to gratify the caprices of others. Do not forget that your immense wealth—"

"Alas! madame," said Ernestine, unable to repress two big tears that rose to her eyes and then rolled slowly down her cheeks, "on the contrary, I am doing my very best to forget this wealth, for it reminds me that I am an orphan."

"My poor dear little darling!" exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, embracing Ernestine effusively, "how angry I am with myself for having unintentionally grieved you. Dry those lovely eyes, I beg of you. It makes me wretched to see you weep!"

Ernestine wiped away her tears, and the baroness continued, affectionately:

"Come, my child, you must be brave and sensible. Of course it is a terrible, an irreparable misfortune to be an orphan, but as the misfortune is irreparable you should make the best of it, and say to yourself that you at least are blessed with some devoted relatives and friends, and that, though the past is sad and gloomy, the future may be most brilliant."

As Madame de la Rochaiguë was thus consoling the orphan, a deprecating rap was heard at the door.

"Who is it?" inquired the baroness.

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil's majordomo, who solicits the honour of throwing himself at her feet."

Ernestine evinced so much surprise that the baroness said, smilingly:

"It is only one of M. de la Rochaiguë's jokes. It is he who is at the door."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil also tried to smile as the baroness said, in a loud voice:

"Come in, M. majordomo, come in!"

Whereupon the baron entered, showing his long teeth more than ever in the broad smile his joke had inspired. Approaching Ernestine with great deference, he bowed low before her and even kissed her hand, saying as he did so:

"Is my charming ward still content with me? Is anything lacking for her comfort? Does she find her establishment on a suitable footing? Has she discovered any inconveniences in her apartments? Is she satisfied with her servants?"

"There is nothing with which I can find the slightest fault," answered Ernestine; "quite the contrary, indeed, for this magnificent suite of rooms, exclusively for my use, is—"

"Nothing can be too handsome or too luxurious for the richest heiress in France," interrupted the baron, in his most peremptory tones.

"I am deeply gratified and touched by the affectionate welcome I have received from your family," said Ernestine; "and I assure you that everything else is of very little importance to me."

Just then the folding doors opened, and the butler announced, in a loud voice: "Mademoiselle is served."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HUNCHBACK MEETS THE HEIRESS.

The baron offered his arm to Ernestine, and conducted her into the dining-room. Helena came in a few minutes afterwards, a trifle late by reason of having despatched a letter to Abbé Ledoux, announcing her plans for the morrow.

During the entire repast Ernestine was the object of the most obsequious attentions, not only from the baron and his wife and sister, but also from the servants, who were as deeply impressed as their employers by the magical power of those words, "the richest heiress in France."

Towards the end of the meal, the baron, with the most careless air imaginable, remarked to Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"Well, my dear ward, as you have now recovered from the fatigue of your journey, it seems to me you ought to go out to-morrow and amuse yourself a little."

"Helena and I think so, too," replied Madame de la Rochaiguë, "so your sister is going to take Ernestine to church to-morrow morning. In the afternoon, Mlle. Palmyre and Mlle. Barenne will come with some dresses and hats I ordered yesterday for our dear child, and day after to-morrow Ernestine and I are going for a drive."

"Capital, capital!" exclaimed the baron. "I see that to-morrow and the day after will be fully occupied, but I think it is hardly fair for me to be so entirely left out, so I beg to have my turn on the day following. Will you grant my request?"

"Certainly, with the greatest pleasure," replied Ernestine.

"The readiness of the response increases its value two-fold," said the baron, with such evident gratitude that the orphan was wondering what she could have said when the baroness, turning to her husband, exclaimed:

"Well, let us hear your plans for your day, M. de la Rochaiguë."

"I am not so spiritual-minded as my sister, nor as worldly as you, my dear," answered the baron, "so I am going to propose to our dear ward (weather, of course, permitting) a visit to one of the most beautiful gardens in Paris, where she will see a wonderful collection of plants and flowers."

"You could not have pleased me better, monsieur," exclaimed Ernestine, delightedly. "I am so fond of flowers."

"Nor is that all," added the baron, "for, as I am a prudent man, in case of bad weather, my charming ward and I can enjoy a promenade through several superb conservatories, or a magnificent picture-gallery, rich in masterpieces of the modern school of art."

"And where is this combination of rare and beautiful things to be found, monsieur?" inquired Ernestine, with great interest.

"A nice Parisienne you are, and you, too, baroness, and you, too, my sister," laughed M. de la Rochaiguë, with a knowing air, "for I see very plainly that none of you have the slightest idea where this collection of wonders is to be found, though it is almost at your very door."

"Really," began Mlle. de la Rochaiguë, "I have been trying to think."

"And you can't imagine," retorted the baron, radiant. "Ah, well, I will take pity on you. All these wonders are to be found at the Luxembourg."

"The Luxembourg!" exclaimed the baroness, laughing. Then, turning to Ernestine:

"Ah, my dear child, it is a trap, an abominable trap, M. de la Rochaiguë has set for you. You don't know my husband's passion for another of the wonders of the Luxembourg. He has taken good care not to reveal that, I'll be

bound!"

"And what is this other attraction, madame?" asked the young girl, smiling.

"Ah, you poor, dear innocent, let me tell you that M. de la Rochaiguë is quite capable of taking you to a session of the Chamber of Peers, under pretext of showing you beautiful conservatories and flowers and picture-galleries."

"Well, why should I not take her into the diplomatic gallery, if she wishes?" retorted the baron. "She will find plenty of good company there in the shape of the fortunate wives of foreign ambassadors and ministers,—for I maintain that there is not a more delightful, charming, and enviable position in the world than that of the wife of a minister and ambassador. Ah, my dear wife," added this unknown Canning, turning to the baroness, "what would I not give to be able to elevate you to such a position. You would be envied, flattered, adored! You would become, I am sure, a wonderfully clever politician! It is not unlikely that you would even control the state, perhaps. Could any woman desire a grander rôle?"

"You see what a dangerous flatterer M. de la Rochaiguë is, my dear child," remarked the baroness. "He is quite capable of imbuing you with a taste for politics, too."

"Me? Oh, I have no fear of that," responded Ernestine, smiling.

"You may laugh at me as much as you like, my dear," the baron said to his wife; "but I do assert that I perceive in our dear ward a thoughtfulness, a self-control, and a power of discrimination remarkable in one of her years, to say nothing of the fact that she strikingly resembles the portrait of the beautiful and famous Duchesse de Longueville, who exerted such a marvellous influence in politics under the Fronde."

"Well, well, this is really too much," exclaimed the baroness, interrupting her husband with a fresh outburst of merriment.

The orphan, who had suddenly become thoughtful, did not join in this gaiety. She was thinking how very strange it was that within the last two hours three persons had, in turn, discovered that she was so singularly adapted to fill three such entirely different rôles, viz.: That of a devotee, that of a woman of fashion, and that of a female politician.

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of carriage-wheels in the courtyard below.

"Haven't you given orders that you are not at home this evening?" inquired the baron, turning to his wife.

"No, but I am expecting no one,—that is, no one but Madame de Mirecourt, who, you know, occasionally drops in for a few minutes on her way to some ball or reception."

"Shall you see her in case she does?"

"If it will not be disagreeable to you, and if you will allow me to receive her in your drawing-room," said the baroness, turning to Ernestine. "She is a very charming woman."

"Do exactly as you please, madame," replied Ernestine, cordially.

"Show the visitor into Mlle. de Beaumesnil's drawing-room," the baroness said to one of the servants.

The man withdrew, but returned a moment afterwards to say:

"I showed the visitor into mademoiselle's drawing-room as madame ordered, but it is not Madame de Mirecourt."

"Who is it, then?"

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort, madame."

"That detestable man!" exclaimed the baron. "A visit at this hour is an inexcusable familiarity on his part."

The baroness motioned to her husband to be more guarded before the servants, then whispered to Ernestine, who seemed surprised at this incident:

"M. de la Rochaiguë does not like M. de Maillefort, who is really one of the most spiteful and mischief-making hunchbacks imaginable."

"A positive devil!" added Helena.

"It seems to me that I have heard my mother speak of a M. de Maillefort," remarked Ernestine, thoughtfully.

"That is more than likely, my dearest child," replied the baroness, smiling, "though no one ever speaks of M. de Maillefort as one's good angel."

"I do not recollect to have heard her say anything either good or bad about M. de Maillefort," answered the orphan. "I merely remember the name."

"And the name is that of a veritable ogre," said the baron, spitefully.

"But if M. de Maillefort is so objectionable, why do you receive him, madame?" inquired the orphan, hesitatingly.

"Ah, my dear child, in society one is obliged to make many concessions, particularly when a person of M. de Maillefort's birth is concerned."

Then addressing the baron, she added:

"It is impossible to prolong the meal farther, for coffee has been served in the drawing-room."

Madame de la Rochaiguë arose from the table. The baron, concealing his annoyance as best he could, offered his

arm to his ward, and the entire party returned to the drawing-room where M. de Maillefort was waiting.

The marquis had so long been accustomed to concealing his love for Madame de Beaumesnil,—the one passion of his life, but one which she alone had divined,—that, on seeing Ernestine, he betrayed none of the interest he felt in her. He remembered, too, not without annoyance, that it would be necessary to appear curt and sarcastic before the orphan, as any sudden change in his manner or language would be sure to arouse the suspicions of the Rochaiguës, and, in order to protect Ernestine from them, and, perhaps, even from herself, or, in other words, to carry out her mother's last wishes, he must carefully refrain from exciting the distrust of those around her.

M. de Maillefort, who was endowed with remarkably acute powers of perception, noted, with a pang of real anguish, the unpleasant impression his appearance seemed to make upon Ernestine; for the latter, still under the influence of the slanders that had been heaped upon him, had involuntarily shuddered, and averted her gaze from his distorted form.

Painful as the feelings of the marquis were, he had the courage to conceal them, and, advancing towards Madame de la Rochaiguë, with a smile on his lips and an ironical gleam in his eye, he said:

"I am very bold, am I not, my dear baroness? But you know, or rather you are ignorant, that one has friends only to impose upon their good nature, at least unless, like Mlle. de la Rochaiguë here," he added, bowing low to that lady, "one has no faults at all, but is nothing more or less than an angel descended from heaven for the edification of the faithful. Then it is even worse, I believe, for when one is perfect, one inspires one's friends with envy, or with admiration, for with many people these two sentiments are one and the same."

Then, turning to M. de la Rochaiguë, he continued:

"Am I not right, baron? I appeal to you who have the good fortune not to wound either by your virtues or your failings."

The baron smiled until he showed his long teeth in the most startling fashion, then, trying to conceal his ill-humour, he exclaimed:

"Ah, marquis, marquis, always sarcastic, but always charming!"

Then seeing that he could not avoid introducing M. de Maillefort to Ernestine, who was watching the hunchback with growing uneasiness, the baron said to his ward:

"My dear Ernestine, allow me to introduce M. le Marquis de Maillefort, one of my particular friends."

After bowing to the young girl, who returned the bow with an embarrassed air, the hunchback said, with formal politeness:

"I am delighted, mademoiselle, to have still another reason for often coming to Madame de la Rochaiguë's house."

And as if he considered himself released from the necessity of paying any further attention to the orphan by this commonplace remark, he bowed again, and then took a seat beside the baroness, while her husband tried to conceal his ill-temper by sipping his coffee very slowly, and Helena took Ernestine a few steps aside, under pretext of calling her attention to the plants in a jardinière.

The marquis, without seeming to pay the slightest attention to Ernestine, never once lost sight of them. He had a remarkably keen sense of hearing, and he hoped to catch a few words of the conversation between the devotee and the orphan, while he chatted gaily with Madame de la Rochaiguë, both of them endeavouring to conceal their real thoughts under the airiest persiflage, and to try and discover what the other was driving at, in vulgar parlance.

The frivolous character of such a conversation favoured the hunchback's intentions, so, while he listened to Madame de la Rochaiguë with a distrait ear, he listened eagerly with the other to Ernestine, the baron, and Helena.

The devotee and her brother, believing the marquis absorbed in his conversation with Madame de la Rochaiguë, reminded the orphan, in the course of their conversation, of the promise she had made to accompany Helena to church the next morning at nine o'clock, and also to go with the baron a couple of days afterwards to view the wonders of the Luxembourg.

Though there was nothing extraordinary in these plans, M. de Maillefort's distrust of the Rochaiguë family was so great that he deemed it advisable to neglect no detail, however insignificant it might appear, so he noted these facts carefully, even while replying with his accustomed wit to Madame de la Rochaiguë's commonplaces.

The hunchback's attention had been divided in this way for, perhaps, a quarter of an hour, when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Helena make a whispered remark to Ernestine, accompanied by a glance at Madame de la Rochaiguë, as if to say that it was not worth while to interrupt her conversation, after which the orphan, Helena, and the baron left the room.

Madame de la Rochaiguë did not perceive their intention until the door closed behind them, but their departure suited her perfectly. The presence of other persons would prevent the explanation she considered it absolutely necessary to have with the marquis, for she was too shrewd and too well versed in the ways of the world not to have felt certain, as she had said to her husband, that the marquis, in thus renewing their acquaintance after a long interruption, had been actuated by a desire to meet the heiress, concerning whom, consequently, he must have some secret designs.

The hunchback's love for Madame de Beaumesnil having been suspected by no one, and his last interview with the dying countess being likewise a secret, Madame de la Rochaiguë did not and could not suspect the solicitude the marquis felt concerning Ernestine.

But wishing to ascertain the designs of the hunchback, so as to circumvent them if they interfered with her own,

Madame de la Rochaiguë abruptly changed the subject as soon as the door had closed upon the orphan, by saying:

"Well, marquis, what do you think of Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"I think her very generous."

"Very generous, marquis? What do you mean by that?"

"Why, with her fortune, your ward would have a perfect right to be as ugly and humpbacked as I am. But does she really possess many admirable traits of character?"

"I have known her so short a time, I scarcely know how to answer you."

"Why this reticence? You must feel sure that I did not come to ask your ward's hand in marriage."

"Who knows?" retorted the baroness, laughing.

"I know, and I have told you."

"Seriously, marquis, I am positive that at this very moment a hundred matrimonial projects have already been formed—"

"Against Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"'Against' is very suggestive. But one moment, marquis. I wish to be perfectly frank with you."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the hunchback, in mocking surprise. "Ah, well, so do I. Come, my dear baroness, let us have this little treat in the way of sincerity, which is such a rare thing, alas!"

And M. de Maillefort drew his chair nearer the sofa on which the baroness was seated.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN ORGY OF SINCERITY.

After a moment's silence, Madame de la Rochaiguë, with a penetrating glance at M. de Maillefort, said:

"Marquis, I understand you."

"Bah!"

"Understand you perfectly."

"You do everything to perfection, so this does not surprise me. But let me hear the proofs of these surprising powers of penetration on your part."

"For fear of harrowing my feelings too much, I will not count the number of years during which you never set foot in my house, and now you suddenly return with a truly flattering eagerness. So, being a sensible woman, and not a mere bundle of conceit, I say to myself—"

"Come, baroness, what is it you say to yourself?"

"I say to myself simply this: 'After M. de Maillefort's long desertion of me, to what am I now indebted for the novel pleasure of seeing him so often? It must be because I am Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian, and because this most estimable marquis has some special reason for again favouring me with his visits.'"

"You are about right, baroness, upon my word."

"What! you admit it?"

"I am compelled to."

"You almost make me doubt my powers of penetration by your prompt confession, marquis."

"Are we not striving to outdo each other in frankness?"

"True; I forgot that."

"And now I, in my turn, will explain why I so suddenly ceased to visit your house. You see, madame, I am something of a stoic, and when anything gives me very great pleasure I suddenly renounce it, so I may not allow myself to become enervated by too much pleasure. That is why I suddenly ceased to visit you."

"I would like to believe it, but—"

"You can at least try. As to the resumption of my visits—"

"Ah, that is the most curious part—"

"You have guessed the reason—pretty nearly."

"Pretty nearly, marquis?"

"Yes, for though I have no special plans in relation to the subject of your ward's marriage, I can't help saying to myself that this great heiress is sure to draw a crowd of unscrupulous fortune-hunters around her, and Madame de la Rochaiguë's house will soon be the scene of all sorts of amusing intrigues. A person who desires to see all the amusing acts of this comedy can view them from the reserved seats, so to speak, in Madame de la Rochaiguë's house. At my age, and made as I am, I have no other amusement in the world except what observation affords me; so I intend to frequent Madame de la Rochaiguë's house for that purpose. She will receive me, because she received me years ago, and because, after all, I am not any more stupid, nor any more of a bore than other people. So, from my quiet corner, I will watch the fierce struggle between the rival suitors. This is the truth, and now, baroness, you surely will not be so hard-hearted as to refuse me a place in your drawing-room where I can watch this contest, of which your ward is to be the prize."

"But, marquis, you are not one of those persons who can watch people fight, without taking a hand in it yourself," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, shaking her head.

"Well, I can't say that I am."

"So you will not remain neutral."

"I don't know about that," answered the marquis.

Then, emphasising the words strongly, he added:

"As I am experienced in the ways of the world, as I have a horror of cowardice and conceit, and as I have always maintained my habit of plain speaking, I admit that if I should see a brave warrior, whose courage and worth have interested me, perfidiously attacked, I should be very likely to come to that person's assistance with all the means at my disposal."

"But this, permit me to say, monsieur," responded the baroness, concealing her anger under a forced laugh, "is nothing more nor less than a sort of inquisition, of which you will be the inquisitor-general, and which will be located in my house."

"Yes, in your house, or elsewhere; for you know, baroness, that if the whim should seize you,—every pretty woman, you know, must have her whims, and you are certainly entitled to a good many of them,—I repeat that, if the whim should seize you, you could easily tell your servants that in future you will never be at home to me."

"Why, marquis, can you suppose—?"

"I was only jesting," replied M. de Maillefort, dryly. "The baron is too sensible a man to allow your doors to be closed against me without a cause, and he will spare me, I am sure, any explanation on the subject. I have the honour to tell you, my dear baroness, that having resolved to watch these very amusing doings, to see, in fact, how the richest heiress in France is married off, I can establish my point of observation almost anywhere, for, in spite of my diminutive stature, I can manage to see from almost any position, high or low."

"Then, my dear marquis, you must confess that it is an offensive and defensive alliance you are proposing to me," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, with the same forced smile.

"Not the least bit in the world. I shall neither be for you nor against you. I shall merely watch what goes on, with a keen eye, and perhaps try to aid this suitor, or to circumvent the other suitor, according to my best judgment and my feeble resources, if the desire seizes me, or rather if justice and truth demand it, for you know I am very peculiar in my notions."

"But why not content yourself with the rôle of a looker-on? Why can you not remain neutral?"

"Because, as you yourself remarked just now, my dear baroness, I am not one of those persons who can watch others fight without taking a hand in the fight myself."

"But," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, quite at her wits' end, "suppose,—and it is merely a supposition, for we have decided not to think of Ernestine's marriage for a long time yet,—suppose, I say, that we did have some one in view for her, what would you do?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, upon my word!"

"Come, come, M. le marquis, you are not acting fairly with me. You have some scheme of your own."

"Nothing of the kind. I do not know Mlle. de Beaumesnil; I have no suitor to suggest for her. I am, consequently, an entirely disinterested looker-on, and, this being the case, my dear baroness, I do not exactly understand why you should have any objection to my watching the amusing proceedings."

"That is true," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, recovering her composure, "for, after all, in marrying Ernestine, what can we have in view, except her happiness?"

"Nothing, of course."

"Consequently, we have nothing to fear from your observation, as you call it, my dear marquis."

"Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"For, in case we should make a mistake—"

"Which may happen to any one, even one who has the best intentions in the world."

"Certainly, marquis. Well, in that event, you would not fail to come to our assistance, and warn us of our danger."

"That is what an observer is for," laughingly remarked M. de Maillefort, rising to take leave.

"What, marquis, you are going so soon?"

"To my great regret. I must make the tour of five or six drawing-rooms, to hear what people are saying about your young heiress. You have no idea how amusing, curious, and sometimes revolting the remarks upon the subject of her immense dowry are!"

"Ah, well, my dear marquis," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, offering her hand to the hunchback in the most cordial manner, "I hope to see you often, very often; and as all this seems to interest you so much, I shall keep you fully posted."

"And I, too, will promise to tell you everything I hear. It will be wonderfully amusing. And, by the way," added the marquis, with the most careless air imaginable, though he had come to Madame de la Rochaiguë's house as much to endeavour to secure some light upon an as yet impenetrable mystery as to see Ernestine,—"by the way, did you ever hear anything about an illegitimate child that M. de Beaumesnil left?"

"M. de Beaumesnil?" asked the baroness, with evident surprise.

"Yes," replied the hunchback, for, in putting the question thus, he hoped to attain his object without endangering the secret he thought he had discovered in relation to Madame de Beaumesnil; "yes, did you never hear that M. de Beaumesnil had an illegitimate child?"

"No," replied the baroness, "this is the first time I ever heard of any such rumour, though a long while ago there was some talk about a liaison the countess had prior to her marriage. It must, consequently, have been in connection with her that you heard this story of an illegitimate child, but I, myself, have never heard anything on the subject before."

"Then whether this rumour relates to the count or the countess, there is evidently not the slightest truth in it, my dear baroness, for, by reason of your close connection with the family, you would have been sure to know of the matter."

"And I assure you, marquis, that we have never heard or seen anything that would lead us to suppose that either M. or Madame de Beaumesnil left any illegitimate child."

M. de Maillefort, who was endowed with an unusual amount of penetration, as well as tact, now felt fully convinced of Madame de la Rochaiguë's entire ignorance of the existence of any illegitimate child, and the failure of this fresh attempt on his part caused him deep chagrin, particularly as he began to despair of discovering any trace of this unknown child, and of thus complying with Madame de Beaumesnil's dying request.

Madame de la Rochaiguë, without appearing to notice the hunchback's preoccupation, continued, gaily:

"It is really very amusing to listen to all the rumours that are afloat concerning our ward's inheritance, as well as the large but singular legacies left by the countess."

"Indeed?"

"There is little or no foundation for these absurd reports," continued the baroness, in supercilious tones, for she had always disliked Madame de Beaumesnil. "The countess left a few trifling legacies to three or four old retainers, and small gratuities to her other servants. That is all the magnificent legacies, of which everybody is talking, amount to. But while the countess was in such a generous mood, she ought not to have been guilty of the ingratitude of forgetting a poor girl to whom she certainly owed some recognition of her services."

"To whom do you refer?" asked the marquis, concealing the pain he felt on hearing the baroness thus asperse Madame de Beaumesnil's memory. "Of what young girl are you speaking?"

"You have not heard, then, that, during the last days of her life, the countess, at the advice of her physician, summoned to her bedside a young and talented musician, who assisted not a little in assuaging the lady's sufferings?"

"It seems to me that I do recollect hearing this fact spoken of," answered the marquis.

"Well, does it not seem monstrous that the countess did not leave even a slight legacy to this poor girl? It may have been an oversight on her part, but, to me, it looks exceedingly like ingratitude."

The marquis knew Madame de Beaumesnil's kindness and nobility of heart so well that he, too, was struck by this apparent forgetfulness of the young artiste's claims.

After a moment of reflection, however, he vaguely felt that, inasmuch as such an oversight, if real, was inexplicable, there must have been something more than a mere failure of memory in the circumstance, so he said:

"You are sure, madame, that this young girl received no remuneration from Madame de Beaumesnil for her services? You are positive of it?"

"We were so unanimously convinced of the fact," replied the baroness, delighted at this opportunity to show her generosity, "that, deploring this ingratitude on the part of the countess, we decided to send five hundred francs to the young girl."

"That was only just."

"I think so, too, but what do you think came of it?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, the young artiste brought the five hundred francs back to us and told us that she had been paid."

"She must be a noble-hearted girl," exclaimed the marquis; "but you see from that, that the countess had not forgotten the young musician, after all. Doubtless, she must have given her a suitable token of her gratitude while she was alive instead of leaving her a legacy."

"You would not think so, monsieur, if you had seen how indicative of decent poverty the young girl's garments were. She would certainly have been better dressed if she had been a recipient of Madame de Beaumesnil's bounty. In fact, the young artiste, who, by the way, is wonderfully handsome, so excited my compassion and admiration by the delicacy of her conduct that I suggested she should come and give Ernestine music lessons."

"You did? Why, that was very noble of you!"

"Your astonishment is not very flattering, marquis."

"You mistake admiration for astonishment, baroness. I am not surprised in the least. I know the wonderful kindness and gentleness of your heart too well," added M. de Maillefort, concealing his hope that he had at last found the desired clue under his usual persiflage.

"Instead of making fun of my kindness of heart, marquis," replied Madame de la Rochaiguë, "you ought to imitate it by endeavouring to procure the poor young girl some pupils among your numerous acquaintances."

"Certainly," replied the marquis, rather indifferently, however; "I will do the best I can for your protégée, though I am not considered much of a musical connoisseur, I fear. But what is this young girl's name, and where does she live?"

"Her name is Herminie, and she lives on the Rue de Monceau. I don't remember the number, but I will ascertain and let you know."

"I will secure some pupils for Mlle. Herminie if I can; but, in return, if I should ever ask your protection for some suitor for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand,—some suitor whom I see getting the worst of it in the mêlée, you will grant my request, will you not?"

"You set a high value on your services, I must say, marquis," replied the baroness, laughing in a very constrained way; "but I am sure we shall come to an amicable understanding."

"You can not imagine how deeply I rejoice in advance at the touching harmony which is henceforth to exist between us, my dear baroness. Well, after all, let us admit that this little orgy of sincerity has been of immense advantage to us. We are full of confidence in each other now, are we not, my dear baroness?"

"Unquestionably, and mutual confidence, alas, is so rare!" exclaimed the baroness, with a sigh.

"But all the more precious when it is found, eh, my dear baroness?"

"Unquestionably, my dear marquis. *Au revoir*, then, if you must go. I shall hope to see you again very soon."

"I trust so," responded M. de Maillefort, as he left the room.

"Detestable man!" exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, springing from the sofa, and beginning to pace the room excitedly, while she gave vent to her long-repressed feelings. "Every word that accursed hunchback uttered contained either a sarcasm or a threat," she added, venomously.

"He's a contemptible scoundrel! There isn't the slightest doubt of it," exclaimed the baron, suddenly drawing aside the portières at one of the doors opening into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN INVOLUNTARY AVERSION.

On seeing M. de la Rochaiguë thus reappear near the sofa where she had sat during her conversation with M. de Maillefort, the baroness exclaimed:

"What, monsieur, were you there?"

"Certainly, for suspecting that your interview with M. de Maillefort would prove exceedingly interesting as soon as you two were left alone together, I slipped into the little salon, and have been listening there behind the portières close to you."

"You heard what that detestable marquis said, then?"

"Yes, madame, and I also noticed that you were so weak as to ask him to come again, instead of giving him plainly to understand that his presence here was no longer desired. You had a fine opportunity to do it, and you should have availed yourself of it."

"But, monsieur, is not the Marquis de Maillefort as dangerous in one place as another? He made me understand

that very plainly; besides, one can not treat a man of M. de Maillefort's lineage and importance in a rude manner."

"What do you suppose would happen if you did?"

"This: the marquis would undoubtedly demand satisfaction of you for such an insult. Are you not aware that he has fought a number of duels, all of which resulted disastrously for his opponents, and have you not heard that only a few days ago he forced M. de Mornand to fight merely on account of an ill-timed jest in which the latter indulged?"

"But I, madame, am not as obliging and simple as M. de Mornand. I would not have fought."

"Then, M. de Maillefort would have made your life a burden by his sneers and ridicule, until you would have been compelled to hide yourself from very shame."

"But are there no laws to protect a man from such a monster? Ah, if I were in the Chamber of Peers such scandalous proceedings should not go unpunished! An honest man should not be at the mercy of the first cutthroat that happens to come along!" exclaimed the indignant baron. "But in heaven's name, what is the matter with him,—what does this damned marquis want, anyhow?"

"You must have very little penetration, monsieur, for he certainly talked with almost brutal frankness, it seemed to me. Others would have resorted to circumlocution and even falsehood, but M. de Maillefort?—no, 'You intend to marry off Mlle. de Beaumesnil,' he says. 'I intend to see in what manner and to whom you marry her, and if your choice does not please me I shall interfere.' This is what he had the audacity to say to me, and he is in a position to carry out his threat."

"Fortunately, Ernestine seems to have taken an intense dislike to this horrid hunchback, and Helena must tell her that he was the mortal enemy of the countess."

"What good will that do? Suppose we should find a party that suited us and Ernestine, isn't the marquis, by his sneers and sarcasms, quite capable of inspiring the innocent girl with an aversion for the very person we want her to marry? And it is not only here, in this house, that he can play us this shameful trick,—and many others that he is capable of concocting,—but he can do it anywhere and everywhere he meets Ernestine, for we cannot hide her. We shall be obliged to take her out into society."

"Is it this that you fear most? I should be of the same opinion, perhaps, if—"

"Do you suppose I know what I fear? I would a hundred times rather have some real danger to contend with, no matter how threatening it might be, for then I should at least know what the danger was, and perhaps contrive to escape it, while now the marquis will keep us in a state of perplexity that may cause us to commit a thousand blunders, and hamper us in every way. Consequently there is nothing for us to do but look the situation straight in the face and say to ourselves: 'Here is a man of wonderful discernment and diabolical cleverness, who sees, or will endeavour to see and know, all that we do, and who, unfortunately, has a thousand means of attaining his ends, while we have no means whatever of escaping his surveillance.'"

"I am more and more convinced that the opinion I expressed a short time ago is a just and correct one," said the baron, complacently.

"What opinion?"

"That the marquis is an abominable scoundrel."

"Good evening, monsieur," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, wrathfully, starting towards the door.

"What, you are going like that when we are in such desperate straits, and without coming to any decision!"

"Decision about what?"

"Why, about what we shall do in the matter."

"I know one thing!" exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, completely beside herself, and stamping her foot angrily, "this abominable hunchback has demoralised me completely, and you—you finish by utterly stupefying me with your asinine remarks."

And Madame de la Rochaiguë flounced out of the room, slamming the door violently in the baron's very face.

During the conversation between Madame de la Rochaiguë and M. de Maillefort, Helena had taken Mlle. de Beaumesnil back to her own room. As she was about to leave the young girl she said:

"Sleep well, my dear Ernestine, and pray to the Saviour that he will not allow the face of that frightful M. de Maillefort to trouble your dreams."

"I really don't know why it is, mademoiselle, but he almost terrifies me."

"The feeling is very natural," replied the devotee, gently; "more natural than you suppose, for if you knew—"

As Helena paused, the young girl said:

"You did not finish, mademoiselle."

"There are some things which it pains one to say against one's neighbour, even though he may deserve it," remarked the devotee, with a saintly air. "This M. de Maillefort—"

"Well, mademoiselle?"

"I am afraid of paining you, my dear Ernestine—"

"Go on, I beg of you, mademoiselle."

"Ah, well, as you insist, I am compelled to tell you that this Marquis de Maillefort has always been one of your mother's bitterest enemies."

"My mother's?" cried Mlle. de Beaumesnil, wonderingly.

Then she added, with touching naïveté:

"Some one must have deceived you, mademoiselle. My mother could not have had any enemies."

In a tone of tender commiseration, Helena replied, shaking her head:

"My dear child, such artlessness does your heart credit; but, alas! the best and most inoffensive people are exposed to the animosity of the wicked. Have not the gentle lambs ravening wolves for enemies?"

"But how had my mother ever wronged M. de Maillefort, mademoiselle?" asked Ernestine, with tears in her eyes.

"Why, in no way. Just Heaven! one might as well say that an innocent dove would attack a tiger."

"Then what was the cause of M. de Maillefort's animosity?"

"Alas! my poor child, I cannot tell you that. It would be too revolting—too horrible," answered Helena, sighing heavily.

"Then I have good cause to loathe this man, and yet I blamed myself for yielding to my involuntary aversion."

"Ah, my dearest child, may you never have a less justifiable aversion," said the devotee, sanctimoniously, lifting her eyes heavenward.

Then she added:

"I must leave you, now, my dear Ernestine. Sleep sweetly. To-morrow morning, at nine o'clock, I will come for you to go to church."

"Good-bye until to-morrow, mademoiselle; but, alas! you leave me with sad thoughts,—my mother had an enemy."

"It is best to know the real character of the wicked, my dear Ernestine, for then one can at least guard against their evil doing. And now good-bye until to-morrow morning."

"Good night, mademoiselle."

So Mlle. de la Rochaiguë departed, proud of the perfidious cunning with which she had aroused a cruel distrust of M. de Maillefort in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's heart.

Ernestine left alone, rang for her governess, who also acted as her personal attendant.

Madame Laîné entered.

She was about forty years of age, with a somewhat insipid face, and a pleasant, though rather obsequious manner, in which there was a touch of servility that made it very different from the devotion of a faithful nurse, which is always instinct with the dignity of disinterested affection.

"Does mademoiselle wish to retire?" asked Madame Laîné.

"No, my good Laîné, not yet. Bring me my writing-desk, please."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

The desk having been brought from Ernestine's chamber, her governess said:

"There is something I wish to tell mademoiselle."

"What is it?"

"Madame has hired two other maids for mademoiselle, and—"

"I have told you that I require no other personal attendants than you and Thérèse."

"I know it, mademoiselle, and I said as much to madame, but she thinks you are not sufficiently well served."

"You satisfy me perfectly."

"But madame says these young women are to stay in case you should need them, and this suits all the better as madame dismissed her own maid recently, and these women are to attend her in the meantime."

"That is all very well," responded Ernestine, indifferently.

"Mademoiselle desires nothing?"

"No, I thank you."

"Does mademoiselle find herself comfortable here?"

"Very comfortable."

"The apartments are certainly superb, but there is nothing too good for mademoiselle. Every one says so."

"My good Laîné, you may put out what I shall require for the night," said Ernestine, without paying any attention

to the governess's remark. "I can undress without your assistance, but I would like you to wake me a little before eight to-morrow morning."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

Madame Laîné turned as if to leave the room, but as Ernestine opened her desk to write, the governess paused, and said:

"I have a favour to ask of mademoiselle."

"What is it?"

"I should be very grateful to mademoiselle if she would have the goodness to spare me a couple of hours to-morrow, or the day after, to go and see a relative of mine, Madame Herbaut, who lives in the Batignolles."

"Very well, go to-morrow morning, while I am at church."

"I thank mademoiselle for her kindness."

"Good-night, my good Laîné," said Ernestine, thus dismissing her governess, who seemed inclined to continue the conversation.

This interview gives a pretty correct idea of the relations that existed between Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Madame Laîné.

The latter had often endeavoured to establish herself on a more familiar footing with her young mistress, but at the very first effort in this direction Mlle. de Beaumesnil always put an end to the conversation, not haughtily nor curtly, but by giving some order in a kindly way.

After Madame Laîné's departure, Ernestine remained lost in thought for some time; then, seating herself at the table, on which her desk had been placed, she opened it and took out a small book bound in Russia leather, the first leaves of which were already filled.

The history of this book was simple but touching.

On her departure for Italy, Ernestine had promised her mother to write every day a sort of diary of her journey. This promise the girl had kept until the sorrowful days that immediately followed her father's fatal accident, and the even more terrible days that followed the news of the Comtesse de Beaumesnil's death; and now that she had rallied a little from these crushing blows, Ernestine found a sort of pious consolation in continuing to write to her mother every day, keeping up the both pleasant and cruel illusion by continuing these confidential revelations.

The first part of this book contained copies of the letters Ernestine had written to her mother while that lady was living.

The second part, separated from the first by a black cross, contained the letters which the poor child had, alas! had no need to recopy.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil seated herself at the table, and, after she had wiped away the tears which the sight of this book always evoked, she wrote as follows:

"I have not written to you, my darling mamma, since my arrival at M. de la Rochaiguë's house, because I wished to analyse my first impressions carefully.

"Besides, you know how peculiar I am, and how, whenever I go to a strange place now, I find myself almost dazed for a day or two by the change. It seems as if I must have time to become accustomed to the new objects by which I am surrounded, to recover my mental faculties.

"The apartments set aside for my exclusive use are so magnificent and so spacious that I felt lost in them yesterday, but to-day I am becoming more accustomed to them.

"Madame de la Rochaiguë and her husband and sister have welcomed me as if I were their own child. They lavish every attention and kindness upon me, and if one could have any feeling save gratitude, for such a cordial reception, I should feel amazed that persons so much older than I am, should treat me with so much deference.

"M. de la Rochaiguë, my guardian, is kindness itself. His wife, who quite spoils me by her tenderness, is of a very gay and lively disposition. Mlle. Helena, her sister-in-law, is the gentlest and most saintly person imaginable.

"You see, my dearest mother, that you need feel no anxiety concerning your poor Ernestine's lot. Surrounded by such devoted friends, she is as happy as she can be, now.

"My chief desire is to become better acquainted with M. de la Rochaiguë and his family, for then they will doubtless treat me with less ceremony, and cease to pay me compliments which embarrass me greatly, but which they probably feel obliged to pay me in order to make me feel at ease.

"They are so kind that each person in turn seems to be racking his or her brain for the pleasantest and most complimentary thing they can say to me. By and by, I hope that they will see they do not need to flatter me to gain my affection. One would almost suppose from their manner that they were under the greatest obligations to me for being allowed to receive me into their household. This does not surprise me much, however, my dearest mother, for how often you have told me that refined people always seem grateful for the services they are able to render others.

"I have had some very painful moments to-day,—not by any fault of my guardian or his family, however.

"This morning, a gentleman (my notary, as I learned afterwards) was introduced to me by my guardian, who said:

"'My dear ward, I think it would be well for you to know the precise amount of your fortune, and this gentleman

will now tell you.'

"Whereupon, the notary, opening a book he had brought with him, showed me the last page all covered with figures, and said:

"'Mademoiselle, from the exact'—he used a word here that I have forgotten—'your yearly income amounts to the sum of three million one hundred and twenty thousand francs, which gives you nearly eight thousand francs a day, so you are the richest heiress in France.'

"This, my poor dear mother, reminded me again of what, alas! I scarcely ever forget,—that I was an orphan, and alone in the world; and in spite of all my efforts to control my feelings, I wept bitterly."

Ernestine was obliged to stop writing. Her tears had burst forth afresh, for to this tender-hearted, artless child, this rich inheritance meant the loss of her mother and of her father.

Becoming calmer after a few moments, she resumed her pen, and continued:

"It is difficult for me to explain it, but on learning that I had eight thousand francs a day, as the notary said, I felt a great awe, not unmixed with fear.

"'So much money—just for myself! why is it?' I thought.

"It seemed to me unjust.

"What had I done to be so rich?

"And then those words which had made me weep, 'You are the richest heiress in France,' almost terrified me.

"Yes; I know not how to explain it, but the knowledge that I possessed this immense fortune made me feel strangely uneasy. It seemed to me that I must feel as people feel who have a great treasure, and who tremble at the thought of the dangers they will incur if any one tries to rob them of it.

"And yet, no; this comparison is not a just one, for I never cared very much for the money you and my father gave me each month to gratify my fancies.

"In fact, I seem unable to analyse my feelings when I think of my wealth, as they call it. It is strange and inexplicable, but perhaps I shall feel differently by and by.

"In the meantime, I am surrounded by the kindest and most devoted of relatives. What can I have to fear? It is pure childishness on my part, undoubtedly. But to whom can I tell everything, if not to you? M. de la Rochaiguë and the other members of his household are wonderfully kind to me, but I shall never make confidants of them. You know I have always been very reserved to every one but you and my father; and I often reproach myself for not being more familiar with my good Laîné, who has been with me several years. But anything like familiarity is impossible to me, though I am far from being proud."

Then alluding to the aversion she felt for M. de Maillefort, in consequence of Mlle. Helena's calumnies, Ernestine added:

"I was cruelly hurt this evening, but it was such a disgraceful thing that, out of respect to you, my dear mother, I will not write it, nor do I really believe that I should have the courage.

"Good night, my darling mamma. To-morrow and the day following, I am going to nine o'clock mass with Mlle. de la Rochaiguë. She is so good and kind that I could not refuse. But my most fervent prayers, my dear mother, are those I offer up in solitude. To-morrow morning and other mornings, in the midst of the careless crowd, I shall pray for you, but it is when I am alone, as now, that my every thought and my very soul lifts itself to thee, and that I pray to thee as one prays to God—my beloved and sainted mother!"

After having replaced the book in the writing-desk, the key of which she wore always suspended around her neck, the orphan sought her couch, and slept much more calmly and peacefully now she had made these artless confessions to an—alas!—now immortal mother.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

On the morning following the day on which M. de Maillefort had been introduced to Mlle. de Beaumesnil for the first time, Commander Bernard was lying stretched out in the comfortable armchair which had been a present from Olivier.

It was a beautiful summer morning, and the old sailor gazed out sadly through the window on the parched flower beds, now full of weeds, for a month before two of the veteran's old wounds had reopened, keeping him a prisoner in his armchair, and preventing him from working in his beloved garden.

The housekeeper was seated near the commander, busy with some sewing, but for several minutes she must have been indulging in her usual recriminations against "Bû-û-onaparte," for she was now saying to the veteran, in tones

of bitter indignation:

"Yes, monsieur, raw, raw; I tell you he ate it raw!"

The veteran, when his acute suffering abated a little, could not help laughing at the housekeeper's absurd stories, so he said:

"What was it that this diabolical Corsican ogre ate raw, Mother Barbançon?"

"His beef, monsieur! Yes, the night before the battle he ate his meat raw! And do you know why?"

"No," answered the veteran, turning himself with difficulty in his armchair; "I can not imagine, I am sure."

"The wretch did it to render himself more ferocious, so he would have the courage to see his soldiers exterminated by the enemy,—above all, the conscripts," added the indignant housekeeper. "His sole object in life was to provide food for cannon, as he said, and so to depopulate France by conscriptions that there would not be a single Frenchman left. That was his diabolical scheme!"

Commander Bernard replied to this tirade by another loud burst of laughter.

"Let me ask just this one question," he said. "If Bonaparte desired that there shouldn't be another Frenchman left in France, who the devil would he have had to reign over, then?"

"Why, negroes, of course," snapped the housekeeper, shrugging her shoulders impatiently, and acting quite as if an absurdly easy question had been put to her.

It was such a ridiculous answer, and so entirely unexpected, that a moment of positive stupefaction preceded a fresh outburst of hilarity on the part of the commander, who, as soon as he could control his mirth a little, inquired:

"Negroes, what negroes?"

"Why, those American negroes with whom he was always plotting, and who, while he was on his rock, began a tunnel which, starting at Champ-d'Asile, and passing under St. Helena, was intended to transport to the capital of the empire other negroes, friends of the American negroes, so Bû-û-onaparte, in company with his odious Roustan, could return to ravage all France."

"Really, Mother Barbançon," exclaimed the veteran, admiringly, "I never knew your imagination to soar to such sublime heights before."

"I don't see that there is anything to laugh at, monsieur. Would you like to have conclusive proof that the monster always intended to replace the French by negroes?"

"I should indeed, Mother Barbançon," exclaimed the veteran, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. "Come, let us have the proof."

"Ah, well, monsieur, hasn't everybody said for years that your Bû-û-onaparte treated the French like so many negroes?"

"Bravo, Mother Barbançon, bravo!"

"Well, isn't that proof enough that he would like to have had all negroes instead of Frenchmen under his thumb?"

"Thanks, Mother Barbançon!" exclaimed the poor commander, fairly writhing with merriment. "But this is too much, really too much!"

Two loud and imperious peals of the bell made the housekeeper spring from her chair and hurry out of the room, exclaiming:

"There is some one who rings in a lordly way, I must say."

And closing the door of the veteran's chamber behind her, Madame Barbançon flew to admit the visitor.

This proved to be a stout man about fifty years of age, wearing the uniform of a second lieutenant in the National Guard,—a uniform that gaped in a ridiculous manner behind, and disclosed to view in front an enormous stomach, over which dangled a big gold chain. This personage, who wore an immense bearskin hat that nearly covered his eyes, had a pompous and extremely self-important air.

On beholding him, Madame Barbançon knit her brows, and, evidently not very deeply impressed by the dignity of this citizen soldier, asked, in a decidedly sharp tone:

"What, you here again?"

"It would be very strange if an owner"—the word owner was uttered with the majestic air of a ruling sovereign—"if an owner could not come into his own house, when—"

"You are not in your own house, for you have rented it to the commander."

"This is the seventeenth of the month, and my porter has sent me a printed notice that my rent has not been paid, so I—"

"We all know that. This is the third time in the last two days that you have been here to dun us. Do you expect us to give you our last cent for the rent? We'll pay you when we can, and that is all there is about it."

"When you can? A house owner is not to be paid in promises."

"House owner! You can boast of being a house owner only because for the last twenty years you've been putting

pepper in your brandy and chicory in your coffee, as well as dipping your candles in boiling water to melt off the tallow without anybody's discovering it, and with the proceeds of this cheating you've perhaps bought a few houses. I don't see anything to be so proud of in that, do you?"

"I have been a grocer, it is true. It is also true that I made money in my business, and I am proud of the fact, madame."

"You have no reason to be. Besides, if you are rich, how can you have the heart to torment a worthy man like the commander merely because he is a little behind in his rent—for the first time, too, in over three years."

"I don't care anything about that. Pay me my money, or out you go! It is very astonishing; people can't pay their rent, but they must have gardens and every modern convenience, these fastidious tenants of mine!"

"Come, come, M. Bouffard, don't go too far or you may be sorry for it! Of course he must have a garden, this brave man, crippled with wounds, for a garden is his only pleasure in life. If, instead of sticking to your counter, you had gone to the wars like the commander, and shed your blood in the four quarters of the globe, and in Russia, you wouldn't own any more houses than he does! Go, and see if you do!"

"Once, twice, I ask, will you pay me to-day?"

"Three times, a hundred times, and a thousand times, no! Since the commander's wound reopened, he can sleep only with the aid of opium. That drug is as costly as gold itself, and the one hundred and fifty francs he has received has had to go in medicine and doctor's visits."

"I don't care anything about your reasons. House owners would be in a nice fix if they listened to their tenants' excuses. It was just the same at one of my houses on the Rue de Monceau where I've just been. My tenant there is a music teacher, who can't pay her rent because she's been sick, she says, and hasn't been able to give lessons as usual. The same old story! When a person is sick, he ought to go to the hospital, and give you a chance to find another tenant."

"The hospital! Commander Bernard go to the hospital!" cried the now thoroughly exasperated housekeeper. "No, not even if I have to go out as a ragpicker at night, and nurse him in the daytime, he sha'n't go to the hospital, understand that, but you run a great risk of going there yourself if you don't clear out, for M. Olivier is coming back, and he'll give you more kicks in your miserable stomach than you have hairs in your bearskin cap."

"I would like to see any other house owner who would allow himself to be abused in this fashion in his own house. But enough of this. I'll be back at four o'clock, and if the hundred and fifty francs are not ready for me, I'll seize your furniture."

"And I'll seize my fire-shovel and give you the reception you deserve!"

And the housekeeper slammed the door in M. Bouffard's face, and went back to the commander. His fit of hilarity was over, but he was still in a very good humour, so, on seeing Madame Barbançon return with cheeks blazing with anger, the old sailor said to her:

"Well, it seems that you didn't expend all your wrath upon Bonaparte, Mother Barbançon. Who the devil are you in such a rage with now?"

"With some one who isn't a bit better than your Emperor, I can tell you that. The two would make a pretty pair. Bah!"

"And who is it that is such a good match for the emperor, Mother Barbançon?"

"It is—"

But the housekeeper suddenly checked herself.

"Poor, dear man," she thought, "it would almost kill him if I should tell him that the rent isn't paid, that the expenses of his illness have eaten up every penny of his money, as well as sixty francs of my own. I'll wait until M. Olivier comes. He may have some good news for us."

"What the deuce are you mooning about there instead of answering me, Mother Barbançon? Is it some new atrocity of the little corporal's that you are going to treat me to?"

"How glad I am! That must be M. Olivier," cried the housekeeper, hearing the bell ring again, gently this time.

And again leaving her employer, Madame Barbançon ran to the door. It was, indeed, the commander's nephew this time.

"Well, M. Olivier?" asked the housekeeper, anxiously.

"We are saved," replied the young man, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "My worthy friend, the mason, had some difficulty in getting the money he owed me, for I had not told him I should want it so soon, but here are the two hundred francs at last," said Olivier, handing a little bag of coin to the housekeeper.

"What a relief it is, M. Olivier."

"Why, has the landlord been here again?"

"He just left, the scoundrel! I told him pretty plainly what I thought of him."

"But, my dear Madame Barbançon, when one owes a man money, one must pay it. But my poor uncle suspects nothing, does he?"

"No, not a thing, I'm glad to say."

"So much the better."

"Such a capital idea has just struck me!" exclaimed the vindictive housekeeper, as she counted the money the young man had just handed her. "Such a capital idea!"

"What is it, Mother Barbançon?"

"That scoundrel will be back here at four o'clock, and I'm going to make up a hot fire in my cook-stove and put thirty of these five-franc pieces in it, and when that monster of a M. Bouffard comes, I'll tell him to wait a minute, and then I'll go and take the money out with my tongs and pile the coins up on the table, and then I'll say to him, 'There's your money; take it.' That will be fine, M. Olivier, won't it. The law doesn't forbid that, does it?"

"So you want to fire red-hot bullets at all the rich grocers, do you?" laughed Olivier. "Do better than that. Save your charcoal, and give the hundred and fifty francs to M. Bouffard cold."

"You are entirely too good-natured, M. Olivier. Let me at least spoil his pretty face with my nails, the brigand."

"Nonsense! He's much more stupid than wicked."

"He's both, M. Olivier, he's both, I tell you!"

"But how is my uncle this morning? I went out so early that he was still asleep, and I didn't like to wake him."

"He is feeling better, for he and I just had a fine dispute about his monster. And then your return, why, it is worth more to him than all the medicines in the world, and when I think that but for you that frightful Bouffard might have turned us out in three or four days! And Heaven knows that our belongings wouldn't have brought much, for our six tablespoons and the commander's watch went when he was ill three years ago."

"My good Mother Barbançon, don't talk of that, or you will drive me mad, for when my furlough is over I shall not be here, and what happened to-day may happen again at any time. But I won't even think of it. It is too terrible!"

The commander's bell rang, and on hearing the sound the housekeeper said to the young man, whose face wore an almost heart-broken expression:

"That is the commander ringing. For heaven's sake don't look so sad, M. Olivier; he will be sure to suspect something."

"You needn't be afraid of that. But, by the way, Gerald is sure to call this morning. You must let him in."

"All right, M. Olivier. Go to the commander at once, and I will soon have your breakfast ready. Dear me, M. Olivier," she continued, with a sigh, "can you be content with—"

"My dear, good woman," cried the young soldier, without allowing her to finish, "don't I always have enough? Aren't you always depriving yourself of something to give it to me?"

"Hush! Monsieur is ringing again. Hasten to him at once!"

And Olivier obeyed.

CHAPTER XXV.

MATRIMONIAL INTENTIONS DISCLOSED.

At the sight of Olivier, the commander's features assumed a joyful expression, and, not being able to rise from his armchair, he held out both hands to his nephew, saying:

"Good morning, my boy."

"Good morning, uncle."

"I feel strongly inclined to scold you."

"Me, uncle?"'

"Certainly. Though you only returned yesterday you were off this morning almost before sunrise. I woke quite early, happy in the thought that I was not alone, as I have been for two months past. I glance over at your bed, but no Olivier is to be seen. You had already flown."

"But, uncle—"

"But, my boy, you have cheated me out of nearly two months of your leave already. A hitch in your master mason's business matters, you told me. So be it; but now, thanks to the earnings of these two months, you must be almost a millionaire, so I intend to enjoy your society from this on. You have earned plenty of money. As it is for me that you are always working, I cannot prevent you from making me presents, and Heaven only knows what you are plotting to do with your millions this very minute, M. Croesus; but I tell you one thing, if you leave me as much of the time alone as you did before you went away, I will not accept another present from you. I swear I will not!"

"But, uncle, listen to me—"

"You have only two more months to spend with me, and I am determined to make the most of them. What is the use of working as you do? Do you suppose that, with a manager like Mother Barbançon, my purse is not always full? Only two or three days ago I said to her: 'Well, Madame Steward, how are we off for funds?' 'You needn't worry about that, monsieur,' she replied; 'when one has more than one spends, there is a plenty.' I tell you that a cashier who answers like that is a comfort."

"Oh, well, uncle," said Olivier, anxious to put an end to this embarrassing conversation, "I promise that I will leave you as little as possible henceforth. Now, one thing more, do you feel able to see Gerald this morning?"

"Why, of course. What a kind and loyal heart that young duke has! When I think that during your absence he came here again and again to see me, and smoke his cigar with me! I was suffering the torments of the damned, but somehow he managed to make me feel ever so much more comfortable. 'Olivier is away,' he said to me, 'and it is my business to look after you.'"

"My good Gerald!" murmured Olivier, deeply moved.

"Yes, he is good. A young man of his position, who leaves his pleasures, his sweethearts, and friends of his own age, to come and spend two or three hours with an old cripple like me, proves conclusively that he has a good heart. But I'm not a conceited fool, I know very well that it was on your account that Gerald came to see me, my dear nephew, and because he knew it would give you pleasure."

"No, no, uncle. It was for your sake, and for yours alone, believe me!"

"Hum!"

"He will tell you so himself, presently, for he wrote yesterday to ask if he would find us at home this morning."

"Alas! he is only too certain to find me; I cannot budge from my armchair. You see the melancholy proof of that," added the old sailor, pointing to his dry and weedy flower borders. "My poor garden is nearly burnt up. Mamma Barbançon has been too busy to attend to it; besides, my illness seems to have put her all out of sorts. I suggested asking the porter to water the flowers every day or two; but you should have heard how she answered me. 'Bring strangers into the house to steal and destroy everything!' You know what a temper the good woman has, and I dared not insist, so you can see what a terrible condition my poor flowers are in."

"Never mind, uncle; I am back now, and I will act as your head gardener," said Olivier, gaily. "I have thought of it before, and if I had not been obliged to go out early this morning on business, you would have found your garden all weeded, and fresh as a rose sparkling with dew when you woke this morning. But to-morrow morning,—well, you shall see!"

The commander was about to thank Olivier when Madame Barbançon opened the door and asked if M. Gerald could come in.

"I should say he could come in!" exclaimed the old naval officer, gaily, as Olivier advanced to meet his friend.

"Thank heaven! his master mason has returned him to us at last," exclaimed the veteran, pointing to Olivier.

"Hopeless chaos seemed to reign in the worthy man's estimates," replied Olivier, "and when they were at last adjusted, the manager of the property, struck by my fine handwriting and symmetrical figures, asked me to straighten out some accounts of his, and I consented. But now I think of it, do you know, Gerald, who owns the magnificent château in which I spent the last two months?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, the Marquise of Carabas."

"What Marquise of Carabas?"

"The enormously wealthy heiress you were talking to us about before I went away."

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil?" exclaimed Gerald, in profound astonishment.

"The same. This magnificent estate belongs to her and yields her a yearly income of twenty thousand livres; and it seems that she has dozens of such properties."

"What the devil can one do with so much money?" exclaimed the veteran.

"It is certainly a strange coincidence," murmured Gerald, thoughtfully.

"And why?"

"Because there is a possibility of my marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Indeed, M. Gerald," said the veteran, artlessly, "so a desire to marry has seized you since I saw you last?"

"So you are in love with Mlle. de Beaumesnil?" asked Olivier, no less naïvely.

Gerald, surprised at these questions, replied, after a moment of reflection:

"It is perfectly natural that you should speak in this way, commander, and you, too, Olivier; and among all the persons I know you are the only ones. Yes, for if I had said to a thousand other people, 'It is proposed that I should marry the richest heiress in France,' each and every one of them would have replied without a thought about anything else: 'Yes, marry her by all means. It is a splendid match; marry her, by all means!'"

Then, after another pause, Gerald added:

"Of course it is only right, but how rare, oh, how rare!"

"Upon my word, I had no idea that I was saying anything remarkable, M. Gerald. Olivier thinks exactly as I do, don't you, my boy?"

"Yes, uncle. But what is the matter with you, Gerald? Why do you seem so serious all of a sudden?"

"I will tell you," said the young duke, whose features did, indeed, wear an unusually thoughtful expression. "I came here this morning to inform you of my matrimonial intentions,—you, commander, and you, Olivier, for I regard you both as sincere and devoted friends."

"You certainly have no truer ones, M. Gerald," said the veteran, earnestly.

"I am certain of that, commander, and this knowledge made me doubly anxious to confide my projects to you."

"That is very natural," replied Olivier, "for you know so well that whatever interests you interests us."

"The real state of the case is this," said Gerald, replying to his friend's words by a friendly gesture. "Yesterday, my mother, dazzled by Mlle. de Beaumesnil's wealth, proposed to me that I should marry that young lady. My mother considered my success certain, if I would consent to follow her counsels. But remembering the pleasures of my bachelor life and of independence, I at first refused."

"But if you have no liking for married life, the millions upon millions should not induce you to change this determination," remarked the old naval officer, kindly.

"But wait, commander," said Gerald, with some little embarrassment. "My refusal irritated my mother. She told me I was blind, and that I had no sense; but finally her anger gave place to such profound chagrin that, seeing her inconsolable at my refusal, I—"

"You consented to the marriage?" asked Olivier.

"Yes," replied Gerald.

Then noticing a slight movement of astonishment on the part of the old sailor, Gerald added:

"Commander, my decision seems to surprise you."

"Yes, M. Gerald."

"But why? Tell me frankly."

"Well, M. Gerald, if you consent to marry contrary to your inclination, and that merely to please your mother, I fear you are making a great mistake," answered the veteran, in firm, but affectionate tones, "for sooner or later your wife will suffer for the compulsion you exert upon yourself to-day, and one ought not to marry to make a woman unhappy. Don't you agree with me, Olivier?"

"Perfectly."

"But how could I bear to see my mother weep, my mother who seems to have set her heart upon this marriage?"

"But think of seeing your wife weep, M. Gerald. Your mother has your affection to console her, while your wife, poor orphan that she is, who will console her? No one, or perhaps she will do as so many other women do,—console herself with lovers who are inferior to you in every way. They will torment her, they will disgrace her, perhaps,—another chance of misery for the poor creature!"

The young duke's head drooped, and he answered not a word.

"You asked us to be frank with you, M. Gerald," continued the commander, "and we are, because we love you sincerely."

"I did not doubt that you would be perfectly frank with me, so I ought to be equally so, and say in my defence that in consenting to this marriage I was influenced by another and not altogether ungenerous sentiment. You remember that I spoke of Macreuse, the other day, Olivier?"

"That miserable wretch who put little birds' eyes out with pins!" cried the veteran, upon whom this incident had evidently made a deep impression, "that hypocrite who is now a hanger-on of the clergy?"

"The same, commander. Well, he is one of the aspirants for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand."

"Macreuse!" exclaimed Olivier. "Poor girl, but he has no chance of success, has he?"

"My mother says not, but I fear that he has; for the Church supports Macreuse's claims, and the Church is very powerful."

"Such a scoundrel as that succeed!" cried the old officer. "It would be shameful!"

"And it was because I was so indignant at the idea that, already touched by my mother's disappointment, I consented to the marriage partly in order to circumvent that wretch, Macreuse."

"But afterwards, M. Gerald, you reflected, did you not, that an honourable man like yourself does not marry merely to please his mother and circumvent a rival, even if that rival is a Macreuse?"

"What, commander!" exclaimed Gerald, evidently much surprised. "Do you think it would be better to allow this wretch to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, when he wants her only for her money?"

"Nothing of the kind," answered the veteran, warmly. "One should always prevent a crime when one can, and if I were in your place, M. Gerald—"

"What would you do, commander?"

"I would go first to M. Macreuse, and say to him: 'You are a scoundrel, and as scoundrels should not be allowed to marry women to make them miserable all their lives, I forbid you to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and I will prevent you from marrying her; I do not know her, I have no intention of marrying her myself, but I take an interest in her because she is in some danger of becoming your wife. As that, in my opinion, would be infinitely worse for her than if she were going to be bitten by a mad dog, I intend to warn her that you are worse than a mad dog.'"

"That would be doing exactly right, uncle, exactly!" cried Olivier.

But Gerald motioned him not to interrupt the veteran, who continued:

"I should then go straight to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and say to her: 'My dear young lady, there is a certain M. Macreuse who wants to marry you for your money. He is a vile cur, and I will prove it to his face whenever and wherever you like. Take my advice; it is entirely disinterested, for I haven't the slightest idea of marrying you myself, but honest men should always put unsuspecting persons on their guard against scoundrels.' I tell you, M. Gerald, my way may be unconventional, but there might be very much worse ones."

"The course my uncle suggests, though rather rough, certainly has the merit of being eminently straightforward, you must admit, my dear Gerald," said Olivier, smilingly; "but you, who are so much better versed in the ways of the world than either of us are, probably know whether you could not achieve the same result by less violent means."

But Gerald, more and more impressed by the veteran's frankness and good sense, had listened to him very respectfully.

"Thanks, commander," he exclaimed, offering him his hand, "you and Olivier have prevented me from doing a dishonourable deed, for the danger was all the greater from the fact that I was investing it with a semblance of virtue. To make my mother the happiest of women, and prevent Mlle. de Beaumesnil from becoming the victim of a man like Macreuse, seemed a very fine thing to me at first. I was deceiving myself most abominably, for I not only gave no thought whatever to the future of this young girl whom I would probably make miserable for life, but I was yielding, though unconsciously, to the fascination of her colossal wealth."

"You are wrong about that, Gerald, I am sure."

"I am not, upon my word, Olivier. So, to save myself from further temptation, I shall return to my first resolution, viz., not to marry at all. I regret only one thing in this change of plans," added Gerald, with much feeling, "and that is the deep disappointment I shall cause my mother, though she is sure to approve my course eventually."

"But listen, Gerald," interrupted Olivier; "you should not do wrong merely to please your mother, as uncle says. Yet a mother is so kind, and it grieves one so much to see her unhappy, why should you not try to satisfy her without the sacrifice of your convictions as an honest and honourable man?"

"Good, my boy!" exclaimed the veteran. "But how is that to be done?"

"Explain, Olivier."

"You have no wish to marry, you say?"

"Not the slightest."

"And you have never seen Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Never."

"Then you cannot love her, of course, that is evident. But who knows but you might fall in love with her if you did see her? A bachelor life is your idea of perfect happiness now, I admit. But is it not quite possible that Mlle. de Beaumesnil might inspire you with a taste for married life instead?"

"You are right, Olivier," exclaimed the veteran. "You ought to see the young lady before you refuse, M. Gerald, and perhaps, as Olivier says, the desire to marry may seize you."

"Impossible, commander!" cried Gerald, gaily. "One is born a husband as one is born a poet or a cripple, and then there is another objection,—the most important of all,—that occurs to me now. It is that the young lady in question is the richest heiress in France."

"And what of that?" urged Olivier. "What difference does that make?"

"It makes a great deal of difference," replied Gerald, "for even if I was obliged to admit that Mlle. de Beaumesnil pleased me infinitely,—that I was dead in love with her, in fact, and that she shared my love,—the fact remains that she is the possessor of a princely fortune, while I have nothing; for my paltry twelve thousand a year would be but a drop in the ocean of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's millions. It would be too humiliating to a man's pride, would it not, commander, to marry a woman to whom you can give nothing, but who gives you everything? Besides, however sincere your love may be, don't you have the appearance of marrying for mercenary motives? Don't you know that everybody would say: 'Mlle. de Beaumesnil wanted to be a duchess. Gerald de Senneterre hadn't a penny, so he sold her his name and title, and threw himself in.'"

On hearing these words, the uncle glanced at his nephew with a decidedly embarrassed air.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COMMANDER'S ADVICE.

Gerald did not fail to notice this fact, and it was with a smile that he exclaimed:

"Yes, I was sure of it, commander. There is something so humiliating to an honest man's pride in such a glaring inequality of fortune that you are as unpleasantly impressed by it as I am. Your silence proves that conclusively."

"The fact is," replied the veteran, after a moment's silence,—"the fact is, I really can't explain why such a state of things would appear perfectly natural and right to me if it was the man who possessed the fortune, and the lady had nothing."

Then the old officer added, with a good-natured smile:

"You think me a great simpleton, I expect, M. Gerald."

"Quite the contrary. Your thought owes its origin to the most profound delicacy of feeling, commander," answered Gerald. "It is the most natural thing in the world that a penniless, but charming young girl, accomplished and endowed with noble attributes of mind and heart, should marry an immensely rich man,—if their love be mutual,—but for a man who has nothing, to marry a woman who has everything—"

"Ah, uncle, and you, too, Gerald," exclaimed Olivier, interrupting his friend, "you are both entirely wrong about this matter."

"And why, if you please?"

"You admit, and so do I, that a penniless young girl is quite justified in marrying an immensely rich man, but this is only on condition that she loves the man sincerely."

"Of course!" said Gerald. "If she is actuated by mercenary motives, it becomes nothing more nor less than a business transaction."

"And disgraceful accordingly," added the old sailor.

"Very well, then," continued Olivier, "why should a poor man,—because, Gerald, you are poor in comparison with Mlle. de Beaumesnil,—why, then, I ask, should you be censured for marrying that young lady if you love her sincerely in spite of her millions,—in short, if you love her as sincerely as if she were without name and without fortune?"

"That is true, M. Gerald," chimed in the commander; "if one loves as an honest man should love, if one is certain that he loves not the money, but the woman, one's conscience is clear. What right can any one have to reproach him? In short, I advise you to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil first, and decide afterwards."

"Yes, that will, I believe, be best," Gerald replied. "That will decide everything. Ah, I was wise to come and talk over my plans with you, commander, and with you, Olivier."

"Nonsense, M. Gerald, as if, in the refined circles in which you move, there were not plenty of persons who would have said the same things Olivier and I have just said to you."

"Ah, don't you believe it," responded Gerald, shrugging his shoulders.

Then, more gravely, he added:

"It is the same in the middle classes, if not worse. Everybody cares only for money."

"But why the devil is it that Olivier and I are so superior to all the rest of the world, M. Gerald?" asked the commander, laughing.

"Why?" repeated Gerald, with much feeling. "It is because you, commander, have led for forty years the hard, rough, dangerous, unselfish life of a sailor; it is because while you were leading this life you acquired the Christian virtues of resignation and contentment with little; it is because, ignorant of the cowardly concessions of society in these matters, you consider a man who marries for money as dishonourable as a man who cheats at cards, or shirks his duty on the battle-field. Am I not right, commander?"

"But you see it all seems so very plain to me, M. Gerald, that—"

"Oh, yes, very plain to you and to Olivier, who has led, like me, though for a much longer time, the life of a soldier,—a life that teaches one unselfishness and brotherly feeling. Is this not true?"

"My brave, kind-hearted Gerald!" cried the young soldier, as deeply moved as his friend. "But you must admit that, though the life of a soldier may have developed your natural generosity, it certainly did not endow you with that virtue. You, alone, perhaps, of all the young men in your rank of life, were capable of realising the sort of cowardice one manifested in sending some poor devil to the wars to be killed in your place,—you, alone, too, seem to feel some scruples with regard to a marriage that all the others would gladly contract at any cost."

"You are not going to begin to pay me compliments at this late day, I hope," laughed Gerald. "Very well, then, it is decided that I am to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and leave the rest to fate. My course is marked out for me. I will not deviate from it, I promise you."

"Bravo, my dear Gerald," replied Olivier, gaily. "I see you now in my mind's eye in love, married,—a happy Benedict, in short. Ah, well, there's no happiness like it, I'm sure. And alas! I, yesterday, knowing nothing of your plans, asked Madame Herbaut's permission to introduce to her a former comrade, a very worthy young man, whom she instantly accepted on the strength of my all-potent recommendation."

"You don't say so," exclaimed Gerald, laughing. "Oh, well, you needn't consider me as good as dead and buried. I shall promptly avail myself of her kind permission to call, I assure you."

"You will?"

"Most assuredly I shall."

"But your matrimonial projects?"

"Why, they make me all the more determined on this point."

"Explain, I beg of you."

"Why, the explanation is very simple, it seems to me. The more reason I have to love a bachelor's life, the better I shall have to love Mlle. de Beaumesnil in order to renounce my pleasures, and consequently the more certain I shall be of the sentiment she inspires. So, once for all, let it be understood that you are to take me with you to Madame Herbaut's, and to make me still stronger—to resist temptation, of course, I'll become the lover of one of the rivals, or even of one of the satellites of that famous duchess who is such a bugbear to me, and with whom I strongly suspect you of being in love."

"Nonsense, Gerald!"

"Come, be frank with me. You surely can't suspect me of desire to cut you out. As if there were not plenty of duchesses in the world! Do you remember the sutler's pretty wife? You had only to say the word, and I, forthwith, left the coast clear for you."

"What, another!" cried the commander. "What a fascinating rascal my nephew must be!"

"Ah, commander, if you knew the number of hearts the scamp won in Algiers alone! Madame Herbaut's fair guests had better be on their guard if they don't want to fall victims to Olivier's fascinations!"

"I haven't any designs on the charming guests, you big simpleton," retorted Olivier, gaily. "But seriously, do you really wish me to take you to Madame Herbaut's?"

"Certainly I do," answered Gerald. Then turning to the veteran, he continued:

"You really must not consider me a harebrained fellow on account of this determination on my part, commander. I have accepted your friendly advice in regard to marriage, you say, and yet I end the conversation by begging Olivier to take me to Madame Herbaut's. Ah, well, strange as this may appear to you, commander, I say, no longer jestingly, but in all seriousness this time, that the less change I make in my habits, the more sincere my love for Mlle. de Beaumesnil will have to be to induce me to abandon them."

"Upon my word, M. Gerald, I must confess that your reasons seemed decidedly odd to me at first," replied the veteran, "but, on reflection, I find them quite sensible. There would, perhaps, be a sort of hypocritical premeditation in breaking off in advance with a life you have led so long."

"Come then, Olivier, and introduce me to Madame Herbaut's charming tribe," exclaimed Gerald, gaily. "Good-bye, commander, I shall return soon and often. What else can you expect? You can't hope to act as my father confessor without more or less trouble, you know."

"You'll find me a pretty exacting mentor as regards absolution and matters of conscience, I warn you," retorted the old sailor, gaily. "You must drop in again soon, for you are to keep me posted about the progress of your matrimonial schemes, you recollect."

"Of course. It is my bounden duty to tell you all now, commander, and I shall not fail to do it. But now I think of it, I must report with regard to a commission you entrusted to me, M. Bernard. Will you allow me a word with your uncle in private, Olivier?"

"Most assuredly," answered the young soldier, promptly leaving the room.

"I have some good news for you, commander," said Gerald, in a low tone. "Thanks partly to my own efforts, and especially to the Marquis de Maillefort's recommendation, Olivier's appointment as a second lieutenant is almost certain."

"Is it possible, M. Gerald!"

"There is very little doubt of it, I think, for it is very generally known that the Marquis de Maillefort is being strongly urged to become a deputy, and this fact has increased his influence very much."

"Ah, M. Gerald, how can I express my gratitude—"

"I must hasten to rejoin Olivier, my dear commander," said Gerald, to escape the veteran's thanks. "His suspicions are sure to be aroused by a longer conversation."

"So you have a secret with my uncle," cried Olivier, as soon as his friend rejoined him.

"Oh, yes, you know I'm a man of mysteries; and, by the way, before we adjourn to Madame Herbaut's, I have another and very mysterious favour to ask of you."

"Let me hear it."

"You know all about this neighbourhood. Can't you recommend some quiet lodgings in a retired street hereabouts?"

"What! You are thinking of deserting the Faubourg St. Germain for the Batignolles? How delightful!"

"Nonsense! Listen to me. Of course, living in my mother's house I cannot receive my friends indiscriminately,—you understand."

"Very well."

"So I have had some rooms elsewhere, but the house has changed hands, and the new owner is such a strictly moral man that he has warned me that I have got to leave when my month is up,—that is, day after to-morrow."

"All the better. It is a very fortunate thing, I think. You're about to marry, so bid farewell to your amours."

"Olivier, you have heard my ideas on the subject. Your uncle approves them. I am resolved to change none of my bachelor habits in advance, and if I should abandon the idea of marriage altogether, think of my desolate situation, homeless and loveless! No, no, I am much too cautious and far-sighted not to—to preserve a pear to quench my thirst."

"You're a man of infinite precautions, certainly. Very well, as I go and come I'll look at the notices of rooms to rent in the windows."

"Two little rooms, with a private hall, is all I need. I'll look myself when we leave Madame Herbaut's, for time presses. Day after to-morrow is the fatal day. Say, Olivier, wouldn't it be strange if I should discover what I need right here? Do you remember the lines:

"'What if in this same quiet spot
I both sweet love and friendship true should find?'

"The lines seem to me a fit motto for a shepherd's pipe; but what of that? Truth needs no ornamentation. But now on, on to the house of Madame Herbaut!"

"You still insist? Consider well."

"Olivier, you are really intolerable. I'll go alone if you won't accompany me."

"Come, then, the die is cast. It is understood that you are simply Gerald Senneterre, a former comrade of mine."

"Senneterre? No; that would be too imprudent. You had better call me Gerald Auvernay, for I am adorned with the marquisate of Auvernay, my dear Olivier, though you may not be aware of the fact."

"You are M. Gerald Auvernay, then; that is decided. But the devil!"

"What's the matter now?"

"But what else are you going to be?"

"What else am I going to be?"

"Yes; what is to be your occupation?"

"Why, a bachelor of the new school."

"Pshaw! I can't introduce you to Madame Herbaut as a young man who is living on the income of the money he saved while in the army. Besides, Madame Herbaut receives no idlers. You would excite her suspicions at once, for the worthy woman strongly distrusts young men who have nothing to do but court pretty girls, for you'll find that her girls are pretty."

"All this is certainly very amusing. Well, what do you want me to be?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Let me see," said Gerald, laughing. "How would you like me to be an apothecary?"

"That would do very well, I should think."

"Oh, no, I was only joking; that wouldn't answer at all."

"But there are some very nice and gentlemanly apothecaries, I assure you, Gerald."

"But really I shouldn't dare to look any one of those pretty girls in the face."

"Let's try to think of something else, then. What do you say to being the clerk of a notary? How does that suit you?"

"Admirably. My mother has an interminable lawsuit on hand, and I drop in to see her notary and lawyer occasionally, so I can study the part from nature."

"Very well, follow me, then, and I will introduce you as Gerald Auvernay, clerk to a notary."

"Chief clerk to a notary," corrected Gerald, with great emphasis.

"Come on, ambitious youth!"

Gerald, thanks to Olivier's recommendation, was received by Madame Herbaut with great cordiality.

On the afternoon of that same day grim M. Bouffard called for the rent Commander Bernard owed him. Madame Barbançon paid him, overcoming with great difficulty her strong desire to disfigure the ferocious landlord's face with her nails.

Unfortunately, the money thus obtained, instead of appeasing M. Bouffard's greed, seemed to imbue him with

increased energy to collect his dues, and persuaded that, but for his persistent dunning and abuse, Madame Barbançon would not have paid him, he hastened off to the Rue Monceau where Herminie lived, resolved to treat the poor girl with increased severity, and thus secure the payment of the rent she owed him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ABODE OF THE DUCHESS.

Herminie lived on the Rue de Monceau in one of the numerous dwellings of which M. Bouffard was the owner. She occupied a room on the ground floor, reached by a small hallway opening under the archway of the porte-cochère. The two windows looked out upon a pretty garden, enclosed on one side by an evergreen hedge, and on the other by a tall lattice that separated it from the adjoining street.

This garden really pertained to a much larger apartment on the ground floor, an apartment which, together with another suite of rooms on the third floor, was unoccupied,—an unpleasant state of things, which considerably increased M. Bouffard's ill-humour towards his delinquent tenants.

Nothing could have been simpler, yet in better taste, than this abode of the duchess.

A cheap but exceedingly fresh and pretty chintz covered the walls and rather low ceiling of the room. In the daytime full draperies of the same material concealed a large alcove in which the bed stood, as well as two glass doors near it, one of which opened into a tiny dressing-room, and the other into the hall, a sort of antechamber about eight feet square.

Chintz curtains, lined with pink, veiled the windows, which were also decorated with pretty white muslin sash curtains, tied back with pink ribbons. A carpet, with a white ground, with small bouquets of pink roses dropped here and there,—this carpet had been the most expensive item in Herminie's furnishing,—covered the floor. The mantel drapery, beautifully embroidered by Herminie herself, was pale blue, with garlands of roses and jonquils. Two candlesticks of exquisite Pompeian design stood, one on either side of a white marble clock, surmounted by a statuette of Joan of Arc, while at each end of the mantel stood two tall vases of *grès verni*, a wonderful invention, by the way. These vases, which were of the purest Etruscan form, held big bunches of fresh roses, which filled the room with their delicious fragrance.

These modest mantel decorations, being all of the cheapest materials, were of slight intrinsic value, having cost not more than fifty or sixty francs, but from an artistic point of view they were irreproachable.

Opposite the fireplace stood Herminie's piano, her bread-winner. Between the two windows was a table, which also served as a bookcase, the duchess having arranged several works by her favourite authors upon it, as well as a few books which she had received as prizes during her school-days.

Here and there upon the wall, in plain pine frames, so highly polished that they looked like citron wood, hung a few well-chosen engravings, among them "Mignon Pining for Her Native Land," and "Mignon Longing for Heaven," both by Scheffer, hanging one on either side of Francesca da Rimini, by the same artist.

In two corners of the room small *étagères* held several plaster statuettes, reduced copies of famous antiques. A small rosewood cabinet, bought for a song from some second-hand furniture dealer in the Batignolles, two pretty tapestry-covered chairs,—Herminie's handiwork,—and a large armchair of green satin decorated with beautiful silk embroidery in brilliant hues, representing flowers and birds, completed the furniture of the room.

By means of industry and intelligence, combined with exquisite taste, Herminie had been able to create for herself this elegant and refined home at comparatively little expense.

Culinary duties or details may have been distasteful to this fastidious duchess. At all events, she had managed to escape that difficulty through the good offices of the portress, who, for a trifling compensation, brought her a glass of milk every morning, and in the evening a plate of excellent soup, accompanied with a dish of vegetables and some fruit,—a frugal repast rendered appetising enough by the exquisite daintiness of Herminie's dinner-table; for though the duchess possessed only two cups and half a dozen plates, they were of fine china, and when the girl had placed on her round table, covered with a napkin of dazzling whiteness, her carafe, her cut-glass tumbler, her two shining silver forks and spoons, and her pretty china plate decorated with tiny pink roses and forget-me-nots, the simplest food seemed wonderfully appetising.

But alas! to Herminie's intense chagrin, her silver spoons and forks, and her watch, the only really valuable article she possessed, were now in pawn at the *mont de piété*, where she had been obliged to send them by the portress, the poor girl having no other means of defraying the daily expenses of her illness, and of obtaining a small sum of money upon which she could live until she was able to resume the lessons interrupted by her illness, for a period of nearly two months.

This long delay was the cause of Herminie's extreme poverty and consequent inability to pay the one hundred and eighty francs she owed M. Bouffard for rent.

One hundred and eighty francs!

And the poor child possessed only about fifteen francs upon which she would have to live for nearly a month!

It is evident, therefore, that the foot of a man had never crossed Herminie's threshold.

The duchess, free and untrammelled in every way, had never loved,—though she had inspired love in the hearts of many, without intending or even caring to do so, for she was too proud to stoop to coquetry, and too generous to enjoy the torments of an unrequited love. None of her suitors had pleased Herminie, in spite of the honesty of their matrimonial overtures, based in some cases, at least, upon a certain amount of affluence, for several had been engaged in business, while others were musicians like Herminie herself, and others clerks in dry-goods establishments, or bookkeepers.

The duchess could not fail to display, in her choice of a husband, the refined taste and exquisite delicacy which were her most prominent characteristics; but it is needless to say that the social position of the man she loved, whether high or low, would not have influenced her in the least.

She knew by herself, and she gloried in the knowledge, that rare nobility and refinement of soul are sometimes found in the poorest and most obscure, and that which had oftenest offended her in her suitors were the slight imperfections, not apparent very possibly to any one save the duchess, but inexpressibly obnoxious to her.

This suitor had been too boisterous in manner; that one, too familiar and unrefined; this one had a rasping voice; that one was almost grotesque in appearance. Nevertheless, some of the rejected suitors possessed many admirable qualities of mind and heart, as Herminie herself had been the first to admit. These she considered the best and most worthy men in the world, and frankly granted them her esteem, and even her friendship, but not her love.

It was not from any feeling of disdain or foolish ambition that Herminie had refused them, but simply, as she herself had said to the unfortunates, "because she felt no love for them, and was resolved to remain single all her life rather than marry without experiencing a sincere and profound love." And yet, by reason of this very pride, fastidiousness, and sensitiveness, Herminie must have suffered much more than the generality of persons from the painful and almost inevitable annoyances inherent to the position of a young girl who is not only obliged to live alone, but who is also exposed to the unfortunate conditions which may result at any time from a lack of employment or from sickness.

For some time, alas! the duchess had been realising most cruelly the unhappy consequences of her poverty and isolation. Any person who understands Herminie's character and her pride,—a pride that had impelled the young girl, in spite of her pressing need, to proudly return the five hundred franc note sent her by the executors of the Beaumesnil estate,—can readily understand the mingled terror and dismay with which the poor child was awaiting the return of M. Bouffard, for, as he had remarked to Madame Barbançon, he intended to pay his last round of visits to his delinquent tenants that afternoon.

Herminie was trying to devise some means of satisfying this coarse and insolent man, but, having already, pawned her silver and her watch, she had nothing more to pawn. No one would have loaned her twenty francs on her mantel ornaments, tasteful as they were, and her pictures and statuettes would have brought little or nothing.

Overcome with terror at the thought of her truly pitiable condition, Herminie was weeping bitterly and shuddering in the dread expectation of hearing M. Bouffard's imperious peal of the bell at any moment.

Yet so noble and generous was this young girl's nature that, even in the midst of these cruel perplexities, Herminie never once thought of saying to herself that she might be saved by an infinitesimal portion of the enormous superabundance belonging to the sister whose sumptuous apartments she had seen a couple of days before. If the duchess thought of her sister at all, it was that she might find in the hope of seeing her some diversion from her present grief and chagrin. And for this sorrow and chagrin Herminie now blamed herself as she cast a tearful glance around her pretty room, reproaching herself the while for her unwarranted expenditures.

She ought to have saved up this money for a rainy day, she said to herself, and for such misfortunes as sickness or a lack of pupils. She ought to have resigned herself to taking a room on the fourth floor, next door to strangers, to living separated from them only by a thin partition, in a bare and desolate room with dirty walls. She ought not to have allowed herself to be tempted by this outlook upon a pretty garden, and by the seclusion of her present apartments. She ought to have kept her money, too, instead of spending it on the pretty trifles which had been the only companions of her solitude, and which had converted the little room into a delightful retreat where she had lived so happily, confident of her ability to support herself.

Who ever would have supposed that a person as proud as she was would have to submit to the coarse, but just abuse of a man to whom she owed money,—money that she could not pay?

Could anything be more humiliating?

But these severe though just reproaches for past delinquencies did not ameliorate her present misery in the least; and she remained seated in her armchair, her eyes swollen with weeping, now absorbed in a gloomy reverie, now starting violently at the slightest sound, fearing that it presaged the arrival of M. Bouffard.

At last the agonising suspense was ended by a violent pull of the bell.

"It is he," murmured the poor creature, trembling in every limb. "I am lost!" she moaned.

And she remained seated in her chair, absolutely paralysed with fear.

A second peal of the bell, even more violent than the first, resounded in the tiny hall.

Herminie dried her eyes, summoned up all her courage, and, pale and trembling, went to open the door.

She had not been deceived.

It was M. Bouffard.

This glorious representative of the nation had laid aside the uniform of a citizen soldier and donned a gray sack coat.

"Well, have you my money ready?" he demanded, roughly, planting himself on the threshold of the door the girl had opened for him with such an unsteady hand.

"But, monsieur—"

"Do you intend to pay me, yes or no?" exclaimed M. Bouffard, in such a loud voice that the question was overheard by two other persons.

One was then standing under the porte-cochère. The other was mounting the staircase which started close to the entrance to Herminie's apartments.

"I ask you for the last time, will you pay me? Answer me, yes or no!" repeated M. Bouffard, in even louder and more threatening tones.

"In pity do not speak so loud," said Herminie, in imploring accents. "I assure you that, though I cannot pay you, it is not my fault; indeed it is not."

"I am in my own house, and I will talk as I please. If any one overhears me so much the better. It may serve as a lesson to other tenants who may want to get out of paying their rent just like you."

"Step inside, monsieur, I beseech you," pleaded Herminie, clasping her hands, imploringly; "and I will explain."

"Explain—explain what?" retorted M. Bouffard, following the girl into her room. "There's no explanation possible. The whole affair is very simple. Are you going to pay me,—yes, or no?"

"It is impossible, unfortunately, just at this time," said Herminie, dashing away a tear, "but if you will have the great kindness to wait—"

"Always the same old story!" sneered M. Bouffard, shrugging his shoulders.

Then glancing around the room with a sardonic air, he added:

"This is a pretty state of things! Here is a tenant who declares she cannot pay her rent, and yet indulges in fine carpets, chintz hangings, and all sorts of knick-knacks. If it isn't enough to make a man swear! I, who own seven houses in the city of Paris, have a carpet only in my drawing-room, and Madame Bouffard's boudoir is hung with a fifteen sous paper; and yet, here is a young woman who gives herself the airs of a princess, though she hasn't a penny."

Herminie, driven to desperation, lifted her head proudly, and, in a manner that was both firm and dignified, said:

"This piano is worth at least four times the amount of my indebtedness, monsieur. Send for it whenever you please. It is the only article of value I possess. Dispose of it; sell it whenever you like."

"Am I a dealer in pianos? How do I know what I should realise from the sale of your instrument? You must pay me my rent in money, and not in pianos."

"But good heavens, monsieur! I have no money. I offer you my piano, though I earn my living by it. What more can I do?"

"I won't accept anything of the kind. You have money, I know it. You sent a watch and some silver, too, to the pawnbroker's, for it was my portress who took them there for you. You can't humbug me, you see."

"Alas! monsieur, the paltry sum they loaned me I have been obliged to spend for—"

But Herminie did not finish the sentence. She had just perceived a gentleman standing in the open doorway. It was M. de Maillefort, and he had been an unobserved witness of the painful scene for several minutes.

Noting the girl's sudden start, and the surprised glance she was directing towards the door, M. Bouffard turned his head, and, seeing the hunchback, seemed quite as astonished as Herminie.

The marquis now advanced, and, bowing respectfully to Herminie, said:

"I beg a thousand pardons for thus intruding, mademoiselle, but I found the door open, and as I hope you will do me the honour to grant me a few moments' conversation on a very important matter, I ventured to enter."

After these words, which were uttered with as much courtesy as deference, the marquis turned to M. Bouffard and surveyed him from head to foot with such an expression of withering contempt that the ex-grocer became not only embarrassed, but thoroughly intimidated as well, in the presence of this hunchback, who said to him, coldly:

"I came, monsieur, to solicit the honour of a few minutes' conversation with this young lady."

"Oh—ah! Well, what is that to me?" grunted M. Bouffard, gradually regaining his assurance.

The marquis, without paying the slightest attention to M. Bouffard, and addressing Herminie, who was becoming more and more astonished, asked, deferentially:

"Will mademoiselle do me the favour to grant me the interview I ask?"

"But, monsieur," replied the girl, much embarrassed, "I do not know—I am not sure—"

"I must take the liberty of remarking that, as it is absolutely necessary that our conversation should be strictly confidential, it is indispensable that this—this gentleman should leave us, unless there may still be something you wish to say to him. In that case, I will retire."

"I have nothing further to say to monsieur," answered Herminie, pleased at the idea of escaping from her present painful position, even for a few moments.

"Mademoiselle has nothing more to say to you, monsieur," said the marquis to M. Bouffard, with a meaning gesture.

But the ex-grocer, who was now himself again, and who was consequently furious at the thought that he had allowed himself to be awed by the hunchback, exclaimed:

"So you fancy a man can be turned out of his own house without paying him his just dues, monsieur, and all because you support this—"

"Enough, monsieur, enough!" cried the marquis, hastily interrupting Bouffard.

And even as he spoke, he seized the offender by the arm with such violence that the ex-grocer, feeling the long, bony fingers of the hunchback hold him as in a vise, gazed at him with mingled fear and astonishment.

But the marquis, still smiling in the most amiable manner, continued with marvellous affability:

"I regret that I am unable to enjoy your delightful society any longer, my dear sir, but you see I am at mademoiselle's orders, and as she is good enough to grant me a few minutes, I must not abuse her kindness."

As he spoke, the marquis half led, half dragged M. Bouffard to the door, and that worthy, astonished to encounter such physical vigour and such an authoritative manner in a hunchback, offered no further resistance.

"I will go, as I have some other matters to attend to in the house," he exclaimed, making the best of the situation. "I am going up-stairs for awhile, but I shall return after you leave. I intend to have my money then, if I don't—"

The marquis bowed ironically, closed the door in the ex-grocer's face, and then returned to Herminie.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SACRED MISSION.

M. de Maillefort, much impressed by what Madame de la Rochaiguë had told him about the young musician who had been so unjustly treated, as she averred, by Madame de Beaumesnil, had again questioned Madame Dupont, a confidential attendant of the deceased countess.

This examination, which the marquis had conducted with great prudence and skill, revealed many new details concerning the relations which had existed between the countess and that young girl, and though Madame Dupont seemed to have no suspicion of the truth, M. de Maillefort felt almost certain that Herminie must be Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

In spite of this firm conviction on his part, the marquis resolved to approach Herminie with the greatest reserve, not only because any revelation of his suspicions would dishonour Madame de Beaumesnil's memory, but, also, because the countess had never revealed her secret to M. de Maillefort, who had mistrusted rather than discovered it.

Herminie, utterly unable to imagine the object of this stranger's visit, was standing by the mantel, pale and agitated when the marquis returned to her side after M. Bouffard's summary expulsion.

A single quick glance around the abode of the duchess had satisfied the marquis of the perfect order, refined taste, and exquisite neatness of the girl's home, and this, together with what Madame de la Rochaiguë had told him of her noble disinterestedness, gave him a very high opinion of Herminie, and, almost sure that he saw in her the person he was so anxious to find, he studied her charming features in the hope of discovering a resemblance to Madame de Beaumesnil, and fancied that he had succeeded.

Though she did not exactly resemble her mother, Herminie, like Madame de Beaumesnil, was a blonde. Like her, she had blue eyes, and though the contour of the two faces was not alike, there was certainly a family likeness that could not fail to strike a close observer like M. de Maillefort; so it was with an emotion that he found it difficult to conceal that he approached Herminie, who was becoming more and more embarrassed by the long silence, and by the searching though almost affectionate gaze of her strange visitor.

"Mademoiselle," he said, at last, in an almost fatherly tone, "I must beg you to excuse my delay, but I experience a sort of embarrassment in expressing the great interest I feel in you."

M. de Maillefort's voice, as he uttered these words, was so full of feeling that the young girl looked at him wonderingly, then, more and more surprised, she ventured, timidly:

"But this interest, monsieur—"

"You cannot imagine what has aroused it. Very well, I will tell you, my dear child,—for let me call you that," the hunchback continued, as if in answer to a hasty movement on the part of Herminie; "my age and the interest I feel in you certainly give me a right to call you my dear child, if you will permit such a familiarity."

"It might serve to prove my gratitude for the kind and consoling words you have just uttered, monsieur, though the humiliating position in which you just saw me placed—"

"Oh, do not trouble yourself in the least about that," interrupted the marquis, "I—"

"I am not trying to justify myself," said Herminie, proudly, interrupting the marquis in her turn. "I have nothing to blush for, and though, for some inexplicable reason, you are kind enough to evince an interest in me, it is only my duty to tell you, or to try to prove to you, that it was neither mismanagement, extravagance, nor idleness that placed me in such a humiliating position for the first time in my life. Ill for nearly two months past, I have been unable to give lessons as usual. I resumed them only a few days ago, so I have been obliged to spend the small amount of money I had saved. This is the truth, monsieur. If I am a little in debt, it is only in consequence of my illness."

"Strange," thought the marquis, mentally comparing the date of the countess's death with that of the beginning of Herminie's illness, "it was about the time of Madame de Beaumesnil's death that this poor child must have been taken ill. Can grief have been the cause?"

And in tones of touching sympathy, the marquis asked aloud:

"And was this attack of illness severe, my dear child? You were overworked, perhaps."

Herminie blushed deeply. Her embarrassment was great, for she felt that it would be necessary to utter an untruth to conceal the real cause of her illness, and it was with considerable hesitation that she finally replied:

"I think I must have been overfatigued, monsieur, for the attack was followed by a sort of mental prostration, but now, thank Heaven, I am well again."

The girl's embarrassment and hesitation did not escape the marquis, who had already noted the expression of profound melancholy on Herminie's features.

"There isn't the slightest doubt of it," he mentally exclaimed. "She became ill with grief after Madame de Beaumesnil's death. She knows, then, that the countess was her mother. But in that case, why didn't the countess, in the frequent opportunities she must have had to be alone with her daughter, give her this money she entrusted to me?"

A prey to these perplexities, the hunchback, after another silence, said to Herminie:

"My dear child, I came here with the intention of maintaining the utmost reserve. Distrusting my own judgment, and greatly in doubt as to the course I ought to pursue, I had resolved to approach the subject that brought me here with infinite caution, for it is a delicate, yes, a sacred mission, that I have to fulfil."

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"Will you be kind enough to listen to me, my dear child. What I have heard about you, and what I have just seen, or rather divined, perhaps,—in short, the confidence you inspire,—had changed this determination on my part, and I am going to talk to you freely and frankly, sure that I am speaking to an honest, true-hearted woman. You know Madame de Beaumesnil,—you loved her—"

Herminie could not repress a movement of astonishment, mingled with anxiety.

"Yes, I know," continued the hunchback. "You loved Madame de Beaumesnil devotedly. Your grief at her death was the sole cause of your illness."

"Monsieur," cried Herminie, terrified to see her secret, or rather that of her mother, almost at the mercy of a stranger, "I do not know what you mean. I conceived for Madame de Beaumesnil, during the brief time we were together, the respectful affection she deserved. Like all who knew her, I deeply deplored her death, but—"

"It is only right and natural that you should answer me thus, my dear child," said the marquis, interrupting Herminie. "You cannot have much confidence in me, not knowing who I am, not knowing even my name. I am M. de Maillefort."

"M. de Maillefort!" exclaimed the young girl, remembering that she had written a letter addressed to the marquis for her mother.

"You have heard my name before, then!"

"Yes, monsieur. Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil, not feeling strong enough to write herself, asked me to do it in her stead, and the letter you received on the night of her death—"

"Was written by you?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then you must feel, my dear child, that you owe me your entire confidence. Madame de Beaumesnil had no more devoted friend than myself,—and it was upon the strength of this friendship of more than thirty years' standing, that she felt she could rely upon me sufficiently to entrust me with a sacred mission."

"Can he mean that my mother confided the secret of my birth to him?" thought Herminie.

The marquis, noticing Herminie's increasing agitation, and confident that he had at last found Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate daughter, continued:

"The letter you wrote for Madame de Beaumesnil requested me to come to her even at that late hour of the night. You remember this fact, do you not?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"I obeyed the summons as soon as I received it. The countess felt that her end was fast approaching," continued the hunchback, in a voice that trembled with suppressed emotion. "After commending her daughter Ernestine to my care, Madame de Beaumesnil implored me to—to do her a last service. She entreated me to—to divide my care and interest between her daughter and—and another young girl no less dear to her—"

"He knows all," Herminie said to herself, with a sinking heart. "My poor mother's sin is no secret to him."

"This other young girl," continued the hunchback, more and more overcome, "was an angel, the countess told me. Yes, those were her very words,—an angel of virtue and courage, a brave and noble-hearted girl," added the marquis, his eyes wet with tears. "A poor, lonely orphan, who, though destitute alike of friends and resources, had struggled bravely on against a most adverse fate. Ah, if you could have heard the accents of despairing tenderness in which that most unhappy woman and unfortunate mother spoke of that young girl; for I divined—though she made no such admission, deterred, doubtless, by the shame of such an avowal—that only a mother could speak thus and suffer thus on thinking of her daughter's fate. No, no, it was not a stranger that the countess commended to my care with so much earnestness on her death-bed."

The marquis, overcome by emotion, paused an instant and wiped his tear-dimmed eyes.

"Oh, my mother," Herminie said to herself, making a brave effort at self-control, "then your last thoughts were indeed of your unhappy daughter!"

"I made the dying woman a solemn promise that I would fulfil her last request, and divide my solicitude between Ernestine de Beaumesnil and the young girl the countess implored me so earnestly to protect. Then she gave me this purse," continued the hunchback, drawing it from his pocket, "which contains, she assured me, a small competence which she charged me to deliver to the young girl whose future would thus be assured. But, unfortunately, Madame de Beaumesnil breathed her last without having told me the orphan's name."

"Thank Heaven! He only has his suspicions, then!" Herminie said to herself, rapturously. "I shall not have to bear the anguish of seeing a stranger know my mother's fault. Her memory will remain untarnished."

"You can judge of my anxiety and chagrin, my dear child," continued the marquis. "How was I to comply with Madame de Beaumesnil's last request, ignorant of the young girl's name? Nevertheless, I began my search, and, at last, after many fruitless attempts, I have found that orphan girl, beautiful, courageous, generous, as her poor mother said, and that girl is—is you—my child—my dear child," cried the hunchback, seizing both Herminie's hands.

Then, in a transport of joy and ineffable tenderness, he exclaimed:

"You see I have indeed the right to call you my child. No, never was there any father prouder of his daughter!"

"Monsieur," answered Herminie, in a voice she tried hard to make calm and firm, "though it costs me a great deal to destroy this illusion on your part, it is my duty to do it."

"What!" cried the hunchback.

"I am not the person you are seeking, monsieur," replied Herminie, firmly.

The marquis recoiled a step or two and gazed at the young girl without being able to utter a word.

To resist the influence of the revelation M. de Maillefort had just made to her, Herminie needed a heroic courage born of all that was purest and noblest in her character,—filial pride.

The young girl's heart revolted at the mere thought of confessing her mother's disgrace to a stranger by acknowledging herself to be Madame de Beaumesnil's daughter.

For what right had Herminie to confirm this stranger's suspicions by revealing a secret the countess herself had been unwilling to confess to her most devoted friend, a secret, too, which her mother had had the strength to conceal from her when clasped to her bosom, her child's heart-throbs mingled with her own.

While these generous thoughts were passing swiftly through Herminie's mind, the marquis, astounded by this refusal on the part of a young girl whose identity he could not doubt, tried in vain to discover the reason of this strange determination on her part.

At last he said to Herminie:

"Some motive, which it is impossible for me to fathom, prevents you from telling me the truth, my dear child. This motive, whatever it may be, is certainly noble and generous; then, why conceal it from me, your mother's friend, a friend who feels that he is obeying your mother's last wishes in coming to you?"

"This conversation is as painful to me as it is to you, M. le marquis," Herminie replied, sadly, "for it brings to mind a person who treated me with the greatest kindness during the brief time I was called upon to minister to her as a musician, and in no other capacity, I give you my word. I think that this declaration should be sufficient, and that you should spare me further entreaties on this subject. I repeat that I am not the person you are seeking."

On hearing this assurance again repeated, some of M. de Maillefort's doubts returned; but unwilling to abandon all hope, he exclaimed:

"No, no, I cannot be mistaken. Never shall I forget Madame de Beaumesnil's anxiety, nor her prayers for—"

"Permit me to interrupt you, M. le marquis, and to say to you that, under the painful influence of a scene that must have been particularly trying to you, you doubtless mistook the nature of the interest Madame de Beaumesnil felt in the orphan of whom you speak. To defend Madame de Beaumesnil's memory against such a mistake, I have no other right than that of gratitude, but the respectful regard I and every one else felt for Madame la comtesse convinces me

that this is an error on your part."

This manner of looking at the matter accorded too well with M. de Maillefort's own secret hopes for him to turn an entirely deaf ear to this argument. Still, remembering the terrible anguish of the countess when she commended the orphan to his protection, he said:

"This much is certain: no one would speak in such terms of a stranger."

"How do you know that, M. le marquis?" retorted Herminie, gaining ground inch by inch. "I have heard many instances cited of Madame de Beaumesnil's boundless generosity. Her affection for some persons she assisted was, I have heard, as great as that she manifested for the orphan she asked you to protect, and as this girl, you say, is as deserving as she is unfortunate, it seems to me a sufficient explanation of the great interest the countess took in her. Possibly, too, she felt her protection to be a duty. Possibly some friend had confided the girl to Madame de Beaumesnil's care, as that lady in turn confided her to yours."

"But in that case, why should she have laid such stress upon concealing the name of the donor from the person to whom I was to deliver this money?"

"Because Madame de Beaumesnil, in this case, perhaps, as in many others, wished to conceal her benevolence."

And Herminie having now entirely recovered her coolness and composure, presented these arguments with such readiness that the marquis at last began to think that he had been deceived, and that he had suspected Madame de Beaumesnil unjustly.

Then a new idea occurred to him, and he exclaimed:

"But even admitting that the merit and the misfortunes of this orphan are her only claim, do not these conditions seem especially applicable in your own case? Why should it not be you the countess meant?" he asked.

"I knew Madame de Beaumesnil too short a time for me to deserve any such mark of her bounty, M. le marquis; besides, as the countess did not designate me by name, how can I,—I appeal to your own delicacy of feeling,—how can I accept a large sum of money on the mere supposition that it may have been intended for me?"

"All that would be very true if you did not deserve the gift."

"And in what way have I deserved it, M. le marquis?"

"By your attentions to the countess, and the alleviation of suffering she secured through you. Why is it at all unlikely that she should have desired to compensate you as she did others?"

"I do not understand you, monsieur."

"The will of the countess contained several legacies. You seem to be the only person who was forgotten, in fact."

"I had no right to expect any bequest, M. le marquis. I was paid for my services."

"By Madame de Beaumesnil?"

"By Madame de Beaumesnil," answered Herminie, firmly.

"Yes, you said as much to Madame de la Rochaiguë on so nobly returning—"

"Money that did not belong to me, M. le marquis, that is all."

"No!" exclaimed M. de Maillefort, his former convictions suddenly regaining the ascendency. "No, I was not mistaken,—instinct, reason, conviction, all tell me that you are—"

"M. le marquis," said Herminie, interrupting the hunchback, for she was anxious to put an end to this painful scene, "one word more, and only one. You were Madame de Beaumesnil's most valued friend, for on her death-bed she entrusted her daughter to your care. Would she not also have told you in that supreme moment if she had another child?"

"Great Heaven, no!" exclaimed the marquis, involuntarily. "The unhappy woman would have shrunk from the shame of such an avowal."

"Yes, I am sure of that," thought Herminie, bitterly. "And is it I who will make the disgraceful confession from which my poor mother shrank?"

The conversation was here interrupted by M. Bouffard's entrance. The emotion of the marquis and of the young girl was so great that they had not noticed the opening of the hall door.

The once ferocious landlord seemed to be in a very different mood. Something must have appeased his wrath, for his coarse and brutal manner had vanished, and his rubicund visage was wreathed with a crafty smile.

"What do you want?" demanded the marquis, curtly. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to make my excuses to mademoiselle."

"Your excuses?" said the young girl, greatly surprised.

"Yes, mademoiselle, and I wish to make them before monsieur, as I reproached you for not paying me in his presence, so I now declare before him,—I swear it in the presence of God and man,—I swear that I have been paid all that mademoiselle owed me."

"You have been paid!" cried Herminie, in amazement; "and by whom, monsieur?"

"Oh, you know very well, mademoiselle," responded M. Bouffard, with the same coarse laugh. "You know very well! What a sly one you are!"

"I have no idea what you mean, monsieur," said Herminie, indignantly.

"Bah!" cried M. Bouffard, shrugging his shoulders, "I suppose you're not going to try to make me believe that handsome young men pay the rent for pretty blondes merely for the love of God!"

"Some one has paid my rent for me, monsieur?" demanded Herminie, blushing scarlet.

"Yes, some one has paid it, and in shining yellow gold," replied M. Bouffard, drawing several gleaming coins from his pocket and tossing them up in the air. "Look at the yellow boys, ain't they pretty, eh?"

"And this gold, monsieur," said Herminie, unable to believe her own ears,—"this gold—who gave it to you?"

"Oh, don't try to play innocent, my dear. The person who paid me is a handsome fellow, tall, and dark complexioned, with a brown moustache. That description would answer for his passport, if he wanted one."

The marquis had listened to M. Bouffard first with surprise, and then with utter dismay.

This young girl, in whom he had taken so deep an interest, had suddenly become hateful in his eyes; so coldly bowing to Herminie, he walked silently to the door, with an expression of bitter disappointment on his face.

"Ah," he thought, "still another lost illusion!"

"Remain, monsieur," cried the young girl, running after him, all of a tremble, and overcome with shame, "I entreat you—I implore you to remain!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

HUMILIATION AND CONSOLATION.

On hearing Herminie's appeal, M. de Maillefort turned and asked, coldly and sternly:

"What do you want, mademoiselle?"

"What do I want, monsieur?" the girl exclaimed, her cheeks on fire, her eyes sparkling with tears of wounded pride and indignation. "What I want is to tell this man in your presence that he lies."

"I?" snorted M. Bouffard, indignantly. "Really, this is a little too much, when I have the yellow boys right here in my pocket."

"But I tell you that you lie!" cried the girl, advancing towards him, with a commanding gesture. "I have given no one the right to pay you, or to make me the victim of such an insult."

In spite of the coarseness of his nature, M. Bouffard was not a little impressed by this display of fiery indignation, so retreating a step or two, the owner of the house stammered by way of excuse:

"But I swear to you, mademoiselle, upon my sacred word of honour, that, as I was going up-stairs a few minutes ago, I was stopped on the first landing by a handsome, dark-complexioned young man who gave me this gold to pay your rent. I'm telling you the honest truth; upon my word I am!"

"Oh, my God, to be humiliated and insulted like this!" cried the young girl, her long repressed sobs bursting forth at last.

After a moment, turning to the hunchback, a silent witness of the scene, Herminie said, in entreating tones, her beautiful face bathed with tears:

"Oh, in pity, do not believe that I have merited this insult, M. le marquis."

"A marquis!" muttered M. Bouffard, hastily removing his hat, which he had kept upon his head up to that time.

M. de Maillefort, turning to Herminie, his face beaming as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his heart, took her by the hand as a father might have done, and said:

"I believe you, I believe you, my dear child! Do not stoop to justify yourself. Your tears, and the evident sincerity of your words, as well as your just indignation, all satisfy me that you are speaking the truth, and that this insulting liberty was taken without your knowledge or consent."

"I am certainly willing to say this much," said M. Bouffard, "though I've been in the habit of coming to the house almost every day, I never saw this young man before. But why do you feel so badly about it, my dear young lady? Your rent is paid, and you may as well make the best of it. There are plenty of other people who would like to be humiliated in the same way. Ha, ha, ha!" added M. Bouffard, with his coarse laugh.

"But you will not keep this money, monsieur?" cried Herminie. "I beg you will not; sell my piano,—my bed,—anything I possess, but in pity return this money to the person who gave it to you. If you keep it, the shame is mine,

monsieur!"

"How you do go on!" exclaimed M. Bouffard. "I didn't feel insulted in the least in pocketing my rent. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, you know. Besides, where am I likely to find this handsome young man to return him his money? He is a stranger to me. I haven't the slightest idea who he is or where he came from; but it can easily be arranged. When you see the fellow you can tell him that it was against your wishes that I kept his money, but that I am a regular old Shylock and all that. Put all the blame on me, I don't mind; I've got a thick hide."

"Mademoiselle," said M. de Maillefort, addressing Herminie, who, with her face buried in her hands, was silently weeping, "will you consent to take my advice?"

"What would you have me do, monsieur?"

"Accept from me, who am old enough to be your father,—from me, who was the devoted friend of a person for whom you had as much respect as affection,—accept from me a loan sufficient to pay this gentleman. Each month you can pay me in small instalments. As for the money monsieur has already received, why, he must do his best to find the stranger who gave it to him. If he fails, he must give the money to some local charity."

Herminie listened to this proposal with the liveliest gratitude.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, M. le marquis," she exclaimed. "I accept your kind offer gladly, and am proud to be under obligations to you."

"But I utterly refuse to be a party to any such arrangement," exclaimed M. Bouffard.

"And why, monsieur?" demanded the marquis.

"I will not,—I will not, I tell you. It sha'n't be said that—in short, I'm not such a monster that—but no matter, let it be understood, once for all, that the marquis is to keep his money. I'll try to find that young coxcomb; if I don't, I'll drop his money in the poor-box. I won't sell your piano, mademoiselle, but I'll be paid, all the same. What do you say to that?"

"Have the goodness to explain, monsieur, if you please," said the marquis.

"Well, this is the long and short of it," answered M. Bouffard. "My daughter Cornelia has a music teacher, quite a famous teacher, I believe,—a M. Tonnerriliuskoff—"

"With such a name one ought certainly to make a noise in the world," said the marquis.

"And on the piano, too, M. le marquis. He's a six-footer, with a big, black moustache, and hands as big as—as shoulders of mutton. But this famous teacher costs like the devil,—fifteen francs a lesson, to say nothing of the repairs to the piano, which he almost hammers to pieces, he is so strong. Now if mademoiselle here would give Cornelia lessons at five—no, say four francs a lesson, and three lessons a week,—that would make twelve francs a week,—she could soon pay me what she owes me, and afterwards could pay her entire rent that way."

"Bravo, M. Bouffard!" cried the marquis.

"Well, what do you think of my proposition, mademoiselle?"

"I accept it most gratefully, and thank you with all my heart for this chance to free myself of my obligations to you in such an easy way. I assure you that I will do everything possible to further your daughter's progress."

"Oh, that will be all right, I'm sure. It is understood, is it? Three lessons a week, at four francs a lesson, beginning day after to-morrow. That will be twelve francs a week,—better call it ten, I guess,—it's easier to calculate. Ten francs a week makes forty francs a month,—quite a snug little sum."

"Any terms you choose to name will suit me, monsieur. I accept them gratefully."

"Ah, well, my dear sir," said the marquis, turning to M. Bouffard, "aren't you much better satisfied with yourself now than you were awhile ago, when you were frightening this poor child nearly to death by your threats?"

"That's a fact, monsieur,—that's a fact, for this young lady is certainly deserving. Then, too, I shall get rid of that odious music master, with his big, black moustache and fifteen franc lessons. Besides, he is always having his big hands on Cornelia's hands to show her the fingering, he says, and I don't like it."

"My dear M. Bouffard," said the marquis, taking the ex-grocer a little aside, "will you allow me to give you a word of advice?"

"Why certainly, M. le marquis."

"Never give masters to a young girl or a young woman, because sometimes, you see, there is a change of rôles."

"A change of rôles, M. le marquis?" repeated M. Bouffard, wonderingly.

"Yes; not unfrequently the scholar becomes the mistress,—the mistress of the master. Understand?"

"The mistress of the master? Oh, yes, very good! I understand perfectly. That is good; very good, indeed! Ha, ha, ha!"

Then, suddenly becoming serious, he added:

"But now I think of it, if that Hercule de Tonnerriliuskoff undertakes—"

"Mlle. Bouffard's virtue must be above suspicion, my dear sir; still, it might be safer—"

"The brigand shall never set foot in my house again. Thanks for your counsel, M. le marquis."

Then, returning to Herminie, M. Bouffard added:

"So we will begin day after to-morrow at two o'clock; that is Cornelia's hour."

"At two o'clock, then. I will be punctual, I promise you."

"And at ten francs a week?"

"Yes, monsieur, and even less, if you say so."

"Would you come for eight?"

"Yes," answered Herminie, smiling, in spite of herself.

"We'll say eight francs, then."

"Come, come, M. Bouffard, a wealthy real estate owner like you shouldn't stoop to any such haggling," the marquis interposed. "What! an elector,—perhaps even an officer in the National Guard,—for you seem to me quite equal to such a position—"

M. Bouffard straightened himself up proudly, and, making a military salute, responded:

"A second lieutenant in the first company of the second regiment of the first batallion, M. le marquis."

"All the more reason that you should uphold the dignity of your rank, dear M. Bouffard," replied M. de Maillefort.

"That is true, M. le marquis. I said ten francs, and ten francs it shall be. I always honour my signature. I will go and try to find that young coxcomb. He may be hanging around somewhere outside the house now. I'll ask Mother Moufflon, the portress, if she knows anything about him, and tell her to watch out for him. Your servant, M. le marquis. I'll see you again, day after to-morrow, mademoiselle."

Then, turning again, just as he reached the door, he said to Herminie:

"Mademoiselle, an idea has just occurred to me. You see I'd like to convince the marquis here that Bouffard is not such a bad fellow, after all."

"Let us hear the idea, M. Bouffard," said the hunchback.

"You see that little garden out there, M. le marquis?"

"Yes."

"It belongs to the large apartment on this floor. Ah, well, I intend to allow mademoiselle the use of this garden—until the other apartment is rented, at least."

"Do you really?" cried Herminie, overjoyed. "Oh, I thank you so much. What pleasure it will give me to walk about in that pretty garden!"

But M. Bouffard had already fled, as if his natural modesty forbade his listening to the protestations of gratitude such a generous offer must inspire.

"'I Will Go and Try To Find That Young Coxcomb'"

"One has no idea what it costs such people as that to be generous and obliging," remarked the hunchback, laughing.

Then becoming serious again, he said: "My dear child, what I have just seen and heard gives me such a clear understanding of the nobility of your heart and the firmness of your character, that I realise the futility of any renewed efforts in relation to the matter that brought me here. If I am mistaken, if you are not Madame de Beaumesnil's daughter, you will naturally persist in your denial; if, on the contrary, I have divined the truth, you will still persist in denying it, actuated, I am sure, by some secret but honourable motive. I shall insist no further. One word more: I have been deeply touched by the feeling that prompted you to defend Madame de Beaumesnil's memory against suspicions which may be entirely without foundation. If you were not so proud, I should tell you that your disinterestedness is all the more noble from the fact that your situation is so precarious; and, by the way, let me say right here that, though M. Bouffard has deprived me of the pleasure of being of service to you this time, I want you to promise me, my dear child, that in future you will apply only to me."

"And to whom else could I apply without humiliation, M. le marquis?"

"Thank you, my dear child, but no more, M. le marquis, I beg. In our recent grave conversation I had no time to protest against this ceremonious appellation; but now we are old friends, no more M. le marquis, I beseech you. That is agreed, is it not?" asked the hunchback, cordially offering his hand to the young girl, who pressed it gratefully as she exclaimed:

"Ah, monsieur, such kindness and such generous confidence more than consoles me for the humiliation I suffered in your presence."

"Dismiss that from your mind entirely, my dear child. The insult you received only proves that the insolent stranger is as foolish as he is coarse. It is doing him entirely too much honour to retain a lasting remembrance of his offence."

"You are right, monsieur," replied Herminie, though she still blushed deeply with wounded pride and indignation; "contempt, the most profound contempt is all that such an insult merits."

"Undoubtedly; but, unfortunately, your loneliness and unprotected condition are probably to a great extent accountable for this unwarranted presumption on the part of a stranger, my poor child, so, as you permit me to talk in all sincerity, why have you never thought of boarding with some respectable elderly woman, instead of living alone?"

"I have thought of doing that more than once, but it is difficult to find the right person—that is when one is as exigeante as I am," she added, smiling.

"You admit that you are very *exigeante*, then?" asked the marquis, also smiling.

"Really I cannot help it, it seems to me, monsieur; could I find such surroundings as these in the home of a person whose means are as modest as mine? Besides, I ought not to say it, perhaps, but I am so keenly sensitive to certain faults of education and manner that I should positively suffer at times. It is silly and ridiculous, I know, for lack of breeding does not lessen the virtue and kindness of most of the people of the class to which I belong, but to which my education has rendered me somewhat superior. Still it is intensely repugnant to me, and I consequently prefer to live alone, in spite of the many inconveniences of such an isolated position. Another objection is that I should be under an obligation to any person who would receive me into her family, and I fear that I might be made to feel this obligation too much."

"All this is very natural," said the hunchback, after a moment's reflection. "It would scarcely be possible for one of your proud nature to act or feel otherwise, and this pride, which I admire so much in you, has been, and I am sure always will be, your best safeguard. But this will not prevent me, with your permission, of course, from coming now and then to see if I can serve you in any way."

"Can you doubt the pleasure, the very great pleasure it will give me to see you?"

"I will not so wrong you as to doubt it, my dear child."

Seeing M. de Maillefort rise to take leave, Herminie felt strongly tempted to make some inquiry concerning Ernestine de Beaumesnil, whom he had probably seen ere this; but the young girl feared she might betray herself and arouse M. de Maillefort's suspicions by speaking of her sister.

"Farewell, my dear child," said the marquis, rising. "I came here in the hope of finding a daughter to love and protect, and I shall not return with an empty heart. And now again, farewell—and *au revoir*."

"And soon, I hope, M. le marquis," responded Herminie, with respectful deference.

"Nonsense!" said the hunchback, smiling. "There is no marquis here, but an old man who loves you,—yes, loves you with all his heart. Don't forget that."

"Oh, I shall never forget it, monsieur."

"Good, that promise atones for everything. Once more au revoir, my child."

And M. de Maillefort departed, still in doubt as to Herminie's identity, and no less in doubt in regard to the best means of carrying out Madame de Beaumesnil's last wishes.

The young girl, left alone, reflected long upon the incidents of the day, which, after all, had proved a happy one for her, for by refusing a gift which proved her mother's deep solicitude for her welfare, but which might compromise that mother's memory, the young girl had gained M. de Maillefort's warm friendship.

But the payment made to M. Bouffard by a stranger was a terrible blow to Herminie's pride.

"I must seem despicable, indeed, in the eyes of a person who dared to take such a liberty as that," the proud girl was saying to herself just as there came a timid ring at the door.

Herminie opened it to find herself confronted by M. Bouffard and a stranger.

This stranger was Gerald de Senneterre.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN APOLOGY ACCEPTED.

On seeing the Duc de Senneterre, who was an entire stranger to her, Herminie coloured with surprise, and said to M. Bouffard, with much embarrassment:

"I did not expect to have the pleasure of seeing you again so soon, monsieur."

"No more did I, mademoiselle. No more did I! It was this gentleman who forced me to return."

"But I do not know the gentleman," Herminie answered, more and more astonished.

"No; I have not the honour of being known to you, mademoiselle," said Gerald, with an expression of the deepest anxiety on his handsome features, "and yet, I have come to ask a favour of you. I beseech you not to refuse it."

Gerald's handsome face showed so much frankness, his emotion seemed so sincere, his voice was so earnest, his manner so respectful, and his appearance so elegant and *distingué*, that it never once occurred to Herminie that this could be the stranger she was so bitterly reproaching.

Besides, reassured by M. Bouffard's presence, and unable to imagine what favour the stranger could have come to ask, the duchess, turning to her landlord, said, timidly:

"Will you have the goodness to come in, monsieur?"

And as she spoke, she led the way into her own room.

The young duke had never seen a woman who compared with Herminie in beauty, and this beauty alike of form and feature was greatly enhanced by the dignified modesty of her demeanour.

But when Gerald followed the girl into her room and saw the countless indications of refined habits and exquisite taste everywhere apparent, he felt more and more confused, and in his profound embarrassment he could not utter a word.

Amazed at the stranger's silence, Herminie turned inquiringly to M. Bouffard, who said:

"It will be best to begin at the beginning, my dear young lady. I will explain why this gentleman—"

"Allow me," said Gerald, interrupting M. Bouffard. Then, turning to Herminie, he continued, with a charming mixture of frankness and deference:

"I may as well confess that it is not a favour I have come to ask, but forgiveness."

"Of me, monsieur—and why?" asked Herminie, ingenuously.

"My dear mademoiselle," said M. Bouffard, with a meaning gesture, "this is the young man who paid me that money, you know. I met him just now, and—"

"It was you, monsieur?" cried Herminie, superb in her indignation. And looking Gerald full in the face, she repeated, witheringly:

"It was you?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, but listen, I beg of you."

"Enough, monsieur, enough!" said Herminie. "Such audacity seems inconceivable! You have at least the courage to insult, monsieur," added Herminie, with crushing contempt.

"But, mademoiselle, do not suppose for one moment—" pleaded Gerald.

"Monsieur," said the young girl, again interrupting him, but in a voice that trembled violently, for she could feel tears of grief and humiliation rising to her eyes, "I can only beg that you will leave my house. I am a woman,—and I am alone."

These last words were uttered in such tones of intense sadness that Gerald was moved to tears in spite of himself, and when the young girl raised her head after a violent effort to conquer her emotion, she saw two big tears gleaming in the eyes of the stranger, who, after bowing low without a word, started towards the door.

But M. Bouffard, seizing Gerald by the arm, exclaimed:

"Why, stop a second! You surely are not going like that!"

And we must admit that M. Bouffard added mentally:

"And my little apartment on the third floor, am I to lose my chance of renting that?"

"Monsieur," interposed Herminie, seeing her landlord attempt to detain the offender; "monsieur, I must insist—"

"But, my dear young lady, you certainly ought to know why I brought this young man here," exclaimed M. Bouffard. "You surely cannot suppose that it was with the intention of annoying you. The fact is, I met the young fellow near the *barrière*, and as soon as I laid eyes on him, I called out, 'Ah, my generous youth, a nice scrape you got me into with your yellow boys. Here they are; take them, and don't let me see any more of them, if you please.' And then I told him how you had felt about the service he had rendered you, and how you had cried and taken on, until monsieur turned red, and then pale, and then green, and finally said to me, apparently quite miserable about what I had told him, 'Ah, monsieur, I have unintentionally insulted a person whose unprotected position renders her all the more worthy of respect. I owe her an apology, and I will make it in your presence, as you were my involuntary accomplice. Come, monsieur, come.' Upon my word of honour, mademoiselle, these were the very words the young man said to me, and somehow what he said touched me. I can't imagine what is the matter with me to-day, I'm as chicken-hearted as a woman. I thought he was right to want to come and apologise to you, so I brought him along, or, rather, he brought me along, for he took me by the arm and dragged me along at the double-quick. In fact, I never walked so fast in my life."

The sincerity of the words was unmistakable, and as Herminie was endowed with a keen sense of justice, and she had been not a little touched by the tears she had seen glittering in Gerald's eyes, she said to the stranger, in a tone which indicated a strong desire to end this painful scene as soon as possible:

"In that case, monsieur, the offence of which I complain was unintentional, and it was not to aggravate the offence that you returned here. I believe this, monsieur, and this should satisfy you, I think."

"If you desire it, mademoiselle, I will leave at once without saying a word in my own defence."

"Do have a little pity, my dear young lady," pleaded M. Bouffard. "You have allowed me to speak, now listen to the gentleman."

Whereupon the Duc de Senneterre, taking Herminie's silence for an assent, said:

"Mademoiselle, this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I was passing along the street, looking for lodgings, and naturally paused in front of the house as I saw several notices of rooms to rent. I asked permission to inspect the apartments, and going on in advance of the portress, who promised to join me in a minute, I began to ascend the stairs. As I reached the first landing my attention was attracted by a timid, supplicating voice. This voice was yours, mademoiselle, and you were pleading with this gentleman. I paused involuntarily, not from any idle

curiosity, but because I could not listen to such a touching appeal unmoved. So I heard all, and my only thought was that a woman was in trouble, and that I could save her, without her even knowing it, so seeing a man come out of your room a few minutes afterwards I called to him."

"Yes," continued M. Bouffard, "and said to me angrily, 'Here is money, pay yourself, and cease to torment a woman, who is only too unhappy already.' If I did not tell you this at first, my dear young lady, it was only because I wanted to have my little joke, and afterwards I was frightened to see how angry you were."

"That is my offence, mademoiselle," continued Gerald. "I yielded to a thoughtless, though not ungenerous impulse, whose deplorable consequences I did not foresee. I unfortunately forgot that the sacred right to render certain services belongs only to tried and trusted friends. I forgot, too, that, however spontaneous and disinterested commiseration may be, it may nevertheless be a cruel insult under some circumstances. When this gentleman told me of your just indignation, mademoiselle, and told me the wrong I had unwittingly done you, I felt it to be my duty as an honourable man to come and beg your pardon, and tell you the simple truth. I had never had the honour of seeing you; I did not even know your name, and I shall probably never see you again, but I wish that I could convince you that I had not the slightest intention of insulting you, and that I never realised the gravity of my offence until now."

Gerald was speaking the truth, and his sincerity, emotion, and tact convinced Herminie that such, indeed, was the case.

Another and entirely different idea also influenced the ingenuous girl, or, rather, an apparently trivial but to her highly significant circumstance, viz., that the stranger was seeking a modest lodging. This convinced her that he was not rich, and that the generosity he had manifested towards her must necessarily have been at the cost of no little personal sacrifice.

These considerations, aided very considerably, perhaps,—and why not, may we ask?—by the influence almost always exerted by a handsome, frank, and expressive face, appeased Herminie's wrath wonderfully. In fact, far from feeling the slightest indignation against Gerald now, she was really touched by the generous impulse to which he had yielded, and which he had just explained with such perfect frankness, and too honest and ingenuous herself to conceal her thoughts, she said to Gerald, with charming simplicity:

"My embarrassment is very great, monsieur, for I must reproach myself for having entirely misinterpreted an act, the kindness of which I now appreciate. I can only beg you to forget the intemperance of my first remarks."

"Permit me to say, on the contrary, that I shall never forget them, mademoiselle," replied Gerald, "for they will always remind me that there is one attribute which should be respected above all others in a woman,—her dignity."

And bowing deferentially to Herminie, Gerald turned to leave the room.

M. Bouffard had listened to the latter part of this conversation in open-mouthed wonder, it being just about as intelligible to him as if it had been carried on in Greek; but now checking Gerald, who had started towards the door, the ex-grocer, evidently with the idea that he was achieving a master-stroke, exclaimed:

"One moment, my good sir, one moment. As mademoiselle is no longer offended with you, there is no reason why you shouldn't take those nice little rooms on the third floor I was telling you about,—a small hall, and two cozy rooms; one that will answer for a sitting-room, and the other for a bedroom—just the thing for a bachelor."

On hearing this proposal, Herminie became very uneasy, for it would have been decidedly unpleasant to see Gerald installed in the same house.

But the young duke promptly replied:

"I have already told you that the rooms would not suit me, my dear sir."

"Yes, because this young lady was offended with you, and it is very unpleasant to be on bad terms with one's fellow tenants. But now this young lady has forgiven you, there is no reason you shouldn't take those nice rooms."

"I am even less inclined to take them now," replied Gerald, venturing a glance at Herminie.

The young girl did not raise her eyes, but she blushed slightly, for she appreciated the delicacy of Gerald's refusal.

"What!" exclaimed M. Bouffard, profoundly astonished; "now you have made up with mademoiselle, you are less inclined to take them than ever? Is it possible that you have noticed any objections to my house since you came back?"

"It is not precisely that which deprives me of the pleasure of taking up my abode under your roof, my dear sir, but —"

"Come, I'll let you have those rooms for two hundred and fifty francs, with a small cellar thrown in, if you want it."

"Impossible, my dear sir, impossible."

"Call it two hundred and forty, then, and say no more about it."

"I am obliged to call your attention to the fact that mademoiselle's room is not the place for this haggling, monsieur."

Then turning to Herminie and bowing profoundly, the young duke said:

"Believe me, mademoiselle, I shall always retain a most delightful recollection of this first and last interview."

The girl bowed graciously, but without raising her eyes, and Gerald departed, resolutely pursued by M. Bouffard, who seemed determined not to lose his prey.

But Gerald remained obdurate in spite of the landlord's tempting offers. The ex-grocer persisted in his efforts, so Gerald, to get rid of him, and perhaps also to have an opportunity to think over his meeting with Herminie, quickened his pace and told the landlord that he intended to extend his walk as far as the fortifications. So he started off, leaving M. Bouffard in despair at having missed this fine opportunity to rent those charming third story rooms.

A road leading to the fortifications intersected the Rue de Monceau near this point. Gerald took it, and then strolled slowly along, absorbed in a profound reverie.

Herminie's rare beauty, as well as her dignity and refinement of manner had made a deep impression on the young duke, and the more he said to himself that he had, of course, seen this charming creature for the first and last time, the more he rebelled against the thought.

Besides, upon analysing or rather comparing his former fancies with his sudden but deep interest in Herminie, and discovering nothing like it in the past, Gerald asked himself, with no little uneasiness:

"What if I should be really caught this time?"

He had just asked himself this question when he was met by an officer of engineers wearing an army redingote without epaulettes, and a big straw hat.

"Why, it's Senneterre!" exclaimed this officer.

The young duke looked up and recognised Captain Comtois, one of his former comrades in the African army.

"How are you, my dear Comtois?" he exclaimed, cordially offering his hand. "I did not expect to see you here, though you are quite in your native element, I must admit," he added, with a glance at the fortifications.

"Yes, my dear fellow, we're making the earth fly and the work is advancing rapidly. I am general-in-chief of that army of labourers and masons you see over there. In Africa, we tore down walls; here, we build them up. Did you come over to look at the works? If you did, I'll show you about."

"A thousand thanks for your kind offer, my dear Comtois, I'll remind you of your promise some day soon."

"Very well, come and take breakfast with me any morning you like. I am living in camp over there. It will remind you of old times; you'll think you're in a Bedouin camp again. Oh, by the way, you remember Clarville, that young lieutenant of *spahis* who resigned in order that he might have the satisfaction of fighting Colonel Duval a year afterwards?"

"Clarville? Yes, a brave fellow—I remember him perfectly."

"Well, after he resigned, he had very little to live on, and the failure of some bank swept away the little that he had. In fact, if I hadn't happened to come across him, I believe he would have starved. Fortunately, I was able to take him on as overseer, and that pays him a little something."

"Poor fellow! it was a lucky thing for him, though."

"I should think so, particularly as he is married,—a love-match,—that is to say, the girl hadn't a penny, and there are two little children in the bargain, so you can judge of his situation. He manages to make both ends meet, but that is all. I have been to see him. He lives in a side street at the end of the Rue de Monceau."

"At the end of the Rue de Monceau?" asked Gerald, hastily. "I, too, must go and see him."

"He would be delighted, my dear Senneterre, for when misfortunes come, one's visitors are rare."

"What is the number of the house?"

"It is the only house on the street,—a little bit of a house. The devil! There's the second bell. I must leave you, my dear Senneterre, and get my men together. Good-bye; don't forget your promise."

"No, certainly not."

"And I may tell Clarville you're coming to see him?"

"Yes, day after to-morrow."

"It will please him very much; good-bye."

"Good-bye, my dear fellow."

"Don't forget Clarville's address."

"I am not very likely to," thought Gerald. "The street where he lives must skirt the end of the garden of the house where I just saw that adorable girl."

So, while the captain rushed off towards a group of wooden shanties in the distance, Gerald strolled along, a prey to a sort of feverish agitation.

The sun was low in the horizon when he awoke from his reverie.

"I don't know what will come of all this," he said to himself, "but this time, and it is the only time, I feel that I'm gone, absolutely gone, this time!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PRIVATE STAIRWAY.

In spite of the deep and novel impression made upon Gerald by his interview with Herminie, he had met Ernestine de Beaumesnil; for, in accordance with the plans of the Rochaiguës, the richest heiress in France had directly or indirectly made the acquaintance of the three aspirants for her hand.

A month had passed since these different presentations, and since the first interview between Gerald and Herminie, an interview whose consequences will become apparent later on.

The clock had just struck eleven, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil was sitting alone in her chamber, deeply absorbed in thought. Her girlish face had lost none of its sweetness and candour, though a rather sarcastic, and sometimes almost mournful, smile occasionally flitted across her lips, and one sometimes noticed a resolute expression, which contrasted strangely with the almost childish ingenuousness of her features.

Suddenly Mlle. de Beaumesnil rose, walked to the mantel, and placed her hand on the bell rope; then she paused a moment as if undecided in relation to some important matter.

At last, as if her mind was fully made up, she rang, and almost immediately Madame Laîné, her governess, entered, with an eager, almost obsequious, air.

"Does mademoiselle desire anything?" she asked.

"Sit down, my dear Laîné."

"Mademoiselle is too kind."

"Sit down, I beg. There is something I wish to say to you."

"Only to obey mademoiselle," said the governess, much surprised at this familiarity on the part of her young mistress, who had always treated her heretofore with marked reserve.

"My dear Laîné," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in an almost affectionate tone, "you have often told me that I could count upon your attachment."

"Oh, yes, mademoiselle."

"And upon your devotion as well?"

"In life and in death, mademoiselle."

"And also upon your discretion?"

"I only ask that mademoiselle will put me to the test, then she can judge," replied the governess, more and more delighted with this truly promising beginning.

"Very well, I am about to put you to the test."

"How rejoiced I am at such a mark of confidence on mademoiselle's part!"

"Yes, a mark of great confidence, of which I hope you will be found deserving."

"I swear to mademoiselle that—"

"Oh, I believe you," said Ernestine, interrupting these protestations on the part of her governess; "but tell me, nearly a week ago you asked me to give you to-morrow evening, in order that you might attend a small reunion which takes place every Sunday night at the house of one of your friends named—What is the name? I have forgotten it."

"Her name is Madame Herbaut, mademoiselle. This friend of mine has two daughters, and every Sunday she invites a few people of their age to her house. I think I said as much to mademoiselle when I asked her permission to attend the entertainment."

"And who are these young people?"

"The young girls who visit Madame Herbaut are mostly shop-girls, or young women who give music and drawing lessons. There are also several bookkeepers among them. As for the men, they are, for the most part, shop-keepers, or musicians, or lawyer's clerks,—all very respectable young men, I assure you, for Madame Herbaut is very particular about the people she invites, and very naturally, as she has daughters to marry off, and between you and me, mademoiselle, it is to establish them in life that she gives these little reunions."

"My dear Laîné," said Ernestine, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "I want to attend one of these reunions at Madame Herbaut's."

"Mademoiselle!" exclaimed the governess, thinking her ears must have deceived her, "what did mademoiselle say?"

"I said I wished to attend one of Madame Herbaut's entertainments,—to-morrow evening, for instance."

"Good heavens! Is mademoiselle really in earnest?"

"Decidedly so."

"What, you, mademoiselle, go to the house of such a very humble person! Impossible! Mademoiselle cannot even

be thinking of such a thing?"

"Impossible, and why, my good Laîné?"

"Why, the baron and baroness would never give their consent."

"So I do not intend to ask it."

"But mademoiselle would not go to Madame Herbaut's without consulting the baron!" cried the governess.

"Certainly."

"But how could you, mademoiselle?"

"My dear Laîné, you told me a minute ago that I could count upon you."

"And I repeat it, mademoiselle."

"Very well, then, you must take me to Madame Herbaut's to-morrow evening."

"I, mademoiselle? Really, I don't know whether I am awake or only dreaming."

"You are not dreaming, so to-morrow evening you will introduce me to Madame Herbaut as one of your relatives, an orphan."

"One of my relatives! Great Heavens! I should never dare!"

"Let me finish, please. You will introduce me, I say, as one of your relatives, recently arrived from the country, who earns her living as—as an embroiderer, for example. But, remember this, if you are guilty of the slightest indiscretion or blunder, and so cause any one to suspect that I am not what I wish to appear, that is to say, an orphan who supports herself by her own exertions, you will not remain another minute in my service, while if you follow my instructions carefully you may expect anything from me."

"Really, mademoiselle, you surprised me so I cannot seem to get over it. But why does mademoiselle wish me to introduce her to Madame Herbaut as a relative of mine and an orphan?"

"Don't ask me any more questions, Laîné. Can I depend upon you, yes or no?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, in life and in death. But—"

"No 'buts,' if you please, and now one word more, and the last. You know, of course," added the young girl, with a strangely bitter smile, "that I am the richest heiress in France."

"Certainly, mademoiselle, everybody knows that, and says that there is no other fortune in the country nearly as large as mademoiselle's."

"Ah, well, if you will do what I ask, and, above all, if you will be discreet, thoroughly discreet, understand,—I insist upon that, for it is absolutely necessary that Madame Herbaut should believe me what I mean to appear, a poor orphan supporting herself by her own exertions,—in short, if, thanks to your cleverness and discretion, everything passes off as I wish, you shall see how the richest heiress in France pays a debt of gratitude."

"What you say pains me deeply, mademoiselle," exclaimed the governess, with a gesture of superb disinterestedness. "Can mademoiselle suppose that I wish to set a price on my devotion?"

"No, but I deem it only right to set a price on my gratitude."

"Good Heavens! Mademoiselle, you know very well that if you should become as poor as I am I should be just as devoted to you."

"I do not doubt that in the least, but until I become poor, do what I ask. Take me to Madame Herbaut's to-morrow evening."

"But if you will talk the matter over a little you will see how impossible your plan is."

"And why?"

"In the first place, how can you arrange to have the disposal of your evening? The baron and baroness and Mlle. Helena never leave you."

"Oh, I can manage that very easily. To-morrow morning I will say that I passed a very uncomfortable night, and that I am not feeling at all well. I will remain in my room all day, and to-morrow evening you will go to the family and tell them that I am asleep and don't wish to be disturbed by anybody. My guardian and his family respect my slightest wish so abjectly that they will not dare to disturb my slumbers," added Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with mingled sadness and disdain.

"Oh, mademoiselle is perfectly right about that. No one would dare to contradict or oppose mademoiselle in anything. If mademoiselle should tell M. le baron to stand on his head, he would do it without a word."

"Oh, yes, they are certainly the most considerate of relatives, so full of tenderness and dignity," replied Ernestine, with a rather peculiar expression. "Ah, well, you see, then, that it will be an easy matter for me to secure an evening to myself."

"Yes, mademoiselle, but how shall we manage to get out of the house?"

"Get out of the house?"

"Yes. I mean without meeting any one on the stairway, or being seen by the concierge."

"That is your lookout. I depend upon you to devise a means of doing that."

"Oh, it is very easy to say devise a means, mademoiselle, but—"

"I foresaw this difficulty, of course, but I said to myself, 'My dear Laîné is very clever. She will assist me in this.'"

"Heaven knows I would be only too glad to, mademoiselle, but I really do not see—"

"Put on your thinking-cap. I have never used any but the main stairway, but are there no servants' stairways leading from my apartments?"

"Of course, mademoiselle. There are two such staircases, but you would run a great risk of meeting the servants if you used either of them; that is," added the governess, thoughtfully,—"that is unless you should choose the time that they are at dinner, about eight o'clock, for example."

"Your idea is an admirable one."

"Mademoiselle should not rejoice too soon."

"Why?"

"Mademoiselle will still have to pass the porter's lodge, and he is a regular Cerberus, for ever on the watch."

"That is true, we shall have to think of some other way."

"I am trying, mademoiselle, but it's no easy matter, I assure you."

"But not impossible, it seems to me."

"Ah, I have an idea, mademoiselle!" exclaimed the governess, suddenly, after reflecting a moment.

"Let me hear it."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but I'm not sure that it is at all feasible yet. Let me go and see. I'll be back in a moment."

And the governess darted out of the room. The orphan was left alone.

"I was right," she murmured, with an expression of bitter disgust. "This woman has a base and mercenary nature, like so many others, but these very failings will ensure me her submission, and, above all, her discretion."

In a few minutes the governess returned, radiant.

"Victory, mademoiselle!" she exclaimed, rapturously.

"Explain, if you please."

"Mademoiselle is aware that her dressing-room opens into my bedroom."

"Yes."

"And adjoining my chamber there is a large room containing the wardrobes for mademoiselle's dresses."

"Well?"

"There is a door in this room which opens upon a narrow staircase to which I never paid any attention before."

"And where does this staircase lead?"

"It leads down to a small door which has been closed up, but which opens, as nearly as I can judge, upon the side street."

"This door opens upon the street?" cried Mlle. de Beaumesnil, quickly.

"Yes, mademoiselle, and this is not at all surprising. In many of the large houses in this neighbourhood there are small private stairways leading up to the sleeping apartments, because in former times the ladies of the court—"

"The ladies of the court?" inquired Ernestine, so naïvely that Madame Laîné's eyes fell before the girl's innocent gaze.

So, fearing that she was going too far, and that she might imperil her recently acquired intimacy with her pupil, Madame Laîné said:

"I don't care to fill mademoiselle's ears with a lot of servants' gossip."

"And you are right. But if this door which leads into the street is condemned, how shall we open it?"

"It is bolted and nailed up on the inside—but mademoiselle needn't worry. I have all night before me, and to-morrow morning I hope to have a good report to make to mademoiselle."

"Very well If you think it necessary, inform your friend, Madame Herbaut, in advance that you will bring a relative with you to-morrow evening."

"I will do so, though it isn't at all necessary. Mademoiselle, if she accompanies me, will be as cordially received as I am. There is very little ceremony among people of that class."

"Very well, it is understood, then. But I repeat once more that I shall expect the utmost caution on your part. Your

reward depends upon that."

"Mademoiselle can punish me in any way she pleases if I break my word."

"I would much rather reward you. See what you can do about that door now, and let me hear early to-morrow morning."

"But really, mademoiselle, all this is very extraordinary!"

"What do you mean?"

"I refer to mademoiselle's desire to go to Madame Herbaut's. It seems to me such a strange idea on mademoiselle's part. But I feel no uneasiness," added the governess, with a complacent air. "I know mademoiselle too well to suppose for one moment that she would involve a poor woman like myself in any trouble, and though I do not presume to question mademoiselle, may I not—as I, of course, must not speak of this matter to any one else—may I not know why, mademoiselle—"

"Good-night, my dear Laîné," said mademoiselle, rising, and thus putting an end to the conversation. "Let me know the results of your researches early to-morrow morning."

Delighted to have a secret between her pupil and herself at last, a secret which she regarded as convincing proof of a confidence which would ensure her a modest fortune, at least, Madame Laîné discreetly withdrew, leaving Mlle. de Beaumesnil again alone.

After a few moments of reflection the orphan unlocked her desk, and, opening the journal dedicated to her mother, began to write hurriedly, even impetuously.

CHAPTER XXXII.

UNBURDENING THE HEART.

"The resolve I have just made, my dear mother," wrote Ernestine, "is a dangerous one; I fear I did wrong to make it, but to whom can I turn for advice?

"To you, my dearest mother, I know, but it was while invoking your aid and protection that this idea occurred to me, and I feel that I must solve, at any cost, the doubts that so torment me.

"During the last few days many revelations have been made to me, some of such a sad and depressing nature that they seem to have upset me entirely, and it is with great difficulty, even now, that I can compose myself sufficiently to lay my heart bare to you, my kind and tender mother.

"For some time after my arrival in this house, I could speak only in terms of the highest praise of my guardian and his family, though sometimes in my secret heart I did censure them a little for the inordinate amount of flattery and attention they lavished upon me.

"This attention and these flatteries have not ceased; they have rather increased, if that were possible.

"My mental attributes, my character, and even my slightest word and act are praised in the most exaggerated way. As for my figure, my bearing, my personal appearance, and my every movement, they are all equally graceful, enchanting, divine,—in short, there is not a more attractive person in the world than I am.

"Saintly Mlle. Helena, who was never known to utter an untruth, assures me that I look like a madonna.

"Madame de la Rochaiguë says, with what she terms really brutal frankness, that I am endowed with such rare distinction and elegance of manner, as well as so many charms of person, that I am sure to become the most admired woman in Paris some day, in spite of myself.

"And last, but not least, according to my guardian, a serious-minded and extremely thoughtful man, the beauty of my features and the dignity of my bearing give me a striking resemblance to the beautiful Duchesse de Longueville, so famous under the Fronde.

"And when one day, in my artlessness, I expressed astonishment at my resembling so many persons at the same time, do you know, my dearest mother, what the answer was?

"'It is very simple. In you, mademoiselle, the most diverse charms are united, so, in you, each person finds the attraction he prefers.'

"And these flatteries pursue me everywhere. If the hair-dresser comes to arrange my hair, never before in his life did he see such superb tresses.

"If I am taken to the milliner's,'What is the use of selecting any particular shape?' says that lady. 'With a face like mademoiselle's any style is equally charming and becoming.'

"The dressmaker declares that my figure is so wonderfully elegant that, dressed in a loosely fitting sack, I should drive the ladies most famed for their perfection of form wild with envy.

"It is the same with the shoemaker, who declares that he will have to make a special last for me, never having worked for the possessor of so small a foot as mine.

"The glovemaker outdoes him even, by declaring that I have the hand of a dwarf.

"So you see, my dear mother, I may almost consider myself a phenomenon, fit for a museum.

"Oh, mother, mother, it was not in this way that you spoke when, taking my face in your two hands, and kissing me on the forehead, you said:

"'My poor Ernestine, you are not beautiful, or even pretty, but the candour and sweetness of your disposition are so plainly written on your expressive face that I do not regret your lack of beauty.'

"And these words of praise, the only ones, I believe, that you ever gave me, I believed, and they made me very happy.

"But alas! the daughter you so fondly loved, has she remained worthy of you? I do not know. I am not sure.

"Then I knew nothing of doubts, suspicion, and mockery! And for several days past cruel presentiments have taken such a hold on me that I am as much astonished as alarmed.

"There must be something terribly insidious in the effects of flattery, for—to you I must confess all—though I have often thought the praises lavished upon me must be exaggerated, I wondered why it should be that so many different people should be so unanimous in praising everything I said and did.

"Nor is this all.

"The other day Madame de la Rochaiguë took me to a concert. I soon perceived that everybody was looking at me. A number of persons even passed and repassed me several times, to examine me more closely, I suppose, though I was very simply dressed. Even when I come out of church I notice that every one stares at me. I mention the fact, and my guardian and his family say: 'Yes, you are right. Everybody does stare at you. See what a sensation you create everywhere!'

"And, in the face of this evidence, what can I say? Nothing.

"I must admit that all this flattery was becoming very pleasant to me. It surprised me less and less, and though it sometimes occurred to me how grossly exaggerated it was, I promptly silenced any misgivings on the subject, by saying to myself:

"'But if this is not true, why is the sensation I create—as my guardian says—so general?'

"Alas! I was soon to learn.

"This is what occurred:

"A gentleman of whom I have never dared to speak until now, has called at my guardian's house several times. This gentleman is M. le Marquis de Maillefort. He is deformed; he has a sardonic air, and he is always uttering the most sarcastic remarks or ironical compliments that sting worse than his sarcasms.

"On account of the antipathy he inspired in me, I usually found some excuse for leaving the drawing-room soon after his arrival, and I was encouraged in this by the persons around me, for they both feared and hated M. de Maillefort, though they always greeted him with pretended affability.

"Three days ago he was ushered into the room where I happened to be sitting alone with Mlle. Helena. To leave the room at once would have been too discourteous, so I remained, hoping to be able to make my escape in a few minutes.

"This short conversation then ensued between M. de Maillefort and Mlle. Helena. Alas! I have not forgotten a word of it.

"'Ah, good evening, my dear Mlle. Helena,' the marquis began, with his most sarcastic air. 'I am delighted to find Mlle. de Beaumesnil with you. She will derive such benefit from your pious conversation. She must profit so much by your excellent counsels, as well as by those of your worthy brother and your no less excellent sister-in-law!'

"'We hope so, indeed, M. le marquis, for we feel that we have a sacred duty to fulfil towards Mlle. de Beaumesnil.'

"'Unquestionably,' replied M. de Maillefort, in more and more sarcastic tones, 'a sacred duty to which you and yours will sedulously devote yourselves. Are you not continually repeating to Mlle. de Beaumesnil: "You are the richest heiress in France, and being that, you are necessarily the most accomplished and wonderfully gifted person in the world?"'

"'But, monsieur,' exclaimed Mlle. Helena, interrupting him, 'what you say—'

"'I leave it to Mlle. de Beaumesnil herself,' retorted the marquis. 'If she speaks the truth, will she not be obliged to admit that a continual chorus of praise is resounding around her, magnificently sustained by our dear baron, his wife, and you, Mlle. Helena,—a delightful chorus in which you all three sustain your parts with wonderful skill, with touching self-abnegation and sublime disinterestedness? All rôles are alike to you. To-day, as leaders of the choir, you give the keynote to a crowd of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's admirers; to-morrow, brilliant soloists, you will improvise hymns of praise which will reveal the extent of your resources, the flexibility of your art, and, above all, the adorable sincerity of your noble hearts.'

"'I suppose, then, monsieur,' said Mlle. Helena, colouring, doubtless, with anger, 'I suppose, then, that I am to infer that our dear ward has none of the admirable traits and personal charms which are so generally conceded to her.'

"'Because she is the richest heiress in France,' replied M. de Maillefort, with an ironical bow to me; 'and in this character Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a right to the most outrageous as well as the most insulting flattery,—insulting, because it is so manifestly untrue, and dictated solely by baseness and cupidity.'

"I rose, and left the room, scarcely able to keep back the tears.

"I cannot forget his words, mother. They are continually ringing in my ears.

"M. de Maillefort's remarks were a revelation to me. My eyes were opened. I understand everything now.

"The praises of every sort and kind, the attentions and protestations of affection lavished upon me, the sensation I always create at entertainments, even the flattering remarks of my tradespeople, are all addressed to the richest heiress in France.

"Ah, mother, it was not without cause that I wrote you of the strange and unpleasant effect it produced upon me when, the day after my arrival in this house, I was so pompously informed that I was the mistress of a colossal fortune.

"'It seems to me,' I said to you then,'that I am in the situation of a person who possesses a valuable treasure, and fears that it may be stolen from him at any moment.'

"I understand this feeling now.

"It was the vague presentiment of this fear and distrust which has pursued me so relentlessly since the truth was thus harshly revealed to me.

"The praise bestowed upon me, the protestations of attachment made to me, are due solely to my wealth.

"Yes, mother, M. de Maillefort's spiteful remarks have really been productive of a great deal of good, though they did cause me so much pain, for they have enlightened me in regard to the incomprehensible but increasing dislike my guardian and his family were inspiring in my heart.

"This revelation at last explains the obsequiousness and servility which surround me on every side.

"And now, my dearly beloved mother, my confession becomes a painful one, even when made to thee. It may be because this atmosphere of deceit and adulation in which I am living has already contaminated me, or, perhaps, because I shrink in such dismay from the thought that all this praise and all these demonstrations of affection are due solely to my wealth, but I can scarcely credit so much baseness and deceitfulness, nor can I quite believe that I am so utterly unattractive, or that I am wholly incapable of inspiring any sincere and disinterested affection.

"And you see, my dearest mother, I no longer know what to think, not only of other people, but of myself. These doubts, this continual suspicion and distrust, are intolerable. I try in vain to devise some means of discovering the truth. From whom can I expect an honest reply?

"Nor is this all. Several recent events have rendered my situation still more trying.

"You shall judge of it.

"M. de Maillefort's sarcastic allusions in regard to the perfections which I must necessarily possess in my character of heiress have doubtless been repeated to my guardian and his wife by Mlle. Helena, or else some other event, of which I am ignorant, has induced those around me to disclose projects of which I had no previous knowledge or even suspicion, and which have increased my distrust and uneasiness a thousandfold."

Mademoiselle was here interrupted in her writing by two cautious raps at her door.

Surprised and almost terrified, as in her preoccupation she had forgotten the subject of her late conversation with her governess, the orphan asked, in trembling tones:

"Who is it?"

"I, mademoiselle," replied Madame Laîné's voice.

"Come in," said Ernestine, remembering now.

"What is the matter?" she asked, as her governess entered.

"I have some good news for mademoiselle. My hands are all bloody, you see, but that doesn't matter."

"I see," cried Ernestine, greatly alarmed. "What has happened? How did you hurt yourself so? Here, take this handkerchief and stanch the blood."

"Oh, it's but a mere scratch, mademoiselle," replied the governess, heroically. "In your service, I would brave death itself."

This exaggeration cooled Mlle. de Beaumesnil's compassion very considerably, and she replied:

"I believe in your courageous devotion, of course, but pray bind up your hand."

"If mademoiselle desires it, of course, but this scratch is of no consequence, for the door is open, mademoiselle. I succeeded in prying out the staples of the padlock, and in removing an iron bar that also secured the door, which opens into the street exactly as I supposed."

"You may be sure that I shall reward you, my dear Laîné, for this—"

"Oh, do not speak of rewarding me, I implore you, mademoiselle. Am I not more than paid in the pleasure of serving you? But mademoiselle will excuse me, I hope, for coming back contrary to her orders, but I was so delighted to have succeeded."

"On the contrary I am very grateful for the zeal you have manifested. So you think we can count upon carrying out our plans to-morrow?"

"There isn't the slightest doubt of that, now, mademoiselle."

"Then have a very simple white dress ready for me to wear to-morrow evening, and as soon as it is dark you and I will go to Madame Herbaut's. And once more let me remind you that I shall expect you to exercise the greatest caution."

"Mademoiselle need have no anxiety on that account. Has mademoiselle any further orders?"

"No, I only desire to thank you again for your zeal."

"Then I will bid mademoiselle good night."

"Good night, my dear Laîné."

The governess left the room and Mlle. de Beaumesnil resumed her writing.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE THREE RIVALS.

"In order to fully understand these recent events, it is necessary to review the past, my dear mother," Mlle. de Beaumesnil continued.

"The day after my arrival at my guardian's house I went to church with Mlle. Helena, who during mass called my attention to a young man who was praying fervently before the same altar.

"This young man I afterwards learned was a M. Célestin de Macreuse.

"Mlle. Helena's attention had been attracted to him, she told me, because, instead of kneeling upon a chair like every one else, he was kneeling upon the marble floor of the church. It must have been for his mother, too, that he was praying, for we afterwards heard him ask the priest who took up the collection in our part of the church for another novena of masses in the same chapel for the repose of his mother's soul.

"As we were coming out of church, M. de Macreuse offered us the holy water with a bow, for he had preceded us to the font. A moment afterwards, we saw him distributing alms among a number of beggars who had crowded around him, saying in a faltering voice: 'The little I can give, I offer you in the name of my mother who is no more. Pray for her.'

"Just as M. de Macreuse was disappearing in the crowd I perceived M. de Maillefort. Whether he was just entering or leaving the church I can not say; but Mlle. Helena, who caught sight of him just as I did, seemed surprised and even disturbed by his presence.

"On our way home she spoke several times of this M. de Macreuse, who seemed to be so truly devout and charitable. She did not know him personally, she said, but she could not help feeling a great interest in him because he seemed to possess virtues seldom found in young men of the present day.

"The next day we went to church again; and again we saw M. de Macreuse. He was performing his devotions in the same chapel, and this time he was so deeply absorbed in prayer that, when mass was over, he remained on his knees with his forehead almost touching the marble pavement, and seemed positively crushed with grief. A moment afterwards he fell backward in a sort of swoon, and had to be carried into the sacristy.

"'Unfortunate young man,' whispered Mlle. Helena, 'how inconsolable he is! How deeply he mourns for his mother! What a noble and tender heart he must have.'

"I shared this feeling of compassion, for who could better sympathise with the sorrow of this young man whose melancholy face indicated the deepest grief.

"Just as the door of the sacristy opened to admit the beadles, who had come to M. de Macreuse's assistance, M. de Maillefort, who chanced to be directly in their path, began to smile ironically.

"Mlle. Helena seemed more and more disturbed to see M. de Maillefort at church a second time.

"'This imp of Satan must have come to the house of God for some deviltry or other,' she remarked to me.

"On the afternoon of that same day, Madame de la Rochaiguë insisted upon my driving with her and one of her friends, Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre, a lady I had never met before. We went to the Bois. There were a great many people there, and as our carriage was moving along at a snail's pace, Madame de la Rochaiguë remarked to her friend:

"'Isn't that your son I see on horseback over there, my dear duchess?'

"'Yes, I believe it is Gerald,' replied Madame de Senneterre, turning her lorgnette in the direction indicated.

"'I hope he will see us, and come and speak to us,' added Madame de Mirecourt, who was also with us.

"'Oh, M. de Senneterre will not fail to do that, as the duchess fortunately is with us,' replied Madame de la Rochaiguë. 'I say fortunately, but that is not exactly the word, as that lady's presence prevents us from saying all we would like to say in M. Gerald's praise.'

"'Oh, as for that, I warn you I haven't a bit of maternal modesty,' answered Madame de Senneterre, smiling. 'I never hear half enough nice things said about my son.'

"'However exacting you may be, you ought to be very well satisfied on that score, it seems to me, my dear duchess,' replied Madame de Mirecourt.

"'But speaking of M. de Senneterre, did you ever hear why he enlisted as a common soldier, at the age of eighteen?' continued Madame de Mirecourt, addressing Madame de la Rochaiguë.

"'No,' replied that lady, 'I have heard that, beginning as a common soldier, in spite of his birth, he gained his several promotions, as well as his cross, on the battlefield, at the cost of several wounds; but I never heard why he enlisted.'

"'Madame la duchesse,' said Madame de Mirecourt, turning to Madame de Senneterre, 'is it not true that your son enlisted because he thought it cowardly to hire a man to go and be killed in his stead?'

"'Yes, that is true,' replied Madame de Senneterre; 'that is the reason my son gave us, and he carried out his resolution in spite of my tears and entreaties.'

"'Superb!' exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë. 'Nobody in the world but M. de Senneterre would ever have made and carried out such a chivalrous resolution as that.'

"'It is easy to judge of the generosity of his character from that fact alone,' added Madame de Mirecourt.

"'Oh, I can say with just pride that there is no better son in the world than my Gerald,' remarked Madame de Senneterre.

"'And when one says that, one says everything,' added Madame de la Rochaiguë.

"I listened in silence to this conversation, naturally sharing in the admiration that M. de Senneterre's generous act excited in those around me.

"A few minutes afterwards, a party of young men passed us on horseback. One of them, I noticed, paused on seeing us, wheeled his horse around and came back.

"This young man proved to be M. de Senneterre. He bowed to his mother; Madame de la Rochaiguë introduced him to me. He made a few courteous remarks, and then walked his horse along by the side of our carriage while we drove several times around the race-track.

"It is needless to say that scarcely a handsome equipage passed without an interchange of friendly bows between the occupants and M. de Senneterre, who seemed to be a general favourite.

"During the conversation he had with us, he was very gay and a trifle sarcastic, but not the least spiteful.

"A short time before he left us, we met a magnificent carriage, drawn by four horses. Its sole occupant was a man to whom many persons bowed with great deference. This man bowed very low to M. de Senneterre, who, instead of returning the salute, surveyed him with the utmost disdain.

"'Why, that was M. du Tilleul that just passed, M. de Senneterre!' exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, evidently much surprised.

"'Yes, madame.'

"'He bowed to you.'

"'True, madame.'

"'But you did not return his bow.'

"'I no longer bow to M. du Tilleul, madame.'

"'But everybody else does.'

"'Then they do very wrong, in my opinion.'

"'But why, M. de Senneterre?'

"'You ask me that, with his recent affair with Madame—'

"Then suddenly checking himself, probably on account of my presence, he continued, addressing Madame de la Rochaiguë:

"'You have heard about his conduct with a certain marquise?'

"'Of course.'

"'Well, in my opinion, a man who behaves with such cowardice and cruelty is a scoundrel, and I do not bow to a

scoundrel.'

"'Still, he is received everywhere,' remarked Madame de Mirecourt.

"'Yes, because he owns the handsomest house in Paris, and everybody wishes to attend his entertainments.'

"'Oh, you are entirely too particular, M. Gerald,' said Madame de Mirecourt.

"'I too particular?' exclaimed M. de Senneterre, laughing. 'What a frightful slander! I will convince you to the contrary. Look at that little green brougham coming this way, and that—'

"'Gerald!' cried Madame de Senneterre, reminding her son of my presence with a look, for I had involuntarily turned to glance at the vehicle to which M. de Senneterre had called attention, and which was occupied by a young and extremely pretty woman, who seemed to be following the young duke with her eyes.

"His mother's warning exclamation, and the look she cast at me, made M. de Senneterre bite his lips, but it was with a smile that he replied:

"You are right, mother. It would make angels too unhappy to know that there are such things as demons in the world."

This half apology was indirectly addressed to me, I suppose, for two of the ladies glanced at me, smiling in their turn, and I felt greatly embarrassed.

"As we were leaving, Madame de Senneterre asked:

"You dine with me to-day, do you not, Gerald?"

"No, mother, and I must ask you to pardon me for not having told you that I had made another engagement."

"That is very unfortunate, for I, too, have made an engagement for you," replied Madame de Senneterre, smiling.

"All right, mother," said M. de Senneterre, affectionately; "I will send my friends a brief note of excuse; then I shall be entirely at your service."

And after having bowed very deferentially to us, M. de Senneterre started his horse off at a gallop.

"He rides with perfect skill and grace, and on horseback reminds me not a little of my poor father.

"Though he had addressed only a very few remarks to me, I feel sure, from what I saw and heard during this interview, that M. de Senneterre must possess a frank, generous, and resolute nature, as well as a profound respect and affection for his mother. The other ladies must have thought so, too, for they did not cease praising him until we separated.

"The next day and the day following, we again saw M. de Macreuse at church. His grief seemed no less deep, though more calm. Two or three times he happened to glance in our direction, and I could not help being struck by the contrast between his sad, almost timid look and bearing, and M. le Duc de Senneterre's dashing ease of manner.

"The next day after our visit to the Bois, I accompanied my guardian to the garden of the Luxembourg, as I had promised.

"We had visited the conservatories and the magnificent rose gardens, when we met a friend of M. de la Rochaiguë. He was introduced to me as the Baron de Ravil or du Ravil, I believe.

"This gentleman walked along beside us for several minutes, then, drawing out his watch, he remarked to M. de la Rochaiguë:

"'Pardon me for leaving you so soon, M. le baron, but I am very anxious not to miss this important session.'

"'What important session?' inquired my guardian.

"'Can it be that you haven't heard that M. de Mornand speaks to-day?'

"'Is it possible?'

"'Certainly; all Paris will be there, for when M. de Mornand speaks, it is an event.'

"'It is indeed. He is a man of wonderful talent, I think, a man who can hardly fail to be minister some day or other. How unfortunate that I did not hear of this before. I am sure, my dear ward, that the session would have interested you very much, in spite of all Madame de la Rochaiguë's nonsensical talk, but if I should take you to the chamber now she would be sure to accuse me of having set a trap for you.'

"'Still, if mademoiselle has the slightest desire to attend the session, I am at your service, M. le baron,' said our companion; 'I expected to meet one of my nieces and her husband here, but they have not come, and probably will not, now. I had procured tickets of admission to the diplomatic gallery for them, and if these tickets would be of any service to you—'

"'What do you say, my dear ward?'

"'I will do whatever you like, monsieur; but it seems to me a session of the Chamber of Peers might be very interesting,' I added, chiefly out of regard for my guardian, I fear.

"'Very well, I will accept your offer, then, my dear M. de Ravil,' cried M. de la Rochaiguë, 'and you are lucky, indeed, my dear child,' he added, turning to me, 'to happen here on a day M. de Mornand speaks.'

"We hastened towards the palace, and just as we were leaving the quincunxes I saw, some distance off, M. de

Maillefort, who seemed to be following us,—a fact that surprised me, and made me rather uneasy.

"'Why do I meet this wicked man at every turn?' I said to myself. 'Who could have informed him of our plans?'

"The diplomatic gallery, where we had seats, was filled with elegantly dressed ladies. I occupied a seat on the upper row of benches between my guardian and M. de Ravil.

"A gentleman near us, having been heard to remark that some noted orator—he did not refer to M. de Mornand—was also to speak during the session, M. de Ravil replied that there was no other orator who could compare with M. de Mornand, and that this crowd had come to hear him. He ascended the tribune almost immediately, and there was a profound silence.

"I was incapable of criticising or even of entirely comprehending M. de Mornand's discourse. It related to subjects with which I was totally unacquainted, but I was deeply impressed by the conclusion of his speech, in which he spoke with the warmest sympathy of the unhappy lot of fishermen's families awaiting in sickening suspense upon the beach the return of a beloved father, son, or husband, while the tempest was raging wildly around them.

"It so happened that, as M. de Mornand uttered these touching words, he turned towards our tribune, and his strong face seemed to me filled with a profound compassion for the unfortunate creatures whose cause he had espoused.

"'Wonderful! How very touching!' whispered M. de Ravil, wiping his eyes, for he, too, seemed deeply affected.

"'M. de Mornand is sublime!' exclaimed my guardian. 'There is little doubt that his speech will greatly ameliorate the lot of thousands of these unfortunates.'

"Prolonged applause followed the conclusion of M. de Mornand's speech. He was about to leave the tribune when another member of the Chamber, a man with a malevolent, sarcastic face, rose in his seat, and said:

"'I ask the permission of the Chamber to ask M. de Mornand a simple question before he descends from the tribune and before his sudden and generous compassion for our brave fishermen shall consequently have evaporated.'

"'If you will take my advice, we will leave at once to escape the crowd,' M. de Ravil remarked to my guardian. 'M. de Mornand having finished, everybody will want to go, for there will be nothing else of interest.'

"M. de la Rochaiguë offered me his arm, but just as we were leaving the hall we heard shouts of laughter, and renewed applause.

"'I know what that means,' remarked M. de Ravil. 'M. de Mornand has crushed, by his sarcasm, the imprudent member who had the audacity to question any of his statements, for when he wishes to be, M. de Mornand is as witty as the devil.'

"My guardian having suggested that we extend our walk to the observatory, I consented, and M. de Ravil accompanied us.

"'M. le baron,' he remarked to my guardian; 'did you notice Madame de Bretigny, who left the hall just as we did?'

"'The wife of the minister? No, I did not.'

"'I am sorry, monsieur, for you would have seen one of the noblest women that ever lived. You have no idea what wonderfully good use she makes of her position as a minister's wife, or of the vast amount of good she does, the wrongs she repairs, and the assistance she gives to the worthy.'

"'I am not surprised to hear it,' replied my guardian. 'In a position like that of Madame de Bretigny, one can do any amount of good, for—'

"But interrupting himself suddenly, he turned to M. de Ravil and exclaimed, eagerly:

"'Say, isn't that he over there in that secluded path, walking along, looking at the flowers?'

"'To whom do you refer?'

"'Why, to M. de Mornand. Look!'

"'You're right, it is he!' replied M. de Ravil. 'He has forgotten his triumph—and is finding a welcome relief from the onerous cares of state in gazing at the flowers. This does not surprise me, however, for, with all his talent and his political genius, he is one of the best and most simple-hearted of men, and his tastes prove it. After his brilliant success, what does he seek? Solitude and flowers.'

"'M. de Ravil, you know M. de Mornand, do you not?' inquired my guardian.

"'Slightly. I meet him occasionally in society.'

"'But you know him well enough to speak to him, do you not?'

"'Certainly.'

"'Then go and congratulate him on the success he just achieved. We will follow you so as to get a closer look at this great man. What do you say to my scheme, my dear ward?'

"'I will accompany you, monsieur. One always likes to see distinguished men like M. de Mornand.'

"Changing our course, we soon reached the path where M. de Mornand was walking. He replied to M. de Ravil's and my guardian's compliments with quite as much modesty as simplicity of manner, and addressed a few kindly

remarks to me, after which we left him to continue his lonely promenade.

"'When one thinks that this simple-mannered man will govern France in less than six months!' exclaimed M. de Ravil.

"'Say admirably-mannered, my dear M. de Ravil,' corrected my guardian. 'M. de Mornand has quite the manner of a grand seigneur. He is both affable and dignified. He is not one of those silly popinjays who think only of the tie of their cravats and the cut of their hair.'

"'Creatures of that type are never likely to govern France,' answered M. de Ravil. 'I say govern because M. de Mornand will not accept a subordinate position. He will be chief of the Cabinet which he forms. May Heaven preserve him, M. le Baron. The welfare of France and the peace of the civilised world depend upon him,' added M. de Ravil, in tones of profound conviction.

"As I walked homeward with my guardian, I thought that there could indeed be no more enviable and noble position than that of a man who, like M. de Mornand, exercises a controlling influence over the welfare of France and the peace of Europe.

"Such, my dear mother, were the circumstances under which I met, for the first time, Messieurs Macreuse, Senneterre, and Mornand.

"I will now tell you what the consequences of these meetings have been."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TORMENTED BY DOUBTS.

"At the expiration of a few days Mlle. Helena had succeeded in securing full information in regard to M. Célestin de Macreuse, and she began to talk of him, not occasionally, but almost incessantly.

"She told me that M. de Macreuse, by his birth and connections, was entitled to a place in the very best society; but, being endowed with the most exemplary piety, and with wonderfully philanthropic instincts, he had founded a charitable mission of the most admirable kind, and though still young, his name was uttered everywhere with the most profound affection and respect.

"Madame de la Rochaiguë, on the other hand, praised M. de Senneterre in the most extravagant way, while my guardian embraced every opportunity to laud M. de Mornand's talents and virtues to the skies.

"At first I saw nothing extraordinary in these flattering mentions of persons who seemed well worthy of praise, but I soon began to notice that the names of these gentlemen were mentioned by my guardian, his wife, or his sister only in conversations which one or the other had separately with me.

"At last came the day when M. de Maillefort so spitefully, but, alas! so truly, explained the real cause of the attentions and flattery lavished upon me, and it soon became evident to me that my guardian and his wife, apprised of the situation by Mlle. Helena, must fear the consequences of the revelation which had been such a shock to me; for the very next day each one of the three, in turn, disclosed his or her plans to me,—plans evidently conceived long before,—and assured me that the happiness of my life and the certainty of a blissful future depended upon my marrying—

"M. de Macreuse,—according to Mlle. Helena.

"M. de Senneterre,—according to Madame de la Rochaiguë.

"M. de Mornand,—according to my guardian.

"On hearing these unexpected proposals, my surprise and uneasiness were so great that I could make no coherent reply, and my embarrassed, incoherent words having been taken as a sort of tacit consent, I, after a little reflection, decided to leave the champions of these three suitors under the same erroneous impression.

"This induced them to make their confidential disclosures much more complete.

"'My brother and his wife,' said Mlle. Helena, 'are excellent people, but extremely vain and worldly. Neither of them is capable of appreciating the rare excellence of M. de Macreuse's principles, his Christian virtues, and his almost angelic piety; so we must keep our secret, my dear Ernestine, until you have chosen the husband I suggest, because he is so worthy of your choice. Then, proud and honoured by this choice, you will only have to notify my brother, your guardian, who will give his consent, I am sure, if you only evince proper firmness. If he should refuse his consent, which is not at all likely, however, we will resort to other and certain means of ensuring your happiness.'

"'My poor sister Helena,' said M. de la Rochaiguë, in his turn, 'is a most excellent woman, a saint if there ever was one, but she knows nothing in the world about mundane matters. If you should take it into your head to say anything about M. de Mornand to her, she would open her eyes in astonishment, and tell you that he cares only for the vain things of this world, that he is ambitious of power, etc. As for my wife, she is perfect, but separate her from her balls, and her toilets, and her social gossip, and her beaux who think only of the tie of their cravats, and their strawberry-coloured gloves, and she is completely at sea, for she knows nothing in the world about higher things. To her, M. de

Mornand would be a grave, serious, depressing man, a statesman, in short, and by the slighting manner in which you have heard her speak of the Chamber of Peers, my dear child, you can imagine how she would regard a proposal of marriage from him. So all this must be kept a profound secret between you and me, my dear ward, and your mind once made up, as it is I who am your guardian after all, and as your marriage will depend upon my consent, you will have no difficulty in carrying out your wishes eventually.'

"'You must understand, my dear child,' said Madame de la Rochaiguë, 'that all I have just said to you about M. de Senneterre must be kept a profound secret between us. My sister Helena knows no more about matrimonial matters than a babe unborn, and that dear husband of mine has really gone politics mad. He dreams only of the Chamber of Peers, and knows no more about the fashions, and pleasure, and elegance, than a Huron Indian. In fact, he has no conception whatever of the delights of a life shared with a charming young duke, who is the most generous and amiable of men. So let us guard our secret well, my dearest child, and, when the time comes to inform your guardian of your decision, I'll attend to that, for M. de la Rochaiguë has been in the habit of letting me have my own way so long that I am sure he will offer no opposition in this instance, but readily consent to do whatever we wish in the matter. And now I want to tell you that a most fortunate idea occurred to me the other day,' continued Madame de la Rochaiguë. 'I have begged one of my friends, whom you already know, Madame de Mirecourt, to give a ball one week from to-day; so, my dear child, next Thursday, in the public *tête-à-tête* of a quadrille, you will have an opportunity to judge of the sincerity of the sentiment M. de Senneterre feels for you.'

"The very next morning after this conversation my guardian said to me, in the most confidential manner:

"'My wife thinks of taking you to a ball Madame de Mirecourt intends to give. You will see M. de Mornand at this entertainment, and I am sure he will not let the opportunity pass to convince you of the deep and irresistible impression the sight of you made upon him when we went to congratulate him on the success of his speech that day at the palace.'

"In like manner, a couple of days after my guardian and his wife had thus disclosed their plans, Mlle. Helena said to me:

"'My dear Ernestine, my sister-in-law intends to take you to Madame de Mirecourt's ball Thursday. I think this will be an excellent opportunity for you to meet M. de Macreuse, and though this poor young man, who is so bowed down with grief, has none of the frivolous attributes which enable one to shine at affairs of this kind, he has requested one of his particular friends—quite an important personage, by the way, the sister of the Bishop of Ratopolis—to ask Madame de Mirecourt for a card for him. This request was promptly complied with, so on Thursday you will see him, and I feel sure you will not be able to resist his eloquence when he tells you, as he has told me, how your adored image has followed him everywhere, and has even troubled his prayers ever since the first time he saw you at church.'

"It is consequently at the ball next Thursday, my dearest mother, that I am to have my first interview with Messrs. de Macreuse, de Senneterre and de Mornand.

"Even if M. de Maillefort's sarcastic remarks had not harshly revealed the real cause of the admiration and affection so generally manifested for me, my fears and suspicions must now have been awakened by the duplicity of those around me, plotting unbeknown to each other, and deceiving each other in order to succeed in their nefarious designs. You can judge of my anxiety, my beloved mother, now these two successive revelations have assumed such grave importance.

"To complete my confession, my dear mother, I must tell you plainly what my first impressions were in relation to the three persons the different members of the Rochaiguë family wish me to marry.

"Up to this time, I had never given the subject of marriage so much as a thought; the day for that seemed so far off, and it was such an important matter, that if a vague thought of it ever did flit through my mind, I merely congratulated myself that there was no need of troubling myself about that matter for a long time.

"Consequently it was not with any thought of him as a possible husband that I was touched by the evident grief of M. de Macreuse, who, like myself, was mourning the loss of a mother, though what Mlle. Helena was continually saying about the sweetness of his expression, his profound melancholy, and the kindness of his heart as shown by his munificent alms, all combined to add a profound esteem to the compassion I felt for him.

"M. de Senneterre, by the frankness and generosity of his character, by his unaffected gaiety and the graceful elegance of his manners, had pleased me very much; and it seemed to me that it would be very easy, though I am naturally so reserved, to feel perfect confidence in him.

"As for M. de Mornand, he had impressed me very much, though this was probably due quite as much to what I had heard about the superiority of his talents and character as to the powerful influence he seemed to exert, so I felt almost overwhelmed, though decidedly proud of the few kind words he addressed to me when I met him in the garden of the Luxembourg.

"And now when M. de Maillefort's revelations have made me distrust everything and everybody, I hear that all three of these men desire to marry me. Is it strange, then, that I am no longer able to read my own heart, and that, tormented by all kinds of doubts and suspicions, I ask myself if these three suitors for my hand are not all actuated by the same base motives as the persons by whom I am surrounded.

"And harassed by these doubts, all that pleased me and all that I so much admired in them now disturbs and alarms me. What if M. de Macreuse's grief and piety, M. de Senneterre's charming urbanity of manner, and M. de Mornand's grand and generous utterances, all conceal base and mercenary natures!

"Oh, mother, if you knew how terrible to me are these doubts which are completing the work of destruction M. de Maillefort's revelation began.

"They are the more terrible because I shall always be obliged to live with my guardian and his family, and if I become convinced beyond a doubt that they have flattered and deceived me merely for their own aggrandisement, I shall feel for them only the bitterest contempt and aversion.

"Because I am immensely rich, must I be married only for my money?

"Am I doomed to the misery of such a marriage, the indifference, contempt, hatred, perhaps, that are sure to follow when a man is mean enough to wed a woman merely for mercenary motives?

"Oh, mother, the thought is so horrible that it haunts me continually. I can not drive it away, strive as I may.

"So I have resolved to escape from it at the cost of a dangerous, perhaps fatal experiment.

"I have been induced to make this resolve because it seemed to be the only means of satisfying my cruel doubts, not only in regard to others, but myself as well. I must know once for all what I really am, and what I really appear to be, independent of my fortune.

"Satisfied on this point, I shall easily be able to distinguish the true from the false. But how am I to ascertain what I am? How am I to discover my precise value, so to speak? Whom can I ask? Who will be frank enough to separate the young girl from the heiress in his valuation?

"Besides, would such a verdict, however severe or kindly it might be, satisfy and reassure me entirely?

"No, I must have the verdict of several disinterested parties.

"But where can I find any such persons? After a great deal of thought, I have decided upon this plan.

"Madame Laîné was telling me about a week ago of some little entertainments that one of her friends gives every Sunday. I have sought and found, this evening, a way to attend one of these reunions in company with my governess, but ostensibly as a relative of hers, a young orphan who supports herself by her daily toil, like all the other young people who compose the company.

"There no one will know me. What they really think of me will be shown conclusively by the reception given me. The rare perfections with which I am endowed—according to those around me—have had such a sudden and irresistible effect, they say, upon them, and upon the husbands they have picked out for me,—in short, I produce such a sensation at all the assemblies I frequent, that I am anxious to see if I shall prove equally irresistible to the young people at Madame Herbaut's modest entertainment.

"If I do not, I shall know that I have been basely deceived, and there is little danger that I shall ever endanger my future happiness by fixing my choice upon either of the suitors attracted solely by cupidity.

"I am also resolved to find some means of escaping the snares that seem to surround me on every side.

"What means I do not know. Alas! alone in the world as I am, in whom can I confide? In whom can I trust?

"In God and in you, my mother. I shall obey all the inspirations you send me, as I obey this, for, strange as it may appear, I cannot divest myself of the idea that this did come from you. At all events, it had its origin in a wise and noble sentiment,—a desire to know the truth, however disheartening it may be.

"So to-morrow, I am resolved to attend the reunion at Madame Herbaut's house."

So the next day, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, having feigned indisposition, and having escaped the assiduous attentions of the Rochaiguës by a firm refusal to admit them to her room, left the house soon after nightfall, accompanied by her governess, and, taking a cab some distance from the mansion, was driven to Madame Herbaut's house.

END OF VOLUME I.

THE SEVEN CARDINAL SINS
PRIDE—Continued

"Gerald rushed in like one distracted"

Pride—One of the Seven Cardinal Sins.
ILLUSTRATED WITH ETCHINGS BY
ADRIAN MARCEL.
BY EUGENE SUE

IN TWO VOLUMES
VOLUME II.

CONTENTS.

VOLUME II.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

Vol. II.

CHAPTER I.

MADAME HERBAUT'S PARTY.

Madame Herbaut occupied quite a spacious suite of apartments on the third floor of the same house in which Commander Bernard lived.

The rooms devoted to these Sunday reunions consisted of the dining-room, where the young people danced to the music of the piano; the drawing-room, where there were card-tables for those who did not care to dance, and, lastly, Madame Herbaut's bedroom, where guests could sit and chat without being disturbed by the noise of the dancing, and without disturbing the card-players.

This simply furnished, but comfortable abode indicated that Madame Herbaut—who, by the way, was the widow of a small merchant—was in very comfortable circumstances, though far from rich.

The worthy woman's two daughters found lucrative employment, one in painting on china, the other in copying music,—work which had led to her acquaintance with Herminie, who also copied music when pupils were scarce.

The rooms presented a scene of even more than usual gaiety that evening. There were about fifteen young girls, none over twenty years of age, all resolved to make the most of Sunday, their only day of rest and pleasure, so richly earned by toil and confinement all the week, either at the counter, in the office, in some gloomy little back shop on the Rue St. Denis or the Rue des Bourdonnais, or perhaps in some *pension*.

Some of these young girls were extremely pretty, and nearly all were dressed with the good taste that characterises the attire of this humble and industrious class of people only in Paris, probably.

These poor girls, being obliged to work hard all the rest of the week, reserved all their little coquettish adornments for their one fête day, the day so impatiently awaited on Saturday, and so deeply regretted on Monday.

As is usual at such reunions, the masculine element in the little assembly presented a much less elegant and stylish appearance than the feminine element. In fact, but for some almost imperceptible shades of difference, most

of these young girls were as bright and attractive as if they belonged to the very best society, but this slight superiority on the part of the young girls was soon forgotten, thanks to the cordial good-humour and frank gaiety, tempered with respect, which the young men displayed towards their fair companions.

Instead of being at its best about one o'clock in the morning, as is generally the case with a fashionable ball, this little assembly reached the very zenith of animation and enjoyment about nine o'clock, as the hostess always sent her guests home relentlessly before midnight, so they would be ready to resume work the next morning at the accustomed hour.

And what a dreary time Monday morning was, with the music and laughter of the night before still ringing in your ears, and the prospect of six long days of close confinement and drudgery before you!

But with what growing impatience and transports of joy you watched the approach of the longed-for day.

It comes at last, and then what exuberant happiness!

Oh, rare and modest joys that have never been impaired by satiety!

But Madame Herbaut's guests were not philosophising much that evening. They were reserving their philosophy for Monday.

These untiring young people were whirling swiftly around the room to the inspiring strains of a lively polka; and such was the magic of the strains that even the ladies and gentlemen in the drawing-room, in spite of their age and the grave preoccupations of Pope Joan and loto,—the only games Madame Herbaut allowed,—moved their heads to and fro and kept time with their feet, in short, executed a sort of antiquated sitting polka, which testified to the skill of the musician at the piano.

And this musician was Herminie.

About a month had passed since her first meeting with Gerald. Had other meetings followed that interview begun under most unpleasant auspices and ending with a gracious forgiveness? We shall know in due time.

This evening, in a dress of some soft, pale blue material that cost, perhaps, twenty sous a yard, and a large bow of ribbon of the same delicate hue in her magnificent golden hair, the duchess was ravishingly beautiful.

A faint rose tint suffused her cheeks, her large blue eyes shone like stars, and her half smiling scarlet lips revealed a row of pearl-white teeth, while her girlish bosom rose and fell gently beneath the thin fabric that veiled it, and her little foot, daintily clad in a satin slipper, beat time to the strains of the lively polka.

To-day there could be no doubt that Herminie was very happy. Far from holding herself aloof from the amusements of her companions, Herminie greatly enjoyed seeing them enjoy themselves, and always did everything in her power to add to their pleasure, but this generosity of feeling would hardly suffice to explain the exuberance of life and youth and happiness which imparted an unusually radiant expression to the enchanting features of the duchess. One somehow felt that this charming creature knew how charming and lovely and refined she was, and that the knowledge made her, not proud, but happy,—happy like those generous possessors of wealth, who prize their wealth chiefly because it enables them to confer happiness on others.

Though the duchess was deeply interested in her polka and the dancers, she turned her head involuntarily several times on hearing the door open, but on seeing the persons who entered, she seemed rather to reproach herself for her inattention to the business in hand.

The door opened again, and again Herminie cast a quick, almost impatient glance in that direction.

The newcomer this time was Olivier, the commander's nephew.

Seeing the young soldier leave the door open as if some one was following him, Herminie blushed slightly, and ventured another glance. But alas! in the doorway behind him there appeared a stout, rosy youth of eighteen, with an honest, artless face, and hands encased in green kid gloves.

It is difficult to say why Herminie seemed a little disappointed on the entrance of this youth,—perhaps it was because she hated green kid gloves,—but the disappointment betrayed itself in a charming pout and in the increasing vivacity of the strains to which her little foot was impatiently beating time.

The polka ended, Herminie, who had been at the piano ever since the beginning of the evening, was immediately surrounded, and thanked and complimented and furthermore invited to dance by a number of the young men, but she filled the souls of the aspirants with despair by pleading a slight lameness as an excuse for not dancing that evening.

And you should have seen the gait Herminie adopted, in support of this atrocious falsehood, decided upon the minute she saw Olivier come in alone! Certainly no wounded dove ever dragged her little pink foot along with a more distressed air.

Inconsolable at this accident which deprived them of the much coveted pleasure of dancing with the duchess, the aspirants, hoping for some compensation, offered their arm to the interesting cripple, but she had the cruelty to prefer the support of Madame Herbaut's eldest daughter, and repaired with her to that lady's room to rest and get a little fresh air, she said, as the windows of that apartment overlooked Commander Bernard's garden.

Herminie had hardly left the room, leaning on Hortense Herbaut's arm, when Mlle. de Beaumesnil arrived, accompanied by Madame Laîné.

The richest heiress in France wore a dress of simple white muslin, with a narrow blue sash, and her entrance was unnoticed, though it occurred during the interval between two quadrilles.

Ernestine was not pretty, neither was she ugly, so no one paid the slightest attention to her; and as the young girl compared this reception with the flattering eagerness with which people had crowded around her heretofore, her heart sank, and she began to realise the truth of M. de Maillefort's words.

"They knew my name at the other entertainments," Ernestine said to herself, "and it was only the heiress that they gazed at, and flattered, and besieged with attentions."

Madame Laîné was just introducing Ernestine to Madame Herbaut when that lady's eldest daughter, who had accompanied Herminie to the bedroom, said, after a glance into the drawing-room:

"I must leave you, my dear duchess. I notice that a lady has just come in who wrote to mamma this morning, asking permission to bring a young relative with her, so you see—"

"Why, go, of course, my dear Hortense. You must do the honours of your house, certainly," replied Herminie, not sorry, perhaps, to be left alone awhile.

So Mlle. Herbaut rejoined her mother, who was welcoming Ernestine with simple cordiality.

"You will soon become used to our ways, my dear," she was saying. "The young girls and the young men dance in the dining-room, while their mothers and fathers—when they come—play cards in the drawing-room, so you see each guest amuses himself to his liking."

Then, to her daughter, she added:

"Hortense, take mademoiselle to the dining-room. You, my dear friend," she continued, addressing the governess, "must come to the Pope Joan table. I know your taste, you see."

As we said before, this introduction had taken place in the interval between the polka and a quadrille, and a young painter, a very good musician, having taken Herminie's seat, now struck a few chords as a signal for the dancers to take their places.

The Herbaut girls, being daughters of the house, and being also extremely pretty and good-natured, seldom lacked for partners, and Olivier, wearing with much grace the dashing uniform which would have sufficed to distinguish him from the other men, even if he had not been remarkably prepossessing in appearance, approached Mlle. Herbaut just as she was entering the dining-room, in company with Ernestine, and said:

"You haven't forgotten, I hope, that this quadrille belongs to me, Mlle. Hortense. Don't you think we had better take our places?"

"I will be at your service in a second, M. Olivier," replied Hortense, who was conducting Mlle. de Beaumesnil towards a long couch, on which several other young girls were seated.

"I hope you will pardon me for leaving you so soon," she remarked to Ernestine, "but I am engaged for this dance. Won't you take a seat here on the couch. I'm sure you will not lack for partners."

"Pray do not trouble yourself any further about me, mademoiselle," replied Ernestine.

The sounds of the piano becoming more and more peremptory, Hortense Herbaut hurried off to join her partner, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil seated herself on the couch.

The test on which Ernestine had so courageously resolved was beginning in earnest. Near her sat five or six young girls, the least attractive, it must be admitted, of the guests, and who, not having been engaged in advance, like the belles of the ball, were modestly waiting for an invitation to take part in the quadrille.

Either because Ernestine's companions were prettier than she was, or because their manner was more attractive, she saw one after another of them invited, without any apparent notice being taken of her.

Only one very plain-looking young girl was sharing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's neglected condition when some one exclaimed:

"Another couple is needed! We must have another couple here!"

The youth so gorgeously adorned with the apple-green kid gloves was anxious to do his part towards filling the vacancy, so, seeing two young girls still unengaged, he rushed forward to invite one of them, but instead of making his choice unhesitatingly, so as to spare the one that was left the petty humiliation of feeling herself weighed in the balance only to be found wanting, he stood for a few seconds as if undecided, and then selected Mlle. de Beaumesnil's neighbour, his preference being, doubtless, due to the greater showiness of her apparel.

Trivial as this incident seems, perhaps, it would be difficult to describe the intense anguish that wrung Mlle. de Beaumesnil's heart.

On seeing several of the other young girls invited in turn, Ernestine's natural modesty had excused the preference thus evinced, but in proportion as the number of her companions diminished, and when she at last found herself left alone with this unprepossessing companion, whose homeliness was not even redeemed by any pretensions to elegance of manner, her heart sank within her, but when she saw herself disdained, as it were, after having been compared with her companion, she experienced a terrible shock.

"Alas!" she said to herself, with infinite sadness, "if I cannot stand comparison with these young girls around me, and particularly with this last one, nobody can ever care for me, and any one who tries to convince me to the contrary must be—I see plainly now—actuated only by base and mercenary motives. All these young girls who have been preferred to me can, at least, feel assured that the preference is sincere,—there are no cruel doubts to mar the

pleasure of their innocent triumph; but I—I shall never know even this slight happiness."

And Mlle. de Beaumesnil's grief at the thought was so poignant that she had all she could do to repress her tears.

But though these tears did not flow, her pale face betrayed such painful emotion that two generous-hearted people each noticed it in turn.

The quadrille was going on while mademoiselle abandoned herself to these gloomy reflections, and Olivier, who was dancing with Mlle. Hortense Herbaut, found himself directly opposite Ernestine, and thus in a position to observe the humiliating situation in which she was placed, as well as the almost heart-broken expression of her face. Olivier was so deeply touched that he asked:

"Who is that young lady sitting alone over there? I have never seen her here before, I think."

"No, M. Olivier, she is a stranger. One of mamma's friends brought her this evening."

"She is not pretty, and she doesn't seem to know anybody. At least nobody has asked her to dance. Poor little thing, how dull it must be for her!"

"If I had not been engaged for this dance, I should have stayed with her, but—"

"Of course, Mlle. Hortense, you have your duties as hostess to attend to, but I will certainly ask her to dance the next quadrille with me. I don't like to see her so neglected."

"Mother and I will both feel exceedingly grateful to you, M. Olivier. It would be a real deed of charity," said Hortense.

Almost at the same instant that Olivier first noticed Mlle. de Beaumesnil's isolation, Herminie entered the salon from the adjoining bedroom, and, walking up to one of the card-tables, leaned over the back of Madame Herbaut's chair to watch the game. From where she stood she could look straight out into the dining-room through the folding doors, and, chancing to raise her eyes, she exclaimed:

"Why, who is that young girl sitting there alone on the couch, and looking so sad?"

Madame Herbaut, glancing up from her cards, answered:

"It is a young girl one of my friends over there at the Pope Joan table brought with her this evening. She doesn't know anybody here, and, not being at all pretty, it is not surprising that she has no partner."

"But the poor child can't be allowed to sit there alone all the evening," said Herminie, "so, as I can't dance myself, I'll try to entertain the stranger and make the time seem less tedious to her."

"It is just like you to think of doing such a kind and generous act," replied Madame Herbaut, laughing, "and I assure you I shall be very grateful to you, for Hortense and Claire have so many other duties on their hands, and I fear there isn't much likelihood of this young girl's securing any partners."

"Oh, don't worry about that, madame," replied Herminie. "I'm sure I shall be able to save her from any discomfort on that account."

"How will you do it, my dear duchess?"

"Oh, that is my affair," laughed Herminie.

And still limping slightly,—deceitful creature that she was,—she walked towards the couch on which Mlle. de Beaumesnil was sitting.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUCHESS ENTERTAINS ERNESTINE.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, on seeing Herminie approach, was so struck by her remarkable beauty that she entirely failed to notice the slight lameness which the duchess had feigned in order to avoid dancing that evening.

So what was Ernestine's surprise, when the duchess, seating herself beside her, said, in the most friendly manner:

"I am deputised by Madame Herbaut to come and keep you company for a little while, in place of her daughters, who, of course, have many duties to perform."

"So some one at least pities me," thought Mlle. de Beaumesnil, deeply humiliated.

But Herminie's voice and manner were so sweet and engaging, and the expression of her face was so kind, that Ernestine, reproaching herself for the bitterness of her first thought, replied:

"I thank you very much, mademoiselle, but I fear that by thus detaining you, I shall deprive you of the pleasure of __"

"Of dancing?" asked Herminie, smilingly. "I assure you, mademoiselle, that my foot hurts me too much this

evening to permit of my enjoying myself in that way, so I trust you will grant me your companionship as a compensation for my misfortune."

"Really, mademoiselle, you quite overpower me by your kindness."

"I am only doing what you would gladly do for me, I am sure, mademoiselle, if you should see me sitting alone, as frequently happens when one attends a little entertainment like this for the first time."

"I do not believe, mademoiselle," replied Ernestine, smiling, and now made entirely at ease by these gracious advances,—"in fact, I am sure that you would never be left alone even the first time you went anywhere."

"Oh, mademoiselle, mademoiselle, it is you who are overwhelming me with compliments now," laughingly protested Herminie.

"I assure you that I am only saying what I really think," Ernestine replied so artlessly that the duchess, appreciating the artless flattery, replied:

"I thank you for your very flattering words. I am sure that they are sincere; as for their being really deserved,—that is an entirely different thing. But tell me, what do you think of our little party?"

"It is charming, mademoiselle."

"I think so, too. Everybody is so gay and animated! Each guest seems determined to make the most of every minute of time. Nor is it strange. Sunday comes only once a week for all of us here, and enjoyment is really enjoyment, while to many people it is a fatiguing occupation. Surfeited with pleasure, they do not even know what it is to be amused; and it seems to me that nothing could be more sad than to be always trying hard to amuse oneself."

"Oh, yes, it must be sad, as sad as trying to find true affection, when nobody cares for you," Ernestine answered, unconsciously revealing the thought uppermost in her mind.

There was such an intense melancholy in the girl's tone and in her face, that Herminie was deeply touched by it.

"Poor child!" she said to herself, "probably she is not a favourite at home, and that makes her all the more sensitive to slights when she is out in company."

Something Herminie noticed just then seemed to confirm this suspicion, for the progress of the dance having brought the green-gloved youth and his partner directly opposite Ernestine, the duchess saw the favoured one cast several compassionate and rather patronising glances at the less fortunate damsel.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil also noticed these glances, and fancied that she must be an object of pity to every one. The thought, of course, wounded her deeply, so one can judge of her gratitude, when Herminie said, with a smile:

"Are you willing to waive all ceremony between us, mademoiselle?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I find it dreadfully warm here. Would you mind going with me to Madame Herbaut's chamber to stay awhile?"

"Oh, thank you, mademoiselle, thank you," exclaimed Ernestine, gratefully, rising eagerly as she spoke.

"But why do you thank me?" asked Herminie, drawing the younger girl's hand through her arm. "On the contrary, it is I who should thank you for consenting to leave the ballroom on my account."

"I thank you because I understand your motive, mademoiselle," replied Ernestine, as they entered Madame Herbaut's chamber, which they found entirely deserted.

"Well, now that we are alone, explain again why you thanked me a minute ago," said Herminie, when they had seated themselves.

"Mademoiselle, you are very generous, so you must be equally frank," began Ernestine.

"Frankness is one of my greatest virtues—or failings, mademoiselle," replied Herminie, smiling. "But why this appeal to my frankness?"

"Just now, when you asked me to accompany you here because the other room was too warm, you were impelled to do it merely by your kindness of heart. You said to yourself: 'This poor girl is neglected. No one asks her to dance because she is so unattractive. If she remains here, she will become an object of ridicule, and the knowledge will wound her deeply. I will save her from this humiliation by getting away under some pretext or other.' That was exactly what you said to yourself. Is it not so?" insisted Mlle. de Beaumesnil, making no effort to conceal her tears this time. "Confess that what I say is only the truth?"

"It is," said Herminie, with her accustomed honesty. "Why should I not admit that your unpleasant position excited my sympathy?"

"And I thank you for it," said Ernestine, offering her hand to her companion. "You have no idea how grateful I am, too, for your sincerity."

"And, as you insist upon my being perfectly frank, I must tell you that you have no idea how deeply you pained me just now," said Herminie, pressing the proffered hand cordially.

"I?"

"Yes; for when I remarked what a sad thing it must be to strive as hard for enjoyment as some people do, you replied, in accents that touched me to the heart, 'Yes, it must be as sad as trying to find true affection when nobody

cares for you.' Have I not set you an example of frankness? Can you not be equally frank with me?"

"It is true, mademoiselle, that I do not seem to follow your example in this respect," said Ernestine, hesitatingly.

"Ah, well, let me ask you just one question, and pray do not attribute it to mere idle curiosity. Can it be that you do not find among your own relatives the affection you long for?"

"I am an orphan," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in such a touching voice that Herminie's sympathy increased.

"An orphan!" she repeated; "an orphan! Alas! I understand, for I, too—"

"You, too, are an orphan?"

"Yes."

"How glad I am!" exclaimed Ernestine, naïvely. Then thinking how cruel or, at least, how strange the remark must have sounded, she added:

"Forgive me, mademoiselle, forgive me, but—"

"Ah, I think I read your feelings in my turn," responded Herminie. "Your exclamation simply meant: 'She knows how sad the lot of an orphan is, and she will love me, perhaps. Perhaps in her I shall find the affection I have failed to find elsewhere.' Am I right?" added Herminie, offering her hand in her turn. "Have I not read your thoughts aright?"

"Yes, that is true," replied Ernestine, yielding more and more to the singular charm that pervaded her companion's every word and look. "You have been so kind to me; you seem so honest and sincere that I do indeed long for your affection, mademoiselle. It—it is an ambition only. I dare not call it a hope, for you scarcely know me," concluded Ernestine, timidly.

"But do you know me any better than I know you?"

"No, but with you it is very different."

"And why?"

"Because I am already under deep obligations to you, and yet I ask an even greater favour."

"But how do you know that I will not be very glad to give you the friendship you ask in exchange for yours? You seem to me well worthy of it," said Herminie, who, on her side, was beginning to feel an increasing fondness for Ernestine.

Then, suddenly becoming thoughtful, she added: "Do you know that this is very strange?"

"What, mademoiselle?" asked Ernestine, a little worried by the seriousness of her companion's face.

"We have known each other barely half an hour. I do not know your name, you do not know mine; yet here we are almost exchanging confidences."

"But why should you be surprised to see affection and confidence spring up suddenly between a benefactress and the person obliged, mademoiselle?" asked Ernestine, timidly, almost imploringly, as if fearing Herminie might regret the interest she had manifested in her up to this time. "I am sure nothing could bring two persons together so quickly and so closely as compassion on one side and gratitude on the other."

"I am too anxious to believe you not to yield to your arguments very readily," Herminie answered, half laughingly, half seriously.

"But my reasoning is true, mademoiselle," said Ernestine, encouraged by her success, and anxious to make her companion share her convictions; "besides, the similarity in our situations helps to bring us together. The fact that we are both orphans is surely a bond between us."

"It is indeed," said the duchess, pressing Ernestine's hand affectionately.

"Then you will really grant me your affection some day?"

"A few minutes ago, without even knowing you, I was touched by your painful position," replied Herminie. "Now I feel that I love you because it is so evident that you have a kind and noble heart."

"Oh, if you only knew what pleasure your words give me! I will never prove ungrateful, I swear it, mademoiselle!"

Then as if bethinking herself, she added, "Mademoiselle? It seems to me that it will be very difficult for me to call you that now."

"And equally difficult for me to reply in the same ceremonious way," responded the duchess. "So call me Herminie and I will call you—"

"Ernestine."

"Ernestine," exclaimed Herminie, remembering that this was her sister's name,—the name the Comtesse de Beaumesnil had mentioned several times in the young musician's presence when speaking of her beloved daughter; "you are called Ernestine? You spoke of one bond between us just a moment ago; this is another."

"What do you mean?"

"A lady to whom I was deeply attached had a daughter who was also named Ernestine."

"You see how many reasons there are that we should love each other, Herminie," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil; "and

as we are friends now, I am going to ask you all sorts of impertinent questions."

"Proceed, then!" said Herminie, smiling.

"Well, in the first place, what do you do for a living? What is your profession, Herminie?"

"I give lessons on the piano and in singing."

"How lucky your pupils are! How kind you must be to them!"

"No, indeed, I am very severe," replied the duchess, gaily. "And you, Ernestine, what do you do?"

"I—I do embroidery and tapestry work," Mlle. de Beaumesnil answered, somewhat embarrassed.

"And do you have plenty of work, my dear child?" asked Herminie, with almost maternal solicitude; "work of that kind is usually so very scarce at this season of the year."

"I came from the country only a short time ago to join my relative here," replied poor Ernestine, more and more confused; then gathering a certain amount of courage from the very exigency of the situation, she added: "So you see, Herminie, that I have never lacked work yet."

"If you ever should, I think I might be able to procure it for you, my dear Ernestine."

"You! and how?"

"I, too, have done embroidery for some of the large shops, when—well, one may surely confess it to a friend—when pupils were scarce, and I had to eke out a living in that way; so as they were very well satisfied with my work at the establishment of which I speak,—one of the largest in town by the way,—I am still on good terms with them, and feel sure that a recommendation from me would ensure you work if you need it."

"But as you embroider, too, Herminie, I should be depriving you of one of your resources, and if pupils should become scarce again, what would you do?" asked Ernestine, deeply touched by Herminie's generous offer.

"Oh, I have other resources now," answered the other girl, proudly. "I copy music, too. But the important thing, you see, Ernestine, is to be certain of work, for you, too, alas! know, perhaps, that it is not enough for those who labour for their daily bread to have energy and determination; they must have employment as well."

"Certainly, and that is very hard to find sometimes," said Ernestine, sadly, thinking for the first time of the sad lot of many young girls, and reflecting that her new friend had doubtless been in the deplorable situation of which she spoke.

"Yes, and it is terrible for one to see oneself nearing the end of one's resources, no matter how willing to work and how courageous one may be," replied Herminie, sadly. "And it is for this very reason that I will do everything in my power to spare you such misery as that, my poor Ernestine. But tell me, where do you live? I will call and see you sometime when I am out giving lessons, that is, if it is not too far out of my way, for I have to be very saving of my time."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil's embarrassment was very great, and it was still farther augmented by the painful necessity of being compelled to utter a falsehood, so it was with no little hesitation that she replied:

"I should be very glad to see you, my dear Herminie, but—but my relative—"

"Poor child, I understand," said Herminie, quickly, unconsciously coming to Ernestine's assistance. "You are not in your own home, of course, and your relative makes you painfully conscious of the fact, sometimes, perhaps."

"That is it exactly," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, delighted with this excuse. "My relative is not bad at heart, but so peevish, and such a grumbler. I don't believe there was ever another such grumbler in the world," she added, smiling.

"That is enough for me," exclaimed Herminie, laughing in her turn. "If she's a grumbler, she'll never have a visit from me. The only way out of the difficulty, Ernestine, is for you to come and see me whenever you have time."

"I was just going to ask you to grant me that privilege."

"Yes, yes, you shall come and see how pretty my room is," said the duchess.

Then remembering that her new friend was not as comfortably housed, Herminie added:

"When I say that, I don't really mean it. My room is really very unpretentious."

But Ernestine understood Herminie's disposition and character pretty well already, so she said, smiling:

"Be honest, Herminie."

"About what?"

"Your room is charming, and you only retracted your words because you thought I would feel badly because I hadn't a room as pretty as yours."

"Do you know, Ernestine, that you would be a very dangerous person to have around if any one had a secret, for you seem to divine everything."

"I was sure of it! Your room is charming. How I shall enjoy seeing it."

"You must not say how I shall enjoy seeing it. You must say, 'Herminie, I am coming to take a glass of milk with you some morning, soon.'"

"Oh, I'll say that with all the pleasure in life."

"And I accept your offer with equal pleasure. Only when you come, Ernestine, don't let it be any later than nine o'clock, for I begin my round of lessons at ten. And now what day will you come?"

Mlle. de Beaumesnil was rescued from this embarrassing situation by Providence in the shape of a handsome non-commissioned officer of hussars, who was no other than Olivier.

Faithful to the promise made to Mlle. Herbaut, the kind-hearted fellow had come to ask Ernestine to dance the next quadrille with him, so, after having greeted Herminie in the most cordial and respectful manner, he bowed low before Ernestine, with the stereotyped phrase:

"Will mademoiselle do me the honour to dance the next quadrille with me."

CHAPTER III.

A BOLD QUESTION.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil was doubly surprised, as the invitation must have been premeditated, inasmuch as she was not then in the ball-room, so having no answer ready in her astonishment, Herminie came to her assistance by saying gaily to the young soldier:

"I accept your invitation in mademoiselle's name, M. Olivier, for she is quite capable of depriving herself of the pleasure of dancing merely to keep me company."

"As mademoiselle has accepted for me," added Ernestine, smiling, "I can but follow her example."

Olivier bowed again, and turning to Herminie remarked:

"Unfortunately I arrived very late this evening, mademoiselle, for I found you had not only ceased playing, but had also abandoned all idea of dancing."

"You did come very late, M. Olivier, for I recollect seeing you come in at the conclusion of the last polka I played."

"Alas! mademoiselle, you see in me a victim of my own patience and another's unpunctuality. I was waiting for a friend who intended to come with me."

Herminie blushed slightly and averted her eyes.

"But this friend did not come," Olivier added.

"Possibly he is ill, M. Olivier," said the duchess, with feigned indifference.

"No, mademoiselle, he is perfectly well, for I saw him only a few hours ago, but I think his mother must have detained him, for the kind-hearted fellow never opposes her in anything."

The words seemed to dispel the slight cloud which had gathered, now and then, on the brow of the duchess during the evening, and she answered, gaily:

"Then you do very wrong to blame your friend if he has such a good excuse for his absence, M. Olivier."

"I am not blaming him in the least, Mlle. Herminie. I am only pitying him for not having come, and pitying myself for arriving so late, as I might, perhaps, have had the pleasure of dancing with mademoiselle sooner," added Olivier, addressing Mlle. de Beaumesnil, so she would not feel that she was left out of the conversation.

Suddenly the words, "Take your places!" resounded through the room, accompanied by a few chords on the piano.

"I am at your service, mademoiselle," said Olivier, offering his arm to Ernestine.

The girl arose to accompany Olivier, but Herminie caught her by the hand, and whispered:

"One moment, Ernestine, let me arrange your sash. It needs pinning."

And the duchess, with charming solicitude, straightened a disordered fold in the sash, fastened it with a pin she took from her own girdle, smoothed out a slight wrinkle in Ernestine's corsage,—rendered her, in short, all those little kindly services which two devoted sisters are always performing for each other.

"Now, mademoiselle," remarked Herminie, with kindly gravity, after another brief survey of Ernestine's toilet, "I will let you go and dance, but you must promise to enjoy yourself immensely."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil was so touched by Herminie's little attentions that, before accepting Olivier's arm, she found an opportunity to imprint a light kiss on the cheek of the duchess, and whisper:

"Thanks again! Many, many thanks!"

And really happy for the first time since her mother's death, Ernestine left Herminie, took the arm Olivier offered, and accompanied him into the ball-room.

The young hussar was remarkably handsome and distinguished-looking, cordial in his manner towards men, and extremely deferential to women. This, together with the fact that he wore his showy uniform, decorated with the cross he had so bravely won, with easy grace, made him a great favourite at Madame Herbaut's entertainments, so Ernestine excited not a little envy and jealousy when she appeared in the ball-room on Olivier's arm.

Even the most artless and ingenuous women are quick to discern the effect they produce upon other women.

And in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's case, these powers of penetration were united with a firm determination to observe every incident of the evening with the closest attention, so, on perceiving the envy which Olivier's preference excited, the young girl's gratitude increased.

She did not doubt in the least that Olivier, out of the kindness of his heart, had wished to avenge the painful, almost humiliating slight she had received earlier in the evening, and a natural feeling of gratitude made Mlle. de Beaumesnil treat Olivier with less reserve, perhaps, than was quite proper in the extremely delicate position in which she was placed.

Olivier, in promising Mlle. Herbaut that he would ask Ernestine to dance, had merely yielded to a generous impulse, for, seeing Mlle. de Beaumesnil such a long way off, he had thought her almost ugly. He had never exchanged a word with her, he did not know whether she was clever or stupid, so, glad to find a topic of conversation in the warm friendship that seemed to exist between Herminie and Ernestine, he remarked to the latter, in one of the pauses of the dance:

"You seem to know Mlle. Herminie very well, mademoiselle. What a charming young lady she is!"

"I agree with you perfectly, monsieur, though I met Mlle. Herminie this evening for the first time."

"Indeed!"

"Our sudden intimacy surprises you, does it not, monsieur? But why should it? Sometimes the richest are the most generous. They do not wait to be asked; they offer their largess to you of their own accord. That was the case with Herminie this evening."

"I understand, mademoiselle. You knew no one here, and Mlle. Herminie—"

"Seeing me alone, had the goodness to come to me. This can not surprise you very much, however."

"Why not, mademoiselle?"

"Because a moment ago you, monsieur, were actuated by the same charitable impulse in asking me to dance."

"Charitable? What an expression to use in this connection, mademoiselle!"

"It is the right one, however."

"Quite the contrary, mademoiselle."

"Come, admit it, monsieur. You ought always to tell the truth, you know."

"Frankly, mademoiselle," responded Olivier, smiling in his turn, "should I be performing an act of charity—allow me to make this comparison—in culling a forgotten or unseen flower?"

"Say, rather, a rejected one."

"So be it, mademoiselle. But might this not merely show the poor taste of a person who would prefer a big red poppy to a modest violet."

And Olivier cast a laughing glance at the buxom lass whose gaudy attire did seem to justify the comparison.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil could not help smiling, but she answered, with a shake of the head:

"Ah, monsieur, kind as your reply is, it proves that I am doubly right."

"How is that, mademoiselle?"

"You took compassion on me, and you still have sufficient compassion to be unwilling to admit the fact."

"You do right to insist upon frankness, mademoiselle. It is a thousand times better than compliments."

"And what I certainly expect of you, monsieur."

"Well, yes, mademoiselle; seeing that you were the only person not dancing, I thought how dull it must be for you, and I resolved to engage you for the next quadrille. I hope my sincerity has not offended you, but you insisted—"

"Certainly, monsieur; and I am so grateful for your sincerity that if I dared—"

"Do not hesitate, I beg of you, mademoiselle."

"But no, however frank you may be, however great a lover of truth, your sincerity, I am sure, would not exceed certain limits—"

"Those you yourself prescribe, mademoiselle; no others."

"Are you in earnest?"

"I am, I assure you."

"The question I am about to put to you, monsieur, will seem so peculiar, so bold, perhaps."

"Then, mademoiselle, I shall tell you that it seems strange and bold, that is all."

"I don't think I shall ever dare—"

"Ah, mademoiselle, you seem to be afraid of frankness, in your turn," said Olivier, laughing.

"Say, rather, that I tremble for your sincerity; it will have to be so great, so rare, to stand my test."

"You need have no fears, I will vouch for it, mademoiselle."

"Well, monsieur, what do you think of my appearance?"

"Mademoiselle," stammered Olivier, who was not in the least prepared for such a brusque and embarrassing question; "really—I—"

"Ah, you see that you dare not say what you think, monsieur," exclaimed Ernestine, gaily. "But wait, to put you quite at your ease, let us suppose that on leaving this entertainment you should meet one of your friends, and in telling him about the young ladies you danced with, what would you say about me if you should happen to remember that I was one of your partners?"

"Well, mademoiselle," responded Olivier, who had partially recovered from his surprise, "I should merely say to my friend, 'I saw a young lady whom nobody asked to dance. This interested me in her, so I engaged her for the next quadrille, not supposing that our conversation would prove particularly interesting, for not knowing the young lady at all, I had nothing but commonplaces to say to her. But quite the contrary. Thanks to my partner, our conversation was extremely animated, and the time passed like a dream.'"

"And what if your friend should perhaps ask if this young lady was pretty or ugly?"

"I should say that I had not been able to distinguish her features very well from a distance," replied Olivier, intrepidly, "but on seeing her closer, and looking at her more attentively, and more particularly after I had heard her talk, I found her face so gentle and kind and characterised by such an expression of winning frankness that I ceased to think that she was not pretty. But I should add, still speaking to my friend, of course: 'Do not repeat these remarks made to you in confidence, for it is only women of great good sense and amiability who ask for, or forgive, sincerity.' It is consequently only to a very discreet friend that I should say this, mademoiselle."

"I thank you so much, monsieur. I am grateful, you have no idea how grateful, for your frankness," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in such a sincere and earnest voice that Olivier, surprised and touched in spite of himself, gazed at the girl with lively interest.

Just then the dance ended, and Olivier took Ernestine back to Herminie, who was waiting for her; then, impressed by the singular character of the young girl with whom he had just danced, he withdrew himself a little apart to think over their strange conversation.

"You enjoyed yourself very much, did you not, Ernestine?" asked Herminie, affectionately. "I knew it by your face. You talked all the time you were dancing."

"M. Olivier is very pleasant; besides, knowing that you were so well acquainted with him made me feel perfect confidence in him at once."

"And he deserves it, I assure you, Ernestine. No one could have a better heart or a nobler character. His most intimate friend"—and the duchess blushed almost imperceptibly—"tells me that M. Olivier works like a slave at the most uncongenial employment in order to utilise his leave and assist his uncle, a retired officer of marines, crippled with wounds, who resides in this same house and has only his pension to live on."

"This doesn't surprise me at all, Herminie. I knew that M. Olivier must have a kind heart."

"He is as brave as a lion, too, with it all. His friend, who served in the same regiment, has told me of many deeds of wonderful valour on M. Olivier's part."

"That seems only natural to me. I have always believed that good and kind-hearted people were the bravest," replied Ernestine. "You, for example, must be very courageous, Herminie."

The conversation between the two young girls was again interrupted by a young man, who, after interchanging a quick glance with Herminie, politely invited Ernestine to dance.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil saw the look, and it made her blush and smile. Nevertheless, she made an engagement to dance the next quadrille, but as soon as the young man had walked away Ernestine gaily remarked to her new friend:

"You are making me a very dangerous person, my dear Herminie."

"Why do you say that, Ernestine?"

"That invitation I just received—"

"Well, what of it?"

"Was all your work."

"Mine?"

"Yes, you said to yourself, 'This poor Ernestine must, at least, dance twice during the evening. Everybody is not as kind-hearted as M. Olivier, but I am queen here, and I will give orders to one of my subjects.'"

But just then Queen Herminie's subject came to say that the quadrille was forming.

"Good-bye, Madame Sybil," exclaimed Herminie, shaking her finger threateningly at Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "I'll teach you not to be so proud of your wonderful powers of divination."

The young girl had scarcely walked away with her partner before Olivier came up, and, seating himself beside the duchess, said:

"Who is that young girl I just danced with?"

"An orphan who supports herself by her embroidery, M. Olivier, and who is not very happy, I think, for you can not imagine the touching way in which she thanked me for my attention this evening. It was this that made us friends so quickly, for I never saw her until to-night."

"That is what she meant, I suppose, by speaking so artlessly of what she called your compassion, and mine."

"Poor child! She must have been very unkindly treated, and is still, perhaps, to make her so grateful for the slightest show of interest."

"Hers is certainly a very original character. You can't imagine what a strange question she asked me, imploring me to be perfectly frank all the while."

"No, I can not."

"Well, she asked me whether I thought her pretty or ugly."

"What a strange child! And what did you answer?"

"I told her the truth, as she insisted."

"What! M. Olivier, did you really tell her that she wasn't pretty?"

"I certainly did, adding, however,—and that, too, was the truth,—that she had such a frank and gentle manner that it made one quite forget that she was not pretty."

"Great heavens! M. Olivier," cried Herminie, almost in affright, "that wasn't a pleasant thing for her to hear. And she did not seem hurt?"

"Not the least bit in the world. Quite the contrary, in fact, and that was what surprised me so much. When one asks questions of this nature, a request to be frank generally means that you are to lie; while she thanked me in such an earnest and pathetic way for my sincerity that I was really touched, in spite of myself."

"Do you know what I think, M. Olivier? I really believe the poor child must have been very unkindly treated at home. She must have been told a hundred times that she was a monster of ugliness, and, finding herself for the first time in her life with some one she really felt that she could trust, she wanted to know the truth in regard to herself."

"You are probably right, Mlle. Herminie, and what touched me, as it did you, was to see with what gratitude the poor girl welcomed the slightest sign of interest, provided it was sincere."

"Would you believe it, I have seen big tears well up in her eyes more than once this evening, M. Olivier?"

"I, too, somehow fancied that her gaiety concealed a habitual melancholy. She was trying to forget herself, perhaps."

"And then her trade, which unfortunately requires such an expenditure of time and labour, is so unremunerative, poor child! If the trials of poverty should be added to her other troubles—"

"I fear that is only too probable, Mlle. Herminie," said Olivier, feelingly. "She is, indeed, very much to be pitied!"

"Hush, here she comes," said Herminie. Then she added: "But she is putting on her wrap; they must be taking her away."

And in fact, Ernestine, behind whom Madame Laîné was walking with an imposing air, came to the door, and made a slight movement of the head to Herminie as if to indicate that she was leaving with regret.

The duchess hastened to her new friend. "What! you are going already?" she asked.

"I must," answered Ernestine, with a meaning look at innocent Madame Laîné.

"But you will come next Sunday, will you not? You know we shall have a thousand things to say to each other."

"I hope to come, my dear Herminie, I shall be so anxious to see you again."

Then with a gracious bow to the young hussar, Ernestine said:

"*Au revoir*, M. Olivier."

"*Au revoir*, mademoiselle," replied the young soldier, with a bow.

An hour afterwards Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Madame Laîné were safe within the walls of the Hôtel de la Rochaiguë.

CHAPTER IV.

REASON ASSERTS ITSELF.

On her return from Madame Herbaut's little entertainment, mademoiselle opened her journal and wrote as follows:

"Thank Heaven, my darling mamma; the inspiration to which I yielded was a wise one!

"What a cruel lesson I received at first, then how much valuable information, and lastly what delightful compensation!

"Two persons with true, honest hearts manifested a genuine interest in me.

"A genuine, unselfish interest this time, for these persons, at least, have not even a suspicion that I am the richest heiress in France.

"On the contrary, they believe me to be poor, almost on the verge of absolute want, in fact; and then, what is more, they have been perfectly honest with me. I know it, I am certain of it!

"Judge of my happiness! I have met some one at last whom I feel I can trust, I, who have come to distrust everybody and everything, thanks to the fulsome flattery of those around me.

"At last I know what I am really worth—how I really appear in the eyes of others.

"I am far from pretty; there is nothing in the world about me worthy of the slightest notice. I am one of those persons who must pass through life unnoticed unless some compassionate heart should be touched by my naturally gentle and rather melancholy ways.

"The feeling I must really inspire, if I inspire any feeling at all, is that sort of affectionate commiseration that truly noble souls feel when they are brought into close contact with an inoffensive creature who is suffering from some hidden sorrow.

"If this commiseration ever attracts one of these noble natures to me, what it will find and love in me is sweetness of disposition combined with an intense longing for mutual sincerity.

"This, then, is precisely what I am,—nothing less, nothing more!

"And when I compare these slight attractions, the only ones I possess, with the marvellous charms and perfections with which my flatterers have endowed me; when I think of the sudden and irresistible passions I have inspired in persons who have scarcely exchanged a word with me; when I think of the sensation I create in fashionable circles, and then think of the modest entertainment this evening, where I was invited to dance only from a feeling of pity, and where I saw all the other young girls chosen in preference to me, because I was the least attractive one present,—oh, mother, I, who never hated any one in my whole life before, now feel that I hate as deeply as I despise these persons who have so shamefully deceived me by their base flattery.

"I am astonished at all the bitter, insolent, and opprobrious epithets which occur to me, and with which I long to crush my deceivers some day, or, rather, when a test to which I mean to subject them at that grand ball next Thursday has wholly convinced me of their deceitfulness and treachery.

"Alas! my dear mother, suppose any one had told me a short time ago that I, who am naturally so timid, should make such a bold resolve some day!

"But the necessity of escaping the greatest of misfortunes imparts courage and determination even to the most timid.

"But, as I have said before, my dear mother, the cruel lesson I received was not without its compensations.

"In the first place, I have gained, I am sure, a generous and sincere friend. Seeing me slighted and neglected, a charming young girl took pity on me. She came to me, and endeavoured to console me with wonderful cleverness and kindness.

"I felt, or, rather, I feel, for her the tenderest gratitude.

"Oh, if you only knew, mother, how novel and pleasant and delightful it was for me, the richest heiress in France, to find some one who, upon seeing me neglected, and, as she supposed, unhappy, on that very account manifests the most touching interest in me,—who, in short, loves me for myself alone.

"To be sought out and to be loved on account of your supposed misfortunes, what ineffable happiness this is to a person who, up to that time, has been loved, apparently, only on account of the wealth she is known to possess.

"The sincere affection I have gained this time is unspeakably precious to me, because it gives me the hope of such a happy future. With a tried and trusted friend, what have I to fear? Ah, I have no fear of seeing this friend change some day when I tell her who I really am!

"What I have said in regard to Herminie, for that is her name, also applies to M. Olivier, who might be taken for this young girl's brother, so great is his kindness of heart and his honesty. Seeing that no one had asked me to dance, it was he who invited me out of pity, and so great is his frankness that he did not deny that he was actuated by motives of compassion. Moreover, when I had the hardihood to ask him if he thought me pretty, he replied that he did not, but that I had a face which was interesting by reason of its gentle, rather sad expression.

"These honest words gave me inexpressible pleasure and satisfaction. I felt that they were true, for they reminded

me of what you said to me once, my beloved mother, when you were speaking of my looks; besides, the words were addressed, not to the wealthy heiress, but to the little embroideress.

"M. Olivier is only a common soldier, I know; but he must have received an excellent education, for he expresses himself admirably and his manners are perfect. Besides, he is as kind-hearted and good as he is brave, for he evinces a truly filial devotion for his aged uncle, a retired naval officer.

"Oh, mother, what noble and courageous natures these are! How entirely at ease one feels with them! How their frankness and sincerity rejoices one's heart! How healthy and wholesome to the soul such association is! What serenity and cheerful resignation they display under adverse circumstances, for both these young people are obliged to work hard,—Herminie, for a mere subsistence; M. Olivier, to increase his old uncle's inadequate means.

"To work for a living!

"And yet Herminie told me if work should fail me at any time she would do her best to secure me employment from a large establishment for which she had occasionally worked herself, for I had no idea yet what a dreadful thing it was to be out of work.

"To be out of work!

"Great Heavens, that means to lack food! That means want, misery, death itself, perhaps!

"All the merry, laughing girls I saw at this little entertainment, girls who are, like Herminie, dependent entirely upon their own exertions for a livelihood, may know all the horrors of abject want to-morrow, if work should fail them!

"Is there no one to whom they can go and say, 'I am brave and willing, only give me work?'

"But such a state of things is unjust! It is shameful! Is there no such thing as pity for the woes of others in the world? Is it a matter of little or no consequence that there should be so many people in the world who do not know whether they will have food on the morrow?

"Oh, mother, mother, now I understand the vague fear and uneasiness I experienced when they told me I was so rich! I had good reason to say to myself, with something akin to remorse:

"Such vast wealth for myself alone? And why?

"Why should I have so much and others nothing?

"How did I acquire this immense fortune?

"Alas! I acquired it only by your death, my mother, and by your death, my father.

"So I had to lose those I held most dear in the world in, order to become so rich.

"In order that I may be so rich, it is necessary, perhaps, that thousands of young girls like Herminie should be always in danger of want,—happy to-day, filled with despair to-morrow.

"And when they have lost their only treasures, the lightheartedness and gaiety of youth, when they are old, and when not only work, but strength is lacking, what becomes of these unfortunates?

"Oh, mother, the more I think of the terrible difference between my lot and that of Herminie and so many other young girls—the more I think of the dangers that surround me, of all the nefarious schemes of which I am the object because I am rich, it seems to me that wealth imparts a strange bitterness to the heart.

"Now my reason has at last asserted itself, I must satisfy myself of the omnipotent power of wealth over venal souls; I must see to what depths of degradation I, a girl of sixteen, can make those around me stoop. Yes, for my eyes are open now. I realise with profound gratitude that M. de Maillefort's revelations alone started this train of thought that is making everything more and more clear to me every minute.

"I do not know, but it seems to me, my dear mother, that I can express my thoughts more clearly now, that my mind is developing, that my faculties are awakening from a sort of stupor, that my character is undergoing a decided change in many respects, and that, while it remains keenly susceptible to all that is sincere and generous, it is becoming strongly antagonistic and aggressive to all that is false, base and mercenary.

"I am convinced of one thing: they lied to me when they told me that M. de Maillefort was your enemy. They told me so merely because they wanted to make me distrust his counsels. It was designedly that they fostered my dislike of him, a dislike caused by the slanders of which I have been the dupe.

"No, never shall I forget that it was to M. de Maillefort's revelations that I was indebted for the idea of going to Madame Herbaut's, where I not only learned the truth concerning myself, but where I met the only two really generous and sincere persons that I have known since I lost you, my father, and you, my mother."

The morning after Madame Herbaut's ball Mlle. de Beaumesnil rang for her governess a little earlier than usual.

Madame Laîné appeared almost instantly, however.

"Did mademoiselle have a comfortable night?" she asked.

"Very, my dear Laîné but tell me, have you made the inquiries I asked you to last evening, so we may know whether any one suspected our absence."

"No one has the slightest suspicion of it, mademoiselle. Madame de la Rochaiguë did not send to inquire for you

until early this morning."

"And you replied?"

"That mademoiselle had passed a very comfortable, though slightly restless, night; but that the quiet and rest had benefited mademoiselle very much."

"That is all right then, my dear Laîné, and now I have another favour to ask of you."

"I am at mademoiselle's service; but I am so distressed about what happened at Madame Herbaut's last night," said the governess. "I was in torture the whole evening."

"But what happened at Madame Herbaut's?"

"Why, mademoiselle was received with such coldness and indifference. It was shameful, for mademoiselle is in the habit of seeing everybody crowd around her as they ought."

"As they ought?"

"Most assuredly. Mademoiselle knows very well the respect that is due to her position, so last evening I was mortified and incensed beyond expression. 'Ah,' I said to myself,'if you only knew that this young lady you are neglecting is Mlle. de Beaumesnil, you would all be down on your knees in the twinkling of an eye.'"

"My dear Laîné, let me first set your mind at rest about last evening. I was delighted, and I enjoyed myself so much that I intend to go again next Sunday evening."

"What, mademoiselle wishes to go again?"

"I shall go, that is decided. Now, another thing. The reception which I met with at Madame Herbaut's, and which scandalises you so deeply, is convincing proof of the discretion I expected from you. I thank you for it, and if you always act in this way I assure you your fortune is made."

"But mademoiselle knows that it is not self-interest—that—"

"Yet that need not prevent me from rewarding you as you deserve, my dear Laîné. And that is not all; I want you to ask Madame Herbaut for the address of one of the young ladies I met last evening. The young lady I mean is called Herminie, and she gives music lessons."

"I shall not have to apply to Madame Herbaut for that, mademoiselle, M. le baron's steward knows the address."

"What! Our steward knows Mlle. Herminie's address?" exclaimed Ernestine, greatly astonished.

"Yes, mademoiselle. They were speaking of the young lady in the office only a few days ago."

"Of Mlle. Herminie?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. It was in relation to a five hundred franc note that she returned to the baroness. Louis, one of the footmen, heard the whole conversation through the door of the reception-room."

"Madame de la Rochaiguë knows Herminie?" cried Ernestine, whose surprise and curiosity were increased by each word the governess uttered. "And what is this about a five hundred franc note?"

"Why, it seems that this honest young girl—I told you that Madame Herbaut was exceedingly particular in the selection of her guests—this honest young girl returned the five hundred francs because she said she had already been paid by the countess."

"What countess?"

"Why, mademoiselle's mother."

"My mother paid Herminie? And for what?"

"Ah, yes, it is true that mademoiselle is not aware—I suppose no one has told mademoiselle for fear of making her still more sad."

"Has not told me what? In Heaven's name, speak!"

"Why, the late countess suffered so much towards the last, that the physicians, at their wit's end, thought that music might ameliorate her sufferings, at least to some extent."

"Great Heaven! I can not believe it. Go on, go on."

"So they sent for a young musician, and this young musician was Herminie!"

"Herminie?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. For ten days or a fortnight before Madame la comtesse died, mademoiselle came to play and sing to her every day, and they say it quieted the countess very much, but unfortunately it was too late."

While Ernestine was drying the tears these sad details, hitherto unknown to her, had brought to her eyes, Madame Laîné continued:

"It seems that, after your mother's death, the baroness, thinking Mlle. Herminie had not been paid, sent her five hundred francs, but this noble-hearted young girl brought the money back and declared that the countess owed her nothing."

"She saw my dying mother! She assuaged her sufferings," thought Ernestine, with inexpressible emotion. "Ah, how

I long to tell her that I am the daughter of the lady she loved, for how could any one know my mother without loving her?"

Then starting violently at another recollection, the young girl said to herself:

"But I remember now, that, when I told her my name was Ernestine, the coincidence seemed to strike her, and she seemed to be deeply moved when she said that a lady, for whom she had a profound regard, had a daughter who was also named Ernestine. So my mother must have talked to her about me, and if my mother talked to her as confidentially as that, my mother must have loved her; so I, too, have reason to love her. In fact, it is my bounden duty. My brain whirls, my heart overflows. This is too much happiness. I can hardly believe it."

Dashing away her tears, Ernestine turned to her governess and asked:

"But how did the steward ascertain Mlle. Herminie's address."

"He went to the notary who sent the five hundred francs, for Madame de la Rochaiguë wished to ascertain the address so she could send it to M. de Maillefort."

"What, does M. de Maillefort, too, know Herminie?"

"I cannot say, mademoiselle, all I know is that the steward took Herminie's address to M. le marquis nearly a month ago."

"Get me the address at once, my dear Laîné."

In a few minutes the governess brought the address and Ernestine immediately sat down and wrote as follows:

"My Dear Herminie:—You invited me to come and see your pretty room. I shall come early day after to-morrow—Tuesday, early in the morning, so I may be sure of not interfering in your work. I look forward with delight to seeing you again. I have a thousand things to tell you. With love,

"Your sincere friend,
"Ernestine."

After she had sealed this note, Mlle. de Beaumesnil said to her governess:

"I wish you to post this letter yourself, my dear Laîné."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"How shall I manage to get out alone with Madame Laîné day after to-morrow?" Ernestine said to herself. "I have no idea, but my heart tells me that I shall see Herminie again!"

CHAPTER V.

A CONSUMING FEVER OF LOVE.

On the morning of the same day that mademoiselle had appointed for her visit to Herminie, Gerald de Senneterre was having a long conversation with Olivier.

The two young men were sitting under the little arbour of which Commander Bernard was so fond.

The young duke's face was extremely pale and agitated. In fact, he seemed a prey to the deepest anxiety and distress.

"So you will see her, my dear Olivier," he was saying to his friend.

"At once. I wrote to her last evening requesting an interview. She has not answered my note, so she consents."

"Then in an hour my fate will be decided," groaned Gerald.

"I am forced to admit that I think this a very serious matter," said Olivier. "You know, even better than I do, how proud this young girl is, and that which would be our greatest chance of success with any one else will be almost sure to have an exactly opposite effect in her case. Still, we will not despair."

"But, Olivier, if I should be obliged to give her up, I don't know how I could bear it!" exclaimed Gerald, hoarsely. "I should kill myself, I believe!"

"Gerald! Gerald!"

"Yes, I admit it. I love her to distraction. I never believed before that even the most impassioned love could attain such a degree of intensity. My love is a consuming fever,—a fixed idea that absorbs me utterly. You know Herminie—"

"Yes, and I know that a more noble and beautiful creature never lived."

"Olivier, I am the most miserable of men!" exclaimed Gerald, burying his face in his hands.

"Come, come, Gerald, don't give way so. You can rely upon me. I believe, too, that you can trust her. Does she not love you as much as you love her? So don't be despondent. On the contrary, hope, and if, unfortunately—"

"But I tell you that I can not and will not live without her."

There was such evident sincerity in the words, as well as such passionate resolve, that Olivier shuddered, for he knew what an indomitable will his former comrade possessed.

"Gerald," he said, with deep emotion, "again I tell you that you should not despair. Wait here until my return."

"You are right," said Gerald, passing his hand across his fevered brow. "I will wait for you."

Olivier, unwilling to leave his friend in such a despondent mood, continued:

"I forgot to tell you that I informed my uncle of your intentions in regard to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and they have his unqualified approval. 'Such conduct is worthy of him,' he said to me, so day after to-morrow, Gerald—"

"Day after to-morrow!" exclaimed the young duke, bitterly and impatiently. "I am not thinking of anything so far off. It is as much as I can do to see my way from hour to hour."

"But, Gerald, it is a duty you have to perform."

"Don't talk to me about anything but Herminie. I am utterly indifferent to everything else. What are these so-called duties and obligations to me when I am in torture?"

"You do not realise what you are saying."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you do not."

"Olivier!"

"Oh, you may rebel as much as you please, but I tell you that your conduct, now as ever, shall be that of a man of honour. You will go to this ball to meet Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"I'll be d—— d if I will. I am at liberty to do as I please, I think, monsieur."

"No, Gerald, you are not at liberty to do anything that is dishonest or dishonourable."

"Do you know that what you are saying—" began the young duke, pale with anger; but seeing the expression of sorrowful astonishment on Olivier's features, Gerald became ashamed of his outburst, and, extending his hand to his friend, he said, in an almost beseeching voice:

"Forgive me, Olivier, forgive me! To think that almost at the very moment that you are undertaking the gravest and most delicate mission for me, I should so far forget myself—"

"Come, come, you needn't go to making excuses," said Olivier, preventing his friend from continuing by affectionately pressing his hand.

"You must have compassion on me, Olivier," said Gerald, despondently. "I really believe I must be mad."

The conversation was here interrupted by the sudden arrival of Madame Barbançon, who rushed into the arbour, crying:

"Oh, M. Olivier, M. Olivier!"

"What is the matter, Madame Barbançon?"

"The commander!"

"Well?"

"He has gone out!"

"What, suffering as he is to-day!" exclaimed Olivier, anxiously. "It was very imprudent. Didn't you try to prevent him from going, Mother Barbançon?"

"Alas! M. Olivier, I really believe the commander is not in his right mind."

"What?"

"I was out, and it was the porter who admitted M. Gerald in my absence. When I returned a few minutes ago, M. Bernard was laughing and singing, and I really believe even dancing, in spite of his weakness, and at last he flung his arms around me, shouting like a maniac, 'Victory, Mother Barbançon, victory!'"

Gerald, in spite of his own troubles, could not repress a faint smile. It seemed as if he understood the cause of the old officer's delight, but when Olivier, who was really much disturbed, asked, "Do you know anything about this, Gerald?" the young duke replied, with the most natural air in the world:

"Nothing whatever, upon my word! It seems to me more than probable, though, that the commander must have heard some good news, and there would be certainly nothing alarming about that."

"Good news!" repeated Olivier, much surprised, and trying in vain to imagine what it could be.

"Well, this much is certain," interposed Madame Barbançon, "after the commander had shouted 'Victory!' almost at the top of his voice, he asked: 'Is Olivier in the garden?' 'Yes, with M. Gerald,' I replied. 'Then get me my hat and cane quick, Mother Barbançon,' said he, 'and let me get off as soon as I can.' 'What! you are going out, weak as you are?' I exclaimed. 'You are very foolish to think of such a thing, monsieur.' But the commander wouldn't listen, and clapped his hat on his head and started as if he intended to come out here and speak to you; then he stopped short, and after reflecting a moment retraced his steps and went out at the front door, singing that miserable old song he sings only when he is in high glee about something,—which doesn't often happen with the poor, dear man!"

"I don't know what to make of it," said Olivier, "and I can't help feeling a little uneasy. My uncle has seemed so feeble since his last attack, that a half hour in the garden yesterday exhausted him completely."

"Oh, don't be alarmed, my friend, joy never kills."

"I think I had better go down the street a little way, M. Olivier," said Madame Barbançon. "He has an idea that exercise outside will do him more good than his walks in the garden, and perhaps I shall find him down there. But what on earth could he have meant by his 'Victory, Mother Barbançon, victory!' He must have heard something new in favour of his Bû-û-onaparte."

And the worthy woman hastened off.

"Don't be uneasy, Olivier," said Gerald, kindly. "The worst that can happen is that the commander may tire himself a little."

The clock in the neighbouring steeple struck nine, and Olivier, remembering the mission he had promised to fulfil, said:

"Well, it is nine o'clock. I am going."

"My dear Olivier," said Gerald, "you forget your own anxieties in your solicitude for my interests; and I, in my selfishness, haven't said so much as a word to you about your sweetheart."

"What sweetheart?"

"Why, the young girl you met at Madame Herbaut's Sunday."

"I would that your love affair were as tranquil as mine, Gerald; that is, if you can dignify with that name the interest one naturally feels in a young girl who is neither happy nor at all pretty, but who has a sweet face, an excellent disposition, and great originality of character."

"But you are thinking of this poor girl a great deal of the time, it seems to me."

"That is true, though I really don't know why. If I find out I will tell you. But never mind me. You have just displayed a vast amount of heroism in forgetting your own passion long enough to interest yourself in what you are pleased to call my love affair," said Olivier, smiling. "This generosity on your part is sure to be rewarded, so courage, my friend! Keep up a good heart and wait for me here."

Herminie, for her part, was thinking of Olivier's approaching visit with a vague uneasiness that cast a slight cloud over her usually radiant face.

"What can M. Olivier want?" thought the duchess. "This is the first time he has ever asked to call on me, and he wishes to see me on a very important matter, he says in his note. This important matter cannot concern him. What if it should concern Gerald, who is his most intimate friend? But I saw Gerald only yesterday, and I shall see him again to-day, for it is to-morrow that he is to tell his mother of our love. I can't imagine why the idea of this approaching interview worries me so. But that reminds me, I must inform the portress that I am at home to M. Olivier."

As she spoke, she pulled a bell that communicated with the room of Madame Moufflon, the portress, who promptly responded to the summons.

"Madame Moufflon, some one will call to see me this morning, and you are to admit the visitor," said Herminie.

"If it is a lady, of course. I understand."

"But it is not a lady who will call this morning," replied Herminie, with some embarrassment.

"It is not a lady? Then it must be that little hunchback I have orders to admit at any time, I suppose."

"No, Madame Moufflon, it is not M. de Maillefort, but a young man."

"A young man?" exclaimed the portress, "a young man? Well, this is the first time—"

"The young man will tell you his name. It is Olivier."

"Olivier? That is not hard to remember. I'll just think of olives; I adore them! Olivier, olives, olive oil—it is very nearly the very same thing. I sha'n't forget it. But, by the way, speaking—not of young men, for this old serpent isn't young—I saw that old scoundrel hanging around the house again last evening."

"Again?" exclaimed Herminie, with a look of scorn and disgust at the thought of Ravil.

For this cynic, since his first meeting with Herminie, had made numerous attempts to see the young girl, but the portress proving above bribery, he had written several times to Herminie, who had treated his letters with the disdain they deserved.

"Yes, mademoiselle, I saw the old snake hanging around again yesterday," continued the portress, "and when I planted myself in the doorway to watch him, he sneered at me as he passed, but I just said to myself: 'Sneer away, you old viper. You'll laugh on the other side of your mouth one of these days.'"

"I cannot help encountering this man on the street sometimes," said Herminie, "for he seems to be always trying to put himself in my way; but I needn't tell you, Madame Moufflon, that he must never be admitted to the house on any pretext whatever."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that, mademoiselle, he knows pretty well who he has to deal with by this time."

"But I forgot to mention that a young lady will probably call this morning, too, Madame Moufflon."

"Very well. But if M. Olivier should be here when the young lady calls, what then? Shall I admit her just the same?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, I never told you, did I, mademoiselle, that M. Bouffard, who was so rough to you, but who has been as gentle as a lamb ever since you began giving his daughter lessons, is always praising you to the skies now. He said to me only the other day, 'There are plenty of rosières who are not half as good and modest as Mlle. Herminie. She is a young lady who—'"

But a peal of the door-bell put a sudden end to these eulogiums.

"It is M. Olivier, I expect," said Herminie. "Show him in, please, Madame Moufflon."

And a minute afterwards that worthy dame ushered in Olivier, and Herminie found herself alone with Gerald's intimate friend.

CHAPTER VI.

A DELICATE MISSION.

The vague uneasiness which Herminie had felt was greatly increased at the sight of Olivier, for the young man looked unusually grave. The duchess even fancied that he avoided her gaze, as if embarrassed, and this embarrassment on his part was made still more apparent by his silence and evident reluctance to explain the object of his visit.

Herminie was the first to break this silence.

"You wrote, M. Olivier, that you wished to see me about a very important matter," she said, at last.

"Very important, mademoiselle."

"I judge so from your manner. What have you to tell me?"

"It concerns Gerald, mademoiselle."

"Great Heavens! What misfortune has befallen him?" exclaimed the duchess, much frightened.

"None, mademoiselle. I left him only a few minutes ago."

Herminie, thus reassured, felt deeply incensed with herself for her unguarded exclamation, and, blushing deeply, she said to Olivier:

"I trust you will not misinterpret—"

But the natural frankness of her character asserted itself, and she said, with quiet dignity:

"But why should I try to conceal from you something that you know already, M. Olivier. Are you not Gerald's dearest friend, in fact, almost a brother to him? Neither of us have any cause to blush for our mutual attachment. To-morrow, he is to inform his mother of his intentions and ask her consent, which he is almost certain to gain. For why should he not gain it. Our conditions in life are almost identical. He supports himself by his own exertions, as I support myself by mine. Our lot will be humble, and—But, forgive me, M. Olivier, for thus boring you. It is a fault to which all lovers are prone. But as no misfortune has befallen Gerald, what is the important matter that brings you here?"

Herminie's words indicated such a feeling of perfect security that Olivier realised the difficulties of his task even more keenly, and it was with painful hesitation that he replied:

"As I said before, no misfortune has befallen Gerald; but I come to you at his request."

Herminie's face, which had grown quite serene, became anxious again, and she said:

"Pray have the kindness to explain, M. Olivier. You say you have come at Gerald's request? Why is an intermediary needed, even in the person of his most intimate friend? This astonishes me. Why did not Gerald come himself?"

"Because there is something he is afraid to confess to you, mademoiselle."

Herminie started violently; the expression of her face changed, and, looking searchingly at Olivier, she repeated:

"There is something Gerald is afraid to confess to me?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"It must be something terrible if he dares not tell me," exclaimed the girl, paling visibly.

"I meant to have used more precautions, and to have approached the subject in a more roundabout way, mademoiselle," replied Olivier, who was in torture, "but I see that such a course on my part would only serve to prolong your anxiety—"

"My God! What am I about to hear?" murmured the young girl, trembling violently in every limb.

"Truth is better than falsehood, Mlle. Herminie."

"Falsehood?"

"In a word, Gerald can no longer endure the false position in which a peculiar combination of circumstances, and his desire to see you, have placed him. His courage has failed him. He has resolved that he will deceive you no longer, and, whatever may come of it, trusting to your generosity, he sends me, I repeat, to tell you what he is afraid to confess himself,—for he knows how bitterly you abhor deceit, and unfortunately Gerald has deceived you."

"Deceived me?"

"Yes, Gerald is not what he seems to be. You have known him under an assumed name. He has pretended to be what he is not."

"My God!" murmured the young girl, in abject terror.

A horrible suspicion had assailed her.

Never supposing for an instant that Olivier could have an aristocrat for an intimate friend, the poor child feared that Gerald had taken another name in order to conceal, not the obscurity of his birth or condition,—these were no disgrace in Herminie's eyes,—but guilty or dishonourable antecedents. In short, she imagined that Gerald must have committed some dishonourable act in the past.

So, in her wild terror, the girl, holding up her two hands as if to ward off an impending blow, exclaimed, brokenly:

"Do not finish this shameful confession, do not, I beseech you."

"Shameful!" repeated Olivier. "What! because Gerald has concealed the fact that he is the Duc de Senneterre—"

"You say that Gerald, your friend—"

"Is the Duc de Senneterre! Yes, mademoiselle. We were at college together; he enlisted, as I did. In that way I met him again, and since that time our intimacy has never flagged. And now, Mlle. Herminie, you can, perhaps, understand why Gerald concealed his real name and position from you. It was a wrong to which I became an accomplice through thoughtlessness; for what has since become a serious matter, that I deeply regret, was at first merely intended as a joke. Unfortunately, the introduction of Gerald as a notary's clerk to Madame Herbaut had already been made, when a singular chance brought you and my friend together. You will understand the rest. But I repeat that Gerald resolved, of his own free will, to confess the truth to you, as a continued deception was too revolting to his sense of honour."

On hearing that Gerald, instead of being a disgraced man, hiding under an assumed name, had really been guilty of no other wrong than that of concealing his noble birth, the revulsion of feeling Herminie underwent was so sudden and violent that she at first experienced a sort of vertigo; but when she became capable of reflection, when she became able to realise the consequences of this revelation, the young girl, who was as pale as death, trembled in every limb. Her knees tottered under her, and for a moment she was obliged to lean against the mantel for support.

When she did speak, it was in a strangely altered voice.

"M. Olivier," she said, "I am going to say something that may seem utterly senseless to you. A moment ago, before you had told me all, a terrible suspicion that Gerald had concealed his real name because he had been guilty of some wrong doing occurred to me—"

"What, you could believe that?"

"Yes, I did believe that, but I do not know but the truth you have told me concerning Gerald's position causes me deeper sorrow than that I experienced when I thought Gerald might be a dishonoured man."

"Impossible, mademoiselle, impossible!"

"This seems to you as absurd as it does senseless, does it not?" asked the young girl, bitterly.

"It does indeed."

"But in that case, by the power of my love, I might hope to raise him from his slough of despond, to restore his self-respect, to rehabilitate him in my eyes, and in his own; but between me and M. le Duc de Senneterre there is now an unfathomable abyss."

"Oh, reassure yourself on that point," hastily exclaimed Olivier, hoping to cure the wound he had inflicted and to change his companion's grief to joy. "You really need have no fears on that score, Mlle. Herminie. I was deputised to inform you of Gerald's deception, but, thank Heaven! I am also authorised to tell you that he intends to atone for his fault and in the most satisfactory manner. Gerald may have deceived you in some matters, but he has never deceived

you as to the sincerity of his sentiments. They are now what they have always been; his determination does not waver in the least. To-day, as yesterday, Gerald has only one desire, one hope,—that you will consent to bear his name, only to-day his name is that of the Duc de Senneterre. That is all."

"That is all!" exclaimed Herminie, whose deep despondency seemed to have given place to a sorrowful indignation. "That is all, you say, monsieur? So it is nothing to have won my affection under false pretences—to have reduced me to the trying necessity of renouncing a love which was the hope and blessing of my life or of entering a family that will regard me with aversion and disdain! And you call this nothing, monsieur! Ah, your friend pretends to love me, and yet respects me so little as to believe that I will ever submit to the countless humiliations such a marriage is sure to bring upon me!"

"But, Mlle. Herminie—"

"Listen to me, M. Olivier. If, after our first meeting, which, by reason of its very strangeness, made a deep impression upon me,—if, I say, after our first meeting, Gerald had frankly confessed that he was the Duc de Senneterre, I should have resisted my growing affection with all my strength, and I should have triumphed over it, perhaps; but, in any case, I would never willingly have seen Gerald again. I will not be his mistress, and, as I said before, I am not the woman to submit to the humiliations that await me if I consent to become his wife."

"You are very much mistaken, Mlle. Herminie. Accept Gerald's offer, and you will have no humiliations to fear. Gerald is his own master. Since he lost his father several years ago, he has had unbounded influence over his mother. He will make her understand what this love is to him. But if Madame de Senneterre seems disposed to sacrifice Gerald's happiness to financial greed, my friend is resolved, after all means of persuasion have been exhausted, of course, to dispense with his mother's consent, if need be."

"But I, monsieur, must have, cost what it may, not the affection,—for that does not come at will,—but the esteem of my husband's mother because I am worthy of her esteem. Never, do you understand me, never shall any one say that I was the cause of a rupture between Gerald and his mother, or that I took advantage of his love for me to force myself upon a noble and distinguished family; no, monsieur, no one shall ever say that of me, my pride will not permit it."

As she uttered these words Herminie was truly superb in her sadness and dignity.

Olivier had too keen a sense of honour himself not to share the young girl's scruples—the same scruples which Gerald, too, had feared, for both the young men knew Herminie's indomitable pride.

Nevertheless, Olivier, resolved to make a last effort, said:

"But consider well, Mlle. Herminie, I entreat you. Gerald does all that any man of honour can do in offering you his hand. What more do you desire?"

"What I desire, monsieur, as I have told you, is to be treated with the consideration which is due me, and which I have a right to expect from M. de Senneterre's family."

"But Gerald can be responsible only for himself, mademoiselle. Any attempt to exact more would—"

"Say no more, M. Olivier," said Herminie, interrupting him; "you know me, and you know that I have a firm will."

"I do, mademoiselle."

"Very well. I will never willingly see Gerald again while I live, unless Madame de Senneterre, his mother, comes here—"

"Here?" exclaimed Olivier, in astonishment.

"Yes, unless Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre comes here and tells me that she consents to my marriage with her son. Then, no one can ever say that I forced myself upon this noble family."

This demand—which seemed and which was, in fact, merely the natural outcome of an intense but laudable pride—Herminie uttered simply and naturally, because, filled with a justly high respect for herself, the young girl felt that she asked only what was her just due.

But at the first thought, this demand seemed to Olivier so exorbitant that, in his astonishment, he could not help saying:

"Madame de Senneterre—come here—to tell you that she consents to your marriage with her son,—why, what are you thinking of, Mlle. Herminie? That exceeds the bounds of possibility!"

"And why, monsieur?" asked the young girl, with such ingenuous pride that Olivier, remembering how generous and noble Herminie's character and love were, replied, with no little embarrassment:

"You ask why Madame de Senneterre can not come here to tell you that she consents to your marriage with her son?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"But, mademoiselle, even ignoring the convenances of the fashionable world, the overtures you ask from a lady of Madame de Senneterre's age—"

But again interrupting Olivier, the girl said, with a bitter smile:

"If I belonged to the fashionable world of which you speak, monsieur,—if I had a mother and relatives, instead of being a poor orphan,—and M. de Senneterre desired my hand in marriage, would it not be according to the rules of propriety you spoke of just now that Madame de Senneterre should be the first to approach my mother or my

relatives in her son's behalf?"

"Certainly, mademoiselle, but—"

"I have no mother, and I have no relatives," continued Herminie, sadly. "To whom, then, if not to me, should Madame de Senneterre address herself in relation to my marriage?"

"One word, mademoiselle, Madame de Senneterre might do this if she approved of the marriage."

"And that is precisely why I ask it, M. Olivier."

"But Gerald's mother does not even know you, mademoiselle."

"If Madame de Senneterre has such a poor opinion of her son as to believe him capable of choosing a wife unworthy of him, she can make all needful inquiries in relation to me. Thank God, I have nothing to fear."

"That is true," said Olivier, who had exhausted all his arguments.

"So this is my last word, M. Olivier," continued Herminie. "If Madame de Senneterre is not opposed to my marriage with her son, she will prove it by making the kindly overtures I ask; if she does not, she will consider me unworthy to enter her family, and in that case I will never see M. de Senneterre again."

"Oh, Mlle. Herminie, if only out of compassion for Gerald—"

"Believe me, I am much more in need of pity than M. de Senneterre," said the girl, and, no longer able to restrain her tears, she buried her face in her hands. "I may die of grief, I do not know, but to the last I will at least be worthy of Gerald and of his love."

Olivier was in despair, but he could not help admiring this noble pride, though he deeply deplored the consequences so far as Gerald was concerned.

Suddenly a loud ring of the door-bell resounded through the room. Herminie sprang up and hastily dried her tears; then, remembering Mlle. de Beaumesnil's note, she said to Olivier:

"It must be Ernestine. Poor child, I had forgotten all about her. M. Olivier, will you have the goodness to open the door for me?"

"One word more," said Olivier, in earnest, almost solemn tones; "you have no conception of the intensity of Gerald's love for you. You know I am not prone to exaggeration, yet I am afraid, do you hear me, positively afraid, when I think of the possible consequences of your refusal."

Herminie trembled at Olivier's ominous words. For a moment she seemed to be torn by conflicting doubts and fears; but she finally triumphed, though the poor girl, exhausted by this mental conflict, answered in tones that were barely audible:

"The thought of causing Gerald suffering is terrible to me, for I can judge of his love by my own. My own sorrow, too, enables me to judge what his must be. Nevertheless, I will never sacrifice my dignity, for that is Gerald's as much as mine."

"I entreat you, mademoiselle, do not—"

"You have heard my resolve, M. Olivier. I shall not say another word. Have pity on me. Can you not see that this interview is killing me?"

Olivier, seeing that it was useless to expostulate further, bowed to Herminie in silence, and then walked towards the door; but he had scarcely opened it when he exclaimed:

"My uncle, and you, Mlle. Ernestine! Great Heavens! This pallor—and this blood on your forehead! What has happened?"

On hearing Olivier's words, Herminie rushed out of her room into the little hallway.

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD NEWS.

The cause of Olivier's surprise and alarm was only too apparent.

Commander Bernard, pale as death and greatly agitated, was clinging to Mlle. de Beaumesnil's arm as if for support; while the young girl, quite as pale as the old officer, and clad in a simple lawn dress, had several blood-stains on her forehead and cheek.

"What is the matter, uncle?" cried Olivier, scrutinising the veteran's face with deep anxiety. "What has happened?"

"Great Heavens! Ernestine, are you hurt?" cried Herminie, almost simultaneously.

"It is nothing, Herminie," replied the young girl, trying to smile, though her voice trembled violently. "It is nothing,

but excuse me for bringing this gentleman in. Just now—I—you see—"

But the poor child could say no more. Strength and courage were alike exhausted. Every vestige of colour fled from her lips; her eyes closed, her head fell back, her limbs gave way under her, and she would have fallen if Herminie had not caught her in her arms.

"She has fainted!" cried the duchess. "Help me carry her into my room, M. Olivier."

"And I—I am the cause of all this trouble," said the commander, following Olivier and Herminie with tottering steps as they carried Ernestine into Herminie's room. "Poor child," he murmured; "what a kind heart she has! What courage she displayed!"

The duchess, having placed Ernestine in the armchair, removed her hat and pushed back from the pure white brow her beautiful chestnut hair, which rolled down in heavy, shining waves upon her shoulders; then, while Olivier supported the girl's unconscious head, Herminie with a soft handkerchief staunched the blood which was flowing from a slight wound a little way above the temple.

The old sailor stood near, watching this touching scene, his lips trembling, and unable to utter a word, while big tears dropped slowly down from his eyes upon his white moustache.

"Support her, M. Olivier, while I go for some cold water and a little cologne," said Herminie.

She returned almost immediately with a handsome china basin, and a bottle of cologne, and, after sponging the wound lightly with a mixture of cologne and water, Herminie poured a little cologne in the palm of her hand and made Mlle. de Beaumesnil inhale it.

Gradually Ernestine's pale lips recovered their wonted colour and a slight flush succeeded the pallor in her cheeks.

"Heaven be praised! She is recovering consciousness," whispered Herminie, gathering up the orphan's long tresses and securing them with her shell comb.

Olivier, who had seemed deeply affected by the scene, now said to the duchess, who was standing beside the armchair, supporting Mlle. de Beaumesnil's head on her bosom:

"Mlle. Herminie, I regret very much that it should be under such unfortunate circumstances that I have the honour of introducing to you my uncle, Commander Bernard."

"'She has fainted.'"
Original etching by Adrian Marcel.

The young girl responded with an almost affectionate smile and bow, and the old officer said:

"And I, mademoiselle, am doubly sorry, as I was unfortunately the cause of this accident which distresses you so much."

"But how did it happen, uncle?" asked Olivier.

So while Herminie, seeing that, thanks to her attentions, Ernestine was gradually regaining consciousness, made her again inhale a few drops of cologne, Commander Bernard began his explanation by saying:

"I went out this morning while you were talking with one of your friends, Olivier."

"Yes, uncle, Madame Barbançon told me that you had been so imprudent as to go out in spite of your extreme weakness, but she felt less anxious about you, I thought, from the fact that you had seemed in unusually good spirits when you left the house."

"Yes, yes, I was unusually gay because I was happy, oh, very happy, for this morning—"

But the commander, checking himself suddenly, gazed at Olivier with a peculiar expression, then added, with a sigh:

"No, no, I must not tell you now. Well, as I said before, I went out—"

"It was a very imprudent thing for you to do, uncle."

"Perhaps it was, but I had my reasons for wanting to go; besides, I thought a walk in the open air might do me good. Still, being a little doubtful of my strength, instead of going out on the plain as usual, I followed the broad grassy terrace that borders the railroad track in this direction. Feeling tired after I had walked a short distance, I sat down to rest and sun myself on the top of a bank on the side of one of those new streets which have been graded and paved, but on which no houses have yet been erected. I sat there a quarter of an hour, perhaps, then, thinking myself sufficiently rested, I decided that I would get up and start for home. But the walk, short as it was, had exhausted my strength completely, for I had scarcely gotten upon my feet before I was seized with vertigo, my knees trembled under me, I lost my balance; the bank was steep—"

"And you fell?" asked Olivier, anxiously.

"I must have slidden rather than fallen to the foot of the bank, I think, and my situation would not have been at all dangerous, I suppose, if a big wagon, loaded with stones and drawn by horses which had been left to guide themselves by the driver who was walking on ahead, had not happened to come along just then."

"Great God!" exclaimed Olivier.

"How terrible!" cried Herminie.

"Ah, yes, especially to that dear young lady you see lying there wounded, yes, wounded by risking her own life to save mine!"

"What, uncle, this wound of Mlle. Ernestine's—?"

"When I fell from the top of the bank," resumed the old man, interrupting his nephew, who had cast a look of inexpressible gratitude on Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "my head struck the pavement, and I lay there unable to make the slightest movement, though I seemed to see the horses advancing towards me through a sort of mist. My head could not have been more than a yard from the wheel when I heard a loud cry, and dimly perceived a woman, who was coming in the opposite direction from the horses, rush towards me. Then consciousness deserted me entirely. When I regained it," continued the old man, with increasing emotion, "I was half lying, half sitting, on the bank a couple of yards from the spot where I had fallen, and a young girl, an angel of goodness and courage, was kneeling beside me, with clasped hands, her face still pale with terror, and her forehead covered with blood. And it was she," exclaimed the old officer, turning to Ernestine, who had now entirely recovered her senses, "yes, it was you, mademoiselle, who saved my life at the risk of your own,—you, a frail, delicate creature who listened only to the promptings of your noble heart and indomitable courage."

"Oh, Ernestine, how proud I am of being your friend!" cried the duchess, pressing the blushing and embarrassed girl to her heart.

"Yes, you may well be!" cried the old man, enthusiastically.

"Mademoiselle," said Olivier, in his turn, addressing Mlle. de Beaumesnil with unmistakable agitation, "I can only say—but I feel sure that you will understand what these words mean to me—I owe the life of my uncle, or rather of the most tenderly loved father, to you."

"M. Olivier," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, averting her eyes after a wondering glance at the young man, "what you say makes me doubly happy, for until now I was entirely ignorant that this gentleman was that dear relative of yours Herminie was telling me about day before yesterday."

"But how are you feeling now, mademoiselle?" inquired the old man, with deep interest. "Don't you think it would be well to send for a physician, Mlle. Herminie? Olivier will run and get one."

"Pray do nothing of the kind, M. Olivier," cried Ernestine, hastily. "My head hurts me very little; the wound must be scarcely more than a scratch, for I hardly feel it. When I fainted just now, it was more from excitement than pain."

"That makes no difference, you must have a little rest, all the same," said Herminie. "I think, with you, that your wound is slight, but you have had such a fright that I intend to keep you a few hours."

"Oh, so far as that prescription is concerned, I will take it with pleasure, my dear Herminie," responded Mlle. de Beaumesnil, smiling; "and I shall try to make my convalescence last as long as possible."

"And now, Olivier, if you will give me your arm, we will leave these young ladies," said the veteran.

"M. Olivier, it will not do at all for Commander Bernard to return home on foot, weak as he is. You had better tell our portress to call a cab for you."

"No, no, my dear young lady, with Olivier's assistance I shall get along nicely. The fresh air will do me a world of good, and then I can show Olivier the place where I should have been killed but for this guardian angel here. I am

not much of a devotee, mademoiselle, but I shall often make a sort of pilgrimage to that grassy slope to pray after my fashion for the noble-hearted girl who saved me at a time I was so anxious to live, for this very morning—"

And then, for the second time, to Olivier's great surprise, the veteran seemed to check words which were almost upon his lips.

"Oh, well, never mind," he continued, "I shall pray after my fashion for my guardian angel, for really," added the veteran, smilingly, "the world seems to be upside down, for now it is young girls who save old soldiers,—but fortunately the old soldiers have heart enough left for gratitude and devotion."

Olivier, with his eyes riveted on Mlle. de Beaumesnil's sad and gentle face, was experiencing a feeling of compassionate tenderness which was full of charm. His heart throbbed with conflicting emotions as he gazed at the young girl, and recalled the incidents of his first meeting with her, her ingenuous frankness and quaint originality, and, above all, Herminie's intimation that her friend's lot was far from being a happy one. Olivier had long been an ardent admirer of Herminie's rare beauty, but at this moment Ernestine seemed equally attractive in his eyes.

The young soldier was so absorbed that his uncle was obliged to take him by the arm and say to him:

"Come, my boy, we must no longer trespass on the hospitality which Mlle. Herminie will surely pardon me for having accepted."

"The fact is, Herminie," said Ernestine, "knowing you lived only a short distance from the scene of the accident, I thought I might venture—"

"Surely you are not going to apologise for having acted as any friend would have done?" the duchess exclaimed, interrupting her.

"We will bid you adieu, young ladies," said the old naval officer, then, turning to Ernestine, he said earnestly:

"It would grieve me too much to think that I had seen you to-day for the first and last time. Oh, have no fears, mademoiselle," exclaimed the old man, noting a slight expression of embarrassment on the girl's tell-tale face, "my gratitude gives me no excuse for intruding myself upon you, but I should consider it a great favour if you and Mlle. Herminie would occasionally permit me to call and see you,—for it is not enough to have a heart full of gratitude, one should at least be allowed to sometimes give expression to it."

"M. Bernard," replied Herminie, "this desire on your part is too natural for Ernestine and me to feel any inclination to oppose it; and some evening when Ernestine will be at liberty, we will let you know, and you must do us the honour to come and take a cup of tea with us."

"May I really?" the veteran exclaimed, joyfully. Then he added:

"Yes, yes, the world does indeed seem to be upside down, for it is those who are already under heavy obligations who have benefits heaped upon them by their benefactors; but I am more than resigned, so adieu, my dear young ladies, or, rather, *au revoir*. Are you ready, Olivier?"

But as he reached the door he paused, and seemed to hesitate, then after a moment's reflection he came back, and said:

"I cannot do it, my dear young ladies; I cannot carry my secret away with me."

"A secret, M. Bernard?"

"Yes; I have been on the point of telling it twice, but both times I have checked myself, because I had promised to keep silence; but after all, it is only right that Mlle. Ernestine, to whom I owe my life, should at least know why I am so glad to live—"

"I, too, think you owe Ernestine this reward, M. Bernard," said Herminie.

"I assure you that I should be very happy to be honoured with your confidence, monsieur," added Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"And it would be a real proof of confidence, mademoiselle, for, as I told you, I was advised to keep the matter a secret, and I must confess, my dear Olivier, that it was to keep it a secret from you that I went out this morning."

"But why, uncle? I do not understand."

"Why, because in spite of all the advice in the world, in my first transports of happiness over the good news which I had just heard, I couldn't have helped falling upon your neck and telling you all. So I went out, hoping to become sufficiently accustomed to my happiness to be able to conceal it from you afterwards."

"But, uncle, what good news do you refer to?" inquired Olivier, with increasing surprise.

"Your friend who was at the house this morning did not tell you that his first visit was to me, did he?"

"No, uncle, when he came out into the garden to find me, I supposed he had just arrived."

"Yes, for we had agreed to say nothing about our interview, as it was he who brought me the good news, and Heaven knows he was pleased enough about it, though everything else seemed to be going wrong with him. In short, young ladies, you will understand my happiness, I think, when I tell you that my brave Olivier has been made an officer."

"I?" exclaimed Olivier, with rapturous delight, "I an officer?"

"Oh, what happiness for you, M. Olivier," cried Herminie.

"Yes, my brave boy," exclaimed the veteran, pressing Olivier's hands warmly, "yes, you are an officer; but I was to keep the secret from you until the day you will receive your commission, so your happiness would be complete, for you do not know all—"

"What more is there to tell, M. Bernard?" inquired Ernestine, who was watching the scene with lively interest.

"It is that my dear Olivier will not have to leave me again; at least not for a long time, for he has been appointed an officer in one of the regiments that have just come to garrison Paris. Ah, Mlle. Ernestine, have I not reason to love life now that Olivier and I are both so fortunate? Do you understand now the full extent of my gratitude to you?"

The newly made officer stood silent and thoughtful, but a strong emotion betrayed itself in his features as he glanced at Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with a new and very peculiar expression.

"Why, my boy," said the veteran, surprised and somewhat chagrined at the thoughtful silence which had followed Olivier's first exclamation of joy and astonishment, "how is this? I thought you would be so delighted to hear of your appointment. I know very well that it is only a tardily rendered acknowledgment of services rendered, still—"

"Pray do not think me ungrateful, uncle," replied Olivier, in a voice that trembled with emotion. "If I am silent, it is only because my heart is too full for utterance when I think of all the happiness this news implies; besides, I feel sure that I owe my appointment to the enthusiastic efforts of my best friend—an appointment, too, that is unspeakably precious to me," added Olivier, casting still another look at Ernestine, who blushed, though she knew not why, as she met his earnest gaze, "because—because—it is you who announce it to me, my dear uncle."

But it was evident that Olivier had not disclosed the real reason that rendered his new appointment such a boon to him.

Ernestine alone seemed to read the young man's secret thoughts, for she blushed again and a tear glittered in her eye.

"And now, Mister Officer," resumed the veteran, gaily, "as these young ladies have heard our good news, we must no longer trespass upon their good nature. I trust, however, that Mlle. Herminie will not forget her promised invitation to take tea with her. You see I have a good memory, mademoiselle."

"You need have no fears on that score, M. Bernard. I shall prove to you that my memory is quite as good as yours," responded Herminie, graciously.

While the commander was addressing a few more words of gratitude and of farewell to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, Olivier, approaching Herminie, said to her in a low, beseeching tone:

"Mlle. Herminie, this is one of those days which should incline one to clemency. What shall I say to Gerald?"

"M. Olivier," replied Herminie, her face clouding suddenly, for the poor child had almost forgotten her own sorrows for the time being, "you know my resolve."

Olivier knew Herminie's remarkable firmness of character, so he smothered a sigh as he thought of Gerald's disappointment.

"One word more, Mlle. Herminie?" he asked. "Will you have the goodness to grant me another interview to-morrow at any hour that suits you? It is upon a very important, but purely personal matter I wish to consult you this time, and you will be doing me a great favour if you grant my request."

"With pleasure, M. Olivier," replied the duchess, though she was not a little surprised at the request. "I shall expect you to-morrow morning."

"I thank you, mademoiselle. Good-bye until to-morrow, then," said Olivier.

He departed in company with Commander Bernard, and the two young girls—the two sisters—were left alone together.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

Olivier's parting words to Herminie had reawakened the grief and chagrin from which her mind had been temporarily diverted by Commander Bernard's unexpected arrival in company with Ernestine.

Ernestine, too, was silent and thoughtful for two reasons. One was the peculiar look Olivier had bestowed on her on hearing of his promotion,—a look whose tender and touching significance the young girl fancied she understood; the other was the melancholy pleasure she experienced at the recollection that this new but dearly prized friend was the young musician who had so greatly ameliorated Madame de Beaumesnil's sufferings towards the last.

Ernestine's silence was likewise prolonged by the difficulty she experienced in bringing the conversation around to the subject of her mother.

Her visit to Herminie had been easily managed. On going to church with Mlle. de la Rochaiguë as usual, she had

asked Madame Laîné to accompany them, and on leaving church, by pretending that she had some shopping to do, she had succeeding in getting away alone with her governess, after which a cab had taken them to within a short distance of the Rue de Monceau, where Madame Laîné was now awaiting, in that vehicle, the return of her youthful employer.

Though the silence of the duchess had lasted only a few moments, Ernestine, noticing the sad reverie into which her friend had fallen, said to her, with mingled tenderness and timidity:

"Herminie, I do not want to be intrusive, but it seems to me you are not in your usual good spirits this morning."

"That is true," answered the girl, frankly. "I am in great trouble."

"In great trouble, my dear Herminie?" asked Ernestine, quickly.

"Yes, and perhaps I will tell you all about it by and by, but just at this time I am too heart-broken to talk about it, so bear with me a little, until I can explain the cause of my grief, though I don't know that I ever can—"

"But why this reserve, Herminie. Don't you think me worthy of your confidence?"

"That is not the reason, my dear child, but you are so young that I ought not to talk to you about such matters, perhaps, but by and by we will see about it. Now, let us think about your comfort. You must lie down on my bed; you can rest better there than in a chair."

"But, my dearest Herminie—"

Without taking any notice of her guest's protest, Herminie stepped to the alcove and drew back the curtains, which her natural delicacy and reserve caused her to keep always closed, and Ernestine saw a little white iron bedstead covered with a pale pink counterpane, and surmounted by a canopy consisting of double draperies of the pretty chintz and fresh white muslin. The alcove, too, was hung with pale pink muslin, and the pillow-slip, dazzling in its whiteness, was edged with lace.

In fact, nothing could be daintier and prettier than this virginal couch, upon which Ernestine, at last yielding to the entreaties of the duchess, laid down to rest awhile.

Drawing the armchair up to the bedside and seating herself in it, Herminie, taking the orphan's two hands affectionately in hers, said, with tender solicitude:

"I am sure a little rest will do you a world of good, Ernestine. How do you feel now?"

"My head aches a little, that is all."

"What a frightful risk you ran, my dear child."

"I don't deserve so much praise, though, Herminie; I did not think of the danger I was incurring for an instant. I saw the old gentleman fall almost under the wheels of the wagon, it seemed to me. I shrieked, and sprang to his assistance, and though I am not very strong, I succeeded, I scarcely know how, in dragging M. Bernard enough out of the way to prevent him from being crushed."

"You dear, brave child! But the wound on your head—"

"The wheel must have struck me, I suppose, for I became unconscious almost at that same instant, and M. Bernard, on recovering his senses, noticed that I was hurt. But don't let us talk any more about it. I was more frightened than hurt, and my reputation for bravery was very cheaply won."

Then casting an admiring glance around her, the young girl continued:

"You were right in saying that your room was charming, Herminie. How pretty and dainty everything is! And those lovely engravings and beautiful statuettes and graceful vases filled with flowers are all so simple and inexpensive that it seems as if any one might have them, and yet nobody has, because one must have taste to select them. And when I think," added the girl, enthusiastically, "that it was by your own labour that you acquired all these pretty things, I do not wonder that you are proud and happy. How much you must have enjoyed yourself here."

"Yes, I have had a great deal of pleasure out of my home, it is true."

"But now all these pretty surroundings have lost their charm? Why, that sounds very ungrateful in you."

"No, no, this little room is still unspeakably dear to me!" exclaimed Herminie, quickly, recollecting that it was in this room that she had seen Gerald for the first time, and for the last time, too, perhaps.

Ernestine had not been able to devise any way of leading the conversation to the subject of her mother without arousing Herminie's suspicions, but now, happening to glance at the piano, she added:

"And there is the instrument you play so divinely. How much pleasure it would give me to hear you."

"Don't ask me just now, I beg of you, Ernestine. I should burst into tears at the sound of the first note. When I am sad, music always makes me weep."

"I can understand that, but you will let me hear you play and sing some day, will you not?"

"Oh, yes, I promise you that."

"And, by the way, speaking of music," continued Ernestine, trying to control herself, "the other night when I was at Madame Herbaut's, I heard somebody say that a very sick lady once sent for you to play and sing for her."

"That is true," replied Herminie, sadly, "and this lady was the one I spoke to you about the other evening because

she had a daughter whose name was the same as yours."

"And while she was listening to you the poor lady's sufferings became less poignant?"

"Because she forgot them, but alas! this alleviation of her sufferings could not save her."

"Kind-hearted as you are, Herminie, what loving attentions you must have lavished on the poor lady."

"Her situation was so interesting, so pitiable, you see, Ernestine. To die while still so young, and deploring the absence of a beloved daughter!"

"Did she ever speak of this daughter to you, Herminie?"

"Poor unhappy mother! Her child was the subject of her every thought. She had a portrait of her, painted when she was a mere child, and I have often seen her eyes fill with tears when they rested upon the picture. She often told me, too, how richly her daughter deserved her tenderness by the amiability and sweetness of her disposition. She spoke, too, of letters which her daughter wrote to her every day, letters in which her beloved child's nobility of heart showed itself in every line."

"This lady must have loved you very much to make you her confidante to such an extent, Herminie."

"She treated me with the greatest kindness, so it was only natural I should become deeply attached to her."

"And the daughter of this lady who was so fond of you, and whom you seem to have loved so much in return,—have you never felt any desire to make the acquaintance of this other Ernestine?"

"Yes, for everything her mother told me about her made me love her in advance, as it were, but at that time she was in a foreign land. When she returned to France, I did, for a time, have some hope of seeing and knowing her, but I was disappointed in that."

"How did that happen, my dear Herminie?" inquired Ernestine, concealing her curiosity, at least in part, however.

"Business took me to the house of her guardian, and while I was there something was said about my giving the young lady music lessons."

Ernestine gave a joyous start. This idea had never occurred to her before, but wishing to have something to justify her curiosity in Herminie's eyes, she exclaimed, laughingly:

"You must think it strange that I ask you so many questions about this young lady. Perhaps it is because I feel that I should be dreadfully jealous if you should ever love her better than you do me."

"Oh, you need have no fears on that score," said Herminie, shaking her head, sadly.

"But why should you not love her?" asked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, eagerly; then regretting her involuntary display of anxiety, she added: "But I am not selfish enough to wish to deprive this young lady of your affection, of course."

"What I know of her, and the recollection of her mother's great kindness to me, will always make me fond of her. But alas! my dear Ernestine, it is a matter of pride with me to shun any friendship that does not seem entirely disinterested, and this young lady is very wealthy and I am poor."

"You must have a poor opinion of her, then, after all," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, bitterly.

"Oh, no, Ernestine, after all her mother told me, I can not doubt her kindness of heart, but I am an entire stranger to her. Then, too, for many reasons, and more particularly from a fear of arousing sad recollections, I should not dare to speak of the circumstances which made me so intimately acquainted with her dying mother, nor of that mother's great kindness to me. Besides, would it not look very much as if I were trying to ingratiate myself with her, and presuming upon an affection to which I really have no claim?"

On hearing this admission, how earnestly Ernestine congratulated herself upon having won Herminie's affection before her new friend knew who she, Ernestine, really was! And what a strange coincidence! She had feared that, because she was the richest heiress in France, she would never be loved for herself alone; while Herminie, because she was poor, feared that her affection would not appear disinterested.

The duchess seemed to have become more and more depressed in spirits as the conversation proceeded. She had hoped to find in it a refuge from her own sad thoughts, but such had not been the case, for it was this same laudable pride which made Herminie fear that her love for Gerald might be attributed to vanity or mercenary motives, and so had led to the resolve which would inevitably ruin her only hope of happiness.

For how could she expect that Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre would ever consent to make the advances required of her? But alas! though endowed with sufficient courage to sacrifice her love to the dignity of that love, Herminie realised none the less keenly what terrible suffering this courageous sacrifice would entail.

So referring almost unconsciously to the anguish she felt, after a moment's silence, she remarked, in a strangely altered voice:

"Ah, my poor Ernestine, how sad it is that the purest and noblest affections can be thus degraded by unworthy suspicions!"

And unable to restrain her feelings any longer, she burst into tears and hid her face upon the bosom of Ernestine, who, half rising and pressing her friend to her heart, exclaimed:

"What is it, Herminie? What is it? I saw that you were becoming more and more depressed, but dared not ask you the reason."

"Do not say any more about it," replied Herminie, ashamed of her tears. "Forgive this weakness in me, but just

now a host of memories—"

"Herminie, I have no right to demand your confidence, I know, but sometimes it is a relief to talk of one's troubles—"

"Yes, yes, I know it. It is the constraint that is killing me, but oh, the humiliation, the disgrace!"

"Humiliation and disgrace attach to you? Oh, no, Herminie, you are too proud for that!"

"But is it not weak and humiliating to weep as I do, after having had the courage to make a commendable and even necessary resolution?" she sobbed.

Then, after a moment's hesitation, the duchess continued:

"Do not regard what I am about to tell you as a confidential revelation on my part, my dear child, but rather as a useful lesson."

"A lesson?"

"Yes, for you, like myself, are an orphan; like me, you are alone in the world; and possessed of none of the experience that might save you from the snares and pitfalls by which poor girls like us are continually surrounded. So listen to me, Ernestine, and may you be spared the misery I am suffering now."

And Herminie described the scene in which, justly incensed against Gerald, who had ventured to pay her landlord the money she owed, she had treated him first with haughtiness and disdain, but afterwards forgiven him, touched by the generous impulse to which he had thoughtlessly yielded. After which, Herminie continued in words like these:

"Two days after this meeting, in the hope of diverting my mind from thoughts which had already gained too great an ascendency over me for my peace of mind, I went to Madame Herbaut's house. Judge of my surprise when I met this same young man again at that entertainment. My first feeling was one of chagrin, almost of fear, a presentiment, doubtless; then I had the weakness to yield to the charm of this second meeting. Never before had I seen a man who possessed, like him, manners at once unpretending, refined and distinguished, a brilliant, versatile mind, but never failing delicacy of feeling. I hate flattery, but his was characterised with so much grace and delicacy that I accepted it only too gladly, I fear. I learned that evening that his name was Gerald, and that—"

"Gerald?" Ernestine exclaimed, hastily, recollecting that the Duc de Senneterre, one of the suitors for her hand, was also named Gerald.

Just then a loud ring of the door-bell attracted Herminie's attention and prevented her from noticing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's astonishment. The latter arose from the bed at the sound, while Herminie, greatly annoyed by this interruption, directed her steps towards the door.

An elderly serving man handed her a note containing these words:

"I have not seen you for several days, my dear child, not having felt as well as usual. Can you see me this morning?

Most affectionately yours,
"MAILLEFORT.

"P.S.—Do not take the trouble to answer in writing. If you will see your old friend, simply say 'yes' to the bearer."

Herminie, in her grief, was inclined to find some excuse for deferring M. de Maillefort's visit, but remembering that the marquis, belonging to the aristocracy as he did, was doubtless acquainted with Gerald, and that she might obtain some more definite information concerning her lover without revealing her secret, she said to the servant:

"I shall expect to see M. le Marquis de Maillefort sometime during the day."

But as she returned to the room where Mlle. de Beaumesnil was awaiting her, Herminie said to herself:

"What if M. de Maillefort should come while Ernestine is here? Oh, well, it will not matter much, after all, if she does see him; besides, the dear child is so retiring that, as soon as a stranger comes, she is sure to leave me alone with him."

So Herminie continued her conversation with Mlle. de Beaumesnil without making any allusion to M. de Maillefort's approaching visit, for fear that Ernestine would leave sooner than she had intended.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"Forgive me for having deserted you so unceremoniously, my dear Ernestine," Herminie remarked to her friend. "It was a letter, and I had to send a verbal reply."

"Do pray go on with your story, Herminie," replied Ernestine. "You have no idea how deeply interested I am."

"And it is such a relief to me to tell you my troubles."

"Yes, I was sure it would be," responded Ernestine, with ingenuous tenderness.

"I was just telling you that I learned at Madame Herbaut's little entertainment that this young man's name was Gerald Auvernay. It was M. Olivier who told me so, on introducing him to me."

"What! he knows M. Olivier?"

"They are intimate friends, for Gerald was a soldier in the same regiment as Olivier. On leaving the service, he entered the office of a notary, so he told me, but for some time past he had given up an employment which was so distasteful to him, and had found occupation on the fortifications under an officer of engineers he had known in Africa. So you see, Ernestine, that Gerald's position and mine were identical, and free as he seemed to be, I was surely excusable for allowing myself to yield to a fatal fondness for him."

"But why fatal, Herminie?"

"Wait and you shall know all. Two days after our meeting at Madame Herbaut's, on my return from my lessons, I went out into the garden to which my landlord had kindly given me the entrée. This garden, as you can see from the window, is separated from the street in the rear only by a hedge, and from the bench on which I had seated myself I saw Gerald pass. Instead of being handsomely dressed as on the evening before, he was clad in a gray blouse and a big straw hat. He gave a start of surprise on perceiving me, but far from seeming mortified at being seen in his working clothes, he bowed to me and, pausing, said gaily that he was just returning from his day's work, being engaged in superintending certain portions of the fortifications now in progress of construction at the end of the Rue de Monceau. 'An occupation which suits me much better than dull notary work,' he remarked. 'I am fairly well paid and I have a crowd of rather rough but very worthy men to superintend. I like it much better than copying stupid documents.'"

"I can understand that perfectly, my dear Herminie."

"It is more than likely that the cheerful way in which he accepted this arduous labour, manual labour, I might almost say, touched me all the more as Gerald had evidently received an excellent education. That evening when he left me he smilingly remarked that it was with the hope of sometimes meeting me within the boundaries of my park, as he often passed through that street on his way to visit a former comrade, who lived in a small house that could be seen from the garden. What will you think, Ernestine, when I tell you that almost every evening about sunset I had a chat with Gerald, and sometimes we even strolled out together to the same grassy knolls where M. Bernard met with his accident this morning? I found Gerald so full of frankness, generosity of heart, talent, and charming humour, he seemed to have such a high—I was about to say such a just—opinion of me, that when the day came that Gerald declared his love, and told me that he could not live without me, I was so happy, Ernestine, oh, so happy! for if Gerald had not loved me I do not know what would have become of me. It would have been impossible for me to do without this love, and now to love alone,—to love without hope," added the poor girl, hardly able to restrain her tears, "oh, it is worse than death, for it means a life for ever desolate."

Controlling her emotion, Herminie continued:

"I told Gerald my feelings with the utmost frankness. On my side there was not only love, but almost gratitude, for without him life would have seemed intolerable to me. 'We are both free to choose,' I said to Gerald; 'our positions are equal. We shall both have to work every day for our daily bread, and that gratifies my pride, for idleness imposed upon a wife is a cruel humiliation to her. Our lot will be humble, even precarious, perhaps, Gerald,' I added, 'but with courage, and strong in our mutual love and trust, we can defy the worst misfortunes.'"

"What noble words, Herminie! How proud M. Gerald must have been of your love! But as you have every chance of happiness, why these tears and your evident despair?"

"Do you not think that I was more than justified in loving him?" asked the poor girl, trying hard to repress her sobs. "Was not mine a true and noble love. Oh, tell me, is it possible that any one can accuse me—"

But Herminie could not finish the sentence, for sobs choked her utterance.

"Accuse you? *Mon Dieu!* Accuse you of what? Are you not as free as M. Gerald? Does he not love you as much as you love him? Are your positions not equal?"

"No, no, our positions are not equal," replied Herminie, dejectedly.

"What is that you say?"

"No, our positions are not equal, alas! and that is my chief misfortune, for in order to equalise our positions apparently, Gerald deceived me as to his real station in life."

"Great Heavens! Who is he, then?"

"The Duc de Senneterre."

"The Duc de Senneterre!" exclaimed Ernestine, filled with terror for Herminie, as she remembered that Gerald was one of the three suitors for her—Ernestine's—hand, and that she was to meet him at the ball on the following Thursday. Consequently, he must have deceived Herminie in the most shameless manner, as he was, at that very time, endeavouring to marry a rich heiress.

Herminie attributed her friend's intense dismay and astonishment entirely to the startling revelation that had just been made, however, and asked:

"Tell me, Ernestine, am I not, indeed, unfortunate?"

"But such a deception on his part was infamous. How did you discover it?"

"M. de Senneterre himself, feeling unable to endure the life of deceit his first falsehood imposed upon him, but not daring to make the confession himself, entrusted the unpleasant task to M. Olivier."

"It should be some comfort to you that M. de Senneterre at least made this confession of his own accord," said Ernestine.

"Yes, and, in spite of the grief it has caused me, I see in it a proof of the loyalty I so admired in him."

"Loyalty!" exclaimed Ernestine, bitterly. "Loyalty, and yet he deserts you!"

"Deserts me? Far from it. On the contrary, he renews his offer of his hand."

"He, M. de Senneterre?" exclaimed Ernestine, in even greater astonishment "But, in that case, why are you so unhappy, Herminie?" she added.

"Because a penniless orphan like myself can make such a marriage only at the cost of the bitterest humiliation."

Herminie could say no more, for just then the door-bell rang again.

"Forgive me, my dear Ernestine," she exclaimed, drying her tears. "I think I know who it is that has just rung. I am obliged to see this visitor and—"

"Then I will leave you, Herminie," said Ernestine, rising hastily. "I am sorry, though, to leave you in such grief."

"At least wait until my visitor comes in!"

"Go and open the door, then, Herminie, while I put on my hat."

The duchess started towards the door, then, recollecting M. de Maillefort's deformity, she returned, and said to her friend:

"My dear Ernestine, in order to spare the person I am expecting the slight annoyance which the expression of your face, when you first perceived his affliction, might cause him, I must warn you that this friend of mine is a hunchback."

On hearing this, Mlle. de Beaumesnil suddenly recollected that her governess had told her that the Marquis de Maillefort had asked for Herminie's address, and a vague fear led her to ask:

"Who is this friend?"

"A most estimable man who made my acquaintance by the merest chance, for he is one of the greatest of *grands seigneurs*. But I must not delay too long in opening the door. Excuse me for one moment, my dear Ernestine."

And Herminie disappeared, leaving Ernestine overwhelmed with consternation.

A grim presentiment whispered that M. de Maillefort was about to enter and find her in Herminie's home, and though Mlle. de Beaumesnil owed her resolve to learn the truth, at any cost, to the Marquis de Maillefort's ironical remarks, and though her feelings towards him had undergone an entire change, she was not yet sure to what extent she could rely upon him, and the prospect of such a meeting was most unwelcome.

Ernestine's fears were realised.

Her friend returned, accompanied by the marquis. Fortunately, Herminie, noticing that the curtains of the alcove were open, hastened to close them according to her habit, so, as her back was turned towards Ernestine and M. de Maillefort for several seconds, she did not notice the evident shock that her two friends experienced at the sight of each other.

M. de Maillefort gave a sudden start of astonishment on recognising Mlle. de Beaumesnil. Intense curiosity, mingled with uneasiness, was apparent in every feature. He could not believe his eyes, and he was about to speak, when Ernestine, pale and trembling, clasped her hands with such a beseeching air that the words died upon his lips.

When Herminie turned, M. de Maillefort's face no longer expressed the slightest astonishment, and, doubtless, with the intention of giving Mlle. de Beaumesnil time to recover herself, he said to Herminie:

"I am intruding, I am sure, mademoiselle. My visit is inopportune, perhaps."

"Believe me, monsieur, no visit of yours will ever be inopportune here," responded the duchess, earnestly. "I only ask your permission to show my friend to the door."

"I beg you will do so," answered the marquis, bowing. "I should be miserable if you stood on the slightest ceremony with me."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil was obliged to exercise all her self-control to maintain even an appearance of calmness, but, fortunately, the little hall-way leading to Herminie's room was dark, so the sudden alteration in Ernestine's features escaped the notice of her friend, as she said:

"Ernestine, after all I have just confided to you, I need not tell you how necessary your presence will be to me. Alas! I did not think I should so soon put your friendship to the test. In pity, Ernestine, do not leave me long alone! If you only knew how I shall suffer, for I cannot hope to see Gerald again, or, rather, the hope is so uncertain that I dare not even think of it, so I beseech you not to let any length of time pass without my seeing you."

"You may rest assured that I shall return as soon as I can, and that it will not be any fault of mine if—"

"Alas! I understand. Your time must be devoted to your work, because you are obliged to work in order to live. It is the same with me. In spite of my mental anguish, I shall have to begin my round of lessons one hour from now. My lessons, great Heavens! and I scarcely know what I am doing. But with people like us, we are not only obliged to suffer, but also to live."

Herminie uttered these last words with such despairing bitterness that Mlle. de Beaumesnil threw her arms around her friend's neck, and burst into tears.

"Come, come, I will not be so weak again, Ernestine," said Herminie, returning the embrace; "I promise you I will not. I will be content with whatever time you can give me. I will wait and think of you," added the duchess, forcing a smile. "Yes, to think of you, and to await your return, will be some consolation."

"Farewell, Herminie, farewell," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "I shall soon see you again,—just as soon as I possibly can, I promise you,—day after to-morrow, if possible. Yes, I will manage it somehow," added the orphan, resolutely, "day after to-morrow, at the same hour, you can count upon seeing me."

"Thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Herminie, embracing Ernestine effusively. "Ah, the compassion I showed to you your generous heart returns in liberal measure."

"Day after to-morrow, then, it shall be, Herminie."

"Again I thank you with my whole heart."

"And now good-bye," said the orphan.

It was in a deeply agitated frame of mind that she wended her way back to the spot where her governess was waiting for her in the cab. As she left the house, she met a man who was walking slowly up the street, casting furtive glances at the house in which Herminie lived.

This man was Ravil, who, as we have said before, frequently hung about the home of the duchess, of whom he had retained a vivid and extremely tantalising recollection ever since the day he so insolently accosted her, when she was on her way to the Beaumesnil mansion.

De Ravil instantly recognised the richest heiress in France, who, in her agitation, did not even glance at this man, whom she had met but once, at the Luxembourg, where M. de la Rochaiguë had taken her.

"What does this mean?" Ravil said to himself, in the utmost astonishment. "Here is the little Beaumesnil dressed almost like a grisette, coming out alone, pale and evidently frightened half to death, from a house in this miserable part of the town. I'll follow her cautiously at a distance, and see where she goes. The more I think of it, the more inclined I am to believe that it is the devil himself who sends me such a piece of good luck as this! Yes, this discovery may be the goose that lays the golden eggs for me. It rejoices my heart. The mere thought of it awakens golden visions like those which haunt that big ninny, Mornand."

While Ravil was following the unsuspecting Ernestine, Herminie returned to M. de Maillefort.

CHAPTER X.

DESPAIR.

M. de Maillefort awaited Herminie's return in a state of deep perplexity, wondering in vain what strange combination of circumstances had brought these two young girls together. The marquis had desired this *rapprochement* greatly, as we shall soon discover, but the hunchback had not yet devised any way to bring it about, so Ernestine's presence in Herminie's home, the secrecy with which she must have gone there, the secrecy, too, which Mlle. de Beaumesnil, by an imploring gesture, had begged him to preserve, all combined to excite his curiosity as well as his anxiety to the highest pitch.

So, on the return of Herminie, who apologised for having absented herself so long, the marquis said, with the most careless air imaginable:

"I shall be very sorry if you do not always treat me with that perfect freedom permissible between devoted friends, my dear child, and nothing could be more natural, I am sure, than a desire to exchange a few parting words with one of your young acquaintances, for this young lady is, I suppose—"

"One of my friends, monsieur, or rather my dearest friend."

"Ah, indeed," answered the marquis, smiling. "It must be a friendship of long standing, then, I suppose?"

"Very recent, on the contrary, monsieur. In fact, this friendship, though so true and tried, was conceived very suddenly."

"I have sufficient confidence in your powers of discernment and your nobility of heart to feel sure that you have chosen your friend wisely, my dear child."

"A single incident, which occurred scarcely an hour ago, monsieur, will give convincing proof of my friend's

courage and nobility of soul. At the risk of her own life,—for she escaped serious injury only by a hair's breadth,—she rescued an aged man from certain death."

And Herminie, proud of her friend, and anxious to see her appreciated as she deserved to be, proceeded to describe Ernestine's courageous rescue of Commander Bernard.

The emotion of the marquis on hearing this unexpected revelation, which revealed Mlle. de Beaumesnil in a new and most attractive light, can be imagined.

"She certainly displayed wonderful courage and generosity of heart!" he cried. Then he added: "I was sure of it! You could not choose your friends other than judiciously, my dear child. But who is this brave young girl?"

"An orphan like myself, monsieur, who supports herself by her own exertions. She is an embroiderer."

"Ah, an embroiderer! But as she, too, is an orphan, she lives alone, I suppose?"

"No, monsieur, she lives with a relative, who took her, last Sunday evening, to a small entertainment, where I met her for the first tame."

The marquis knit his brows. For an instant he was almost tempted to believe that one of the Rochaiguës was implicated in this mystery, but his implicit faith in Herminie caused him to reject that idea, though he wondered how Mlle. de Beaumesnil had managed to absent herself from her guardian's house for an entire evening, without the knowledge of the baron or his family. He asked himself, too, with no less astonishment, how Ernestine had managed to secure several hours of entire freedom that very morning, but fearing he would arouse Herminie's suspicions by questioning her further, he remarked:

"It is pleasant for me to know that you have a friend so worthy of you, and it seems to me," added the hunchback, "that she could not have come more opportunely."

"And why, monsieur?"

"You know you have given me the privilege of being perfectly frank with you."

"Certainly, monsieur."

"Very well, then, it seems to me that you are not in your accustomed good spirits. You look pale, and it is very evident that you have been weeping, my poor child."

"I assure you, monsieur—"

"And all this is the more noticeable because you seemed so perfectly happy the last two or three times I saw you. Yes, contentment could be read on every feature; it even imparted to your beauty such a radiance and expansiveness that—as you may perhaps remember, from the rarity of the thing—I complimented you upon your radiant beauty. Think of it! I, who am the very poorest flatterer that ever lived!" added the hunchback, probably in the hope of bringing a smile to Herminie's lips.

But the girl, unable to conquer her sadness, replied:

"The change in my appearance which you speak of is probably due to the fright that Ernestine's narrow escape caused me, monsieur."

The marquis, sure now that Herminie was suffering from some grief that she wished to conceal, insisted no further, but said:

"It is as you say, doubtless, but the danger is over now, my dear child, so I may as well tell you that my visit this morning is important, very important. You know that I have made it a point of honour not to say anything to you of late in relation to the grave matter that first brought me here."

"Yes, monsieur, and I am grateful to you for not having again referred to a subject that is so painful to me."

"I am compelled to speak again, if not of Madame de Beaumesnil, at least of her daughter," said the marquis, casting a keen, searching look at Herminie, in order to discover—though he was almost certain to the contrary—if the young girl knew that her new friend was Mlle. de Beaumesnil; but he did not feel the shadow of a doubt of Herminie's ignorance on the subject when she promptly replied, without the slightest embarrassment:

"You say you must speak of Madame de Beaumesnil's daughter, monsieur?"

"Yes, my dear child. I have made no attempt to conceal my devoted friendship for Madame de Beaumesnil, nor her dying requests in relation to the young orphan whom I have not yet discovered, in spite of the most persistent efforts. I told you, too, of the no less urgent request of the countess concerning her daughter, Ernestine. For divers reasons which, believe me, do not affect you in the least, I am very desirous, solely on Mlle. de Beaumesnil's account, understand, that you two young girls should become acquainted."

"But how could that be brought about, monsieur?" asked Herminie, eagerly, thinking what happiness it would give her to know her sister.

"In the easiest way imaginable—a way that was even suggested to you, I believe, when you so nobly returned that five hundred franc note to Madame de la Rochaiguë."

"Yes, monsieur, Madame de la Rochaiguë did give me some reason to hope that I might be employed to give Mlle. de Beaumesnil music lessons."

"Well, my dear child, that has been arranged."

"Really, monsieur?"

"Yes, I had a talk with the baroness last evening, and either to-day or to-morrow she is going to mention the matter to Mlle. de Beaumesnil. I do not doubt that she will accept the proposition. As for you, my dear child, I do not apprehend any refusal on your part."

"Far from it, monsieur."

"Besides, what I ask for this young girl, I ask in the name of the mother to whom you were so devotedly attached," said the marquis, with deep emotion.

"You can not doubt the interest I shall always feel in Mlle. de Beaumesnil, monsieur, but the relations between, us will, of course, be confined to our lessons."

"Not by any means."

"But, monsieur!"

"You must understand, my dear child, that I should not have taken all this trouble to bring about an acquaintance between Mlle. de Beaumesnil and yourself, if it was to be confined to the lessons given and received."

"But, monsieur—"

"There are important interests at stake, interests which I feel can be safely intrusted to your hands."

"Explain, monsieur, I beg of you."

"I will do that after you have seen your new scholar," replied the marquis, thinking what a delightful surprise it would be to Herminie when she recognised Mlle. de Beaumesnil in the poor embroideress, her best friend.

"In any case, you may be sure that I shall consider it a sacred duty to fulfil your instructions, monsieur, and that I shall hold myself in readiness to go to Mlle. de Beaumesnil as soon as I am sent for."

"I will introduce you to her, myself."

"So much the better, monsieur."

"And if agreeable to you, next Saturday at this hour, I will come for you."

"I shall expect you monsieur, and I thank you very much for sparing me the embarrassment of presenting myself alone."

"And now a word of advice in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's interest, my dear child. No one knows, and no one must know that her poor mother summoned me to her in her last hours. My deep affection for the countess must also remain a secret. You will maintain a profound silence on the subject in case either M. or Madame de la Rochaiguë should ever speak of me."

"I shall comply with your wishes, monsieur."

"And I will come on Saturday, that is understood," said the hunchback, rising. "It will give me great pleasure to introduce you to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and I feel sure that you yourself will find a pleasure you do not anticipate in this meeting."

"I hope so, monsieur," replied Herminie, rather absently, for, seeing that the marquis was about to go, she did not know how to broach the subject that had been uppermost in her mind ever since the hunchback's arrival.

At last, endeavouring to appear perfectly calm, she said:

"Before you go, monsieur, will you have the goodness to give me a little information if it be in your power to do it?"

"Speak, my dear child," said M. de Maillefort, reseating himself.

"M. le marquis, in the social world to which you belong, have you ever chanced to meet Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre?"

"I was one of her deceased husband's most intimate friends, and I am extremely fond of the present Duc de Senneterre, one of the best, most whole-souled young men I know. I had fresh proofs of his nobility of character only yesterday," added the hunchback, with evident emotion.

A slight flush suffused Herminie's face on hearing Gerald thus praised by a man she esteemed as highly as M. de Maillefort.

That gentleman, evidently much surprised, continued:

"But what information do you desire in relation to Madame de Senneterre, my dear child? Has any one proposed that you should give her daughters lessons?"

Hastily catching at these words which helped her out of a great difficulty by furnishing her with a pretext for her inquiries, Herminie, in spite of her natural abhorrence of anything like deception, replied:

"Yes, monsieur, some one told me that I might possibly secure pupils in that distinguished family, but before making any attempt in that direction, I was anxious to know if I could expect from Madame de Senneterre the consideration my rather too sensitive nature exacts. In short, monsieur, I am anxious to know whether Madame de Senneterre possesses a kindly nature or whether I am not likely to find in her that haughtiness which sometimes characterises persons of such an exalted position as hers."

"I understand you perfectly, and I am very glad you applied to me, for knowing you as I know you, dear, proud

child that you are, I say very plainly, neither seek nor accept any pupils in that family. The Mlles. de Senneterre are lovely girls—they have their brother's disposition—but the duchess—!"

"Well, monsieur?" asked poor Herminie.

"Ah, my dear child, the duchess is more deeply in love with her title than any other woman I ever saw—which is very strange, as she is really extremely well born, while this ridiculous and absurd pride of rank is generally confined to *parvenus*. In short, my dear child, I would much rather see you brought in contact with twenty M. Bouffards than with this insufferably arrogant woman. The Bouffards are so coarse and ignorant that their rudeness amuses rather than wounds, but in the Duchesse de Senneterre you will find the most polite insolence, or rather the most insolent politeness, imaginable, so I am sure that you, my dear child, who have such a high respect for yourself, could not remain in Madame de Senneterre's company ten minutes without being wounded to the quick, and resolving that you would never set foot in her house again. That being the case, what is the use of entering it?"

"I thank you, monsieur," replied Herminie, almost crushed by this revelation which destroyed her last hope,—a hope she had preserved in spite of herself, that perhaps Madame de Senneterre, touched by her son's love, would consent to make the concession that Herminie's pride demanded.

"No, no, my dear child," continued the marquis, "Gerald de Senneterre's filial tenderness must blind him completely for him not to lose all patience with his mother's absurd arrogance, and for him not to see that she is as hard-hearted as she is narrow-minded. In short, her selfishness is only exceeded by her cupidity. I have every reason to know this, so I am delighted to defraud her of a victim by enlightening you in regard to her. And now good-bye. Let me be of service to you in any matter, however small, as often as you can. It will serve to content me while waiting for something better. And now I will again bid you good-bye until Saturday."

"Until Saturday, monsieur."

And M. de Maillefort departed, leaving Herminie alone with her immeasurable despair.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BALL.

The day of Madame de Mirecourt's ball had arrived.

The three suitors for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand were to press their claims at this brilliant fête.

The announcement that the richest heiress in France was to make her début that evening furnished a topic for general conversation, and made every one forget a suicide that had plunged one of the most illustrious houses in France into mourning.

Madame de Mirecourt did not attempt to conceal her intense gratification that her house had been selected for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's début, and secretly congratulated herself, too, at the thought that it would probably be in her house that the marriage of this famous heiress with the Duc de Senneterre would be virtually concluded, for being devoted to Gerald's mother, Madame de Mirecourt was one of the most ardent promoters of the scheme.

Having stationed herself as usual near the door of the main drawing-room to welcome her guests, Madame de Mirecourt awaited the coming of the Duchesse de Senneterre with the utmost impatience. That lady, who was to be accompanied by her son, had promised to come early, but had not yet arrived.

An unusually large number of guests, attracted thither by curiosity, had crowded into the principal salon in order to be the first to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil, whose name was upon every lip.

There was not a marriageable young man who had not bestowed an unusual amount of care upon his toilet, not that these young men had any openly avowed intentions, but—who knows? Heiresses are so peculiar, and who could foresee the consequences of a brief chat, of a quadrille, or of a first impression?

So each young man, as he cast a last complacent glance in his mirror, recalled all sorts of romantic episodes in which wealthy damsels had fallen in love at first sight with some stranger, whom they had finally married against the wishes of their relatives,—for all these worthy bachelors had but one thought in this instance, marriage, and they even carried their honesty so far as to love marriage for the sake of marriage itself, and the bride became little more than an accessory in their eyes.

Each bachelor had endeavoured to make the most of himself according to his character and appearance. The handsome ones had striven to make themselves still more handsome and irresistible.

Those of a less attractive or even homely exterior assumed a *spirituelle* or melancholy air.

In short, each and every one said to himself, like the people who allow themselves to be enticed into those lotteries that offer prizes of several millions:

"Of course it is absurd to suppose that I shall win one of these fabulous prizes. I have but one chance in nobody knows how many thousand, but somebody has got to win. Why may I not be the lucky one?"

As for the persons that composed the assemblage, they were very nearly the same who had attended the dance given by Madame de Senneterre several months before, and who had taken a more or less prominent part in the numerous conversations on the subject of Madame de Beaumesnil's approaching death.

Several of these persons also recollected the curiosity that had been expressed in regard to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who was then in a foreign land, and whom no one had ever seen, so a majority of Madame Mirecourt's guests would consequently witness to-night the solution of the problem propounded several weeks before.

Was the richest heiress in France as beautiful as a star or as hideous as a monster? Was she glowing with health or a hopeless consumptive?

It was ten o'clock, and Madame de Mirecourt was becoming very uneasy. Madame de Senneterre and her son had not made their appearance; Mlle. de Beaumesnil might arrive at any moment, and it had been arranged that Ernestine should be chaperoned by Madame de la Rochaiguë or Madame de Senneterre the entire evening, and that Gerald should dance the first quadrille with the heiress.

Every minute the crowd increased. Among the newcomers, M. de Mornand, accompanied by M. de Ravil, advanced in the most disinterested air imaginable to pay his respects to Madame de Mirecourt, who greeted him very graciously, and innocently remarked, without the slightest suspicion how true her words were:

"I am sure you came partially to see me, but chiefly to see the lioness of the evening, Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

The prospective minister smiled as he replied, with truly diplomatic guile:

"I assure you, madame, I came only to have the honour of paying my respects to you, and to witness one of those charming fêtes you alone know how to give."

After which M. de Mornand made his best bow and passed on, whispering to Ravil:

"Go and see if she is in one of the other rooms. I will remain here. Try to bring the baron to me if you see him."

De Ravil nodded an assent to his Pylades and mingled with the crowd, saying to himself, as he thought of the meeting of the day before, which he had carefully refrained from mentioning to M. de Mornand:

"So here is an heiress who wanders about lonely parts of the town, grisette fashion, and then returns to that abominable Madame Laîné, who is complacently waiting for her in a cab. This last surprises me very little, however, as that unscrupulous female told me flatly, a week or so ago, that I could no longer count upon her influence. But at whose expense is she favouring this intrigue on the part of the little Beaumesnil? for there must be an intrigue, of course. That big ninny of a Mornand is no good. I might have known it. I must ferret out the truth of all this, for the more I think of it, the more convinced I am that the best thing for me to do is to drop Mornand, and devote my attention to the goose that lays the golden eggs, and, as a preliminary measure, I'll watch what goes on here this evening."

Just as the cynic vanished in the crowd, the Duchesse de Senneterre entered the room, but alone—her expression indicative of the deepest annoyance.

Madame de Mirecourt advanced a few steps to meet her, and, with the cleverness which women of the world possess in such an eminent degree, she found a way, though surrounded by a crowd of guests, and engaged to all appearance in exchanging the usual commonplaces with the duchess, to really hold the following low-toned conversation with her:

"But where is Gerald?"

"The doctor had to bleed him this evening."

"Good Heavens! what is the matter with him?"

"He has been in a terrible state ever since yesterday."

"But why did you not warn me, my dear duchess?"

"Because up to the very last minute he declared that he was coming, though he did feel so badly."

"It is too bad! Mlle. de Beaumesnil may come at any moment, and you were to have taken possession of her immediately upon her arrival."

"I know it, so I am in misery—nor is this all."

"Why, what else is troubling you, my dear duchess?"

"I cannot exactly explain why, but I have some doubts as to my son's intentions."

"What an idea!"

"He has acted so strangely of late."

"But did he not assure you this very day that, though he was far from well, he intended coming here this evening to meet Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Certainly; and another thing that reassures me is that M. de Maillefort—whom Madame de la Rochaiguë fears so much, and to whom my son has imprudently confided our plans—M. de Maillefort is on our side, for he knows the object of this meeting, and yet he promised to accompany Gerald and me."

"There is no help for it, I suppose, but it certainly is a fine opportunity lost. When Madame de la Rochaiguë arrives with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, do not leave them for an instant, and so arrange with the baroness that the girl shall have

only unattractive men for partners."

"Yes, that is very important."

Every minute or two new guests came up to pay their respects to Madame de Mirecourt.

Suddenly Madame de Senneterre made a hasty movement, then, in a quick aside to her friend, exclaimed:

"Why, that is M. de Macreuse who has just come in! Can it be you receive that creature?"

"Why, my dear duchess, I have met him at your house a hundred times; besides, it was one of my most particular friends, the sister of the Bishop of Ratopolis, Madame de Cheverny, who requested an invitation for him. You know, too, that M. de Macreuse is received everywhere on account of his St. Polycarpe Mission."

"St Polycarpe has nothing in the world to do with it. I assure you, my dear," said the duchess, interrupting her friend impatiently, "I received the man like everybody else, but I am sorry enough now, for I have discovered that he is nothing more or less than a scoundrel, a man that shouldn't be allowed in decent society. I have even heard that valuable articles have been known to disappear during his visits," added Madame de Senneterre, unblushingly.

"Great Heavens! is it possible that the man's a thief?" exclaimed Madame de Mirecourt.

"No, my dear, of course not, he only borrows a diamond or some other jewel now and then, and forgets to return it."

At that very instant M. de Macreuse, who had been watching the expression of the ladies' faces as he slowly advanced, and who shrewdly suspected that they were none too charitably inclined towards him, but who nevertheless came forward to bow to the mistress of the house with imperturbable assurance, interrupted the conversation by saying:

"I hoped, madame, to have had the honour of presenting myself here this evening under Madame de Cheverny's auspices, but unfortunately for me she is feeling far from well, and made me the bearer of her profound regrets."

"I am truly inconsolable that indisposition deprives me of the pleasure of seeing Madame de Cheverny this evening," replied Madame de Mirecourt, dryly, still under the influence of what Madame de Senneterre had just said to her.

But Macreuse was not easily disconcerted, for bowing low to the duchess this time, he said, smilingly:

"I have less occasion to regret the kind protection of my friend, Madame de Cheverny, as I may almost venture to count upon yours, madame la duchesse."

"Justly, monsieur," responded Madame de Senneterre, with bitter hauteur, "I was just speaking to Madame de Mirecourt of you when you came in, and congratulating her upon having the honour of receiving you in her house."

"I expected no less from the habitual kindness of madame la duchesse, to whom I am indebted for many valuable acquaintances in the delightful circle in which she moves," replied M. de Macreuse, in tones of the utmost respect.

After which he bowed low again, and passed on.

This protégé of Abbé Ledoux, Madame de Beaumesnil's former confessor, was much too shrewd and clear-sighted not to have felt that, in his late interview with Madame de Senneterre (the interview in which he had confessed that he was an aspirant for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand), he had, in vulgar parlance, put his foot in it, though the duchess had ostensibly promised him her support.

Too late Macreuse awoke to the fact that the duchess had a marriageable son, and the haughty and sarcastic greeting she had just given him confirmed this pious young man's suspicions; but he troubled himself very little about this hostility, feeling sure, from Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë's reports, that he was not only the first suitor in the field, but that he had already made a deep impression upon the young heiress by his touching melancholy and piety.

So, full of hope, M. de Macreuse first satisfied himself that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was not in the room, and then stationed himself in a convenient place to watch for her arrival, resolved to take advantage of the first opportune moment to invite her to dance.

"Did any one ever see anything to equal his impudence?" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, as the abbé's protégé moved away.

"Really, my dear duchess, what you tell me astonishes me beyond measure. And to think that M. de Macreuse is regarded as a model of virtue and piety almost everywhere!"

"A fine model he is! There are plenty of other things I could tell you about him, too—"

But interrupting herself, Madame de Senneterre exclaimed:

"Here comes Mlle. de Beaumesnil at last. Ah, what a pity it is that Gerald is not here!"

"Oh, well, you can console yourself with the thought that Mlle. de Beaumesnil will hear nothing but your son's praises the entire evening. Remain here, and I will bring the dear child to you. You and the baroness must not leave her even for a moment."

And Madame de Mirecourt advanced to meet Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who had just come in, accompanied by M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë.

The young girl was leaning on her guardian's arm. A low buzzing sound, produced by loud whispers of "That is Mlle. de Beaumesnil," created a general stir in the spacious rooms, and a crowd of curious observers soon filled the

doorways of the salon in which Ernestine found herself.

It was in the midst of this eager excitement that the richest heiress in France, lowering her eyes under the curious looks directed upon her from every side, made her entrance into society.

The poor child was secretly comparing this eagerness and impatience to see and to be seen by her, as well as the murmurs of admiration which she heard as she advanced, with the entirely different reception she had received at Madame Herbaut's house the Sunday before; and all this only made her the more resolved to carry her attempted test as far as possible, and thus satisfy herself once for all in regard to the honour and sincerity of the people with whom she seemed destined to live.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, to the utter dismay of the Rochaiguës, and with a sudden display of obstinacy that both amazed and cowed them, had insisted upon dressing as simply as on the occasion of Madame Herbaut's little entertainment.

A plain white muslin gown and a blue sash, exactly like those she had worn the Sunday before, composed the attire of the heiress, who wished to look neither better nor worse than she did then.

The thought of attiring herself in a ridiculous manner had occurred to her, almost certain that, even in that case, the charming originality of her toilet would be loudly praised on every side, but the thought of what a serious and important thing this test was to her led to a speedy abandonment of that idea.

As had been planned in advance by Mesdames de Mirecourt, de Senneterre, and de la Rochaiguë, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, as soon as she arrived at the ball, and made her way through the eager crowd that blocked her passage, was conducted by her hostess to the large and magnificent room which had been reserved for dancing. Here, Madame de Mirecourt left Ernestine in the care of Madame de la Rochaiguë and Madame de Senneterre, whom the baroness had just met—by the merest chance.

Not far from the divan on which the heiress was seated were several charming young girls, all as pretty and much more elegantly dressed than the belles of Madame Herbaut's ball, but every eye was riveted upon Ernestine.

"I shall not lack partners this evening," she thought, "nor shall I be asked out of pity. All those charming girls over there will doubtless be neglected on my account."

While Mlle. de Beaumesnil was absorbed in these observations, recollections, and comparisons, Madame de Senneterre was telling Madame de la Rochaiguë, in subdued tones, that, unfortunately, Gerald was so ill that it would be impossible for him to attend the ball, and it was therefore decided that Ernestine should be allowed to dance very little, and then only with carefully selected partners.

To attain this end, Madame de la Rochaiguë said to Ernestine:

"My darling child, you can judge of the sensation you are creating in spite of the unheard-of simplicity of your toilet. My predictions are more than realised, you see. You are sure to be overwhelmed with invitations to dance, but as it would never do for you to dance with everybody, we will manage in this way. When I think it advisable for you to accept an invitation, I will open my fan; if, on the contrary, I keep it closed, you will decline on the plea that you are dancing very little, and that you have made too many engagements already."

Madame de la Rochaiguë had scarcely addressed this remark to Ernestine before quite a number of young people began to take their places for a quadrille. Several young men who were dying to invite Mlle. de Beaumesnil hesitated a little, rightly thinking that it was hardly the thing to ask her the minute she entered the ball-room; but M. de Macreuse, being either less scrupulous or more daring, did not hesitate a second, but, making his way swiftly through the crowd, begged Ernestine to do him the honour to dance the quadrille that was then forming, with him.

Madame de Senneterre, positively stupefied by what she called such unheard-of audacity on M. de Macreuse's part, turned to hastily implore Madame de la Rochaiguë to give the signal for a refusal, but it was too late.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, anxious to find herself virtually alone with M. de Macreuse as soon as possible, promptly accepted the invitation, without waiting to note the movements of Madame de la Rochaiguë's fan, and, to that lady's great astonishment, immediately rose, accepted the pious young man's arm, and walked away.

"That scoundrel's insolence is really unbearable!" exclaimed the duchess, wrathfully.

But checking herself suddenly, she exclaimed in an entirely different tone:

"Why, there he is now!"

"Who?"

"Gerald."

"How fortunate! Where do you see him, my dear duchess?"

"Over there by the window. Poor boy, how pale he looks!" added the duchess, feelingly. "How brave it was in him to come! We are saved!"

"Yes, it is, indeed, Gerald!" said Madame de la Rochaiguë, no less delighted than her friend. "M. de Maillefort is with him. The marquis did not deceive me, after all. He promised that he would do nothing to interfere with my plans as soon as he found out that M. de Senneterre was the husband I had picked out for Ernestine."

The music struck up, and just as Madame de Senneterre motioned to Gerald that there was a vacant seat beside her, the quadrille in which M. de Macreuse and Mlle. de Beaumesnil were to participate began.

CHAPTER XII.

M. DE MACREUSE OVERDOES THE MATTER.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil had eagerly availed herself of the first opportunity for a conversation with M. de Macreuse, for from this conversation she hoped to ascertain whether her distrust of him was well founded. She was strongly inclined to think so, the abbé's protégé having assured Mlle. Helena that he had fallen suddenly and passionately in love with Mlle. de Beaumesnil at first sight.

And after her experience at Madame Herbaut's, the heiress knew what to think of the sudden and irresistible impressions her beauty must produce.

But recollecting the different things that had attracted her attention to M. de Macreuse, recalling the profound grief he had seemed to feel at his mother's death, the charity of which he had given such convincing proof by his alms, and, above all, the rare virtues which Mlle. Helena was continually lauding to the skies, Ernestine was anxious to know exactly what to think of this so-called model young man.

"M. de Macreuse has interested me very much," she said to herself. "He is very prepossessing in appearance, and his melancholy is extremely touching; in fact, but for M. de Maillefort's sneering remarks, which have made me distrust myself as well as others, I should perhaps have taken a decided fancy to M. de Macreuse. Perhaps, captivated by the rare virtues of which I have heard so much, I should have unconsciously yielded to Mlle. Helena's influence, and perhaps have married M. de Macreuse, a choice which I am told would assure my happiness for life. Let me see, then, what kind of a choice I should have made, for I have an infallible means of distinguishing truth from falsehood now."

M. de Macreuse, full of confidence by reason of Helena's flattering reports, and realising the decisive nature of this interview, had long been preparing himself to play the liar to perfection.

When Ernestine laid her hand lightly on his arm, this pious youth pretended to give a sudden start, and the young girl was conscious of the sort of thrill that traversed her partner's arm.

When they had taken their places, M. de Macreuse made two ineffectual attempts to address a few words to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, but he seemed dominated by such a powerful, though perfectly natural emotion, that speech failed him and he could only blush deeply.

Abbé Ledoux, by the way, had taught his protégé an almost infallible means of blushing: this was to hang one's head for several seconds, holding one's breath all the while.

This skilfully counterfeited emotion occupied the first few minutes of the quadrille, M. de Macreuse having addressed scarcely a word to Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

Moreover, by a marvel of tact and cunning, the originator of the St. Polycarpe mission not only managed to escape the ridicule to which a profoundly melancholy man exposes himself when he undertakes to dance, but also to preserve an interesting appearance in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's eyes in spite of the terpsichorean evolutions he was obliged to perform.

He was aided not a little by his personal appearance, we must admit.

Dressed entirely in black, booted and gloved in the most irreproachable manner, the cut of his coat was perfection, and his black satin cravat extremely becoming to one with his fair complexion and regular features. His figure, though a little too stout, was replete with an easy grace, and as he walked through the different figures of the quadrille, keeping perfect time to the music, he now and then cast a resigned but pathetic look at Mlle. de Beaumesnil, a look that seemed to say:

"I am a stranger to worldly pleasures—entirely out of place at fêtes, from which my sorrow impels me to hold myself aloof, but I submit to this painful contrast between my grief and the gaiety around me, because I have no other means of seeing you."

This beloved disciple of Abbé Ledoux, in short, belonged to that school of actors that seems to make a specialty of meaning but constrained glances, expressive but discreet sighs, all fittingly accompanied with rollings of the eyes, and a contrite, radiant, or ingenuous expression of countenance, as best suits the occasion.

In fact, M. de Macreuse's rendition of his rôle was so admirable that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in spite of her suspicions, could not help saying to herself:

"Poor M. de Macreuse! it must be very painful for him to find himself at a gay entertainment in which he can take so little pleasure, overwhelmed as he is by the despair his mother's death has caused him."

But her suspicions reasserting themselves, "Then why did he come?" she asked herself. "Very possibly he was impelled to do so solely by avaricious motives. Is it a shameful hope of securing my wealth that makes him forget his grief and his regret?"

M. de Macreuse having at last found a favourable opportunity for beginning a conversation with Ernestine, summoned up another blush, then said, in his most timid, unctuous, and ingratiating tones:

"Really, I must appear very awkward and ridiculous to you, mademoiselle."

"And why, monsieur?"

"I have not dared to address so much as a word to you since the beginning of the dance, mademoiselle, but—embarrassment—fear—"

"What! I frighten you, monsieur?"

"Alas! yes, mademoiselle."

"That is not a very gallant remark, monsieur."

"I make no pretentious to gallantry, mademoiselle," replied Macreuse, sadly, but proudly. "I am only sincere—and the fear you inspire in me is real, only too real."

"But why do I inspire you with fear?"

"Because you have unsettled my life and my reason, mademoiselle, for from the first moment I saw you, without even knowing who you were, your image placed itself between me and the only previous objects of my adoration. Up to that time, I had lived only to pray to God and to cherish or mourn for my mother, while now—"

"Good Heavens, monsieur, how tiresome all this is! What I say may surprise you, but it is the truth, nevertheless; for you see," continued Mlle. de Beaumesnil, assuming from this on the imperious and flippant tone and manner of a spoiled child, "I am in the habit of saying anything that comes into my head, unless I am absolutely compelled to play the hypocrite."

It is needless to say that M. de Macreuse was astounded by this interruption, and above all by the manner in which it was made, for, from Mlle. Helena's reports, he had fully expected to find in Ernestine an artless, but deeply religious child; so, up to this time, he had carefully maintained a manner and a style of conversation which would be likely to please an unsophisticated devotee.

Still, too wary to betray his astonishment, and ready to change his character at a moment's notice if that should prove necessary to put him in tune with the heiress, this pious young man replied, venturing a half smile—he had preserved a melancholy gravity up to that time:

"You are right, mademoiselle, to say whatever comes into your head, particularly as only charming thoughts can find shelter there."

"Really, monsieur, I like this kind of talk very much better. You were not at all amusing before."

"It depends upon you, mademoiselle," responded Macreuse, risking a whole smile this time, and so transforming his formerly grief-stricken face by degrees, as it were, "and it will always depend upon you, mademoiselle, to change sorrow to gladness. Nothing is impossible to you."

"Oh, as to that, there's a time for everything, I think. Now this morning at church I seemed sad, because church is so dull any way; besides, in order not to be outdone by Mlle. Helena I put on the most saintly airs imaginable, but in my secret heart I am awfully fond of gaiety and of amusing myself. By the way, what do you think of my gown?"

"It is in exquisite taste. In its charming simplicity it is a delightful contrast to the gaudy attire of all the other young ladies; but they are excusable, after all, and you deserve very little credit, for they have need of outward adornments, while you can dispense with them, mademoiselle. Perfection needs no ornamentation."

"That is exactly what I said to myself," responded Ernestine, with the most arrogant and conceited air imaginable. "I felt sure that, even in a plain white dress, I was pretty certain to eclipse all the other young girls and make them turn green with envy. It is such fun to excite envy in others and torment them."

"You must be accustomed to that pleasure, mademoiselle. It is true that the jealousy of others does afford one a vast amount of amusement, as you so wittily remarked a moment ago."

"Oh, I am not so wonderfully witty," responded Ernestine, with an admirable semblance of overweening conceit; "but I am very fond of my own way and can't bear any one to oppose or contradict me. That is why I hate old people so. They are for ever preaching to young folks. Do you like old people, monsieur?"

"You mean mummies, mademoiselle. The chief aim of life should be pleasure."

And the imperious necessity of executing a figure in the quadrille having interrupted M. de Macreuse at this point, he took advantage of the excellent opportunity thus afforded to change the expression of his countenance entirely, and to assume the most joyous dare-devil air imaginable. A similar change, too, was apparent in his dancing. It was much more lively and animated. The young man straightened himself up, lifted his head high in the air, and whenever he found an opportunity he bestowed upon Mlle. de Beaumesnil glances which were now as impassioned as the former ones had been timid and discreet.

While he was assuming this new character, the abbé's protégé was all the while saying to himself:

"How strange! the girl is an arrant hypocrite evidently, inasmuch as she succeeded in deceiving Mlle. de la Rochaiguë so completely in regard to her real character. I strongly suspect, though, that my excellent friend was afraid that she would frighten me if she told me the truth about the girl. She little knows me. I'm glad that the girl is silly and vain, and that she thinks herself witty and beautiful and capable of out-shining all the pretty women here to-night. Deceitfulness, ignorance, and vanity—it must be a fool indeed that can not use three such potent factors as these to advantage. But now to the main question! With a simpleton like this, reserve is unnecessary, nor can one pile on the flattery too thickly. Complaisance must extend almost to baseness, for the girl has evidently been utterly spoiled by her wealth. She knows perfectly well that anything is permissible in her,—that any offence will be condoned in the richest heiress in France."

So as he returned to his place M. de Macreuse remarked to Ernestine:

"You accused me just now of being too grave, mademoiselle. You must not suppose that I am in the most hilarious spirits now, but the happiness of being with you intoxicates me."

"And why?"

"If Mlle. Helena, in encouraging me to hope that some day, when you learned to know me better, you might think me worthy to consecrate my life to you,—if Mlle. Helena was mistaken in this—"

"By the way, speaking of Mlle. Helena, you must admit that she is a frightful bore."

"That is true, but she is so good."

"So good! Well, that did not prevent her from saying something dreadful to me about you the other day."

"About me?"

"Yes, she made you out such a paragon of goodness that I said to myself: 'Great Heavens, how intolerable that man must be with all his virtues. A person as perfect as that must be a frightful nuisance! And then to be always at church or engaged in charitable works, the mere idea of it is enough to make one die of ennui.' I did not say this to Mlle. Helena, but I thought it all the same. Judge then, monsieur, I, who would marry only to be as free as air and amuse myself from morning till night, to be always on the go, to be the most fashionable woman in Paris, and above all to be able to go to the masked ball at the Opera house! Oh, that ball, it sets me crazy just to think of it! Mercy! what is the use of being as rich as I am if one cannot enjoy everything and do exactly as one pleases?"

"When one is as rich as you are," replied M. de Macreuse, with unblushing effrontery, "one is queen everywhere, above all in one's own home. The man you honour with your choice should, to follow out my comparison, be the prime minister of your kingdom of pleasure,—no, your chief courtier, and as such be ever submissive and eager to do your bidding. His one thought should be to save you from the slightest annoyance, and leave you only the flowers of existence. The birds of the air should not be freer than you; and if your husband understands his duty, your pleasures, your wishes, and even your slightest caprice, should be sacred to him. Is he not your slave, and you his divinity?"

"Good, monsieur, that would suit me perfectly, but from what Mlle. Helena has told me about you, and from what I myself have seen—"

"And what have you seen, mademoiselle?"

"I have seen you giving alms to the poor and even talking with them."

"Certainly, mademoiselle, and I—"

"In the first place, I have a horror of poor people,—they are so loathsome in their rags they fairly turn one's stomach."

"They are horrible creatures, it is true, but one has to throw them a little money now and then as one throws a bone to a starving dog to keep him from biting you. It is merely a matter of policy."

"I understand, then, for I wondered how you could feel any interest in such repulsive creatures."

"Good Heavens, mademoiselle," replied Macreuse, more and more earnestly, "you must not wonder at certain apparent contradictions between the present and the past. If any do exist you are the cause of them, so ought you not to pardon them? What did I tell you from the very first? Did I not confess that you had wrought a complete change in my life? Ah, yes, I had sorrows, but I have them no longer. I was devout, but henceforth there is only one divinity for me, yourself. As for my virtues," added M. de Macreuse, with a cynical smile, "they need not worry you. Only too happy to lay the others at your feet, I will retain only such as may please you."

"How infamous!" thought Ernestine. "To attract my attention, or, rather, to excite my interest, this man made a pretence of being charitable, virtuous, devout, and a most devoted son; now he denies his virtues, his charity, his mother, and even his God, to please me, and attain his object, viz., to marry me for my money, while the detestable faults I affect do not shock him in the least; he even praises and exalts them."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who was little versed in dissimulation, and who had been obliged to exercise the greatest self-restraint in order to enact the rôle which would assist her in unmasking M. de Macreuse, could no longer conceal her scorn and disgust, and, in spite of all her efforts, her face betrayed her real feelings only too plainly, as she listened to M. de Macreuse's last words.

That gentleman, like all the disciples of his school, made a constant study of the countenance of the person he wished to deceive or convince; and the quick contraction of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's features, her smile of bitter disdain, and a sort of impatient indignation that she made little or no attempt to conceal at the moment, were a sudden and startling revelation to M. de Macreuse.

"I am caught," he said to himself. "It was a trap. She distrusted me and wanted to try me. She pretended to be silly, capricious, vain, heartless, and irreligious, merely to see if I would have the courage to censure her, and if my love would survive such a discovery. Who the devil would have suspected such cunning in a girl of sixteen? But if she has feigned all these objectionable proclivities, her real instincts must be good and generous," this beloved disciple of Abbé Ledoux said to himself. "And if she was anxious to put me to the test she must have had some idea of marrying me. All is not lost. I must recover my lost ground by a bold stroke."

These reflections on the part of the pious youth lasted only for an instant, but that instant sufficed to prepare him for another transformation.

The same brief interval had also given Mlle. de Beaumesnil time to calm her indignation, and summon up courage to end this interview by covering Macreuse with shame and confusion.

"So you are really willing to sacrifice all your virtues on my account?" exclaimed Ernestine. "Few persons are as obliging as all that. But the quadrille is ended. Instead of escorting me back to my seat, won't you take me to that

conservatory I see at the other end of the room?"

"I am all the more pleased to comply with your request, mademoiselle, as I have a few words, very serious words they are, too, that I wish to say to you."

M. de Macreuse's tone had changed entirely. It was grave now, even stern.

Ernestine glanced at the pious young man in astonishment. His expression had become as sad as at the beginning of the quadrille, but the sadness was no longer of a melancholy, touching character, but stern, almost wrathful.

More and more amazed at this sudden metamorphosis which Macreuse intensified, so to speak, during their walk through the salon to the conservatory, Mlle. de Beaumesnil asked herself what could be the cause of this strange change in her companion.

The long gallery, enclosed in glass, which they entered, was bordered on each side with masses of flowering plants and palms, and at the farther end was an immense buffet loaded with the choicest viands. As nearly all the gentlemen were engaged in escorting their partners to their seats, there were very few people in the gallery at the time, so M. de Macreuse had an excellent opportunity to say all he had to say.

"May I ask, monsieur," asked the orphan, flippantly, seeing that she must not yet abandon her rôle—"may I ask what very important thing you have to say to me. Grave is about the same thing as being tiresome, it seems to me, and I have a horror of everything that is tiresome, you know."

"Grave or tiresome, you will, nevertheless, have to listen to these words, which are the last you will ever hear from my lips, mademoiselle."

"The last during this quadrille, evidently."

"They are the last words I shall ever say to you in my life, mademoiselle."

There was something so sad and yet so proud in the voice, face, and bearing of this model young man that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was overwhelmed with astonishment.

Nevertheless, she continued, still trying to smile:

"What, monsieur, I am never to see you again after all—all Mlle. Helena has said about—about—"

"Listen, mademoiselle," said M. de Macreuse, interrupting her; "it is impossible for me to keep up this farce any longer—or to express any longer sentiments that are and ever will be farthest from my thoughts."

"To what farce do you allude, monsieur?"

"I came here, mademoiselle, expecting to find in you the pious, sensible, generous, kind-hearted, honest young girl of whom Mlle. Helena has always spoken in terms of the highest praise. It was to such a girl that my first remarks were addressed, but the frivolous, sneering manner in which they were received disappointed and even shocked me."

"Can I believe my ears?" thought Ernestine. "What on earth does he mean?"

"Then a terrible doubt seized me," continued M. de Macreuse, with a heavy sigh. "I said to myself that perhaps you did not possess those rare virtues which I so greatly admire and which I was confident I should find in you, but I could not and would not believe it at first, preferring to attribute your words to the thoughtlessness of youth. But alas! your frivolity, vanity, hardness of heart, and impiety became more and more apparent as our conversation proceeded. I wished to convince myself thoroughly, however, and though my heart bled each moment, I wanted to overcome your insensibility to all that is pitiable, your contempt for all that is sacred. I even went so far as to seem to scoff at that which is dearest to me in life,—my religion and the memory of my mother."

And a tear glistened on the lashes of the abbé's disciple.

"It was a test, then, in his case, as in mine," thought Ernestine.

"I feigned the most pernicious sentiments," continued M. de Macreuse, waxing more and more indignant, "and you did not utter a word of censure or even of surprise! At last I pushed flattery, cowardice, and baseness to their utmost limits, and you remained calm and approving instead of crushing me with the scorn I deserved. It has been a terrible ordeal for me, for the blow to my hopes is as unexpected as it is overwhelming. All is over now. Pardon a severity of language to which you are little accustomed, mademoiselle, but understand, once for all, that I will never devote my life to any woman, who is not worthy both of my love and my respect."

And with a stern and dignified air M. de Macreuse bowed low to Ernestine, and walked away, leaving her speechless with astonishment.

"I thank God that I was mistaken," thought the poor child, with a feeling of profound relief. "Such hypocrisy, deceit, and unscrupulousness are an impossibility. M. de Macreuse was horrified by the sentiments I expressed, consequently he must possess a sincere and upright soul."

The reflections of this artless girl, who was so ill fitted to cope with the wily founder of the St. Polycarpe mission, were interrupted by Mesdames de Rochaiguë and de Senneterre, who, having seen Mlle. de Beaumesnil enter the gallery in company with M. de Macreuse, had hastened after her, thinking the young girl intended to partake of some refreshments, but the two ladies found her alone.

"Why, what are you doing here, my own dearest?" inquired Madame de la Rochaiguë.

"I came here for a little fresh air, madame; it is so warm in the ballroom."

"But the gallery is just as much too cool, my dear child, and you run a great risk of taking cold. You had better

come back to the ballroom at once."

"As you please, madame," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

As she reëntered the ballroom, in company with the two ladies, she saw M. de Macreuse give her a despairing look; but he turned quickly away, as if he feared the young girl would perceive the sorrowful emotion to which he was a prey.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN HONEST CONFESSION IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, on reëntering the ball-room, also noticed Gerald de Senneterre standing near one of the doorways. He was very pale, and looked extremely sad.

The sight of him reminded Ernestine of her friend's despair, and she asked herself why Gerald, in spite of his love for Herminie and his desire to marry her, had come to this ball where a meeting with her, Ernestine, had been arranged by Madame de la Rochaiguë.

As she conducted the richest heiress in France back to her seat, Madame de la Senneterre said to her, with the utmost affability:

"Mademoiselle, I am deputised to ask a favour of you in behalf of my son."

"What is it, madame?"

"He begs that you will give him the next quadrille, though he is not dancing this evening, for he has been, and is still, quite indisposed, so much so, in fact, that it required almost superhuman courage on his part to come at all. But he hoped to have the honour of meeting you here, mademoiselle, and such a hope as that works wonders."

"But if M. de Senneterre does not feel able to dance, madame, what is the use of my making an engagement with him?"

"That is a secret which I will divulge when the crowds of young men that are going to besiege you with invitations to dance are disposed of. Merely remember that the next quadrille belongs to my son, that is, if you are so kind as to grant him the favour he asks."

"With the greatest pleasure, madame."

"Keep my seat for me, my dear," the duchess said to Madame de la Rochaiguë, rising as she spoke, "I must go and tell Gerald."

While awaiting M. de Senneterre's coming, Mlle. de Beaumesnil was also reflecting with all the satisfaction of a truly honest heart that M. de Macreuse had not deserved her distrust. The more she reflected on the subject, the more the young man's conduct pleased her by reason of its very rudeness. In fact, his austere frankness seemed to her almost as noble as the sentiment she fancied she had discerned in Olivier's breast, when he gave her such a peculiar but meaning look on so unexpectedly hearing that he had been made an officer.

"They are both noble men," she said to herself.

But Mlle. de Beaumesnil was not allowed to enjoy these pleasant and consoling thoughts long, for she had scarcely seated herself before she was besieged with invitations to dance, as Madame de Senneterre had predicted. Resolved to observe and judge for herself, as much as possible, the heiress accepted quite a number of these invitations, among them one from M. de Mornand.

Eager to discover M. de Senneterre's intentions, and to ascertain why he had engaged her for a quadrille if he did not feel able to dance, Ernestine awaited the time for Gerald's approach with no little interest and curiosity. At last she saw him leave his place, after exchanging a few words with M. de Maillefort, whom Ernestine had not seen since she met him so unexpectedly at Herminie's home.

On seeing the hunchback, the orphan could not help blushing, but, as she cast another glance at him, she was touched by the expression of tender solicitude with which he was regarding her, and the meaning smile he bestowed upon her reassured her completely in regard to that gentleman's discretion.

The time for forming the quadrille having arrived, Gerald approached Mlle. de Beaumesnil and said:

"I have come to thank you for the promise you so kindly made to my mother."

"And I am ready to fulfil it, monsieur, as soon as I know—"

"Why I engaged you for this quadrille when I am not able to dance?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"It is an innovation, mademoiselle, that would prove very popular, I am sure, if it were adopted," said Gerald,

smiling in spite of his melancholy.

"And this innovation, monsieur?"

"For many persons, and I confess that I am one of the number, a quadrille is merely a pretext for a quarter of an hour's tête-à-tête. Then why not say in so many words: 'Madame, or mademoiselle, will you do me the honour to talk with me for the next quarter of an hour?' and as one can talk much more comfortably sitting on a sofa than standing, why, let us sit through this dance and talk."

"I think the idea a very happy one, monsieur."

"And you consent?"

"Certainly," replied Ernestine, moving a little closer to Madame de la Rochaiguë, and thus making room for Gerald beside her.

The dancers having taken their places on the floor, most of the seats were vacant; and Gerald, having no neighbour on the other side, could talk to Ernestine without any danger of being overheard, especially as Madame de la Rochaiguë, in order to give her ward greater freedom, moved a little farther from Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and a little nearer to Madame de Senneterre.

Up to this time, M. de Senneterre had been talking in a light, half jesting tone, but as soon as he found himself virtually alone with Mlle. de Beanmesnil, his manner changed entirely, and his features and accents alike indicated the deepest interest and anxiety.

"Mademoiselle," he said earnestly, almost solemnly, "though I am far from well, I came here this evening to do my duty as an honourable man."

Mlle. de Beanmesnil experienced a feeling of intense relief. Gerald had no intention of deceiving Herminie, then, and doubtless he was about to explain why he had not relinquished all pretensions to her—Ernestine's—hand.

"Do you know how an heiress is married off, mademoiselle?" asked Gerald.

And as Mlle. de Beaumesnil gazed at him in surprise, without making any reply, Gerald continued:

"I will tell you, mademoiselle, and this knowledge may serve to protect you from many dangers. A certain mother, my mother, for example,—one of the best women in the world,—hears that the richest heiress in France is in the matrimonial market. My mother, dazzled by the advantages that such a union would afford me, does not trouble herself in the least about the character or personal appearance of this heiress. She has never even seen her, for the rich orphan is still in a foreign land. But that makes no difference; this enormous fortune must be secured for me if possible, it matters not by what means. My mother, yielding to an aberration of maternal love, hastens to the wife of this orphan's guardian, and it is decided that, on the arrival of the heiress, an inexperienced child of sixteen, weak and defenceless, and ignorant of the ways of the world, she shall be so surrounded and influenced that her choice is almost certain to fall upon me. This shameful bargain is concluded; the way in which I am to first make her acquaintance, apparently by chance, is decided upon, even to the more or less becoming costume I am to wear on that occasion! Everything has been arranged, though I hear and know nothing about it. The heiress, too, who is still a hundred leagues from Paris, knows no more about it than I do. At last she arrives. Then, for the first time, my mother informs me of her plans, sure that I will accept with joy the piece of good fortune offered me. Nevertheless, I decline it at first, saying that I have no taste for married life, and that I should be certain to prove a bad husband. 'What difference does that make?' says my mother. 'Marry her, in spite of that—she is rich.' And yet my mother is as honourable and as widely honoured as any woman. But you do not know the baneful, yes, fatal, influence of money!"

"Can you hear what they are saying, my dear?" the duchess whispered to Madame de la Rochaiguë as this conversation was going on.

"No," replied that lady, likewise in a whisper, "but the child seems to be listening with a great deal of interest. I just stole a glance at her when she was not looking, and her face was positively radiant."

"I was sure of Gerald. He can be irresistible when he chooses!" exclaimed the delighted duchess. "The girl is ours. And to think I was simpleton enough to fly into a passion just because that miserable Macreuse asked her to dance!"

"As I remarked a few minutes ago, I acted the part of an honourable man and refused to think of this marriage at first," Gerald continued; "but unfortunately my mother's entreaties, my fear of grieving her, and last, though not least, my indignation on hearing of the nefarious schemes of an unscrupulous rival, and possibly my own unconscious longing for such colossal wealth, induced me to reconsider, and I finally decided to try to marry the heiress, even at the risk of making her the most wretched of women, for a mercenary marriage is sure to end disastrously."

"Well, monsieur, have you kept this resolution?"

"A subsequent conversation with two dear friends of mine, high-minded, noble-hearted men, opened my eyes. I saw that I was pursuing a course unworthy of me and of those who loved me. It was decided, however, that, out of consideration for my mother's wishes, I should meet the heiress, and if, after seeing her and knowing her, I loved her as much as I would have loved a penniless and nameless young girl, I would do my best to win her."

"Well, monsieur, have you seen this heiress?

"Yes, mademoiselle; but when I saw her it was too late."

"Too late?"

"A love as sudden as it was honourable and sincere for a person who was worthy of it no longer permitted me to appreciate, as she, I am sure, deserves, the young lady my mother wished me to marry."

On hearing this honest but delicately worded confession, Mlle. de Beaumesnil could not repress a joyous movement. Gerald loved Herminie as she deserved to be loved, and he had just given fresh proof of his nobility of character by the generosity of his conduct towards Ernestine.

The orphan's joyous start had not escaped the watchful eyes of Madame de la Rochaiguë, and that lady said, in a low tone, to the duchess:

"All is well! Look at Mlle. de Beaumesnil! See what a brilliant colour she has, and how her eyes sparkle!"

"Yes," said the duchess, leaning slightly forward to peep at Ernestine, "the poor little thing looks almost pretty, as she listens to Gerald."

"One of the greatest triumphs of love is its transfiguration of its object, my dear duchess," answered Madame de la Rochaiguë, smiling, "and I am sure your son will not be blind to this triumph."

"M. de Senneterre," said Ernestine, "I thank you most sincerely for your frankness and your wise counsels, of which I, perhaps, stand in greater need than you think; but though I am too glad of your presence here to be astonished at it, I should like to know—"

"Why I am here this evening, mademoiselle, in spite of my resolution? It is because I wished to avail myself of this opportunity—the only one I shall have, perhaps—to talk to you alone, and perhaps put you on your guard against schemes similar to those to which I so narrowly escaped becoming an accomplice, for not many men, I fear, will be as scrupulous. Your guardian and his wife will lend themselves to any scheme that will serve their interests. They care nothing about your future happiness and welfare. All this is hard, mademoiselle, very hard, and it would be cruel, indeed, in me to arouse this fear and distrust in your heart, if I could not, at the same time, offer you, as a guide and protector, a noble-hearted man who is as much feared by the base and unscrupulous as he is loved by men of worth. Have confidence, perfect confidence, in this man, mademoiselle, though strenuous efforts have been, and will be, made to prejudice you against him."

"You refer to M. de Maillefort, do you not?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. Believe me, you will never find a more faithful and devoted friend. If doubts assail you, turn to him. He is a wonderfully shrewd and discerning man. Guided by him, you are sure to escape the snares and pitfalls that surround you."

"I shall not forget this advice, M. de Senneterre. A strong liking for M. de Maillefort has succeeded the animosity I formerly felt for him, an animosity due entirely to the shameful slanders repeated to me in regard to him."

"Our quadrille is nearly over, mademoiselle," said Gerald, forcing a smile. "I have profited by the only opportunity at my disposal. To-morrow, much as it pains me to disappoint my mother, she must know the truth."

Ernestine's heart sank at the thought that Gerald would, doubtless, also confess his love for Herminie on the morrow. How terribly angry Madame de Senneterre would be to hear that her son preferred a penniless and nameless orphan to the richest heiress in France! And though she had no suspicion of the condition Herminie had attached to her marriage with Gerald, Mlle. de Beaumesnil realised what well-nigh insuperable difficulties must stand in the way of such a marriage, so she sadly replied:

"You may be sure, M. de Senneterre, that, in return for the generous interest you have manifested in me, you shall have my most fervent wishes for your own happiness, and that of the woman you love. Farewell, M. de Senneterre, I hope to be able to prove some day how grateful I am for the generosity of your conduct towards me."

The quadrille having ended, several young ladies returned to their seats near Mlle. de Beaumesnil; so Gerald rose, bowed to the orphan, and, feeling both ill and fatigued, immediately left the ball-room.

Madame de Senneterre, delighted by the favourable indications which she, as well as Madame de la Rochaiguë, had observed, whispered to the baroness:

"Try to find out what effect Gerald has produced."

So Madame de la Rochaiguë, leaning towards Mlle. de Beaumesnil, said to her:

"Ah, my dear child, is he not charming?"

"No one could be more agreeable or evince more noble and refined feelings."

"Then, my dear child, you are the Duchesse de Senneterre. At least, it depends solely upon yourself. Come, say yes, here and now!"

"You embarrass me very much, madame," responded Ernestine, casting down her eyes.

"Oh, yes, I understand," replied Madame de la Rochaiguë, thinking that maidenly reserve alone prevented Ernestine from confessing that she wished to marry Gerald.

"Well, my dear, he has quite turned her head, has he not?" asked Madame de Senneterre, nudging the baroness slightly with her elbow.

"Completely, completely, my dear duchess. But give me your arm, and let us go and find M. de Senneterre, to tell him of his success."

"The dear child is ours at last, and Gerald will be the largest landowner in France. As for our little private compact, my dear baroness," added Madame de Senneterre, in even more subdued tones, "I scarcely need assure you that it shall be carried out with scrupulous exactitude. I have said nothing to my son about it, understand, but I will vouch for him."

"We will not talk of that now, my dear duchess; but as Madame de Mirecourt has been so exceedingly kind, don't you think it would be in excellent taste for him—"

"Oh, that is understood, of course," said Madame de Senneterre, hastily interrupting the baroness. "Nothing could be more just, I am sure. But let us make haste and find Gerald. Do you see him anywhere?"

"No, my dear duchess, but he is in the gallery, doubtless. Come, let us look for him there."

Then turning to Ernestine, Madame de la Rochaiguë said:

"We shall leave you only for a moment, my dear child. We are merely going to make some one as happy as a king."

And without waiting for any reply from Ernestine, Madame de la Rochaiguë gave her arm to the duchess, and the two ladies hastened towards the gallery.

M. de Maillefort, who seemed to have noted the departure of the two ladies, now approached Ernestine, and, availing himself of one of the privileges accorded a man of his years, took the seat beside the young girl which Madame de la Rochaiguë had just vacated.

CHAPTER XIV.

VILLAINY UNMASKED.

As M. de Maillefort seated himself beside Ernestine, he remarked, with a smile:

"So you are no longer afraid of me, I see."

"Ah, monsieur," replied the girl, "I am so thankful for this opportunity to thank you—"

"For my discretion? That will stand any test, I assure you. I give you my word that no one knows or ever will know that I met you at the home of the very best and noblest young woman I know."

"Is she not, monsieur? But if I know Herminie, monsieur, it is to you that I am indebted for the honour."

"To me?"

"You remember, perhaps, that one evening in Mlle. Helena's presence you said some very hard, but alas! only too true things about me."

"Yes, my poor child. I knew how much you disliked me. I could never find an opportunity to see you alone, and, though I was watching over you, it was necessary, imperatively necessary, that your eyes should be opened, and that you should understand the object of the fulsome flattery of which you might eventually become the dupe."

"Ah, well, monsieur, your words did open my eyes, and I saw very plainly that those around me were deceiving me, and that I was already on the verge of becoming a victim to their shameful flattery. I made a resolve then and there, and, in order to discover the truth concerning myself, I arranged with my governess to attend a little dancing party given by one of her friends, where I was to be introduced as a poor orphan relative of hers."

"And at this party you met Herminie. She told me so. I understand everything now. So you wished to know your own intrinsic worth without your fortune, eh?"

"Yes, monsieur, and the test was a very painful though profitable one. It has taught me among other things to appreciate the value and the sincerity of the attentions showered upon me this evening," she added, meaningly.

And as the hunchback, hardly able to repress his emotion, gazed at Ernestine in silence, deeply touched by the strength of character this young and defenceless girl had displayed, she asked, timidly:

"Can you blame me, monsieur?"

"Blame you, my poor child, no, no. The only blame attaches to the unscrupulous persons whose baseness almost compelled you to take such a step—a step I not only approve but admire, for you yourself do not realise how much courage and nobility of character you evinced."

A rather elderly man, approaching the divan upon which M. de Maillefort was seated, leaned over the back of it, and said to the hunchback, in a low tone:

"My dear marquis, Morainville and Hauterive are at your service. They are standing by the window opposite you."

"Very well, my dear friend. A thousand thanks for your kindness and theirs! You have informed them of the condition of affairs, have you not?"

"Fully."

"And they make no objection?"

"How could they in a case like this?"

"Then all is well," responded the marquis.

Then turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he asked:

"For which quadrille did M. de Mornand engage you?"

"For the next, monsieur," replied Ernestine, much surprised at the question.

"You hear, my friend," said M. de Maillefort to the gentleman who had just spoken to him.

"Very well, my dear marquis."

And M. de Maillefort's friend, after having made quite a détour, rejoined Messrs. Morainville and d'Hauterive, and said a few words to which both gave a nod of assent.

"My dear child," remarked the marquis, again turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "I have been watching over you for some time past without appearing to do so, for though you never saw me at your mother's house during your childhood, I was one of your mother's friends—most devoted friends."

"Ah, monsieur, I ought to have mistrusted that sooner, for you have been so grossly maligned to me."

"That was very natural under the circumstances. Now, a word or two upon a more important matter. M. de la Rochaiguë has often spoken of M. de Mornand as a suitor for your hand, has he not? and has also assured you that you could not make a better choice?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"My poor child!" said the marquis, compassionately; then he continued, in his usual sarcastic tone:

"And Mlle. Helena, in her turn, saintly, devout creature that she is, has said the very same thing about M. Célestin de Macreuse, another extremely devout and saintly personage."

But the orphan, noting the bitter and cynical smile that played about the lips of the marquis as he spoke of the saintliness of the abbé's disciple, ventured to say:

"You have a poor opinion of M. de Macreuse, perhaps, marquis?"

"Perhaps? No, my opinion on that subject is very decided."

"I admit that I, too, distrusted M. de Macreuse," began Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"So much the better," interrupted the marquis, hastily. "The wretch caused me far more anxiety than any of the others. I was so afraid that you would be duped by his pretended melancholy and his hypocrisy, but fortunately such persons not unfrequently excite the instinctive distrust of the honest and ingenuous."

"But you need feel no such apprehensions, I assure you," resumed Ernestine, triumphantly. "I must undeceive you on that point."

"Undeceive me?"

"In regard to M. de Macreuse? Yes."

"And why, pray?"

"Because there are no real grounds for any distrust. M. de Macreuse is a sincere and honourable man, plain-spoken almost to rudeness, in fact."

"My child, you frighten me," exclaimed M. de Maillefort, in such accents of alarm that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was thunderstruck. "Do not conceal anything from me, I beseech you," continued the hunchback. "You can have no conception of the diabolical cunning of a man like that. I have seen such hypocrites deceive the shrewdest people,—and you, my poor innocent child!"

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, impressed by M. de Maillefort's evident anxiety, and having perfect confidence in him now, proceeded to give him the gist of her recent conversation with the pious young man.

"He mistrusted your motive, my child," said the hunchback, after a moment's reflection, "and, seeing that he had been caught in a trap, audaciously resolved to turn the tables on you by pretending that he had been putting you to a similar test. I tell you that such men positively appall me."

"Good Heavens! is it possible, monsieur?" exclaimed the terrified girl. "Oh, no, he cannot be so utterly base! Besides, I am sure you would think very differently if you had seen him. Why, the tears positively came to his eyes when he spoke of the bitter grief the loss of his mother had caused him."

"The loss of his mother!" repeated the marquis. "Ah, you little know—"

Then suddenly checking himself, he added:

"There he is now! Ah, it was certainly Heaven that sent him here just at this moment. Listen and judge for yourself, my poor dear child. Ah, your innocent heart little suspects the depths of degradation to which avarice reduces such souls as his."

Then elevating his voice loud enough to make himself distinctly heard by those around him, he called out to Macreuse, who was just then crossing the ballroom in order to steal another glance at Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"M. de Macreuse, one word, if you please."

The abbé's protégé hesitated a moment before responding to the summons, for he both hated and feared the marquis, but seeing every turned eye upon him, and encouraged by the success of his late ruse with Ernestine, he straightened himself up, and approaching M. de Maillefort, said coldly:

"You did me the honour to call me, M. le marquis."

"Yes, I did you that honour, monsieur," replied the marquis, sardonically, and without taking the trouble to rise from his seat; "and yet you are not at all polite to me, nor to the other persons who happen to have the pleasure of your company."

On hearing these words, quite a number of persons gathered around the two men, for the satirical and aggressive spirit of the marquis was well known.

"I do not understand you, M. le marquis," replied M. de Macreuse, much annoyed, and evidently fearing; some disagreeable explanation. "So far as I know I have not been lacking in respect towards you or any other person present."

"I hear that you have had the misfortune to lose your mother, monsieur," said the marquis, in his rather shrill, penetrating voice.

"Monsieur," stammered M. de Macreuse, apparently stupefied by these words.

"Would it be indiscreet in me to ask when you lost madame, your mother—if you know."

"Monsieur!" faltered this model young man, blushing scarlet. "Such a question—"

"Is very natural, it seems to me, besides being rendered almost necessary by the lack of respect of which I complain, not only in my own name, but in the name of all your acquaintances."

"Lack of respect?"

"Certainly. Why did you not politely inform your acquaintances of the sad loss which you have had the misfortune to sustain, etc?"

"I do not know what you mean, M. le marquis," replied Macreuse, who had now recovered his composure, in a measure.

"Nonsense! I, who am a great church-goer, as every one knows, heard you ask a priest at St. Thomas d'Aquin the other day to say a certain number of masses for the repose of your mother's soul."

"But, monsieur—"

"But, monsieur, there can be no doubt of the truth of my statement, as you were quite overcome with grief and despair, apparently, while praying for this beloved parent in the Chapel of the Virgin,—so completely overcome, in fact, that your good friends, the beadles, were obliged to carry you in a dead swoon to the sacristy,—a piece of shameful deception on your part that would have amused if it had not revolted me."

Staggered for a moment by this unexpected attack, the abbé's protégé had now recovered all his native impudence.

"Every one will understand why I could not and should not answer such an extraordinary—such a truly distressing question. The secret of one's prayers is sacred—"

"That is true!" cried several voices, indignantly. "Such an attack is outrageous!"

"Did any one ever hear the like of it?"

As we have remarked before, M. de Macreuse, like all persons of his stamp, had his partisans, and these partisans very naturally had a strong antipathy for M. de Maillefort, who hunted down everything false and cowardly in the most pitiless fashion, so a still louder murmur of disapproval was heard, and such expressions as: "What a distressing scene!" "Did you ever hear anything as scandalous!" and "How brutal!" were distinctly audible. But the marquis, no whit disconcerted, allowed the storm to spend itself, until Macreuse, emboldened by his opponent's silence said, boldly:

"The interest so many highly esteemed persons manifest in me makes it unnecessary for me to prolong this interview, and—"

But the marquis, interrupting him, said, in accents of withering contempt:

"M. de Macreuse, you have lied atrociously. You have not lost your mother, M. de Macreuse; your sainted mother is living, as you know very well, and your sainted father also. You see that I am sufficiently well informed concerning your antecedents. You have played an infamous part! You have cast odium upon a sentiment that even the most degraded respect,—the sentiment of filial love. The object of all this duplicity is known to me, and if I refrain from disclosing it, you may be sure that it is only because names are involved which are so honoured that they should not even be mentioned in the same breath with yours—if you possess one."

M. de Macreuse's frightful pallor and utter consternation proved the truth of these charges so conclusively that even the warmest admirers of this model young man dared not rally to his defence, while those who had always felt an instinctive dislike for the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission, loudly applauded the marquis.

"Monsieur," cried Macreuse, terrible to behold in his suppressed rage,—for he felt that his villainy was certain to be unmasked now,—"for such an insult as this—"

"Enough, monsieur, enough. Leave this house at once. The mere sight of you is offensive to respectable people,

and Madame de Mirecourt will be infinitely obliged to me for punishing you as you deserve. It is absolutely necessary that scoundrels like you should be made an example of now and then, and, distasteful as the rôle of executioner is to me, I have assumed it to-night, and my task is not yet ended by any means."

This announcement increased the confusion and excitement very considerably.

The model young man, anticipating another attack, and thinking he had had quite enough of it, straightened himself up, as a snake straightens itself up from beneath the foot that is crushing it, and said, insolently:

"After these gross insults, I will not remain another minute in this house, but I venture to hope that, in spite of the difference in our ages, M. le Marquis de Maillefort will be so kind as to accede to-morrow to a request which I shall make through two of my friends."

"Go, monsieur, go! The night brings counsel, and after a little reflection you will abandon your absurd and sanguinary pretensions."

"So be it, monsieur, but in that case you may rest assured that I shall resort to other means," retorted the model youth, casting a venomous look at the hunchback, as he turned to depart.

"'Enough, monsieur, enough.'"
Original etching by Adrian Marcel.

Madame de Mirecourt, recollecting what Madame de Senneterre had said in relation to M. de Macreuse, was not sorry to see that gentleman's villainy exposed, but to put an end to the excitement and confusion this strange scene had created, she requested several men she knew very well to form a quadrille as soon as possible.

In fact, the young men were already starting out in search of partners.

This exposure of M. de Macreuse filled Mlle. de Beaumesnil's heart with gratitude and also with terror when she thought that she might have yielded to the interest M. de Macreuse had at first inspired, and perhaps married a man capable of such an infamous act—an act that revealed an utterly depraved nature.

While engaged in these reflections, the orphan saw that Madame de Senneterre and Madame de la Rochaiguë, who had been for a time unable to force their way through the crowd that had gathered around the two men, had returned and resumed their seats beside her. The marquis then rose and stepped around back of the divan, after which he leaned over Madame de la Rochaiguë and said, almost in a whisper:

"Ah, well, madame, you see I am not a bad auxiliary, after all. I discover many strange and villainous things from my post of observation, as I told you some time ago."

"I am utterly astounded, my dear marquis," replied the baroness. "I understand everything now, however. This explains why my odious sister-in-law has been dragging the poor dear child off to the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin every morning. With her apparent stupidity and her religious zeal, Helena is a most perfidious creature. Did any one ever hear of such deceitfulness and treachery?"

"The end is not yet, my dear baroness. You have not only been sheltering a viper in your house, but a veritable serpent as well."

"A serpent?"

"Yes, an enormous one, with long teeth," said the marquis, with a meaning glance at M. de la Rochaiguë, who happened to be standing in the doorway, showing his teeth after his usual fashion.

"What! my husband?" exclaimed the baroness. "What do you mean?"

"You will soon know. Do you see that stout man advancing towards us with such a triumphant air?"

"Of course. That is M. de Mornand."

"He is coming to ask your ward to dance."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. We can let her dance with anybody now, for we were right in our suppositions. The dear child is charmed with M. de Senneterre, my dear marquis."

"I am sure of it."

"So behold the Duchesse de Senneterre," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, triumphantly, "and that without the slightest trouble."

"The Duchesse de Senneterre!" repeated the hunchback. "Not quite."

"Of course not, but the matter is virtually settled."

"So at last you are satisfied with Gerald, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and me, are you not, my dear baroness?"

"Delighted, my dear marquis."

"That is all I want to know. Now I can devote my attention to that stout man and your serpent of a husband, whose coils—"

"What! M. de la Rochaiguë has dared—"

"Ah, my poor baroness, your ingenuousness rends my heart. Look, listen and profit thereby, poor credulous woman that you are!"

As the marquis uttered these words, M. de Mornand was already bowing low before Mlle. de Beaumesnil to remind her of the engagement she had made to dance with him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PROSPECTIVE MINISTER'S DEFEAT.

"Mademoiselle has not forgotten that she promised me this dance, I trust," said M. de Mornand, complacently. "Will she do me the honour to accept my arm?"

"That cannot be, M. de Mornand," interposed M. de Maillefort, who was still leaning over the back of the sofa on which Ernestine was seated.

M. de Mornand straightened himself up hastily, and, perceiving the marquis, demanded with great hauteur:

"What can not be, monsieur?"

"You can not dance with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, monsieur," answered the hunchback, still in the same quiet tone.

M. de Mornand shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, then, turning to Ernestine, repeated:

"Will mademoiselle do me the honour to accept my arm?"

Embarrassed and bewildered, Ernestine turned to M. de Maillefort as if to ask his advice, and again the marquis repeated in the same quiet but impressive tone, emphasising each word strongly:

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil can not and must not dance with M. de Mornand."

Ernestine was so impressed by M. de Maillefort's grave, almost solemn manner that, turning to M. de Mornand, she said, casting down her eyes:

"I must beg you to excuse me, monsieur, for I feel too fatigued to keep the promise I made you."

M. de Mornand bowed low before Ernestine without uttering a word, but as he straightened himself up he cast a meaning glance at the hunchback.

That gentleman answered it by pointing to one of the doors of the gallery towards which he, too, directed his steps, leaving Mlle. de Beaumesnil in a state of great mental perturbation.

This little scene had passed unnoticed, the few words interchanged between the marquis and M. de Mornand having been uttered in subdued tones and in the midst of the confusion that always accompanies the forming of a quadrille, so no one but Madame de la Rochaiguë and the Duchesse de Senneterre had the slightest suspicion of what had occurred.

M. de Mornand on his way to the gallery was accosted successively by M. de la Rochaiguë and M. de Ravil, who had watched with mingled wonder and uneasiness their protégé's futile efforts to induce the heiress to keep her engagement.

"What! you are not going to dance?" inquired De Ravil.

"What has happened, my dear M. de Mornand?" asked the baron, in his turn. "I thought I saw you talking with that accursed hunchback, whose insolence and audacity really exceed all bounds."

"You are right, monsieur," replied the prospective minister, his face darkening. "M. de Maillefort seems to think he can do anything he pleases. Such insolence as his must be put a stop to. He actually had the impertinence to forbid your ward's dancing with me."

"And she obeyed him?" exclaimed the baron.

"What else could the poor girl do after such an injunction?"

"Why this is abominable, outrageous, inconceivable!" exclaimed the baron. "I will go to my ward at once, and—"

"That is useless now," said M. de Mornand. Then, turning to Ravil, he added:

"Come with me. I must have an explanation with M. de Maillefort. He is waiting for me in the gallery."

"I, too, will accompany you," added the baron.

As the three gentlemen approached the hunchback, they saw Messrs. de Morainville and d'Hauterive standing beside him, as well as five or six other men who had been assembled at the request of the marquis.

"M. de Maillefort, I have a few words of explanation to ask of you," said M. de Mornand, in coldly polite tones.

"I am at your service, monsieur."

"Then, if agreeable to you, you and I will go to the picture-gallery. Ask one of your friends to accompany you."

"I am not disposed to comply with your request, monsieur, for I intend to have our explanation as public as possible."

"Monsieur?"

"I do not see why you should fear publicity if I do not."

"So be it, then," responded M. de Mornand, "so I ask you here before these gentleman, why, when I had the honour to invite a certain young lady to dance a few minutes ago, you took the liberty of saying to that young lady, 'Mlle. de Beaumesnil can not and must not dance with M. de Mornand.' Those were your very words."

"Those were my very words, monsieur. You have an excellent memory. I hope it will not play you false, presently."

"And I wish to say to M. de Maillefort," interposed the baron, "that he arrogates to himself an authority, a right, and a surveillance which belong to me exclusively, for in telling my ward that—"

"My dear baron," said the marquis, smilingly, interrupting M. de la Rochaiguë, "you are a model, paragon, and example for all guardians, past, present and future, as I will prove to you later, but permit me now to reply to M. de Mornand, whom I have just had the honour to congratulate upon his excellent memory, and to ask him if he recollects something I said to him at a certain *matinée dansante* given by the Duchesse de Senneterre,—something in relation to a slight scratch that was intended to fix in his memory a date which I might have occasion to remind him of at some future day."

"That is true, monsieur," said M. de Mornand, "but that affair has not the slightest connection with the explanation I just demanded of you."

"On the contrary, monsieur, this explanation is the natural consequence of that affair."

"Be more explicit, if you please, monsieur."

"I will. At that entertainment at the house of Madame de Senneterre, in the garden, under a clump of lilacs, in the presence of several gentlemen, and notably M. de Morainville and M. d'Hauterive here, you had the audacity to calumniate Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil in the most shameless manner."

"Monsieur!"

"Without either compassion or consideration for an unfortunate lady who was then lying at the point of death," continued the hunchback, interrupting M. de Mornand, indignantly, "you insulted her in the most cowardly manner and even went so far as to say that no honourable man would ever marry the daughter of such a mother as Madame de Beaumesnil."

And at a hasty movement on the part of M. de Mornand, who was white with rage, the marquis, turning to Messrs. de Morainville and d'Hauterive, asked:

"Is it not true that M. de Mornand made that remark in your presence, gentlemen?"

"M. de Mornand did make that remark in our presence," they replied. "It is impossible for us to deny the fact."

"And I, myself, unseen by you, heard you make it, monsieur," continued the hunchback, "and, carried away with just indignation, I could not help exclaiming, 'Scoundrel!'"

"So it was you!" cried Mornand, furious to see all his hopes of future wealth thus rudely blighted.

"Yes, it was I, and that is why I just told Mlle. de Beaumesnil that she could not and should not dance with you, monsieur,—a man who had publicly defamed her mother; and I leave it to these gentlemen here if I have not done perfectly right to interfere in this matter."

A silence that was anything but complimentary to M. de Mornand followed the words of the hunchback.

De Ravil alone ventured to speak. It was in an ironical tone.

"M. le marquis must be trying to pose as a paladin or knight-errant to inflict a wound upon a gallant gentleman, as a sort of memento, merely to prevent him from dancing a quadrille with Mlle. de Beaumesnil some day."

"Or rather to prevent M. de Mornand from marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil, monsieur," corrected the marquis, "for your friend is as mercenary as Mlle. de Beaumesnil is rich, which is saying a good deal, and in the conversation I overheard at Madame de Senneterre's dance, M. de Mornand betrayed his intentions even at that early day. By defaming Madame de Beaumesnil's character, and making the disgraceful effects of his calumnies extend to the daughter, and even to any man who might wish to marry her, M. de Mornand hoped to drive away all rivals. This infamous conduct exasperated me beyond endurance. In my indignation the word 'Scoundrel!' escaped me. I subsequently devised a way to offer M. de Mornand the reparation due him, however. Hence the wound which was to serve as a sort of memento, and hence my resolve to prevent M. de Mornand from marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and I have succeeded, for I defy him now to venture into the presence of the richest heiress in France, even if he delivers a dozen more philanthropical speeches on the cod fisheries, or even under your protection, baron,—you the most exemplary, admirable, and high-minded of guardians, who were not only willing, but eager, to sacrifice your ward's happiness and welfare to your absurd ambition."

And as no one made any attempt to reply, the hunchback continued:

"Ah, gentlemen, these villainies are of such frequent occurrence in society that it would be well to make an example of at least one offender. Because such shameful things often occur among respectable people, is that any reason they should go unpunished? What! there is a prison cell for poor devils who make a few louis by cheating at cards, and there is no pillory in which to place people who, by means of false pretences and foul lies, endeavour to secure possession of an enormous fortune, and plot in cold blood to enchain for ever an innocent child, whose only crime is the possession of a colossal fortune, which, unbeknown to her, excites the most shameless cupidity in those around her! And when these men succeed, people praise them and envy them and welcome them to their houses. People praise their shrewdness and go into ecstasies over their good fortune! Yes, for thanks to the wealth acquired by such unworthy means, they will entertain magnificently, and their gold not only enables them to gratify their every wish, but to attain any official position, no matter how exalted. The unfortunate woman who has enriched them, and whom they have so basely deceived, weeps her life away or plunges into a career of dissipation in order to forget her misery. Ah, gentlemen, I have at least had the satisfaction of bringing two scoundrels to grief, for M. de Macreuse, whom I drove from this house a few minutes ago, had devised a similar scheme."

"You are outwitted like the fool that you are, and it has been very cleverly done," De Ravil whispered in the ear of his friend, who stood as if petrified. "I will never forgive you as long as I live for having made me lose my percentage on that dowry."

Noble and generous sentiments exert such an irresistible influence sometimes that, after the hunchback's scathing words, M. de Mornand felt that he was censured by every one. Not a voice was lifted in his defence, but fortunately the termination of the quadrille brought quite a crowd of people into the gallery, and the prospective minister was thus afforded an opportunity to make his escape, pale and agitated, and without having been able to find a word to say in refutation of M. de Maillefort's grievous charges.

The marquis then rejoined Madame de la Rochaiguë, who was as entirely in the dark concerning what had just taken place as Ernestine.

"It is absolutely necessary that you take Mlle. de Beaumesnil away at once," M. de Maillefort said to the baroness. "Her presence here is no longer desirable. Yes, my dear child," added the marquis, turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "the unpleasant curiosity you excite is increasing, instead of diminishing. To-morrow I will tell you all, but now take my advice and go home at once."

"Oh, gladly, monsieur," replied Ernestine, "for I am in misery."

So the young girl rose and took the arm of Madame de la Rochaiguë, who said to the hunchback, in a tone of the liveliest gratitude:

"I understand the situation now, I think. M. de Mornand had also entered the lists, it seems."

"We will talk all this over to-morrow. Now, in Heaven's name, take Mlle. de Beaumesnil away at once!"

"Ah, you are certainly our guardian angel, my dear marquis," whispered Madame de la Rochaiguë. "I was wise to confide in you!"

"Yes, yes, but for pity's sake, get Mlle. de Beaumesnil away."

The orphan cast a quick glance of gratitude at the hunchback, then, agitated and almost terrified by the exciting events of the evening, she left the ballroom in company with Madame de la Rochaiguë; but M. de Maillefort remained, unwilling to appear to leave under cover of the sort of stupor his daring act had caused.

De Ravil, like a true cynic, had no sooner witnessed the ruin of his friend Mornand's hopes than he abandoned him then and there. The future minister had thrown himself into a cab, but Ravil wended his way homeward on foot, reviewing the events that had just occurred, and comparing the overthrow of M. de Mornand with that of M. de Macreuse.

As he turned the corner of the street on which Madame de Mirecourt's house stood, De Ravil saw in the bright

moonlight a man a short distance ahead of him, walking now slowly, now with feverish haste.

The agitated bearing of this man excited the cynic's curiosity. He quickened his pace, and soon recognised M. de Macreuse, who could not tear himself away from the house where the marquis lingered,—the marquis whose heart Macreuse would have torn from his breast, had he been able to do it.

Yielding to a truly diabolical impulse, Ravil approached Macreuse, and said:

"Good evening, M. de Macreuse."

The abbé's protégé raised his head, and the evil passions that filled his heart could be read so plainly in his face that De Ravil congratulated himself upon his idea.

"What do you want?" Macreuse demanded, brusquely, not recognising De Ravil at the first glance. Then looking at him more attentively, he said:

"Ah, it is you, M. de Ravil; excuse me."

He made a movement as if about to walk on, but De Ravil checked him by saying:

"M. de Macreuse, I feel sure that we are likely to understand and be of service to each other."

"In what way, monsieur?"

"We hate the same man, that is something."

"Whom?"

"M. de Maillefort."

"So you, too, hate him?"

"With a deadly hatred."

"Well, what of it, monsieur?"

"Well, having the same animosity, we may have the same interests."

"I do not understand you, M. de Ravil."

"M. de Macreuse, you are a much too gifted and energetic man to allow yourself to be discouraged by one setback."

"What setback, monsieur?"

"So I will take you into my confidence. I had a fool of a friend, known to you as M. de Mornand, who had designs upon the same heiress that you did."

"M. de Mornand?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, a few minutes after your hasty departure, that d—d marquis exposed him as he had exposed you. That is to say, he has rendered my imbecile friend's marriage with the little Beaumesnil an impossibility."

"But what difference does it make to you whether the heiress does or does not marry your friend?"

"The devil! A great deal of difference! I went into the affair with the expectation of getting a handsome percentage on the dowry, so that accursed hunchback ruined me in ruining Mornand. Do you understand now?"

"Perfectly."

"Mornand is too much of a milksop—too blubbery, in short, to make any attempt to recover from his setback or even to console himself by revenge."

"Revenge? Upon whom?"

"Upon that little ninny of an heiress, and indirectly upon that d—d hunchback. But let me assure you that I am not one of those blockheads who thirst for revenge alone; it is a profitable revenge I am after every time."

"Profitable?"

"Yes, very profitable, and I can furnish the materials for it, too."

"You? And what are your materials, pray?"

"Excuse me. I possess a very valuable secret."

"In relation to Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"The same. I can work up this valuable secret alone, however, just as well."

"And yet you offer—"

"To go shares with you? Nothing of the kind. You would think me a simpleton if I did, and you've no fondness for simpletons."

"Then, monsieur, to what purpose—?"

"You did not embark in such an important enterprise—as my imbecile friend the politician would say—you did not embark in such an important enterprise as your marriage with the greatest heiress in France without backers,

without powerful intermediaries and without strong probabilities of success. One does not make such a blunder as that when one is the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission,—a work, by the way, which has convinced me that you are a remarkably able man, and gained you my sincere admiration. This being the case, you are too high-spirited to submit quietly to such a setback to the atrocious treatment you have received from M. de Maillefort. You may, perhaps, have some means of retrieving your lost ground, or of obtaining your object in some other way, and so long as the little Beaumesnil remains single, a man like you does not abandon hope."

"Well, so be it, monsieur; suppose I have not given up all hope, what then?"

"If you admit that, I will propose that we pool, you, your means of success, and I, my secret. If your hopes are realised, we will not make use of my secret; if they are not realised, my secret will remain a luscious, juicy pear to quench our thirst. In short, if you marry the heiress, you will give me a small percentage on her dowry; if you do not marry her, I will give you a part of the money my secret will gain for me, that is, if the aforesaid secret can not be made to render you valuable assistance in your new attempt."

"All this is worthy of attention," answered Macreuse, after a moment's reflection, for he, too, was beginning to think that he and De Ravil were, indeed, congenial spirits. "But it would be well for me to know what this secret is, and what its influence is likely to be."

"Give me your arm, my dear M. de Macreuse, I am going to state the case plainly to you, for I have nothing to gain by deceiving you, as you will soon see for yourself."

The two men walked on arm in arm and were soon lost in the shadow of the tall houses that bordered one edge of the sidewalk.

CHAPTER XVI.

DISINTERESTED AFFECTION.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil had promised Herminie that she would come and see her Friday morning, or, in other words, on the day immediately following the ball which the richest heiress in France had attended at Madame de Mirecourt's house, and where M. de Macreuse and M. de Mornand had seen their villainous projects exposed by the Marquis de Maillefort.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil had left the ballroom deeply distressed and terrified by the discoveries she made in relation to her suitors, discoveries which had been completed by Gerald's frank confession concerning the manner in which an heiress was married off; and feeling quite as much contempt as aversion, now, for her guardian and his family, the young girl realised the necessity of taking some decisive action in the matter, her present relations with the Rochaiguës having become intolerable.

It was consequently necessary for her to ask the protection and counsel of some person outside of this family of sage advisers.

Ernestine knew only two persons whom she could trust,—Herminie and M. de Maillefort.

In order to open her heart to Herminie Mlle. de Beaumesnil would be obliged to confess who she really was, but though she had no intention of deferring this revelation much longer, she did long to enjoy once more the inexpressible happiness of receiving those evidences of tender friendship which the duchess supposed she was lavishing upon a poor orphan girl who had to work for her living.

"Heaven grant that she will love me just as much when she knows that I am rich!" thought the heiress, anxiously. "Heaven grant that this discovery may not impair the friendship that a person of Herminie's proud and sensitive nature feels for me!"

Faithful to her promise, and rejoiced to know how entirely worthy Gerald was of Herminie's love, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, accompanied by Madame Laîné, who was to wait for her in the cab, as usual, started early Friday morning for the home of the duchess, for it is needless to say that, after M. de Macreuse's humiliation of the evening before, Mlle. Helena did not come to take her brother's ward to church as usual.

As she neared her friend's home, Ernestine became very uneasy, for though, since her conversation with M. de Senneterre the evening before, the young girl knew for a certainty how perfectly honourable Gerald's intentions were, and how passionately he loved Herminie, Mlle. de Beaumesnil foresaw only too plainly the many difficulties to be overcome before a marriage between the young duke and a penniless music teacher could be brought about.

When Ernestine reached her friend's house, Herminie sprang forward to meet her and embraced her tenderly.

"Ah, I was sure you would not forget your promise, Ernestine," she cried, "for did I not tell you what a comfort your coming would be to me?"

"I trust it may prove so, indeed, my dear Herminie. Have you regained a little of your wonted courage? Are you not more hopeful?"

The duchess shook her head sadly.

"Alas! I can not say that I see any reason to hope," she replied, "but don't let us talk of my troubles now, Ernestine. We will discuss them again when the subject that is now on my mind has ceased to divert my thoughts from them."

"To what subject do you refer?"

"It is a matter that concerns you, Ernestine."

"Me?"

"It is a matter that may exert a very happy influence over your future, my poor, lonely child."

"What do you mean, Herminie?"

"I am not the proper person to explain this mystery to you. I was asked to do so, but fearing I might influence you by the manner in which I presented the case, I refused, wishing your decision to be unbiased by any outside influence, though I will express my opinion afterwards if you wish."

"Good Heavens! What you say, Herminie, mystifies me more and more. What is this very important project?"

"The last time you were here, and while Commander Bernard was again expressing his fervent gratitude to you, M. Olivier begged me to see him the next day on a very important matter, he said. I complied with his request, and the matter was indeed one of grave importance, so grave, in fact, that he asked me to act as his intermediary with you, which I refused to do for reasons I have already explained."

"Ah, then the matter has some connection with M. Olivier?"

"Yes, and I thought it would be better for him to make his wishes known himself, in my presence, if you have no objection."

"And you advise me to grant M. Olivier a hearing, my dear Herminie?"

"I do, Ernestine, because whatever happens and whatever your decision may be, you will, I am sure, be both proud and happy to have heard what he has to tell you."

"Then I am to see M. Olivier. But when, Herminie?"

"To-day, now, if you desire it."

"Where is he?"

"Out in the garden. Counting upon a visit from you this morning, I said to him: 'Come Friday morning. You will not mind waiting in the garden awhile, and if Ernestine consents to see you, I will send for you.'"

"Very well, then, Herminie, have the goodness to send M. Olivier word that I should be pleased to see him."

A moment afterwards M. Olivier Raymond was ushered into the room by Madame Moufflon, the concierge.

"M. Olivier," said Herminie, "Ernestine is ready to listen to you. You know my friendship for her. You know, too, how highly I esteem you, so I trust my presence will prove no restraint."

"I particularly desire your presence, Mlle. Herminie, as I shall, perhaps, find it necessary to appeal to your memory in support of some of my statements," replied Olivier. Then, turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he continued, without making any attempt to conceal his emotion:

"Mademoiselle, permit me to say, first of all, that I must have perfect confidence in the rectitude of my intentions to venture upon the rather peculiar step I am about to take."

"I am certain, in advance, M. Olivier, that this step is worthy of you, of me, and of the friend that is listening to us."

"I think so, too, mademoiselle, so I am going to speak to you in all sincerity, for you may recollect that once before you expressed yourself as grateful to me for my frankness."

"I was certainly deeply touched by it, as Herminie will tell you, M. Olivier."

"Mlle. Herminie can also testify to the deep interest you inspired in my heart, mademoiselle, I will not say from the time of the charity dance," added Olivier, with a faint smile, "but rather from the time of the conversation I had with you that evening."

"It is perfectly true, my dear Ernestine," said Herminie, "that, after your departure, M. Olivier seemed to be deeply touched by the strange mixture of melancholy, frankness, and originality, that he had noticed in your conversation, and his interest seemed to be greatly increased when I told him, without committing any breach of confidence, I trust, that I felt sure your life was far from happy."

"The truth is never a breach of confidence, my dear Herminie. Though one ought, of course, to conceal one's unhappiness from the indifferent, one should at least have the consolation of confessing it to one's friends."

"Then you may be able to understand, mademoiselle," said Olivier, "that, by reason of the very peculiar circumstances of our first interview, there sprang up in my heart, not one of those sudden and violent emotions one sometimes experiences,—I should be uttering an untruth if I asserted this,—but an emotion full of sweetness and charm, together with a lively solicitude for you, a solicitude which memory and reflection rendered more and more keen. Such were my feelings, mademoiselle, when you, at the risk of your own life, saved the uncle whom I love as a father from a horrible death. Then, gratitude and the admiration which so noble an act richly merited were added to the sentiments I already entertained for you, but I should, probably, never have dared to give expression to these feelings had it not been for the unexpected good fortune that has befallen me."

After pausing an instant, as if uncertain whether he had better go on, Olivier added:

"And now, mademoiselle, I find myself again obliged to remind myself and to remind you that you love sincerity above all things."

"Yes, M. Olivier, I do both love and appreciate sincerity above all things."

"Well, mademoiselle, to speak frankly, you are not happy, and the persons with whom you live are not congenial to you. Is this not so?"

"Yes, M. Olivier. The only happiness I have known since my parents' death dates from the hour of my entrance into Madame Herbaut's house."

"I do not wish to sadden you, mademoiselle," continued Olivier, kindly, even tenderly. "I am loath, too, to remind you how hard and precarious the life of a young girl who is dependent upon her own exertions is, and yet, mademoiselle, however courageous and industrious you may be, you cannot forget that you are an orphan, surrounded by selfish, hard-hearted persons, who would cruelly desert you, perhaps, if want or sickness should be your portion, or manifest a humiliating pity towards you which would be even more hard to bear than heartless desertion."

"You are perfectly right, monsieur. Privations, disdain, desertion, these are all I have to expect from the persons around me if I should become really destitute."

"You exposed to disdain and privations, never!" exclaimed Olivier. "No, you must not, you shall not, be treated thus," he continued. "I know that you can count upon Mlle. Herminie's devoted friendship; but poor and honest people like ourselves must not deceive ourselves. Mlle. Herminie may need your aid herself some day. Besides, two devoted friends are better than one, so I would gladly offer myself as well, if I only knew that you had half as much confidence in me as I have true and faithful affection for you."

"Monsieur," said Ernestine, trembling, and casting down her eyes, "I do not know—I am not sure that I ought—"

"Listen one moment, mademoiselle. If I were still a common soldier, for to be a common soldier and a non-commissioned officer really amount to the same thing, I should not have spoken to you on this subject. I should have tried to forget, not my gratitude, but the sentiment that renders it doubly dear to me. Whether I should have succeeded or not, I cannot say. But now I am an officer, and that means a competence to me. Will you allow me to offer this competence to you?"

"Such a future far exceeds my wildest hopes," replied Ernestine, only partially concealing the intense joy Olivier's words caused her.

"Ah, mademoiselle, if you should make me happy by an acceptance of this offer, far from feeling that I was released from a sacred obligation, I should realise that I had only contracted another,—for I should owe the happiness of my life to you, though this debt, at least, I should be certain to pay by my love and devotion. Yes, for why should I not say it, there can be no love deeper or more honourable than mine. There is no cause more holy and generous than that which lies so near my heart."

On hearing Olivier utter these words, in tones of intense earnestness and profound sincerity, Mlle. de Beaumesnil experienced a rapturous emotion hitherto unknown to her, and a vivid blush dyed her throat and brow as she cast a timid glance at Olivier's handsome, manly face, now radiant with love and hope.

So Ernestine had not been mistaken as to the meaning of Olivier's look when he heard, in her presence, of his promotion. The girl saw and felt that she was loved, ardently loved. The proofs of it were so unmistakable, the causes that had produced it were so noble, that she could not doubt its reality.

And to believe, understand, and appreciate all that is noble, tender, and charming in such a love, is that not equivalent to sharing it, above all when one has lived, like Mlle. de Beaumesnil, a prey to apprehensions which recent events had more than justified, and to a distrust which had threatened to destroy all her hopes of future happiness?

And what inexpressible joy it was for her to be able to say to herself:

"It is I, the poor, nameless, penniless orphan, that he loves, because I have proved myself to be sincere, brave, and generous. And I am so truly loved that he offers a life of comparative ease, and an honourable position to me, who seemed destined to a life of poverty, if not absolute want."

And Mlle. de Beaumesnil, agitated by a thousand new emotions, blushing and smiling at the same time, seized the hand of Herminie, by whom she was sitting, and, thus avoiding the necessity of any direct reply to Olivier's proposal, exclaimed:

"You were right, Herminie; I have, indeed, good reason to be proud of M. Olivier's offer."

"And do you accept this offer, Ernestine?" asked Herminie, certain what her friend's reply would be.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with a graceful, almost childish movement, threw her arms around the neck of the duchess, kissed her tenderly, and said, almost in a whisper:

"Yes—I accept it."

But she still kept her face almost hidden on her friend's bosom, while Herminie, scarcely able to restrain her tears of sympathetic emotion, turned to the young officer, who was himself deeply moved by this charming scene, and said:

"Ernestine accepts, M. Olivier. I am delighted both on your account and hers, for from this time I feel that her

happiness is certain."

"Ah, yes, mademoiselle," cried Olivier, his face radiant with joy, "for from this moment I have the right to devote my life to Mlle. Ernestine."

"I believe in you, and in my future happiness, M. Olivier," said mademoiselle, shyly, raising her head until it rested on Herminie's shoulder. Then, with cheeks slightly flushed, and her beautiful eyes sparkling with purest joy, the girl timidly extended her little hand to the young man.

Olivier trembled, as he touched this hand which he dared not carry to his lips, but he pressed it tenderly with mingled love and deference.

Then, without trying to conceal the tears that filled his eyes, he said:

"By this dear hand so generously given, mademoiselle, I swear to you, and ask your friend to bear witness to my vow, I swear that my life shall be consecrated to your happiness."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

After the vows thus plighted by Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Olivier Raymond in Herminie's presence, the three actors in the scene maintained an almost solemn silence for several minutes.

All three fully realised the gravity of the obligation assumed.

"How delightful it is to be rich," thought Olivier, "for I am rich in comparison with this dear child who has only her own labour to depend upon. What happiness it gives me to be able to assure her an existence superior even to her wildest dreams."

His features were radiant with the delight of this thought, as he broke the silence by saying to Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"Until I became sure of your consent, mademoiselle, I did not care to broach the subject to your relative, though I have every reason to hope she will accede to my request. Do you not think so? As for my uncle, need I tell you that his joy will almost equal mine, when he knows that he can call you his daughter? If you think proper, mademoiselle, he had better be the one, perhaps, to go to your relative and make known my request."

This proposal threw Ernestine into a state of deep perplexity. Yielding to an outburst of irresistible confidence, that told her that every possible guarantee of safety and happiness would be found in Olivier, she had never once thought of the many difficulties that were sure to arise from the maintenance of the incognito which she dared not throw off at once, however.

But already somewhat familiar with the sudden dilemmas resulting from the position in which she had placed herself, Mlle. de Beaumesnil replied, after a moment's reflection:

"I am hardly able to say to-day whether it had better be M. Bernard or Herminie who goes to my relative to inform her of your intentions—and of my consent. I will think the matter over, and let you know my decision the next time I see you."

"Ernestine is right, M. Olivier," remarked Herminie; "from what I have heard of her relative's disposition, it would be advisable to act with prudence, as—as the consent of this parent is indispensable to Ernestine's marriage."

"I shall be guided entirely by Mlle. Ernestine and by you, Mlle. Herminie, in this matter. Sure of Mlle. Ernestine's consent, I can wait with patience. If you knew with what happiness I think of the future—our future, I can say now! And my brave, kind uncle, how happy he will be surrounded by our care, for it will not be at all unpleasant to you to live with him, will it, Mlle. Ernestine? He is so good and kind, and it would make him so happy to have us with him!"

"Did you not tell me that he would call me his daughter, M. Olivier? I shall be very proud of that title and try to deserve it."

"Tell me, Mlle. Herminie," asked Olivier, addressing the duchess, "after such a reply, can there be a happier man in the world than I?"

"No, M. Olivier," replied the duchess, smothering a sigh as she thought how she, too, might have enjoyed the same felicity if Gerald's position had been as modest as Olivier's; "no, I do not believe there can be any greater happiness than yours, nor any that is more richly deserved."

"We shall not be high and mighty seigneurs, Mlle. Ernestine," said Olivier, smiling, "for a second lieutenant is no great things, but even a single epaulette honourably worn levels all conditions. Besides, I am young, and I shall soon have two epaulettes instead of one, some day I shall become a major, perhaps even a colonel."

"Beware of ambition, M. Olivier," said Ernestine, smiling in her turn.

"That is true. It seems to me that I am devoured with ambition now. It would give me such happiness to see you

enjoy the consideration with which the wife of a colonel is surrounded! My poor uncle, too, how proud he would be to see me hold that rank. Then, think of it, Mlle. Ernestine, we should be millionaires on a colonel's pay. And what pleasure it would give me to surround you with comforts and even luxuries enough to make you forget the hardships of your youth, and to at last see my poor uncle placed above the reach of want, for he is sometimes subjected to great privations!"

"Yes, in spite of your generous assistance, M. Olivier," said Ernestine, with deep emotion, "and in spite of the hard work you have been doing all through your furlough."

"Ah, you have been tattling, Mlle. Herminie," said Olivier, gaily.

"At all events, I was entirely disinterested," she retorted; "for when I told Ernestine all the good I knew of you, M. Olivier, I was far from suspecting that you would corroborate my statements so soon."

"And I must tell M. Olivier, with that frankness on which he sets such store, that he misjudges me very much if he thinks I am pining for the luxury he promises me," said Ernestine, smiling.

"And I," said Olivier, "shall reply with equal frankness that I am terribly selfish, and that, in hoping to be able to surround Mlle. Ernestine with luxury, I am thinking only of the pleasure it will give me."

"And I, who am Reason personified," said Herminie, with a melancholy smile, "I shall tell Mlle. Ernestine and M. Olivier that they are two foolish children to indulge in these golden visions. The present should content them."

"Yes, I admit it is wrong," responded Olivier, gaily. "Just see where ambition leads one! I am dreaming of becoming a colonel, instead of saying to myself that my worthy uncle and myself—thanks to my pay as a second lieutenant—have never been so rich before. Think of it, nearly six thousand francs a year—for us two. What happiness to be able to say, 'For us three, Mlle. Ernestine!'"

"Six thousand francs a year? Why, that is an enormous amount," exclaimed the richest heiress in France. "How can any one spend all that money?"

"Poor child!" Olivier said to himself, exulting in his new-found prosperity, "I thought as much. She has been so poor up to this time, that it seems an immense fortune to her."

But he said aloud:

"We shall manage to spend our three thousand francs, all the same, I expect, Mlle. Ernestine. In the first place, I shall always insist upon your being nicely dressed, in simple but elegant toilets. Our rank requires it, you know, mademoiselle. An officer's wife—why, the army regulations require her to be well dressed, you understand."

"If the dignity of your rank is at stake, why, I submit, of course," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, laughing, "but only on condition that your dear uncle shall have a pretty garden, as he is so fond of flowers."

"That is understood, Mlle. Ernestine. We can easily find a snug little apartment with a garden in a quiet part of the town, for as I shall belong to the garrison we can not live in the Batignolles any longer. But—great Heavens—"

"What is the matter, M. Olivier?"

"Are you a Bonapartist, Mlle. Ernestine?" inquired the young officer, with comical seriousness.

"Why certainly, M. Olivier. I admire the emperor very much. But why do you ask that question?"

"Then we are lost, mademoiselle, for my poor uncle shelters beneath his roof the most implacable enemy of the great Napoleon that ever lived."

"Indeed!"

"You will shudder to hear her frightful stories of his atrocities; but seriously, Mlle. Ernestine, I shall be obliged to ask your indulgence, and your affection as well, for a very worthy woman, my uncle's housekeeper, who during the ten years she has been in his employ has never allowed a day to pass without lavishing every attention upon him, and without quarrelling with him in the most outrageous manner on the subject of the Corsican ogre."

"Very well, M. Olivier, I will disclose my admiration for the great emperor only to your dear uncle, and play the hypocrite before this worthy woman. Oh, you shall see; I am very politic, and she will love me in spite of my Bonapartism."

Madame Moufflon, the concierge, having rapped at the door, interrupted the conversation by handing a letter to Herminie, who, recognising the handwriting as that of M. de Maillefort, told the portress to ask the messenger to wait, as there might be an answer required.

So Olivier, fearing that a longer stay would be indiscreet, and being also in a hurry to find Commander Bernard, and report the success of his wooing, said to Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"I came here in a very anxious frame of mind, Mlle. Ernestine. Thanks to you, I am going away the happiest and most contented of men. I need not tell you how impatiently I shall await your decision in regard to your relative. If you think it advisable for my uncle to approach her on the subject, please let me know as soon as possible."

"I will do so at our next interview, which had better take place here, M. Olivier."

"May I not be permitted to bring my uncle?" asked Olivier. "There is so much that he wishes to say to you. He will be so anxious to see you, too, that it would hardly be fair to deny him the favour, for there is nothing he wouldn't be capable of doing in order to reach you, and tell you of his joy and gratitude."

"Herminie and I will not force your dear uncle to any extreme measures, for I, myself, am very impatient to see

him again, so *à bientôt*, M. Olivier."

"*A bientôt*, mademoiselle."

And Olivier departed, leaving the two girls alone together.

Herminie then opened M. de Maillefort's letter. It read as follows:

"It is still to-morrow, Saturday, my dear child, that I shall call to take you to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, only, if agreeable to you, I will come at three in the afternoon, instead of at noon as we agreed.

"A cousin-germain of mine, the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, the head of our house, has just died in Hungary.

"I received this news through the Austrian ambassador, upon whom I must call early to-morrow morning for some necessary formalities, which, to my great regret, will prevent me from fulfilling my engagement with you as early as I promised.

"I shall see you, then, to-morrow, my dear child,

"Affectionately,
"MAILLEFORT."

"Ernestine, you will excuse me to write a few words in answer to this letter, will you not?" asked Herminie, seating herself at the table.

So, while the duchess was writing to M. de Maillefort, Mlle. de Beaumesnil reflected with growing satisfaction upon the engagement she had just contracted with Olivier.

The duchess wrote M. de Maillefort that she would expect him at three the following afternoon, then rang for Madame Moufflon, and asked her to deliver the note to the messenger.

When the portress had left the room, Herminie returned to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and, kissing her affectionately, asked:

"You are very happy, are you not, Ernestine?"

"Yes, very happy, Herminie," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "and it was here in your home that this happiness came to me, my dear friend. How generous M. Olivier is! How much he must esteem and love me for him to desire to marry me, when his position is so superior to mine! That, in itself, is enough to make me adore him, and to make me place implicit faith in his promises. With what a feeling of security I can now face the future, however trying may be the circumstances in which I find myself to-day!"

"Yes, Ernestine, you are indeed certain of happiness. Your life cannot fail to be pleasant and fortunate. To love and to be loved worthily is, indeed, a fate to be envied."

And as the contrast between her own future and that of her friend struck her, the poor duchess could not help bursting into tears.

"It is, indeed, true that happiness is always selfish!" cried Ernestine. "Oh, Herminie, forgive me, forgive me! How much you must have suffered! Every word of our conversation with M. Olivier must have pierced your soul! You heard us talk of our mutual love, of our hope of a blissful future, and all the while you felt that you, perhaps, would have to renounce all such joys. Ah, our thoughtlessness must have pained you deeply, my dear Herminie."

"No, no, Ernestine," said the poor duchess, drying her eyes, "on the contrary, your happiness has been a great consolation to me. Has it not enabled me to forget my own grief and despair all the morning?"

"Despair? But why do you say that? M. de Senneterre is worthy of you," cried Ernestine, thoughtlessly, remembering only her conversation with the young duke the evening before. "He loves you as you deserve to be loved, I know it."

"You know it, Ernestine? How do you know it?"

"I mean that—that I am sure of it, Herminie," replied Ernestine, much embarrassed. "All you have told me about him convinces me that you could not have placed your affections more wisely. The obstacles to your union are great, I admit, but by no means insurmountable."

"But they are, Ernestine. I have never told you before, but my own sense of dignity will not permit me to marry M. de Senneterre, unless his mother comes here and tells me that she consents to my marriage with her son. Without that, nothing could induce me to enter this aristocratic family."

"Oh, Herminie, how much I admire your pride!" exclaimed Ernestine. "And what does M. de Senneterre say?"

"When M. Olivier told him my resolution, far from appearing either surprised or shocked, Gerald replied: 'What Herminie asks is only just. Her dignity, as well as mine, requires it. Despair is cowardly and foolish. It is for me to find the means of compelling my mother to acknowledge the worth of the woman to whom I shall be proud to give my name.' Noble and touching words, were they not, Ernestine?"

"You are right, Herminie."

"My mother loves me devotedly,' added M. de Senneterre, 'and nothing is impossible to an ardent lover. I shall find a way to convince my mother of the wisdom of my choice, and to induce her to make the advances Herminie has a

right to expect. How I shall do it, I cannot say, but I shall do it, for Herminie's happiness and mine are at stake.'

"And does not this courageous resolve inspire you with some hope?" asked Ernestine.

The duchess shook her head sadly as she replied:

"Gerald is sincere in his determination, but he deceives himself. All I have heard of his mother convinces me that this haughty woman will never—"

"Never! why do you say never?" cried Ernestine, interrupting her friend. "Ah, Herminie, you have no idea how much the love of a man like M. de Senneterre can accomplish. His mother is a very proud woman, you say; so much the better. She would show herself pitiless to any cowardly humility, while your eminently proper pride will be sure to impress her, as she, too, is proud; so she will at least be obliged to esteem and respect you. That will be one great advantage gained; her love for her son will do the rest, for you do not know how she idolises him. She loves him so devotedly, in fact, that she has so far forgotten herself as to mix herself up in a shameful conspiracy in order to secure him an immense fortune by an act unworthy of him. Why, then, is her maternal love likely to fail when a worthy, commendable act on her part is alone needed to assure her son's happiness? Believe me, Herminie, no one ever need despair when there is a mother's heart to appeal to."

"Really, Ernestine, you amaze me. You speak of M. de Senneterre and his family as if you knew them."

"Well, I may as well admit, my dear Herminie," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, unable to resist her desire to allay her friend's fears and to encourage her to hope, "that, knowing how unhappy you were, I managed to make some inquiries about the Senneterre family through my relative."

"But how?"

"She knows one of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's servants."

"Your relative does?"

"Yes, and she discovered in this way that Madame de Senneterre has been mixed up in an unfortunate scheme to bring about a marriage between her son and Mlle. de Beaumesnil, that rich heiress."

"Gerald was to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil?" exclaimed Herminie.

"Yes, but he nobly refused. Her immense fortune has no attraction for him, because he loves you,—loves you devotedly, Herminie."

"Is this true?" exclaimed the duchess, delightedly. "Are you sure of what you say, Ernestine?"

"Perfectly sure."

"It is not so much that this disinterestedness on Gerald's part astonishes me," said Herminie, "as that—"

"That you are proud of this new proof of his love. Am I not right?"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the duchess, her hopes reviving in spite of herself. "But once more, I can not help asking if you are perfectly sure of what you say? My poor child, you are so anxious to see me happy that I am afraid you have lent too ready an ear to these reports, for servants' gossip, you know, is proverbially unreliable. Do you know whether Gerald has ever met Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Once or twice, I think my relative told me. But why do you ask that question, Herminie?"

"Because it seems to me that I shall feel very uncomfortable to-morrow, knowing that there has been some talk of a marriage between Gerald and Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Why, what is to happen to-morrow, Herminie?"

"I am to give Mlle. de Beaumesnil her first music lesson."

"To-morrow?" exclaimed Ernestine, without concealing her surprise.

"Read this letter, my dear," replied the duchess. "It is from that gentleman, the hunchback, you remember, that you once met here."

"M. de Maillefort probably had his reasons for not warning me of his intentions," Ernestine said to herself, as she perused the missive. "I am glad that he is hastening the dénouement, however, for my powers of dissimulation are nearly exhausted. What a relief it will be to confess all!"

As she returned the letter, Ernestine asked:

"What difference does it make to you, Herminie, if there has been some talk of a marriage between M. de Senneterre and Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"I do not know, but I somehow feel that it places me in a false, almost painful position towards that young lady, and if I had not promised M. de Maillefort—"

"What would you do?"

"I would abandon this visit, which now causes me a sort of vague uneasiness."

"But you have promised, Herminie, and you can not break your word. Besides, is not Mlle. de Beaumesnil the child of the lady whom you loved so much, and who so often talked to you about her dear daughter? Think of it, Herminie; would it not be wrong to give up going to see her? Do you not at least owe that to her mother's memory?"

"You are right, Ernestine. I shall have to go, and yet—"

"Who knows, Herminie, but your acquaintance with this young girl will prove of benefit to both of you. I scarcely know why, but I prophesy good from this visit, and I certainly prove my disinterestedness by doing so, for devoted friendship is naturally jealous. But it is growing late, my friend, and I must go. I will write to you to-morrow."

The duchess sat silent and evidently absorbed in thought for a moment.

"Ah, Ernestine," she exclaimed at last, "I can not tell you all the strange thoughts that are passing through my mind. Gerald's noble disinterestedness, my approaching interview with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, your disclosures in relation to the character of Madame de Senneterre, who, being proud herself, can, perhaps, better understand the demands of my pride,—all this agitates me deeply. Nevertheless, though I was so full of despair a few minutes ago, I now hope, in spite of myself, and thanks to you, my dear friend, my heart is much less heavy than when you came."

Consideration for M. de Maillefort's plans alone prevented Ernestine from putting an end to her friend's anxiety and increasing her hope by giving her further proofs of Gerald's love as well as of his nobility of character, but remembering that all this mystery would soon be cleared up, she carried her secret away with her when she parted from Herminie.

The following afternoon, according to promise, M. de Maillefort called for the duchess, and the two immediately started for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's residence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

Before going to Herminie's, Friday morning, Mlle. de Beaumesnil had had no conversation with M. de la Rochaiguë and Mlle. Helena on the subject of M. de Macreuse and M. de Mornand.

On her return from the ball the night before, Ernestine had pleaded fatigue as an excuse for at once retiring to her room, and she had left the house early the next morning, in company with Madame Laîné.

One can easily imagine the bitter reproaches and recriminations that were interchanged between the baron and his wife and sister after returning from the entertainment, where their secret plans had been so ruthlessly unveiled.

Madame de la Rochaiguë, still confident of the speedy marriage of M. de Senneterre and Mlle. de Beaumesnil, was pitiless in her triumph, which she scarcely took the pains to conceal now, and quite overwhelmed the baron and his sister by her reproaches and sarcasms.

The devotee replied, sweetly and patiently, that "the success of the proud and the wicked was fleeting, but that the just, though laid low for a time, would soon rise again, radiant in glory."

The baron, who was less versed in Biblical diction, declared that his wife did not know him yet, and that, though he could not compel Mlle. de Beaumesnil to marry M. de Mornand, after the deplorable scene of the evening before, he should nevertheless completely, absolutely, and irrevocably refuse his consent to any other marriage until mademoiselle attained her majority.

Ernestine, on her return from Herminie's, had been tenderly welcomed by Madame de la Rochaiguë, who informed her that the baron had declared his intention of opposing any marriage whatever until his ward became of age, but that all this did not make the slightest difference, as he would change his mind within twenty-four hours if he discovered that there was any possibility of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's marriage with M. de Senneterre.

But when the baroness added that it would be advisable for Ernestine to receive Gerald's mother on the following day, as that lady wished to come to some definite understanding in relation to her son's marriage with the heiress, the young girl replied that, while she fully appreciated M. de Senneterre's merits, she would like to have a few days longer for reflection, hoping in this way to secure time to consult with M. de Maillefort and Herminie concerning her plans for the future. The baroness tried in vain to change Ernestine's decision, but the young girl was obdurate.

Considerably surprised, and not a little irritated by this refusal, the baroness remarked to the orphan, as she was leaving her:

"I forgot to inform you yesterday, my dear child, that after a talk with M. de Maillefort, who is now one of my best friends, and yours as well (you know how highly he speaks of M. de Senneterre), we decided to give you an opportunity to perform a truly charitable act. The idea originated with me, even prior to your arrival in Paris. There is a poor, but honest young girl, who was employed to play and sing to your poor dear mother during her last illness. This young girl is very proud, in spite of her poverty; so we thought you might assist her pecuniarily under the pretext of taking a few music lessons, and if you are willing to do so, the marquis will bring her to you to-morrow."

The reader can imagine Ernestine's response, and the impatience with which she awaited the coming of Herminie and her escort.

At last the long-looked-for hour arrived.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil had put on the same dress she had worn on her first visit to her friend's house,—a simply

made gown of inexpensive lawn.

Soon a footman threw open the folding doors that led into the small drawing-room where the heiress usually sat, and announced, in a loud voice:

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort."

Herminie was with the hunchback, and for some reason or other seemed to be greatly agitated by the prospect of this meeting with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and as the duchess, whose bosom was heaving visibly, kept her eyes fixed upon the floor, the footman had time to close the door and make his escape before Herminie recognised Ernestine.

The marquis, who was enjoying this little scene immensely, gave Mlle. de Beaumesnil a meaning glance just as Herminie, surprised at the long silence, ventured to raise her eyes.

"Ernestine, you here!" she exclaimed, taking a step towards her friend, then, intensely surprised, looked wonderingly at the marquis, as Mlle. de Beaumesnil, throwing herself upon Herminie's neck, embraced her tenderly, while tears of joy rolled down her cheeks.

"You are weeping, Ernestine!" said Herminie, more and more astonished, but still without the slightest suspicion of the truth, though her heart was throbbing with unwonted violence. "What is the matter with you, Ernestine?" she continued. "How do you happen to be here? You do not answer me. Good Heavens! I cannot imagine why I tremble so!"

And again the duchess turned inquiringly to the hunchback, whose eyes were dim with tears.

"I do not know, but it seems to me something extraordinary is going on here, M. le marquis; tell me what all this means, I beseech you."

"It means, my dear child, that I was a true prophet when, in talking with you about your approaching interview with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, I told you that I felt sure this meeting would afford you much more pleasure than you anticipated."

"Then you knew that I would find Ernestine here, monsieur?"

"I was certain of it."

"You were certain of it?"

"Yes, there could be no doubt of it."

"Why do you say that?"

"For the simple reason that—"

"That what, monsieur?"

"Is it possible you don't suspect?"

"No, monsieur."

"That the two Ernestines are one and the same person."

The duchess was so far from suspecting the truth that she utterly failed to understand the import of the hunchback's reply at first, and repeated mechanically, gazing at him wonderingly all the while:

"The two Ernestines are one and the same person?"

Then seeing her friend gazing at her with an expression of ineffable joy and happiness, and with arms outstretched as if to embrace her, she exclaimed, overwhelmed with astonishment, and almost terror:

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil! Can it be—my God! can it be that you are Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes," exclaimed the hunchback, "she is Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the daughter of the lady who loved you so much, and to whom you were so deeply attached."

"Ernestine is my sister," thought the duchess.

This startling revelation, and the recollection of the strange way in which she had made Mlle. de Beaumesnil's acquaintance, as well as of the events which had occurred since their first meeting, gave Herminie a sort of vertigo. Her brain seemed to whirl; she turned pale, and trembled so violently, that Ernestine was obliged to assist her to a neighbouring armchair.

There, kneeling beside her, and gazing up in her face with all a sister's tenderness, Mlle. de Beaumesnil took Herminie's hands in hers, and kissed them almost reverently, while the marquis stood contemplating this touching scene in silence.

"Pardon me," faltered Herminie, "but the surprise,—the trying position in which I find myself, mademoiselle—"

"Mademoiselle! Oh, do not call me that," exclaimed Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "Am I no longer your Ernestine, the orphan to whom you promised your friendship because you thought she was so unhappy? Alas! M. de Maillefort, your friend and mine, will tell you that I am indeed very unhappy, and that I am in even greater need of your tender affection than ever. What if I am no longer the poor little embroideress! The rich have their sorrows as well as the poor. In pity remember the words of my dying mother, who so often talked to you of me, and continue to love me for her sake."

"Have no fears on that score. You will always be dear, doubly dear to me," replied Herminie; "but you see I have

scarcely recovered from my bewilderment. It seems like a dream to me, and when I think of the way in which I became acquainted with you, Ernestine, and of a thousand other things, I have to see you here close beside me, to believe that it is not really all a dream."

"Your surprise is very natural, my dear child," remarked the marquis, "and I myself, when I met Mlle. de Beaumesnil at your home a few days ago, was so overwhelmed with astonishment that, if something had not diverted your attention for a moment, you would have perceived my amazement; but Ernestine begged me to keep her secret, and I did."

When Herminie had recovered from the shock sufficiently for her mind to become clear again, the first words she uttered were:

"But, Ernestine, how did you happen to come to Madame Herbaut's? What is the meaning of all this mystery? Why did you wish to attend that reunion?"

Ernestine, smiling sadly, took from a table the journal she had been writing, the journal dedicated to the memory of her mother, and, handing it to Herminie open at the page where were enumerated the divers reasons which had forced the richest heiress in France to resort to the painful test she had endured so heroically, the young girl said to the duchess:

"I anticipated these questions, Herminie, and, as I am anxious that you should deem me worthy of your affection, I beg you to read these pages. They speak the truth, for it is to the memory of my mother that they are dedicated. M. de Maillefort, I would like you to peruse their contents at the same time, so you can see that, though I unfortunately believed, for a time, the base slanders told me concerning you, your wise, though severe, lesson was not lost upon me, but gave me the courage to resort to a test that may, perhaps, seem strange to you, my dear Herminie."

The duchess took the book from Ernestine's hands. It was an interesting scene to see Herminie holding the open journal, while the marquis, leaning over the back of the armchair in which she was seated, read with her and like her, in silence, Mlle. de Beaumesnil's artless story.

That young girl watched both Herminie and the hunchback intently during the reading, evidently anxious to know if they would approve her motives.

All doubts on this subject were soon allayed, however, for touching and sympathetic exclamations speedily testified to the approval of both.

When the perusal was ended, the duchess, her eyes filled with tears of love and compassion, exclaimed:

"Ah, it is not friendship alone that I feel for you now, Ernestine, but respect and admiration. Great Heavens! how these frightful doubts must have tortured you! What an immense amount of courage it must have required to take such an important step alone—to face an ordeal from which even the bravest heart would have shrunk! Ah, I can at least offer you an affection which has been proved as disinterested as it is sincere. Thank God, I have been able to convince you beyond a doubt that you can and should be loved for yourself alone."

"Ah, yes, and it is this fact that makes your affection so precious to me," replied Ernestine, with effusion.

"Herminie is right. Your conduct has been worthy of all praise," said the marquis, who seemed deeply moved. "The few words you let drop on this subject night before last, at the ball, only partially enlightened me in regard to the real facts of the case. You are a noble girl."

But suddenly the duchess, remembering the promise Ernestine had made Olivier, exclaimed anxiously:

"But, Ernestine,—the promise you made M. Olivier yesterday, in my presence!"

"That promise I shall keep," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, quietly.

CHAPTER XIX.

ERNESTINE'S APPEAL.

On hearing Mlle. de Beaumesnil speak of a promise which she had made to M. Olivier, and which she intended to keep, M. de Maillefort seemed both surprised and uneasy, especially when the duchess repeated:

"What! the promise made to M. Olivier—"

"Yes, this promise, I repeat, I intend to keep, my dear Herminie. Did you not approve my acceptance of M. Olivier's offer? Did you not regard it as a sure guarantee of happiness to come? Did you not appreciate the great generosity of his offer as much as I did?"

"Yes, Ernestine, but it was to the little embroideress that this offer was made."

"Ah, well, why should M. Olivier's generosity seem less great and less noble now, my dear Herminie? Why should not the guarantee of happiness to come be just as certain?"

"I do not know how to answer you, Ernestine. I feel that you are right, and yet I am conscious of a vague

uneasiness in spite of myself. But you must have no secrets from M. de Maillefort. You must tell him all."

"I will, and I am sure that M. de Maillefort will approve my decision."

The marquis had been listening silently but thoughtfully.

"Is this M. Olivier the young man who invited you to dance out of charity, and to whom frequent allusion is made in your journal?"

"Yes, M. de Maillefort."

"And it was M. Olivier's uncle that Ernestine saved from almost certain death the other day," added Herminie.

"His uncle?" exclaimed the hunchback, quickly.

Then, after a moment's reflection, he added:

"I understand. Gratitude, combined with another and more tender sentiment which had its birth at her first meeting with this young man at Madame Herbaut's house, led him to propose to Ernestine when he believed her to be poor and unprotected."

"And a brilliant match it seemed for one of my supposed position," remarked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "for M. Olivier had just been made an officer, so it was an enviable social position as well as comparative affluence that he offered a penniless and obscure girl who laboured for her daily bread."

"Is his name Olivier Raymond?" exclaimed the hunchback, as if a new idea had suddenly occurred to him.

"That is his name. Do you know him, monsieur?" asked Ernestine.

"Olivier Raymond, formerly a non-commissioned officer of hussars, decorated in Africa, is it not?" continued the marquis.

"The same."

"Then it was for him, though not at his request, nor even with his knowledge, that I requested his promotion the other day in company with my dear young friend, Gerald de Senneterre, who loves the young man like a brother," added the hunchback, thoughtfully.

Then, turning to Ernestine, he continued:

"My child, it is your mother's devoted friend, almost a father, that speaks. All this seems very serious to me, and I tremble lest the natural generosity of your character should cause you to go too far. Have you engaged yourself to Olivier Raymond?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And do you love him?"

"As profoundly as I esteem him, my dear M. de Maillefort."

"I can very well understand, my dear child, why, after the shocking revelations at the ball, night before last, you should have felt the need of sincere and disinterested affection more than ever. I can understand, too, why you should find a wonderful charm, and even see a certain guarantee of future happiness, in M. Olivier Raymond's generous offer, but this should not have prevented you from exercising more prudence. Remember how short your acquaintance with M. Olivier has been!"

"That is true, monsieur, but it did not take me long, when my eyes had once been opened, to realise the fact that your heart was full of the tenderest solicitude for me, and that Herminie was the noblest creature that ever lived, so you may be sure that I am no more deceived in M. Olivier."

"I hope you are right, my child, Heaven knows! This young man is Gerald de Senneterre's most intimate friend, which is a very strong recommendation, I must admit. Besides, before interesting myself in Gerald's protégé, as I feared his affection for a former comrade might have blinded him somewhat, I made numerous inquiries about M. Olivier."

"Well?" exclaimed Ernestine and Herminie, in the same breath.

"Well, the best proof of my satisfaction at the result of these inquiries was the fact that I brought the full force of an influence I rarely exert to bear on M. Olivier's advancement."

"Then why should you feel any apprehensions, M. de Maillefort?" urged Ernestine. "How could I have made a better choice? M. Olivier's birth is honourable, his profession honoured. He is poor, but am I not, alas! only too rich? And then think of my position as an heiress continually exposed to machinations like those you exposed and punished, night before last! Remember, too, that, in order to protect me from such shameless cupidity, you yourself aroused in me a distrust which has become well-nigh incurable. A prey henceforth to the dreadful thought that I am sought only for my wealth, whom can I trust? Is it strange that, under circumstances like these, I should appreciate disinterestedness and unselfishness? And where could I ever find greater disinterestedness than that of which M. Olivier has given convincing proof? For in the offer that he made me, when he believed me to be poor and unprotected, was it not he who had everything to give?"

There was a half smile on the lips of the marquis as he turned to Herminie and said:

"Your friend, the little embroideress, has quick wit and a ready tongue. There is a good deal of sense and justice in what she says, I must admit, and I should find it very difficult to prove that she is wrong."

"I think so, too," replied Herminie, "for though I have been trying to discover some objections to her keeping her promise, I can find none."

"Nor can I, my dear children," said the hunchback; "but, unfortunately, human reason is not infallible, neither does right always make might; besides, even if this should prove to be a suitable marriage for Ernestine, the consent of her guardian is necessary to this marriage, and with ideas like his, it is not at all likely that he will ever consent to such a union. Ernestine would consequently be obliged to wait several years. Nor is this all. M. Olivier will discover sooner or later that his little embroideress is the richest heiress in France, and from what you have said of him, as well as from what Gerald himself has told me of his friend's extreme sensitiveness in money matters, there is good reason to fear that M. Olivier will shrink from the possibility of being accused of mercenary motives in wedding so rich an heiress when he himself is poor; so, in spite of his love and gratitude, he may be capable of sacrificing everything to his scruples."

On hearing these words, which she felt were only too true, mademoiselle shuddered. A pang of real anguish pierced her heart, and she exclaimed, bitterly:

"Ah, my accursed wealth! Shall I never escape the torments it causes me!"

Then, in an entreating voice, and gazing at the hunchback with eyes swimming in tears, she added:

"Ah, M. de Maillefort, you were my mother's devoted friend, you love Herminie devotedly,—save me and save her! Come to our assistance. Be our guardian angel, for I feel that my life will be blighted for ever by the suspicions and the distrust you have awakened in my heart. The only chance of happiness left for me is to marry M. Olivier, and Herminie will die of grief if she does not marry M. de Senneterre, so once more I beseech you, my dear M. Maillefort, to take pity on us."

"Oh, Ernestine," cried the duchess, reproachfully, blushing scarlet in her confusion, "that secret was confided to you alone!"

"Gerald!" exclaimed the marquis, in his turn astounded by this revelation. "Gerald! is it possible that you love Gerald?" he continued, with a searching look at Herminie. "Then it was to this irresistible passion that he alluded when I was praising him yesterday for his generous conduct towards Mlle. de Beaumesnil. He told me, then, that he lived only for a young girl who was worthy of his adoration. Yes, I understand everything now, my poor, dear children, and I tremble for your future."

"Forgive me, oh, forgive me, Herminie," pleaded Ernestine, for her friend's tears were flowing fast. "Do not be angry with me for having betrayed your confidence. But in whom can we have any hope and confidence if not in M. de Maillefort? Who else can guide and comfort and sustain us in these trying hours? Alas! as he himself remarked just now, right does not make might. He admits that, in the trying position in which my accursed wealth places me, I could not have given my affections more wisely, and yet there are great, if not insurmountable, difficulties in the way of my marriage. It is the same with you, Herminie. M. de Maillefort is certainly convinced that there can be no happiness for you and for M. de Senneterre save in your union, which seems even more uncertain than mine."

"Ah, my children, if you knew what kind of a woman the Duchesse de Senneterre is! I told you the other day, Herminie, when you asked me about her. I understand your motive now. But I tell you now, as I told you then, that no woman ever lived who was more absurdly vain of her rank."

"And yet Herminie says she will never marry Gerald unless Madame de Senneterre comes and tells her that she consents to this marriage. This only shows a proper pride in Herminie, though. You think so, too, do you not, M. de Maillefort?"

"She has made that resolve? Ah, what a brave and noble-hearted girl she is!" exclaimed the marquis. "This is still another proof of the laudable pride that makes me love her so much. Most assuredly I approve her decision. I admire it, too, for such a resolve could be born only of a noble soul. I no longer wonder at Gerald's ardent devotion."

"You hear what M. de Maillefort says, Herminie," said Ernestine. "Are you angry with me now for having betrayed your secret?"

"No, Ernestine," replied the duchess, gently. "I blame you only for one thing, and that is for grieving M. de Maillefort by telling him of misfortunes which he cannot remedy."

"But why may he not be able to remedy them?" retorted Ernestine. "You do not know him. You do not know the great influence he exerts in the world,—how much noble-hearted people love and admire him, and how abjectly afraid cowards and evil-doers are of him. And, then, he is so good, so kind to all who are in trouble; he loved my mother so dearly!"

And as M. de Maillefort, overwhelmed with emotion, averted his face to conceal his tears, Mlle. de Beaumesnil continued, in even more beseeching tones:

"Oh, is it not true that you feel all a father's solicitude for us, M. de Maillefort? Are we not sisters in your eyes, and in the tenderness and attachment we feel for you? Oh, do not, I beseech you, in mercy, do not desert us!"

And Ernestine seized one of the hunchback's hands, while Herminie, involuntarily following her friend's example, possessed herself of the other, saying, in entreating tones:

"Ah, M. de Maillefort, you are our only hope!"

The hunchback was deeply affected. One of these young girls was the child of a woman he had loved devotedly, though secretly, for years.

The other, too, was, perhaps, her child, for very frequently the conviction that Herminie was Madame de Beaumesnil's daughter returned.

But however that might be, M. de Maillefort had received from this dying mother the sacred trust of watching over and protecting Ernestine and Herminie. He had sworn to fulfil this trust, and, unable to make even a pretence of concealing his emotion any longer, he clasped both the young girls passionately to his breast, and, in a voice broken with sobs, exclaimed:

"Yes, yes, my poor, dear children. I will do all the most loving of fathers could do for you!"

It is impossible to describe the touching scene and the eloquent silence that followed, which Ernestine, now radiant with hope, was the first to break, by exclaiming:

"Herminie, we are saved! You will marry M. Gerald, and I, M. Olivier!"

CHAPTER XX.

AN ALLIANCE OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE.

On hearing Ernestine's joyful exclamation, M. de Maillefort shook his head, and said, with a faint smile:

"One moment, young ladies, don't go and indulge in all sorts of wild hopes that will worry me almost as much as your despair. Let us look at the situation calmly and sensibly. All this excitement is not going to help matters; on the contrary, it unnerves one. One weeps and laments, or exults, as the case may be, and that is all it amounts to."

"But, M. de Maillefort, these are tears of happiness," replied Ernestine, wiping her eyes. "I have no reason to regret them."

"No, but they should not be indulged in again. They impair one's vision, and it is necessary to see our situation clearly, very clearly."

"M. de Maillefort is right," said Herminie. "Let us be calm and sensible."

"Yes, yes, we will!" cried Ernestine. "Sit down here between us, M. de Maillefort, and let us talk the matter over calmly and sensibly, as you say."

"Very well," replied the hunchback, seating himself on the sofa between the two girls, and taking a hand of each in his. "Which one of you shall we consider first?"

"Herminie," replied Ernestine, promptly.

"So be it," responded the marquis. "Very well, Herminie and Gerald love each other devotedly, and are worthy of each other, that is understood; but, with a pride that I both admire and approve,—because there is no possibility of either love or happiness without dignity,—Herminie will not consent to marry Gerald unless the Duchesse de Senneterre calls on her and gives her consent to this marriage. The question is, therefore, to devise a means of compelling this haughtiest of duchesses to make these overtures."

"But nothing is impossible to you, M. de Maillefort," said Ernestine, naïvely.

"Just hear this wheedler with her 'Nothing is impossible to you, M. de Maillefort,'" said the marquis, smiling. Then he added with a sigh: "Ah, my dear child, if you knew what hard things vanity and selfishness are to fight! And those two words describe Madame de Senneterre exactly. But though I am not the great necromancer you say, I shall have to devise some way of taming this two-headed monster, I suppose."

"Ah, if you can ever accomplish that feat, monsieur," said Herminie, "my whole life—"

"I count upon that, my child. Yes, I hope and trust that you will love me during your whole life, even if I should fail in what I am about to undertake, for in that case I believe I should be quite as unhappy as you are, and stand in almost equal need of consolation. Now it is your turn, my dear Ernestine!"

"It seems to me that my prospects are even gloomier than Herminie's," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, sadly.

"I don't know about that, but I must warn you, my poor child, that I can do nothing for you until after I have satisfied myself beyond a doubt of M. Olivier Raymond's worth."

"Why, doesn't what you already know satisfy you, M. de Maillefort?"

"It is perfectly satisfactory so far as his life as a soldier is concerned, but as a man can be a very brave officer and a very bad husband, I shall make some further inquiries concerning him."

"But M. de Senneterre speaks very highly of M. Olivier, you say."

"Yes, my dear child, but a man may be an admirable friend and an excellent comrade, and yet make his wife very unhappy."

"How suspicious you are! You forget that M. Olivier thinks me a poor girl—and that—"

"That his gratitude, generosity, and love impelled him to offer you a more brilliant future than one in your supposed position had a right to expect, perhaps. It was a very generous and noble impulse, I admit, and a little

while ago I was so touched by it that I allowed myself to become almost as enthusiastic as you and Herminie."

"And has your opinion changed, now?" asked Ernestine, anxiously.

"Now, my child, I judge not only with my heart but with my head; and reason tells me that, though M. Olivier's impulse was highly commendable, it was only an impulse. I do not doubt for an instant that M. Olivier will keep the promise he made you, and that he will act honourably in the matter, but I want to be sure—that is, as sure as one can be of anything in this world—that, in case M. Olivier married you, his whole life would harmonise with the impulse which I admire as much as you do."

Ernestine could not conceal a sort of sorrowful impatience as she listened to these wise and prudent words, and noting this fact, the marquis continued, in a tone that was both grave and affectionate:

"My poor child, the confidence you have in me, the affection I felt for your mother, the very interest I take in your future, all compel me to say this, though it may disappoint and grieve you. But I promise you that, if I find M. Olivier is worthy of you, I will devote myself body and soul to overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of your marriage."

"Ernestine, we must trust M. de Maillefort implicitly, blindly," Herminie said to her friend. "The responsibility he assumes is so great, we must not hamper him in any way. Besides, instead of opposing the inquiries he intends to make, you should urge him to make them as searching as possible, for, believe me, they will only prove still more conclusively that M. Olivier is worthy of you."

"That is true, Herminie; and you, M. de Maillefort, will forgive me, I trust," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "I was wrong, but, alas! with my only chance of happiness at stake, you can perhaps understand my terror and my wretchedness at the thought that I may lose it."

"On the contrary, it is to make your chance of happiness more certain that I speak as I do. But even supposing that M. Olivier should be found to possess all the attributes we desire, it will, first of all, be necessary to persuade your guardian to consent to this marriage; then, what will prove an even more difficult task, I fear, we shall have to convince M. Olivier that he can, with honour, marry the richest heiress in France, inasmuch as he loved her when he thought her penniless and unprotected."

"In this, alas! I agree with you, M. de Maillefort," said Ernestine, despondently. "I, too, am afraid that M. Olivier will refuse to marry me. And yet this refusal would show such nobility of soul that, even though it made me miserable, I could not help admiring it. Alas, alas! what are we to do, M. de Maillefort?"

"I do not know, my dear child. I will think the matter over to-night, and try to devise some means of accomplishing our object. I have a vague, shadowy idea of one expedient," added the hunchback, thoughtfully. "Yes, why not? But I must reduce this chaotic mass of ideas to a little order first, and, above all, don't let us give way to despair."

"Do you think Ernestine might see M. Olivier again soon?" inquired Herminie.

"Not for several days."

"Oh, dear, what will he think of me?" sighed Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"So far as that is concerned, Ernestine, you remember you told him that the relative with whom you were living was so peculiar that you would need several days to decide whether it had better be M. Olivier or Commander Bernard who should go to her to ask your hand in marriage."

"That is true."

"And this pretended relative is your governess, I suppose, my dear child?" said the marquis.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Can you rely upon her discretion?"

"Self-interest ensures that."

"That is a very important point, for there can be little or no chance of success in our undertaking without absolute secrecy," remarked the hunchback; "and I need not say, my dear Herminie, that even Gerald himself must not know that the little embroideress, about whom M. Olivier has often talked to him, is Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Alas! monsieur, it will be an easy matter for me to promise that, for I shall not see Gerald again until his mother comes to me, or, in other words, I shall never see him again."

"Courage, my child, courage!" said the hunchback. "I am not a very devout man, but I do believe in the God of good people, and that virtue is rewarded, even in this world. Courage, then! But to return to the subject of M. Olivier; my dear Herminie, if you see him, as you probably will, you must tell him that Ernestine is not very well. This will give me time to form my plans, for I only ask that you will give me one week, my dear children. If I have not brought these matters to a successful termination in one week, I never shall. Then it will be time to think of resignation and consolation, and you, my children, must admit, I think, that if you are obliged to give up all idea of these much desired marriages, your grief and disappointment will be much more endurable if you are together, than alone. Besides, I shall be left to you, and we three, together, can surely make a brave stand against misfortune."

"Ah, if I had to endure such a sorrow, deprived of Ernestine's friendship and yours, I believe it would kill me," murmured Herminie.

"Alas! my dear Herminie, how fraught with fears and anxiety this coming week will be!" exclaimed Ernestine. "But we shall at least see each other every day, shall we not? Or what is far better," exclaimed Mlle. de Beaumesnil, starting violently as a new idea suddenly occurred to her, "we need not be separated any more."

"What do you mean, Ernestine?"

"You must stay here with me from now on. Must she not, M. de Maillefort?"

"It would be a great happiness for me," answered Herminie, blushing, "but I cannot accept it."

The hunchback understood Herminie's feelings. She felt that it would be humiliating to accept an idle and luxurious life from the rich heiress; besides, Ernestine's proposal, even if it were accepted by the duchess, might injure M. de Maillefort's plans, and he said as much to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who was as greatly surprised as chagrined by her friend's refusal.

"I think it might seriously interfere with my plans, my dear child, if your guardian and his family should discover your fondness for Herminie, for they would immediately institute an inquiry into the cause of this sudden intimacy with the young girl you had apparently met to-day for the first time, and the suspicious distrusts thus aroused might give me a great deal of trouble."

"We shall be obliged to resign ourselves to a separation, then, I suppose," said Ernestine, sadly; "but it would have been such a comfort to spend this week of anxiety and suspense with Herminie."

"I share your regret, Ernestine," said the duchess, "but M. de Maillefort knows what will further our interests better than we do; besides, my sudden disappearance would, perhaps, arouse M. Olivier's suspicions. It would be utterly impossible to give him any news of you, and last, but not least, my dear Ernestine, it will not do to forget that I support myself by my music lessons, and I could not remain idle for a whole week."

For an instant, Mlle. de Beaumesnil gazed at the duchess in a sort of bewilderment, not understanding how Herminie could think of working for her living now she had the richest heiress in France for an intimate friend; but remembering the young musician's delicacy and pride, Mlle. de Beaumesnil shuddered at the thought that she had, perhaps, been in danger of alienating her friend for ever by her thoughtless, though kindly meant proposal.

"True, my dear Herminie, I forgot all about your lessons," she replied. "You must not miss them, of course; but you will at least number me among your favourite pupils, and not let a day pass without coming. Won't you promise me that?"

"Oh, yes," replied Herminie, greatly relieved, for, as Ernestine had suspected, the duchess had trembled lest her friend should insist upon her acceptance of a hospitality which she regarded as humiliating.

"And now we can only hope that fate will prove propitious, my children," said the marquis, rising. "As for your manner towards your guardian, my dear Ernestine, let it be slightly cold and reserved. Remain in your own room as much as possible, but do not manifest any very bitter resentment towards these people. A quarrel might injure us deeply. Later we will see."

"By the way, M. de Maillefort," said Ernestine, "I think it might be well to inform you that Madame de la Rochaiguë, who is still under the impression that I intend to marry M. Gerald, wanted me to promise that I would see Madame de Senneterre to-morrow, but I asked for a few days for reflection."

"You did wisely, my child, but to-morrow you must formally announce to Madame de la Rochaiguë that you have decided not to marry Gerald. You need not give any explanation whatever. I will attend to the rest."

"I will follow your advice, monsieur. To-morrow, Herminie, I will make you both proud and happy by telling you how nobly and frankly M. de Senneterre behaved towards me. Did he not, M. de Maillefort?"

"His conduct was admirable. Gerald warned me in advance of his plan, and he kept his promise. But now you girls will be obliged to separate for awhile."

"Already!" cried Ernestine. "Let me at least keep Herminie until evening, M. de Maillefort."

"I can not remain any longer, unfortunately, Ernestine," said the duchess, trying to smile. "At five o'clock I have to give a lesson at the house of a M. Bouffard, whom M. de Maillefort knows, and I am obliged to be very punctual."

"I must submit then, I suppose," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with a sigh, thinking what a drawback Herminie's occupation was to the pleasures of life; "but you will at least promise to come and see me to-morrow, will you not, Herminie?"

"Yes, yes," replied the duchess. "I shall await the morrow with quite as much impatience as you will, I assure you."

"Herminie," asked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, suddenly, "do you love me as much as when you believed me to be Ernestine, the little embroideress?"

"I love you even more, perhaps," replied the duchess, earnestly, "for Mlle. de Beaumesnil has retained the heart of Ernestine, the little embroideress."

The two girls embraced each other affectionately once again and then separated.

CHAPTER XXI.

"DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND."

Two days after this conversation with Herminie and Ernestine, M. de Maillefort, after two long and serious consultations with Gerald, wrote to the Duchesse de Senneterre, asking her to see him that afternoon, and, his request being granted, the marquis presented himself at the appointed hour.

The marquis, warned by Gerald, was not surprised at the expression of bitter anger and chagrin on the face of Madame de Senneterre, for that very morning Madame de la Rochaiguë had informed the duchess that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, though she liked and admired M. de Senneterre very much, had no intention of marrying him.

At the sight of the hunchback, Madame de Senneterre's wrath blazed up still more fiercely, and she exclaimed, bitterly:

"You must confess, monsieur, that I am wonderfully generous!"

"In what way?"

"Am I not giving you the pleasure of coming to exult over the misery you have caused?"

"To what misery do you allude?"

"What misery?" exclaimed the duchess, wrathfully. "Is it not your fault that my son's marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil is broken off?"

"My fault?"

"Oh, I am not your dupe, monsieur, and it is to assure you of that fact that I consented to the interview you had the audacity to ask of me. I did not want to miss this opportunity to tell you face to face how much I hate and despise you."

"So be it, madame. It affords just as good a topic of conversation as any other, and you excel in this kind of discourse, I believe."

"M. de Maillefort will oblige me by reserving his insulting irony for some other occasion," retorted Madame de Senneterre, haughtily. "He would also do well to remember that he has the honour of speaking to the Duchesse de Senneterre."

"Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre will do me the honour to treat me with the consideration due me," replied the hunchback, sternly; "if not, I shall govern my words exactly by Madame de Senneterre's."

"Is that intended as a threat, monsieur?"

"As a lesson, madame."

"A lesson, to me?"

"And why not, may I ask? What, I who was your husband's oldest and most trusted friend, I who love Gerald as a son, I who have a right to the respect and esteem of every one,—do you understand, madame? to the respect of every one,—I whose birth is at least equal to yours (it is well to remind you of that, as you attach such an absurd importance to such trifles), I am to be greeted with insulting words and eyes flashing with anger; and yet I am not to remind you of what you owe to me and what you owe to yourself?"

Like all vain and arrogant persons who are not accustomed to the slightest contradiction, Madame de Senneterre was at first surprised and irritated, but afterwards, awed by this stern and sensible language, her anger giving place to a profound despondency, she replied:

"Ah, monsieur, you should at least make some allowance for the despair a mother naturally feels on seeing her son ruined for ever."

"Ruined?"

"Yes, and through you."

"Will you have the goodness to prove that?"

"I have heard of the wonderful influence you have recently acquired over Mlle. de Beaumesnil. My son, too, has more confidence in you than he has in his mother, and if you had been favourably disposed, this marriage, which had been virtually decided upon, would not have been suddenly broken off for no apparent reason. Yes, there is a mystery about all this which you only can solve. And when I think that Gerald, with his illustrious name, might be the richest landed proprietor in France, but for you, I am,—well, yes, I am,—the most wretched of women and mothers, and I positively weep with rage and chagrin, as you see, monsieur. You are satisfied now, are you not?"

For the proud Duchesse de Senneterre was indeed weeping bitterly.

Had it not been for the deep interest he felt in Gerald and Herminie, M. de Maillefort, not in the least affected by these absurd tears, would have turned his back on this haughty and avaricious woman, who naïvely believed herself the tenderest and most unfortunate of mothers simply because she had left no means untried to secure her son an immense fortune and because this scheme of hers had failed; but desiring above all things to ensure the successful termination of the undertaking entrusted to him, the marquis allowed this ebullition of grief, which did not touch him in the least, to pass unnoticed.

"The mystery you speak of is very simple, it seems to me. Gerald and Mlle. de Beaumesnil like and appreciate each other, but are not the least bit in love, that is all."

"What has love to do with the matter? Are there not plenty of marriages, besides those in royal families, made without love?"

"You must know that I have not requested an important interview with you merely to discuss a question which has been a matter of contention ever since the world began, viz., which is better, a marriage of convenience or a love match. We should never come to any agreement; besides, we have to deal with an accomplished fact: Gerald's marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil is now an impossibility, and you may as well make the best of it. That young lady's millions will never belong to your son, who, fine fellow that he is, cares nothing whatever about them."

"Yes, and thanks to such idiotic disinterestedness, or rather such shameful indifference to enhancing the splendour of their name, the scions of our most illustrious houses are lapsing into a disgraceful mediocrity. It was for this very reason that my father and my husband—by neglecting the means of reestablishing the fortune of which that infamous revolution stripped us—left my son and my daughters almost penniless. In the present condition of affairs, I have little chance of marrying off my daughters, while Gerald, if he were rich, could help his sisters pecuniarily, and they would thus be able to secure eligible partis. And you wonder that I am overwhelmed with despair at the ruin of my plans,—at the destruction of my hope of securing for my son a fortune suited to his rank!"

"I suppose that you love Gerald after your fashion. It is not a very commendable fashion, still you do love him, I suppose."

"Yes, I do love him—I love him as I ought to love him, too."

"We will see about that."

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"In the first place, it is my duty to tell you that Gerald is deeply in love, and that—"

Madame de Senneterre sprang up out of her armchair, fairly purple with anger, and, interrupting the hunchback, exclaimed, vehemently:

"It is outrageous! I have suspected it all along! The mystery is cleared up now. It is my son who has refused, for that little Beaumesnil was wild about him. I could see that at the ball, and it is you, you, monsieur, who have had a hand in this abominable intrigue. I will never see my son again. He has no heart, no soul!"

The marquis had anticipated this explosion, and, without taking the slightest notice of it, continued:

"You interrupted me, madame. I was about to say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, far from being in love with Gerald, entertains a very ardent affection for another man."

"The bold-faced hussy!" exclaimed the duchess with such naïveté that the marquis could not help smiling slightly, in spite of his anxiety.

"I also feel it my duty to inform you, madame, that Gerald is in love with a young girl who is in every respect worthy of his love."

"I beg, monsieur, that you will not say another word to me on the subject," said Madame de Senneterre, feigning a calmness which the trembling of her voice grievously belied. "All is ended between my son and me. He can love whom he pleases and marry whom he pleases, as he is old enough to dispense with my consent. Let him drag his name through the mire if he likes. From this day I shall resume my maiden name, and I shall proclaim high and low and everywhere why I blush to bear a name so dishonoured and degraded. It is to be hoped that I shall, at least, find some consolation in my daughters."

To these senseless ravings the marquis replied, quietly and gravely:

"Your son understands his duty towards you very differently from what you understand yours towards him. He will not even make the formal request for parental consent on the part of a person who is of legal age, which is usual in such cases. He will both honour and respect your wishes to this extent: he will not marry without your consent."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, with a sardonic laugh. "He really does me this honour?"

"And, in spite of the profound love she cherishes for him, the young lady he loves will consent to marry him only upon one condition: that you, madame, go and tell this young lady that you consent to her marriage with your son."

"This, M. de Maillefort, must be only a jest."

"It is a matter of life or death for your son, madame."

The voice of the marquis and the expression of his face were so full of earnestness and authority, that Madame de Senneterre, impressed in spite of herself, cried in alarm:

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"I mean that you must be a hard-hearted mother if you have not noticed your son's pallor and almost prostrated condition for several days past. On the day of the ball at which your son behaved so nobly, did not your physician tell you that, but for the heroic treatment to which he had resorted, you would have been in great danger of losing your son by brain fever?"

Gradually recovering from her alarm, and regretting that she had allowed herself to display even a momentary solicitude, Madame de Senneterre retorted, disdainfully:

"Nonsense! A brain fever can be cured by a few bleedings, monsieur, and one dies of love only in novels, and in very poor novels."

"That is a kind and motherly remark, madame, and to keep it company I will say to you, with equal coolness, that if, after you have had time to make proper inquiries and obtain all needful information concerning the young lady of whom I have spoken, you do not take the step expected of you—"

"Well, monsieur?"

"Well, madame, your son will kill himself—"

"Yes, as the disappointed lover does in all the thrilling melodramas," retorted Madame de Senneterre, with an even shriller laugh.

"I tell you that your son will kill himself, you poor fool!" exclaimed the marquis, terrible in his earnestness. "I tell you the last Duc de Senneterre will perish by his own hand like the last Duc de Bretigny!"

This allusion to a recent tragical event, which had been one of the chief topics of conversation at Madame de Mirecourt's ball, gave the duchess a severe shock. She knew Gerald's remarkable energy and determination of character, and consequently knew how much he must suffer from this hidden grief; besides, she had such a profound respect for M. de Maillefort, much as she disliked him personally, that she knew he would be incapable of threatening her with the possibility of Gerald's suicide if he was not really convinced that such a danger was imminent, so the now thoroughly frightened woman cried:

"What you say is terrible, monsieur. The house of De Senneterre become extinct by a suicide!"

The blind pride of race spoke more loudly than maternal love in this cry.

The proud woman shuddered first chiefly at the thought that the name of the Senneterres, of that great and illustrious house, might become extinct through an act that the society in which she moved considered a crime.

The marquis understood Madame de Senneterre's real feelings so well that he exclaimed:

"Yes; if you are as blind as you are pitiless, this illustrious name of Senneterre, often famous and always honoured, will be blotted out for ever in tears and in blood."

"M. de Maillefort, such an idea is horrible! I know my son is capable of going to almost any extreme—but no, no, I will not believe that. You make me shudder! And when I think of the grief and despair and shame of a family that sees its head end his life by his own rash act—hold—enough—enough—I should go mad!"

And passing her hand hastily across her brow, covered with big drops of cold sweat, Madame de Senneterre continued:

"I tell you, monsieur, that I cannot and will not think of such a thing. But who is this young woman you speak of? Though I am in mortal dread as to the choice Gerald has made, there is one thing that reassures me a little. It is that the young woman insists that I shall come and tell her that I consent to her marriage with my son. For her to dare expect such a concession from me, she must hold such a social position that I, at least, have no cause to fear an unworthy love on the part of my son."

"Gerald has placed his affections creditably, even nobly, madame. I have already had the honour of assuring you of this fact," responded the marquis, severely, "and usually what I say can be believed."

"That is true, monsieur. Your assurance should satisfy me on that point. It is not likely that I shall ever have another opportunity to make such a match as that which I dreamed of for my son; but if the birth and fortune of the young lady in question are satisfactory, and—"

But here the hunchback interrupted Madame de Senneterre by saying:

"The young lady in question is an orphan. She is a music teacher, and supports herself by giving lessons."

It is impossible to describe the expression of Madame de Senneterre's face as the words of the marquis fell upon her ear. Had she experienced an electric shock, the movement she made could not have been more convulsive.

"An adventuress, then! The wretched boy, to degrade himself like this!" she cried. "What a humiliation for me and my daughters!"

And as M. de Maillefort sprang up no less hastily to reply to Madame de Senneterre, the latter interrupted him by adding:

"And such a creature has the audacity to ask me—me to so degrade myself as to go to her, the—"

But Madame de Senneterre did not complete the sentence. She had fully intended to add an opprobrious epithet, but she burst into a shrill, almost frenzied, laugh instead.

A cold silence following this ebullition of rage, Madame de Senneterre placed a trembling hand on M. de Maillefort's arm, and said:

"My dear marquis, listen to me. If my unworthy son should come and stand there,—right before me, do you understand?—and say to me,'I will kill myself before your very eyes if you refuse your consent,' I should say, 'Kill yourself, then. I would rather see you dead than disgraced. I would rather your name should die out, than to see it perpetuated to your dishonour, mine, and that of your sisters.'"

Then seeing the marquis was about to protest, she added:

"M. de Maillefort, I am not in a passion, I am calm, and I am saying exactly what I mean. I am telling you exactly what I should do, and after the insulting demand of my son and his accomplice, it is no longer maternal love or even indifference I feel for him; it is contempt, it is hatred, yes, hatred, do you hear? Tell him so. All the affection I once

felt for this scoundrel I shall now bestow upon my daughters."

"This woman would do what she says," thought the marquis, with a feeling of horror. "It is useless to insist further. Reason is no match for such blind obstinacy as this. This woman, as she says, would watch her son kill himself before her very eyes unmoved. This is a pride of race that amounts to the stupid ferocity of the brute. Poor Gerald! Poor Herminie!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A FINAL VICTORY.

After a moment's silence, during which Madame de Senneterre sat positively panting with rage at this odious revelation which she could not yet fully make up her mind to believe, viz., that her son wished to marry a music teacher who supported herself by her own exertions, M. de Maillefort said, coldly, and exactly as if the foregoing conversation had never taken place:

"Madame, what do you think of the nobility and illustriousness of the house of Haut-Martel?"

At first Madame de Senneterre gazed at the hunchback with evident surprise, then she said:

"Really, monsieur, this question is most extraordinary."

"And why, madame?"

"What, monsieur, you see me crushed under the blow that has just struck me, or, rather, that you have just dealt me, unintentionally, no doubt," she added, with bitter irony, "and then ask me without rhyme or reason what I think of the illustriousness of the house of Haut-Martel."

"My question is less extraordinary, as you do not seem to think there can be the slightest ameliorating circumstance in the blow that has just overtaken you. So once more I ask, what do you think of the house of Haut-Martel?"

"There is not an older or more illustrious family in France, you most know very well, as you are closely connected with it on your father's side."

"I am now the head of that house, madame."

"You?" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre.

And strange to say the lady's acerbity of manner gave place to a sort of envious deference for the new representative of this powerful family.

"But I thought that the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, who has resided on his estates in Germany since that idiotic revolution of 1830—"

"That Prince Duc de Haut-Martel is dead, madame, and as he had neither brothers nor children, and as I am his cousin-germain, I inherit his estates and title."

"Then this event must have occurred very recently."

"I received the first intimation of it through the Austrian ambassador, and last night I had an official confirmation of the fact."

"So you are now the Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel?" said Madame de Senneterre, with mingled admiration and envy.

"Precisely, and without troubling myself very much about it, as you see."

"But your position is magnificent," exclaimed this monomaniac, quite forgetting the son whose despair might end in suicide. "Why, you are now one of the greatest noblemen in France."

"Good Heavens! yes. My newly acquired dignities enable me to aspire to anything, do they not? And to think that only yesterday I was but a simple marquis! What a change to-day, is there not? Don't you find my hump a little smaller since you have heard that I am so great a nobleman?"

"One should no more sneer at rank than at religion, monsieur."

"Certainly not. There are plenty of other subjects for ridicule. But I forgot to tell you that the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel left me estates in Hungary which yield a yearly income of about fifty thousand crowns, free of all incumbrances."

"One hundred and fifty thousand francs! Why, though no one knows the exact amount of your fortune, you are supposed to be very rich already, monsieur," replied Madame de Senneterre, with a sort of jealous envy.

"I scarcely know the exact amount of my income, myself," said the hunchback, "for my tenants, poor souls! pay me only when they can do so without too great an effort; but even in the worst of times I can generally count upon at

least sixty thousand francs a year, to say nothing of the fact—of course, this is little more than an empty honour—that the electors of the arrondissement in which my estates are located propose to do me the honour of making me their deputy, their former representative having recently died; so you see that wealth and honours are falling upon me thick as hail."

"Then you have an income of more than two hundred thousand francs, and are Prince Duc de Haut-Martel and—"

"Prospective deputy, besides. Don't forget that."

"Your position is certainly a very enviable one."

"Yes, and with my figure and appearance I can aspire to the most beautiful woman in the land, can I not? Say, what a pity it is that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is in love with a handsome young man! But for that, I might have married her myself."

A new thought suddenly occurred to Madame de Senneterre, and after a moment's reflection the avaricious creature, casting a keen glance at M. de Maillefort, said:

"I think I understand you, M. le marquis."

"Let me see if you do."

"The question you asked me just now as to what I thought of the house of Haut-Martel was intended to suggest a sort of compensation for the terrible disappointment my unworthy son has caused me."

"You are right, madame."

"And as you have unexpectedly become the head of an illustrious house, you do not want it to become extinct."

"There is some truth in that, also," replied the hunchback, not a little surprised at Madame de Senneterre's penetration, though he was far from suspecting the lady's real thought.

"Yes, I admit that I would not like the name to die out, madame," he added, after a slight pause.

"And as you know that only a carefully reared girl of noble birth would be capable of bearing this noble name as it should be borne, and of understanding the sacred obligations she would have to fulfil towards the man to whom she owed such a magnificent position, you are thinking of my eldest daughter,—and believe you can thus offer me an adequate compensation for the misery my son's insubordination has caused me."

"I! marry?" exclaimed the hunchback, even more revolted than surprised by Madame de Senneterre's heartless proposal.

But anxious to see how far the blindness, hardness of heart, and love of greed would carry this cruel parent, he responded with one of those half way refusals that seem to be made only in the hope of seeing them overcome.

"I think of such a marriage! Besides, even if I did, would there be any possibility of compassing it? Think of it, madame, at my age and deformed as I am, while your daughter Bertha is a charming girl of barely twenty. She would laugh in my face and she would do perfectly right."

"You are mistaken, monsieur," replied this incomparable parent, gravely. "In the first place, Mlle. de Senneterre has been reared in habits of respect and submission from which I feel sure she will never depart. Besides, she knows that she is poor, and that she would never be likely to attain another position to be compared with that you offer her."

"But again let me remind you that I am old and ugly and a hunchback besides."

"M. le marquis, my daughters have been brought up in such a way that they would not dare to so much as look at the husband I select for them until the marriage ceremony is over."

"A pleasant surprise you would give the poor child that married me!"

"I repeat, M. le marquis, that my daughters have not those lewd imaginations that are capable only of a carnal appreciation of a husband. If I tell my daughter my wishes, that will suffice."

"I am strongly inclined to tell this heartless, unscrupulous woman what I think of her," the hunchback said to himself; "but what should I gain by it? She is an egregious fool, and there is nothing for me to do but answer the fool according to her folly."

So seeing that Madame de Senneterre was awaiting his reply with keen anxiety, the marquis said:

"You said a few minutes ago, and very sensibly, I think, that one should no more speak lightly of rank than of religion, did you not?"

"Yes, M. le marquis."

"You will admit, too, probably, that it is equally wrong to treat marriage lightly."

"Certainly, M. le marquis."

"Then allow me to say that your desire to see your daughter Bertha Princesse de Haut-Martel would result in nothing more or less than a cruel mockery of religion, nobility of rank, and marriage,—three sacred things, as you call them."

"How is that, monsieur?"

"Mlle. de Senneterre would outrage all the laws of marriage and religion, or rather of nature and the Creator,

which is even worse, by pledging love and fidelity to an old hunchback like me; and I, in turn, would bring disgrace and ridicule upon the nobility in general, and upon the houses of Senneterre and Haut-Martel in particular, by running any risk of perpetuating their illustrious line with a set of hideous little hunchbacks made in my image. They might serve as convincing proof of my wife's resignation and faithfulness, but they would certainly give the world a droll opinion of our great historic races."

"Really, M. le marquis—I—"

"You are going to cite Prince Eugène, possibly, as an example for me, and I ought, perhaps, to feel greatly flattered by the comparison, but it would not be well to impair the lustre of such rarities by multiplying them. I am extremely grateful to you for your kind offer, and Mlle. Bertha, believe me, will be equally grateful to me for having declined it. It depends entirely upon you, however, whether a union of our two powerful houses is realised or not, and also whether this income of two hundred thousand francs is allowed to go out of your family. I make haste to assure you that I am too thoroughly convinced of my own unworthiness to venture to lift my eyes to you, madame la duchesse," added the hunchback, with a low, though decidedly ironical bow. "In the first place I should make you the most detestable husband in the world, and then I have no inclination for marriage."

"It is hardly necessary to decline with such alacrity a proposition that has never been made to you," replied the Duchesse de Senneterre, rather spitefully. "You would oblige me by explaining yourself more clearly, however, for I never was good at solving enigmas. You are kind enough to speak of a union of our two houses, and of preventing your fortune from going out of my family, but I haven't the slightest idea how you propose to bring these things about."

"First permit me to say—not at all by way of reproach, understand—that you were not so very difficult to please in regard to lineage when Gerald's marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil was under consideration. Beaumesnil is not an aristocratic name by any means,—the grandfather of the late count, though a highly respected man, was simply M. Joseph Vert-Puis, a very wealthy banker."

"I know perfectly well that Mlle. Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil is a mere nobody, so far as birth is concerned, but—"

"But the numerous millions gild this recently ennobled plebeian, do they not? Very well, though that number of millions may have to be divided by four or five, what would you say to a notice couched in the following terms:

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, etc., etc., has the honour to inform you of the marriage of Mlle. Herminie de Haut-Martel, with M. le Duc de Senneterre."

Madame de Senneterre, surprised beyond expression, gazed wonderingly at the hunchback, who continued:

"The marriage contract stipulates that all male children that may be born of this marriage shall take the name of Senneterre-Haut-Martel, which I fancy will sound quite as well as Noailles-Noailles, Rohan-Rochefort, or Montmorency-Luxembourg, and as Mlle. Herminie Haut-Martel is an only child, and I am very frugal in my tastes, the young couple will have, up to the time of my death, one hundred and fifty thousand francs a year to sustain their exalted rank in a suitable manner."

"I really do not understand you at all, M. de Maillefort. You have never been married, and you have no daughter."

"No, but what is there to prevent me from adopting one, and thus giving her my name and fortune?"

"Nothing, of course. But who are the parents of this girl you contemplate adopting?"

"She is an orphan, and, as I told you before, she is a music teacher, and supports herself by giving lessons."

"What!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, "that same creature Gerald is crazy about?"

"Enough, madame," said the marquis, sternly. "I will not permit any one to speak in that way in my presence of a young lady whom I love and esteem sufficiently to give her my name."

"But what you say is so strange—"

"Strange or not, do you accept my proposal, yes or no?"

"Accept—monsieur? Accept for a daughter-in-law—a—a person who has given music lessons for a living?"

"Such sensitiveness on your part is truly heroic, doubtless, but I must call your attention to the fact that your son has little or nothing, and that Mlle. Herminie de Maillefort, though she has done such a scandalous thing as to earn an honest living, would bring M. de Senneterre two hundred thousand francs a year, and an alliance with the Haut-Martel family. I also take the liberty of reminding you that your son will probably kill himself if he does not marry this young lady. I know you would rather see him dead than married to some one beneath him, for the mother of the Gracchi is not to be compared with you, so far as stoicism is concerned, but it is none the less certain that the extinction of the house of Senneterre in such a fashion would cause a frightful scandal, which would, I think, be even worse than a *mésalliance*, especially when a Senneterre makes a *mésalliance* with a Maillefort de Haut-Martel."

"But, monsieur, every one will know that this young person is only your adopted child."

"All I can say in reply to that objection, madame, is that I, myself, could never have had so beautiful, so affectionate, and so truly noble a child."

"You know her well, then?"

"You certainly ask a singular question, madame. What! can you believe that I—being the man you know me to be—would give my name to a person who would not be an honour to that name?"

"But, monsieur," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, in a tone of sorrowful reproach, "there can be no denying the

fact that your adopted daughter has been a—a professional artiste."

"My adopted daughter, will, indeed, have the terrible misfortune to be and to have been a musical artiste of a high order. This is truly deplorable. I weep—I mourn—I bewail the fact. But, alas! you know the proverb, 'The prettiest girl in the world has some fault.'"

"And her patrons, do they belong to our set?"

"No, she is too proud for that."

"*Mon Dieu!* marquis, you place me in a very embarrassing position."

"I shall be able to put an end to this perplexity, I think. Listen attentively," continued M. de Maillefort, no longer in an ironical manner, but in firm, even stern tones. "I tell you plainly, once for all, that, if you refuse your consent, I shall go straight to Herminie, tell her exactly, what I intend to do for her, and prove to her that though, as a nameless and penniless girl, her dignity demanded the advances she asked from you, lest it might be said that she had forced herself upon the Senneterre family from ambitious or mercenary motives, as the adopted child of M. de Maillefort, who brings an illustrious name and a fortune of two hundred thousand francs a year to her husband, she need feel no such scruples. As Herminie adores Gerald, and my reasoning is perfectly just and sensible, I think, in fact I am sure, that she will be guided by me. Your son will make the usual formal application for your consent, and then there is nothing more to be said."

"Monsieur—"

"It will pain Gerald a good deal, I am sure, to have to dispense with your consent, for he loves you—blindly—that is the proper word to use in this connection; but in order to spare him all remorse, I shall repeat your words to him, madame: 'I had rather see him dead, than married to one beneath him.' Atrocious, or, rather, senseless words, when I, myself, assured you that Gerald could not find a wife more worthy of him than the one he has chosen!"

"You surely would not create discord between my son and me, monsieur."

"I shall certainly do everything in my power to ensure Gerald's peace of mind and happiness, since you are so stubborn and opinionated as to be willing to sacrifice both to your absurd prejudices—"

"That expression, monsieur—"

"These prejudices are not only absurd, madame, but after the adoption I propose, there is no longer even an excuse for them. One word more. If you have the good sense to prefer to live in peace and on affectionate terms with your son, and spare yourself, as well as him, a most deplorable scandal, you will go to Herminie's home to-morrow—any further inquiries being entirely unnecessary after what I have told you about her."

"I—monsieur—I, go first to the home of this young person?"

"You will be obliged to degrade yourself to that extent, the degradation being the more terrible, as Herminie, for certain reasons, must remain ignorant of my intention of adopting her until after your visit. So it will be to Mlle. Herminie, the poor music teacher, that you will go to give your consent to her marriage with your son."

"Never, monsieur, never will I so lower myself as to do this thing."

"But remember that there is nothing really humiliating about this step, and that no one will witness it but me, for I shall be there at the time."

"I tell you that it is impossible, monsieur. Never will I subject myself to such a humiliation."

"Then, instead of making your son adore you by consenting to a thing you cannot prevent, Gerald will know exactly what your affection is worth, and dispense with your consent entirely."

"But you cannot expect me to come to such an important decision in a moment, as it were."

"So be it, madame. I will give you until to-morrow noon. I will call then to hear your decision, and, if it conforms alike to the dictates of common sense and maternal love, I will precede you by a few moments to Herminie's home, in order that I may be there when you arrive. If you do not agree to this, I declare to you that your son will be married in less than six weeks."

Having said this, the marquis bowed low to Madame de Senneterre, and walked straight out of the room.

"I am satisfied that the egregious simpleton will do what I ask," he said to himself, "for her ambition and her avarice will both be so thoroughly gratified by this marriage that she will forget that objectionable feature,—the adoption. Besides, by one of those strange contradictions we so often see in poor, frail human nature, this woman, who in her obstinacy would drive her son to suicide, is as jealous of his affection as if she were the tenderest and most devoted of mothers; and, understanding how Gerald will adore her if she pretends to give a free consent to his marriage, she will go to Herminie, I am sure of it.

"But, alas! the game is only half won so far as I am concerned," mused the hunchback. "Will Herminie, who is so proud, consent to become my adopted child, when she knows the advantages which this adoption will give her, and which alone decided Madame de Senneterre to take the initiative? I am very much afraid that she will not. Did I not see how uncomfortable she felt when Ernestine insisted, not that she should share her wealth, but merely give up her lessons and remain with her? And yet, she perhaps knows that Ernestine is her sister, for I can doubt it no longer,—Herminie is, and knows she is, the daughter of Madame de Beaumesnil.

"Under these circumstances will Herminie, proud and sensitive as she is, accept my offer? I am by no means certain of it, though I told Gerald's mother so in order to frighten her. That, too, is the reason I desired that the marriage should be definitely arranged before I broached the subject of adoption at all. But I found that could not be

managed. Madame de Senneterre would have seen her son kill himself in her presence rather than consent to a *mésalliance* with a poor girl without name or fortune. All I have been able to do is, perhaps, to induce Madame de Senneterre to make the desired advances to Herminie,—the poor orphan and music teacher. Afterwards we will see."

"I shall now go straight to M. de la Rochaiguë. Having done all I can for Herminie, I must now see what I can do for Ernestine. I shall have to take the baron unawares, for, in his exasperation against me as the fell destroyer of his hopes of a seat in the Senate, he will refuse to see me, but, with Ernestine's aid, I shall be able to surprise him, I think, and, fortunately for my plans, he is much more stupid than wicked."

And M. de Maillefort, reëntering his carriage, was driven to M. de la Rochaiguë's house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TEMPTING BAIT.

M. de Maillefort, having asked to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil, was conducted straight to Ernestine's apartments.

"Have you some good news for Herminie?" cried Ernestine, hastening forward to meet him.

"A little, I think."

"How glad I am! Can I tell Herminie when I see her what you have just told me?"

"Yes; tell her to hope, and yet not to expect too much. And now, as you seem to have forgotten all about yourself, I will add that the result of my inquiries concerning M. Olivier has been eminently satisfactory."

"I was sure it would be."

"I even discovered one rather strange fact. It is that, while he was working during his leave so he might be able to assist his uncle, he went down to Beaumesnil, your estate near Luzarches, to help a contractor with his estimates there."

"M. Olivier? That was, indeed, strange."

"And this circumstance suggested a plan which I think may prove a good one, for now I think, with you, that you could not have made a wiser choice, but—"

"But what?"

"It is such an important matter that I have thought one more test might be advisable. What is your opinion on the subject?"

"Try it; I have no fears."

"Besides, you shall witness it yourself, my dear child. If M. Olivier withstands it, you will be the proudest and happiest of women, and there can be no further doubt of your future happiness. If, on the contrary, he succumbs, it will, alas! only be a fresh proof that the noblest natures sometimes yield to certain temptations. This test, too, will have another and very important result."

"And what is that?"

"After this test M. Olivier can not feel the slightest scruples about marrying the richest heiress in France, and you know, my dear child, that you have some very grave apprehensions on that score."

"Ah, monsieur, you are, indeed, our good angel!"

"Wait a little, my child. Don't praise me too soon. Now, one thing more. Didn't you tell me that there was a back stairway that led up to your guardian's rooms?"

"Yes, monsieur, several of his intimate friends, who are never formally announced, always make use of it mornings."

"Very well; I propose to play the part of an intimate friend myself, then, and give the baron a surprise. Show me the way, my child."

As they were passing through Madame Laîné's room, Ernestine paused and said to the hunchback:

"I have always forgotten to tell you how I managed to leave the house unobserved the night I went to Madame Herbaut's party, M. de Maillefort. That door you see over there opens upon another back stairway that leads down to the street. The door at the foot of it was nailed up a long time ago, but my governess succeeded in opening it, and it was through that door we left the house and entered it."

"Has this door been securely nailed up again?" inquired the hunchback, thoughtfully.

"My governess told me that she had fastened it securely on the inside."

"My dear child, your governess is an unprincipled woman. She assisted you in making your escape from the house

and also favoured your long visits to Herminie. No matter how reprehensible your motives had been, she would have obeyed you just the same, so she is not to be trusted."

"I have no confidence in her, of course, M. de Maillefort, and, as soon as I can, I intend to pay her liberally, as I promised, and send her away."

"This door, which affords such easy access to your apartments and which is so entirely at this woman's disposal, seems to me a very bad thing," remarked the hunchback. "You had better tell your guardian to-day that you have discovered this door, and ask him to have it walled up as soon as possible, or else give you some other room."

"I will do as you say, monsieur, but what fears can you have on the subject?"

"I have no well-founded fears at all, my dear child. I consider the walling up of this door as, first, a matter of propriety, and subsequently as a matter of prudence. There is nothing in this to alarm you in the least. Now, au revoir. I am going to have a bout with your guardian, and hope to have some good news for you on my return."

A moment afterwards M. de Maillefort had reached the floor above. Seeing a key in the lock of the door in front of him, he opened this door, and, finding himself in a narrow passage, he followed this passage until he came to a second door, which he opened like the first and found himself in M. de la Rochaiguë's study.

That gentleman was seated with his back to the door, reading, in the morning paper, an account of the proceedings during the session of the Chamber of Peers the day before. Hearing the door open, he turned his head and saw the hunchback, who came briskly, even gaily, forward, and, giving him a friendly nod of the head, exclaimed, blithely:

"Good morning, my dear baron, good morning!"

M. de la Rochaiguë was too much astounded to utter a word.

Leaning back in his armchair, his hands still clutching the paper, he sat like one petrified, though his eyes were full of surprise and anger.

"You see, my dear baron, I am assuming all the privileges of an intimate friend and making myself quite at home," continued the hunchback, in the same jovial, almost affectionate tone, as he seated himself in an armchair near the fireplace.

M. de la Rochaiguë was fairly purple with rage by this time, but, having a wholesome fear of the marquis, he controlled his wrath as best he could, and said, rising abruptly:

"It seems incredible, unheard of, outrageous, that—that I should have your presence thus forced upon me, monsieur, after that scene the other evening, and—and—"

"My dear baron, excuse me, but if I had requested the honour of an interview, you would have refused it, would you not?"

"Most assuredly I should, monsieur, for—"

"So I very wisely decided to take you by surprise. Now do me the favour to sit down, and let us talk this matter over like a couple of friends."

"Friends? You have the audacity to say that, monsieur; you, who ever since I first had the misfortune to know you, have fairly hounded me with sneers and sarcasms which—which I have returned in kind," added the baron, with true parliamentary aplomb. "A friend? you, monsieur, who have just outdone yourself by—"

"My dear baron," said the hunchback, interrupting M. de la Rochaiguë afresh, "did you ever see an amusing comedy by Scribe, called 'A Woman's Hatred'?"

"I am unable to see any connection—"

"But you will, my dear baron. In this little play, a young and pretty woman seems to pursue with the bitterest animosity a young man, whom in her secret heart she adores."

"And what of that, may I ask?"

"Well, my dear baron, with this slight difference, viz., that you are not a young man, and I am not a pretty woman who adores you, our relative positions are exactly the same as those of the hero and heroine in Scribe's little comedy."

"Once more, monsieur, I—"

"My dear baron, one question, if you please. Have you political aspirations,—yes, or no?"

"Monsieur—"

"Oh, put all false modesty aside and answer me frankly. Do you consider yourself a politician or not?"

On hearing this allusion to his pet hobby, the poor baron, forgetting his resentment, puffed out his cheeks, and, slipping his left hand in the bosom of his dressing-gown while he gesticulated with his right, assumed a parliamentary attitude and majestically responded:

"If a most profound, extended, and conscientious study of the internal and external condition of France, if a certain aptitude for public speaking, and a devoted love of country constitute a politician, I might reasonably aspire to that rôle. Yes, and but for you, monsieur,—but for your outrageous attack upon M. de Mornand,—I might not only aspire to, but assume that rôle at an early day."

"True, my dear baron, and I must confess that it was with unutterable satisfaction that I killed two birds with one stone by preventing a base and corrupt man like M. de Mornand from marrying your ward, and at the same time preventing you from becoming a peer of France."

"Yes, from satisfying my ridiculous ambition, as you have told me to my face more than once, monsieur, and I repel the insulting aspersion with scorn and disdain. There is nothing ridiculous about my ambition, monsieur."

"It is ridiculous in every respect, my dear baron."

"Have you come here to insult me, monsieur?"

"Do you know why your ambition is ridiculous and out of place, my dear baron? It is because you long for a field of labour in which your political talents will be entirely wasted, completely swallowed up, so to speak."

"What, monsieur, can it be you that I hear speaking of my political talents when you have never neglected an opportunity to sneer at them?"

"A 'Woman's Hatred,' my dear baron, a 'Woman's Hatred'!"

And as M. de la Rochaiguë gazed at the hunchback with a bewildered air, the latter gentleman continued:

"You know, of course, that you and I belong to the same political party, my dear baron."

"I was not aware of that fact, monsieur; still, it should not surprise me. Persons of exalted rank are inevitably the born, immutable, and unwavering advocates, champions, and representatives of the traditions of the past."

"And it is for this very reason that I am so bitterly opposed to your holding a seat in the Chamber of Peers, my dear baron."

"You amaze me greatly, infinitely, prodigiously, monsieur," said the baron, hanging upon his visitor's words with breathless eagerness now.

"Can it be that M. de la Rochaiguë is really so blind, or that this mistake is due to bad advisers? I have said to myself again and again. He must, with reason, desire to bring about a return to the traditions of the past, and there cannot be the slightest doubt that he possesses many of the requisites to effect such a consummation: birth, talents, an extended knowledge of political affairs, and antecedents entirely free of any troublesome entanglements—"

When this enumeration of his political qualifications began, M. de la Rochaiguë might have been seen to smile almost imperceptibly, but when the hunchback paused to take breath, the baron's long teeth were exposed to view.

Noting this sure sign of internal satisfaction, the marquis continued:

"And where does the baron propose to bury all these talents? In the Upper Chamber, which is already filled to overflowing with members of the aristocracy. What will be the result? Why, in spite of his talents, this unfortunate baron will be completely swallowed up in this overwhelming majority. He will necessarily, too, be regarded as a mere dummy or tool, as he will owe his political position to party favour, and his energetic plainness of speech as well as the—the—pray give me the word, baron—the ardour of his impassioned oratory will be hampered by personal obligations."

"But why do you tell me all this at this late day, monsieur?" exclaimed the baron, in tones of heartfelt reproach.

But the marquis, without giving any sign of having heard the baron's question, continued:

"How different it would be if this unfortunate baron began his political career in the Chamber of Deputies! He would not enter that body by favour, but by a public election—by the will of the people. Under these circumstances, how forcible the words of this energetic and faithful representative of the traditions of the past would become! It could not be said of him: 'Your opinion is that of the favoured class to which you belong.' Far from it, for the baron could reply, and justly: 'No, my views are the views of the nation, as it is the nation that sent me here.'"

"What you say is true, perfectly true, monsieur, but why did you defer telling me so long?"

"Why, baron? Why, because you manifested such a deep distrust and such an intense antipathy to me."

"On the contrary, it was you, marquis, who seemed to pursue me with relentless cruelty."

"Very possibly, for I was continually saying to myself: 'Ah, if the baron is so blind as to neglect the opportunity to play such a magnificent rôle, he shall bear the penalty of it. I will give him no peace.' Nor have I; but when the time came to prevent you from committing such a fatal blunder—I did it."

"But marquis, permit me to say—"

"You do not belong to yourself, monsieur, you belong to your party, and the injury you do yourself will reflect upon the other members of your party. You are consequently an egotist, a heartless—"

"One word, monsieur, one word."

"Ambitious man who prefers to owe his position to political favour rather than to a public election."

"You talk very lightly of a public election, monsieur. Do you believe that a seat in either political body can be secured so easily, no matter how well fitted the person may be to fill such a position? (In speaking in this way of myself, I am only repeating your words, remember.) You may not be aware that I have been trying to secure a seat in the Chamber of Peers ten years, monsieur."

"Nonsense! You could be a deputy in less than a month if you chose."

"I?"

"Yes, you, Baron de la Rochaiguë."

"I, a deputy! That would be magnificent, marquis, for you have opened my eyes to the vast, immense, infinite field of labour that would lie before me. But how could I secure an election?"

"It so happens that the electors of the district where my estates are situated desire to confer the honour of representing them upon me."

"You, M. le marquis?"

"Yes, I! Just imagine what an idea people will form of those worthy fellows down there from their representative. People will fancy when they see me that I am the envoy of a colony founded by Punchinello."

This lively sally excited considerable hilarity on the part of the baron, who manifested it as usual by displaying his long teeth several times.

"If my district was located in a mountainous country, there might be some sense in my election," continued the marquis, indicating his hump by a laughing gesture, to keep the baron in good humour, doubtless.

"Really, marquis," exclaimed M. de la Rochaiguë, much amused, "you certainly do the honours of yourself with wonderful grace and wit."

"Then shout, 'Long live my hump!' my dear baron, for you little know what you—no, our party—will perhaps owe to it!"

"I—our party—owe anything to your—" the baron hesitated—"to your—to your gibbosity."

"Gibbosity is a remarkably well chosen word, baron. You were evidently born for the tribune, and, as I said before, you can be a deputy in less than a month if you choose."

"Once more may I beg you to explain, marquis."

"Nothing could be simpler. Be a deputy in my stead."

"You are jesting."

"Not at all. I should only make the Chamber laugh. You will hold it captive by your eloquence, and our party will consequently be much the gainer by the change. I will introduce you to three or four delegates who have been chosen by my constituents, and who really control the elections down there, and I am sure I shall have little or no difficulty in persuading them to accept you in my stead. I will write to them this afternoon; day after to-morrow they will be here, and by the following day everything will be settled."

"Really, marquis, I scarcely know whether I am awake or dreaming. You, whom I have hitherto regarded as a bitter enemy—"

"Only a 'Woman's Hatred,' you know—or, if you like it better, the 'Hatred of a Political Friend.'"

"It seems inconceivable."

"So even as I ruined your absurd plans for securing a peerage at the same time that I prevented you from marrying your ward to an unprincipled scoundrel, I now propose to make you a deputy, and at the same time secure your consent to her marriage with a worthy young man who loves her, and whom she loves in return."

On hearing this announcement, M. de la Rochaiguë moved uneasily in his chair, cast a suspicious look at the marquis, and answered, coldly:

"I have been your dupe, I see, M. le marquis; I fell into the trap like a fool."

"What trap, my dear baron?"

"Your pretended anger at the course my political aspirations had taken, your flattery, your proposal to make me a deputy in your stead, all conceal an ulterior motive. Fortunately, I divine it—I unmask it—I unveil it."

"You are sure to become Minister of Foreign Affairs, baron, if you manifest like perspicuity in political matters."

"A truce to pleasantries, monsieur."

"So be it, monsieur. You must believe one of two things: I am either mocking you by pretending to take your political aspirations seriously, or else I really see in you the stuff from which statesmen are made. It is for you to decide which of these hypotheses is the correct one. Now, to state the case simply but clearly, your ward has made an admirable choice, as I will prove to you. Consent to this marriage, and I will have you elected deputy. That is the bright side of the medal."

"Ah, there are two sides?" sneered the baron.

"Naturally. I have shown you the good side; this is the bad: You and your wife and sister have grossly abused the trust confided to you—"

"Monsieur—"

"Oh, I can prove it. All three of you have either favoured or been personally mixed up in the most abominable intrigues, of which Mlle. de Beaumesnil was to be the victim. I repeat that I have abundant proofs of this fact, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil herself will unite with me in exposing these nefarious schemes."

"And to whom do you propose to denounce us, if you please?"

"To the members of the family council which Mlle. de Beaumesnil will convoke at once. You can guess what the result of such a proceeding will be. Your appointment as guardian will be annulled, forthwith."

"We will see about that! We will see about that, monsieur!"

"You will certainly have an admirable chance to see about it. Now choose. Consent to this marriage and you are a deputy. Refuse your consent, there will be a frightful scandal; you will be deprived of your guardianship, and all your ambitious hopes will be blighted for ever!"

"Ah, you censure me for having desired to marry my ward in a way that might benefit me personally, and yet you—you propose to do the same thing you censure me for, yourself."

"There is not the slightest justice in your comparison, my dear sir. You were trying to marry your ward to a scoundrel; I want to marry her to an honourable man, and I offer you a certain price for your consent, because you have proved to me that it is necessary to give a certain price for your consent."

"And why, if the person you have selected for Mlle. de Beaumesnil is a suitable person?"

"The husband I have suggested, and that Mlle. de Beaumesnil desires, is a perfectly honourable man—"

"And his fortune, social position, etc.,—these are all that can be desired, I suppose."

"He is a lieutenant in the army, without either name or fortune, but he is one of the bravest and most honest men I know. He loves Ernestine, and she loves him in return. What objection have you to offer?"

"What objection have I to offer? A mere nobody, whose only possessions are his cloak and sword, marry the richest heiress in France! Never. Do you hear me? Never will I consent to such an unequal marriage! M. de Mornand at least had a fair prospect of becoming a minister, an ambassador, or president of the Chamber, monsieur."

"So you see, baron, I was very wise to offer you a handsome price for your consent."

"But according to you, monsieur, in thus allowing myself to be influenced by motives of personal aggrandisement, I should be acting very—"

"Disgracefully. Still, that does not matter, provided Ernestine's happiness can be assured."

"And it is a person capable of an act you consider so dishonourable that you dare to propose to the electors of your district as their representative!" exclaimed the baron, triumphantly. "You would so abuse their confidence as to give them, as a representative of our party, a man who—"

"In the first place, the electors in question are a parcel of fools, my dear sir; besides, I do not interfere with their right of suffrage in the least. They imagine, because I am a marquis, that I should be just as fanatical a partisan of church and throne as their late deputy. They even told me that, in case of my refusal, they should consider it a favour if I would designate some other suitable person. I offer them as a candidate a man of their own party, perfectly capable of representing them. (It is not very high praise, my dear baron, to say that you are at least as gifted a man as their deceased deputy.) The rest is for you to decide, for I need not tell you that I was only jesting a few minutes ago when I said that your political sentiments and mine were identical. It was merely a means of paving the way to the offer which I have made, and which I reiterate. And now, you will, perhaps, ask me why, if I feel confident of my ability to compel you to resign your guardianship of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, I do not do it."

"I should like to ask you that very plain question, monsieur," responded the baron.

"My explanation will be very simple, my dear sir. It is because I do not believe there is, among the other persons to whom this guardianship is likely to be entrusted, any man with sense and heart enough to understand why the richest heiress in France might be permitted to marry a brave and honourable man without either rank or fortune. So, as I should have the same difficulty to contend with in another guardian, but not have the same effectual means of coercing him, perhaps, such a change might injure rather than aid my plans, besides ruining you irretrievably. Now reflect, and make your choice. I shall expect to see you at my house to-morrow morning, not later than ten o'clock."

And the marquis departed, leaving M. de la Rochaiguë in a state of painful perplexity.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER.

Three days had elapsed since M. de Maillefort's interviews with Madame de Senneterre and M. de la Rochaiguë, and Herminie, alone in her pretty room, seemed a prey to the keenest anxiety; for every now and then she cast an impatient glance at the clock, or started at the slightest sound, or turned hastily towards the door.

In fact, one could discern in the face of the duchess an anxiety fully equal to that which she had experienced some time before, while in momentary expectation of the much dreaded M. Bouffard's coming.

And yet it was not a visit from M. Bouffard, but from M. de Maillefort, that caused the girl's agitation.

The flowers in the pretty little room had just been renewed, and the muslin curtains at the windows that overlooked the garden had been freshly laundered. These windows were open, but the green outside shutters were closed to keep out the glare.

After setting her house in order with scrupulous care, the duchess had evidently made an unusually careful toilet, for she had donned her best dress, a high-necked, black levantine, with chemisette and sleeves of dazzling whiteness. Her sole ornament was her magnificent hair, which gleamed like burnished gold in the sun-light, but never had her beauty seemed more noble and touching in its character, for, for some time past, her face had been paler, though her complexion had lost none of its dazzling clearness.

The duchess had just given another quick glance at the door, when she fancied she heard a footstep outside, near the window that overlooked the garden, and she was about to rise and satisfy her doubts, when the door opened, and Madame Moufflon ushered in M. de Maillefort.

That gentleman was hardly in the room, however, before he turned and said to the portress:

"A lady will come and ask to see Mlle. Herminie, in a few moments—you will admit her."

"Yes, monsieur," replied Madame Moufflon, deferentially, as she took her departure.

On hearing the words, "A lady will come and ask to see Mlle. Herminie," the girl sprang forward hastily, exclaiming:

"*Mon Dieu!* M. le marquis,—this lady—whom you expect—?"

"Is she!" replied the marquis, radiant with joy and hope. "Yes, she is coming at last!"

Then, seeing Herminie turn as pale as death and tremble violently in every limb, the hunchback cried:

"What is the matter, my child? Tell me, what is the matter?"

"Ah, monsieur," said the duchess, faintly, "I don't know why, but now, oh, I feel so afraid!"

"Afraid! when Madame de Senneterre has pledged herself to make the concession which you were very right to ask, but which you had little hope that she would ever grant!"

"Alas! monsieur, now, for the first time, I seem to understand the temerity, the impropriety, perhaps, of my demand."

"My dear child," exclaimed the hunchback, anxiously, "no weakness, I beg, or you will lose all. Be your own noble, charming self, the personification of modesty without humility, and of dignity without arrogance, and all will be well,—I trust."

"Ah, monsieur, when you told me yesterday that there was a possibility of this visit from Madame de Senneterre, I thought my cup of joy would be filled to overflowing, if this hope should be realised, and now I feel only the most abject terror and alarm."

"Here she comes! Summon up all your courage, my child, for God's sake, and think of Gerald!" exclaimed the hunchback, hearing a carriage stop at the door.

"Oh, monsieur, have pity on me," murmured the duchess, clutching M. de Maillefort's hand convulsively. "Oh, I shall never dare—"

"Poor child! she is going to ruin her prospects, I fear," thought the marquis.

Almost at that very instant the door opened, and Madame de Senneterre entered.

She was a tall and slender woman, with an exceedingly haughty manner, and she came into the room with head high in the air, an insolent gleam in her eyes, and a disdainful smile upon her lips. She had an unusually high colour, and seemed to find it difficult to control her feelings.

The fact is, Madame de Senneterre was violently agitated by conflicting emotions. This ridiculously proud and arrogant woman had left her home firmly resolved to make the concession towards Herminie which M. de Maillefort demanded, and in return for which he had promised to adopt the young girl.

Madame de Senneterre had consequently resolved that during this visit, which cost her pride so much, her demeanour should be scrupulously, though coldly, polite; but as the moment for the interview approached, and as this arrogant woman reflected that she, the Duchesse de Senneterre, was about to present herself as a petitioner at the home of an obscure young girl, who worked for her living, the implacable pride of the grande dame revolted at the thought. Anger filled her heart, she lost her head, and, forgetting the advantages her son would derive from this marriage, forgetting that, after all, it was the adopted daughter of the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel she was about to visit, and not the poor music teacher, Madame de Senneterre reached Herminie's home with no intention of adopting any conciliatory measures, but resolved to treat this insolent creature, who had been so audacious in her pretensions, as she deserved to be treated.

On seeing the haughtiness, aggressiveness, and anger so legibly imprinted on Madame de Senneterre's features, the marquis, no less surprised than alarmed, understood the sudden change which had taken place in the intentions of Gerald's mother, and said to himself, despairingly:

"All is lost!"

As for Herminie, she did not seem to have a drop of blood in her veins. Her beautiful face had become frightfully

pale; her lips, which were almost blue, trembled convulsively; it seemed impossible for her to raise her eyes—in fact, she seemed unable to make the slightest movement, or even to utter a word.

In spite of the high terms in which M. de Maillefort had spoken of this young girl whom he esteemed so highly as to be willing to give her his name, Madame de Senneterre, too insufferably proud as well as opinionated to concede that Herminie's conduct might have been prompted solely by a sense of dignity, had expected to find herself confronted by a vain, pert, rather coarse, ill-bred girl, proud of her conquest, and resolved to make the most of it; so, as Gerald's mother, she had armed herself with the most insulting disdain and arrogance of manner.

She was consequently both astonished and discomfited at the sight of this charming but timid creature, of such rare loveliness and wonderful distinction of manner, who, instead of giving herself any impertinent airs, did not even dare to raise her eyes, and seemed more dead than alive in the presence of the great lady from whom she had exacted this visit.

"Good Heavens, how beautiful she is!" Madame de Senneterre said to herself, with a strange mixture of spitefulness and involuntary admiration. "What a refined and distinguished looking young woman this poor, obscure music teacher is! It is simply marvellous! My own daughters are not to be compared with her."

Though it has taken some time to describe these conflicting sentiments in the heart of Madame de Senneterre, their coming and going had been well-nigh simultaneous, and only a few seconds had elapsed after her entrance into the room before, blushing for the sort of embarrassment and dismay that she had at first experienced, she broke the silence by demanding in haughty, supercilious tones:

"Mlle. Herminie, is she here?"

"I am she, madame la duchesse," faltered Herminie, while M. de Maillefort stood watching the scene with growing anxiety.

"Mlle. Herminie—the music teacher?" repeated Madame de Senneterre, with a contemptuous emphasis on the last word. "You are that young person, I suppose."

"Yes, madame la duchesse," replied the poor girl, trembling like a leaf, and without venturing to raise her eyes.

"Well, mademoiselle, you are satisfied, I trust? You have had the audacity to insist that I should come here, and here I am."

"I felt constrained—madame la duchesse—to solicit the honour—that—that—"

"Indeed! And what right have you to presume to make this insolent demand?"

"Madame!" exclaimed the hunchback, threateningly.

But as Madame de Senneterre uttered these last insulting words, Herminie, who had seemed so terrified, so utterly crushed until then, lifted her head proudly, a slight tinge of colour suffused her cheeks, and, raising her large blue eyes for the first time to the face of Gerald's mother, she replied in firm though gentle tones:

"I have never felt that I had the right to expect even the slightest mark of deference from you, madame. On the contrary, I only desired to—to testify the respect that I felt for your authority, madame, by declaring to M. de Senneterre that I could not and would not accept his hand without his mother's consent."

"And I—a person of my age and position—must humiliate myself by making the first advances to mademoiselle?"

"I am an orphan, madame, without a relative in the world. I could designate no one else for you to approach on the subject, and my dignity would not permit me to go to you and solicit—"

"Your dignity,—this is really very amusing!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, infuriated at finding herself obliged to acknowledge the charming reserve and perfect dignity of the girl's demeanour under such very trying circumstances. "Could anything be more extraordinary?" she continued, with a sarcastic laugh. "Mademoiselle has her dignity."

"I have the dignity of virtue, poverty, and honest toil, madame la duchesse," replied Herminie, looking Madame de Senneterre full in the face, this time with such an unflinching, noble air that Gerald's mother became embarrassed and was obliged to avert her eyes.

For several minutes the marquis had found it very difficult to restrain his desire to punish Madame de Senneterre for her insolence to his protégée, but on hearing Herminie's simple but noble reply, he thought her sufficiently avenged.

"So be it, then," responded Madame de Senneterre, in a rather less bitter tone. "You have your dignity, but you can hardly think that for a person to be able to enter one of the most illustrious families in France it is enough for that person to be honest, virtuous and industrious."

"But I do think so, madame."

"You are not lacking in pride, I must say," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, thoroughly exasperated. "Mademoiselle doubtless supposes that by marrying M. le Duc de Senneterre she will confer a great honour upon him, as well as upon his family."

"In responding to M. de Senneterre's affection with an affection equal to his own, I feel that I do honour him by my preference as much as he has honoured me. As for M. de Senneterre's family, I know, madame, that they will never be proud of me, but I shall have the consciousness of being worthy of them."

"Good!" exclaimed the hunchback, "good, my brave and noble child!"

Though Madame de Senneterre was making every effort to resist the influence of Herminie's charms, she found herself gradually yielding to it in spite of herself.

The beauty, grace, and exquisite tact of this charming creature exerted a sort of fascination over Gerald's mother, so, fearing she might succumb to it, she resolved to end all temptation to do so by burning her ships behind her, or, in other words, by again resorting to vituperation, so she exclaimed, wrathfully:

"No, no, it shall never be said that I allowed myself to be cajoled by the charms and perfidious words of a mere adventuress, and that I was fool enough to give my consent to her marriage with my son."

The hunchback sprang forward with a terrible look at Madame de Senneterre, but, before he could utter a word, Herminie replied, in faltering tones, while big tears rolled slowly down her cheeks:

"Pardon me, madame. Insult finds me speechless and defenceless, especially when it is M. de Senneterre's mother that insults. I have but one favour to ask of you, madame. It is to remember that I not only anticipated this refusal, but accepted it in advance, so it would have been more generous in you not to have come here to crush me with it. What was my crime, madame? Simply to have believed that M. de Senneterre's station in life was as obscure and laborious as my own. But for that, I would have died rather than yielded to such a love."

"What!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, "you did not know that my son—"

"M. de Senneterre represented himself to be a man who was obliged to labour hard for his daily bread. I believed him; I loved him,—loved him truly and disinterestedly. When I discovered who he really was, I refused to see him again, for I was resolved that I would never marry him against the wishes of his family. That, madame, is the truth, and the whole truth," added Herminie, in a voice broken with sobs. "This love, for which, thank God, I shall never have to blush, must be sacrificed. I expected it, but I believed I had the right to suffer without the presence of witnesses. I forgive your cruel words, madame. You are a mother, you did not know, perhaps, that I was worthy of your son,—and maternal love is sacred, even if it be in the wrong."

Herminie dried the tears that were streaming down her pale face, then continued, in a weak and faltering voice, for, overcome by this painful scene, she felt that her strength was fast failing her:

"Will you have the goodness to say to M. de Senneterre, madame, that I forgive him the wrong he has, unconsciously, done me. Here, before you—you—his mother—I swear that—I will never see him again,—and you need have no fear of my breaking my word. So, madame, you can leave here reassured and content,—but—but I feel so strangely—M. de Maillefort—come to me—I beg—come—I—"

The poor girl could say no more. Her lips fluttered feebly, and she cast a despairing look at the hunchback, who sprang forward only just in time to receive her almost lifeless form in his arms. He placed her tenderly in an armchair, then, turning to Madame de Senneterre, with a terrible expression on his face, he cried:

"Ah, you shall weep tears of blood for your cruelty here, madame. Go, go, I tell you. Don't you see that she is dying!"

Herminie did, indeed, look as if death had claimed her for his own, with her marble white face, and her head hanging inertly down upon one shoulder. Her forehead, bathed in a cold sweat, was half covered with some soft ringlets of golden hair which had escaped from their confinement, and an occasional tear forced its way through her half closed eyelids, while ever and anon a convulsive shudder shook her entire body.

M. de Maillefort could not restrain his tears, and, turning to Madame de Senneterre, he exclaimed, bitterly, in a voice hoarse with emotion: "You are gloating over your work, are you not?"

What was the hunchback's astonishment to see compassionate grief and keen remorse plainly imprinted upon this haughty woman's face, for, conquered at last by Herminie's noble and touching resignation, she, in turn, burst into tears, and said to the marquis, in beseeching tones:

"Have pity on me, M. de Maillefort I came here resolved to keep my promise, but—but my pride revolted in spite of me. I lost my head. Now, I repent, oh, how bitterly! I am ashamed, I am horrified at my heartless conduct."

And, running to Herminie, the duchess tenderly lifted her head and kissed her upon the forehead; then, twining her arms around her to support her, said, in a voice faltering with emotion:

"Poor child! Will she ever forgive me? M. de Maillefort, ring for assistance, call some one, her pallor terrifies me."

Just then hurried steps were heard in the hall. The door flew open, and Gerald rushed in like one distracted, his eyes wild, his manner threatening, for, from the garden in which he had concealed himself without the knowledge of either Herminie or M. de Maillefort, he had heard his mother's cruel words.

"Gerald!" cried the astonished marquis.

"I was there," the young man exclaimed, pointing to the window. "I heard all, and—"

But the young duke did not complete the sentence, so amazed was he to see his mother supporting Herminie's head upon her bosom.

"My son," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, "I am truly horrified at what I have done. I consent to everything. She is an angel. May Heaven forgive me!"

"Oh, mother, mother," murmured Gerald, in accents of ineffable gratitude, as he fell upon his knees beside Herminie, and covered her cold hands with tears and kisses.

"You have done wisely," the marquis said, in low tones, to Madame de Senneterre. "It is adoration that your son will feel for you now."

That same instant, seeing Herminie make a slight movement, Gerald exclaimed, joyfully:

"She is recovering consciousness!"

Then, in a thrilling voice, he cried:

"Herminie, it is I. It is Gerald!"

On hearing M. de Senneterre's voice, Herminie gave a slight start, then slowly opened her eyes, which seemed at first fixed and troubled, like the eyes of one awaking from a dream.

Then the sort of mist which seemed to obscure her mental faculties faded away, and the girl slowly raised her head, which had been reposing on Madame de Senneterre's bosom, and looked around her.

To her intense astonishment, she saw that Gerald's mother was supporting her in her arms and watching her with the tenderest solicitude.

Believing she was still in a dream, Herminie hastily raised herself, and passed her burning hands over her eyes, after which her gaze, as it became more and more assured, was directed, first upon M. de Maillefort, who was gazing at her with ineffable delight, and then upon Gerald, who was still kneeling before her.

"Gerald!" she cried, rapturously.

Then, with an expression of mingled hope and fear, she hastily glanced around at Madame de Senneterre, as if to satisfy herself that it was indeed from Gerald's mother that she was receiving these marks of touching interest.

Gerald, noticing the girl's movement, hastily exclaimed:

"Herminie, my mother consents to everything."

"Yes, yes, mademoiselle," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, effusively. "I consent to everything. There are many wrongs for which I must ask forgiveness,—but my love and tenderness will enable me to gain it at last."

"Can this be true, madame?" cried Herminie, clasping her hands. "Oh, God, can it be possible! You really consent? All this is not a dream?"

"No, Herminie, it is not a dream," exclaimed Gerald, rapturously. "We belong to each other now! You shall soon be my wife."

"No, my noble child, it is not a dream," said M. de Maillefort, "It is a fitting reward for a life of toil and virtue."

"No, mademoiselle, it is not a dream," said Madame de Senneterre, "for it is you," she added, casting a meaning glance at the marquis, "you, Mlle. Herminie, who nobly support yourself by your own exertions, that I joyfully accept as my daughter-in-law in M. de Maillefort's presence, for I am satisfied that my son could not make a choice more worthy of him, of me, and of his family."

Half an hour afterwards Madame de Senneterre and her son took an affectionate leave of Herminie, who, in company with M. de Maillefort, forthwith repaired to the house of Mlle. de Beaumesnil to tell her the good news, and sustain the courage of the richest heiress in France, for a final and formidable ordeal was in store for her, or, rather, for Olivier.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCE.

While M. de Senneterre was taking his mother home, Herminie and M. de Maillefort were bowling swiftly along in the marquis's carriage on their way to Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

The delight of the marquis and his youthful protégée, whose happiness was now assured, can be imagined.

The marquis knew Madame de Senneterre well enough to feel sure that she was incapable of retracting the solemn consent she had given to the marriage of Gerald and Herminie.

Nevertheless, M. de Maillefort resolved to call on Madame de Senneterre the following morning, and assure her that he had not changed his intention of adopting Herminie, who was dearer to him than ever, if that were possible, since he had witnessed her noble and touching behaviour during her interview with the haughty Duchesse de Senneterre.

M. de Maillefort's only fear now was that the proud and sensitive girl might refuse to accept the advantages he was so anxious to confer upon her; but almost sure that he would succeed in overcoming her scruples eventually, he resolved to maintain an absolute silence concerning his intentions for the present.

M. de Maillefort and his companion had been driving along for several minutes, when a block of vehicles at the corner of the Rue de Courcelles obliged their driver to check his horses for an instant.

There was a locksmith's shop on the corner of this street, and the hunchback, who had put his head out of the carriage window to ascertain the cause of the sudden stop, uttered an exclamation of surprise, and, hastily drawing in his head, muttered:

"What can that man be doing there?"

As was natural, Herminie's eyes quickly followed those of the hunchback, and she could not repress a movement of disgust and aversion which M. de Maillefort failed to notice, however, for almost at the same instant he lowered the curtain of the window nearest him.

By drawing this small silken curtain a little aside, the marquis could see without being seen, and through the tiny opening he seemed to be watching something or somebody with considerable uneasiness, while Herminie, not daring to question him, gazed at him wonderingly.

The marquis had caught sight of M. de Ravil in the locksmith's shop, and he could still see him talking with the locksmith,—a man with a kind, honest face. He was showing him a key, and evidently giving him some instructions in regard to it, for, taking the key, the locksmith placed it in his vice just as M. de Maillefort's carriage again started on its way towards the Faubourg St. Germain, and M. de Macreuse's new friend, or, rather, his new accomplice, was lost to sight.

"What is the matter, monsieur?" inquired Herminie, seeing that the hunchback had suddenly become thoughtful.

"I just observed an apparently insignificant thing, my dear child, but it makes me a trifle uneasy. I saw a man in a locksmith's shop just now, showing the locksmith a key. I should not even have noticed the fact, though, if I did not know that the man who had the key was a scoundrel, capable of anything, and under certain circumstances the slightest act of a man like that furnishes food for reflection."

"Is the man you refer to unusually tall, and has he a bad, hard face?"

"So you, too, noticed him?"

"I have had only too much cause to do so, monsieur."

"Explain, my dear child."

So Herminie briefly related Ravil's many futile attempts to obtain access to her since the evening he so grossly insulted her while on her way to Madame de Beaumesnil's.

"If the scoundrel is in the habit of hanging around your house, my dear child, it is not so surprising that we should have seen him in a shop in this part of the town. Still, what can have taken him to this locksmith's?" asked the hunchback, thoughtfully. "Since he became so intimate with that rascal, Macreuse, I have been keeping a close watch on both of them. One of my men is shadowing them, for such creatures as they are are never more dangerous than when they are playing dead,—not that I fear them myself; oh, no, but I do fear for Ernestine."

"For Ernestine?" asked the duchess, with quite as much surprise as uneasiness. "What can she have to fear from creatures like these?"

"You do not know, my dear child, that this Ravil was the most zealous aider and abettor of one of the suitors for Ernestine's hand. Macreuse, too, made equally nefarious attempts to secure this tempting prey. As I unmasked them both in public, I fear that their resentment will fall upon Ernestine, especially as their rage, on finding that they will not be able to make the poor child their victim, is so venomous; but I am watching them closely, and this visit of Ravil to the locksmith—though I cannot imagine the motive of it now—will make me redouble my vigilance."

"But you can hardly imagine that this visit would affect Ernestine in any way."

"I am not at all sure that it does, my dear child, but I think it strange that De Ravil should take the trouble to seek out a locksmith in this remote part of the town. But let us say no more about it. Such scoundrels as those two men are should not be allowed to mar pure and richly deserved happiness. My task is only half completed. Your happiness is assured, my child, and now I trust this may prove an equally fortunate day for Ernestine. Here we are at last. Find her and tell her of your happiness while I go up to the baron's apartments. I have a few words to say to him, after which I will rejoin you in Ernestine's rooms."

"Did I not hear you say something in regard to a final test?"

"Yes, my dear child."

"Does it relate to M. Olivier?"

"Yes, and if he sustains the ordeal bravely and nobly, as I am sure he will, Ernestine will have no cause to envy you your felicity."

"And did Ernestine consent to this test, monsieur?"

"Yes, my child, for it would not only serve to establish the nobility of Olivier's sentiments beyond a doubt, but also remove any scruples he might feel about marrying Ernestine when he discovers that the little embroideress is the richest heiress in France."

"Alas! monsieur, it is on that point I feel the greatest misgivings. M. Olivier is so extremely sensitive in regard to all money matters, Gerald says."

"And for that very reason I gave my poor brain no rest until I had found, or at least fancied I had found, a means of escape from this danger. I can not explain any further now, but you will soon know all."

Meanwhile the carriage had paused in front of the Rochaiguë mansion. The footman opened the door, and while

Herminie hastened to Mlle. de Beaumesnil's apartments the hunchback went up to the baron's study, where he found that gentleman evidently expecting him, for he promptly advanced to meet him, displaying his long teeth with the most satisfied air imaginable.

The fact is, M. de la Rochaiguë, after reflecting on the marquis's offers,—and threats,—had decided to accept a proposal that would enable him to gratify his political ambition at last, and had consequently given his consent to this marriage under certain conditions that seemed incomprehensible to him,—M. de Maillefort not having deemed it advisable to inform the baron of the double character Mlle. de Beaumesnil had been playing.

"Well, my dear baron, has everything been satisfactorily arranged?" inquired the hunchback.

"Yes, my dear marquis. The interview is to take place here in my study, and, as this room is separated from the adjoining room only by a portière, everything that is said can be distinctly heard in there."

The marquis examined the two rooms for himself and then returned to M. de la Rochaiguë.

"This arrangement will suit perfectly, my dear baron. But tell me, did the inquiries you made in relation to M. Olivier Raymond prove entirely satisfactory?"

"I called on his old colonel in the African army this morning, and M. de Berville spoke of him in the highest possible terms."

"I was sure that he would, my dear baron, but I wished you to satisfy yourself, and from several different sources, of my protégé's irreproachable character."

"He possesses neither wealth nor rank, unfortunately," responded the baron, with a sigh, "but there doesn't seem to be the slightest doubt that he is an exceedingly honest and worthy young man."

"And what you have heard about him is nothing in comparison with what you will soon discover for yourself."

"What! is there still another mystery in store for me, my dear marquis?"

"Have a little patience, and an hour from now you will know all. By the way, I hope you haven't said a word to your wife or sister in regard to our plans?"

"How can you ask me such a question, my dear marquis? Am I not longing to have my revenge upon Helena and the baroness? Think of their deceiving me as they did! Each of them plotting to bring about a marriage between my ward and one of their protégés, and making me play the most ridiculous rôle. Ah, it will at least be some consolation to outwit them in my turn."

"No weakness, though, baron. Your wife openly boasts that she can make you do exactly as she pleases,—that she leads you around by the nose, in short,—excuse the expression."

"Well, well, we shall see! So she leads me around by the nose, does she?"

"I think we shall have to admit that she has, in days gone by."

"I admit nothing of the kind."

"But now you are a statesman, any such weakness would be unpardonable, for you no longer belong to yourself, and, apropos of this, did you see our delegates again?"

"We had another conference last evening. I talked to them two hours on the subject of an alliance with England."

The baron rose, and slipping his left hand in the bosom of his coat, and assuming his usual oratorical attitude, continued:

"I subsequently gave them my views upon the importation of horned cattle, and briefly expounded the principles of religious liberty as practised in Belgium; and I must admit that your electors seemed much pleased, to say the least."

"I don't doubt it. You must suit them wonderfully well. I am doing them a signal service, for they will find in you—all that is lacking in me."

"You are entirely too modest, my dear marquis."

"Quite the contrary, my dear baron; so as soon as Olivier's and Ernestine's marriage contract is signed, I shall resign my candidacy in your favour."

A servant, entering at this moment, announced that M. Olivier Raymond wished to see M. de la Rochaiguë.

"Ask M. Raymond to wait a moment," replied the baron, and the servant left the room.

"Now, baron, remember that this is a very important, as well as delicate, matter," said the marquis. "Do not forget any of my instructions, and, above all, do not evince any surprise at M. Raymond's answers, no matter how extraordinary they may appear. I will explain everything after your interview with him is over."

"It will be comparatively easy for me to show no surprise at anything I see or hear, marquis, inasmuch as I am very much in the dark with regard to the whole affair myself."

"You will be thoroughly enlightened soon, I tell you. But, by the way, be sure not to forget about the work M. Olivier did for the steward of the Château de Beaumesnil, near Luzarches."

"I shall not forget that, for I intend to introduce the subject in that way; and permit me to say that I am to start out with a colossal lie, my dear marquis."

"But, as this colossal lie is sure to bring out the truth in the most incontrovertible fashion, you need feel no

scruples! You will certainly have no cause to regret it, either, for what is about to occur will be quite as much to your advantage as to that of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, perhaps. I am going to summon her now, and do not have M. Olivier ushered in until after you know that we are in the next room, remember."

"Oh, I understand all about that. Go at once, my dear marquis, and use the back stairs. It is the shortest way, and M. Olivier, who is waiting in the library, will not see you."

The marquis complied with these instructions, and soon found himself in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's apartments.

"Ah, M. de Maillefort," exclaimed Ernestine, her face radiant, and her eyes still filled with tears of joy, "Herminie has told me all. Her happiness seems certain to equal mine,—if mine is realised."

"Come quick, my child," exclaimed the hunchback. "M. Olivier is up-stairs now."

"Herminie can accompany me, can she not, M. de Maillefort? She will be near me to keep up my courage—"

"Your courage?"

"Yes, for now I confess that, in spite of myself, I am sorry that I consented to this test."

"But was not this test necessary to overcome Olivier's scruples, my dear child? Remember, too, that these scruples are probably the most dangerous obstacles you will have to overcome now."

"Alas! that is only too true," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, sadly.

"Then come, my child, come at once. Herminie shall accompany you. She must be the first to congratulate you."

"Or to console me," added Ernestine, unable to conquer her fears. "But it is better I should know my fate as soon as possible," she continued, resolutely. "Let us go up to my guardian's apartments at once, M. de Maillefort."

Three minutes afterwards, Ernestine, Herminie, and M. de Maillefort were in the baron's parlour, which was separated from his study only by a closely drawn portière, which the hunchback opened a little way in order to inform M. de la Rochaiguë that they were there.

"Very well," replied the baron.

He rang the bell.

"Show M. Olivier Raymond in," he said to the servant who answered the summons, and who almost immediately announced:

"M. Olivier Raymond, sir."

On hearing Olivier enter the adjoining room, Ernestine turned as pale as death, and, seizing with one hand the hand of Herminie, and with the other the hand of M. de Maillefort, she whispered, tremblingly:

"Oh, stay close by me, I entreat you. Do not leave me. Oh, my God, what a solemn moment this is!"

"Hush! Olivier is speaking," whispered M. de Maillefort; "let us listen. We must not miss a word."

And all three listened, with breathless anxiety, to the following conversation between Olivier and M. de la Rochaiguë.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A CRUCIAL MOMENT.

When Olivier Raymond entered M. de la Rochaiguë's study, his face expressed astonishment, mingled with a lively curiosity.

The baron bowed courteously, and, after having motioned his visitor to a seat, inquired:

"Is it to M. Olivier Raymond that I have the honour of speaking?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"A second lieutenant in the Third Hussars?"

"The same, monsieur."

"From the letter I had the honour to write you, monsieur, you know that I am—"

"M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë, monsieur, though I have not the honour of your acquaintance. May I now inquire to what important personal matter you referred in your recent letter?"

"Certainly, monsieur. Pray be kind enough to give me your close attention, and, above all, not to be surprised at any singular, strange, and extraordinary facts which I may have the honour to communicate."

Olivier gazed at the baron with such evident astonishment that Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian cast an involuntary glance towards the portière, behind which Herminie, Ernestine, and M. de Maillefort were listening to the conversation.

"Monsieur," continued the baron, again turning to Olivier, "a few weeks ago you were at a château, near Luzarches, assisting a master mason, who had undertaken some repairs upon this property, in making his estimates."

"That is true, monsieur," replied Olivier, little suspecting the import of all this.

"After these estimates were finished, you remained several days to assist the steward in straightening up his accounts, did you not?"

"That is also true, monsieur."

"This château," resumed the baron, with an air of great importance, "belongs to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the richest heiress in France."

"I was so informed during my stay there. But may I know the object of these questions?"

"In one moment, monsieur; but will you first oblige me by glancing over this document?"

And the baron took from his desk a folded paper and handed it to Olivier.

While the young man was hastily perusing this document, the baron said:

"You will see by this document, which is a certified copy of the deliberations of the family council, convoked after the death of the late Comtesse de Beaumesnil, you will see, I repeat, from this document, that I am the legally appointed guardian and trustee of Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"I perceive so," replied Olivier, returning the document, "but I fail to see that this fact interests me in any way."

"It was of the utmost importance that you should be enlightened as to my legal, official, and judicial connection with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in order that what I may have the honour to say to you on the subject of my ward will be invested with irresistible, unmistakable, and incontestable authority in your eyes."

This flow of words, monotonous and measured as the movements of a pendulum, was beginning to make Olivier all the more impatient, as he could not imagine whither all these grave preliminaries were tending.

In fact, he gazed at the baron with such a bewildered air that M. de la Rochaiguë said to himself:

"One might really suppose that I was talking Hebrew to him. He evinces so little emotion on hearing the name of Mlle. de Beaumesnil that one would suppose he did not even know her. What does all this mean? That cunning devil of a marquis was right when he told me that I must be prepared for very surprising developments."

"May I again inquire in what possible way the fact that you are, or are not, Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian interests me?" said Olivier, with ill-suppressed impatience.

"Now for the lie," the baron said to himself. "Let us see what effect it will have."

Then he added aloud:

"You made quite a long stay at the Château de Beaumesnil?"

"I did, as I told you some time ago," responded Olivier, with growing impatience.

"You probably were not aware that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was at the château at the same time that you were."

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes, monsieur," replied the baron, imperturbably, satisfied that he was lying with true diplomatic ease and assurance; "yes, monsieur, Mlle. de Beaumesnil was at the château while you were there."

"But I was told that the young lady was in a foreign country, monsieur; besides, I saw no one at the château."

"That does not surprise me at all, monsieur. The fact is, Mlle. de Beaumesnil wished to spend the early days of her mourning for her mother at this château, and as she desired complete solitude, every one on the estate was requested to keep her arrival a profound secret."

"Then it is not strange that I should have been ignorant of it, particularly as I stayed in the house of the steward, quite a little distance from the château. But once more, let me ask—"

"I beg you will not be impatient, monsieur, but listen to me with the closest attention, for the matter to be considered is, I repeat, of the greatest, gravest, and highest importance to you."

"The man nearly drives me mad by his absurd and senseless repetitions!" Olivier mentally exclaimed. "What on earth is he driving at? What possible interest have I in Mlle. de Beaumesnil and her château?"

"The master mason by whom you were employed," continued the baron, suavely, "told our steward that the proceeds of the labour you imposed upon yourself during your leave were to be devoted to aiding your uncle, for whom you felt an almost filial affection."

"Good Heavens, monsieur, why should any importance be attached to such a trivial thing as that? Let us get at the facts of the case."

"The fact is just this, monsieur," resumed the baron, impressively, and with an almost solemn gesture, "your

generous conduct towards your uncle was reported to Mlle. de Beaumesnil by her steward."

"Well, what if it was!" exclaimed Olivier, whose patience was now completely exhausted. "What is your object in apprising me of the fact?"

"My object is to let you know that mademoiselle is one of the noblest, best-hearted young ladies in the world, and, being such, is more keenly appreciative of generous acts in others than the majority of people; so when she heard of your devotion to your uncle, she was so touched by it that she desired to see you."

"See me?" repeated Olivier, incredulously.

"Yes, monsieur, my ward wished to see you, but without being seen by you; she was anxious, too, to hear you talk, and, with the aid of her steward, managed to act the part of an unseen auditor at several of your conversations, both with the steward and the master mason by whom you were employed. The strict integrity and nobility of your sentiments were so clearly revealed in these conversations, that my ward was as deeply impressed by your nobility of character as by your pleasing personal attributes, and—"

"Monsieur," interrupted Olivier, turning crimson, "I can scarcely believe that a man of your age and position could find any amusement in such unseemly jesting, and yet I do not suppose for one moment that you are speaking seriously."

"I had the honour, monsieur, to submit for your inspection the documentary evidence that I am Mlle. de Beaumesnil's legally appointed guardian in order that you might give full credence to my words. I subsequently warned you that what I had to say might appear singular, strange, even extraordinary to you, and you surely can not suppose that a man of my age, position, and social prominence would feel any inclination to trifle with the sacred interests entrusted to him or to make as honourable a young man as yourself the victim of a practical joke."

"So be it, monsieur," replied Olivier, pacified by this assurance on the part of the baron, "I confess I was wrong to suppose, even for an instant, that you were capable of such a thing, and yet—"

"Once again will you kindly allow me to remind you of my warning that I had some very extraordinary things to impart," said the baron, again interrupting Olivier. "Now, with your permission, I will proceed with my explanation. Mlle. de Beaumesnil is sixteen years of age. She is the richest heiress in France, consequently," added the baron, emphasising the words strongly and giving Olivier a meaning look, "consequently she need not trouble herself in the least about the pecuniary condition of the man she will choose for a husband. She desires, above all, to marry a man who pleases her, and who she feels will assure her future happiness. As regards his name and social position, provided his name and social position are honourable and honoured, Mlle. de Beaumesnil is content. Do you understand me at last, monsieur?"

"I have listened to you with the closest attention, M. le baron. I understand perfectly that Mlle. de Beaumesnil intends to marry to her own liking, without much, or, indeed, any regard to the rank and pecuniary condition of the man of her choice. She is perfectly right, I think; but why should I be told all this,—I, who have never met Mlle. de Beaumesnil in my life, and who probably never shall?"

"I have told you this, M. Olivier Raymond, because Mlle. de Beaumesnil is persuaded that in you are united all the attributes she most desires in a husband; so, after having made the most careful inquiries concerning you,—with results which were most flattering to yourself, I must admit,—I, as the guardian of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, am deputised, authorised, and commissioned to offer you her hand in marriage."

The baron might have gone on a good while longer without any interruption from Olivier.

Though the latter was astounded by what he had just heard, he could no longer suppose that this was a hoax on the part of M. de la Rochaiguë, who, in spite of his absurd flights of oratory, was really a grave, dignified man, with perfect manners.

On the other hand, how could he believe,—without an immense amount of conceit, and conceit was not one of Olivier's besetting sins, by any means,—how could he believe that the richest heiress in France had so suddenly lost her heart to him?

A minute or two passed before Olivier spoke. When he did, it was to say:

"I am sure you will excuse my silence and my bewilderment, monsieur, as you, yourself, fully realised that you had some very extraordinary revelations to make—"

"Do not hurry yourself in the least, monsieur. Take plenty of time to recover yourself, for I can very easily understand the mental agitation such a proposition must excite. I should add, however, that Mlle. de Beaumesnil knows perfectly well that you cannot accept her offer until after you have seen her and made her acquaintance. So, if you desire it, I will present you to my ward, and it is my earnest desire that you will both find in your mutual acquaintance a guaranty, hope, and certainty of future happiness."

After which peroration, the baron said to himself:

"Thank Heaven, that is over! Now, I shall discover the answer to this enigma which seems more and more incomprehensible every minute."

Up to this time, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, Herminie, and the hunchback had listened to the conversation in breathless silence. Herminie now understood for the first time the twofold object of the test to which M. de Maillefort had felt it necessary to subject Olivier; but Ernestine, in spite of her confidence in the nobility of the young officer's character, was in torture, as she awaited Olivier's reply to the baron's dazzling offer. The temptation, alas! was so great. How few persons would be able to resist it! Was there any living man who would not forget or ignore a promise made to an unattractive, penniless, and friendless girl, and eagerly embrace the opportunity to acquire colossal wealth?

"*Mon Dieu!* I tremble, in spite of myself," murmured Ernestine. "The renunciation we expect of M. Olivier is above human strength, perhaps. Alas! alas! why did I consent to this test?"

"Courage, my child," whispered the hunchback, "think only of the happiness and admiration you will feel if Olivier realises our expectations. But hush, he is going to reply."

With a half frenzied movement, Ernestine threw herself into Herminie's arms, and it was thus that the two girls, trembling with fear and hope, awaited Olivier's answer.

The young man could no longer doubt that this most remarkable offer had been made in all seriousness; but unable to explain it on the ground of personal merit,—for Olivier was an extremely modest man,—he attributed it to one of those caprices not uncommon in romantic young persons whose exorbitant wealth places them in an exceptional position,—caprices which in many cases amount to positive eccentricity.

"Monsieur," Olivier began, in a firm voice, after quite a long silence, "though the proposition you have just made to me is so strange, so entirely beyond the bounds of possibility, I might almost say, I give you my word of honour that, inexplicable as it seems to me, I believe in its sincerity."

"You can, monsieur, that is the important thing; that is all I ask of you."

"I do, and I shall make no attempt to fathom the incomprehensible reasons which led Mlle. de Beaumesnil to think of me even for an instant."

"Pardon me, but I have already explained these reasons, monsieur."

"Though I am not particularly modest, these reasons seem to me far from adequate; besides, I have no right to avail myself of this too flattering offer, for—for it is impossible for me—I will not say to accept Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand—such an important act must necessarily depend upon a thousand unforeseen contingencies, but to—"

"I give you my word of honour, monsieur, that it depends only upon yourself," said the baron, in such grave tones that Olivier could not fail to be deeply impressed, "understand me, upon yourself, absolutely and entirely. And, if you desire it, I will introduce you to the young lady before an hour has elapsed. It will then be impossible for you to feel the slightest doubt in regard to—to the sincerity of the offer I have just made you."

"I believe you, monsieur, as I said before. I only wish to say that it is impossible for me to even consider the proposition you have been so kind as to make to me."

The baron was astounded now in his turn.

"What, monsieur, you refuse?" he exclaimed. "But no, I cannot have heard you aright. It is impossible that you should be so blind as not to see the immense advantages of such a marriage."

"Then I must endeavour to be more explicit, monsieur. I positively decline your offer, while acknowledging that Mlle. de Beaumesnil's kind intentions are entirely too flattering to me."

"You decline—the richest heiress in France. You treat Mlle. de Beaumesnil's unheard-of concessions with disdain."

"Pardon me," exclaimed Olivier, hastily interrupting him. "I told you just now how deeply honoured I felt by your proposition, so I should be truly inconsolable if you interpreted my refusal as in any respect uncomplimentary to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, whom I have not the honour of knowing."

"But I have offered you an opportunity to make her acquaintance."

"That would be useless, monsieur. I do not doubt Mlle. de Beaumesnil's merits in the least, but as I should tell you all under the circumstances, I am not free. My heart and my honour are alike pledged."

"You are betrothed already?"

"In short, monsieur, I am about to marry a young lady whom I both love and esteem."

"Great God! What are you telling me, monsieur?" exclaimed the unfortunate baron, fairly gasping for breath, so great was his consternation.

"The truth, monsieur, and such an announcement will suffice, I am sure, to convince you that—without the slightest intended disparagement of Mlle. de Beaumesnil—I cannot even consider the proposition you have made to me."

"But if this marriage doesn't come off, I shall lose my deputyship," thought the baron, despairingly. "Why the devil did the marquis insist upon my giving my consent if this young idiot was going to be fool enough to refuse such a colossal fortune? And there is my ward who declared to me this very morning that she would never marry anybody but Olivier Raymond. The marquis told me that I would find this an enigma, but all enigmas have their answers, and this can be no exception to the rule!"

So the baron, unwilling to renounce his hope of political preferment, added aloud:

"My dear sir, I implore you to reflect. Do not decide hastily. You have plighted your troth,—well and good! You love a young girl, you say,—so be it, but thank Heaven, you are still free, and there are sacrifices which one should have the courage to make for the sake of his future. Think, monsieur, an income of more than three million francs a year from landed property! Why, nobody on earth could be expected to refuse such a fortune as that! And the young girl who loves you—if she really loves you for yourself alone—will be the first, if she is not frightfully selfish, to advise you to accept this unexpected good fortune with resignation. An income of over three million francs, my dear sir, and from real estate, remember."

"I have told you that my heart and honour are alike pledged, monsieur, so it pains me to see that, in spite of the

favourable reports you have heard concerning me, you still believe me capable of a base and cowardly act," added Olivier, severely.

"Heaven forbid, my dear sir! I believe you to be the most honourable man in the world, but—"

"Will you do me the favour, monsieur," said Olivier, rising, "to inform Mlle. de Beaumesnil of the reasons that prompted my decision. I feel sure that when she hears them she will consider me worthy of her esteem, though—"

"But you are worthy of something more than esteem, my dear sir. Such disinterestedness is marvellous, admirable, sublime."

"Such disinterestedness on my part is a very simple thing, monsieur. I love and I am loved in return. The happiness of my life depends upon my approaching marriage."

And Olivier started towards the door.

"But take a few days for reflection, I beseech you, monsieur. Do not be guided by this first rash impulse. Again let me venture to remind you that it means an income of over three million francs from—"

"There is nothing more that you wish to say to me, I suppose, monsieur," said Olivier, interrupting the baron, and bowing, as if to take leave of him.

"Monsieur," exclaimed the baron, desperately, "consider, I beg of you, that this refusal on your part is sure to make Mlle. de Beaumesnil very unhappy; for you must realise that a guardian, a grave, conscientious man like myself, would not have taken the step I have, if he had not been absolutely compelled to do so. In other words, my ward will be made miserable by your refusal,—she will die, perhaps—"

"Monsieur, I beseech you, in my turn, to remember the exceedingly painful position in which you are placing me, a position, in fact, that it is impossible for me to endure longer after the announcement of my approaching marriage, which I have felt it my duty to make."

Again Olivier bowed respectfully to the baron, and again he started towards the door, adding, as he opened it:

"I should have been glad to end this interview less abruptly, monsieur. Will you, therefore, be kind enough to excuse me, and to attribute my hasty retreat to an insistence on your part which places me in the most disagreeable, I was about to say the most ridiculous, position imaginable."

And having uttered these words, Olivier walked out of the room, in spite of the baron's despairing protests.

That gentleman, half frantic with disappointment and anger, rushed towards the door leading into the room where the hunchback and the two young girls were standing, and pulling aside the portière, exclaimed:

"And now will you be good enough to explain the meaning of all this? Why have you made such a fool of me? And why does this M. Olivier refuse Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand, and declare he has never seen her in his life when you assure me that he and my ward are desperately in love with each other?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

But M. de la Rochaiguë's bewilderment was by no means at an end.

The baron had fully expected to find the unseen auditors of the foregoing conversation in a state of intense consternation over M. Olivier's refusal.

Far from it.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Herminie, clasped in each other's arms, were laughing and crying and kissing each other in a transport of half delirious joy.

"He refused me! He refused me!" exclaimed Ernestine, in accents of ineffable delight.

"Ah, I told you that M. Olivier would not disappoint our expectations, my dear Ernestine," added Herminie.

"Wasn't I right? Didn't I tell you that he would refuse?" cried the marquis, no less delighted.

"Then why the devil did you make such a fuss about gaining my consent?" demanded the baron, forgetting his dignity in his thorough exasperation. "Why did both of you insist upon my making that young idiot such an unheard-of proposal, if you wanted him to refuse it?"

These words seemed to recall Ernestine to the fact of the baron's existence, for, releasing herself from her friend's arms, she turned a radiant face towards her guardian, and exclaimed, in tones of the most profound gratitude:

"Oh, thank you, monsieur, thank you! I shall owe the happiness of my whole life to you, and I assure you, I shall never prove ungrateful."

"But you must have misunderstood him," cried the baron, "he refuses, he refuses, he refuses, I tell you."

"Yes, he refuses," exclaimed Ernestine, ecstatically. "Ah, has he not the noblest of hearts!"

"They have certainly gone mad, every one of them," murmured the poor baron, in despair.

"But this young man is as good as married,—he won't have you! He says nothing would induce him to have you!" he fairly shouted in Ernestine's ear. "His marriage is to take place very shortly."

"Yes, thank God, there is no further obstacle to that marriage now," cried Ernestine, "so I thank you once again, M. de la Rochaiguë. I thank you with all my heart, and I shall never, never forget what you have done for me."

Fortunately the hunchback now came to the rescue of the unfortunate baron, who really felt as if his poor brain was about to burst.

"I promised you the answer to the enigma, you remember, my dear baron," said M. de Maillefort.

"I think it is time, quite time for you to give it, then, marquis. If you do not, I believe I shall go mad. There is a strange buzzing in my ears, my head feels as if it would split, there are specks floating before my eyes—and—"

"Well, then, listen to me. This morning your ward declared that she would not marry anybody but M. Olivier Raymond, and that the happiness of her life depended upon it, did she not?"

"You certainly are not going to begin that all over again?" exclaimed M. de la Rochaiguë, stamping his foot angrily.

"Have a little patience, baron. I told you afterwards that all the good you had heard in relation to M. Olivier Raymond was nothing in comparison with what you would soon discover for yourself."

"Well, what have I discovered?"

"Is the disinterestedness which you yourself were obliged to admire nothing? To refuse the richest heiress in France to fulfil a promise of marriage previously made to a penniless young girl—is not such conduct as that—?"

"Admirable, commendable, worthy of all praise," exclaimed the baron. "I know all that! But I repeat that I shall go stark staring mad if you don't explain why this refusal, which should fill you and my ward with dismay and consternation, seems to delight you beyond measure,—that is, if you are still anxious for Ernestine to marry Olivier."

"I certainly am."

"Well, I'd like to know how you are going to bring it about, for his heart seems to be set upon marrying the other girl."

"And that is precisely what pleases us so much," said the hunchback.

"Delights us, you mean," corrected Ernestine.

"It delights you because he is determined to marry another girl?" exclaimed the baron, positively furious now.

"Yes, but you see this other girl is she!" explained the marquis.

"She—and who is she?" shouted the baron.

"Your ward."

"But the other girl is my ward."

"Certainly," replied Ernestine, triumphantly, "I am the other girl."

"Yes, baron, the other girl, I tell you, is she, your ward."

"Yes, she is Ernestine," added Herminie.

"It is all perfectly clear now, you see," remarked the marquis.

On hearing this explanation, which was even more incomprehensible to him than what had gone before, the unfortunate baron cast a half frantic glance around him, then, closing his eyes, said to the hunchback, in despairing tones:

"M. de Maillefort, you seem to be absolutely pitiless. I have as strong a mind as anybody else, I think, but it is incapable of unravelling such a mystery as this. You promised to give me the answer to this beastly enigma, but the answer is even more incomprehensible than the enigma itself."

"Come, come, my dear baron, calm yourself, and listen to me."

"I have been listening to you for a quarter of an hour or more," groaned the baron, "and yet I am very much worse off than I was in the beginning."

"Well, well, everything shall be made plain now," said the marquis, soothingly.

"Proceed, then, I beg of you."

"Very well, then, these are the facts of the case: Through a combination of circumstances which will be explained later on, and which have no special bearing on the subject now under consideration, your ward met M. Olivier and passed herself off to him as a poor orphan girl, who was supporting herself by her needle. Do you understand thus far, baron?"

"Yes, I understand thus far. What next?"

"Well, by reason of other circumstances with which you will soon be made conversant, your ward and M. Olivier fell in love with each other, he still supposing Mlle. de Beaumesnil to be a friendless and penniless orphan, and so unhappy in her home relations that he felt that he was, and in fact was, exceedingly generous in offering to marry her when he was made an officer."

"In short," exclaimed the baron, straightening himself up to his full height, and speaking in triumphant tones,—"in short, Ernestine and the other young girl are simply one and the same person."

"Precisely," responded the hunchback.

"And so," continued the baron, wiping the perspiration which his Herculean mental efforts had produced from his brow,—"and so you wished to find out if Olivier loved the other, the poor girl, enough to resist, for her sake, the temptation to marry the richest heiress in France?"

"Exactly, baron."

"Hence your romantic story that Mlle. de Beaumesnil had seen Olivier during his stay at the château and had fallen in love with him."

"It was necessary to find some plausible excuse for the proposal you were commissioned to make to him. This story furnished it, and I must say that you played your part admirably. And M. Olivier,—well, was I wrong in assuring you that M. Olivier Raymond was the soul of honour?"

"He is, indeed!" exclaimed the baron. "Listen, marquis. I am not inclined to revert to the past, but I admit that I considered this a very unsuitable marriage for my ward. Ah, well, now I distinctly assert, affirm, and declare that, after what I have just seen and heard, if my ward were my own daughter, I should say to her: 'Marry M. Raymond, by all means. You could not make a better choice.'"

"Ah, monsieur, I shall never forget those words!" cried Ernestine.

"But this is not all, my dear baron."

"What else can there be, pray?" demanded M. de la Rochaiguë, uneasily, evidently fearing a fresh imbroglio.

"This test had a twofold object. M. Olivier's extreme sensitiveness in pecuniary matters is so well known to his friends that we feared when he discovered that the young girl whom he thought so poor was really Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he, being only a young lieutenant without either rank or fortune, would absolutely refuse to marry the richest heiress in France, though he had loved her and asked her to be his wife, when he believed her absolutely penniless."

"Such scruples on his part would not surprise me in the least," said the baron. "The fellow is so proud, the slightest hint that he might be considered a fortune-hunter would infuriate him. And now I think of it, the obstacle you fear still exists."

"No, my dear baron."

"But why not?"

"Why, can't you see?" exclaimed Ernestine, joyously. "M. Olivier has positively refused to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the rich heiress, has he not?"

"Unquestionably," said the baron; "still, I don't understand—"

"But when M. Olivier discovers who I really am, how can he feel any fear of being accused of mercenary motives in marrying me, when he had positively refused to accept the proffered hand of the richest heiress in France?"

"Or, in other words, an income of over three million francs," exclaimed the baron, interrupting his ward. "That is true. The idea is an excellent one. I congratulate you upon it, M. le marquis, and I say, with you, that even if M. Olivier were a thousand times more proud and sensitive, he could not hold out against this argument, viz.: 'You positively refused to accept the three million francs when they were offered you, so your motives are necessarily above suspicion.'"

"And it is impossible for M. Olivier to feel any scruples under these circumstances, do you not think so, monsieur?"

"Most assuredly I do, my dear ward. But this revelation will have to be made to M. Olivier sooner or later, I suppose."

"Of course, and I will attend to it," replied the marquis. "I have a plan. We will talk that over together, by and by, baron, that and certain business matters which young girls understand very little about. Am I not right, my child?" added the marquis, with a smile, turning to Ernestine.

"Perfectly right," answered Mlle. de Beanmesnil, "and whatever you and my guardian may decide, I agree to in advance."

"I need not say, my dear baron, that we must maintain the utmost secrecy in relation to all this until the signing of the marriage contract, which I have my reasons for desiring should precede the publishing of the banns. Day after to-morrow will not be too soon, I suppose. What do you think about it, Ernestine?"

"You can guess my reply, monsieur," answered the young girl, blushing and smiling.

Then she added, hastily:

"But mine will not be the only contract to sign. There is another, isn't there, Herminie?"

"That is for M. de Maillefort to decide," replied Herminie, blushingly.

"I approve most decidedly; but who is to attend to all this rather troublesome business?"

"You, of course, M. de Maillefort. You are so good and kind!" cried Ernestine.

"Besides, have you not proved that nothing is impossible to you?" added Herminie.

"Oh, as for the impossibilities achieved, when I think of the scene at your home this morning, you, my dear child, are the one who deserves praise, not I."

On hearing these words, M. de la Rochaiguë, who had seemed to be hardly aware of Herminie's presence before, turned to her, and said:

"Pardon me, my dear young lady; my attention has been so engrossed by what has just occurred that—"

"M. de la Rochaiguë," said Ernestine, taking Herminie by the hand, "I wish to present to you my dearest friend, or, rather, my sister, for no two sisters could love each other more devotedly than we do."

"But," said the baron, greatly surprised, "if I am not very much mistaken, mademoiselle—mademoiselle is the music teacher we selected for you on account of the extreme delicacy of her conduct in relation to a perfectly just claim upon the Beaumesnil estate."

"You still have some very remarkable things to learn in relation to Mlle. Herminie, my dear baron," said the marquis.

"Indeed? And what are they, may I ask?"

"In the conversation which you and I must have, presently, I will answer your question fully; but now I am sure it will suffice you to know that your ward has placed her friendship as wisely as her love; for I can truly say that the person who would select M. Olivier Raymond for a husband would be certain to select Mlle. Herminie for a friend."

"M. de Maillefort is right," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, twining her arm affectionately about her friend's waist; "both these greatest blessings came to me the same evening at Madame Herbaut's little party."

"Madame Herbaut's little party!" repeated the baron, opening his eyes wide, in astonishment, "What Madame Herbaut?"

"My dear child, you should be generous, and not give M. de la Rochaiguë any more enigmas to solve this evening," said the hunchback.

"I declare myself utterly incapable of solving them," exclaimed the baron. "My poor brain feels as confused and bewildered as if I had just made a balloon ascension."

"Don't be alarmed, baron," said M. de Maillefort, laughing. "I shall spare your imagination any further flights by soon telling you all there is to tell."

"In that case we will leave you," said Ernestine, smiling. Then she added:

"But I feel it my duty to warn you before I go that Herminie and I have entered into a conspiracy, M. de la Rochaiguë."

"And what is this conspiracy, young ladies?"

"As it is so late, and as I should certainly become quite crazed with joy if I were left entirely alone with my happiness, Herminie has consented to remain with me until to-morrow morning. We shall dine tête-à-tête, and in the happiest of moods, as you may imagine."

"An admirable arrangement, young ladies, for Madame de la Rochaiguë and I have an engagement to dine out this evening," said the baron; "so a pleasant evening to you."

"I shall see you both again to-morrow," said M. de Maillefort. "There are some details which I am sure you will enjoy, that we must discuss together."

The two girls, radiant with delight, returned to Ernestine's apartments, and, after a daintily served dinner,—which they scarcely touched, so absorbed were they in their new-found joy and happiness,—they retired to Ernestine's chamber, to again talk over the strange vicissitudes of their love affairs and of their friendship.

In about a quarter of an hour they were, to their great regret, interrupted by Madame Laîné, who entered the room after having rapped in a deprecating manner.

"What do you want, my dear Laîné?" asked Ernestine, a trifle impatiently.

"I have a favour to ask of mademoiselle."

"What is it?"

"Mademoiselle is perhaps aware that M. le baron and madame are dining out this evening, and that they will not return home until late."

"Yes, what of it?"

"Mlle. Helena, wishing the servants to profit by the leisure evening monsieur's and madame's absence affords them, secured three loges at the Gaîté Theatre this morning, where they are playing 'The Maccabees,' a drama founded on an episode in Bible history."

"And you, too, wish to go, I suppose, my dear Laîné?"

"If mademoiselle will not need me until it is time for her to retire."

"You can have the entire evening, my dear Laîné, and take Thérèse with you, if you choose."

"But what if mademoiselle should need something before our return?"

"Oh, I shall not need anything. Mlle. Herminie and I will wait on each other. Go, and enjoy yourself, by all means, my dear Laîné, and be sure to take Thérèse with you."

"Mademoiselle is very kind. I thank her a thousand times. If mademoiselle should need anything, she has only to ring, however, for Mlle. Helena told Placide to come down so as to be ready to answer mademoiselle's bell if she rang."

"Very well, I will ring for her if I want anything. Good night, my dear Laîné."

The governess bowed and retired, and the two young girls were left almost alone in the big house, all the other inmates of the dwelling having gone out, with the exception of Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë and Placide, that lady's personal attendant, who had been instructed to respond to the summons should Mlle. de Beaumesnil ring.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOILED!

The clock had just struck ten.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the howling of the wind was the only sound that broke the profound silence which pervaded the spacious mansion.

The young girls had been talking for two hours of their sad past and their radiant future, though it seemed to them that the interchange of confidence had scarcely begun.

But suddenly Ernestine paused in the middle of a sentence, and, turning her head in the direction of Madame Laîné's room, seemed to listen attentively.

"What is the matter, Ernestine?" inquired Herminie.

"Nothing, my dear, nothing," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "I was mistaken, of course."

"But what was it?"

"It seemed to me I heard a sound in Madame Laîné's room."

"What a timid little thing you are!" said Herminie. "It was probably some outside shutter rattling in the wind you heard and—"

But Herminie, making a sudden movement of surprise in her turn, quickly turned her head towards the door that separated Ernestine's bedroom from the adjoining parlour, and said:

"How strange, Ernestine! Did you notice—?"

"That some one turned the key in that door."

Without replying, Herminie ran to the door and turned the knob.

Further doubt was impossible. Some one had, indeed, locked the door on the outside.

"Great Heavens! what does this mean?" whispered Ernestine, really frightened now. "And all the servants are out. Ah, fortunately, Placide, one of Mlle. Helena's maids remained at home."

And rushing to the bell-rope, Mlle. de Beaumesnil pulled it violently several times.

Meanwhile Herminie had recalled the vague uneasiness the marquis had shown that afternoon when he alluded to the intimacy between Ravil and Macreuse, but though she was considerably alarmed herself she did not wish to increase Ernestine's terror, so she said:

"Don't be frightened, my dear; the person you rang for can explain what surprises you so much, probably."

"But she doesn't come, and this is the third time I have rung for her!" exclaimed Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

Then, trembling like a leaf, she added, in a whisper, pointing this time to the door which separated her chamber from Madame Laîné's':

"Listen. Oh, my God! don't you hear somebody walking about in there?"

Herminie made her a reassuring gesture, but Mlle. de Beaumesnil, after listening again for an instant, exclaimed with even greater terror:

"Herminie, I tell you I hear some one moving about! They are coming towards the door. Listen!"

"We'll push the bolt and fasten ourselves in," said Herminie, promptly, hastening towards the door.

But just as the young girl was about to place her hand on the bolt, the door suddenly opened, and M. de Macreuse entered the room.

On seeing him, Herminie uttered a cry and sprang back, while this model young man, turning towards some one who had remained in the next room, exclaimed, in accents of amazement and baffled rage:

"Hell! she is not alone! All is lost!"

On hearing these words, a second intruder appeared.

It was Ravil.

And at the sight of Herminie, he cried, in a no less surprised and angry tone:

"Damnation! that girl here!"

Herminie and Ernestine had retreated to the farther end of the room, and there, clasped in each other's arms as if to afford each other mutual support, they stood, paralysed with fright, and unable to utter a word.

Macreuse and Ravil, at first astounded, and then infuriated by the unexpected presence of Herminie, which seemed likely to ruin their plans, also stood silent and motionless for a moment, gazing inquiringly at each other as if to read in each other's faces what they had better do under such unforeseen circumstances.

The two girls, in spite of their terror, had noted the exclamations of astonishment and dismay which had escaped both Macreuse and his accomplice on finding that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was not alone, as they had anticipated.

The two girls had also noticed the state of consternation in which the founder of the St. Polycarpe mission and his accomplice had been momentarily plunged.

Both these observations served to restore a little courage to the sisters, and, reason coming to their aid, they finally came to the conclusion that together they were as strong as they would have been helpless had either of them found herself at the mercy of these wretches, alone.

So Mlle. de Beaumesnil, realising how great was the danger from which Herminie's presence had saved her, exclaimed, with a tenderness and gratitude which proved the intensity of her anxiety and dread:

"See, Herminie, Heaven has again sent you to act as my protector! But for you I should be lost."

"Courage, my dear, courage!" whispered the duchess. "See how disconcerted the scoundrels look!"

"You are right, Herminie! Such a blissful day as this has been to us can not be spoiled! I have a blind confidence in our star now."

Cheered by this brief interchange of whispered words, the orphans, strengthened, too, by the thought of the radiant future before them, gradually recovered their composure, and at last Ernestine, addressing Macreuse and his accomplice, said, bravely:

"You will not succeed in terrifying us. The first shock is over and your audacity arouses only disdain. In a short time the servants will return, and you will be put out of the house as disgracefully as you entered it."

"It is true we may be compelled to endure your presence for awhile," added Herminie, with bitter scorn; "but in spite of our contempt and aversion, Mlle. de Beaumesnil and I have both been subjected to more severe ordeals."

"What a courageous man you are, M. de Macreuse, to steal at night, with an accomplice, into the room of a young girl you believe to be alone, in order to secure a cowardly revenge for the humiliation that M. de Maillefort, who knows you, inflicted upon you in public!" added Ernestine.

Macreuse and Ravil listened to these sarcasms in silence, interchanging wrathful looks the while.

"My dear Herminie," resumed Mlle. de Beaumesnil, whose countenance was gradually regaining its accustomed serenity, "I may seem very silly to you, and it may be that the great happiness we have experienced to-day has upset me a little, but really all this seems so utterly absurd and ridiculous to me that I can scarcely help laughing."

"I, too, must admit that it seems ridiculous, and even grotesque, to me."

"The discomfiture of these scoundrels is really pitiable," remarked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, bursting into a hearty laugh this time.

"The impotent rage of these conspirators, who excite mirth rather than fear, is extremely amusing," chimed in Herminie, no less gaily.

In fact, the bewilderment of these two scoundrels, who did not consider themselves in the least subjects for mirth, was so ludicrous that the orphans, either because their happiness had, indeed, made them bold, or because they were really brave enough to face this danger unflinchingly, gave way to another burst of feverish, vindictive gaiety,—feverish, because the two girls were naturally excited by the very strangeness of the situation, vindictive, because they were fully conscious of the disappointment and exasperation they were causing Macreuse and Ravil.

The intruders, momentarily disconcerted by the unexpected presence of Herminie, and by the strange hilarity of the young girls, soon began to recover their assurance.

Macreuse, whose drawn features were assuming a more and more threatening expression, whispered a few words in Ravil's ear, whereupon that worthy hastily stepped to the only window in the room, and slipped a small steel chain around the fastening, thus effectually closing the window as well as the inside shutters, and then united the two ends

of the chain with a padlock.

This done, it was impossible, of course, to open either the window or shutters from the inside and call for help.

The two girls thus found themselves at the mercy of Macreuse and De Ravil.

The door leading into the sitting-room had been locked on the other side by Mlle. Helena's maid, for it is needless to say that this saintly creature and her attendant were Macreuse's accomplices, but both were ignorant that Herminie was still with Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

While Ravil was thus engaged, Macreuse, whose countenance expressed the most execrable sentiments, folded his arms upon his breast, and said, with portentous calmness:

"My first plan has failed by reason of the presence of this accursed creature (indicating Herminie by a gesture). I am frank, you see. But I have ingenuity in plenty, and a devoted friend. You are both in our power. We have two hours at our disposal, and I will convince you that I am not a person to be laughed at long."

These threats, as well as the tone and expression of the man that made them, were rendered even more terrifying by the solitude and entirely defenceless position in which the two girls found themselves; but if tragical things are once viewed in a ridiculous light, anything that increases the horror of them likewise seems to increase the laughter of the beholder, which soon becomes irrepressible.

Macreuse's threats produced this very effect upon the two young girls, for, unfortunately, as he spoke he made an involuntary movement that caused his hat to slip far back on his head, and this, in spite of his threatening, almost ferocious expression, gave such an odd appearance to his rather broad face that the two girls burst into a fresh fit of merriment.

Then came the accomplice's turn.

The girls had watched Ravil's manœuvre with even more curiosity than alarm, but when the time came to pass the hasp of the padlock through the last links of the chain, Ravil, who was a little near-sighted, did not succeed at first, and stamped his foot violently in his anger and impatience.

This elicited another such paroxysm of nervous laughter from the two girls that Macreuse and his accomplice, amazed, then as deeply exasperated as if they had been slapped in the face, in the presence of a hundred witnesses, lost their heads, and, quite carried away with ferocious rage, sprang towards the young girls, and seized them savagely by the arm.

As they did so, Macreuse, his face livid, his eyes haggard, and positively foaming at the mouth with rage, but with his unfortunate hat still on the back of his head, exclaimed:

"Have we got to kill you to frighten you?"

"Alas! it is not our fault," said Ernestine, bursting into another fit of laughter at the sight of this alike terrible and grotesque figure. "You can only kill us—with laughter."

And Herminie chimed in.

Infuriated beyond expression, there is no knowing to what violence the two villains might have resorted, but at that very instant the door leading into the sitting-room—the door which had been locked on the outside—was suddenly opened, and M. de Maillefort, accompanied by Gerald, burst into the room, exclaiming, in a voice full of anxiety and alarm:

"Have no fears, my children; here we are!"

But judge of the newcomers' astonishment. Both had rushed in, pale and terrified, like persons who had come to rescue a friend from some great danger. And what did they behold?

Two young girls with brilliant colour, sparkling eyes, and bosoms heaving with laughter, while Macreuse and Ravil stood pale with rage and motionless with terror at this unexpected interference.

For an instant the marquis attributed this strange hilarity on the part of the two girls to hysteria, caused by intense fright, but he was speedily reassured by Ernestine, who said:

"Forgive this extraordinary gaiety, my dear M. de Maillefort, but such a strange thing has happened. These two men entered the house by that back stairway I told you about—"

"M. de Maillefort, accompanied by Gerald, burst into the room."
Original etching by Adrian Marcel.

"Yes," said the marquis, turning to Herminie; "the key—this morning—you remember, my child. My presentiments did not deceive me, it seems."

"I must admit that we were terribly frightened at first," replied Herminie, "but when we saw the rage and disappointment of these men, who had expected to find Ernestine alone—"

"And their consternation was so ludicrous," added Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "and we felt so perfectly safe, being together, that what had seemed so terrible at first began—"

"To appear positively ludicrous," added Herminie.

"But just as you came in M. de Macreuse was talking of killing us to cure us of our inclination to laugh," remarked Ernestine.

"Did any one ever see the like of them?" the marquis exclaimed, admiringly, turning to Gerald. "Are they not as brave as they are charming?"

"I admire their courage as much as you do," replied Gerald, "but when I think of the shameful audacity of these scoundrels, whom I hardly dare to look at for fear I shall not be able to control myself and so trample them under my feet, I—"

"Nonsense, my dear Gerald, nonsense!" exclaimed the marquis. "Gentlemen do not touch carrion like that even with their feet. The criminal court will attend to them now."

And turning to the model young man and to Ravil, who had summoned up all their assurance with the evident intention of braving the storm, the hunchback said:

"M. de Macreuse, since your sudden intimacy with M. de Ravil began, knowing what you were both capable of, I have had you closely watched."

"A system of espionage, eh?" said Macreuse, with a haughty smile. "I am not surprised."

"Yes, of espionage," retorted the hunchback. "This morning I happened to see you in a locksmith's. You were showing a key to him, and this excited my suspicions. I consequently redoubled my vigilance, and this evening you and your companion were followed here by two of my men. One of those men remained by the door which he had just seen you open with a false key. The other ran to inform me, and I, in turn, sent him to summon the police, who must be waiting for you this very minute at the foot of the stairway by which you effected an entrance here. They will speedily give you and your worthy friend some idea of the annoyance to which persons who enter an occupied house at night by the aid of false keys expose themselves."

On hearing this announcement, Macreuse and Ravil gave a violent start, and looked at each other, their faces livid with fear.

"You are pretty certain to be sent to the galleys, I think," continued the hunchback, coolly. "But M. de Macreuse can play the part of St. Vincent de Paul there, and excite the admiration of his red-capped colleagues by his Christian virtues."

The sound of footsteps was heard in the room of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's governess.

"The commissioner of police has taken the trouble to come for you, as you don't seem inclined to go down," remarked the marquis. "It is certainly very kind in him."

The door opened almost at that very instant, and a commissioner of police, followed by several members of the force, entered, and said to Macreuse and Ravil:

"I arrest you in the name of the law, and I shall now proceed in your presence to draw up an official report of the criminating facts in the case."

"Come, my dear children," said the marquis to Ernestine and Herminie, "let us leave these gentlemen to attend to their own affairs while we go up to Madame de la Rochaiguë's apartments to await the return of your guardian."

"The testimony of these young ladies will be indispensable, M. le marquis," said the commissioner, "and I shall do myself the honour to call upon them for it presently."

An hour afterwards, the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission and his accomplice were both placed in prison, to answer to the charge of having entered an occupied house at night by means of false keys, and of having attempted to intimidate the inmates by threats and violence.

On the return of the baron and baroness, it was decided that Ernestine and Herminie should share Madame de la Rochaiguë's room the rest of the night.

As the hunchback took leave of the young girls, he smilingly remarked to them:

"I have accomplished a good deal since I last saw you. The marriage contracts are drawn up, and they will be signed at Herminie's home at seven o'clock to-morrow evening."

"At my home? How glad I am!" said the duchess.

"Is it not always customary to sign the contract at the house of the bride?" asked the marquis. "And as you and Ernestine are so devoted to each other that you are almost the same as sisters—"

"Exactly the same as sisters, you mean."

"It is only proper that Ernestine's marriage contract should be signed at the home of her elder sister."

So all the next day, Herminie, radiant with happiness, was making important preparations in her pretty, dainty room for the signing of the marriage contracts of the richest heiress in France, and of the adopted daughter of M. le Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel,—an adoption of which the poor musician had not as yet the slightest suspicion.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN EVENTFUL DAY.

Herminie was not the only person who was busily engaged in preparations for the signing of these contracts.

A joyous excitement pervaded a modest little home in the Batignolles, also.

Commander Bernard, Gerald, and Olivier had insisted upon dining together that evening under the same arbour where the opening scene of this story had occurred several months before.

At the conclusion of the repast all three were to repair to Herminie's for the signing of the marriage contract.

A superb autumn afternoon had favoured the realisation of this project, and Madame Barbançon had surpassed herself in her culinary achievements.

Notified in advance this time, she had tended with the utmost solicitude a triumphant *pot au feu*, which was to be followed by some juicy cutlets, a fine roast chicken, and a boiled custard, where the snowy whites of the eggs floated in immaculate whiteness upon a rich vanilla cream.

Poor Madame Barbançon considered this decidedly commonplace menu the *ne plus ultra* of culinary magnificence.

But, alas! in spite of the excellence of the repast, the three guests did little honour to it. Joy had deprived them of their appetites, and the worthy housekeeper, in her disappointment, could not help comparing this disheartening indifference with the zest with which Gerald and Olivier had devoured two helpings of her hastily improvised vinaigrette several months before.

Madame Barbançon had just removed the fowl almost untouched, and as she placed the snow custard on the table, she muttered between her teeth:

"They'll clean this dish sure. One doesn't have to be hungry to eat this. It is the very food for lovers."

"The devil! Mother Barbançon," said the commander, gaily, "here's a dish that reminds me of the snow-banks of Newfoundland. What a pity it is that none of us are the least bit hungry!"

"It is, indeed, for Madame Barbançon has proved herself to be a veritable *cordon bleu* to-day," remarked Gerald.

"It is the finest snow custard that was ever concocted," added Olivier. "We can at least devour it with our eyes."

The housekeeper, who could not believe that she was to be subjected to this last cruel affront, said, in constrained tones:

"You gentlemen must be jesting."

"Jesting about such a sacred thing as your snow custard, Mother Barbançon? The devil take me if I should dare to be as sacrilegious as all that," said the commander. "But as we're not in the least hungry, it is impossible for us to taste your *chef-d'œuvre*."

"Yes, absolutely impossible," repeated the two young men.

The housekeeper did not utter a word, but a sudden contraction of her features betrayed the violence of her resentment plainly enough.

Seizing a soup plate, she emptied nearly half the contents of the dish into it; then, placing it in front of the astonished commander, said, in tones of authority:

"You—you will eat it, monsieur."

"But listen, Mother Barbançon—"

"It is no use to 'Mother Barbançon' me. This is only the second time in ten years that I have had occasion to make a snow custard. I made this in honour of M. Olivier's and M. Gerald's marriages. There are no 'ifs' and 'buts' about it; you are going to eat it."

The unfortunate veteran, seeing only hostile faces around him,—for Gerald and Olivier, the traitors, pretended to uphold the housekeeper,—attempted a compromise.

"All right. I will eat it to-morrow, Mother Barbançon," he said.

"As if a snow custard would keep until to-morrow!" retorted the housekeeper, shrugging her shoulders. "You're going to eat it now, this minute."

"I won't do anything of the kind," exclaimed the veteran, testily. "I'm not going to kill myself for anybody."

"Kill yourself with a snow custard made by me!" exclaimed the housekeeper, as sadly and reproachfully as if her employer had mortally insulted her. "Ah, me! I little expected—after ten years of faithful service—and on such—such a happy day—the day when M. Olivier is to take a wife—to find myself—treated—like—this."

And the worthy woman began to sob violently.

"What on earth is the woman crying about?" exclaimed the veteran, in despair. "You are crazy, my dear woman! Upon my word of honour, you must be crazy!"

"Kill you! Ah, I shall not forget those words for many a long year, I can tell you."

"Oh, come, come now! I'll eat the—Look, don't you see that I am eating it now?" said the unfortunate commander, hastily swallowing a few spoonfuls. "It is delicious, divine, this custard of yours. Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes, monsieur; yes, that satisfies me," said the housekeeper, drying her tears. "It was a nice custard. I said to myself while I was stirring it, 'I certainly must give my recipe to M. Olivier's little wife.' I must, mustn't I, M. Olivier?"

"Of course you must, Madame Barbançon, for Mlle. Ernestine is going to prove a model housekeeper, I'm sure."

"And the grand pickles I'll teach her to make,—green as grass and crisp as hazelnuts. Oh, you shall see what nice little dishes we will fix up for you, your little wife and I."

Gerald, to whom M. de Maillefort had been obliged to confide the secret of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's masquerade, could not help laughing heartily at the idea of Madame Barbançon giving her cooking recipes to the richest heiress in France.

"What are you laughing at, M. Gerald?" asked the housekeeper. "Have you no confidence in my recipes?"

"I believe in them as I believe in the gospels. I am laughing just because I am so happy, I suppose. That is only natural, I imagine, on one's marriage day."

"There have been monsters who were more ferocious than ever on their marriage day," responded Madame Barbançon, with a gloomy and profoundly mysterious air.

"Nonsense!"

"Think, M. Gerald. Don't you recollect how he conducted himself on the day of his marriage with Marie Louise?—the scoundrel!"

Madame Barbançon evidently thought it entirely superfluous to mention the object of her execration by name.

"Come, Mother Barbançon, you had better give us our coffee now," interposed the commander. "It is nearly six

o'clock."

"Well, monsieur, that wretch whom you admire so much, on the day of his marriage with Marie Louise, behaved more cruelly than any tiger to that darling little King of Rome, who, clasping his tiny hands, pleaded in his fresh, sweet voice: 'Papa Emperor, do not desert poor Mamma Josephine.'"

"Oh, yes, yes; I remember it very well," replied Gerald, with wonderful *sang-froid*. "You are speaking of the King of Rome, Josephine's son."

"Certainly, M. Gerald; there were no other children. But, after all, that is nothing in comparison to what the wretch had the audacity to do to the Holy Father, on the very steps of the altar at Notre-Dame."

"What was it he did? I have forgotten."

"It seems," began Madame Barbançon, sententiously, "it seems that at coronations the Pope always takes the crown and places it on the head of the monarch he is crowning. You can imagine how much this must have angered your Bû-û-onaparte, who was already in a huff because he had had to kiss the Pope's toe in the middle of the Carrousel, before those swaggering guards of his. But he kissed it, the scoundrel! He had to. If he hadn't, the *petit homme rouge*, who was against Roustan, and for the pope, would have wrung his neck that very night."

"The Pope's?" asked Gerald.

"Roustan's?" inquired Olivier.

"No, no, gentlemen, not theirs, but Bû-û-onaparte's. Still, no matter about that. What I was going to say was that when the Holy Father was about to crown him, what did that Corsican ogre you are so fond of do—like the low common grocer that he was—but grab the crown from the hands of the poor Holy Father and put it on his head with one hand, while with the other he gave the Holy Father a sound rap on the skull, as if to say to the French people: 'Down with religion, the clergy, and all! It is only to me you must bow the knee.' It was such a blow that he gave the poor Holy Father that he reeled and fell headlong on the steps of the altar with his cap down over his eyes, and there he gave thanks in Latin, that angel of a man! This goes to prove, M. Olivier," added the housekeeper, as a sort of conclusion and moral, "that marriage only renders Corsican ogres still more ferocious, while I am sure your and M. Gerald's marriage to such dear girls as your sweethearts must be will only make you still more kind and amiable."

And the worthy woman hurried off to bring the coffee and serve it while Commander Bernard filled his big Kummer pipe.

The hilarity caused by Madame Barbançon's story soon gave place to graver and nobler thoughts.

"In spite of her peculiarities, this good woman is right in reminding us that our marriage ought to increase whatever good we have in us," remarked Gerald. "I hardly see how it can fail to do so, do you, Olivier?"

Then perceiving that his friend had fallen into a sort of reverie, Gerald laid a hand affectionately on his shoulder and asked:

"What are you thinking about, Olivier?"

"I was thinking, my dear Gerald, that it was while we were seated at this table, just six months ago, that I spoke to you for the first time about the charming girl everybody here called the duchess, and that you replied: 'Duchesses, don't talk to me of duchesses. I've had enough of them!' and now, thanks to you, she is a real duchess, the Duchesse de Senneterre. How strangely things come about in this world of ours!"

"You are right, my dear boys," said the old naval officer, "and when the present is all that one can desire, it is very pleasant to look back upon the past. Six months ago, for example, who would have guessed that my brave Olivier would now be on the eve of marrying a dear, sweet girl who had saved my life at the risk of her own?"

"And who ever would have supposed that the Mlle. de Beaumesnil we talked so much about, and upon whom I had matrimonial designs myself, would ever have fallen in love with Olivier?" added Gerald, with a keen look at his friend.

"Oh, don't say any more about that foolish affair, Gerald. It was a mere whim on the part of a spoiled child,—a whim that is probably forgotten even now."

"You are mistaken, Olivier," replied Gerald, gravely. "I have seen Mlle. de Beaumesnil and talked with her, and though she is no older than your Ernestine, she is not a spoiled or capricious child by any means, but a young woman full of good sense and discernment."

"My opinion is that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is at least a young lady of excellent taste, as she was so much pleased with my Olivier," exclaimed the commander, gaily. "But it was too late; the fortress had already surrendered to our dear little Ernestine, who isn't overburdened with money, it is true, but who has the very bravest and noblest heart in the world."

"You are right, uncle," replied Olivier. "The fortress had surrendered, surrendered unconditionally, but even if I had not—"

"What do you mean?" asked Gerald, looking at his friend rather anxiously. "If your affections had been fancy free, wouldn't you have married Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"You're mad, Gerald; of course I wouldn't."

"But why?"

"Do you remember what you said here, at this very table, a few months ago: that when an immensely wealthy man

marries an attractive girl because she is charming and worthy of him nobody disapproves of it; but that when a man who has nothing, marries a woman who brings him an enormous fortune, it is disgraceful. Those were almost his very words, were they not, uncle?"

"Undoubtedly."

"One moment," exclaimed Gerald, unable to control his growing anxiety, "you should also recall the arguments you yourself used, Olivier, to overcome my scruples on the subject of Mlle. de Beaumesnil: if, in spite of her immense fortune, it is evident that you love this young lady as much as you would have loved her had she been poor and obscure, the most suspicious person could not disapprove of such a marriage. Wasn't that what Olivier said, commander, and didn't you agree with him?"

"That is true, M. Gerald; and I am sure nothing could be more just and reasonable, but, thank Heaven, we have no such delicate question to deal with in this instance. Olivier only acted like any other honourable man in refusing to make a wealthy marriage because he loved elsewhere; it was all perfectly natural, it seems to me. I am sure neither you nor I ought to be at all surprised, for you are making a love match as well as Olivier."

"A love match! That is the very word for it!" exclaimed the young officer, enthusiastically. "Ernestine is as gentle and kind as she is ingenuous; and then the dear girl is so grateful that a fine gentleman like myself should be generous enough to marry her!" added Olivier, smiling. "Ah, if you only knew what a charming letter she wrote me yesterday, telling me that her relative consented to everything, and that, if my intentions had not changed, the marriage contract could be signed to-day. You cannot imagine anything more artless, and yet more exquisitely modest and touching than this letter. It proves Ernestine to be the very person I judged her to be from her countenance."

"I have never seen a more attractive face according to my ideas," said the old officer.

"Is it not, my dear uncle? Her features are not so remarkably regular, it is true, but what a gentle expression she has, and what a charming smile, with her little white teeth. And then what superb chestnut hair she has, and such a slender waist and such a pretty little hand, and the tiniest foot imaginable!"

"Olivier, my boy," said the old officer, pulling out his watch, "you are so engaged in enumerating your sweetheart's charms, that you forget it is almost time to join her, to say nothing of the fact that M. Gerald must have time to go home for his mother so as to take her with him to Mlle. Herminie's house."

"We shall have plenty of time, commander," said Gerald, "but I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see Olivier so deeply in love with his Ernestine."

"Deeply in love, unquestionably, my dear Gerald, to say nothing of the fact that I love her all the more devotedly because she is your dear Herminie's most intimate friend."

"Really, Olivier, it is enough to turn one's head completely, to think of so much happiness and felicity, after so many obstacles and difficulties! Come, my friend, my brother,—for is it not almost as if we were marrying two sisters, or they were marrying two brothers; upon my word, the tears come to my eyes in spite of me, when I think of it!—come, embrace me here before we start. We should look too absurd doing it before all the grand relatives!"

And the two young men embraced each other with fraternal tenderness, while Commander Bernard, anxious to maintain his dignity as a grand relative, tried to conceal his emotion by puffing away lustily at his pipe; after which, Gerald left in hot haste to escort his mother to Herminie's.

Olivier and his uncle were about to start themselves, when they were stopped by Madame Barbançon, who advanced towards them with measured steps, holding on the palms of her extended hands, for fear of soiling it, a superb white cravat starched to the last degree of stiffness and folded ready for wear.

"What the deuce is that, Mother Barbançon?" asked the veteran, who had already picked up his hat and cane, preparatory to departure.

"It is a cravat I have made for you, monsieur," said the worthy housekeeper,—"a little surprise I ventured upon, as you have nothing but your black cravat to wear on this happy day—and—I—I thought that—"

And the worthy woman, quite overcome with excitement and emotion, burst into tears, unable to finish the sentence.

The old officer, though he positively loathed the idea of swathing his neck in this uncomfortable affair, was so deeply touched by this attention on the part of his housekeeper that his voice trembled with emotion, as he replied:

"Why, Mother Barbançon, Mother Barbançon, what extravagance! I really ought to scold you well."

"See, there is a J and a B for Jacques Bernard, embroidered in each corner," said the housekeeper, calling attention to this decoration with manifest pride.

"True, there are my initials. See, Olivier!" said the good man, delighted with this attention.

"Why, my dear, good woman, you have no idea what pleasure, what great pleasure you have given me!" he added.

"Oh, thank you, monsieur," replied Madame Barbançon, as deeply touched and as joyfully as if she had received the most generous reward.

"But it is getting late," she added. "Look, it is half past six. Quick, monsieur, let me put it on for you."

"Put what on, Mother Barbançon?"

"Why, the cravat, monsieur."

"On me? The deuce take me, if—"

But a meaning look from Olivier made the old officer realise how much chagrin he would cause the worthy housekeeper by refusing to don her gift.

On the other hand, the good man had never worn a white cravat in his life, and fairly shuddered at the idea of such a piece of neck-gear.

But his natural kindness of heart conquered, and, smothering a sigh, he yielded his neck to Madame Barbançon, saying, in order to complete his exclamation in a manner that would be more flattering to his housekeeper:

"I meant to say, the deuce take me if I refuse, Mother Barbançon, but it is much too fine for me."

"Nothing can be too fine for such an occasion as this, monsieur," said the housekeeper, carefully adjusting the cravat. "It is a great pity that you haven't something better to wear than that old blue coat you've had at least seven years, but with your cross of the Legion of Honour and this handsome cravat,"—pulling out the ends of the cravat until they looked like two immense rabbits' ears, and then eying her work complacently,—"you have no cause to blush for your appearance. Ah, monsieur," she added, stepping back a little to see the effect better, "it makes you look twenty years younger, doesn't it, M. Olivier? Besides, it is so—so stylish—it makes you look like a notary, indeed it does."

The poor commander, with his neck imprisoned in the huge cravat that reached up to the middle of his cheeks, turned and looked in the little mirror that hung over the mantel in his bedroom, and it must be confessed that the effect was really very becoming.

"It's a pity it prevents me from turning my head," he said to himself, "but, as Mother Barbançon says, it is rather becoming—and decidedly professional looking," he added, with just the least bit of foppishness.

And the old officer passed his hand rather complacently through his thick white hair.

"Come, uncle, it is quarter of seven," said Olivier, with all a lover's impatience, "and quite time we were off."

"Very well, my boy, we will start at once. Give me my hat and cane, Mother Barbançon," said the old officer, not daring to look either to the right or left, for fear of disarranging the wonderful rabbit-eared bow.

The evening was superb, and the distance from the Batignolles to the Rue de Monceau very short, so the commander and Olivier proceeded modestly on foot to Herminie's home.

Fortunately the exercise this involved softened the rigid folds of the commander's cravat a little, and though he may have looked a little less imposing when he reached his destination, this fact did not impair in the least the noble expression of his honest, manly face.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SIGNING OF THE MARRIAGE CONTRACTS.

On the very evening that the two marriage contracts were to be signed, M. Bouffard, the owner of the house that sheltered Herminie, his pianist, as he had styled her ever since the young girl began giving lessons to his daughter,—M. Bouffard came after dinner to make his usual tour of inspection, for rent day was close at hand.

He reached the house about half-past six in the evening, and seated himself in Madame Moufflon's room to question her in regard to the supposed financial condition of the tenants, and to ascertain if any of them showed signs of uneasiness as the dread moment approached.

"Why, no, M. Bouffard. I can't say that any of them do," replied Madame Moufflon, "that is, except the new tenant on the third floor."

"Well, what about him?" inquired M. Bouffard, anxiously.

"When he came here, three months ago, he was as pompous as a lord, but in proportion as rent day approaches, he is becoming polite, distressingly polite to me."

"I shall have to watch the fellow closely, then, Madame Moufflon, that is a very bad sign. Ah, what a pity it is that that handsome young fellow who paid my pianist's rent didn't take to those rooms on the third floor. He wouldn't have—"

M. Bouffard never finished the sentence, for there came two or three such violent knocks at the porte-cochère that Madame Moufflon and her employer both bounded out of their chairs.

"Well, well, who is it that knocks as I, the owner of the house, would not think of knocking?" exclaimed M. Bouffard. "Let me see who this ill-mannered fellow is," added M. Bouffard, stepping to the door, as the portress pulled the rope.

"The doors, please!" cried a stentorian voice, thus announcing that both doors of the porte-cochère must be opened to admit a carriage.

M. Bouffard and the portress, amazed at this unheard-of demand, stood as if petrified on seeing a tall powdered footman, attired in a bright blue livery trimmed with silver braid, emerge from the shadow.

"Open both doors, quick!" said this liveried giant, authoritatively.

M. Bouffard was so overcome that he bowed low to the lackey.

"Will you never get the doors open? This is outrageous! The prince is waiting—"

"The prince!" gasped M. Bouffard, with another even more profound bow to the footman.

Just then another no less imperious blow of the knocker resounded.

Madame Moufflon drew the cord with an automatic movement exactly as before, and again a voice cried from under the archway:

"Both doors, please!"

And another footman, clad in green and gold livery this time, stepped up to the door of the porter's lodge, at which an acquaintance must have been standing, for he exclaimed:

"What, Lorrain, is that you? I just saw your master's carriage. What's the matter here? Why don't they open the doors? Are the porter and portress asleep?"

"One would think they had glass eyes. Look at them, they don't move."

"And it is madame la duchesse they're keeping waiting. She never gets impatient, oh, no!"

"Madame la duchesse!" repeated M. Bouffard, more and more astounded, but still motionless.

"*Mille tonnerres!* will you open the doors sometime to-night?" demanded one of the footmen.

"But who do you wish to see?" asked M. Bouffard, awakening from his stupor.

"Mlle. Herminie," said the tallest lackey, with an evident respect for the person his master was about to visit.

"Yes, Mlle. Herminie," replied the other.

"The small door to the left, under the archway," said the portress, more and more amazed. "I'll open the doors at once."

"A prince and a duchess, visiting my pianist!" gasped M. Bouffard.

Soon came another knocking, much more gentle this time, and another footman in brown livery, with blue trimmings, came to complete the assemblage of lackeys, exclaiming:

"Is everybody stone-deaf here? The doors, why don't you open the doors, I say?"

M. Bouffard, desperate now, resolved to play a heroic part, so, while the portress was tidying herself up a little so as to usher in Herminie's aristocratic visitors, the ex-grocer rushed out to open the double doors of the porte-cochère. This menial task performed, he had barely time to draw back close to the wall to prevent himself from being crushed by the broad breasts of two superb gray horses attached to an elegant dark blue coupé that dashed in, and, skilfully guided by a tall coachman, stopped short at a sign from one of the footmen, who had stationed himself at Herminie's door.

A hunchback and a stout man, both dressed in black, alighted from this handsome equipage, and Madame Moufflon made haste to announce to M. Bouffard's pianist:

"M. le Prince Duc de Haut-Martel."

"M. Leroi, notary."

The first carriage had hardly left the door before a handsome landau drove up.

Two ladies and a young man descended from this vehicle, and Madame Moufflon, who thought she must be dreaming, announced to M. Bouffard's pianist:

"Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre."

"Mlle. Berthe de Senneterre."

"M. le Duc de Senneterre."

An elegant brougham having followed these carriages, another guest alighted, and Madame Moufflon announced:

"M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë."

A few minutes afterwards the portress ushered into Mlle. Herminie's apartment the following less pretentious personages:

"Commander Bernard."

"M. Olivier Raymond."

"Mlle. Ernestine Vert-Puis."

"Madame Laîné."

These last two persons had come in a modest cab.

These duties performed, Madame Moufflon rejoined her employer, who was pacing vehemently to and fro, under the porte-cochère,—his forehead covered with big drops of sweat, so intense was his excitement,—saying to himself:

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* What can these great lords and ladies be doing in my pianist's room? What do you suppose all this means, Mother Moufflon?"

"I don't know what to think,—my brain fairly whirls. I see stars, and I'm so afraid of a stroke of apoplexy, I'm going to put my head under the water spigot to cool it off."

"I have it!" suddenly exclaimed the ex-grocer, triumphantly. "My pianist is giving a concert."

"I don't think so, for the last time I looked in I saw the ladies had laid their wraps on the piano, which was closed, and the entire company was standing in a row, while a notary—"

"What notary? Is there a notary here?"

"Yes, monsieur, the tall, stout man,—with a stomach twice as big as yours. I announced him as 'M. Leroi, notary.' Well, he was seated at Mlle. Herminie's table, with a pile of papers in front of him, and a candle on each side—like a juggler."

"Perhaps he is one," exclaimed M. Bouffard, "or, possibly, a fortune teller."

"But, as I told you just now, I announced him as a notary."

"True, true! Oh, well, I will stay awhile, and perhaps I shall be able to find out something when they leave."

Such a brilliant assemblage had never honoured Herminie's modest little home before, and the young girl experienced the liveliest satisfaction and happiness at this unexpected dénouement of a love that had seemed so hopeless. But the pleasure of welcoming Mlle. Berthe de Senneterre, Gerald's sister, and the eldest daughter of the duchess, filled her cup of joy to overflowing.

"Ah, madame," Herminie had said to the duchess, in a voice trembling with emotion,—for she appreciated the delicacy of this proceeding on the part of Gerald's mother, and felt that it was intended to serve as some reparation for the cruel words of the evening before,—"ah, madame, if I had been asked my most earnest desire, it would have been to see Mlle. de Senneterre here,—that is, if I had dared to hope for the honour."

"Berthe takes too deep an interest in her brother's happiness not to wish to be the first to welcome her new sister-in-law," replied Madame de Senneterre, in gracious, even affectionate tones.

Then Mlle. de Senneterre, a charming girl, for she strongly resembled Gerald both in appearance and character, had said to Herminie, with delightful affability:

"Yes, mademoiselle, I was anxious to be the first to thank you, for my brother is so happy, and I feel and know that he has a thousand reasons to be."

"I wish I were more worthy to offer M. de Senneterre the only family happiness he can lack," replied Herminie, gently.

And while the two young girls continued this interchange of affectionate words, thus prolonging a little scene in which Herminie gave convincing proof of perfect tact, rare distinction of manner, and a modest and graceful dignity, the hunchback, more and more charmed with his adopted daughter, said, in a whispered aside to Madame de Senneterre:

"Tell me frankly; do you think it would be possible for any person to do better under the circumstances?"

"It is really wonderful. She has an air of the most perfect breeding, combined with marvellous tact, and an apparent familiarity with all the rules and customs of the very best society. In short, she is a born duchess; that is all there is about it."

"And what do you think of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's betrothed,—Gerald's friend and former comrade?"

"You are subjecting me to a hard test, marquis," replied Madame de Senneterre, smothering a sigh, "but I am forced to admit that he is a charming and exceedingly distinguished-looking man, and that I can see little, if any, difference between this gentleman and a member of our own set in manner and bearing. It seems inconceivable to me that people of this class can be so polished and refined. Ah, marquis, marquis, what are we coming to?"

"We are coming to the signing of the contracts, my dear duchess; but I beg of you," added the hunchback, in a low tone, "not a word that would lead Gerald's friend to suppose that that simply dressed girl is Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"You need feel no fears on that score, marquis. Incomprehensible as this mystery seems to me, I shall not say a word. Have I not maintained the strictest secrecy on the subject of Herminie's adoption? My son is still ignorant of your intentions, but all these mysteries will necessarily be cleared up when the marriage contracts are read."

"I will attend to that, my dear duchess," replied the hunchback. "All I ask of you is that you will keep the secret until I authorise you to speak."

"Oh, I promise you I will do that."

Leaving Madame de Senneterre, who had seated herself beside her daughter, and near Herminie, the hunchback rejoined the notary, and said a few words, to which that official replied with a smile of assent; after which, the marquis said aloud:

"We should now give our attention to the reading of the contracts, I think."

"Undoubtedly," replied Madame de Senneterre.

The different actors in the scene were grouped as follows:

Herminie and Ernestine were seated side by side. On Herminie's right sat Madame and Mlle. de Senneterre, while to the left of Ernestine sat Madame Laîné, who was playing her modest rôle in a very satisfactory fashion.

Standing behind Herminie and Ernestine were Gerald, Olivier, Commander Bernard, and Baron de la Rochaiguë, whose presence astonished Olivier very much, and caused him no little vague uneasiness, though he was still far from suspecting that Ernestine, the little embroideress, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil were one and the same person.

M. de Maillefort had remained at the other end of the room, seated beside the notary, who, taking up one of the documents, said to the hunchback:

"We will begin, if agreeable to you, M. le marquis, with M. le Duc de Senneterre's contract."

"Certainly," replied the hunchback, smiling. "Mlle. Herminie is older than Mlle. Ernestine, so she is entitled to this honour."

Whereupon the notary, bowing slightly to his auditors, was about to begin the reading of Herminie's marriage contract, when M. de le Rochaiguë, assuming one of his most imposing parliamentary attitudes, said, impressively:

"I ask this honourable assembly's permission to make a few remarks prior to the reading of these contracts."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BARON HAS HIS REVENGE.

Olivier Raymond, who had marvelled greatly at the baron's presence before, became decidedly uneasy on hearing this request.

"M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë has the floor," responded M. de Maillefort, smiling.

"In heaven's name, what business has that man here?" Olivier whispered to his friend.

"I haven't the slightest idea, upon my word," replied the young duke, with the most innocent air imaginable, "but if we listen we shall soon find out, I suppose."

The baron cleared his throat, slipped his left hand in the bosom of his coat, and said, in his most impressive tones:

"In behalf of certain interests that have been entrusted to me, I beg M. Olivier Raymond to be good enough to answer a few questions I should like to put to him."

"I am at your orders, monsieur," replied Olivier, more and more astonished.

"In that case, I have the honour to ask M. Olivier Raymond if I did not recently offer him,—being empowered, authorised, and commissioned to do so in the capacity of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian,—if I did not offer him, I repeat, the hand of my ward, Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Monsieur," replied Olivier, who was evidently quite as much incensed as embarrassed by this question put to him in the presence of several entire strangers,—"monsieur, I fail to see either the necessity or the propriety of the question you just addressed to me."

"I am, nevertheless, obliged to appeal to the well-known honesty, frankness, and sincerity of the honourable witness," said the marquis, solemnly, "and adjure him to answer this question: Did I, or did I not, offer him the hand of my ward, Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Well, yes, monsieur," answered Olivier, impatiently, "you did."

"And did not M. Olivier Raymond clearly, positively, and categorically decline this offer?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Did not the honourable witness state, as the reason for this refusal, the fact that his heart and honour were alike bound by an engagement that would assure his happiness for life? Were these not, in substance, this honourable gentleman's own words?"

"It is true, monsieur, and, thanks be to God! what was then my dearest hope becomes a reality to-day," added the young man with an eloquent look at Ernestine.

"Such disinterestedness is positively inconceivable," said the Duchesse de Senneterre to her daughter, *sotto voce*. "It was associating with such people that spoiled our poor Gerald so."

Mlle. de Senneterre cast down her eyes and dared not answer her mother, who continued:

"But I fail to understand the situation. If this heroic gentleman declined Mlle. de Beaumesnil, what are she and

that idiotic guardian of hers doing here? It is too much of a puzzle for me. Let us wait and see."

In spite of the pride and delight that this public exposition of Olivier's noble conduct excited in Ernestine's heart, she was by no means entirely reassured in regard to the scruples he might feel when he discovered that his little embroideress was Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"I have now only to thank M. Olivier Raymond for the very honest, explicit, and straightforward manner in which he has answered the questions that have been addressed to him," said the baron, reseating himself, "and to request this honourable assemblage to kindly take full cognisance of my young friend's noble words."

"Why the devil does that long-toothed, pompous creature have to put in his oar?" whispered Commander Bernard to Olivier, who was standing beside him.

"I haven't the slightest idea, uncle. I am quite as much surprised to find the man here as you are, and why he should desire to refer to the offer he made me now, I cannot imagine."

"Oh, well, it can have no other ill effect than to make your dear Ernestine still more fond of you on learning that you sacrificed a colossal fortune on account of your love for her."

"It is just this sort of publicity given to a very natural act that so annoys me," replied Olivier.

"You are right, my boy," chimed in the old officer. "One does such things as that for one's own approval, not for the approval of others."

Then, turning to the Duc de Senneterre, he added:

"Say, M. Gerald, that little hunchback seated beside the notary is the marquis you were telling us about, is it not?"

"Yes, commander."

"It is very odd. Sometimes he looks as cunning as a fox, and sometimes as kind and gentle as a child. See how tenderly he is gazing at Mlle. Herminie now."

"M. de Maillefort has as noble a heart as yours, commander. That means everything."

"Hush, Gerald," whispered Olivier, "the notary is rising. He is about to read your contract."

"It is a mere form," said Gerald. "The contract is of very little consequence; the real conditions Herminie and I long since settled between ourselves."

The excitement created by M. de la Rochaiguë's interruption having subsided, the notary began to read Herminie's and Gerald's marriage contract; but when, after the customary preliminaries, the notary came to the names and occupations of the parties, M. de Maillefort remarked to him, smiling:

"Skip all that, monsieur, if you please; we know the names. Let us get to the important point, the settlement of pecuniary interests between the parties."

"Very well, M. le marquis," replied the notary.

So he continued:

"'It is agreed by this contract that any property which either of the aforesaid parties now possesses, or may possess at any future time, belongs, and shall belong absolutely to that party, entirely independent of the other contracting party.'"

"It was you, my dear child," the marquis said to Herminie, interrupting the notary, "who, when I explained to you, yesterday, the various methods of settling questions of pecuniary interest between husband and wife, insisted, from motives of delicacy, that each party should hold his or her property absolutely independent of the other, for possessing nothing yourself except the talent by which you have so honourably maintained yourself up to the present time, you refused absolutely the community of interests and property which M. de Senneterre is so anxious to have you accept."

Herminie's eyes drooped, and she blushed deeply, as she replied:

"I am almost certain that M. de Senneterre will excuse and understand my refusal, monsieur."

Gerald bowed respectfully, and Berthe, his pretty sister, whispered delightedly to her mother:

"Mlle. Herminie's sentiments certainly harmonise with her charming and noble face, do they not, mamma?"

"Certainly, oh, certainly," replied Madame de Senneterre, absently; for she was saying to herself all the while: "By this delicacy of feeling, my daughter-in-law, little suspecting that the marquis intends to make her so rich, has virtually settled all her property upon herself, entirely independent of my son; but she loves him so much that, when she finds that she is rich, she is sure to change this state of affairs."

The notary continued: "'It is also hereby agreed that any male offspring that may result from this marriage shall add to their name of Senneterre that of Haut-Martel. This clause has been consented to by the parties aforesaid, at the request of Louis Auguste, Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel.'"

Herminie having made a slight movement as if of surprise, the hunchback said to her, glancing at Gerald:

"My dear child, this is a slight concession to ancestral pride, to which Gerald has given his consent, certain that you would have no objection to seeing your son bear, in addition to his own illustrious name, the name of a man who regards you and loves you as his own daughter."

A look of respectful tenderness and gratitude from Herminie was sufficient answer, and the hunchback, turning to the notary, said:

"That is the concluding clause of the contract, is it not?"

"Yes, M. le marquis."

"Then we can now proceed with the reading of Mlle. Ernestine's contract, can we not," asked the hunchback, "and sign both contracts at the same time, afterwards."

"Certainly, M. le marquis," replied the notary.

"Now comes our turn, my boy," whispered the commander to his nephew. "What a pity it is that I haven't a snug little fortune to settle upon you and that dear child in the contract. But alas! all I shall be able to bequeath to you, I'm afraid, is good old Mother Barbançon," added the old officer, half sadly, half smilingly. "A queer wedding present she would be! I did think of selling our six tablespoons so I could make Ernestine a little present, but Mother Barbançon wouldn't listen to it. Your wife would rather have the silver than jewelry, she said."

"And Mother Barbançon was right, uncle. But hush. He is beginning to read our contract now," for the notary, picking up the second contract, said aloud:

"Shall we also skip the names in this contract?"

"Yes, yes; go on," responded the marquis.

"In that case, I come at once to the first and only clause relative to financial matters in this contract."

"It is not likely to be a lengthy one," whispered Commander Bernard.

"Permit me to interrupt you a moment, monsieur," said Olivier, smiling. "This clause of the contract seems entirely superfluous to me, for, as I had the honour to tell you yesterday, I have nothing but my pay, and Mlle. Ernestine Vert-Puis possesses nothing, save her skill as an embroideress."

"True, monsieur," replied the notary, smiling in his turn, "but as one has to be married under some régime or other, I thought it advisable to adopt this one, and state in the contract that you married Mlle. Ernestine Vert-Puis under the community of goods régime, which stipulates that the husband and wife shall hold and enjoy their property in common."

"It would be more correct to say that we married under the community of no-goods régime," responded Olivier, gaily, "but it makes no difference. As it is customary, we accept the clause, do we not, Mlle. Ernestine?"

"Very willingly, M. Olivier," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"So, monsieur," continued the young man, laughing, "it is agreed that Mlle. Ernestine and I each turn our entire property into one common fund,—everything, from my one epaulette to her embroidery needle,—a complete mutual renunciation, as it were."

"There will be only burdens to share," muttered the commander, with a sigh. "Ah, I never before longed to be rich as I do to-day!"

"It is decided, then, that the clause stipulating for a community of property shall remain; so I will proceed," said the notary.

"'The parties aforesaid marry under the community of property régime, and, consequently, agree to share, hold, and enjoy in common all property, real or personal, of any value whatsoever, of which they may now or at any future time be possessed, in their own right, or by inheritance.'"

"By inheritance! Poor things! My cross and my old sword are all they have to expect from me, M. Gerald," whispered the veteran.

"Oh, nonsense, commander," replied Gerald, gaily. "Who knows but you may die a millionaire?"

But as the old officer, not sharing this hope, shook his head, the notary, turning to Ernestine and Olivier, asked:

"This provision is perfectly satisfactory to you, mademoiselle, and to you, monsieur?"

"Whatever is satisfactory to M. Olivier is satisfactory to me," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"I think the arrangement perfect," answered Olivier, gaily; "and I assure you that never in your life did you insert in any contract a clause that is less likely to excite controversy than this."

"We will now proceed with the signing of the contracts," said the notary, gravely, rising as he spoke.

Madame de Senneterre, having taken advantage of the general movement, to approach M. de la Rochaiguë, now said, like one completely bewildered:

"My dear baron, will you be kind enough to tell me what all this means?"

"What, madame la duchesse?"

"Why, all this mystery that is going on here."

"It is one that brought me nearly to the verge of madness a few days ago, madame la duchesse."

"But does M. Olivier really believe that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is a poor little embroideress?"

"Yes, madame."

"But why did he refuse the offer you made him?"

"Because he loved another, madame."

"And that other?"

"Was my ward."

"What ward?"

"Why, Mlle. de Beaumesnil," replied the baron, with a sort of ferocious joy, delighted to subject another person to the same torture to which the marquis had subjected him.

"Is it possible that you are trying to amuse yourself at my expense, M. le baron?" demanded the duchess, arrogantly.

"Madame la duchesse cannot suppose that I am capable of forgetting myself to such an extent as that."

"Then what does all this mystery mean? And why was it necessary that M. Olivier should be made to repeat that he had refused Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand, though he is about to sign his marriage contract with her? and—"

"I promised M. de Maillefort I would keep his secret, so you must apply to him, madame la duchesse. He hasn't his equal for solving enigmas."

Despairing of obtaining any satisfaction from the baron, Madame de Senneterre approached M. de Maillefort, and asked:

"Well, marquis, may I know the object—"

"In five minutes you shall know all, my dear duchess," replied the hunchback.

Then he turned, apparently to give some final instructions to the notary.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CONCLUSION.

As the little party approached the table where the two contracts lay, Mlle. de Beaumesnil said to Herminie, in subdued tones, but evidently with no little anxiety:

"Alas! the decisive moment has come! What will M. Olivier think? What will he do? If I had committed some terrible crime and it was about to be made public, I could not feel more anxious."

"Courage, Ernestine. You can leave everything to M. de Maillefort without the slightest fear."

If Ernestine experienced dire misgivings in regard to Olivier's scruples, the hunchback was no less uneasy in regard to those of Herminie, who was still ignorant that she had figured in the marriage contract as the adopted daughter of the Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel.

So it was with considerable inward perturbation that the hunchback now approached the young girl and said:

"You are to sign first, my child."

The notary presented a pen; the girl took it, and, with a hand trembling with joyful emotion, signed, "Herminie."

"Well, my child, why do you stop there?" asked M. de Maillefort, as he saw her about to return the pen to the notary.

And as his protégée turned and looked at him in silent surprise, the hunchback continued:

"Go on, of course, my child, and sign yourself 'Herminie de Maillefort.'"

"Ah, I understand now," Gerald said to his mother, with profound emotion. "M. de Maillefort is the best and most generous of men."

Herminie continued to gaze at the hunchback in speechless astonishment, but at last she said, hesitatingly:

"Why, monsieur, I cannot sign myself 'Herminie de Maillefort.' That name—"

"My child," said the hunchback, in pleading tones, "have you not often told me that you felt a truly filial affection for me?"

"I do, indeed, monsieur."

"And have you not more than once felt that you could best express your gratitude by telling me that I manifested all a father's solicitude for you?"

"Oh, yes, the tenderest, most devoted father's," exclaimed the girl, earnestly.

"Then why should you not take my name?" asked the marquis, with a winning smile. "You have already promised that your son, if you have one, shall bear this name. Besides, are you not by your attachment to me, and by my affection for you, my adopted child? Then why should you not sign this contract as my adopted daughter?"

"I, monsieur?" exclaimed Herminie, unable to believe her own ears. "I your adopted daughter?"

"Yes; think of my audacity. I am famed for it, you know. I even had you so designated in the marriage contract."

"What do you say, monsieur?"

"Tell me," added the hunchback, with tears in his eyes, and in his most persuasive tones, "tell me, do you not think I have justly earned the great happiness of being able to say to every one, 'This is my daughter?' Will you refuse to honour still more, by bearing it, an ever honoured name?"

"Ah, monsieur," said Herminie, unable to restrain her tears, "such kindness as yours—"

"Then sign at once, you obstinate child," said the marquis, smiling, though his eyes were full of tears, "or else our friends here will perhaps imagine that a beautiful and charming creature like you is ashamed to have a poor hunchback like me even for an adopted father."

"Ah, such a thought as that—" exclaimed Herminie, quickly.

"Then sign, sign at once!" urged the marquis.

And with an affectionate movement, he took Herminie's hand, as if to guide her pen, and, drawing her closer, said in a low tone so as not to be overheard:

"Did not the loved one we both mourn implore me to be a father to her daughter?"

Deeply moved by this allusion to her mother, half stunned by this unexpected proposal, and finally vanquished by the affection and gratitude she felt for the marquis, the young girl with a trembling hand affixed the signature of Herminie de Maillefort to the document, little suspecting what a generous gift she was thus accepting from the hunchback, for she had no idea of the amount of his fortune.

Commander Bernard was so deeply affected by this scene, that, hastily approaching the hunchback, he said:

"Monsieur, I am a retired naval officer, and Olivier's uncle. I have the honour of knowing you only by all the good I have heard of you through M. Gerald, and by the aid you so kindly rendered in securing Olivier's promotion; but what you have just done for Mlle. Herminie shows such a generous heart that I beg you will allow me to take you by the hand."

"Very gladly, I assure you, monsieur," said the marquis, responding to the veteran's advances with marked cordiality, "I, too, have the honour of knowing you only by the good I have heard of you through my dear Gerald, M. Olivier's friend. I know, too, the sensible and high-minded advice you gave Gerald in relation to his marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and, as people of such a keen sense of honour are rare, I deem a meeting with you a most fortunate thing. And it is very pleasant to think that these meetings are likely to be frequent in the future," added the hunchback, smiling, "for you love Ernestine and Olivier as devotedly as I love Herminie and Gerald, and we are certain to spend many a delightful hour with these charming young people."

"Yes; as I have decided to live with Olivier and his wife, I shall see you very often, I hope."

"And I, too, intend to live with my children, Herminie and Gerald, and as our two daughters love each other like sisters, we shall be almost like one happy family."

"Do you know, monsieur, if I were a religious man, the devil take me if I shouldn't say that it was indeed the good God who had assured me such a paradise in my old age. But I forget that these poor children are dying of impatience to sign in their turn.

"So come, mademoiselle," he continued, turning to Ernestine, "and write at once, at the bottom of this page, the name that gives me the right to call you daughter. I really owe my life to you, though," added the old officer, gaily, "so, in our case, the usual order of things is reversed, and it is the daughter who gives life to the father."

Ernestine took the pen from the notary's hand, with a poignant anxiety, which, for divers reasons, was shared by all the other actors in the scene except Olivier and Commander Bernard, and affixed the name of Ernestine Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil to the document. Then, with a trembling hand, she offered the pen to Olivier. With a look of inexpressible happiness, the young man stooped to append his signature to the contract; but he had scarcely written the name of Olivier, when the pen dropped from his fingers, and he remained for a moment leaning over the table, silent and motionless, believing himself, in fact, the victim of an optical delusion, as he saw, above the name he had just begun to write, the signature of Ernestine Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil.

Those around him understood the cause of this astonishment so well, and were so fully prepared for it, that they all maintained a profound silence—all save the commander, who gazed at his nephew for a moment with great surprise, and then exclaimed, excitedly:

"What the devil is the matter with you, my boy? Have you forgotten how to write your name?"

But suddenly the strange silence of the other spectators seemed to strike him, and he turned inquiringly to them; but upon every face, and particularly upon the faces of Ernestine and Herminie, he noticed such a grave, deeply troubled expression, that the veteran, not knowing what to think, but apprehending some serious difficulty, again exclaimed:

"Olivier, my boy, what is the matter? What prevents you from signing?"

"Read that name, uncle," replied the young man, pointing with a trembling finger to Ernestine's signature.

"Ernestine Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil!" exclaimed the old man, bringing the contract closer to his eyes, as if he could not believe what he saw. Then, turning to Ernestine, he cried:

"You—mademoiselle—you, Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes, monsieur," said M. de la Rochaiguë; "I, Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian, do declare, certify, and affirm that this young lady is my ward. It was for this reason that my presence at her marriage was indispensable."

Olivier had turned frightfully pale, and it was in a strangely altered voice that he said, "Pardon my—my bewilderment,—every one here will understand it. You—Mlle. de Beaumesnil! You, whom I thought poor and alone in the world,—because you told me so. What object could you have had in this deception?"

Seeing how deeply Olivier was wounded, Ernestine felt as if her heart would break. Tears gushed from her eyes, and, clasping her hands beseechingly, she faltered:

"Forgive me, M. Olivier! Oh, forgive me!"

There was such a touching simplicity in the words in which the young girl thus implored forgiveness for being the richest heiress in France, that everybody, even to the baron and Madame de Senneterre, was deeply affected, and even Olivier felt the tears rise to his eyes.

M. de Maillefort felt that it was quite time to make a clear statement of the facts of the case, and effectually silence Olivier's scruples, for the hunchback perceived that the young man was not only amazed and bewildered by the deception Mlle. de Beaumesnil had practised, but that he was also suffering cruelly from the conflict between devoted love and extreme sensitiveness that was raging in his breast.

"Will you have the goodness, M. Olivier, and you, too, commander, to give me your attention for a few moments," said the marquis, "and this mystery, which must both astonish and annoy you, shall be explained. Mlle. de Beaumesnil, an orphan immensely wealthy, very young, and too ingenuous herself to suspect the avaricious motives of those around her, believed the exaggerated praise and the protestations of affection lavished upon her, until, one day, an old friend of her mother's, who was unfortunately powerless to protect her from them, felt that he must at least warn her against the flattery, baseness, deceit, and cupidity of those around her, and assured her that whatever might be the pretext for the devotion manifested towards her, her enormous fortune was the sole cause of it. This revelation was a terrible blow to Mlle. de Beaumesnil. Afterwards, tormented by the fear that she would never be loved except for her wealth, she began to find this distrust of everybody and everything intolerable. So, there being no one to whom she could turn for counsel and encouragement, Mlle. de Beaumesnil courageously resolved to ascertain her real value, inasmuch as this knowledge would enable her to judge of the sincerity of the adulations and attentions that beset her on every side. But how was she to discover the truth? There seemed to be only one way, viz., to divest herself of the prestige that enveloped the rich heiress, and to present herself to entire strangers as a poor and obscure orphan who was obliged to labour hard for her daily bread."

"Enough, monsieur, enough!" cried Olivier, in tones of the deepest admiration. "I understand it all now. What courage she displayed!"

"And she did that?" exclaimed Commander Bernard, clasping his hands ecstatically. "What a brave girl to subject herself to such a test! But I might have known it! A girl who would throw herself under a wagon wheel to prevent me from being crushed by it—!"

"You hear what your uncle says, M. Olivier," said the marquis, "and, whatever Mlle. de Beaumesnil's position may be now, have you not still a heavy debt of gratitude to pay?"

"Ah, monsieur," exclaimed Olivier, "this debt of gratitude, the sacred cause of the deepest affection, I hoped to repay by imploring Mlle. de Beaumesnil to share my lot,—a lot much more fortunate than hers, as I supposed, for I believed her to be both poor and friendless. But now, I—I—"

"One word more, M. Olivier," hastily interrupted the marquis; "Mlle. de Beaumesnil and I both knew and respected your extreme sensitiveness and pride, so, to spare you the slightest feeling of self-reproach, we arranged with M. de la Rochaiguë here to offer to you the alternative of breaking a sacred promise made to a young girl you believed poor and friendless, or of refusing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand. You stood this severe test nobly, unhesitatingly sacrificing the certainty of a fabulously rich marriage to your affection for a poor little embroideress. What greater proof of disinterestedness could you or any one give?"

"That is true," said Commander Bernard. "I am as jealous of Olivier's honour as any person could possibly be, but I want to remind him that, though it is undoubtedly wrong to marry a woman for her money, it is equally wrong, when one loves the noblest of creatures, to refuse to keep a solemn promise and to repay a sacred obligation merely because the dear child has a lot of money. Just suppose, Olivier, that Mlle. Ernestine, who was so poor yesterday, has inherited nobody knows how many millions from a relative this morning, and let that be the end of it. This miserable money ought not to be allowed to ruin everybody's happiness, surely."

"Oh, thank you, M. Bernard," exclaimed Ernestine, throwing her arms around the old officer's neck, in a transport of filial affection, "thank you for those kind, wise words which M. Olivier cannot, I am sure, contradict."

"I defy him to do it," said Gerald, taking his friend's hand. "Remember, too, my dear Olivier, what you said to me a few months ago, when there was some talk of my marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Besides, is it not Ernestine, the little embroideress that you and I have always loved so much, M. Olivier?" said Herminie, in her turn.

"And you must permit me to say, monsieur," added Madame de Senneterre, "that the disinterestedness you showed in refusing M. de la Rochaiguë's offer has made such a deep impression upon me, that in my eyes you will always be the young man who refused the richest heiress in France to marry a friendless and penniless young girl."

Olivier, though influenced in spite of himself by these proofs of esteem and sympathy, nevertheless experienced a feeling of deep humiliation at the idea of sharing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's immense fortune, so he said:

"I know that I have no right to show myself more fastidious and exacting than the persons around me in matters where honour and delicacy are involved; I know, too, that what I have just heard in relation to Mlle. de Beaumesnil has only increased—if that were possible—my respect and devoted love for her, and yet—" But the marquis, who read Olivier's thoughts, again interrupted him by saying:

"One word more, M. Olivier. You experience a sort of humiliation at the thought of sharing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's large fortune. I could understand this feeling on your part, if you saw in the immense wealth Ernestine brings you merely the means of leading an idle and luxurious life at your wife's expense. Shame and ignominy should, indeed, attach to any man who contracts such a marriage as that. But this will not be your future, M. Olivier,—nor yours, Gerald; for though you and Herminie, my daughter,—my beloved daughter,—are both ignorant of the fact, and though her fortune is not to be compared with Ernestine's, of course, I have settled upon my adopted daughter an income of about one hundred and fifty thousand francs a year from property I have just inherited in Hungary."

"Such a fortune as that for me!" exclaimed Herminie. "Oh, never, never, I beseech you—"

"Listen to me, my child," said the hunchback, interrupting her, "and you, too, listen, M. Olivier. Ernestine, in some touching pages that you will read some day,—pages dedicated to her mother's memory,—in the candour of her noble soul, wrote these words which I shall never forget:

"'I have a yearly income of three million francs!

"'All this wealth for my own use! Why should this be? Why should I have so much and others nothing?

"'This immense fortune, how did I acquire it?

"'Alas! by your death, my father; and yours, my mother.

"'So, to make me rich, I had to lose the two whom I loved best in the world.

"'And in order that I may be so rich, there must, perhaps, be thousands of young girls like Herminie always in danger of want, however irreproachable and laborious their lives may be.'

"Ah," added the marquis, with increasing warmth, "this generous cry of an ingenuous heart, these words, artless as the truth that comes from the mouth of a child, are a revelation. Yes, Ernestine, the inheritance of wealth is a curse when it perpetuates the vices and degradation of an idle and luxurious life; yes, the inheritance of wealth is a curse when it arouses and excites the execrable passions of which you so narrowly escaped becoming the victim, my poor, dear child! Yes, the inheritance of wealth is a sacrilege when it concentrates in selfish hands the millions which should furnish employment and the means of subsistence to thousands of families; but the inheritance of wealth is also ennobling in the highest degree when the inheritor zealously and faithfully performs the sacred, indefinable, imprescriptible duties towards the less favoured of fortune which the possession of great wealth imposes upon him, and when he devotes his life to ameliorating the moral and physical condition of those whom society disinherits in favour of a privileged few. And now," said the hunchback, in conclusion, taking the hands of Herminie and of Olivier, "tell me, my children, do you, who were poor yesterday, see any disgrace or humiliation in becoming rich in accordance with these principles of human fraternity? Do you shrink from the sacred and often difficult duties which must be fulfilled each day with wise discrimination and unwearying devotion—if one would secure forgiveness for that gross inequality against which Ernestine in her noble candour protests, when she says, 'Why should I have so much, and others nothing?'"

"Ah, monsieur," cried Olivier, with enthusiasm, "Mlle. de Beaumesnil's fortune is all too small for a work like that."

And picking up the pen with a hand trembling with joy and happiness, the young man affixed his name to the contract.

"At last!" exclaimed Herminie and Ernestine, in the same breath, throwing themselves into each other's arms.

As M. de Maillefort was entering his carriage in company with Herminie, for the latter was to live in the house of her adopted father henceforth, M. Bouffard, who was still a prey to the most intense curiosity, suddenly presented himself to the hunchback's astonished gaze.

"Ah, M. Bouffard, I am delighted to see you," remarked the marquis. "It is truly said that Providence sometimes employs strange agents to attain its ends, for you are one of these strange agents, my dear M. Bouffard."

"M. le marquis is too kind," responded M. Bouffard, not understanding in the least what the marquis meant.

"Do you know one thing, my dear M. Bouffard? But for your pitiless greed as a landlord, Mlle. Herminie, my adopted daughter, would not be the Duchesse de Senneterre now."

"What, mademoiselle, my pianist, the daughter of a marquis, and the Duchesse de Senneterre!" faltered M. Bouffard, as the hunchback and the young girl stepped into the handsome coupé, which bore them swiftly away.

A short time after the signing of these contracts, the fashionable world was electrified by the following announcement cards:

"M. de la Rochaiguë has the honour to announce the marriage of Mlle. Ernestine de Beaumesnil, his ward, with M. Olivier Raymond."

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, has the honour to announce the marriage of Mlle. Herminie de Maillefort, his adopted daughter, with M. le Duc Gerald de Senneterre."

THE END.

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