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AUTUMN GLORY

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COUNT STANISLAUS C. DE SOISSONS.

By RENÉ BAZIN.

Autumn Glory.

Translated by MRS. ELLEN WAUGH.

By the Author of
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Ivy Cardew.

PERRINGTON PRIMM.

By HULBERT FULLER.

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Autumn Glory

OR

The Toilers of the Field

By **René Bazin**

Author of "A Blot of Ink," etc.

Translated by Mrs. Ellen Waugh

With Photogravure Portrait of the Author

SANS PEUR ET
SANS REPROCHE

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AUTUMN GLORY.

CHAPTER I.

LA FROMENTIÈRE.

"Quiet! Bas-Rouge, down! Don't you know folk born and bred here?"
The dog thus addressed, a mongrel in which some twenty breeds were mixed, with grey long-haired coat changing to auburn silky fleece about the paws, at once left off barking at the gate, trotted along the grassy path bordering the field, and, content at having done his duty, sat down at the extreme edge of the line of cabbages which the farmer was trimming. Along the same path a man was approaching, clad in gaiters and a suit of well-worn corduroys. His pace was the even steady gait of a man accustomed to tramp the country. The face in its setting of black beard was drawn and pale, the eyes, accustomed to roam the hedges and rest nowhere, bore an expression of weariness and mistrust, the contested authority of an agent. He was the head-keeper and steward to the Marquis de la Fromentière.
He came to a halt behind Bas-Rouge, whose eyelids gave a furtive quiver, though his ears made not the slightest movement.
"Good day, Lumineau."
"Good day."
"I have a word to say to you. M. le Marquis has written."
Probably he expected the farmer to leave his cabbages and come towards him. Not a bit of it. The yeoman of the Marais bending double, a huge bundle of green leaves in his arms, stood some thirty feet off, looking askance at the keeper waiting motionless in the path. What did he want of him? His well-fed cheeks broadened into a smile, his clear, deep-set eyes lengthened. In order to show his independence, he bent down and resumed his labours for a moment without reply. He felt himself upon the ground that he looked upon as his own, which his race had cultivated by virtue of a contract indefinitely renewed. Around him, his cabbages formed an immense square, a billowy mass of superb growth, firm and heavy, their colour comprising every imaginable shade of green, blue, and violet, tinting in harmony with the hues of the setting sun. Of huge stature though he was, the farmer plunged to his middle, like a ship, in this compact sea of vegetation. All that was to be seen above it was the short coat and round felt hat, set well back on his head, from which hung velvet streamers, the headgear of La Vendée.
When by this period of silence and labour he had sufficiently marked the superiority of a tenant farmer over a hired labourer, Lumineau straightening himself, said:
"You can talk on; there's no one here but me and my dog."
Nettled, the man replied:
"M. le Marquis is displeased that you did not pay your rent at Midsummer. It will soon be three months in arrears."
"But he knows that I have lost two oxen this year; that the wheat is poor; and that one must live, I and my sons, and the 'Creatures.'"
By "Creatures" the farmer meant, as is customary in the Marais, his two daughters, Eléonore and Marie-Rose.
"Tut, tut," replied the keeper, "it is not reasons he wants from you, my good man, it's the money."
The farmer shrugged his shoulders.
"Were he here at the Château the Marquis would not require it; I would soon explain how things stand. He and I were friends, I may say, as his father and mine were before us. I could show him what changes time has brought about with me. He would understand. But now one only has to do with paid agents, no longer the Master; he is no more to be seen, and some folks say we shall never see him at La Fromentière any more. It is a bad thing for us."
"Very likely," returned the keeper, "but it is not my place to discuss orders. When will you pay?"
"It's easy to ask when will you pay, but it's another thing to find the money."
"Well then, I am to answer, No."
"You will answer, Yes, as it must be. I will pay at Michaelmas, which is not far off now."
The farmer was about to stoop to resume his work when the keeper added:
"You will do well, too, Lumineau, to look after your man. I found some snares the other day in the preserves of La Cailleterie, which could only have been laid by him."
"Had he written his name upon them?"
"No. But he is known to be the most desperate poacher in the country round. You beware! The Marquis has written to me that you were to go out, bag and baggage, if I caught any one of you poaching again."
The farmer let fall his armful of cabbage leaves, and extending his two fists, cried:
"You liar! He cannot have said that. I know him better than you do, and he knows me. And it's not to a fellow of your sort that he would give any such instructions. M. le Marquis to turn me off his land, me, his old Lumineau! It is false."
"Those were his written instructions."
"Liar!" repeated the farmer.
"All very well; we shall see," quoth the agent, turning to resume his way. "You have been warned. That Jean Nesmy will pay you a bad turn one of these days; without taking into account, that for a penniless lad from the Bocage, he is rather too sweet on your daughter. People are talking, you know."
Ramming his hat down on his head, with crimsoned face and inflated chest, the farmer advanced a few steps, as though to fall upon the man who had insulted him; but he, leaning on his stout thorn stick, had already walked on, and his discontented face was seen outlined against the hedge as he rapidly receded. He had a certain dread of the colossal farmer whose strength was still formidable despite his years, and, moreover, an uneasy sense of the past ill success of his threats, a recollection of having been, more than once, disavowed by the Marquis de la Fromentière, their joint master, whose leniency towards the Lumineau family he never could understand.
The farmer stopped short, following with his eyes the head-keeper's receding figure. He watched as it passed along the fence in the opposite corner to the gate, scaled it, and disappeared to the left of the farm buildings along the green path leading to the Château. When he had watched the man finally out of sight:
"No," the farmer exclaimed aloud. "No, the Marquis did not say it! Turn us out!"
For the moment the agent's evil insinuations against Marie-Rose, his youngest daughter, were completely forgotten, his mind wholly absorbed in the threat of being turned out. Slowly, with a harder look in them than was their wont, he

suffered his eyes to wander around, as if to call all the familiar objects to witness that the man had lied; then, stooping down, he resumed his labours.

The sun, already low in the heavens, had nearly reached the row of young elms which bordered the field to the west, their lopped branches that ended in tufts of leaves resembling huge marguerites were bending to the strong sea breeze. It was the beginning of September, the time of evening when a glow of heat seems to traverse the descending chills of night. The farmer worked on as quickly and unremittingly as any younger man; his outstretched hand snapped off the crisp leaves close down to the stem of the cabbages with a noise as of breaking glass, where they lay in heaps along the furrows beneath the over-arching rows of plants. Hidden in the gloom, whence was emitted the warm, moist smell of earth, he was lost amid the huge velvety leaves intersected with their purple veins of colour. In truth he made one with the vegetation, and it would have been difficult to discern which was corduroy and which cabbage in the billowy expanse of the blue-green field.

Withal, close to earth as was his bent body, his soul was agitated and deep in thought; and as he worked, the farmer continued to ponder many things. The irritation caused by the keeper's threats had subsided; it only needed reflection to dismiss all fear of hard treatment from the Marquis. Did they not both come of a good stock; and did they not acknowledge it, one of the other? For the yeoman's ancestor was a Lumineau who had fought in the great war; and although now in these changed times he never mentioned past glories, neither the nobles nor the peasants were ignorant that his ancestor, a giant, surnamed Brin d'Amour, in the war of La Vendée, had taken the generals of the insurrection across the marshes in his own punt, had fought brilliantly, and had received a sword of honour, which now hung, eaten with rust, behind one of the farm presses. The family was one of the most widely connected in the country side. He claimed cousinship with thirty farmers, spread over that district which formed the Marais, extending from Saint Gilles to the Ile de Bouin. No one, himself included, could tell at what period his forefathers had begun to till the fields of La Fromentière. They had been there of right for generations, the Marquis in his Castle, the Lumineaus in their farm, united through long custom, each knowing the land and alike loving it; drinking the vintage of the soil together when they met; never dreaming that one or the other could ever forsake Château or farm bearing one and the same name.

And, in truth, eight years ago, great had been the astonishment when one Christmas morning, amid falling sleet, M. Henri, the present Marquis, a man of forty, a greater hunter, harder drinker, and more boorish mannered than any of his predecessors, had said to Toussaint Lumineau, "My Toussaint, I am going to live in Paris. My wife cannot accustom herself to this place; it is too dull and too cold for her. But do not worry; I shall come back." He had never come back, save on rare occasions for a day or two. But, of course, he had not forgotten the past. He still remained the same uncouth, kindly master known of old, and the keeper had lied when he talked of their being turned out.

No, the more Toussaint Lumineau thought of it the less did he believe that a master so rich, so liberal, so good at heart, could have written such words. Only the rent must be paid. Well, so it should. The farmer himself did not possess two hundred francs ready-money in the walnut wood chest beside his bed; but his children were rich, having inherited over two thousand francs apiece from their mother, La Luminette, dead now these three years past. So he would ask François, his second son, to lend him the sum due to the master. François was not a lad without heart, he would not let his old father be in difficulties. Once again anxiety for the morrow would be dispelled, good harvests would come, prosperous years which should make all hearts light again.

Weary of his stooping posture, the farmer straightened himself, passed his flannel shirt sleeve over his perspiring face, then turned his eyes to the roof of La Fromentière with the expression of one gazing on some well beloved object. To wipe his brow he had taken off his hat; now, in the oblique ray of sunshine which no longer reached the grass or the cabbages, in the soft declining light like that of a happy old age, he raised his firm, square-cut face. His complexion, unlike the cadaverous hue of peasants accustomed to scant living, was clear and healthy; the full cheeks with their narrow line of black whisker, straight nose, broad at the base, square jaw, in fact the whole face and clear grey eyes—eyes that always looked a man full in the face, betokened health, vigour, and the habit of command, while the long lips, refined-looking despite the weather-beaten skin, drooping at the corners, bespoke the ready fluency and somewhat haughty spirit of a son of the Marshes, who looks down upon everyone not belonging to that favoured spot. The perfectly white hair, dishevelled and fine, formed a fitting setting to the head, and shone with a silvery sheen.

Standing thus motionless with head uncovered in the waning light, the farmer of La Fromentière presented an imposing appearance, making it easy to understand the distinction of *la Seigneurie* commonly given him in the neighbourhood. He was called Lumineau l'Evêque, to single him out from others of the name, Lumineau le Pauvre; Lumineau Barbefine; Lumineau Tournevire.

He was looking at his beloved La Fromentière. Some hundred yards away to the south, among the stems of elms, the pale red tiles stood out like rough enamels. Borne on the evening wind there came the sound of the lowing of cattle going home to their sheds, the smell of the stables, the pungent aroma of camomile and fennel stored up in the barn. Nor was that all that presented itself to the farmer's mind as he gazed on his roof illuminated by the last rays of the declining sun; he called to his mental vision the two sons and two daughters living under that roof, Mathurin, François, Eléonore, and Marie-Rose, the heavy burdens, yet mixed with how much sweetness of his life. The eldest, his splendid eldest, doomed by a terrible misfortune to be a cripple, only to see others work, never to share it himself; Eléonore, who took the place of her dead mother; François, weak of nature, in whom could be seen but the incomplete, uncertain future master of the farm; Rousille, the youngest girl, just twenty.... Had the keeper lied again when speaking of the farm-servant's love-making? Not unlikely. How could a servant, the son of a poor widow in the Bocage, that heavy, unproductive land, how could he dare to pay court to the daughter of a farmer of the Marais? He might feel friendship and respect for the pretty girl, whose smiling face attracted many a remark on the way back from Mass on Sundays at Sallertaine; but anything more?... Well, one must watch.... It was but for a moment that Toussaint Lumineau pondered the man's insinuations; then with a sense of tenderness and comfort his thoughts flew to the absent one, the son next in age to Rousille, André, the Chasseur d'Afrique, now in Algiers as orderly to his Colonel, a brother of the Marquis de la Fromentière. But one month more and that youngest son would be home, his time of service expired. They would see him again, the fair, handsome young fellow, so tall, the living portrait of his father grown young again, full of noble vigour and love for Sallertaine and the farmstead. And all anxieties would be forgotten and merged in the joy of having the son home again, who used to make the ladies of Chalons turn as he passed, to say to each other: "That is a handsome lad, Lumineau's youngest son!"

The farmer often remained thus, the day's work done, sunk in thought before his farmstead. This time he remained longer than usual in the midst of the swaying masses of leaves, now grown grey, indistinct looking in the gathering darkness like some unfamiliar ground. The trees themselves had become but vague outlines bordering the fields. The

large expanse of clear sky overhead, still bright with golden glory, suffered but faint rays to fall to earth, making objects visible but only dimly. Lumineau, putting both hands to his mouth to carry the sound, turned towards the farm, and called out lustily:
"Ohé! Rousille?"
The first to respond to the call was the dog, Bas-Rouge, who, at the sound of his master's voice, flew like an arrow from the far end of the field. Then a young, clear voice was heard in the distance:
"Yes, father, I am coming."
The farmer stooped, took a cord, and bound a huge mass of leaves together, loaded it on his shoulder, and staggering under its weight, with arms raised to steady it, his head buried in the soft burden, followed the furrow, turned, and proceeded down the trodden path. As he reached the corner of the field a girl's slender form rose up before a break in the hedge. With agile movement Rousille cleared the fence; as she alighted her short petticoats revealed a pair of black stockings and sabots turned up at the toes.
"Good evening, father."
He could not refrain from thinking of what the keeper had said, and made no reply.
Marie-Rose, her two hands on her hips, nodding her little head as if meditating something grave, watched him go. Then entering in among the furrows she gathered together the remainder of the fallen leaves, knotted them with the cord she had brought, and, as her father had done, raised the green mass, and though bending beneath the weight, proceeded with light step down the grassy path.
To go into the field, collect, and bind together the leaves must have taken some ten minutes; her father should have reached the farm by now. She neared the fence, when suddenly from the top of the slope, the foot of which she was skirting, came a whistle like that of a plover. She was not frightened. Now a man jumped over the brambles into the field. Rousille threw down her burden. He approached no nearer, and they began to talk in brief sentences.
"Oh, Rousille, what a heavy load you are carrying."
"I am strong enough. Have you seen my father?"
"No, I have only just come. Has he said anything against me?"
"He did not say a word. But he looked at me.... Believe me, Jean, he mistrusts us. You ought not to stay out to-night, for he dislikes poaching and you will be scolded."
"What can it matter to him if I shoot at night, so long as I am as early next morning at my work as anyone else? Do I grumble over my work? Rousille, I was told at La Seulière, and the miller of Moque-Souris told me too, that plovers have been seen on the Marais. It will be full moon to-night, I mean to go out, and you shall have some to-morrow morning."
"Jean," she returned, "you ought not.... I assure you."
The young man was carrying a gun slung across his shoulder; over his brown coat he wore a short blouse scarcely reaching to his waist-belt. He was slim, about the same height as Rousille, dark, sinewy, pale, with regular features, and a small moustache, slightly curled at the corners of the mouth. The complexion alone served to show that he was not a native of the Marais, where the mists soften and tint the skin, but of a district where the soil is poor and chalky, and where small holdings and penury abound. Withal, from his lean, self-possessed countenance, straight-pencilled eyebrows, the fire and vivacity of the eyes, one could discern a fund of indomitable energy, a tenacity of purpose that would yield to no opposition.
Not for an instant did Rousille's fears move him. A little for love of her, but far more for the pleasure of sport and of nocturnal marauding so dear to the heart of primitive man, he had made up his mind to go shooting that night on the Marais. That being the case, nothing would have made him desist, not even the thought of displeasing Marie-Rose.
She looked but a child. Her girlish figure, her fresh young complexion, the full oval of her face, the pure brow with its bands of hair smoothly parted on either side, straight lips, which one never knew were they about to part in a smile or to droop for tears, gave her the appearance of a virgin in some sacred procession wearing a broad band across the shoulders. Her eyes alone were those of a woman, dark chestnut eyes the colour of the hair, wherein lay and shone a tenderness youthful yet grave, noble and enduring.
Without having known it, she had been loved for a long time by her father's farm-servant. For a year now they had been secretly engaged. On Sundays, as she returned from Mass, wearing the flowered muslin coif in the form of a pyramid, the coif of Sallertaine, many a farmer's, or horse and cattle breeder's son, tried to attract her gaze. But she paid no attention to them; had she not betrothed herself to Jean Nesmy, the taciturn stranger, poor and friendless, who had no place, no authority, no friendship save in her young heart? Already she obeyed him. In her home they never spoke to each other. Out-of-doors when they could meet their talk was always hurried on account of her brothers' watchfulness, that of Mathurin especially, the cripple, who was ever jealously prowling about. This time, too, they must avoid being surprised.
Jean Nesmy, therefore, without stopping to consider Rousille's cause for uneasiness, asked abruptly:
"Have you brought everything?"
Without further insistence she gave in.
"Yes," she answered; and producing from her pocket a bottle of wine and slice of coarse bread, she held them out to him with a smile that irradiated her whole face, despite the darkness. "Here, my Jean," she said, "it was not easy; Lionore is always on the watch, and Mathurin follows me about everywhere;" there was melody in her voice, as though she was saying, "I love you."
"When will you be back?" she added.
"At dawn. I shall come by the dwarf orchard."
As he spoke, the youth raising his blouse had opened a linen ration bag, brought back from his military service, and which he wore hung round his neck. In it he stored the wine and bread.
Absorbed in the action, intent on the thing of the moment, he did not notice that Rousille was bending forward listening to a sound from the farm. When he had finished fastening the two buttons of the ration bag, the girl was still listening.
"What am I to answer," she gravely said, "if father asks for you presently? He is now shutting the door of the barn."
With a smile that displayed two rows of teeth white as milk, Jean Nesmy, touching his hat, unadorned and wider than those worn in the Marais, said:
"Good night, Rousille. Tell your father that I am going to be out all night, and hope to bring back some plovers for my little sweetheart!"
He turned, sprang up the slope, jumped down into the neighbouring field, and the next second the barrel of his gun caught the light as it disappeared among the branches.

Rousille still stood before the break in the hedge, her heart had gone forth with the wanderer. Then, for the second time, a noise broke the stillness of evening. Now it was the sound of frightened fowls, the flapping of wings, the noise of a key turning in the lock—the sign that Eléonore, as always before supper, was locking the door of the fowl-house; Marie-Rose would be late. Hurriedly she caught up her load of leaves, cleared the fence, and hastened back to the farm. Soon she had reached the uneven grassy path, which, coming from the high lands, makes a bend ere, a little further on, it reaches the edge of the Marais. Crossing it, she pushed open the side entrance of a large gate, followed a half-fallen wall covered with creepers, and passing through a ruined archway, whose gaping interstices had once formed the imposing centre of the ancient walls, she entered a courtyard, surrounded with farm buildings. The barn wherein was piled the green forage stood to the left beside the stables. The girl threw in the bundle of leaves she had brought, and shaking her damp dress, went towards the long, low, tiled dwelling-house forming the end of the courtyard. Arrived at the last door on the right, where light shone through chinks and keyhole, she paused a little. A feeling of dread, often experienced, had come over her. From inside could be heard the sound of spoons clinking against the sides of plates; men's voices, a dragging step along the floor. Softly as she could she opened the door and slipped in.

CHAPTER II.

THE FAMILY LUMINEAU.

The family was assembled in the large living-room, or "house-place" of the farm. As the girl entered all eyes were turned upon her, but not a word was spoken. Feeling isolated, she crept along beside the wall, trying by lessening the noise of her sabots the sooner to escape observation, and having reached the chimney-corner, stooped down and held out her hands to the fire, as if she were cold.

Her sister Eléonore, a tall young woman with horse-like profile, lifeless blue eyes, and heavy apathetic face, drew back either to make way for her or to mark the ill-feeling existing between them, and continued to eat her slice of bread and few scraps of meat standing, the time-honoured custom among the women of La Vendée. The chimney-corner, blackened with smoke, hid them from the rest of the family as they stood one on either side; the dancing flames between them lit up, from time to time, the inmates and contents of the big house-place, built at a period when wood was plentiful, and houses and furniture were intended to last; while overhead numberless rafters discoloured with smoke and dust, joined the huge centre beam. The fitful flames anon rested on the woodwork of two four-post beds that stood against the wall, each with a walnut wood chest beside it, by aid of which the occupants mounted to the heavy structures, two wardrobes, some photographs, and a rosary hung round a copper crucifix over the nearest bed.

The three men at the table in the centre of the room were seated on the same bench in order of precedence; first, at the farthest end from the door, the father, then Mathurin, then François. A small petroleum lamp shed its light upon their bent heads, upon the soup-tureen, a dish of cold bacon, and another of uncooked apples. They were not eating from the tureen as do many peasant farmers, but each had his plate, and beside it his metal spoon, fork, and knife, not a pocket-knife but a proper table one, a luxury introduced by François on his return from military service; from which the old farmer had drawn his conclusion that the outside world was full of changes.

Toussaint Lumineau looked worried and kept silence. His calm, strong face, though that of an old man, contrasted strangely with the deformed features of his eldest son, Mathurin. Formerly they had been alike; but since the misfortune of which they never spoke and which yet haunted the memories of all at La Fromentière, the son was only the grotesque suffering caricature of his father. The enormous head, covered with a bush of tawny hair, was sunk between his high, thickened shoulders. The width of chest, length of arms, and size of hands denoted a man of gigantic stature; but when this giant, supported by his crutches, stood up, one saw a poor twisted, thickened torso, with contorted powerless legs dragging after it; a prize-fighter's body terminating in two wasted limbs, capable at most of supporting it for a few seconds, and from which even, powerless as they now were, the life was gradually ebbing. Scarce thirty years of age, the beard which grew almost to his cheek-bones was grey in places. Above the muddy-veined cheek-bones, from out the tangled mass of hair and beard which gave him the appearance of a wild animal, shone a pair of deep blue eyes, small, sad-looking, whence would flash all suddenly the wild exasperation of one condemned to a living death, who counted each stage of his torture. It was as though one half of him were assisting with impotent rage at the slow agony of the other. His forehead was lined with wrinkles which made deep furrows between the eyebrows.

"Our poor eldest son, the handsomest of them all, what a wreck he is!" their mother used sorrowfully to say.

She had reason to pity him. Six years ago he had come home from his military service as handsome a fellow as when he went. The three years of barrack life had passed over his simple peasant nature, over his dreams of ploughing the land and harvesting, over the tenets of faith he held in common with his race, with scarce a trace of harm. Innate contempt of the life led in towns had been his protection. "Lumineau's eldest son is not like other lads; he is not a bit changed," was the verdict of the neighbours.

One evening when he had taken a waggon-load of corn to the flour-miller of Chalons, he came back with empty sacks, but beside him, sitting upon a pile of them, was a laughing girl from Sallertaine, Félicité Gauvrit, of La Seulière, whom he wished to take for wife. The dusk of evening was over the roads, it was hard to distinguish ruts from tufts of grass; but he, all absorbed in his sweetheart, confident that his horse knew the way, was not even holding the reins that had fallen and were dragging on the ground. And suddenly, as they were descending a hill close to La Fromentière, the horse, struck by a branch from a tree, started into a gallop. The waggon jerked from side to side, was in danger of being upset; the wheels were on the bank, the girl wanted to jump out.

"Don't be frightened, Félicité, I will manage him!" cried her lover. And standing up he leant forward to seize the horse by the bit and stop him. But whether the darkness, a jolt, or ill-luck deceived him, he overbalanced and fell along the harness. There were two simultaneous cries, one from the waggon, one from beneath it. The wheel had gone over his limbs. When Félicité Gauvrit could get to her lover's assistance, she found him trying in vain to struggle up from the ground. For eight months Mathurin was groaning in agony; then his groans ceased, his sufferings grew less acute; but

first the feet became paralyzed, then the knees, and gradually the slow death mounted.... At the present time he could only drag his lower limbs after him, crawling on his knees and wrists, grown to an enormous size. He could still guide a punt upon the canals of the Marais, but his strength was soon exhausted. In a hand-cart, such as farm children use for a plaything, the father or brother would draw him to the more distant fields whither the plough had preceded them; and thus, utterly useless, the young man would look on at the work to which he was born, and which he still loved so passionately. "Our poor eldest Lumineau, the handsomest of them all!"

His gay spirits had flown; his character had become as changed and warped as his body. He had grown hard, suspicious, cruel. His brothers and sisters hid all their little concerns from the man who looked upon the happiness of others as a personal wrong to himself; they feared his skill at ferreting out any love-making; the treachery which would prompt him to try and mar it. He, who never could hope now to inspire love, could not brook that others should possess it. Above all, could not brook that another should take the place which came to him by right of birth, that of future master, of the father's successor to the farm.

On that account he was jealous of François, and still more of André, the handsome young Chasseur d'Afrique, their father's favourite. He even was jealous of the farm-servant, who might become dangerous, did he marry Rousille.

Sometimes Mathurin Lumineau said to himself:

"If only I could get well again! I believe I do feel better!" At other times a kind of rage would take possession of him, and he would not speak for days, would hide away in corners or in the stables, until a flood of tears would melt his passion. At those times one man only could go near him: his father. One thing alone softened the cripple's churlishness, and that was to look on the home fields, to see the oxen at work, the seed sown which should yield abundantly in its season, and to gaze out on to the horizon where he had tasted of the fulness of life.

For the whole six years in which the girl he had loved had deserted him, he had never once been into the town of Sallertaine, even to Easter Communion, which he no longer attended. Nor had he ever met Félicité Gauvrit, of La Seulière, along the lanes.

He sometimes asked Eléonore:

"Do you ever hear any talk of her marrying? Is she still as handsome as when she loved me?"

When Marie-Rose went into the supper-room that night, it was Mathurin only whom she furtively glanced at, and his face seemed to her to wear a malicious smile, as though he had seen, or guessed Jean's absence.

Near Mathurin sat François, a very different looking man from the other, of middle height, stout, red faced, easy going. Of him, Rousille had no fear.

He was more pleasure-loving than the rest of the family. No great worker, extravagant, running off to all the fairs and markets, easy to get on with because he needed the indulgence of others. Physically and morally the counterpart of Eléonore, two years his senior, like her he had a broad face, dull blue eyes, and the same apathetic nature which so often called forth lectures from their father.

But while the girl in the protection of her home remained pure under the influence of her good mother, now dead, who, like so many of the simple peasant women of those parts, had lived a humble saint-like life, François had been ruined by barrack life.

He had submitted to military discipline, but without understanding the necessity for it; therefore without deriving the corresponding benefit. He had been subject to his superiors, had received punishment, had been sent hither and thither for three years; but he had never made a friend, never felt himself encouraged in the few halting intentions for good that he had taken with him from the home life, never been treated as a man, who has a soul, and whom sacrifice, however humble, can ennoble. On the other hand, he fell an easy prey to all the evils of a soldier's life; the loose talk at mess, the drinking habits of his companions, the constant endeavour to shirk duty, the prejudices, in a word the hundred and one corruptions into which young men can sink who are taken from their homes and sent out into the world, new to the temptations of great cities, without a guide at the very period when most they stand in need of one.

Neither better nor worse than the average of men home from military training, he had brought back with him to La Fromentière a remembrance of illicit pleasures that followed him everywhere; defiance of all authority, a disgust for the hard, uncertain, often unproductive work of farming, which he contrasted with vague notions about civil employment of which the leisure and privileges had been vaunted to him. How far off was he now from the simple son of the marshes, with fearless eyes, the inseparable companion, model and protector of André, who, twirling his tamarind stick, would make the round of the canals to see if the cows had strayed from the meadows, or to search for any ducks which might have wandered into the ditches! With unwilling spirit, and because he had nothing better to do, he had returned to the care of the animals and to follow the plough. The proximity of Chalons, its wine shops and taverns was a temptation to him; urged on by his companions, weak and passive, he suffered himself to be led away. On Tuesdays, particularly, market day, the poor old father too often saw his son of seven-and-twenty start off from the farm under various pretexts before it was dawn, to come back late at night, stupefied, insensible to reproaches. It was an ever abiding grief to the father. François had made La Fromentière no longer the sacred abode beloved by, defended by all, which no one had dreamed of deserting. In that room where they were now assembled what a long line of mothers and children, of grandsires and grandames, united or resigned, had lived and died!

In those high beds ranged against the walls how many children had been born, fed, and at last had slept their last sleep! There had been sorrow and weeping there, but never ingratitude.

A whole forest might have been re-planted if all the wood burned in that chimney, by those bearing the same name, could have re-taken root. What was in store for his descendants hereafter?

The old farmer had noticed for months past that François and Eléonore were plotting something; they received letters, one and the other, of which they never spoke; they talked together in corners; sometimes of a Sunday, Eléonore would write a letter on plain paper, not such as she would use when writing to a friend. And the thought had come to him that his two children, weary of rule and scoldings, were on the look-out for a farm in some neighbouring parish, where they would be their own masters—it was a thought he dared not dwell upon; he cast it from him as unjust. Still it haunted his mind, for the future of La Fromentière was his one chief care, and, since his eldest son's misfortune, François was the heir. When work went well, the father would think joyfully, "After all, the lad is buckling to again."

In truth, of the four young people assembled that September evening in the farm house-place, one only personified intact all the characteristics, all the energy of the race, and this was little Rousille, who was eating the crust of bread given her by Eléonore; one face alone expressed the joy of living, the health of body and soul, the brave spirit of one who has not yet had to do battle but who bides her time, and this was the face of the girl to whom no one, as yet, had spoken a word, and who was standing erect in the chimney-corner.

"Now the soup is finished," said the farmer. "Come, Mathurin, try a slice of bacon with me."

"No. It is always the same thing with us."
"Well, and so much the better," replied the father, "bacon is very good fare; I like it."
But the cripple, shrugging his shoulders, pushed away the dish, muttering:
"I suppose other meat is too dear for us now, eh?"
Toussaint Lumineau's brows contracted at the mention of former prosperity, but he replied, gently:
"You are right, my poor boy, it is a bad year, and expenses are heavy," then, wishing to change the subject—"Has Jean not come in yet?"
Three voices, in succession, replied:
"I have not seen him!"
"Nor I."
"Nor I."
After a silence, during which all eyes were turned towards the chimney-corner.
"It would be best to ask Rousille," exclaimed Eléonore, "she must know."
The girl half turning towards the table, her profile standing out in the firelight, answered:
"Of course I do. I met him at the turn of the road by our swing gate; he was going shooting."
"Again!" exclaimed the farmer. "Once for all this must be put a stop to. To-night, when I was tying up my cabbages, the keeper of M. le Marquis reprimanded me for that lad's poaching."
"But is he not free to shoot plovers?" asked Rousille. "Everyone does."
A simultaneous snort proceeding from Eléonore and François marked their hostility to the *Boquin*, the alien, Rousille's friend.
The farmer, reassured by the reflection that the keeper would not trouble himself about Nesmy's shooting in the neutral ground of the Marais, where anyone was free to go after wild-fowl as much as he pleased, resumed his supper.
François was already nodding, and ate no more.
The cripple drank slowly, his eyes fixed on space, perhaps he was thinking of the time when he, too, loved shooting.
There was an interval of apparent peace.
The summer breeze came through the chinks of the door with a gentle murmur, regular as the waves on a seashore.
The two girls sitting on either side of the chimney-corner, were each giving all their attention to the peeling of an apple, the conclusion of their supper. But the farmer's mind was unsettled by the keeper's words, and by Mathurin's "Meat is too dear for us, now." The old man was looking back to the long ago, when the four children before him had been busied with their own childish experiences, and could only take their little part in the parents' interests according to their age. First he looked at Mathurin, then at François, as though to appeal to their memory about the old days when as tiny boys they drove the cattle, or fished for eels. Too moved longer to keep silence, he ended by saying:
"Ah, the country side has changed greatly since M. le Marquis' time! Do you remember him, Mathurin?"
"Yes," returned Mathurin's thick voice. "I remember him. A big fellow, very red in the face, who used to call out when he came in, 'Good evening, my lads! Has father another bottle of old wine in the cellar? Go and ask him, Mathurin, or you, François.'"
"Yes, that was just him all over," said the good farmer, with an affectionate smile.
"He knew how to drink; and you would never find noblemen so affable as ours; they would tell you stories that made you die with laughing. And rich, children! They never used to mind waiting for the rent if there had been a bad harvest. They have even made me a loan, more than once, to buy oxen or seed. They were hot-tempered, but not to those who knew how to manage them; while these agents...." he made a violent gesture as if to knock someone down.
"Yes," replied Mathurin, "they are a bad lot."
"And Mademoiselle Ambroisine! She used to come to play with you, Eléonore, but particularly with Rousille, for she was between Eléonore and Rousille for age. I should say she must be about twenty-five by now. How pretty she used to look, with her lace frocks, her hair dressed like one of the saints in a church, her pretty laughing nods to everyone she met when she went into Sallertaine. Ah, what a pity that they have gone away. There are people who do not regret them; but I am not one of those!"
Mathurin shook his tawny head, and in a voice that rose at the slightest contradiction, exclaimed:
"What else could they do? They are ruined."
"Oh, ruined! Not so bad as that."
"You only need to look at the Château, shut up these eight years like a prison; only need to hear what people say. All their property is mortgaged; the notary makes no secret about it. You will see before long that La Fromentière is sold, and we with it!"
"No, Mathurin, that I shall not see, thank God, I shall be dead before that. Besides, our nobles are not like us, my boy; they always have property to come into when their own money runs a little short. I hope better things than you. It is my idea that M. Henri will one day come back to the Château, that he will stand just where you now are, and with outstretched hand, say: 'Good day, Father Lumineau!' and Mademoiselle Ambroisine too, who will be so delighted to kiss my two girls on both cheeks, as we do in the Marais, and cry, 'How do you do, Eléonore? How do you do, Marie-Rose?' Ah, it may all come about sooner than you suppose."
With eyes raised to the mantel-piece, the old man seemed to be seeing his master's daughter standing between his own two girls, while something like a tear moistened his eyelids.
But Mathurin, striking the table with his fist, said, as he turned his peevish face towards his father:
"Do you believe they are thinking of us? I tell you, no, unless it is about Midsummer. I'll wager that the keeper just now asked you again for the rent? The beggar only has that one word in his mouth."
Toussaint Lumineau leant back on the bench, thought for a moment, then said in a low voice:
"You are right. Only one never can tell if the master really did order him to speak as he did, Mathurin. He often invents words!"
"Yes, yes. And what did you answer?"
"That I would pay at Michaelmas."
"With what?"
A few minutes before the two girls had gone into the kitchen, to the left of the house-place, and thence came in the sound of running water and the washing of dishes. Every evening, at this hour, the men were left to themselves; it was the time when they discussed matters of interest. Already, in the previous year, the farmer had borrowed from his eldest son the larger portion of the money that he had inherited from his mother. He could therefore only hope for help from the younger; but of that he had so little doubt that, speaking in a low voice to avoid being overheard by his

daughters, he said:
"I was thinking that François would help."
François, roused from his sleepiness by the foregoing talk, answered hastily:
"No, no. Do not count on me. It cannot be done...." He had not the courage to look his father in the face as he spoke, but fixed his gaze on the ground like a schoolboy.
His father was not angry, he only replied gently:
"I would have repaid you, François, as I shall repay your brother. One year is not like another. Good times will come back to us." And he waited, looking at the thick tawny hair and bull neck of his eldest son that scarcely rose above the table. But François must have already made up his mind, and that very decidedly, for in a half-smothered voice he made answer:
"Father, I cannot; nor can Eléonore. Our money is our own, is it not? and each of us is free to use it as he or she pleases? Ours is already invested. What does it matter to us if the Marquis does have to wait a year for his money? You say he is so rich."
"What matter to us, François?" Then, and not till then, the father's voice rose and became authoritative. He did not put himself into a passion, he rather felt hurt as though not recognising his own flesh and blood; it was as if, all suddenly, there had dawned upon him without his understanding it the wide gulf that existed between the feelings of the present generation and the past, and he said:
"What you say is not to my taste, François Lumineau. For my part, I consider it a duty to pay what I owe—the family at the Château have never done me a wrong. I and your mother, and Mathurin, who have known them better than you, have always respected them; do you understand? They are perfectly justified in spending their wealth as it seems them best; that is a matter that does not concern us.... Not pay? And do you know that they could turn us out of La Fromentière?"
"Bah!" returned François. "And what does it matter whether we are here or elsewhere? as far as farming goes, it does not pay so mighty well anywhere."
Treacherously, without seeing the old man's pallor, struck to the heart, he thus seceded from La Fromentière. The sound of washing of dishes was heard no more in the adjacent kitchen, the girls were listening.
The farmer made no reply; but, rising, he drew himself up to his full height, passed before his son, his intimidated son, who watched him from the corner of his eye, and flung open the door that led into the courtyard. A rush of air, the scent of leaves, the breath of green fields, came into the heated room redolent of food. François, hastening to make off, sidled along the wall, passed through the kitchen, exchanging a few words with Eléonore as he went, and going through the girls' bedchamber went out into the night.
It was the farmer's custom every night to cross his threshold and breathe the fresh air before going to rest; to-night as usual he walked out to the middle of the courtyard to judge of the weather for the morrow. Some light clouds were gliding away towards the west, rear-guard of a bank of more extended clouds deep down in the horizon. Swept on by the wind to the neighbouring coast they formed themselves into transparent islands, separating abysses of deep-blue sky studded with stars. With the leisurely movement of a laden vessel the wind bore on towards the ever-changing sea the kiss of earth, the scent and thrill of vegetation, the scattered seeds, the germs entangled in the dust failing hither and thither in mysterious rain-showers, the voice of innumerable insects that sing in the grasses, and have no other witness than the winds.
There was a sense of content, a series of waves, as it were, of calm and fecundity following one upon the other, which should spread abroad in many a sea-solitude the scent of the harvests of France.
And the farmer, drinking in the air wherein floated the essence of his beloved Vendée, felt that love-thrill within him which, unable to express, he experienced for it to the very marrow of his bones.
"How is it with these young people," he thought, "that they can he indifferent to the farmstead? I have been young in my day, but it would have taken a good deal to make me leave La Fromentière. Perhaps they find it dull; the house is not like it was in my dear wife's time; I do not know how to keep them together as she did." And he thought of la mère Lumineau, the good, saving housewife, haughty towards strangers, loving to her own, who, with a word in the right place, could always so quietly influence and control her boys, and check the rivalry of her girls. Around him the stables, the barns, the huge hayrick glistened in the moonlight.
A distant shot resounded from the Marais. Toussaint heard it, and his thoughts turned at once to the man shooting. At the same instant a voice behind him exclaimed:
"There's another plover down for Rousille!"
"That's enough, Mathurin!" said his father, who, without looking back, had recognised the speaker. "Do not be telling tales, which you know irritate me, against your sister. I am troubled to-night, my boy, troubled enough about François."
The crutches striking on the gravel came nearer, and the farmer felt the shaggy head touch his shoulder as the cripple straightened himself.
"I am only speaking the truth, father," he said in a low voice, "these are no tales. It makes my blood boil to see this *Boquin* making love to my sister in order to get hold of our money, and play the master here. A fellow who has not a halfpenny to bless himself with! There is no time to be lost, if he is to be brought to his senses."
"Do you really believe," asked the father, bending down a little to him, "that a girl like Rousille would listen to my hired labourer? Does she care anything for him, Mathurin?"
It was a weakness of Toussaint Lumineau to lend too ready ear to the judgment and strictures of his eldest son. Even now that all hope had been abandoned of seeing him his successor; after all the many proofs experienced of the violence and malevolence of the cripple, he still retained predominant influence over the father.
"Father, they are lovers!" As a whispered breath the words came to the father's ear.
Rage at the happiness of others had distorted the younger man's features. Toussaint Lumineau looked down at the face raised to his, so white in the moonlight, and was struck by the air of suffering it wore.
"If you watched them as I do," continued his son, "you would see that though they never speak to each other indoors, outside they always contrive to meet. I have often caught them talking and laughing together like acknowledged lovers. You do not know that Jean Nesmy; he is audacity itself. He lets you think that he likes shooting, and I do not say but what he may, but he does not carry his love for it to that extent, I'll be bound. Is it only for his own pleasure that he is off to the far end of the Marais to shoot plovers; only for his own pleasure that he risks malarial fever fishing for eels; that he spends whole nights out after being hard at work all day? No, I tell you, it is for Rousille, for Rousille, for Rousille!" His voice had risen, it could be heard from within the house.
"I will be on the watch, my boy," returned his father soothingly, "do not you worry yourself."

"Ah, if I were you, I would go at dawn to-morrow along the road to the Marais, and if I caught them together...."
"Enough!" exclaimed his father, "you do yourself no good by so much talking, Mathurin. Here is Eléonore coming to help you in."
Eléonore had come, as usual, to help Mathurin up the steps, and unlace his boots. No sooner did she touch his arm than turning, he went in with her. The sound of crutches and of footsteps died away; the father was alone again.
"Come," he thought aloud, "if this be true, I will not suffer the laugh to last long against me in the Marais!" He drew in a deep breath of pure air, as though it were a bumper of wine, then to make sure that Rousille had not gone out again, he entered the house by the door in the middle, which was that of his daughter's bedchamber. All was dark within; a ray of moonlight fell across the well-waxed wardrobes furnishing the sides of the room—wardrobes always kept in perfect order by Eléonore and Rousille. The farmer felt his way round the huge walnut wood one which had formed his mother's dowry, had crossed the room, and was making his way out into the kitchen communicating with the large living-room where he and Mathurin slept, when behind him, in the angle of a bed, a shadowy form arose:
"Father!"
He stopped.
"Is it you, Rousille? Are you not in bed?"
"No, I was waiting for you. I wanted to say something to you." They were separated by the length of the room; the darkness was too great for them to see each other. "As François cannot give you his money, I have been thinking that I will give you mine."
"You are not afraid then that I shall not repay you?" the farmer asked harshly.
The girlish voice, as if discouraged by this reception, and checked in its enthusiasm, replied timidly:
"I will go to-morrow to fetch it ... the Michelonne's nephew has it.... I will, indeed, and you shall have it the day after to-morrow."
If a tear rolled down his cheeks, the farmer was unaware of it; he passed on into his own room.
Some minutes later, when Eléonore came into the room, a lighted candle in her hand, Marie-Rose was no longer beside her bed, but was standing before the open windows looking out on to the courtyard.
The farmhouse stood upon an eminence, and from this window there was a view over the low wall, and through the arched gateway to the slopes beyond, and even across the sedge-covered Marais.
The sisters often undressed without exchanging a word. Rousille was gazing straight before her into the clear moonlight; her accustomed eye could distinguish objects by it almost as accurately as by the light of day. Immediately beyond the wall came a group of elms, under shelter of which stood carts and ploughs, then a stretch of land lying fallow, and beyond that again the broad flat expanse of marshland, across which on most nights would come now faintly, now loudly, the sound of the roll of the ocean, as of some far-off chariot that never stopped. The immense grassy plain looked blue in the darkness; here and there the water of a dyke shone in the moonlight. A few distant lights, a window lit up, pierced the veil of mist that spread over the meadows. Unerringly Rousille could name each farmstead to herself by its beacon light, similar to that on the mast-head of a ship riding at anchor; La Pinçonnière, La Parée du Mont, both near; further away, Les Levrelles; then so distant that their lights were only visible at intervals, like tiny stars, La Terre-Aymont, La Seulière, Malabrit, and the flour-mill of Moque-Souris. By a group of starry points on the right, she could discern the town of Sallertaine standing out on an invisible mound in the middle of the Marais. Somewhere about there Jean Nesmy was wading among the reeds, for love of Rousille. So she continued to think of him; she seemed to see him so far, so very far away, amid the dreamy shadows, and her lips pressed together, then parted in a long, silent kiss.
There was a sudden swish of wings over the tiles of La Fromentière.
"Do shut the window, Rousille," said Eléonore, waking up. "It is the turn of the night, and blows in cold."
The sky was clear, the clouds had dispersed. The lights of Moque-Souris were extinguished; those of Sallertaine had gradually diminished like a bunch of currants pecked by birds.
"Until to-morrow, my Jean, in the dwarf orchard," murmured Rousille. And slowly, musingly, the girl began unfastening her dress by the light reflected from her white sheet, her young heart filled with dreams of youth.

CHAPTER III.

THE DWARF ORCHARD.

Towards four o'clock the stars began to fade in the sky, the first signs of daybreak to appear. A cock crowed. It was the same golden-feathered cock, with fiery eyes under his red crest, that crowed every morning. Marie-Rose had reared him. Now hearing it she thought, "Thank you, little cock!" Then began to dress quietly, for fear of rousing Eléonore, who still slept soundly.
She was quickly ready, and crossing the courtyard, turned to the left past the ruined wall by a grassy path on the farm property, strewn with fallen branches, which led down to the Marais. About some hundred yards from La Fromentière all vegetation abruptly ceased, and one came upon a low wall grown with lichen and moss, surrounding an orchard of about an acre in extent. Rousille, pushing open a gate in the middle of the wall, entered.
It was a curious sight, this dwarf orchard. The cider apple and pear trees with which it was planted had never been able to grow higher than the top of the wall on account of the strong winds that blew from the sea. Their stems were thick and gnarled, their branches all bent and driven towards the east; leafless above, they met and over-arched beneath. Looking at it from outside one simply saw a billowy mass of bare branches; but on making one's way down the central path, one found oneself in a leafy shade some four feet high, safe from inquisitive eyes, from rain and heat, and from the gales which sweep over the Marais. It was a sailor's folly, such as might be found in far-off isles. As a child, it had been Rousille's playground; now grown up, it was here she had come to meet her betrothed.
Entering, she stooped and made a path for herself towards the western wall, then sitting upon the forked branch of an

apple-tree, hidden among them like a partridge in a corn-field, she gazed out upon the vast plain along which Jean Nesmy must come.
At this early hour the Marais was covered with mists which did not rise, but parted ever and anon, undulating in the breeze. The solitude was unbroken, the atmosphere light, sensitive, nervous, carrying the faintest sound without diminution. The bark of a dog at Sallertaine came to her ears as if it were beside her. Great square corn-fields that looked like patches of grey fur stitched together faded away into nothing in the distance. Here and there canals, cutting each other at right angles, looked like tarnished mirrors, the mist curling in smoke above them. Then vaguely from out the fog darker outlines began to appear, like oases in the desert; they were farmhouses built on the low-lying ground of the marshland, with their outbuildings and groups of poplars to lend shade. Now the undulating veil of mist began to rise, rays of light touched the grasses, sheets of water sparkled like windows in a setting sun. For many a league, from the bay of Bourgneuf to Saint Gilles, the Marais of La Vendée had awakened to the light of a fresh day.
Rousille rejoiced in it. She loved her native soil, faithful, true, generous soil, ever yielding its increase whether in rain or sunshine; where one would sleep one's last sleep to the sighing of the wind, under the shelter of the Cross. She loved nothing better than that horizon where every tiniest road was familiar to her, from the fence that ran along the first meadow of La Fromentière close at hand, to the paths on the embankment which must be traversed pole in hand to jump the dykes.
"Four o'clock," she said to herself, "and he has not come back yet! What will father say?" She was beginning to grow uneasy, when, as she was gazing into the distance towards the pointed clock tower of Sallertaine, a voice startled her with:
"Rousille!" On the rising path, the marshland behind him, standing looking at her in the light of the early morning, was Jean Nesmy.
"I did not see you come," she said.
He laughed, and with a proud air raised above his head a bundle of feathers, four plovers and a teal tied together. The next moment, resting the gun he carried against the inside of the wall, and flinging over the birds, he dropped down beside Rousille.
"Rousille," he said, taking her hand under the arching apple-trees, "I have had luck! Four plovers and such fine ones! I had a couple of hours' sleep in the barn at La Pinçonnière, and if the farmer had not dragged me out this morning, I should have been late, I was so sound asleep. And you?"
"I," replied Marie-Rose, as he sat opposite to her, "I am afraid. Father spoke to me so angrily last night—he had been talking to Mathurin in the courtyard—they must know."
"Well, and if they do? I am doing nothing to anger them. I mean to win you by my work, to ask your father for your hand, and take you home as my wife."
She looked at him, happy, despite her fears, at the determination she read in the lad's face. And reserving her thought which answered yes, she said without direct reply:
"What is it like in your home?"
"In my home," replied Jean Nesmy, contracting his eyes as if to fix the picture thus evoked, and looking over Rousille's head—"in my home is my mother, who is old and poor. The house she lives in is called the Château, as I have told you before, in the parish of Châtelliers; but it is not by any means a castle, Rousille, only two rooms, in which live six little Nesmys besides myself, who am the eldest ... it was, as you know, on account of our poverty and the number of children that I could only serve one year in the army."
"Oh, yes, I remember," she answered, laughing, "that year seemed to me longer than any other."
"I am the eldest; then come two girls, who are growing up. They are not dressed altogether like you, for instance...."
An idea seized him, and with his hand quite near yet without touching Rousille, he sketched about the young girl's shoulders and waist, the little shawl and the long velvet ribbons encircling the bust. "All round there two rows of velvet; rich girls have even three. You would be charming, Rousille, in the costume of the Châtelliers and La Flocellière, for they dress in the same manner, the villages are quite close."
She laughed, as if caressed by the hand which never touched her, following its action with half-closed eyes.
"As you may suppose," he continued, "they only dress like that on Sundays! There would not be bread in the house every day if I did not send home the wages that your father gives me. Then I have two brothers who have finished their schooling, and look after cows and begin to do little odd jobs. The farmer who hires them gives them each one row of potatoes to dig up for their own. It is a great help!"
"So I should think!" returned Rousille, with an air of conviction
"But above all," continued the lad, "our air is superb. We have plenty of rain, indeed it rains without ceasing when the wind blows from Saint Michael, a place about one league from us. But immediately after we are in full sunshine; and as we have plenty of trees and moss and ferns about us, the air is a very joy to breathe, quite different from here; for our country is not at all like that of the Marais; it is all hills, here, there, and everywhere, big and little; there is no getting away from them. From any height it looks a perfect paradise. Ah, Rousille, if you only knew Le Bocage, and the moors of Nouzillac, you would never want to leave them!"
"And is the land tilled like this?"
"Very nearly, but much deeper. It takes strong oxen, sometimes six or eight to plough."
"Father uses as many, when it pleases him."
"Yes, for the honour of it, Rousille, because your father is a rich man. But down there, believe me, the soil has more granite and is harder to turn."
She hesitated a little, the smile left her face as she asked:
"Do the women work in the fields?"
"Oh, no, of course not," answered the lad warmly. "We respect and care for them as much as men do here in your Marais. Even my mother, who goes gleaning at harvest-time and when the chestnuts are gathered, is never seen working in the fields like a man. No, you may depend on it, our women are more indoors spinning, than doing out-of-door work."
Recalled to the stern conditions of his daily life, the young man grew grave, and added slowly:
"Rest assured, I will never slacken in my work. I am known for more than two leagues round Châtelliers as a lad who has no fear of hard work. We will have our own little house to ourselves, and if only I have your love, Rousille, like my father and mother, I will never complain of any hardships."
He had scarcely ended his speech of humble love-making when a voice from the road called:
"Rousille!"

"We are betrayed!" she said, turning pale. "It is father."
They both remained motionless, with beating hearts, thinking only of the voice that would call again.
And, in truth, it was now heard nearer.
"Rousille!"
She did not resist. Signing to Jean Nesmy to remain under cover of the trees, and bending half double, she made her way out to the path that divided the orchard. There straightening herself, she saw her father standing before her in the road. He looked at his daughter for a moment, as she presented herself, pale, breathless, dishevelled by the branches, then said:
"What were you doing there?"
She would not lie; she felt herself lost. In her trouble involuntarily she turned her head as if to invoke the protection of him in hiding, and there just behind, erect, quite close to her, Rousille saw her lover, who had come to her aid in the moment of danger. With an air of defiance he drew himself up, and strode in front of her. Then the girl ventured to look again at her father. He was no longer occupied with her, nor had he the angry aspect she expected to see; his expression was grave and sad, and he looked steadily at Jean Nesmy, who, pressing forward on the grassy walk, had stopped at the opening, within three feet of him:
"You here, my farm-servant!" he said.
Jean Nesmy made answer:
"Yes, I am here."
"You have been with Rousille, then?"
"And what is the harm?" inquired the lad, with a slight tremor, which he could not control, not of fear, but of the hot blood of youth.
There was no anger in the farmer's voice. With head bent on his breast, as of a master whose kindness has been abused, and who is sorrowing, he said with a sigh:
"Come you here, at once, with me."
Not a word to Marie-Rose, not one look. It was a matter to be settled among men first; the daughter did not count at present.
The farmer was already retracing his steps, walking with leisurely stride towards La Fromentière; Jean Nesmy followed at a short distance, his gun slung on his back, swinging the birds he had shot in one hand. Far behind them came Rousille in sore distress, sometimes looking at Jean Nesmy, sometimes at the master who was to decide his fate.
When the two men had gone into the courtyard, she did not dare to follow them in, but leaning against a pillar of the ruined gateway, half hidden behind it, her head on her arm, she waited to see what would happen.
Her father and his man, crossing the yard, proceeded to Jean Nesmy's room, which was to the left beyond the stables. There was no sound but the noise of wooden shoes on the gravel; but Rousille had seen the cripple crouching down in the first rays of the sun, beyond the stables; he was nodding his head with an air of satisfaction, his malicious eyes never leaving the stranger he had denounced, who, yesterday so happy, was now the culprit.
Not far off, François, on a ladder, was cutting out a wedge of hay from a rick, firm and compact as a wall; he, too, was watching slyly from under the brim of his hat, but there was no malice upon his phlegmatic countenance, nothing more than a mild curiosity broadening his lips into a half smile under the heavy yellow moustache. He did his work as slowly as possible so as to be able to remain there and see the end of it.
Toussaint Lumineau and his man had soon reached the shed piled with empty casks, baskets, spades, and pickaxes, that had for many a year served as sleeping-place for the farm-servants. The master sat down on the foot of the bed. The look on his face had not changed; it was still the dignified paternal look of one who regrets parting from a good servant, and yet is resolutely determined to suffer no encroachment upon his authority, no disrespect to his position. Leaning his elbow upon an old cask showing marks of tallow, on which Jean Nesmy used to rest his candle at night, he slowly raised his head, and in the daylight that streamed in at the open door, he at length addressed the young man, who was standing bare-headed in the middle of the shed.
"I hired you for forty pistoles," he said. "You received your wages at Midsummer; how much is now owing to you?"
The lad, absorbed, began counting and recounting with his fingers on his blouse, the veins of his forehead swelling with the effort; his eyes were fixed on the ground, and not another thought disturbed the complicated operation of the countryman calculating the price of his labour. During this time, the farmer mentally went over the brief history of his connection with the lad, who, come by chance to the Marais in search of burnt cow-dung, used by the Vendéens for manure, had been then and there hired by him, and had quickly fallen into the ways of his new master. The farmer thought of the three years that the stranger lad had lived under the roof of La Fromentière, one before his military training, two since; years of hard, thorough work, of good conduct, without having once given cause for serious reproof, of astonishing gentleness and submission despite his sons' hostility, which, manifested on the very first day, had never lessened.
"It should make ninety-five francs," said Jean Nesmy.
"That is what I make it," said the farmer. "Here is the money. Count and see if it is right." From his coat pocket where he had already placed them, Toussaint Lumineau drew out a number of silver pieces which he threw on the top of the cask. "Take it, lad."
Without touching the money Jean Nesmy had drawn back.
"You will not have me any longer at La Fromentière?"
"No, my lad, you are going." The old man's voice faltered, and he continued: "I am not sending you away because you are idle, nor even, though it did annoy me, because you are too fond of shooting wild-fowl. You have served me well. But my daughter is my own, Jean Nesmy, and I have not given my consent to your courting her."
"If she likes me, and I like her, Maître Lumineau?"
"You are not one of us, my poor boy. That a *Boquin* should marry a girl like Rousille is an impossibility, as you know. You should have thought of it before."
For the first time Jean Nesmy's face grew a shade paler, he half closed his eyes, the corners of his mouth drooped as though he were about to burst into tears. In a low voice he said:
"I will wait for her as long as you think fit. She is young, and so am I. Only say how long it must be, and I will submit."
But the farmer answered:
"No, it cannot be. You must go."
The young man quivered from head to foot. He hesitated for a moment, with knitted brows, his eyes fixed on the ground, then decided not to speak his thought: I will not give her up. I will come back. She shall be mine. True to the

taciturn race from which he sprang, he said nothing, took up the money, counted it, dropping the pieces one by one into his pocket as he did so. Then without another word, as though the farmer were not in existence, he began to collect his clothes and belongings. The blue blouse that he knotted by the sleeves to the barrel of his gun held them all, save a pair of boots that he slung on to a piece of string. When he had finished, he raised his hat, and went out.

It was broad sunshine. Jean Nesmy walked slowly; the strong will that dominated the slight youth made him hold his head high, and his eyes scanned the windows of the house seeking Rousille. She was nowhere to be seen. Then in the middle of the great courtyard, he, the hired servant, who had been dismissed, who had but another moment to tread the ground of La Fromentière, called:

"Rousille!"

A pointed coif appeared at the angle of the gateway; Rousille came forth from her shelter and ran to him, tears streaming down her face. But almost at the same moment she stopped, intimidated by the sight of her father on the threshold of the shed, and stricken with terror at a cry which, rising from that side of the courtyard, some fifty paces off, had caused Nesmy to turn his head:

"*Dannion!*"

A monstrous apparition came out from the stables. The cripple, bare-headed, with eyes bloodshot, inspired by impotent rage, had rushed out, with arms rigid on his crutches, his huge body shaking with the effort. Roaring like some wild beast with wide-open mouth he hurled the old cry of hatred at the stranger, the cry with which the children of the Marais greet the despised dwellers of the Bocage.

"*Dannion! Dannion Sarraillon*—look to yourself!"

Rushing with a speed that betokened the violence and strength of the man, he neared Nesmy. The rage in his heart, the jealousy that tortured him, the agony caused by the effort he was making, rendered the convulsed face terrible to behold, as it was projected forward by jerks; while onlookers could not but think, with a shudder, what a powerful man this deformed, unearthly looking creature had once been.

Seeing him come close up to the farm-servant, Rousille was terrified for the man she loved. She ran to Jean Nesmy, put her two hands on his arms, and drew him backward towards the road.

And, on her account, Jean Nesmy began to draw back, slowly, step by step, while the cripple, growing still more furious, shouted insultingly:

"Let go of my sister, *Dannion*!"

The farmer's loud voice interposed from the depths of the courtyard:

"Stop where you are, Mathurin; and you, Nesmy, loose your hold of my daughter!"

And he advanced to them, without haste, as a man not desiring to compromise his dignity. The cripple stopped short, let go of his crutches, and sank exhausted to the ground.

But Jean Nesmy continued to retreat. He had placed his hand in Rousille's; and soon they were within the portal of the gateway, framed in sunshine. There lay the road. The young man bent towards Rousille and kissed her cheek.

"Farewell, my Rousille," he said.

And she, running across the courtyard without looking back, her hands to her face, wept bitterly.

Having watched her disappear round the corner of the house by the barn, Nesmy called out:

"Mathurin Lumineau, I shall come back!"

"Only try!" retorted the cripple.

The whilom farm-servant of La Fromentière began to mount the hill beside the farm; clad in his russet work-day clothes he walked with difficulty as if worn out with fatigue. His whole wardrobe, slung on to his gun, consisted of but one coat, a blouse, three shirts, a couple of boxwood bird calls for quails that clapped together as he walked, and yet the load seemed heavy. A feeling of dismay at having to go back to the daily seeking of employment had come over him while making up the modest bundle. He was already thinking of his mother's alarm at this sudden return. Every step was a wrench from some loved object, for he had lived three years in this Fromentière. His heart was heavy with memories; he walked on slowly, looking at nothing yet seeing every stick and stone. The trees he brushed past had all been pruned by him, or flicked by his whip; every inch of ground had been ploughed and reaped by him; he knew how every furrow was to be sown on the morrow.

Having reached the back of the farm, at the rise of the road where formerly four mills had been busily grinding corn and now only two were at work, he turned to look back that he might increase the pain of parting.

Below him, bathed in sunlight, lay the plain of the Marais, where rushes, taking on their autumn array, formed golden circles round the meadows; there were farms distinguishable by their groups of poplars, inhabited islands in the desert of marshland, where he was leaving good friends, and the recollection of happy hours that come back in sorrow; his eyes scanned the crowded houses of Sallertaine and its church dominating them all, recalling bygone Sundays. Then, with his soul in his eyes, he bent them upon La Fromentière, as a bird would hover with wide extended wings.

From the height on which he stood the lad could discern the whole of the farm, even to its slightest details. One by one he counted the windows, the doors and gates, the paths round the fields along which every evening, for the last two years especially, he had never failed to sing as he drove the cattle homewards. When his eyes lighted on the dwarf orchard, so distant that it looked no larger than a pea-pod, he quickly turned away; as he did so, his foot struck against something in the path, it was a dog lying down, quite still.

"What, you, Bas-Rouge?" said Jean. "My poor doggie, you cannot follow me where I am going;" and, walking on, he stroked the dog's head between his ears, in the place where Rousille loved to fondle him. After some twenty paces, he said again:

"You must go back, Bas-Rouge. I do not belong to you any more."

Bas-Rouge trotted on a little further with his friend; but when they had reached the last hedge of La Fromentière, he stopped, and turned slowly homewards.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MICHELONNES.

"Rousille," said her father, as shortly before noon she went into the house to help her sister prepare dinner, "you will not take your meals with us either to-day, or for some days to come. A girl like Eléonore, who respects herself, would be ashamed to eat her food beside a young woman who could allow a penniless *Boquin* to make love to her. A pretty kind of lover! A fellow from I don't know where, who would not even have a wardrobe to furnish his house with! All very well for a serving-maid, such as they are in those parts; but the whole kit of them are not worth their salt in the Marais, those *dannions*! I am cured of taking them into my service. There must have been some fine tales going the round at my expense. And now, Rousille, mind that you conduct yourself properly; and take yourself out of my sight!"

So the farmer spoke, far more harshly than he felt, because Mathurin had been talking to him a long time after Nesmy had gone, and had inspired him with some of his resentment.

Marie-Rose made no reply, shed no tear, but withdrew to her room. She had no thought of dinner, either with or without them; but began to dress herself in her best, as for Sunday, taking by turns from the wardrobe a black skirt, raised from the ground by a broad tuck, showing the pretty feet beneath; her most dainty coif and embroidered pyramid of muslin kept in shape by silver paper that rested on her hair; open-work stockings; sabots, like the prow of a ship, so much did they turn up. A blue silk kerchief filled in the low bodice, as was the custom in the Marais; there only remained to smooth the bands of chestnut hair with a little water, to bathe her red eyes, then going out into the courtyard she turned off on the road to Sallertaine.

For the first time in her life she had a feeling of standing alone in the world. Mathurin did not love her; François did not understand her. André himself, the soldier brother so soon coming home, who had always been kind, only treated her as a child to be teased and petted. And she felt herself a woman—a woman who was learning to know sorrow, and one who needed to pour out her trouble to sympathetic ears.

Hitherto, if they were unkind, if they neglected her, she had never felt the need of telling her troubles to anyone; the thought of Jean Nesmy had been enough to make her forget them all. But now that he whom she loved had had to go, and that his going was the sorrow, her soul cried out for aid—sought some safe place wherein to rest. In her distress she thought of the sisters Michelonne. Rousille passed close beside the dwarf orchard; Rousille skirted the edge of the Marais whence can be seen Sallertaine upon its eminence. No, she had no other hope save in those two dear old friends; no other regret than that she had not before been to that little house in the town. The old sisters' warmth of heart seemed to her just now a thing of priceless worth, which, hitherto, had not been valued half enough. The mere thought of their round faces, withered and smiling, was a goal to her. It seemed as if only to see the Michelonnes, even if she might not speak one word of her trouble, would be a consolation, because of their kind hearts, and because, old maids though they were, they were not the people to gossip about a young girl's red eyes. What excuse could she make for going to them? Oh, it was very simple. She had promised to draw out her money and lend it to her father to pay the rent. She had only to say, "I have come for my money; father needs it." Then if they guessed the slightest thing, she would tell all, all her trouble, all the grief she could not endure alone.

It was close upon one o'clock. A mist of heat quivered over the meadows. Rousille walked fast. Now she had reached the Grand Canal, smooth as a mirror; there was the bridge across it, the winding road flanked on either side by the white-washed houses of the outskirts of Sallertaine, their orchards at the back looking towards the Marais. Rousille walks faster. She is afraid of being hailed and stopped, for the Lumineaus are known to everyone in the district. But the good folks are either taking their noonday sleep, or else without quitting their shady corners they call to her, "Good day, little one! How fast you are walking!" "Yes, I am in a hurry. Sometimes one is." "Yes, indeed," they reply, and on she goes. She has reached the long open Place that narrows as it reaches the church. Now she has only eyes for the humble dwelling which stands at the extreme end where the street is narrowest, facing the side door of the church by which the faithful enter on Sundays. It is a very little house, one window looks on to the Place, the other on to a steep lane, the three steps to the entrance are at the corner; it is also very old, and built under the shadow of the clock tower, beneath the peal of bells, thus nearer to Heaven.

The sisters Michelonne have lived there all their lives. Rousille can picture them within the walls; a half smile, a ray of hope crosses her sad face. She ascends the three steps, and pauses to regain breath.

When Rousille presses down the iron latch, the door opens to the tinkle of so tiny a bell that it would need the ears of a cat to hear it.

But they were true cats, ever on the watch, these two old sisters, cloak-makers to the whole of Sallertaine. Scarcely did they divine a visitor from the shadow cast through the glass door, than with simultaneous movement their chairs, always close together, were pushed back, their heads turned towards the door, and their busy hands sunk on their laps. The two sisters were very much alike; the same deep, arched wrinkles in the rosy faces, round the toothless mouths, round the short noses, round the blue, childlike eyes that had a light in them as of a perpetual laugh, and was the reflection of their sixty years of work, of sisterly affection, and their good consciences. There was also a twinkle in their eyes of fun without malice; a something as of the flame of youth economised in the course of their lives, and leaving a fund for their old age. Poverty had not been wanting, but it had always been borne by them together. From childhood's day they had worked side by side in the light of the same window, day rising and setting on their busy needles never at rest. There was no one in all Sallertaine, nor in Perrier, nor Saint Gervais who could cut and make cloaks as skilfully as they could; and they were general favourites. As soon as the weather was mild enough for them to stand a pot of ivy geranium on the sill and to sit by the open window, there was not a person coming down the lane, whether fisherman, sportsman, drover, or horse-breeder, who did not call in as he passed "Good day and good luck, *les Michelonnes*." To which they would make some kind reply in soft voices, so alike that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. They were asked to St. Sylvester gatherings because they had an inexhaustible store of songs, when young folks had long come to the end of all they knew.

The Curé said of them: "The flower of my flock; it is a pity they have no successors."

When Rose-Marie entered, they did not get up, but said both together, Adelaide at the window, Véronique a little away:

"It is you, little Lumineau! Good day, pretty one!"

"Sit down, child," said Adelaide, "you are quite out of breath."

"But not ill?" asked Véronique. "Your eyes are as bright as if you had fever?"

"Thank you, aunts," answered Marie-Rose. She called them aunts on account of a distant relationship difficult to establish, but principally on account of the old ladies' kindness. "I have been walking quickly, and I do feel a little tired. I have come for some of my money."

The sisters exchanged a side-look, laughing already at the thought of the coming marriage, and the eldest, Adelaide, drawing her needle across her lips as if to smooth out the wrinkles, asked:
"You are about to marry, then?"
"Oh, indeed no!" returned Marie-Rose, "I shall be married like you, my aunts, to my seat in church and my rosary. It is for father, who has not money to pay the rent of the farm; he is in arrears."
And as, while speaking, she did not look into her old friends' faces, but into the shade of the room, somewhere towards the two beds ranged along the side of the wall, the sisters Michelonne shook their heads as though to communicate the impression that, all the same, some disturbing element had entered into Rousille's life. But the sisters were more instinctively polite than curious. They reserved their thought for the long hours of chat together, and Adelaide, throwing down her half-finished work, clasping her white bony hands, and bending forward her thin body, said gaily:
"Well, my pretty one, you have come just at the right time! I had lent your money on interest to my nephew, who, you know, breeds foals, and very good ones, on the Marais. He is a sharp fellow, that François. Would you believe it, yesterday he actually sold his dappled grey filly—that flies like a plover, and was the envy of all the breeders and dannions that went by the meadow—and for such a big price that he would not even tell us the amount. So, you see, it will be quite easy for him to pay back a good part of the loan. How much will you want?"
"A hundred and twenty pistoles."
"You shall have them. Are they wanted at once?"
"Yes, Aunt Adelaide. I promised them by to-morrow."
"Then, Véronique, my girl, suppose you were to go to our nephew? The cloak can well wait an hour."
The younger sister rose at once; she was so short standing, that she did not reach above the head of Marie-Rose sitting. Rapidly shaking off the threads of cotton from her black apron, she kissed the girl on both cheeks:
"Good-bye, Rousille. To-morrow the money will be here, and you will only have to come and fetch it."
In the quiet of the sleepy town, Véronique's gliding steps could be heard as they went down the lane. No sooner had she gone than Adelaide went up to Marie-Rose and fixing upon the girl her clear kind eyes, her eyelids quivering with uneasiness:
"Child," she said hurriedly, "you are in trouble; you have been crying. Why, you are crying now!" The wrinkled hand seized the girl's pink palm. "What is it, my Rousille? Tell me, as you would tell your own mother. I love you as she would do."
Marie-Rose repressed her tears. She would not cry when she could speak. Trembling at the contact of the hand which touched her own, her eyes like diamonds, her face set, as though she were addressing those enemies before whom her tongue had been tied:
"They have sent away Jean Nesmy," she said rising.
"He, my dear? Such a good worker? And why?"
"Because I love him, Aunt Michelonne. They turned him out this morning. And they think that all is over between us because I shall not see him again. They little know the girls of these parts."
"Well said, *Maraîchine*," exclaimed the old aunt.
"I will give them all my money, yes, readily; but my love—where I have placed it there I will leave it. It is as sacred as my baptismal vows. I have no fear of poverty; no fear that he will forget me. The day he comes back, for he has promised to come back, I will go to meet him, and no one shall prevent me—had I to cross the Marais, were there snow and ice, and all the girls of the town to mock at me, did my father and my brothers forbid me to go, still I would do it!"
Erect, passionate, she made the walls of the little room unused to loud voices ring with the voice of love and bitterness. It was to herself, herself only, that she spoke, because she suffered. She was looking straight before her, vaguely, apparently unaware of the Michelonne's presence.
Adelaide, however, had risen, and was listening, agitated and excited, so struck by Rousille's words, so carried out of the restricted circle of everyday thought, that all the calm had vanished from her face, and the quiet old maid, oppressed by the small cares of life, seemed transformed into a woman—a woman who remembered and had regained her youth to suffer with the other.
"You are right, dear child. I thoroughly approve. Love him truly!"
At these words Rousille, looking down at the old lady, had the revelation of a being hitherto unknown to her. There was a light in her face; the poor arms, helpless from rheumatism, were held out towards Rousille trembling with emotion.
"Yes, love him truly. Your happiness is with him. Leave it to time, but do not yield, my Rousille, for I know others who in their youth refused to marry to please their fathers, and who had such difficulty afterwards to kill their hearts! Do not live alone, it is worse than death! Your Nesmy, I know him—your Nesmy and you are true lovers of the soil, such as the land can boast but few nowadays, and if old Aunt Adelaide can help you, defend you, give you what is wanted to enable you to marry, come to me, my child, at any time, come!"
She was holding Rousille now in close embrace, the girl bending over the little black-robed figure and suffering her tears to flow on the friendly shoulder, now that she had unburdened her heart.
For a moment the room was as silent as was the town slumbering in the mid-day sun. Then the Michelonne, gently disengaging herself from the girl's arms, went towards the window, standing where she could not be seen from outside. Between the roofs of two adjoining houses, looking westwards, was set, as in a frame, a corner of the Marais, its reddish-brown rushes finally fading away on the horizon.
"It was Mathurin, was it not, who denounced you?" she asked in a low voice.
"Yes, he was always watching me."
"He is jealous, you see. He has a grudge against you."
"For what, poor creature!"
"Your youth, my poor child. He is jealous of all who take the place that should have been his; jealous of François, of André, of you. He is like a lost soul when he hears that anyone but himself is to manage your father's farm. Shall I tell you all?"
Her frail hand uplifted, she pointed to the distant Marais, where the poplars, tiny as grains of oats, were standing out against the sky.
"Well, he still thinks of Félicité."
"Poor brother!" exclaimed Rousille, nodding her head. "If he is still thinking of her, she is only making fun of him."
"Innocent," returned the old woman in a whisper, "I know what I know. Beware of Mathurin, he has drunk too deeply of love to forget. Beware of Félicité Gauvrit, because she is furious that being an heiress, no suitors come to her."
Rousille was about to reply. Adelaide made her a sign to keep silence; she had heard a footstep in the lane. Hastily

drying her eyes, the old lady re-seated herself and picked up her work, like a child surprised in some fault by her mother. A pair of sabots was heard at the foot of the wall, they passed the doorsteps, and went on down the Place. It was not Véronique. Marie-Rose had drawn back; she was looking at her one friend, so old, so worn, so timid, yet whose heart was so young. And she thought no more of what she had been about to reply; she only said simply:
"Good-bye, Aunt Michelonne. If I need help I shall know where to come."
"Good-bye, dear child. Beware of Mathurin. Beware of the girl out there!"
They said no more in words, only their eyes were fixed on each other's, Rousille looking back until she had reached the door; then the latch was lifted, fell back into its socket, and there only remained in the silent chamber a little old woman stooping down over her black work, but who could not see her needle for the mist of tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER V.

PLOUGHING IN SEPTEMBER.

It was Monday, the third day after Rousille had seen the Michelonnes. On the previous day, from morn till eve, storm clouds, rising out of the sea, had discharged their contents on the arid earth, as pockets full of corn are scattered by the sower. Showers of leaves, mostly from the topmost branches, had fallen; others, heavy with moisture, hung pendant. An aroma of damp earth rose up to the calm, milky sky; there was not a breath stirring, the birds were silenced, the land seemed intent upon the last drops of rain formed during the night, that came crashing down at the foot of the trees with a ring as of falling glass. Something in Nature seemed to have died with the last breath of summer, and the whole earth to be conscious of its loss.
And in truth, on the hills of Chalons, the most distant area of La Fromentière, the far-off grinding of a plough, and the calls of the man to his oxen, proclaimed that Autumn labour had begun.
In the farm bakery, left of the building, and dividing their room from that of François, Eléonore and Marie-Rose were engaged heating the oven. From the semicircular opening flames were shooting up, now in heavy wreaths, now in groups of red petals set on upright stems. Eléonore standing before it, in a print gown, was feeding the oven with faggots of bramble, thrusting them with an iron fork into the furnace. Marie-Rose was busily going backwards and forwards bringing in the baskets of dough. They did not speak; for a long time there had been a coolness between the sisters. But as for the tenth time Eléonore looked towards the door, as if expecting to see some person or thing in the courtyard, Rousille asked:
"What are you expecting, Eléonore?"
"Nothing," was the cross reply. "I am hot. My eyes smart." And she busied herself with separating the burning embers, arranging them in layers at the sides of the oven; this finished:
"Help me to fill the oven," she said.
One by one the loaves of leavened dough were placed by Rousille upon a large flat shovel, which Eléonore slid over the burning bricks, and drew out again with a sharp jerk. Twenty loaves there were of twelve pound each; enough wherewith to feed all at La Fromentière, and to give to the poor of Monday for a fortnight. The last having been placed, Eléonore closed the mouth of the oven with an iron plate; the sisters had wiped their hot cheeks with their sleeves, the smell of new bread was beginning to be perceptible through the chinks of the oven, when a loud laughing voice called in from the yard:
"M François Lumineau. Is he at home?" and the postman, a visitor who had been seen fairly often at La Fromentière for some months past, held out a letter with printed heading on it. He added jocosely, for something to say:
"Another letter from the State Railways, Mam'selle Eléonore. Any of you got friends there?"
"Thank you," returned Eléonore, hastily taking the letter and putting it into the pocket of her apron, "I will give it to my brother. Fine weather to-day for your round?"
"Aye, that it is. Better than for heating the oven I should say by the look of you." The man made a half-turn on his well-worn shoes, and went his way in the steady jog-trot of seven leagues a day at thirty sous.
Eléonore, leaning against the doorpost, paid no further attention to him; she was gazing, as if hypnotized, on the corner of white paper that protruded from her pocket. She seemed strangely agitated, her eyelids swelled, her breast heaved beneath the calico bodice all streaked with flour and soot.
"There is some secret, I am sure," exclaimed Marie-Rose from behind her. "I do not ask what it is, I am accustomed at home to be left to myself. But still I cannot help seeing what is going on; only yesterday, after mass, you and François went off by yourselves to read some paper in the lane by the Michelonnes, I was there to fetch my money, and saw you gesticulating.... And now you are crying. It is hard, Eléonore, to see one's sister cry and not to know the reason—not to be able to say one word to comfort her."
To Rousille's intense surprise, Eléonore, without turning, held out a trembling hand towards her, and drew her younger sister tumultuously to her beating heart; and for the first time for many years, overcome with emotion, she leant her cheek on Rousille's, then suddenly broke out into sobs.
"Yes," she sobbed, "there is a secret, my poor Rousille, such a secret that I can never have the like again in all my life. I cannot tell it to you ... it is there in the letter ... but François must read it first, and then father—Heavens! what an unhappy girl I am!"
Tenderly Rousille pressed her face against her sister's all bathed in tears.
"But the secret, Eléonore, it only concerns François, does it?"
"No, me too; me too! Oh, when you hear it, Rousille.... It was François who persuaded me, he talked until I yielded ... and then I signed ... and now it is all done. Still, were it not for him, I feel that even now I could not do it; I would break the agreement—I would refuse."
"You are going, Eléonore?" cried the girl, drawing back.
Her sister's white face was the only answer.

"You are going?" she repeated. "Oh, where? Oh, do not leave us."
Eléonore, stupefied for the moment, now gave way to a feeling of anger, and repulsed the girl whom the instant before she had drawn to her.
"Hold your tongue!" she said roughly. "Do not talk like that. Are you going to tell tales of us?"
"I have no wish to do so."
"They are coming. You heard them. You said it aloud for them to hear, you sneak!"
"Indeed, I did not."
"They are coming. Hark!"
The distant footsteps of the men, one following the other, were audible. They were returning for the mid-day meal.
Eléonore, in terror, almost suppliant, her voice shaken with emotion, ejaculated:
"Mathurin is coming first—if only he did not hear what you were saying, Rousille. If he catches sight of me, he will guess everything.... I dare not go back into the house with such red eyes. You take my place. Go and pour out the soup, I will be with you in a moment."
The men went into the house, walking in their usual leisurely manner; François alone had a presentiment of the news awaiting them. The hot sun had dried the moisture on grass and leaves, a soft haze lay all around, the air was mild and balmy; linnets, innumerable, had settled on the waggon-ruts, where lay thistles trodden down by the oxen. An aroma of hot bread pervaded the farmyard, and cheered by the wholesome smell the fine old farmer entered the house-place, whither Mathurin had preceded him.
As soon as they had disappeared within the house, Eléonore, who had been watching at the door of the bakery, crossed the yard to the stable where François, having deposited his load of maize, was coiling up the rope by which he had carried it.
"François," she exclaimed, "they want you. Your letter has been burning me like fire." And still quite pale, Eléonore held out the letter, watching it pass from her hands to those of her brother with a nervous dread of the unknown future.
"When is it?" she asked. "Be quick!"
Without showing any emotion François tried to smile, as though to mark masculine superiority over the weaker sex, as he proceeded deliberately to open the envelope with his thick, moist fingers. He read, reflected for a moment, then answered:
"Humph! to-morrow."
"To-morrow?"
"Yes, I have to be at La Roche at noon, to begin work on the railway."
Eléonore covered her face with both hands.
"Oh, I say, don't you go and leave me now," he continued. "Do you want to?"
"No, François, but to go to-morrow—to-morrow!"
"Not to-morrow, to-night—at once. You ought to have expected it. Why, you engaged with the owner of the coffee shop in Rue Neuve two months ago. Did you sign the lease or not?"
"Yes."
"Did you promise to keep house for me?"
"Yes, François."
"When you bothered me to find you a good place at La Roche, did I not trouble myself about you on the condition that you would keep house for me? Yes or no? Of course, I want someone, and now you are not willing to go?"
"I do not say...."
"Oh, well. I shall tell father presently what you promised. Stay behind, if you like; but I warn you they will lead you a pretty life at La Fromentière when I am gone; without mentioning the action the landlord at La Roche will bring against you at once, do you understand? at once, if you refuse to take the shop you have rented. Stay, if you like. I am going!"
She raised her arms above her head and always under the impression of the moment, said:
"I will go; whatever time you like, I will be ready. Only I cannot hear you tell father. Do not speak to him when I am there." She hurriedly left the stable and went into the house to serve the dinner, whilst François proceeded to give the oxen their forage, taking as much time over it as he could.
Toussaint Lumineau was quietly talking with Mathurin. Sitting side by side at the table, they watched their steaming plates of soup cool as they discussed the new farm-servant whom it was necessary to engage shortly.
"I will hire him at Chalons fair," said the father.
"That will be too late."
"We must do our best till then, my boy. I will look out for a strong fellow, a lad from these parts."
"Yes, no *Boquin*, above all things! We know what they are!"
Toussaint Lumineau shook his head as he replied gently:
"Do not wrong the lad, Mathurin. I sent Jean Nesmy away, and for a reason. But as regards work, I have nothing but good to say of him; he worked well, and he loved farming, whilst others...." Little Rousille was listening with eyes lowered, standing like a statue by the window. François entered. "Whilst others," continued the farmer, slightly raising his voice, "do not show as much energy as they might. Eh, my François?"
The fair, ruddy-cheeked youth shrugged his shoulders as he took his seat.
"The work is too hard," he said. "Since I came back I have felt that I cannot accustom myself to that kind of thing."
"Oh, you half of a man," cried Mathurin. "Are you not ashamed of yourself? If I could but walk, our father would have no need to hire anyone. Look at these arms," and he held them out, the muscles showing under his coat sleeves like knots of an oak-tree imprisoned within the bark, while his face was suffused with crimson, the veins of his forehead swelled, and his eyes were bloodshot.
"My poor boy!" said his father, touching his hand to calm him. "My poor boy, I well know your misfortune has cost La Fromentière dear." Then after a short silence, he added: "Still we will get through some good work, children, with François and Driot, who will soon be home, and the man I am about to hire. I have a mind to start to-day on the field of La Cailleterie, that has lain fallow there two years. The rain we have had must have softened the ground, the plough will bite."
Eléonore, who had just then pushed open the inner door, stopped tremblingly, seeing François in the act of moving his lips as if to speak and tell their secret. But no word escaped the young man's lips during the remainder of the meal. Towards the end, as they were rising from table, Mathurin, looking at the sky through the smoke-begrimed windows, said:
"Father, will you take me up there in the cart?"

"Of course I will. Go fetch the cart, Eléonore, and you, François, yoke the oxen."
The farmer was well-nigh gay; the young people thought his mind was dwelling upon Driot, whose name was now so constantly upon his lips. But it was nothing but the first tillage of the season that made him so content.
A quarter of an hour later the farmer passed round his body the strap fixed to the box on wheels in which the cripple was seated and began dragging it as one tows a boat; the oxen, led by François, going on in front. They took the same road which Jean Nesmy had taken the morning of his dismissal; his footprints were still visible in the dust. There were four superb oxen, preceded by a grey mare, Noblet, Cavalier, Paladin, and Matelot, all with tawny coats, widespread horns, high backs, and slow supple gait. With perfect ease they drew the plough, the share raised, up the steep ascent; and when a trail of bramble across their path tempted them, they would simultaneously slacken speed, and the iron chain that linked the foremost couple to the beam would clank on the ground. François walked gloomily beside them, deep in thought on matters not connected with the day's work.
Those following him, the farmer and his crippled son, were equally silent, but their thoughts were centred on the soil over which they were passing; and with the like sense of peaceful content their eyes roamed over gates, ditches, fields, their minds filled with the same simple interests. With them meditation was a sign of their calling, the mark of the noble vocation of those by whose labours the world is fed. Arrived at the top of the knoll in the field of La Cailleterie, his father helped Mathurin out of the little cart to the foot of an ash-tree, whose branches threw a light shadow over the slope. Before them the fallow land, covered with weeds and ferns, fell away in an even descent, surrounded by hedges on the four sides. Looking down the slope and over the lower hedge could be seen the Marais fading away in the distance like a blue plain.
And now the farmer, having loosened the pin that held the share, himself guided the plough to the extreme left of the field, and put it in place.
"You stay there in the sun," he said to Mathurin. "And you, François, lead your oxen straight. This is a grand day for ploughing. Ohé! Noblet, Cavalier, Paladin, Matelot!"
A cut of the whip sent the mare off, the four oxen lowered their horns and extended their hocks, the ploughshare cut into the earth with the noise of a scythe being whetted; the earth parted in brown clods that formed high ridges on either side, falling back in powdery masses upon themselves like water divided by the bow of a ship. The well-trained oxen went straight and steadily. Their muscles under the supple skin moved regularly and without more apparent effort than if they had been drawing an empty cart upon an even road. Weeds lay uprooted in the ruts; trefoil, wild oats, plantains, pimpernels, broom, its yellow blossoms already mixed with brown pods, brakes folded back on their long stems like young oaks cut down. A haze ascended from the upturned earth exposed to the heat of the sun; in front the dust raised by the feet of the oxen caused the team to proceed in a ruddy aureole, through which numberless gnats and flies were darting.
Mathurin, in the shade of the mountain ash, looked on with envy as the team descended the slope of the hill, and the forms of his father and brother, the oxen and mare, grew smaller in the distance.
"François," exclaimed his father, enjoying the feeling of the shaft under his hand, "François, see to Noblet, he is slackening. Touch up Matelot! The mare is drawing to the left. Brisk up, my boy, you look half asleep!"
And, in truth, François was taking no interest in guiding the plough. He was feeling that the time had come for him to speak, and the difficulty of beginning made him walk with head downcast. At the far end of the field they turned and began the ascent, the plough marking a second line of furrows beside the first. From where Mathurin sat he had lost sight of them on the low ground; now the horns of the oxen and his brother's goad came into view, and, to greet the return of the plough, he began with stentorian voice to chant the slow refrain which can be varied or ended at pleasure. The notes were flung far and wide from his powerful chest, embellished with *fioriture* ancient as the art of ploughing itself. The oxen knew the rhythm, and stepped in time to it; the cadence accompanied the groan of the wheels on their axes; borne on the air, it was wafted afar o'er the hedges, telling other labourers in fields that the plough was at work on the fallow land of La Cailleterie. The cadence rejoiced the farmer's heart. But François remained gloomy. As the plough neared the shade of the ash-tree, Mathurin, whose thoughts were always busied with the future of La Fromentière, said:
"Father, it would be a good thing to re-plant our vineyard that is dying off. As soon as Driot is home we should do it; what think you?"
The farmer stayed his oxen, lifted his hat to cool his hot head, and smiled, well pleased.
"You are always thinking of something to the point, Mathurin. If the wheat comes up well in La Cailleterie, faith of a Lumineau! I will lay in a stock of vines. I am hopeful of our work to-day. Come on, youngster, straighten the harness. Look to your mare, she is hot; coax her a bit, walk beside her, that she may see you and go more quietly."
The team moved off again; a mist of heat enveloped men and beasts; the air was thick with flies; turtle-doves, gorged with seed, took shelter in the ash-trees from the burning heat of the stubble fields. The cripple had ceased his song, and the farmer, as they got to the middle of the field, said:
"It is your turn to tune up now, François. Sing, boy, it will gladden your heart!"
The young man went on a few paces, then began: "Oh! oh! my men, oh! oh! oh!" His voice, of higher register than Mathurin's, made the oxen prick up their ears as it faltered past them; then, all suddenly, it came to a dead stop, rendered mute by the fear that mastered the singer. He pulled himself together, raised his head, and, looking towards the Marais, made a fresh effort; a few more notes faltered out, then a sob choked them, and, crimson with shame, the young man resumed his way in silence, his face turned towards the fallow land, walking in front of his father, who looked at him across the croup of the oxen. No word was said by either until the farmer had finished the furrow; then, at the end of the field, Toussaint Lumineau, troubled to the very depths of his soul, said:
"You have news for me, François, what is it?"
They were some three feet apart, the father standing level with the hedge, his son on the far side of the plough at the head of the oxen.
"That I am going away, father."
"What, François? The heat has turned your head, my boy. Are you feeling ill?" But from the expression of his son's eyes he quickly saw that this was a very different thing from some passing illness; that misfortune was coming.
François had made up his mind to speak. With one hand resting on Noblet's back, as if to support himself, trembling and nervous, yet with hard, insolent look, he cried:
"I have had enough of this. I shall cut it."
"Enough of what, my lad?"
"Enough of digging the ground, enough of looking after the cattle, enough of drudgery at seven-and-twenty to make

money that all goes to pay the rent of the farm. I mean to be my own master, and make money for myself. I have got a situation on the railway, and I begin to-morrow—to-morrow, do you hear?" His voice rose in a kind of frenzy.
"I am accepted; there is nothing more to be said. The thing is done. I am taking Eléonore to La Roche to keep house for me. She, too, has had enough of this. She has found a good place, a shop where she will make more than with you; at any rate, she will have a chance of marrying.... And I don't see that we have acted badly towards you in what we have done. Don't say that we have! And don't make that rueful face about it! We have served our time with you, father, have waited patiently for André's return. Now that he is coming home, let him help you. It is his turn."
The unexpected blow had stupefied the farmer; he had grown very white. With set teeth, one arm resting on the plough, he remained speechless, his eyes fixed upon François as if demented. Slowly the full force of the situation, with all its pain, filtered into his soul.
"But, François, what you tell me cannot be true; Eléonore never complained of her work."
"Oh yes, she has; not to you."
"As for you, you have always had plenty of help. If I have sometimes reproached you for idleness, it has been because times are hard for everyone. But now that I am going to take on a farm-servant, now that another fortnight will see Driot home, we shall be four of us, counting myself, who am still of some use. You will not go, François?"
"Yes."
"Where will you do better than at home? Have you been short of food?"
"No."
"Have I ever refused you clothes, or even money for your tobacco?"
"No."
"François, it must be that military service has changed your heart towards us."
"That may be."
"But say that you will not leave us?"
The young man put his hand into his coat pocket, and held out the letter.
"I have to be there at noon to-morrow," he said. "If you don't believe me, read for yourself."
The father stretched out his hand across the team for the letter, trembling so much that he could scarcely take it. Once in his hands, without opening it, in a sudden access of indignation he crumpled and tore it into atoms, then crushed the pieces under his sabots into the soft earth.
"There," he cried, "is an end to the letter. Now are you going?"
"That alters nothing," returned François.
He would have passed his father, but a powerful hand was laid upon his shoulders, a voice commanded:
"Stay here!"
And the son was constrained to stay.
"Who engaged you, François?"
"The head of the office."
"No; who advised you? You did not do this thing by yourself, you had the help of some gentleman. Who was it?"
The young man hesitated for a moment, then, feeling himself a prisoner, stammered out:
"M. Meffray."
With one thrust the farmer sent him flying.
"Run; harness La Rousse to the dog-cart. Quick! I am going myself to M. Meffray."
So he shouted in his rage. But when he saw his son obey him and take the path towards the farm—when he found himself alone in the far end of his field, he was seized with anguish. So far he had ever found help in the difficulties of his life; this time, taken unawares by danger in the full swing of work, he turned him slowly round as if moved by habit, and searched the landscape as far as his eyes would carry, for a helper, a support, someone who should defend his cause and advise with him. His oxen standing still, looked at him out of their large soft eyes. The first object he saw, in among the trees, was the belfry of Sallertaine. He shook his head. No, the Curé, the good old friend he consulted so willingly, could do nothing. Toussaint Lumineau knew him to be powerless against town officials and authorities, all the great unknown outside the parish. His gaze left the church, passed over the farm without stopping, but rested awhile on the pointed roofs of La Fromentière. Ah! were the Marquis but there! He feared nothing: neither uniforms, nor titles, nor long words that poor uncultured people could not understand. And expense was nothing to him. He would have made the journey from Paris to prevent a *Maraîchin* from leaving the soil. Alas! the Château was empty. No longer the Master to appeal to.... The old farmer's eyes fell upon the two newly made furrows rising before him to the ash-tree on the hill; then it struck him that Mathurin was waiting and wondering, and that he must say something to prevent his growing uneasy.
"Ohé!" cried he, "Lumineau!"
Over the curve of the hill, through the still air, a voice replied:
"Here I am. You are not coming up again?"
"No; the chain has snapped. I must take back the team."
"All right."
"Do not mind waiting a bit; Rousille will come to fetch you. I am going round by the slope of the meadow."
At the foot of the field, filled in with bundles of thorn, was a gap in the hedge leading on to a narrow slip of meadow, and thence to the farm. To avoid having to answer Mathurin's questions, the farmer touched up his oxen and took this way back. In the middle of the courtyard he perceived the dog-cart already harnessed, François standing beside it in his Sunday clothes.
"Fasten up the oxen," he said roughly. Then, passing in front of him, he opened the house door and called:
"Eléonore!"
There was no answer. Going through the house-place he passed into the kitchen, where he met Rousille.
"Where is your sister?"
"She was talking to François in the courtyard just now. Shall I look for her?"
"No, that will do. I will see her later on. Rousille, we have some business at Chalons, François and I. We shall be back before supper. Go to Mathurin, who will be tired of waiting so long at La Cailleterie, and bring him back."
Without another word, the farmer returned to the yard, where François awaited him. Getting into the cart, he signed to his son to take the place beside him, and with a cut of the whip sent the mare, unaccustomed to such harsh usage, off at a gallop.
"Where are they going at such speed?" thought the few spectators whom they passed on their way—spectators whom

nothing escapes: innkeepers standing at their doors, tramps on the highway, peasants lopping the trees. "What has come to them? Old Lumineau is lashing La Rousse, and jerking the reins like a groom afraid of his master, and not a word does he say to his lad."

In fact the farmer's wrath was growing as he meditated his wrongs; he muttered between his teeth what he would say to that Meffray, while his stalwart arms, eager for strife and vengeance, lashed into the mare. François, on the contrary, exhausted by the effort he had made, had relapsed into his usual apathy, and suffered himself to be carried on towards his fate, looking at the hedges with vacant stare.

It was he, who on arrival at the Place by the Halles-Neuves of Chalons, jumped down and tied the mare to a ring attached to one of the pillars; then followed his father who turned up one of the streets on the left, and stopped before a modern, narrow, red-brick building. An iron plate, under the door bell, was inscribed, "Jules Meffray, Ex-Sheriff's Officer, Town Councillor."

The farmer pulled the bell vigorously.

"Is your master in?" he asked the servant who opened the door.

The girl examined the peasant who inquired for her master in a tone and look not of the pleasantest, and who presented himself in work-day clothes soiled with mud, and replied:

"I think he is. What may be your business?"

"Tell him that Toussaint Lumineau, of La Fromentière, wants to speak to him; and let him be quick, I am in a hurry."

Astonished, not daring to show Lumineau into the dining-room where M. Meffray was wont to receive his clients, the maid left the farmer and his son standing in the shabby passage at the foot of the stairs. So taken aback was she, that she did not see the shamefaced François hidden in the background, but only the stalwart old peasant, whose broad shoulders almost blocked the way as he stood erect, hat on head, under the ill-kept hall lamp that was never lighted.

A few seconds later the garden door opened, and a tall, stout man came in, dressed in a white flannel suit, a cap of the same material on his head; his face was clean-shaven, his small eyes blinking, probably with the sudden change from the outer glare. This was M. Meffray, member for Chalons, an ambitious small tradesman, who, originally one of them, was possessed by a secret animosity towards the peasant class; and who, living amongst them, had only learnt to know their defects of which he made use.

Informed of the manner in which Lumineau had presented himself, dreading some violence, he stopped short at the foot of the staircase, rested his elbow on the banisters, and touching the brim of his cap with three fingers, said carelessly:

"They should have shown you in, farmer. But as it seems that you are in haste, we can talk just as well here. I have done your son a service, is that your reason for coming?"

"Just so," returned Lumineau.

"Can I do anything more for you?"

"I want to keep my boy, M. Meffray."

"Keep him? What do you mean?"

"Yes; that you should undo what you have done."

"But that depends upon him. Have you had your summons, François?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my friend, if you do not want to take the post, there is no lack of candidates to fill your place, as you know. I have now ten other applications which I have far more reason to support than I had yours. For after all, you Lumineaus, you do not vote with us in the elections. So do you wish to give up the place?"

"No, sir."

"It is I who will not have him go," broke in Toussaint Lumineau, "I want him at La Fromentière."

"But he is of age, farmer!"

"He is my son, M. Meffray. It is his part to work for me. Put yourself in my place, I who am an old man. I had counted on leaving my farm to him, as my father left it to me. He goes away, and takes my daughter with him. So I lose two children, and through your fault."

"Excuse me; I did not seek him; he came to me."

"But without you he would not be going, nor Eléonore either! They had to have recommendations. You call that doing a service, M. Meffray? Did you even know what would be best for François—had you ever seen him in his home to know if he was unhappy there? Monsieur Meffray, you must give him back to me."

"Settle it with your son. It does not concern me."

"You will not speak to those who have entrapped my son, and annul the agreement?" Advancing a step, and pointing at him with extended arm, Toussaint Lumineau said in a loud voice: "Then you have done my son more harm in one single day than I in all my life."

M. Meffray's heavy face crimsoned.

"Be off, old hound!" he shouted. "Be off, take your son! Manage your own affairs. Ah! these peasants! Such are the thanks one gets for troubling about them!"

The farmer seemed not to have heard; he remained motionless. But there was a strange fire in his eyes; from the depths of his tortured heart, from the depths of the faith taught to his race for generations past, the words came to his lips:

"You shall answer for them," he said.

"How so?"

"There where they are going they will both be lost, M. Meffray. You shall answer for their eternal perdition."

As though stupefied by a speech so unlike any he had ever heard, the town councillor made no reply; it needed time for him to take in an idea so different from those usually filling his mind; then throwing a contemptuous glance at the huge peasant standing erect before him, he turned on his heel, and moved to the garden door, with a muttered:

"Boor—go!"

Toussaint Lumineau and his son went out into the street, walking silently side by side until they reached the Place. There the father, unfastening the mare, said as he was about to put his foot on the step of the cart:

"Get up, François. We will go home."

But the young man drew back.

"No," he said, "the thing is done; you will not make me alter it. Besides, I arranged with Eléonore, who must have left La Fromentière by now. You will not find her there when you go back." He had taken off his hat in farewell, and was looking uneasily at his old father, who, leaning against the shaft with half-closed eyes, seemed about to swoon. Under the colonnade of the Halles there was not a soul; a few women in their shops round the Place were carelessly looking at the two men. After a moment, François drew a little nearer and held out his hand, doubtless to clasp that of his father

for the last time; but seeing him approach the old man revived, motioned his son away, sprang into the cart, and lashing up La Rousse, drove off at a gallop.

CHAPTER VI.

THE APPEAL TO THE MASTER.

Eléonore had suffered herself to be persuaded. She had left her home. Weak, and easily led, she had for months past listened too readily to the promptings of vanity and laziness, which, censured by her father at La Fromentière, could be yielded to at will in the town. To have no more baking to do, no more cows to milk, to be in some sort a lady, to wear a hat trimmed with ribbons—such were the reasons for which she went out into the unknown, with only her brother, who would be away all day, for protector. Eléonore had yielded from force of example, and in complete ignorance of the step she was taking. Thus she cast herself adrift, and exposed herself to life in a suburb, to the familiarities of frequenters of the café, without dreaming of its dangers, with the utter ignorance of the peasant who knows nothing beyond the troubles incidental to life in the country.

The separation was accomplished. At the moment that the farmer drove away, intent upon the hope of still recovering his children, Eléonore had hurriedly left the shelter of the barn where she had been hiding, and, despite the entreaties of Marie-Rose and even of Mathurin, going from room to room she had hurriedly collected the little store of personal clothing and trinkets belonging to her. To all Rousille's pleading, as to the calmer adjurations of Mathurin, she had replied:

"It is François' wish, my dears! I cannot tell if I shall be happy; but it is too late now. My promise is given."

She was so greatly in fear of seeing her father come back that she was almost frenzied with haste. Quickly she made up her bundle, went out from La Fromentière, and reached the hollow road, where, crouching beneath the hedge, she waited for the steam tram that runs between Fromentière and Chalons. There some hours later François was to rejoin her.

Meanwhile the farmer, driving La Rousse at her greatest speed, had returned home.

"Eléonore!" he had cried.

"Gone," Mathurin had answered.

Then, half-mad with grief, the old man had flung the reins across the steaming beast, and without a word of explanation had stridden away in the direction of Sallertaine. Had he been actuated by a last hope and idea? Or did his deserted house inspire him with dread?

Night was falling. He had not yet returned. A damp, encircling mist, silent as death, enveloped all around. In the living-room of La Fromentière, beside the fire that no one tended, beside the simmering pot that murmured as if in low plaint, the two remaining inmates of the farm sat watching, but how differently! Rousille, nervous, burning with fever, could not keep still; she was for ever rising from her chair, clasping her hands, and murmuring: "My God, my God!" then going to the open door to look out, shivering, into the dark, thick night.

"Listen!" she said.

The cripple listened, then said:

"It is the goatherd of Malabrit taking home his flock."

"Listen again!"

A distant sound of barking, borne on the silent air, died away in the stillness.

"That is not Bas-Rouge's bark," returned Mathurin.

So from hour to hour, and minute to minute, a step, a cry, the rolling of a vehicle, would keep their senses on the alert.

What were they expecting? Their father, who came not. But Rousille, younger, more credulous, was expecting the others too, or if not both, at least one, either François or Eléonore, who, repentant—was it too much to hope—had come back. Oh, what joy it would be, what rapture to see one of them! It seemed as if the other would have the right to go if one came back to take his place in the home. The young girl felt raised out of herself as a vague sense of duty came over her; she, the only woman, the only one to act in her deserted home.

Mathurin sat in a stooping posture by the hearth, his feet wrapped in a rug, the glow of the fire reddening the beard crushed beneath his chin. For hours he had sat so, never moving, speaking as little as possible; from time to time tears rolled down his cheeks; at other times Rousille, looking at him, was astonished to see the shadow of a smile cross his face—a smile she could in nowise understand.

Nine o'clock struck.

"Mathurin," exclaimed the girl, "I am afraid that some misfortune has befallen father."

"He may be talking over his trouble with the Curé, or the Mayor."

"So I tell myself; yet, all the same, I am frightened."

"That's because you are not accustomed to wait as I am. What do you want to do?"

"To go towards Sallertaine to meet him."

"Go, if you like."

Rousille ran to her room to get her black cloak. When she came back, looking like a little nun, she found that Mathurin had thrown off the rug, and was standing up. His crutches were lying on the ground, and by an effort of will he stood nearly upright, resting one hand on the table, the other on the back of his chair. He looked at his sister with an air of pride and of suppressed pain, perspiration standing on his forehead.

"Rousille," he said, "what should you do if father did not come back?"

"Oh, don't say such things," she exclaimed, covering her eyes with her hand. "And do not exert yourself to stand like that; you make me feel quite ill!"

"Well, I," continued Mathurin gravely, "should take the management here. I feel strong enough. I feel that I am recovering."

"Sit down; sit down, I beg of you. You will fall."
But he remained standing until she reached the door. Scarce had she crossed the threshold before she heard the human mass sink together with a groan. She turned back, saw that he was in a sitting posture on the chair, pressing both hands to his side, doubtless to still his fast-beating heart; then noiselessly, timid as a fawn rising out of the bracken, she ran into the courtyard, and out on to the road.
The rising moon had lessened the mist, already one could see a considerable distance; in another hour it would be clear moonlight. Avoiding the shade of the hedges, Marie-Rose followed the middle of the path that, leading past the dwarf orchard, skirted the meadows; she was frightened, almost running, nor did she slacken speed until she reached the edge of the Marais, where the road suddenly widening like a river that falls into the sea, mingled its grasses with those of the marshland. Then, reassured by the moonlight, she stood still and listened. Where could her father be?
She hoped to hear footsteps on the road, or even Bas-Rouge's bark. But no; in the dream-like mist that incessantly formed and dispersed about her, amid the dim moving lights and shadows around, there was but one sound, that of the distant roll of the sea against the shores of La Vendée. She was about to turn, follow the dyke to reach the bridge of Sallertaine and its familiar houses, when a well-known whistle, like that of a plover, met her ear. Could it be possible?
The young girl's blood rushed to her heart; she stopped short in rapture and astonishment, without strength to look behind her. Motionless she stood, listening to the coming of one her heart had recognised. He came by the road she had come, from the thickets of La Fromentière. Erect, trembling, she stood on the grass-grown road, felt two hands placed on her shoulders, then a rush of air that moved the right side of her cloak, and a man had lightly sprung in front of her, with the words:
"It is I, Rousille. I have not frightened you?"
There he was in his brown coat, stick in hand, looking well pleased at his piece of audacity.
Notwithstanding her distress, Rousille could not repress a cry of joy. A smile rose to her face like an air bubble on troubled waters that none can hinder, and that widens as it goes.
"Oh how happy I am!" she said. But then quickly resumed: "No, I am wrong to speak like that. You do not know of our trouble at home. François has gone, Eléonore has gone; I am all alone there, and I have come out to find father, who has not come home. I have no time to spare for you, Jean Nesmy. It would be wrong!"
He watched the smile fade from her face in the moonlight; and as she drew her cloak about her to resume her way, he said hurriedly:
"I know all, Rousille. For the last three days I have been at Chalons trying to find a situation as near here as possible. I have not found one. But this evening I heard of François' going; it is the talk of the town in one way and another. I ran at once to La Fromentière, keeping out of sight. I watched you in the garden, in the barn. Since sundown I have heard you crying; but the farmer was the only one I saw go out."
"Where is he—at Sallertaine?"
"No; he went, but came back. I was in hiding about here. He passed just where we are now standing, and he was gesticulating and talking to himself as if he were demented."
Terrified, she asked:
"Was that long ago?"
"A quarter of an hour."
"Which way did he go?"
Jean Nesmy pointed in the direction of the mainland, and to the wooden heights further away.
"To the grounds of the Château, I believe. He jumped the fence some hundred yards from here."
"Thanks and good-bye, Jean. I must go."
But he, taking her hand, grew very grave in his turn.
"Yes," he replied, "I know quite well—but myself—soon you will have me no longer. To-morrow I am going home to the Bocage; and I came back to ask you one thing, Rousille. What shall I say to my mother to-morrow when she asks me, 'Is it really true that she loves you? What word of plighted troth did she give you when you parted? My poor Jean, when true-hearted girls see their sweethearts going away from them they say some word that is as binding as a betrothal ring, something to comfort him in absence. What did she of La Fromentière say to you?' If you have said no word, she will not believe me!"
The dim solitude enveloping them threw their shadows faintly on the grey grass. Rousille, her sweetheart's glowing eyes fixed upon her, answered sadly:
"Do not come back until Driot is well settled at home. Some months hence, in mid-winter, if our neighbours who frequent your markets tell you that he is working like a true farmer, that he is to be seen at fairs and gatherings, above all, that he is courting a girl at Sallertaine, then come back and speak to father. My father will not hear of a *Boquin* for son-in-law; but if I will have no other husband than you—if André speaks for me, who can tell? Father spoke well of you after you went."
"Really, Rousille? What did he say?"
"No, not now. I must be going. Good-bye."
He raised his hat with a natural courtesy that sat well upon him; nor did he seek to detain her longer.
Already Rousille, turning her back upon Sallertaine, was running across the meadow; she had reached the last bushes that border the Marais, her cloak fluttering in the mist. For more than a minute after she had disappeared beyond the fence Jean Nesmy remained motionless, on the same spot, where the words she had spoken were still ringing in his ears. Then slowly, as one learning by heart who looks not about him, he took his way towards Sallertaine and on from thence to Chalons. His heart sang with joy as he repeated to himself: "In mid-winter, if our neighbours who frequent your markets tell you that he is working like a true farmer, come back...."
The one thing he saw on the road to Chalons was that the topmost leaves of the willows were already turning yellow, and that the branches were growing leafless.
Rousille, through a gap in the fence, had made her way into a stubble field, thence through a narrow belt of wood. Then finding that she was in the gravel walk of an avenue, she paused, terrified by the solitude, and seized by the instinctive respect for the seigniorial domain, where even then her people ventured but rarely, from fear of displeasing the Marquis. She was in the outskirts of the park. On all sides, lit by the peaceful light of the moon, were sloping lawns, broken now by groups of forest-trees forming islands of black shade, now disappearing in the blue mist of distance. Sometimes in light, sometimes in shadow, Rousille followed the path, her eyes on the watch, her heart beating wildly. She was seeking marks of footsteps on the gravel; straining to see objects amid the dense thickets. Was that her father over there, that dark form through the wood? No, it was but the pile of a fence overgrown with brambles. Everywhere

thorn-bushes, roots, dead branches impeded the moss-grown paths. How neglect had grown with years! The master absent, all was deserted, gone to waste. As she pursued her way, Rousille began to realise more keenly her sorrow at her brother's and sister's flight. They too, perhaps, would never come back to their home; fear in her gave place to grief.

Suddenly, the path winding round a clump of cedars, she found herself in front of the Château, with its huge main building flanked by towers and pointed roofs, on which the weather-cocks that once told the direction of the wind were now motionless with rust. Night owls were silently chasing each other round the gables; the windows were shut, the ground-floor secured with shutters strongly battened.

Anxious as she was, the young girl could not but stop for a moment to look at the melancholy pile, stained by winter rains, already as grey as any ruin; and as she stood there on the broad carriage-drive, her ear detected a distant murmur of words.

"It is father," she thought without a moment's hesitation.

He was sitting some hundred yards away from the Château, on a bench that Rousille knew well, placed in the half-bend of a group of birches, and called by the country people the bench of the Marquise. Bent double, his head resting on his hands, the old man was looking at the Château and down the avenues that sloped towards the Marais. Under the shadow of the birches Rousille drew nearer to him, and as she came closer, she began to distinguish the words he was saying, like a refrain: "Monsieur le Marquis! Monsieur le Marquis!" And as she hastened over the soft turf which deadened her footsteps, Rousille had the horrible dread that her father was mad. No, it was not that, but grief, fatigue, and hunger, of which he was unconscious, had excited his brain. Finding neither help nor support anywhere, in his despair instinct and habit had brought him to the door of the Château, where so often before he had come in sure hope of relief. He had lost all knowledge of time, and only continued to address his lament, "Monsieur le Marquis! Monsieur le Marquis!" to the ears of the master too distant to pay heed. The girl, throwing back the hood of her cloak, said softly so as not to startle him:

"Father, it is Rousille. I have been looking for you for an hour. Father, it is late—come!"

The old farmer shuddered, looking at her with absent eyes that saw not present objects.

"Only think," he said, "the Marquis is not here, Rousille. My house is going to ruin, and he is not here to defend me. He should come back when I am in trouble, should he not?"

"Of course, father, but he does not know of it; he is far away, in Paris."

"The others, the people of Sallertaine, they can do nothing for us because they are humble folks like ourselves, who have no authority beyond their farms. I have been to the Mayor, to Guerineau, to de la Pinçonnière, le Glorieux, de la Terre-Aymont. They sent me away with empty words. But the Marquis, Rousille, when he comes back—when he knows all! Perhaps to-morrow?"

"Perhaps."

"Then he will not leave me alone in my grief. He will help me; he will give me back François—eh, child? will he not give me back François?"

His voice was raised; the shrill words struck against the walls of the Château, that sent them echoing back in softened accents to the avenues, the lawns, until they were lost in the forest. The still, pure night listened as they died away, as it listened to the rustle of insects in the thickets.

Rousille, seeing her father in so great distress, sat down beside him, and talked to him for a while, trying to inspire a hope which she did not feel. And, possibly, a calming influence, a consoling power emanated from her, for when she said: "There is Mathurin at home, father, waiting for you," of his own accord he rose, and took his daughter's arm. For a long while he looked into the face of his pretty little Rousille, so pale with emotion and fatigue.

"True," he replied, "there is Mathurin. We must go."

And together they passed in front of the Château, turned into the avenue leading towards the servants' offices, and thence into the fields belonging to the farm. As they neared La Fromentière, Rousille felt that the farmer was gradually recovering his self-control, and when they were in the courtyard, with a rush of pity for the cripple, Rousille said:

"Father, Mathurin is very unhappy too. Do not talk much to him of your distress."

Hereupon the farmer, whose courage and clear reasoning had revived, passed his hand over his eyes, and preceding Rousille, pushed open the door of the house-place, where his crippled son lay stretched deep in thought, beside the nearly burnt-out candle.

"Mathurin, my son," he said, "do not worry overmuch ... they have gone, but our Driot will soon be home again!"

CHAPTER VII.

DRIOT'S RETURN.

"Our Driot is coming." For a fortnight La Fromentière lived on these words. Work had been resumed the day after the trouble. A farm-labourer, hired by Lumineau at Saint Jean-de-Mont, a tall, lean man, with thighs as flat as his cheeks, replaced Jean Nesmy, and slept in the room beyond the stable. Marie-Rose did, single-handed, the work before shared by both sisters: housekeeping, cooking, dairy-work, and bread-making. She rose earlier and went to bed later. Under her coif she ever had some wise idea in her little head which prevented her from thinking of the past; and in all her movements was displayed that silent activity that the farmer had loved in his old Luminette.

Mathurin had of himself offered to look after the "birds," that is to say, the stock of half-wild turkeys and geese bred at La Fromentière. Carrying a sack fastened across his shoulders, he would drag himself down every morning to the edge of the first canal of the Marais, where, at a part that widened out, were fastened the two boats belonging to La Fromentière. In the shallow water he would scatter his supply of corn or buck-wheat, and from across the meadows drakes with blue-tinted wings, ducks, grey, with a double notch cut on the right side of their beaks to mark them as belonging to Lumineau, would hurry and dive for their food. For hours Mathurin would find amusement in watching

them, then, lowering himself gently into one of the boats, seated or kneeling, would try to recover the sure and rapid stroke which at one time had made him famous among the puntsmen of the Marais.
Toussaint Lumineau delighted to see him managing his boat near the farm, thus distracting his mind, as he thought, from the ever present regret. He would say: "The lad is regaining his old pleasure in punting. It can but be good for him and for us all." But to Mathurin, to Rousille, to his man, to the passers-by, sometimes even to his oxen, often when alone to himself, he would talk of the son so soon to be home again among them. Help was coming; youth and joy were returning to sorrow-stricken La Fromentière. At table nothing else was talked about:
"Only twelve days; only ten; only seven. I will drive to Chalons to meet him," said Lumineau.
"And I will make him some porridge," said Rousille, "he used to be so fond of it before he joined his regiment."
"And I" said Mathurin, "will go in the punt with him the first time he looks up his friends."
"How much there will be to hear!" exclaimed Rousille. "When he was home on furlough he had an endless store of tales to tell. As for me, I shall have no time to listen to them. I shall have to send him to you, Mathurin. And what a change it will make in the house to have a chatterbox among us." Then she added, with the grave air of one entrusted with the household purse: "One change we must make, father, and that will be to buy a paper on Sunday. He will not like to go without one; our André is sure to want to know the news."
"He is young," said the father, as if to excuse him.
And all André's predilections, every recollection connected with him, all the hopes that centred in his return were incessantly recapitulated by one and the other in the living-room of La Fromentière, where the caress of such discourses must have ascended more than once to the smoke-stained rafters.
Meanwhile the son thus occupying all their thoughts had not been told by any of them of the going of François and Eléonore. Partly from dislike to letter-writing, but principally to spare him pain, and to avoid giving him bad news on the eve of his homecoming, the blow which had so diminished the number of those he was to rejoin had been withheld from him. For they could not tell how he would take the absence of his favourite brother, his childhood's companion; it would be better to break the news to him gently, when he should have come back to France, back to his home. Soon a letter came, bearing the Algiers postmark, giving from day to day the itinerary of the journey; and under the elms of La Fromentière would be heard, every successive four-and-twenty hours, announced by one of the family lovingly, meditated over by the others, "Now Driot must be leaving Algiers." "Now Driot is on the sea." "Now Driot is in the train for Marseilles." "Children, he has reached the soil of France."
So one morning, which chanced to be the last Saturday in September, Toussaint Lumineau gave La Rousse a double feed of oats, and drew out from the coach-house a tilbury, the body and wheels of which were painted red. This tilbury was a relic of former prosperity, and as well known in all the country side as were the round head, white hair, and clear eyes of Toussaint Lumineau himself. He, harnessing the mare, looked so joyous and happy, that Rousille, who had not heard him laugh for many a day, as she watched him from the doorway, felt her eyes fill with tears, she knew not wherefore, as though it were the return of spring. The last strap buckled, the old farmer put on his best coat with upright collar, fastened the broad blue Sunday belt round his waist, and slipped two cigars at a halfpenny each into his coat pocket, a luxury he never indulged in nowadays. Then swinging himself up into the tilbury with a cheery, "Ohé, La Rousse!" he was off.
The mare started at such a pace that an instant later her headstall, ornamented with a rosette, looked like a poppy swept along the hedges by the wind. Bas-Rouge tore along after them. His master had called out on starting, "Driot is coming, Bas-Rouge! Come to meet him!" and the dog, all excitement, had dashed after La Rousse in ungainly gallop. Soon they had reached Chalons. Without slackening speed, the farmer drove through the streets, responding to the greeting of the landlord of the Hotel des Voyageurs, and nicely marking by the angle at which he raised his hat his sense of a tenant farmer's superiority over shopkeepers as he returned their salutations, then proudly erect upon the box-seat, tightening the reins, he turned in the direction of the railway station, some two miles beyond the town.
People looking after him, said:
"He has gone to meet his lad, that's certain. Well, poor fellow, he has had plenty of trouble, now he is having his share of good luck!"
La Rousse being restive, Lumineau alighted in the railway yard, and stood at the head of the mare. Thence could be seen the perspective of lines going towards La Roche—the lines by which one son had left, and the other was so soon to return to La Fromentière. He had not long to wait. The train dashed into the station with a whistle; the farmer was still quieting the mare, terrified by the noise, when the passengers came thronging out: townspeople, men-of-war's men on leave, fishmongers from Saint Gilles or Sables, and lastly a smart Chasseur d'Afrique, slight and tall, his képi well balanced, fair moustaches waxed to a point, his knapsack full to bursting, who, after looking eagerly round the yard, smiled and ran out with widespread arms:
"Father! Ah! what luck, it's father!"
The bystanders, indifferently looking on, saw the two men embrace each other with a strong, almost suffocating pressure.
"My Driot!" exclaimed the old man. "How happy I am!"
"And I too, father!"
"No, not so happy as I am! If you only knew!"
"What, then?"
"I will tell you. Oh, my Driot, the joy of seeing you again!"
They disengaged themselves from each other's arms. The young soldier adjusted his collar, and restored the equilibrium of his képi on the point of falling.
"Ah, I expect you will have no end of things to tell me, after all this long time? Important, perhaps? You will tell me by degrees at La Fromentière, while we are at work. Ever so much better than letters, eh?" And he threw back his fair head with a merry laugh.
His father could only respond with a faint smile; then, going towards the tilbury, one on either side, they swung themselves up with the elasticity of two men of the same age.
"Shall I drive?" asked André, and taking up the reins he gave a click with his tongue. La Rousse pricked up her ears, reared playfully to show that she recognised her young master, and with arched neck and eyes aflame, she soon left far behind the two empty hotel omnibuses, which were in the habit of racing each other on their way back from the station.
Those who had exchanged greetings with the farmer on his way to the train, and many others, watched to see the two men pass by; clear-starchers looking out as they ironed; the little dressmaker from Nantes who came at the beginning of each season to take orders from her ladies at Chalons; shopkeepers standing at their doors; peasants at their dinners

in inn parlours; all attracted by the sight of a soldier, or gratified to have a sign of recognition from the two Lumineaus. La Rousse trotted at such speed that the old man had not time to resume his hat between his salutations. Remarks followed the tilbury in the vacuum of air made by its rapid course.

"That's the son from Africa. A handsome lad! How well his blue tunic suits him. And the old man, how happy he looks!"

The farmer sat close to his recovered son. Halfway down the last street, bordered by an elm hedge shedding its leaves on the road, the old man plunged his big hand into his pocket and nudged Driot's elbow to call attention to the two choice cigars he held between finger and thumb.

"With pleasure," responded the young man, and taking one he lit it, somewhat slackening the mare's pace as he did so, then, after a few puffs, as the gorse-covered slopes, golden with blossom, the stony fields, the crown-topped elms, came in sight, bringing with them the sweetness of old familiar scenes, Driot, hitherto somewhat silent and abashed by the attention they had excited, began:

"And all the home-folks, father, how are they?"

A deep furrow lined the farmer's brow. Toussaint Lumineau turned a little in his seat and looked away towards the landscape, distressed at having to tell the trouble, and still more by the fear of what his handsome Driot would think about it.

"My poor boy," he said, "we have only Mathurin and Rousille at home now."

"And François, where is he?"

"Only fancy! Ah! you little think what I am going to tell you. A fortnight ago yesterday he left La Fromentière to work on the railway at La Roche. Eléonore went with him. It seems that she was to keep a coffee shop. Can you believe it?"

"You sent them away from home?" asked the young man, removing the cigar from his mouth and looking straight at his father. "They are not such fools as to have left you for any other reason!"

The words gave the old father a thrill of joy. His Driot understood him; his Driot was at one with him. Returning the frank gaze, he answered:

"No; they are a couple of idlers, who want to make money without doing anything for it ... ungrateful, both of them, leaving their old father ... and then you know that François loves pleasure. Since he served his time he has always had a hankering after town life."

"I know; and I know that town has its attractions," returned André, touching up La Rousse with the point of the whip; "but to grease the wheels of a railway carriage, or serve out drink! Well, everyone goes his own way in this world. All the better for them if they succeed. But I cannot tell you what the fact of François' going is to me. I was so looking forward to our farm-life together."

He remained bending forward awhile as if only intent on the twitching of the mare's delicate ears, then asked in his caressing voice:

"Things are going badly with us then, father?"

"They have been somewhat, my boy. But they won't now that you are home."

André made no direct reply, nor did he say anything at all just then. He was scanning the horizon for a slate-covered clock tower and certain tree-tops not yet distinguishable in the distance; his heart was already in the old home.

"At any rate," said he, "Rousille is left to us. She had grown a pretty girl when I was last home on leave, very taking, and with a will of her own! You cannot imagine how often I used to think of her when I was out in Africa, and try to sketch her portrait from memory. Is she as jolly as ever?"

"She is not bad," replied the farmer.

"And a good girl, I hope? She is not the sort to turn herself into a barmaid."

"No, certainly not."

The good-looking young soldier slackened the mare's pace, partly because they had reached a turn in the road where there was a steep descent, partly that he might the better see, at the foot of the sloping ground, the Marais of La Vendée opening out like a gulf. He had only been home once before in his three years of service; with growing emotion he gazed upon the groups of poplars and tiny red roofs standing out from the waste of marshland; his eyes roved from one to the other; his lips trembled as he named the farms one by one; all other emotion was silenced in that of coming home again.

"Parée-du-Mont!" he exclaimed. "What has become of the eldest Ertus?"

"Nothing much; he is in the Customs."

"And Guerineau of la Pinçonnière, who was in the 32nd line regiment?"

"Oh, he went off like François; is conductor on the tramway to Nantes."

"And Dominique Perrocheau of Levrelles?"

The farmer shrugged his shoulders with annoyance, for, in truth, it was aggravating to be obliged constantly to answer "Gone—left—deserted the Marais." However he had to say:

"You heard, doubtless, that he gained his gold stripes at the end of his first leave; then he obtained further promotion, and was given some post, I don't know where, as Government clerk. A set of stupid fellows, all of them—not worth much, my Driot!"

"Ah, now I see Terre d'Aymont," cried Driot. "It seems nearer than it used to be; I can distinguish their wind-mill. Tell me, father, there were two of my playfellows there, sons of Massonneau le Glorieux, one older, the other younger than me. What are they doing?"

Radiant, Toussaint Lumineau made reply:

"Both on the farm. The eldest exempted his brother. They are fine fellows who do not mind hard work; you will see them to-morrow at mass in Sallertaine."

With a light, happy laugh the young soldier said:

"Ah, by-the-bye, one must get into the way of attending mass again, I suppose. In the army devotion did not trouble us much. Sundays were rather a favourite day for our chiefs to hold reviews ... they don't look at things as you do. But you see, father, I will soon accustom myself to going to mass again—even to high mass—it is not that that will be the difficulty."

"What then, my lad?"

They were both silent for a moment. Another turn in the road had revealed La Fromentière on their left. With a simultaneous movement father and son had risen and were standing almost upright, one hand on the front of the carriage, contemplating the property, La Rousse trotting along, unheeded by the driver.

A great, tender rush of feeling, cruel withal, paled André's face. The land was welcoming a son of its soil; all the scattered recollections of his childhood awoke and called aloud to him; there was not a hillock that did not greet him,

not a furze-bush, not a lopped elm but had a friendly look for him. But one and all, too, recalled the brother and sister he would find there no more.
Without turning his eyes from La Fromentière Driot replied, after a silence, and without naming those of whom he was thinking:
"I will go and see them at La Roche ... of course I will ... but brotherhood is not altogether the same when one has broken from the old place...."
An instant later he was holding Rousille, who had run out into the courtyard to meet him, high in his arms, looking her full in the face, into the very depth of her eyes, with the gaze of a brother whose military experience has made him somewhat suspicious of maidenly virtue; but seeing that her eyes met his in all frankness, but with something of a sad expression, he kissed her, and set her down on terra firma again.
"Always the same, little sister! That's good; but a little sorry at having lost Lionore, eh?"
"You can see that?"
"Ah well! But I have come now. We will try to get on without them, won't we?"
"And I?" put in a thick voice.
The soldier left Rousille, and hastened to Mathurin who was coming towards them; dragging his limbs after him.
"Do not hurry, old man! I must do the running for both; I have sound legs."
Stooping over his crutches, and stroking his elder brother's tawny head, André could find no words of comfort. Coming fresh from a military centre where all was young, active, alert, he could not hide the distress and a certain feeling of horror with which Mathurin's infirmity inspired him. However, compelled by the other's anxious look, which seemed to ask, "What do you think of me?—you who come back, judge—can I live?" he hastened to say:
"My poor old man, I am so glad to find you like this. So you have not got any worse?"
With a shrug of the shoulders, the cripple angrily pushed him away.
"I am much better," he returned. "You will see. I walk more easily. I can stand as firmly as I did three years ago, when I thought I was getting well ... and, for a beginning, I am going with you to mass at Sallertaine to-morrow."
To avoid answering, the young soldier turned to meet his father, who, having unharnessed La Rousse, was coming towards them, with happy, smiling face, having eyes only for his Driot come home to him again. The men, one following the other, turned towards the house, and went in; but on this happy day it was the farmer who held back, and the returned son who went first. Alert, interested as on a first visit, rejoiced to be made the object of the eyes and ears of the others, he did not sit down but wandered from room to room, the blue and red uniform an unfamiliar sight in this home of the toilers of the field.
To amuse his auditors he made the old walls ring again with words of command; knocked up against corners to feel the strength of the massive stones; opened the cupboard, cut himself a slice of bread, and tasted it, with a, "Better than the bread of Algiers, my friends. This is Rousille's baking, eh? It is excellent; we shall have a good farmer's wife in her."
Followed everywhere by his father, Mathurin, and Marie-Rose, he went from the house into the stables and barns.
"I do not know these oxen," said he.
"No, my boy, I bought them last winter at Beauvoir fair."
"Well, I'll bet that I can tell their names from their faces. This dun-coloured one, that does not look great shakes, is Noblet, and his companion, the little tawny one, is Matelot?"
"Right," answered his father.
"As for the others, our old ones, they have not changed much, save to put on more horn and muscle. The plough ought to work well drawn by them. Good day, Paladin; good day, Cavalier!"
The good creatures lying in the straw, hearing the young voice that called to them, thrust out their heads, and with their thoughtful eyes followed the young master.
A little further, stooping down, he took up a handful of green forage.
"Fine maize for the time of year," he said. "This must have come from our high land; from La Cailleterie?"
"No."
"From Jobinière then, where not a grain is lost. Here's a good specimen!"
The father was ready to join in praise of his oxen, his fields, everything, so happy was he that the last of his sons, after three years' absence, still loved the ground.
But the handsome young soldier laughed more than he felt inclined to do, to hide the sad thoughts that would come during his round, and when in the shed affected not to see the traps for blackbirds, made by François the preceding winter. In the threshing floor, seeing a bundle of faded grass lying on the neatly made hayrick, he bent towards Rousille, and murmured:
"Did François gather that? Ah, it pains me more than I could have believed, Rousille, not to find François here. It quite changes La Fromentière for me."
But the father heard nothing of this. He only saw that his son was home again, and the future of La Fromentière assured. When they had re-entered the general sitting-room, Lumineau passed his hand over the blue tunic of the Chasseur d'Afrique, saying:
"I like you in this, but I bet anything that you will not be sorry to lay aside your soldier's toggery."
"All right, father," returned André, laughing at the unwitting affront to his uniform, and his father's indirect mode of inviting him to change to civilian dress. "I am not got up in Sallertaine guise; I'll go and change."
From the bottom of the chest in the end room, beside the bed where he was to sleep, André took the carefully folded work-day suit, laid there by him the day he left. He took great pains with the waxing of his moustache, and adjusting the brim of his hat, adorned his button-hole with a sprig of jasmine; then going the length of the house, opened the kitchen door, and there, framed against the old walls, his slim figure clad in cloth suit, was seen the handsomest young Vendéen of the Marais. Bronzed and fair-haired, his joyous face reflected the happiness of the others.
"Ah, Driot," exclaimed the farmer merrily, "now you are quite yourself again! You were my son before, but not so completely my very own as now," then added: "Now come, and we will drink to your health, and that you may stay at La Fromentière; for I am ageing fast, and you shall take my place."
Mathurin, sitting at table beside his father, became very gloomy. When the glasses were filled, he raised his with the others, but did not clink it against that of André.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE PLACE DE L'EGLISE.

The bells rang out the close of High Mass; choir boys chanted the *Deo gratias*.
As in its early days, when in the last years of the twelfth century it was erected on the summit of the Isle of Sallertaine, the little church, now yellow with age and growth of lichen and wild-flower, witnessed the crowd of worshippers, dressed in the same fashions as then, pour out from the same doors in the same order and collect in the same groups in the same Place.
The first to be seen were the farm-labourers and farmers' sons, who came out by the east door from the transept where they had heard mass, and who, passing round the choir, grouped themselves on the other side, where the young girls would presently emerge. Two by two they appeared between the pillars of the west porch with eyes lowered to the tips of their sabots. They were well aware that their rosy cheeks, smoothly braided hair beneath the pyramid of muslin, the embroidered stockings peeping under the short petticoat, the manner in which they walked with hands demurely crossed over the moiré aprons, made them the cynosure of all eyes. This retired bearing only lasted for some twenty paces; soon the girls had formed themselves into a group close by the Michelonnes' house, at a short distance from that of the younger men. And now in their turn they waited. Eyes grey, blue, brown, very much on the alert; eyes sparkling with life; eyes in which lived a remembrance. Laughing lips, telling of the mere joy of living; the chirping as of a flock of birds greeting one another. Following them came the farmers and their wives; widows, distinguishable by the band of velvet in front of their coifs; older men, men of position; these all issuing from the nave, among them many a grave face still under the influence of devotion, in which like walking saints they seemed wholly absorbed. Many tall, finely set up men there were, with calm, fresh complexioned faces closely shaven, save for a thin line of whisker. All wore the same costume of black cloth coat with straight collar, trousers with flaps, raised on the ankle by a fold in the cloth, blue or green belt extending half way up the waistcoat, round felt hat bound with velvet. They joined the younger men, swelling the groups that shouldered each other, forming by this time a dark swaying mass reaching to the last buttress of the choir.
The matrons, on the contrary, making a passage for themselves through the crowd, went their way, looking in their plaited skirts like ornamental round towers. From their calm eyes, and the brief smile with which they exchanged greetings with a town acquaintance, it was plain to see that, having outgrown the follies and illusions of youth, each had settled down to her store of domestic happiness, joy, or sorrow that a green patch in the Marais had reserved for her. They talked with other farmers' wives, were joined by one or other for the homeward way, and thus accompanied, dignified and worthy, they directed their steps towards the plain, or to the various boating stages.
Despite their departure, the gathering in the Place grew denser and denser. It was the place of Sunday meeting where for centuries past the dwellers of the marshes, prisoners of the canal-bound land, had been wont to assemble. To them attendance at mass was alike a religious duty and an occasion of social gathering. Before wending their way back to their farms, not a man, even the gravest and most considered among them, would have failed to pass an hour in a wine shop chatting with his friends over a bottle of muscadet and a game of cards, *luette* particularly, a game imported from Spain in ancient times. Already innkeepers were standing at their doors at the foot of the Place, sounds of merriment and laughter were to be heard from within, and the stock-phrases of *luette* players, "Your turn." "My turn." "I play a horse." "I take merienne."
Meanwhile there was more than ordinary animation among the girls stationed behind the groups of men. They were scanning all the church doors, whence were now issuing good women, tellers of rosaries, who had lingered long over their devotions.
"He is coming out," exclaimed tall Aimée Massonneau, the daughter of farmer Glorieux, of Terre-Aymont. "Did you see him, that poor Mathurin Lumineau? He insisted upon coming to mass. I am sure he might have got dispensation!"
"Yes," returned the little auburn-haired daughter of Malabrit, "it is six years since he came to Sallertaine."
"Six years—really?"
"Yes, I remember. It was the year my sister was married."
"And why do you think he came?" asked Victoire Guerineau, of La Pinçonnière, a sharp-tongued pretty girl, with a complexion like a wild rose. "For he must have shown some spirit to manage it."
"To stand by his father," said a voice; "the old man had been so saddened by the going of Eléonore and François."
"To show himself with his brother André," put in another. "He's a good-looking fellow is André Lumineau! I should not mind——"
Victoire Guerineau and the others broke into a peal of laughter.
"You are quite out of it. It's for Félicité Gauvrit he came!"
"Oh, oh!" exclaimed those in front.
"How ill-natured you are! If she were to hear you."
And several turned towards the Michelonnes' doorstep, near to which, amid a little throng, stood Mathurin's former fiancée.
Suddenly a murmur ran through the crowd.
"There he is. Poor fellow! How difficult it is for him to walk."
And under the pointed arch of a low doorway, one half of which only was open, a deformed figure was seen struggling to force a passage through the narrow aperture, one hand holding a crutch clutched hold of a pillar outside, by which the poor man strove to drag himself through, but he had only succeeded in freeing one shoulder. With head thrown back, there was an expression of agony upon the face which attested the violence of the effort, and the strength of will that would not give in. Mathurin Lumineau seemed on the point of suffocation; he looked at no one in the throng of people whose gaze was riveted upon him; his eyes on a higher level than those of the spectators were fixed upon the blue vault of heaven with an expression of anguish that re-acted upon them.
Conversation was interrupted; voices began to murmur:
"Oh, help him! He is suffocating!"
Some of the men made a movement to go to his assistance; at that moment, from the gloom of the interior, his father

asked:
"Shall I help you out, Mathurin? You cannot squeeze through there. Let me help you."
In a low voice, inaudible to those without, but with terrible energy, Mathurin answered:
"Don't touch me. Confound it! Don't touch me. I will get out by myself."
At length the man forced his huge bust through the door, and with a tremendous effort steadied himself, stroked his tawny beard and settled his hat on his head. Then with the aid of his crutches, standing as upright as he could, Mathurin looked straight before him, and advanced towards the group of men, which opened out silently at his approach. No one ventured to address him, it was so long since he had been among them, the old habit of familiarity seemed lost; but the attention of all was concentrated upon their former comrade, and no one noticed that his old father with André and Marie-Rose were following close behind him.
The cripple had soon reached the spot where the girls were standing. They fell apart even more quickly than the men had done, for they guessed his intention; a lane opened between them reaching up to the houses. At the far end of this living avenue, clad in black dresses and white coifs, standing erect, quite alone, was seen Félicité Gauvrit. She was the one he sought. She knew it; she had foreseen her triumph. No sooner had she observed Mathurin Lumineau sitting on the family bench in church, then she had said to herself: "He has come for me. I will hide away by the Michelonnes' house, and he will follow me." For she was gratified to have it seen that he still loved her, the girl to whom, handsome though she was, no suitors came. The women with whom she had been talking had prudently moved away; she stood alone, under the Michelonnes' window, looking like a lay figure from some museum in her costume of heavy stiff material, the braids of her lustrous brown hair shining under the small coif, her dazzlingly white complexion and uncovered throat. Erect, with arms pendant on either side of the moiré apron, she watched her former lover coming towards her between the double row of inquisitive lookers-on. The many faces bent upon the girl in nowise intimidated her. Perhaps in the suit and cravat Mathurin was wearing she recognised the very ones he had worn at the time of the accident; any way, she remained calm and unabashed, her face even wore a slight smile. He drew nearer, leaning on his crutches, his eyes fixed, not on the path, but on Félicité Gauvrit. What the poor fellow wanted was to see her once again; to make her understand that health was returning, that hope was awakening out of his misery, that the heart of Mathurin Lumineau had never wavered. All this his sad eyes told her as he drew near, offering in piteous pleading the bodily and mental suffering he had endured to her who had been their cause. But his strength was unequal to the effort, he grew deadly white; and when the insolent beauty, the first to speak, said calmly before all the throng:
"Good day, Mathurin," he could not answer. To have seen the smile on those rosy lips, to be so near to her, and to hear her address him in the same easy tones as if they had but parted the day before, was more than he could bear.
He grew faint, leant heavily on his crutches, and slightly turned his tawny head to Driot, who was behind him, as if to say: "Take me away," and the younger brother understanding the appeal, passed the suffering man's arm under his and led him away, saying as he did so, to divert the attention of the crowd:
"Good day to yourself, Félicité. It is an age since I have seen you. You are not a bit altered."
"Nor are you," she retorted.
A few laughed; but among those assembled there were many who were deeply touched, even disposed to tears. Some of the girls of Sallertaine pitied the poor fellow so exhausted and confused, led away on his brother's arm; they sorrowed that he could never enjoy that love which each, in the recesses of her heart, hoped some day to share with the yet unknown swain. One of them murmured:
"It is not only in body that he is afflicted, his mind, too, seems gone, poor fellow!"
Many women, mothers going home with their children, walked more sedately as they saw the group on the way to Chalons: old farmer Toussaint, André and Mathurin, with Marie-Rose bringing up the rear. They recalled with a shudder what a magnificent youth the poor cripple once had been, and thought: Heaven send that no such calamity befall our boys when they grow up!
Félicité Gauvrit began to be affected in her turn, but in a different manner. The departure of the Lumineaus had turned attention away from her. Some of the men surrounded the district crier, who was calling out the list of lost articles and farms to be let; others repaired to the inns. The girls collected in little companies to seek the homeward way. Every minute five or six white coifs were to be seen bowing and bending in farewell salute, separating from the others, and going off to the right hand or the left. Félicité, left alone for some minutes, joined one of the groups going west of Sallertaine, towards the high Marais; she was received with some embarrassment, as one whom they did not want to fall out with, yet who was somewhat compromising, and whose company their mothers did not desire for them.
Young men drinking together in the inns called after her the slighting remarks men make on girls for whom they have little respect. She did not answer them back, but with her companions descended the hilly road bordered with houses, and thence on to the open Marais in the direction of Perrier.
At that time of the year, before autumn rains had set in, many of the farms could be reached on foot without the aid of boats. A raised path, rough and ill-kept, flanked by dykes on either side, led across the meadows; grey-green grass covered the level plain until the uniform tint dissolved in brownish hue in the distant horizon. Horses grazing, stretched out their necks, and looked at the little group clad in black and white, breaking the continuity of grey-green plain. Ducks, at the sound of their footsteps, ran in among the rushes that trembled on the edge. From time to time a shelving embankment branched off the path, and one of the girls, separating from the group, would make her way by it to some distant house, only marked by the customary cluster of poplar-trees; and Félicité Gauvrit, roused for a moment from her abstraction, would say "Good-bye," and then walk on silently as before.
Soon she was left alone on the path that stretches to the sea. Then slackening her pace, she gave herself up without restraint to her thoughts. She was not happy at home. At sixty-five her father had married again a woman of thirty of loose character, whom he had met at Barre-de-Mont, and to whom in virtue of her youth he had made over the most realisable part of his property. The young stepmother was not kind to Félicité. One reproached the other with extravagance and ruining the home. The eldest brother, in the Customs at Sables d'Olonne, a gambler and hard drinker, was perpetually threatening the old man with a summons for falsified accounts, and by thus intimidating him drained still further the diminished capital of the Gauvrits. The old family, once so respected in the Marais, was rapidly declining, and this Félicité knew too well. The young men of Sallertaine and the neighbouring parishes came readily enough to dances at La Seulière; they danced, drank, joked with her, but not one of them offered to marry her. The impending ruin, the family divisions, kept suitors away.
Yet another reason, more real, and one that appealed more strongly to sentiment than any other, held back the sons of farmers, and even farm-labourers from asking the hand of Félicité Gauvrit in marriage; and this was the tie, binding only in honour, the debt of fidelity, rendered even more sacred by misfortune, which public opinion obstinately

maintained as still existing between La Seulière and La Fromentière. In everybody's opinion Félicité Gauvrit remained one of the Lumineau household; a girl who had not the right to withdraw her betrothal promise, and who was not to be sought in marriage by any other while Mathurin was living. Some men even had a superstitious dread of her; they would have been afraid to set up housekeeping with a girl whose first love had met so unhappy a fate. All the advances she had made had come to nought. Soured and embittered, in her rage she had gone so far as to regret that the cripple had not been killed on the spot. Had the poor wretch, who was scarcely to be called living, died then and there, she would have recovered her liberty, the past would have been quickly forgotten; while now, it was kept in everyone's memory by the sight of the maimed man on crutches, hanging about the farmstead of which he should have been master. She had found that Death is sometimes long in claiming its victims. Then courage had returned; in her astuteness Félicité had recognised that public opinion holding her as belonging to the Lumineau family, by them only could she realise her ambition: to go away from La Seulière, escape the domination of her stepmother, and become the mistress of a large farm, with more means and freedom than ever she had possessed at home. Never having loved her former betrothed, actuated only by vanity, as is sometimes the case in country surroundings, she had said to herself:

"I will bide my time. I will make them long the more for me by not going to La Fromentière. One day Mathurin will come to me, or will call me to him. I am positive that he has not forgotten me. Stupid of him; but it will help my ends. Thanks to him, I shall see them all again; the old man who mistrusts me, the young men who will admire me for my beauty. And I shall marry either François or André, and shall be the mistress of a farm as I ought to be, and of the richest farm in the whole parish."

Now François, whom she had tried to captivate, had gone away. But, on the other hand, Mathurin had come to her; at the cost of terrible fatigue and suffering he had dragged himself to Sallertaine to greet her publicly; while André, before all the girls, had said: "It is an age since I saw you. You are not a bit altered."

Félicité had gathered one of the yellow irises that grew so profusely on the Marais. Half laughing she thought over her recent triumph, the iris lightly held between her lips; her arms swinging as she walked caused the full sleeves to rustle against the moiré of her apron; her smiling gaze was directed to the distant meadows. She was thinking that André would make a handsome husband, better looking than ever Mathurin had been; that, after all, he was one year younger than herself, that he had engaging manners, and had not been wanting in audacity either to have said: "You have not altered." And she went on to think: "The first opportunity that offers, I will invite them to a dance at home. I am sure that André will come."

Slowly she walked along the raised path in the burning rays of the mid-day sun. Grasshoppers were chirping; every now and again the acrid scent of fading rushes was in the air. Wholly absorbed in her daydream, Félicité Gauvrit did not perceive that she had nearly reached home. The white buildings of La Seulière, standing out in the meadow, came as an unwelcome surprise. At the same moment a doubt crossed her mind, disturbing, unbidden ending to her dream. Suppose André too were to go away? Or that Mathurin, elated as he was sure to be by the least sign of remembrance, and made thereby more eager, more jealous, were to guess what was in the wind?

Félicité had stopped in the middle of the bridge that led from the path to the farm. The tall, supple young woman raised her arms above her head, scowled impatiently, and snapped the stem of the yellow iris, which fell prone into the dyke, then following it with her eyes for a second, she looked at her own reflection in the water, and smiled again. "I shall succeed," she said. And descending the slope of the bridge she reached La Seulière by the cross road.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONSCRIPTS OF SALLERTAINE.

The afternoon of that autumn Sunday was marked by a deeper peacefulness than usual. The air was warm, the light veiled, the wind, which, rising with the tide, had outstripped it, sweeping over the vast grassy plain, brought no sound of work in its train, no creak of plough, no ring of hammer, spade, or axe. The bells alone were heard answering each other from Sallertaine, Perrier, Saint Gervais, Chalons with its new church, vast as a cathedral, and Seullans hidden among the trees on the hill. Chimes for High Mass, ringing for Angelus, the three strokes for vespers left the bells but little rest; far and near they told out the familiar tones, understood for centuries past. Adoration of the Holy One; forgetfulness of earth; pardon for sin; union in prayer; equality of all men in the light of eternal promises. The tones rang out into space and interlocked with a vibration, and were as garlands flung from one belfry to another. Among the toilers of the fields, cattle drivers, sowers, there were but few who did not obey the summons. Along roads deserted all the week were to be seen families hastening, passing and repassing one another, of those who lived at the remotest portions of the parish; while those who lived nearer took it more leisurely. On the canal, which, broadening at the foot of the church, forms the quay of Sallertaine, boats were constantly moving hither and thither.

Towards evening the bells had ceased; the frequenters of inn parlours too had betaken themselves to their farms, lying peacefully in the light of the setting sun. Universal silence reigned over the land. Quiet as it was on working-days, at the close of the week it seemed sunk in meditation and silence; dominical truce that had its great significance, when weary souls refresh themselves, and whole families unite in calm and meditation to review their living and their dead.

But to-day the quiet was to be of short duration.

Mathurin and André were lying under the shade of the elms that afforded provisional shelter to the harrows and ploughs close by the old stonework gateway. The cripple, leaning against the cross-bars of a harrow, was resting after the fatigue and excitement of the morning. André, from concern for him, had not gone into town again with his father, but lying at full-length on the grass was reading the paper aloud, pausing every now and then to make his comments on the news, and, as a travelled man, to explain the whereabouts of places and countries—Clermont Ferrand, India, Japan, the while twirling his little fair moustache, a very youthful and ingenuous self-sufficiency showing itself in his frank, merry face. At about four o'clock, to the left of Sallertaine, was heard the sound of a bugle, coming apparently from the open marsh between the parishes of Lumineau and Seullans. Mathurin roused from the torpor into which he had sunk,

looked at André, who at the first sound of the bugle had let fall the paper, and with uplifted face and straining ears was listening to the call.
"It is the cadets," said his brother, "they are out this afternoon. Soon they will be leaving."
"They are playing the call of the 'Chasseurs d'Afrique,'" returned André, a light in his eyes. "I recognise it. Is there anyone of our old regiment in the Marais?"
"Yes, the son of a gooseherd in Fief; he served his time with the Zouaves."
They were silent, both men listening to the bugling of the ex-Zouave, their thoughts very different. André with eyes fixed on the distant marshland was seeing in imagination a white town, with narrow streets, and a troop of horsemen emerging from a crenulated gateway, its arches echoing with the ring of their horses' hoofs.
Mathurin, watching the expression on his brother's face, thought: "His heart is still with the regiment." For an instant his features distended, his eyes dilated as those of a wild beast detecting its prey, then he returned to his one idea.
"Driot," he exclaimed after a while, "you like that music?"
"I should think so."
"Do you regret the regiment?"
"No, that I don't. No one does."
"Then what was the attraction out there?"
The young man looked inquiringly into his brother's face as though to say, why should he want to know, then answered:
"The country——Hark! that's the reveille now."
The sounds of the bugle, sharp, incisive, stopped. Now five or six strong untrained voices struck up "Le chant du départ." Occasional words reached the listeners where they lay. "Mourir pour la patrie ... le plus beau ... d'envie." The rest was lost in space.
Meanwhile the sounds were approaching; the two brothers motionless under the elms, each pursuing the train of thought evoked by the first notes of the bugle, could hear the conscripts of Sallertaine coming up the hill towards them.
Toussaint Lumineau, on his way home from vespers with his friend Massonneau, heard them also. Massonneau, an old tenant farmer, tall and thin, with skin as dark as a ripe ear of corn, the cartilages of his neck standing out like the breast-bone of a fowl, had acquired his name of "Le Glorieux" from a nervous twitch he had, which caused his chin to jerk upwards at every instant; Lumineau and he were discussing the latest events of La Fromentière. The two men represented the age and wisdom of the Marais; moreover, they could tell the names and nicknames of every living soul at Sallertaine, their history and parentage. As they reached the last houses of the town, both simultaneously stopped and turned their faces windward.
"Do you hear, Glorieux?" exclaimed Lumineau. "They are bugling and singing, poor boys! But the parents of those who are going may well weep."
"Yes," returned Massonneau, with a twitch of the chin, "the parents are to be pitied."
"I could name them, everyone, from only hearing their lad's voices," continued Lumineau. "You, good people of La Bounellerie, and you, of Grand Paiement; you, of Juch-Pie; you, of Linotteries; and you, of Belle-Blanche, I recognise your boys' voices. May it not do the same work for them that it did for my François! They are going to the place that changed my boy's heart—to the town that robbed me of him."
"As it robbed La Pinçonnière," said his companion.
"And Leverells."
"And Parée-du-Mont."
The litany might have been prolonged; Massonneau hearing the voices at the edge of the Marais broke in with:
"They are singing again," he said, "they are going up the hill to you, Lumineau."
And in truth the young conscripts had begun the ascent towards La Fromentière; soon the bugle call, soon their voices, resounded over the silent Marais, carried afar by the wind, like grains of seed falling everywhere. And everywhere, without apparent reason, emotions were stirred, old sorrows awoke, and the humble occupants of isolated farms or remote villages listened with a tightening of the heart to the tramp of the conscripts of Sallertaine.
As they reached the meadow-land of La Fromentière, Mathurin, who had been following the sounds, and with his marvellous sense of observation had marked every step of their way, said to André:
"They have already halted at three farms. I think they must be collecting for their class. You did not do that? For the last two years they have started calling at all the houses where there is a young girl of their own age, to ask her for a fowl as compensation for having to serve. Rousille is drawn among the other girls. You should catch a fowl to give them when they come."
"So I will," returned André, laughing and springing up with a bound. "I'm off. What do they do with all the fowls?"
"Eat them. They get three or four farewell dinners out of them. Be quick! they are coming!"
André disappeared within the courtyard. Soon could be heard his merry laugh, and a rush in the direction of the barn, then the terrified cries of the fowl he had evidently caught; and soon he reappeared holding his prize by the legs, its round spotted wings, grey and white, rising and falling on the grass as he walked. At the same moment a blast on the bugle was heard at the foot of the dwarf orchard; Mathurin half-raised himself upon the harrow, his hands clasping the cross-bars, his arms extended, his shaggy head bent forward, awaited the arrival of the troop, André standing beside him. Opposite them, just at the opening of the road leading down to the Marais, the setting sun, an enormous ball tinted orange by the mist, filled the entire space between the two treeless banks.
In this sun-bathed glory three girls advanced, arm-in-arm, up the ascent, the tallest in the middle; all were dressed in black with lace coifs; the jet on their velvet kerchiefs sparkling in the light. As they walked they rhythmically swayed their heads; they were girls from Sallertaine, but the light was behind them, and only Mathurin could recognise in the centre one Félicité Gauvrit. A few paces in the rear came the bugler, a standard-bearer, and five young men walking abreast, carrying either in their arms or suspended from a hempen cord the fowls collected from the farmhouses. The procession advanced some hundred yards along the road, then pulled up between the elms and the ruined wall of La Fromentière.
"Good day, brothers Lumineau!" said a voice.
There was a burst of laughter from the band, excited by their march and the muscadet they had drunk on the way. The cripple's hands gave way, he glanced up at André.
Félicité Gauvrit, without leaving hold of her companions, had advanced slightly in front of them, and was gazing with a pleased expression at the youngest Lumineau, who held out the grey fowl to her.
"You guessed then, André?" she said. "Ah, that's what it is to have to do with intelligent boys. Here, Sosthene Pageot, come and take Rousille's fowl."

A sturdy lad with ruddy face, and the stupefied air of one beginning to feel the effects of drink, stepped out from among the others and took the fowl. But from the mocking attitude of André, and his studied silence, Félicité guessed that he was surprised to see a girl of her position in such company, therefore she added carelessly:
"You may be satisfied that I do not range the Marais every day with conscripts. My doing it to-day is out of kindness. My two friends here, who belong to the class, were called upon to go the round to collect; they are shy and dared not go alone, and so it must have been given up, had I not come to the rescue." She expressed herself well, with a certain refinement that came with the habit of reading.
"That would have been a pity!" said the young man coldly.
"Yes, would it not? The more so, that I am not often seen in your part of the world."
She turned her head towards the windows of La Fromentière, the stables, the hayricks, sighed, then immediately remarked in a playful tone:
"You will come to one of our dances, will you not, André? The Maraîchines hope so."
At this there were signs of approval to the right and left of her.
"Perhaps," replied André. "It is so long since I was at a dance in Sallertaine; inclination may return."
She thanked him with a knowing wink; then for the first time seemed to be aware of the presence of Mathurin, who was looking at her with an air of mingled passion and grief.
A look of pity and embarrassment, not altogether feigned, came into her face as she said:
"You understand, Mathurin, what I say to one I say to all in your house.... If it were not too fatiguing for you?... I was glad to see you at mass again this morning ... it shows that you are feeling better...."
The cripple, only able to express himself clearly when he had time to think over his words, stammered out:
"Thank you, Félicité ... you are very kind, Félicité," and he uttered her name with a kind of adoration that seemed to touch two or three of the conscripts, stupefied as they were.
"What was your regiment, Mathurin?" asked the standard-bearer.
"The third Cuirassiers."
"Bugler, a *fanfare* of the Cuirassiers in honour of Mathurin Lumineau! Forward, march!"
The three girls, the bugler, the standard-bearer, and the five young men bringing up the rear, left the shade of the elms, and went on their way towards Quatre-Moulins, raising clouds of dust crossed by the slanting rays of the sun. The *fanfare* shook the walls of the old farmhouse.
When the last lace coif had disappeared among the furze-bushes and willows that bordered the road, Mathurin said to his brother, who had taken up the paper again and was absently reading:
"Would you believe it, Driot, this is the first time for six years that she has been here!"
André replied, too abruptly:
"She did for you once, old man. Better take care that she does not do it a second time."
With muttered words of anger Mathurin Lumineau picked up his crutches, and moving away to a little distance, leant up against a tree. The two brothers spoke no more to each other; both were absently gazing out over the marshland, where the daylight was dying away. The sun was rapidly sinking in the lowland, only a red crescent broken by shadows remained of the fiery globe, against which some dark object in the horizon, a willow, or a group of rushes, stood out like a crown of thorns. It faded away; a fresh breeze rose on the hills; the sounds of the bugle and of voices were no longer heard. Profound silence was over the country, here and there in the grey distance was the glimmer of a fire. Peace had returned; sorrows, one by one, were ending in sleep or in prayer.
Old Lumineau coming back from the town saw his two sons standing motionless among the trees wrapt in contemplation of the quiet scene, and not knowing their thoughts, said brightly:
"A fine sight, our Marais, eh, boys? Now let us go in together; supper will be waiting." Then as, in the darkness, André came first, he added:
"How glad I am to have you home again from the regiment, my Driot!"

CHAPTER X.

THE UPROOTED VINEYARD.

Winter had come. La Fromentière seemed peaceful and happy. Anyone going over the fields and watching the men at work, would have had no fear for the future of the farmstead. The new farm-hand did not excite himself, as Toussaint Lumineau said, that is to say, he worked his fourteen hours a day regularly, without uttering fourteen words. As for André, he was the joy and pride of his father, who, on his part, did not spare himself. Good labourer, good sower, an early riser, careful of the animals and of everything else that came to his hand, the young man seemed to prove that he had found his vocation, and was determined to remain a farmer all his life.
And yet at the bottom of his affectionate, restless heart, there was a growing sore. André could not accustom himself to François' absence. He missed the friend of his young life, the companion without whom La Fromentière had never presented itself to his mind.
The week after his return home, André had gone to see François and Eléonore at La Roche-sur-Yon. He had found them settled in a house in the outskirts, already somewhat discontented: one inveighing against the hardness of his employers; the other that customers did not come; without any regrets, however, for what they had done, and quite decided as to the advantages of living in a town, and being their own masters. He had gone back without the least wish to follow their example—more severe even than before against the renegades from the old home life; but possessed of a fixed idea, he sought François in everything. La Fromentière that knew François no longer was to him empty and void. It became a thing of which he could not shake himself free; a suffering of which he never spoke, but that everyone unwittingly renewed.
The farmer, whose anger had abated, more particularly since he knew that the position of his two absent children at La

Roche was none too brilliant, began voluntarily to speak of François as if to secretly encourage the others to remember him, and to do their best to bring him home again. It would be: "To-day we will sow La Cailleterie, where François ploughed the first two furrows," or, "let us have some chestnuts roasted in the embers to-night, Rousille, François used to like them." He thought to do well by so speaking, to re-unite, as it were, in some degree those whom misfortune had parted. And Rousille did the same. Still oftener did everyday objects speak of, and recall the absent one. Now it was a fork he had been wont to use; a basket woven by him; the rope twisted round a rafter of the stables by a hand no longer there; or even a nook or corner of a road or field to which some memory clung; the stump of a tree; a furze-bush; in fact, the whole Marais, where for years two boys of almost the same age, brothers inseparable, had driven the cows, jumped dykes, and gone birds'-nesting together.

Poor François, lazy, spendthrift, pleasure-loving as he was in reality, legendary virtues were already gathering round him at La Fromentière. His place in the diminished family was reserved to him with tender, affectionate regret, a regret that even magnified what had been his place there. André, disheartened, and disappointed in the joy of home coming, had not the same love for the new La Fromentière that he had had for the old one. It was all so changed! He had known it bright with the noise and bustle of a large, united family under the control of a man who, despite his years, was cheery and vigorous, and with more willing hands than were needed to get through the day's work—a home as passionately loved and defended as any nest from which the fledgelings have not yet flown. He found it unrecognisable. Two had gone, leaving the house desolate, the old father inconsolable, the work too heavy for those left behind. Rousille was wearing herself out. André saw clearly that he alone would not suffice to keep La Fromentière in a state of good cultivation, certainly not to improve it, as he had so often meditated through the hot, sleepless nights in Africa, thinking of the elm-trees at home. For this two strong young pair of arms were needed, without counting the help of a farm-servant: François should have been there with André! He struggled against the discouragement that oppressed him, for he was a brave lad. Every morning he went out into the fields with the determination to work so hard that there should be no room for thought; and he worked and ploughed, sowed seed or dug ditches, planted apple-trees with all zest and energy, not taking a moment's rest. But the recollection of François followed him everywhere; in everything he saw the decline of the farmstead. Working alone made the days long; longer still were they in the company of the new farm-hand, who went about his work stolidly, interested neither in the projects nor regrets of the farmer's son.

In the evening when André returned from work in whom should he confide, or who was there to comfort him? His mother was dead; his father had need of all his own hope and buoyancy of spirit that he might not break down himself; Mathurin was so uncertain and so soured that pity might well go out to him, but not real brotherly love. There remained Rousille, possibly. But Rousille was seventeen when André had left home, and he continued to treat her as a child, and told her nothing. Besides she was scarcely ever to be seen, poor girl, always on the run and hurried. The house was dull, and the young man felt it the more that regimental life, hard enough in all conscience, was yet full of go and movement.

Weeks went by, and there was no break in the sadness. Weary of being thus thrown upon himself, little by little André suffered his thoughts to go out from the mournful surroundings amid which he, in vain, tried to recognise the home of his youth. Like all peasants of the coast, he was one of those taciturn labourers who look over the sand-hills towards the sea, and who dream dreams when the wind blows. Sad and dejected he fell back upon the fatal knowledge he had acquired in absence: that life was possible in other places than at La Fromentière on the borders of the Marais of La Vendée.

The temptation grew stronger. Two months after having re-taken possession of the room that the two brothers had formerly shared together, one night, when the other inmates of the farm were sound asleep, André began a letter to a comrade in the foreign legion, whom he had known in Africa. "I find it too dull here. My brother and sister have left home. If you happen to know of any good investment in land in Algiers, or elsewhere, let me know. I have not come to any decision, but I am thinking of going away. I am, as it were, alone here." And answers soon came. To the great astonishment of Toussaint Lumineau the postman began bringing pamphlets, papers, and prospectuses to La Fromentière, over which André did not make merry as did Rousille and Mathurin. Laughingly his father, who had no suspicion of André, said:

"There has never been such a supply of paper at La Fromentière, Driot, as in the few weeks since you have been home. I don't grudge it you, reading is such a hobby of yours! As for me, I should be tired to death with all the printed stuff."

Only on Sundays the old father suffered a little from his son's passion for reading and writing. On that day after vespers it was his habit to bring back some old friend, either Le Glorieux de la Terre-Aymont, or Pipet de la Pinçonnière to pay a visit of inspection round the farm fields. Up hill and down dale they would go in single file, examining everything, expressing approval or disapproval by uplifted eye or shrug of the shoulder, exchanging an occasional word that had always the same object: the harvest, present or future, good or indifferent, threatened or gathered in. In this winter season it was the fields, the young wheat, and patches of lucerne that were under consideration; and Toussaint Lumineau, who had not succeeded in getting André to accompany them, would confide to his neighbour of La Terre-Aymont, or La Pinçonnière as they stopped where the slanting rays of the sun fell on the corner of a field:

"My son André is quite different from anyone I have ever known, and not a bit like we used to be. Not that he despises the land, on the contrary, he loves it, and I have no fault to find with his work all the week. But since he came home from the regiment, his one idea on Sunday is reading."

Rousille, too, was sometimes surprised. She had too much to do indoors to occupy herself with the work or amusements of the others. Busy with housekeeping, and the thousand and one duties of the farmyard, she never saw André save at meal-times, and in presence of the others. At those times, whether by an effort of will, or that youth obtained the mastery over depression, André was usually in gay and careless spirits, bantering Rousille and trying to make her laugh. But as a woman and one who had suffered, Rousille had learned to discern the sorrows of others; and from many a little sign, eyes fixed on the upper window, words dropped that might bear some other meaning, her loving heart had divined that André was not altogether happy; without knowing more, she felt sorry for him. But even she was far from guessing the crisis through which her brother was passing, or the project he was meditating.

One solitary member of the family had penetrated the designs of André, and that was Mathurin. He had observed his brother's increasing sadness; the useless efforts he was making to regain his former equability of temper; his calm fortitude in daily labour. Sometimes he would follow him into the fields, then watch for the arrival of the postman and take charge of the letters and papers addressed to André. The smallest details remained engraven on his brooding memory; and one day, under the guise of indifference, with a skilfully put question his brooding took shape. He was aware that the greater number of the letters received by André bore the stamp either of Algiers or Antwerp, and the latter place conveying nothing to Mathurin, André had explained:

"It is a large port in Belgium, larger than Nantes that you once passed through."
"How do you come to know anyone living so far from here and far from Algiers?"
"It's very simple," replied his brother. "My best friend in Algiers is a Belgian in the foreign legion, whose family live in Antwerp. Sometimes I hear from Demolder, sometimes from his people, who write to give me the information I want."
"News of old comrades, then?"
"No, things that interest me in the matter of voyages, other countries.... One of the sons has settled across the sea, in America. He has a farm as large as this whole parish."
"Was he rich?"
"No. He is now."
Mathurin did not further press the subject, but he continued to observe, to add indication on indication. If André chanced to leave a pamphlet on emigration lying about, or an advertisement of land to be let or sold, taking it up Mathurin would seek to discover the places over which his brother's brows had met in a frown, or where something like a smile, a wish, a desire had lighted up his eyes.
By proof on proof he had arrived at the conviction that Driot was thinking of leaving La Fromentière. When? For what remote land where money was easily made? Those were the problems. Thus in the month of December, when opportunities for confidential chat are more frequent by reason of days of snow and rain and squall, when alone with André in the stables or the house, he would say treacherously:
"Tell me about Africa, Driot. Tell me some yarns of men who have made money out there. I like to hear such things." Or at other times he would say: "La Fromentière must seem small and insignificant to a fellow like you who read so much. It certainly is not as productive as it used to be."
Mathurin had settled coming events in his mind, while Driot was still in doubt.
So the year drew to a close, and the new year began. It was a wet winter, with hard frost at nights; every morning spiders' webs covered with frozen mist would wave in the breeze like white wings, the damp earth would steam in the mid-day sun, and the white wings turn grey. The main work of the fields was suspended; the owners of land on high ground felled trees, or re-made fences; those on the Marais were perforce reduced to idleness; it was holiday-time with them; dykes and ditches were overflowing. The greater number of the farms surrounded by water, and, as it were, floating above it, were cut off from all communication with the neighbouring towns or each other save by boats steered over the inundated meadows. It was the time for dancing and shooting.
The ground, however, was not too hard to work upon, and, following Mathurin's advice, Toussaint Lumineau resolved to dig up his vineyard attacked by phylloxera.
So one morning the farmer and André made their way up to the little field lying well exposed to the south on the high ground which cuts the road between Chalons and La Fromentière. Before them they saw nothing but seven rows of vine enclosed by furze hedges, stony ground, and the revolving sails of two wind-mills.
"You begin on one row," said the farmer, "I will take the next," and pulling off their coats, despite the cold, for it meant hard work, they began on their task. Coming up the hill they had talked cheerily to each other; but no sooner did they begin to dig than their spirits sank, and they grew silent, not wanting to impart the thoughts that the work of destruction engendered. If a root, perchance, made very tough resistance, the father once or twice attempted to joke, saying playfully: "It felt quite comfortable there, and did not want to be turned out," or something else to that effect. But he soon gave up the attempt. He could not succeed in banishing from his mind, nor from that of the son working beside him, sad thoughts of the time when the vine prospered, and yielded abundantly the white foaming wine they had drunk so merrily in the old happy days of fêtes and gatherings. The contrast of his former prosperity with present hard times fretted him; and as far as he could see, it weighed still more upon the spirits of his Driot.
Thus, in silence, they plied their huge, old-fashioned pickaxes, made to be wielded by giants. The earth flew in showers; the trunks trembled; some few shrivelled leaves left upon the branches fell, and were blown about in the wind with a noise as of broken glass; now the stem was disclosed, vigorous but warped, covered with green moss, the effects of many a summer dew and rain, and tapering off to the size of a tendril. The marks of pruning made by successive vinedressers were not to be numbered; no one could tell the age of the vineyard. Every year since he could remember anything, Driot had pruned it, dressed it, gathered its grapes, drunk of its juice. And now it was dying. Each time that he gave the final blow to a root he felt a pang; each time that, seizing a portion of the lifeless fibres he threw it on the heap of dead uprooted stems, he shrugged his shoulders with mingled sorrow and rage. Dead those veins through which the red, joyous sap was wont to rise. Dead the fertile branches once bending under the weight of bunches of grapes, until they rested a golden glory on the ground! Never again would the flowerets, pale stars with drops of honey in each centre, attract the summer gnats, nor diffuse their mignonette-like perfume far over the fields, even to La Fromentière. Never again would the children of the farmstead push eager hands through the gaps in the hedge to clutch the bunches within reach! Never again would the women carry away basketfuls at vintage time. For many a long day wine would be scarce at the farm, and would be no more of "our own growing." Something belonging to the family, an hereditary and sacred possession seemed to perish with the vineyard, old and faithful servant of the Lumineaus. Father and son were both so intensely penetrated by the sense of their loss, that, as night descended, and the father raised his pickaxe for a final stroke, he could not help exclaiming:
"It's a hateful work, Driot, we have done to-day."
All the same, there was a difference between the sadness of father and son. Toussaint Lumineau, as he rooted up the vines, was already thinking of the day when he would plant fresh ones, and in his silent musings had seen his successor gathering in the vintage and drinking the muscadet of the new vineyard. He possessed that love, strong and tried, which rises hopefully after every stroke of misfortune. With André hope did not speak, because with him love had waxed feeble.
The two men, their figures indistinct in the darkening day, turned to skirt the grassy edge of the vineyard, then descended the sloping fields that led towards the farm. With weary, stooping frame, shouldering their heavy implements, they looked across the Marais to the crimson horizon, and at the clouds driven by the wind towards the setting sun. It was a melancholy evening; all around them were furze-bushes, ground uncultivated, hedges devastated, leafless trees, the gloom and chill of autumn. Thus they had gone some two hundred yards before the son could make up his mind to speak, as though feeling that his reply would be too hard for the father, who lived on in the same old groove.
"Yes," he said, "the day of the vine is at an end in our land, but it flourishes elsewhere."
"Where, my Driot?"
In the half dark the son extended his disengaged hand above La Fromentière, sunk below in the shadows; and the

action extended so far, away over the Marais and over La Vendée, that through his stout woollen garments Toussaint Lumineau felt the keen blast of the wind.
"What do other countries matter to us, my Driot," said he, "seeing that we are living in our own?"
Did the son understand the anxious tenderness of the words? He answered:
"Because in ours it becomes more and more difficult to live."
Toussaint Lumineau remembered words, almost similar, spoken by François and was silent, trying to explain to himself how it was that André, who was neither lazy nor a frequenter of town pleasures, could have fallen upon the very same way of thought. As the men, skirting the brown fields, came nearer home, La Fromentière with its masses of trees rose like a dome of denser darkness, above which the winter night was lighting its first stars. The farmer never entered the beloved precincts of his home without emotion; to-night, more than ever, he experienced its sweetness, dear to him as any bridal promise.
Rousille, hearing their approaching footsteps, opened the door, and raised the lamp high in air, like a signal.
"You are late to-night," she said.
Before they could make reply, the long-drawn sound of a horn was heard coming from the depths of the Marais, beyond Sallertaine.
"It is the horn of La Seulière," cried the voice of Mathurin from within. The two men, followed by Rousille, entered the warm room with its blazing hearth.
Mathurin resumed:
"There's a dance at La Seulière to-night. Will you come, Driot?"
The cripple, half-rising, supporting himself by his arms against the table with a nervous movement, his eyes glaring with long-suppressed desire, was alike painful to see, and fear-inspiring, as one whose reason was tottering.
"I am not much in the mood for dancing," returned André carelessly, "but it may do me good to-night."
Silently the farmer pressed his hand on the shoulder of his afflicted eldest son, and the fevered eyes relaxed their stare, the body obeyed, and fell back upon the bench like a sack of wheat that expands as it touches the ground. The men ate their supper hurriedly; towards the end of the meal Toussaint Lumineau, whose mind had reverted to André's words, wishing to take those of his children to witness whose hearts had never swerved in their loyal love to La Fromentière, said:
"Would you believe, Mathurin, what foolish stuff this Driot was talking to-night? He declares that vines have had their day with us; that they flourish better elsewhere. But when one plants a vine, one expects it to die some day, does one not?"
"Many enough have died before ours," responded the cripple roughly. "We are not more unlucky than our neighbours."
"That is just what I say," put in André, and he raised his head. His eyes were lit by a spirit of contradiction, and his silky moustache quivered as he spoke. "It is not our vineyard alone that is played out, it is the soil; ours, our neighbours', that of the whole country, as far and further than you have ever been. One must have new land to produce good results."
"New land?" returned his father. "I know none about here. It is all cultivated."
"Ah, but there is in many a country." He hesitated an instant, then enumerated hurriedly: "In America, the Cape, Australia, British possessions—everything flourishes in those countries. There the earth is prolific; while here——"
"Don't speak ill of it, Driot; it is worth the very best!"
"Used up; too dear!"
"Too dear, yes, somewhat. But feed it well, and you will see!"
"Feed it then. You have nothing to buy the stuff with."
"Only come a good year, not too dry, not too wet, and we shall have money enough!"
The farmer had drawn himself up, as if under a personal insult, and now awaited Driot's answer.
He, carried away by passion, rose. Everyone looked at him, even the farm-servant, who, with chin sunk in his horny hand, was trying to understand the situation. And there was something in the fluency of words, ease of gesture that made all vaguely feel that André was no longer like one of themselves.
"Yes," said the youth, proud of an audience, "there might still be some work to be done here, in the old country; but we are taught nothing of such things in our schools; that would be too practical. Then taxes are too heavy, and rents too high; and all the time that we are leading a miserable existence, they out yonder are having magnificent harvests. That I hear every day. Our vineyards are ruined, and they have wine. Wheat grows without their having to dress the land, and they export it to us in shiploads as full as, from what you say, the granaries of the old Château used to be——"
"Cock and bull stories! You have read them in books."
"Some of them; but I have seen ships in port, and sacks of wheat being unloaded like the water of a dyke overflowing its banks. If you were to read the papers, you would know that everything now comes to us from abroad far cheaper than we can produce it ourselves: corn, oats, horses, oxen; and that we have competing with us Americans, Australians, and soon we shall have Japanese, Chinese——" he was intoxicated with words; he was but the echo of the few pamphlets he had read, or of what he had heard from others. La Fromentière heard him with stupor. China, Japan, America, the names circled round the room like some unknown variety of bird, brought by the tempest from far-off regions. The farmhouse walls had heard many uncouth peasant sounds, but never had they resounded under the shock of these foreign words.
Astonishment was marked upon the faces that, in the light of the lamp, were turned upon Driot, who continued:
"I have learnt things, I can assure you! I learn more every day. And, look you, when one comes home as I have done to-night, from rooting up a vineyard, it makes one savage to think that there are parts of America, and I could give you the names, where one can settle without opening one's purse——"
"You be off!" quoth the ploughman.
"Yes! Government gives the agriculturist his passage free; keeps him when he first lands; and gives him a ranch of seventy-four acres of land."
This time the farmer shook his head, scandalised at the enormity of his son's statement, and said in a tone of disapprobation:
"You are telling up a parcel of lies, my boy. Seventy-four acres, that makes two hundred and ninety-six roods. I am not much of a reader, it is true, but I do not let myself be crammed with all the stuff you believe in like the Gospel. Two hundred and ninety-six roods. Governments would soon be ruined if they made a present like that to everyone who wanted it.... Hold your tongue.... It vexes me to hear our native land talked ill of. Since you want to cultivate it with me, Driot, do as we do, and don't talk ill of it.... It has always supported us."
There ensued an embarrassed silence, of which the farm-servant took advantage to get up, and betake himself to bed.

The call from La Seulière sounded out again in the still night. Mathurin said no word, but looked at his brother; he, ill at ease, excited by the recent discussion, understood the mute question, and answered promptly, in a manner that should show that he was free to do as he chose:
"Very well. Yes, I am going."
"I will go with you as far as the boat," responded the cripple.
Toussaint Lumineau foresaw danger.
"It is bad enough that your brother should be going to La Seulière," said he. "But for you, my poor boy, on no account would it do to go to their dance. It is cold out of doors. Do not go further than the duck meadow, and come back quickly." He followed with his eyes the cripple, who, in great haste, with the unnatural energy given him by emotion, raised himself on his crutches, hobbled the length of the table, down the steps, and following André, was lost in the night.
His sons had gone; an icy wind blew in at the wide open door. Alas! how difficult it had become to govern the household! Sitting on the bench, his head on his arm, looking out into the dark farmyard, the old man pondered the things he had heard that night, and his powerlessness, despite his great love and long experience, to make himself obeyed, now that interest was lessening in the work of the old farmstead.
But it was not long before he called to his daughter, busy at her work of washing up; the least word was such a relief in the empty rooms! "Rousille!"
The girl opened the connecting door, and came, drying the plate in her hands without looking at him.
"I am afraid that Mathurin may go back to see her——"
"Oh, father, he would not do that. Besides, he cannot have his shoes, and he dare not appear at La Seulière" ... stooping, she searched under Mathurin's bed, then in the chest, then said as she rose:
"Yes. He has taken them ... he must have put them on beforehand ... the first sound of the horn came at six o'clock."
The old father began pacing the room with great strides, stopping uneasily from minute to minute to listen for the sound of crutches on the gravel that should announce Mathurin's return.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DANCE AT LA SEULIÈRE

Toussaint Lumineau's uneasiness was well founded. His two sons had gone down to the meadow, where the dyke, widening, served as a drinking place for the animals on the farm, and as a harbour for the two punts belonging to it.
There André had offered no resistance when Mathurin had said:
"Take me. I want to see Félicité." Venturesome, imprudent in things concerning himself, soldier of but yesterday, still impregnated with barrack maxims, he had merely said:
"There's not a shadow of sense in it; but if it amuses you!"
And he had chosen the best of the boats, and helped the cripple to stretch himself in the prow; then, standing on the raised part in the stern, and taking up the pole, had begun to punt, now pressing the iron point into the bed of the dyke, now into the bank on either side.
Soon they were far out in the middle of the Marais, the night intensely cold with no moon. Clouds were chasing each other towards the sea; and yet it was not one unbroken darkness; up above in the grey firmament were lighter trails, clear patches constantly broken and effaced by shifting clouds reflected in their passage on the surface of the waters, not only of the dykes, but of the submerged meadows which had been changed into a series of lakes by winter rains, and above which the sloping embankments were scarcely perceptible. Every light was multiplied. The darkness had eddies of light, which enabled André to keep a right course.
The punt followed the canals, cut at right angles; progress was slow, impeded by ice needles, that formed by the cold clustered on the sedges of the bank. Did the wind not rise, the whole Marais would be one sheet of ice before morning; André knew this, and tried to reach La Seulière as quickly as possible. He began to realise the imprudence he had committed in taking Mathurin with him on such a night and so far. The cripple neither moved nor spoke, anxious not to attract his brother's attention to himself, lest he should straightway turn back. But when he saw that they were more than two thousand yards from La Fromentière, sure of reaching their destination, he broke the silence. Lying on his back, his face hidden by the side of the boat, he asked:
"Driot, when you were speaking to-night of land being given to agricultural emigrants, you were not joking?"
"Of course not."
"Have they proposed to give you some?"
Noiselessly, he had raised his head, and was watching with eyes and ears for André's answer. No reply came. In the vast extent of inundated meadows there was heard no sound but the swish of the water parted by the punt and washing up as the tide rose against the hard mud of the shore with little sharp gurgles. Mathurin resumed:
"You miss François, do you not? The house seems different to you with only me there?"
The young man standing so erect in the stern, his profile scarcely defined in the darkness, stooped precipitately:
"Look out!" he cried, "lie back, Mathurin!" Perfect darkness was around them; they were passing under one of the single-arched stone bridges that intersect the Marais here and there. When they had passed through Mathurin noticed that the boat was going more slowly, as though the propeller were absorbed in thought. Encouraged by this, resolved to be put in possession of the secret that concerned the future of La Fromentière, the cripple resumed persuasively:
"We are quite by ourselves here, André; why not tell me all you are pondering? You would like to cultivate newer soil than ours; you, too, want to go away, but further than François, and for another purpose?"
Then the younger brother ceased to punt. He still stood erect on the raised stern of the boat, and suffered the pole to float aimlessly behind him.
"As you have discovered it, Mathurin," he said, "keep my secret. It is true that proposals have been made to me.... With

my two thousand francs I might have, on the other side of the Atlantic, a whole farm of my own and a brood of horses.... Some friends of mine are looking into the matter for me ... but I have not made up my mind. I have not yet consented."
"You are afraid of father?"
"I am afraid of leaving him in difficulties. If I were to go, who would carry on La Fromentière? There is certainly Rousille, she might marry."
"Not that *Boquin* fellow! That would not do for us at all! But my father has said No; and he is not the man to go back on his word."
"Then I do not see who is to carry on the farm?"
In a hard, imperious voice, which betrayed the intensity of his feelings, the cripple cried:
"Then I count for nothing?"
"My poor Mathurin...."
"I am better, I shall recover," continued Mathurin, in the same tone. "When it comes to be my turn to rule, no one but myself will manage La Fromentière, do you understand?"
Not to exasperate him, André replied:
"Your recovery would be a happy thing for us all, old man. I, for one, heartily wish it may come about."
But the cripple's wrath was not to be appeased so easily nor so quickly. Rising from his recumbent position with an effort which threatened to capsize the punt, he dragged himself on hands and knees to the stern, where shouting, "Give me your place, boy, you shall see me punt," he struggled for possession of the pole; and seating himself in the stern, began propelling the boat with astonishing force and steadiness, keeping it clear of the banks, and with a rapidity, despite ice splinters and sedges, which André could not have accomplished. His huge frame took up the whole width of the boat; his powerful chest bent and raised itself with all the ease of robust health. As he went on arms and punt pole worked ever more vigorously; the banks flew by on either side. Soon he turned off into a canal on the right for some hundred yards. Now rays of light appeared on the surface of the water, rendering them more dazzling. They proceeded from the door of La Seulière. The farm buildings rose up indistinctly from out the darkness; sounds of voices singing broke the stillness, mingled with the noise of footsteps on the paved court. With a couple of strokes, Mathurin brought up the boat into line with some ten other punts lying side by side; and before André had thought of going to his help, had rolled with his crutches on to the slope before the house where he got up unaided.
"Well punted, Mathurin," cried his younger brother, jumping on shore. He, crimsoned, breathless, pleased as if with a victory won, looked round:
"Then don't worry yourself!" he said. "A man who can punt a boat as I do, is capable of managing a farm," and with a blow of his shoulder he shook the house door. A voice from within called out:
"Gently there! Who wants to break the door in?"
It was flung noisily open, revealing Mathurin standing in the full glare of the lamplight. The appearance of a ghost could not have produced greater effect. The noise ceased abruptly, the girls, frightened, ran away or clustered in groups against the walls. In their astonishment, many of the lads took off their hats, which they had kept on while dancing; farmers' wives half rose from the chairs on which they were sitting. Scarcely did they recognise the new-comer at such an hour and place.
Tired and crimsoned from his exertions, affected by the hot air of the room, but proud of the stupefaction he was causing, Mathurin stood erect on his crutches, and, laughing in his tawny beard, called out in a stentorian voice:
"How do you do, all of you!"
Then, addressing the group of girls who were retreating to the other end of the room:
"Who will dance a round with me, my beauties? Why do you look at me like that? I am not a ghost. I have brought my brother, handsome Driot, to dance *vis-à-vis* with me." And they saw him approach, followed by the youngest son of La Fromentière, tall and slim, his hand at his forehead in military salute. Then the room resounded with merry laughter, questions, and greetings; the girls ran towards them as precipitately as they had before retreated; men's hands were extended on all sides. Old Gauvrit's loud voice drowned all others, as, already somewhat heated with wine, he called out from an inner room:
"The handsomest girl to dance with Mathurin! the handsomest! Let her show herself!"
It was not in obedience to her father that Félicité Gauvrit came forward. But, though for an instant disconcerted by this abrupt entry before all these men and women, she realised that she must put a bold face on it, and going up to Mathurin Lumineau, her black eyes looking into his, she threw her arms round his neck and embraced him.
"I embrace him," she said, "because he has more courage than most of the lads in the parish. It was I who invited him!"
Stupefied, intoxicated by the memories awakened in him, Mathurin once more shrank away. They saw him grow livid, and, turning on his crutches, force a path through the group of men on his left, with:
"Make way, make way, lads. I want to sit down!"
He found a place in the second room, beside some of the elder men, old Gauvrit among them; who rising, poured him out a bumper of the white wine of Sallertaine, in token of welcome. Still quite pale, Mathurin lifted the glass with the customary formula, "I drink to you all with cordiality and love!"
Soon he appeared to be forgotten, and dancing was resumed.
The farmstead where the gathering was held was a fairly modern building, the usual large house-place being divided into two rooms of unequal size. In the smaller of these the elder men, with the master of the house, were drinking and playing luette. In the larger, that by which the two Lumineaus had entered, dancing was going on. The tables had been pushed along the walls beside the beds, the curtains of which had been spread over the counterpanes to save them from being torn. Some half-dozen matrons, who had accompanied their daughters, had collected round the hearth before a fire of dried cow-dung, the fuel of that treeless district, each having on the mantel-piece her cup of coffee, with a dash of brandy in it, from which she took an occasional sip.
Petroleum lamps placed along the wall lighted the narrow space reserved for dancing. A smoky, heated, vinous atmosphere pervaded the house. The icy air from without drew in under the door, sometimes making the young Maraîchines, despite their stout woollen gowns, shiver with cold. But no one minded. The room was filled with laughter, chatter, and movement. Youths and maidens from isolated farmhouses, cut off from one another by periodical inundations, they were tired of solitude and repose. Escaped from their tedium and restored for a brief space of social intercourse, they seemed possessed by feverish excitement. Soon all the gay dancers would be dispersed again over the mute, trembling sheet of water. They knew it; and made the most of the short reprieve.
So dancing recommenced.
First the Maraîchine, a dance for four, a kind of ancient *bourrée*, which the lookers-on accompanied by a rhythmic

humming; then *rondes* sung by a male or female voice, taken up by the others in chorus to the accompaniment of an accordeon played by a sickly, deformed boy of twelve; or there were modern dances, polkas and quadrilles, danced to one and the same tune, the time only made to vary. The girls, for the most part, danced well, some with a keen sense of rhythm and grace. Round their waists the most dainty had knotted a white handkerchief, to preserve their dresses when, after each refrain, their partner seized his lady round the waist and jumped her as high as possible, to demonstrate the lightness of the Maraîchines and the strength of the Maraîchins. Known to each other, these young people from the same parish, often neighbours, resumed the flirtations of the preceding winter; they made love; appointed meetings at Chalons fair, or at some coming dance at another farm; new-comers were gladly welcomed. Among these latter André Lumineau was the most sought after, the most cheery, most fertile at inventing nonsense and talking it.

Time passed. Twice Père Gauvrit had gone through the two rooms, opened the house door, and said:

"The moon is rising and will soon be visible; the wind is getting up and it freezes hard," then had gone back to resume his place at the card-table where the players awaited him. Mathurin Lumineau had taken a hand, but was playing absently, attending far less to his cards than to every movement, look, and word of Félicité. Already the artful beauty had several times contrived to bring her partner to a halt in the inner room, that she might exchange a few words with Mathurin. She was radiant with pride; on the bold, regular features that towered above the greater number of tulle coifs could be read triumphant joy, that after six whole years, the mad love she had inspired still endured, and had brought back to her the young men of La Fromentière.

It was ten o'clock. A little Maraîchine, her complexion russet as a thrush, started the first notes of a *ronde*:

"When as a little child I played,
  Light-hearted, never dull;
Down to the spring one day I strayed
  The cresses fresh to cull."

Twenty lads and as many girls took up the chorus:

"The ducks, the ducks, the ducklings, oh!
  To the Marais forth they go!"

And the *ronde* invaded both rooms. At the same time Félicité Gauvrit, who had refused to take her place in the chain of dancers, drew near the table where Mathurin was sitting. He at once rose, throwing down his cards to the man sitting next him.

"Stay where you are, Mathurin," she exclaimed. "Do not trouble about me. I have come to watch the dancers."

But she drew a chair into a corner of the room, assisted Mathurin to it, and then sat down beside him. Neither spoke. They were sitting in the half shade of a projecting piece of furniture; the cripple was not looking at Félicité, nor she at him. Side by side they sat in the shade of the cherry wood wardrobe, apparently engrossed in watching the dancers as they passed in and out of the room. But what they really saw was something very different; one saw the past love meetings, the plighted troth, the return that night in the waggon, the awful suffering stretching out through years, the desertion—now at this very moment—at an end. The other saw the possible, perhaps, near future; the farmstead of La Fromentière where she would reign; the bench in church where she would sit; the greetings that would be hers from the proudest girls round about; and the husband she would have—André Lumineau—who was now dancing the *ronde* with the little girl of fifteen, the singer of the couplets.

Mathurin began speaking in a low voice, words broken by long periods of silence; he was very pale and in fear that this brief happiness would too soon come to an end.

Grave and reserved, her hands crossed upon her apron, the daughter of La Seulière spoke without haste words heard by none but themselves. Many eyes were turned upon this strange pair of once betrothed lovers.

The dance went on, the refrain echoed from the walls.

The clear, laughing voice of the little Maraîchine sang:

"The spring was deep, alas, alas,
  Therein I needs must fall.
Along the road just then did pass
  Three barons valiant all.

"'What will you give us, maiden fair,
  If to your help we press?'
'An' you do that,' I did declare,
  'My gift you'll never guess.'

"Now when the little maid was freed
  And home again that day,
Straight to the window she did speed
  And sang a merry lay.

"'Not that we ask, oh, maiden fair,
  'Tis hard to treat us so,
But tresses of your golden hair,
  Or tokens ere we go.'"

The dance grew faster and more furious. The big Maraîchins seized their partners and sprang them so high that their muslin coifs touched the ceiling. The mothers drank a final cup of coffee. The card-players watched the *sarabande* through the dusty atmosphere by the uneven light of the smoking lamps. Mathurin and Félicité, sitting closer together, still talked on. But the daughter of La Seulière had suffered one of her hands to be taken between those of the cripple, and it was the huge hairy hands that trembled, and the little white hand that seemed not to understand, or to be unwilling to respond.

The *ronde* came to an end:

"'Ah, tokens give I none,' said she,
'To barons gay like you,
For chosen I am proud to be
By Pierre, who serves us true.'"

For the first time Félicité, looking at Mathurin said confidentially, with a laugh:
"That song is Rousille's story."
"Do you know what she wanted?" returned Mathurin hotly, "to marry our farm-servant; to become mistress of La Fromentière! But I was on the watch. I had that fellow Jean Nesmy turned out, and I swear to you it will be long before he dare show his face there again. And now...."
Here he lowered his voice and bent forward until the tawny hair touched the outer rim of the muslin coif, which did not draw back—"And now, if you will still have me, Félicité, it is you who shall be the mistress of La Fromentière." She had not time to answer. She had risen, the last refrain of the *ronde* had ended in a murmur of surprise. A man, whose white head towered above those of the assembled guests, had abruptly entered and advanced into the middle of the first room, without removing the hat he wore on his entrance, or making any salutation. His clothes were coated with ice; on his left arm he carried an old brown cloak that swept the ground as he walked. Severe of countenance, with eyes half closed from coming suddenly into the glare of light, he was evidently seeking someone.
All made way for the farmer of La Fromentière, "Are my lads here?" he asked.
"Yes, of course," returned a voice behind him. "Here I am, father."
"That's right, Driot," said the old man without looking back, "I am not afraid for you, though this is not the place for my sons. But it is freezing so hard that it seems likely that the whole Marais will be frozen before sunrise; and it may be the death of Mathurin, crippled as he is. Why did you bring him?"
In the general silence the farmer's eyes swept the larger room; a movement of some of those present showed him Mathurin sitting in the inner one; and the father saw his crippled son, and beside him the girl who had been the cause of so much suffering and sorrow.
"That girl!" he muttered, "lying in wait for him again!" With imperious gesture he forced a passage through the dancers, shouldering them to right and left. "Gauvrit," he exclaimed, nodding to the host, who had risen and was staggering towards him, "Gauvrit, I have no wish to offend you; but I must take away my lads. The Marais is a deathtrap in weather such as this."
"I couldn't prevent your sons coming," stammered Gauvrit. "I assure you, Toussaint Lumineau...."
Without heeding him, the farmer raised his voice:
"Out of this, Mathurin!" said he. "Take the wrap I have brought you," and he threw the shabby old cloak over the cripple's shoulders, who rising, meek as a child, followed his father without a word. The guests looked on, some mockingly, others with emotion, at the sight of the fine old man who had come that bitter night across the Marais to rescue his son from the wiles of La Seulière. Some of the girls said to each other, "He had not a word for Félicité." Others, "How handsome he must have been as a young man." And one voice murmured, and it was that of the young girl who had sung the *ronde*, "André is the image of his father."
Toussaint Lumineau and his sons heard nothing of this. The door of La Seulière had shut behind them, and they were out in the darkness and the icy wind.
The clouds were very high; as they scudded along in huge irregular bodies they formed a succession of black patches, their edges silvered by the moon. The cold was so intense it seemed to pierce through the stoutest clothing, and chill to the very marrow of the bones. It was indeed death to any but the strongest. The farmer, who knew the danger, hurriedly untied the two punts, and getting into the first motioned Mathurin to lie down in the bottom of the boat, then pushed out into the middle of the canal. Again the cripple obeyed, curling himself up on the boards; wrapped in his brown cloak, motionless, he looked like a mass of sea-wrack. But, unnoticed by the others, he had lain down with his face turned towards La Seulière, and raising his cloak with one finger, was looking back towards the farm. As long as distance and the canal banks allowed him to distinguish the light proceeding from the chinks of the door, he remained with eyes fixed upon the paling ray that recalled to him a new hope. Then the cloak fell back into its place, covering the radiant, tearful face of the crippled man.
André followed in the second punt. By the same dykes, past the same meadows they returned, struggling against the strong gusts of wind that blew. The storm that had burst had prevented the sheet of ice from covering the water. The farmer, unaccustomed to punting, did not make rapid progress. From time to time he would ask:
"You are not too cold, Mathurin?"
Then in a louder voice:
"Are you following, André?"
And in their wake a cheery voice would reply:
"I am all right."
The strain was tremendous, but with it was mingled the joy of taking back his two sons.
Although there was no apparent reason, and he had not thought of her for weeks, the farmer's thoughts flew to his dead wife: "She would be pleased with me," he mused, "for taking Mathurin away from La Seulière." And at times in the turn of a canal he would seem to see a pair of blue eyes like those of his old wife smiling upon him, which gradually sank until they rested among the reeds under the punt. And he would dry his eyelids with his sleeve, shake himself free from the overmastering drowsiness, and say again to his youngest son:
"Are you following?"
The younger son was not dreaming. He was thinking over what he had seen and heard: Mathurin's senseless infatuation, his violence, which, when their father should be no more, would make life very difficult to the head at La Fromentière. The events of that evening had increased the temptation of pastures new to this disturbed mind. In course of time both punts had reached the duck meadow.

CHAPTER XII.

ROUSILLE'S LOVE DREAM.

Sunday afternoon had become Rousille's hour for solitude. She could only go to vespers when the farm-servant was left in charge of the house; and he had stipulated that he should go once a fortnight to Saint Jean-de-Mont to his sister, a deaf-mute. Mathurin, who formerly had not left La Fromentière, now never missed attending High Mass at Sallertaine, where he met Félicité Gauvrit, greeted her for the most part without speaking, in order not to vex his father, watched her as she moved about the Place, then sat down at one of the inn tables to luette. As for André, he seemed just now to like to be away from La Fromentière as much as possible, and on Sundays would be off as early as he could to the villages on the sea coast, where he sought out old sailors and travellers who could tell him of the countries where fortunes were to be made.

Rousille knew nothing of the attraction that led her brother so far afield. One day she affectionately reproached him with leaving her so much alone. At first he had laughed, then suddenly had grown serious and said:

"Don't reproach me with leaving you so much alone, Rousille. Perhaps you will reap the benefit of my tramps one of these days; I am acting in your interests."

Thus on the fourth Sunday in January La Fromentière was in charge of Rousille. But Rousille did not find time hang heavy on her hands; she had taken refuge in the threshing-floor at the back of the farm, and was sitting at the foot of a great heap of straw, her face turned towards the Marais, visible through a break in the hedge. She would have been frozen in the north wind that was blowing, had not the straw all about her kept in the warmth like a nest. Leaning her head back against it, she had buried her elbows in the soft depths of some loose straw that had been forked out from the compact mass and not yet taken away.

The air was so clear that she could see away to the clock tower of Perrier, to the most remote farmsteads of the Marais, and even to the ruddy streaks, but rarely visible, of the pine-grown downs that bordered the sea more than three leagues distant. She was looking before her, but her mind was travelling beyond her father's meadows, beyond the great Marais, beyond the horizon—for Jean Nesmy had written to her. Rousille had the letter in her pocket—was feeling it with the tips of her fingers. Since morning she had known it by heart, had said it over to herself many a time, that letter of Jean Nesmy; the smile it called forth did not leave her lips, save to light up her eyes. All care was driven away, forgotten. Little Rousille was still loved by someone; the letter testified to it. It said:

"Le Château, Parish des Châtelliers,
"January 25th.

"My Dear Friend,

"We are all in good health, and I hope it is the same with you, though one is never sure when so far away. I have hired myself as labourer in a farm on the back of a hill as you leave the moor of Nouzillac, about which I have told you. In fine weather one can see six clock towers round about, and I think that but for the Mount of Saint Michel one might see the trees of the Marais where you are. Despite that, I see you always before my eyes. On Saturdays I generally go home to La Mère Nesmy, and so does my brother next in age to myself, who also has hired himself to one of the farmers of La Flocellière. We talk of you at mother's, and I often say that I am not as happy as I was before I knew you, or as I should be if they all at home knew you. At any rate, they know your name! My sister Noémi and the little ones, when they come along the road to meet me on Saturday evenings, always call out to make me laugh: 'Any news of Rousille?' But Mother Nesmy will not believe that you care for me, because we are too poor. If only she saw you, she would understand that it is for life. And I spend my time on Sundays telling her all about La Fromentière.

"Rousille, it is now four months since I have seen you, according to your desire. It was only at the fair at Pouzanges that, through a man from the Marais who came to buy wood, I heard that your brother André had come home, and that he was working on the land as the master of La Fromentière likes those about him to work; so it will not be very long before I come back to see you. Some evening I shall come, when the men are still out in the fields, and you, perhaps, are thinking of me as you boil the soup in the big room. I shall come round by the barn, and when you hear or see me, open the window, Rousille, and tell me with one of your little smiles, tell me that you still care for me. Then La Mère Nesmy will make the journey in the proper manner, and will ask your hand from your father, and if he says, Yes, by my baptism! I swear to you that I will bring you home to be my wife. You are my one thought and desire; there is no one but you that I cherish in my heart of hearts. Take care of yourself. I greet you with my whole heart.

"Jean Nesmy."

One by one, like the beads of a rosary being told, and that pass between the fingers of the devotee, the sentences of the letter passed through the mind of Marie-Rose, and her eyes gazing intently on the landscape, saw only the image of Jean Nesmy. The young girl saw him in his coat with the horn buttons, his high cheek-bones, his eager eyes that only laughed for her and for good work done, when at the close of day, his scythe slung on to his bare arm, he scanned the corn he had cut, and the sheaves he had tied standing upright in the stubble.

"Father no longer talks against him," thought she. "He even defended him once to Mathurin. As for me, he has never found me complain, nor refuse to do the work I had to do, and I think he is pleased with me for having done my best. If André were to settle down now, and to bring a wife to La Fromentière, perhaps father would not refuse to let me marry. And I begin to think that Master André has his reasons for absenting himself on Sundays, and going off to Saint Jean, Perrier, and Saint Gervais, as he does...."

She smiled. Her eyes had taken the colour of the fresh straw that surrounded her. Far away, on the road to the meadows, she saw a fine strapping youth walking with swaying movement, carrying over one shoulder a pole to jump the dykes with.

"Driot," she murmured. "I will tease him about his Sunday walks."

Soon she saw André come up the hill, skirt the dwarf orchard, then pass between the leafless hedges in the road. When he was at a little distance, she coughed to attract his attention. He looked up. His face which had worn an anxious expression cleared; instead of continuing his way to the courtyard of La Fromentière, he jumped over into a small field that ran beside it, passed the row of hives where the bees were sleeping their winter sleep, and stopped beside Rousille in the threshing-floor, leaning on his pole. As he did so, he endeavoured to assume the half-bantering, half-protecting air he usually adopted towards his sister, thinking himself obliged to laugh with her as with a child.

"I was looking for you," he said.

"Oh, you were looking for me very badly then. Your head was bent down. I believe you were thinking of someone else than me."
"Indeed!"
"Yes. Where do you come from with your pole, you roamer? Not from vespers?"
"No, from Saint Jean. The water is grand, and jolly cold. On the other side of Le Perrier there are inundations on both sides of the road."
"You have been calling at the farms, I suppose. Did you stop at La Seulière?"
"You do not know me one bit; do you think I should go against...."
He was about to say "against the intrigues of Mathurin, who has returned to his former infatuation," but he stopped short.
So happy herself that she did not notice his reticence, she resumed:
"To the Levrelles? No? Then to the mill of Moque-Souris, where there is that pretty little Marie Dieu-donnée, the prettiest miller's daughter between here and Beauvoir?"
"Still wrong."
Trying to be grave, but without succeeding in hiding the joy that pervaded her whole soul, she resumed:
"You see, I want you so much to marry, André. And such a dear boy as you are, I think it would be easy. Indeed, you have no idea how greatly I wish it!"
André's face grew careworn again as before, and he said:
"On the contrary I know very well...."
"No. You always think of me as a child. But I am twenty, Driot. I know when others are unhappy. You, for instance, are grieving over our François; you miss him even more than father does. If you were to marry, you would forget your sorrow a little. Settled down at La Fromentière, married to a girl you love, your thoughts would no longer be brooding over the past as now."
"And above all," put in André, "there would be a housekeeper here, and little Rousille could marry her faithful swain."
Pressing herself back against the rick with a girlish movement of shoulders, head, and arms, Rousille raised herself and knelt forward the better to reach her pocket. Bending over the aperture hidden amongst the innumerable folds of her dress, she extracted the letter and gently held up the square of paper to her brother, raising it to the level of her head and following it with her eyes as she did so.
"I would show it to no one but you, André ... read my letter ... I want to prove that I have confidence in you. And then you will understand how light it makes one's heart to receive such a dear letter, so light that one feels like air. It will make you want to receive such an one yourself."
André took the letter without showing the slightest impatience, and without a word of thanks. But as he read, he grew moved, not with jealousy of such love, but with pity for the girl, who was dreaming her dream of happiness between two misfortunes.
For he had definitely decided to leave the farmstead and La Vendée. Some tidings, in a measure foreseen, dreaded for some time past, very serious for La Fromentière, had caused him to come to a decision that very afternoon. He had returned home, sorrow stricken, weighing all the pain he was about to cause; and now coming upon this joy, this hope of Rousille's, those eyes that persisted in smiling at life, that flower of the ruined farmstead, the feeling came over him that he must spare the child, at least, that one evening, and not tell her at once all he knew.
Having read the letter he slowly folded it, and gave it back to Rousille, who, impatient for an appreciative comment, her whole soul in her eyes, her lips breaking into a smile, asked:
"Do you think that father would consent, if you were to marry, and if you spoke for my Jean?"
"Would you go to live in the Bocage, Rousille?"
"I should have to on account of Mathurin, who would never suffer us near him."
She was surprised at the manner in which André looked at her, so gravely and so tenderly. Taking her hand in both of his, her hand which still held the letter, he said:
"No, little Rousille, I will not speak for you. But I will shortly do something else, of which I cannot tell you now, and which will avail you. The day I do it, your marriage will be assured, unless father breaks up everything.... And it will not be at the Bocage that you will make your home, but at La Fromentière, in our mother's place—the dear mother with whom we were so happy in the days of our childhood. Put your faith in what I say, and do not worry about Mathurin."
Letting go her hand, which fell to her side, he added:
"I have an idea that you, at least, will be happy, Rousille."
She opened her lips to speak; he made her a sign that he would say no more. All the same Rousille asked hurriedly, seeing him move away:
"One thing only, André, tell me only one thing. Promise me that you will always till the ground, for father would be so grieved...."
And he answered:
"I promise you, I will."
Rousille watched him as he went round the corner, and on into the courtyard. What was the matter with him? What meant those mysterious words? Why had he spoken the last so sadly? For a moment she wondered; but the trouble was evanescent. Scarce had solitude returned about her, than Rousille heard again the words of her love-letter singing their soft refrain to her. They came into her heart, one by one, like transparent waves, each opening out in its turn and covering the shore. "It cannot be a very important secret," thought she, "since Driot will continue to till the ground, that will make father happy, and I shall be happy too."
She recalled the smile that had passed over her brother's face, and thought: "It is nothing," and peace, entire, unquestioning, returned to her.
In the twilight of that winter afternoon on the borders of the Marais of Sallertaine, for one short hour there was a girl who smiled at life, and deemed that bad times were past and gone. She was still smiling, still sheltered in her retreat amid the straw, when André accosted his father, coming in from the Sunday tour of inspection, with:
"Everything is certainly going to the bad, father."
The farmer, his head full of the promise of hay and wheat harvests he had just been examining, answered contentedly:
"No, everything is coming up well. The spring crop of oats is promising; what is going to the bad?"
"I heard at Saint Jean-de-Mont that there is to be a sale of the furniture at the Château, father!"
For a moment Toussaint Lumineau could not take it in.
"Yes, all the furniture," repeated André. "It is advertised in the papers. See, if you don't believe me, here's the list.

Everything is to be sold."
He drew a paper from his pocket, and pointed with his finger to an advertisement, from which the old farmer laboriously read:
"On Sunday, February 20th, Maître Oulry, notary at Chalons, will proceed to sell the furniture of the Château de la Fromentière. There will be sold: the entire drawing-room and dining-room furniture, old tapestries, oak chests, pictures, beds, tables, china and glass, wines, guns, contents of the library, wardrobes, etc."
"Well?" exclaimed André.
"Oh," returned his father, "who would have foretold this eight years ago? Have they become poor, then, in Paris?" He fell into silence, not willing to judge his master too hardly.
"It is ruin," said André. "After the furniture, they will be for selling the land, and us with it!"
The head of La Fromentière, the successor of so many farmers under the same masters, was standing in the middle of the room; he raised his weary eyes until they rested upon the little copper crucifix hanging at the head of his bed, then let them fall again in sign of acceptance.
"It will be a great misfortune," he said, "but it will not hinder our working!"
And he went out, perhaps to shed tears.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE AUCTION.

In the ensuing week the coming sale at the Château was the frequent subject of discussion among the men of La Fromentière. André openly attacked the masters.
"They are ruined," he said. "All the nobles go the same road, because they do nothing. So much the worse for them!"
"So much the worse for the farmers," replied his father; "they do not often gain much by changing masters."
Toussaint Lumineau was painfully hit by the coming event, not only in his sincere and lifelong affection for the master's family, but in his honest pride as a peasant.
It was a humiliation to hear people talk of the downfall of the family to whom the Lumineaus were allied by traditions of generations; he took his share of the blame, his share of the disgrace; he felt he had lost stability, that in future he must be exposed to chances and changes, like so many another; and even found himself envying those whose farms belonged to wealthy proprietors, clear of mortgage.
"No," he resumed, "you do wrong to speak as you do, Driot. Our masters may have their reasons for this, of which we know nothing. Perhaps M. le Marquis is about to marry his daughter, and is in want of ready money. Rich and poor alike find it an expensive business to settle their children."
"If that is their only means to obtain money, they must be at a pretty low ebb!" rejoined André. "To think that even family portraits are to be sold. I remember seeing them one day when I went with you to pay the rent."
"Bah! Perhaps they were not good likenesses. Besides, the Marquis probably has others. How are people in our station in life to know all that families like theirs possess?"
"And personal clothing? Is that usually sold? It is not very creditable in them to let everything go in a public sale, as if they were bankrupts."
"I tell you what, André, I do not believe that half the things will be sold that are down in the catalogue; it is merely to draw people." But all the same, in his heart of hearts, the farmer well knew how poor were the reasons which respect for the family led him to urge.
Rising from the table, under pretext of having work to do, he shortened the meal.
André's aggressiveness did not lessen, indeed his irritation seemed to increase as the day fixed for the sale approached. The poor lad needed to anger himself against something or somebody to gain courage. February 20th was the date on which he had secretly planned to leave La Fromentière, four days before the departure of an emigrant ship that he was to join at Antwerp. His anger was inspired not by temper, but by the ever-increasing grief within him. He forced himself to speak ill of La Fromentière because he still loved it, and was about to desert it.
Thus Sunday, the 20th of February, arrived. On that day the silence that had reigned over La Fromentière vanished, but to give place to what noises—what clatter! Visitors were again seen within its walls, but what visitors! People had come from afar, curiosity dealers from Nantes, from La Rochelle, even from Paris. Before eight in the morning they had gathered in groups beside the two flights of steps leading to the portico. Men, short, stout, red-faced; some with auburn beards, others with bird-like noses, talking together in subdued voices, sitting on chairs—to be sold—that had been ranged in rows on the broad carriage drive, laid with the red gravel that used to crunch so pleasantly beneath the roll of carriage wheels. On the topmost of the entrance steps, now converted into an auctioneer's rostrum, were the notary, Maître Oulry, his eyes displaying discreet satisfaction behind his spectacles, the public crier, indifferent as any stone-breaker to the relics of which he was about to announce the dispersion, and the furniture removers standing in their shirt-sleeves despite the intense cold. The two flights of stone steps, stained with mud even to half way up the balustrades, testified to the crowds admitted on the previous two days to see the interior of the Château. Some had gone from curiosity, taking advantage of their first opportunity to go over a seigniorial dwelling; but all within was in disorder, faded, covered with dust. The battens, which for years had secured the windows of the rooms on the ground-floor, had been unnailed on one side, and hung down beside the open *persiennes*. In the dining-hall, and the two drawing-rooms *en suite*, had been piled the greater part of the bedroom furniture, cooking utensils, and crockery. Pictures, turned with their faces to the wall, formed a dado in front of couches and easy-chairs; there were four clocks on one mantel-piece, candelabras standing in fireplaces, fire-dogs on occasional tables, book shelves on the billiard table, baskets of choice wine standing in the boudoir of the dowager Marquise, hung with its dainty cherry-coloured satin; silk draperies trailing on a kitchen table. Broken bell-ropes and strips of torn paper hung from the walls. Everywhere was disorder and desolation as complete as is produced by Death in the human frame.

Pushing their way through the narrow passages left by all these piles of costly objects were to be seen coarse men accustomed to the handling of rags and rubbish, discharged servants, dealers in old clothes, coffee-house keepers covetously fingering carved oak chests, scratching the gold off picture frames to see how deep it was laid; opening cupboards and drawers, and bursting into rude loud laughter if, perchance, they lighted upon some private token, such as photographs, letters, missals, rosaries, relics of departed souls thus exposed to, and profaned by vulgar eyes.

On the upper floors boys in their sabots had perched themselves on the window-sills with legs hanging out, or were trying the mattresses still left on their wooden bedsteads. Gradually as the late February day dispersed the fog, and it was drifted by the wind in heavy masses over the woods, vehicles of all descriptions—cabriolets, victorias, tilburys, closed carriages formerly graced with armorial bearings, now let out on hire, mixed with some few well-appointed turn-outs—drove into the park. These were unharnessed, the carriages standing upon the lawns, some of the horses tied to the trees with nosebags of hay; while others, their feet clogged, were left to graze where they would. A row of carts stood on the border of a neighbouring copse, their shafts raised diagonally.

All round the Château was like a fair; the stables and coach-houses had been appropriated; plough horses were to be seen in the loose boxes; coachmen and stable-boys from inns, in their straw hats, gazed admiringly at the vast proportions of the stables and dependencies, or stood hypnotized before the copper appointments of the stalls, the nickel locks, the iron bars separating one from the other.

"It was a fine place after all," they said to themselves.

The sight of all the careful appointments seemed to give them a vague insight into the ancient splendours of the domain, while at the same time it came across them with stupefying force: how could a man have lost such a fortune? how could there be ruin, with a rental of hundreds of thousands of pounds? And, as a natural consequence, they gave the family credit for vices which had but a very small share in the disaster, for, spitting on the cemented floors, they exclaimed: "A pleasure-loving set!"

In front of the entrance the crowd increased rapidly, some impelled by the desire to buy, others by curiosity. Three hundred people, seated on chairs and benches, formed a compact, immovable, semicircular mass; outside them was perpetual movement of coming and going. Dealers in antiquities, sellers of old clothes, occupied the first row; after them came a number of shopkeepers, former purveyors to the Marquis, householders of Chalons with their wives, country dames dressed up as if for Easter Day, with bright eyes and loud voices, wearing little bunches of spring flowers in their bodices which they themselves had cut from the hot-houses of La Fromentière, given up this day to pillage. They commented derisively to each other on the ill-kept state of the apartments in the Château, the dirty windows, the grass-grown avenues, the bogs in the cross roads of the park. "We keep things very differently," said they. "Thank goodness, we know better what is fitting than your ruined Marquises do!" And with an air of "knowing all about it," they called up memories of bygone fêtes. Behind them, again, were to be seen peasants of Saint Gervais, of Soullans, of Saint Urbian, but men only. Very few had come from the parish itself. The auction was not for them; what should take them there? To many who had known the family, it had seemed as if it would have been an insult to assist at the humiliating spectacle. At the most some ten of the old inhabitants of Sallertaine were there, and they not the most important, keeping well at the back, not daring to sit down. Shamefaced, as though the lord of the Château were there before them and sorrowful, they had followed the crowd, having nothing else to do in their Sunday leisure, and now exchanged recollections of kind words spoken by "Monsieur Henri," of greetings and girlish smiles given by Mademoiselle Ambroisine. Alas! after all the money so lavishly spent, so many a kindly action, so much cordiality and urbanity shown for centuries past by successive Marquises of La Fromentière—after eight years there only remained that slight expression of regret to be seen in the sad faces of a handful of farmers.

Still fewer in number were the neighbouring gentry. Hidden among the throng was the Baron de la Houvelle, whose mania for collecting led him to forget what was due to his rank; the Comte de Bouart, coarse and red-faced, attracted by the wine cellar, and young d'Escaron, whose object was to secure a breeding mare.

But the notary had many commissions to buy; for earlier in the week, before the day on which the Château had been on view to the invasion of plebeians, châtelaines, young and old, friends of the family, had driven over and, shown round by the game-keeper, might have been seen in private apartments and reception rooms, examining old tapestries and household linen with many an exclamation and regret.

Only one member of the Lumineau family was present at the auction, and that was Mathurin, to whom every event, even of a painful character, was a grateful change to his sufferings and weariness. When he had announced "I shall go," his father had said:

"I could not; it would irritate me too much. Go if you like; and when they come to selling personal things, send me word, Mathurin, for I want some little thing as a remembrance of M. le Marquis."

At some distance from the circle of buyers, to the left of the entrance, Mathurin Lumineau had found a seat under a group of trees. Wrapped in his brown cloak, more taciturn and brooding than ever, he had gradually pushed back his chair until he was almost hidden between the branches of two fir-trees, thence, as if lying in ambush, he listened to all that was going on, and his blue eyes, ever and anon lit up with sudden anger, scanned the front of the Château, now the buyers, now the passers-by.

At half-past eight the auction began. The auctioneer, a small bloodless man, endowed with a strong voice, announced from the top of the entrance steps to the crowd assembled, to brute nature, to the forests left for the past eight years to solitude and silence:

"The reception-room furniture of M. le Marquis, comprising six *fauteuils*, a couch, four ebony chairs upholstered in old gold satin, Louis XV. style, with gilt nails, for fifteen hundred francs; the covers will be thrown in. Going at fifteen hundred francs! Fifteen hundred and twenty; fifteen hundred and fifty; sixteen hundred." He rolled his eyes as the price augmented.

At sixteen hundred francs, the old gold satin *suite* was knocked down; and while the notary was putting the curtains up for auction, Mathurin's eyes followed the *fauteuils*, couch, and chairs he had only seen once before and that by chance on a quarter-day, now being carted away by the furniture removers who fell at once on these the first spoils. After the contents of the reception rooms followed tables, wardrobes, beds, these latter especially coveted; crockery, covered with dust and displayed to view on the steps, clocks, the billiard table.

The sale lasted the whole day, save a short interval at half-past ten. The auctioneer's voice was untiring. As people went, their places were taken by new-comers; the pale rays of the February sun lighted up clouds of dust issuing from the open windows; the rooms were thronged. Many of the purchasers were carrying away their lots themselves; others, who were only later to come into possession of their acquisitions, were writing their names in chalk on old oak chests, or pieces of furniture, covered for the time being with heaps of incongruous articles. Costly hangings, partly unnailed,

hung from the cornices, and streaming over step-ladders, trailed on the dusty floors.
Towards four o'clock, the number of spectators had diminished; tethered horses had been taken from under sheltering trees; vehicles of all kinds and descriptions were on the homeward way to town and outskirts. Mathurin had not left his nook under the shade of the fir-trees. An uneasy suspicion was agitating him violently. Twice, at some distance in the direction of the offices, he had thought to recognise the eager face of Jean Nesmy. The young man, clad in brown, his hat drawn over his eyes, who only stealthily advanced, but who had been seen by Mathurin now here, now there in the copse on the other side of the lawn, could be no other than the dismissed farm-servant, Rousille's lover.
Mathurin sat and waited for his father, to whom he had despatched a village lad, telling him of the approaching close of the sale. In the bluish mist, to right of the Château, Farmer Lumineau appeared, and with him Marie-Rose. Despite the growing dusk, both were somewhat shamefaced. Rousille did not go far, at a hundred paces from the front of the Château she stopped, and sitting on the bench of *la Marquise*, looked on with startled eyes at the scene of devastation, while her father went up closer to make his purchase. Among the two hundred people still grouped round the granite steps, women predominated. They had stayed to see the "wearing apparel and toilet appurtenances," given out by the notary as being the next lot. And now the auctioneer lifted above his head a soft, clinging, pale violet material, that unfolded and fluttered in the wind.
"A young lady's dress of mauve silk with muslin collarette—ten francs!" he called.
"Show it!" cried the women's voices.
And Rousille saw the object lowered on to the stone steps, the little silken gown left behind, forgotten, that still retained something of the supple grace of its wearer, Mademoiselle Ambroisine de la Fromentière. And coarse words and low jests reached her, made by the brokers as they handled the dainty relics of refinement and purity.
"Can they put up that for sale!" she murmured; she shrank from the profanation, and would gladly have gone away.
But at that moment two sudden emotions, two surprises nailed her to her seat. Across the lawn, facing her, in front of a group of fir-trees, she had seen Mathurin, who had left the protection of the branches, and was looking over at the bench of *la Marquise*, shaking his fist; while, quite close behind her, she heard a voice from out the flowering laurels, say:
"My Rousille, Jean Nesmy has come!"
With perfect self-control she did not turn her head, made no movement; feeling herself to be spied upon, she had all the courage of her ancestors whom peril had ever found ready. Scarce opening her lips as if only breathing to calm her beating heart, she said to him who had rustled the leaves behind her:
"Beware! Mathurin is watching us."
"I know, he has already seen me."
"Then, go quickly! Come back later."
"When?"
"To-night, in the barn; when I put my candlestick on the window-sill."
Mathurin was hurrying across with the aid of his crutches to satisfy himself that he had seen a man's figure among the shadows of trees in that opposite group. Jean Nesmy meanwhile slipped away amid the undergrowth, and through the lonely copses. Round the steps, already in darkness, loud talking and laughing rose from the diminished crowd.
"I will have it. That's what I want," was heard in Lumineau's strong voice. The auctioneer was offering a walking-stick, with horn handle bound with a gold ring.
"That depends, my good man," was the reply, amid the jibes of the townspeople of Chalons, "that depends! To say 'I will have it' in an auction is not enough. What price do you put on it?"
"Two francs," said a broker.
"Five francs!" cried the farmer. Now no one laughed; the bid was an unusual one. Toussaint Lumineau had made it greatly to prevent competition, but also, as he would have said, from a spirit of bravado to prove that the tenant was not ruined like his master. Mounting the lower steps he reached up a crown piece, seized the cane, and, not venturing to lean upon it, tucked it under his arm, and slouched away from the remaining group of bargainers who were greedily snapping up odd remnants of the furniture of La Fromentière, hastily priced, given for next to nothing. Skirting the excited cluster of buyers, he went towards the group of trees where Mathurin had again taken up his post.
"Let us go," he said, "I have made my purchase. M. Henri's walking-stick."
"You paid too much for it," said the cripple.
"My poor lad," returned the farmer reproachfully, "he would have given it to me had he been there. I paid that price that no one should dispute it with me.... All those fellows would have made game of me, had I not!—"
And with a movement of the shoulder he signified the notary, the auctioneer, the invisible agents of the law, who to his excited fancy had had a hand in the proceedings now coming to an end. Moderating his pace so as not to hurry Mathurin, whose crutches struck against the mole-hills on the lawn, the farmer crossed the broad expanse where the blue mist thickened. They could hear the cracking of whips; see the red light of lanterns passing along the leafless woods, the frightened wood-pigeons circling over head. Rousille saw her father coming. She had remained in the same place sitting on the bench, joyous at heart, but with somewhat too much of love's dream in her eyes, for her father asked severely:
"What is it, child? This is no day for laughter."
"Nothing," she answered, rising.
"Then walk on in front," put in Mathurin. "You might be meeting someone."
And she went down the avenues, then along the path by the leafless hedges in front as she had been hidden. Her white coif turned neither to the right nor to the left; but proud as one enduring for her love, she walked on with elastic step down the hill towards the elm-trees of the farmstead, and her eyes gazing fixedly into the gathering night—those eyes which none could read, gazing at everything, seeing nothing, were filled with tender musings. She entered her domain, and began to pour over the bread the soup which had been simmering in her absence. The men stayed without, talking. When they came in she felt sure that she had been again betrayed by Mathurin, and that her father was angry with her. André came in last, at about eight o'clock. The farmer had proposed waiting supper until his return, and he and Mathurin had sat in the chimney-corner warming themselves, by turns taking and trying the cane of M. Henri as they talked over the sad events of the day: the men who had come from Sallertaine to bid, how they had heard the battens nailed up again across the lower windows as they came away; the lights they had seen wandering along the corridors of the upper floor as in the good old days when the great white house was full of guests.
"Our masters will never come back now," said Toussaint Lumineau. "And I, who always believed in them! This is the end!"

"The end!" repeated André, as he came in at the door from the outer darkness. "I am glad not to have seen it."
The good-looking young Maraîchin seemed tired and troubled; his eyes were brilliant as if about to shed tears. Toussaint Lumineau thought that the shame of this public auction, so painful to him, had affected his son in like manner, and had been the sole cause of his long absence.
"Sit down, Driot," he said, "you must be hungry. The soup is ready."
"No, I am not hungry," replied André.
"Nor am I," returned his father.
Mathurin alone, dragging himself to the table, ladled out a plate of soup; while his father remained sitting beside the fire, and Driot stood leaning against the projecting chimney-corner, looking alternately at his father and brother.
"Where did you go?" asked the farmer.
André made a sweeping gesture:
"From one to the other. To your friend Guerineau, of La Pinçonnière; to the miller of Moque-Souris; the Levrelles; the Massonneau...."
"A good fellow, le Glorieux," interrupted the farmer; "worthy family his."
"I saw the Ricolleaus of Malabrit too."
"What, you went as far as that?"
"The Ertus of La Parée du Mont——"
Toussaint Lumineau looked straight into his son's clear eyes, trying to understand.
"What led you to go and see all these people, my boy?"
"An idea"—no longer able to endure his father's inquiring look, his eyes sought the dark corner wherein stood the bed—"an idea. Well then, going along, I thought I would go as far as La Roche and see François."
"François?" murmured the farmer. "You are like me then, dear lad, your thoughts are often with him?"
Slowly the young man nodded his head, as he answered:
"Yes, this evening especially; this evening, more than any evening of my whole life, I would have liked to have him beside me."
André's words were spoken with such strong emotion, with so mournful a solemnity, that Mathurin, who had not known the date of André's departure, understood that the time had come, and that his brother had not many more minutes to remain in La Fromentière.
The blood rushed to his head, his lips half opened, a violent fit of trembling seized him, while his eyes stared fixedly at André. There was an unwonted animation in those eyes of his, for, while they expressed triumphant pride, there was also, in that supreme hour, something of pity and affection, perhaps of remorse. André knew that they bade him farewell. The father, meanwhile, had drawn up his chair to the table, and raising the cane horizontally to the level of the lamp, that André might the better see it, was caressing the gold ring with his fingers, none too clean from the day's toil. He imagined that his son's thoughts were again with the present, or like his own, were embracing the same future.
"See," said he, "what I bought as a souvenir of M. Henri. How often he has knocked against my door with the point of this cane, tap! tap! tap! 'Are you there, my old Lumineau?' André, when you are the master of La Fromentière——"
At these words the young man, who was standing behind the farmer, felt all his courage give way. Unable to restrain his tears, and fearing lest his father should turn towards him, he retreated silently towards the door.
Toussaint Lumineau had noticed nothing; he continued: "When you are the master at La Fromentière, you will see no more of the family. I do not believe that the farmstead will be sold. I greatly hope not, but our Marquises will not come amongst us again. My lad, the new times you will be living in will not be like those I used to know!"
Now Driot's tears fell fast as he looked at the old walls worn with the shoulders of many a Lumineau past and gone.
"Do not distress yourself, dear boy. If the masters go, the land remains." Driot's tears fell fast as he looked on the rosary of Mère Lumineau, hanging at the head of the bed.
"The land is good, though you have spoken ill of it, and so you will find out."
Driot's tears fell as he looked at Mathurin.
"You will do your best for it; and it will do its best for you!"
Driot's tears fell fast as he looked at his father, still fondling the light wood cane. He gazed for some time by the light of the lamp on the tired hands, the horny hands, seamed with scars gained working for his family for their support and education—the hands that had never known discouragement, and, impelled by respect and grief, he did a thing unknown at La Fromentière, now that the sons were grown up and the mother dead; he came close in the shadow behind his father, leant over him, and kissed the old man's wrinkled brow.
"Dear boy!" said Toussaint Lumineau, kissing him in return.
"I will be off to bed," murmured André. "I am done up."
He seized Mathurin's hand in a warm, hurried clasp. But he took some time to go the ten paces which separated him from the door leading into the kitchen where Rousille was washing up her dishes. As he shut the door he looked back once more into the room. Then he was heard talking to his sister. Then he was heard no more.
Deep night enveloped the farmstead, the last on which the roof of La Fromentière would shelter Driot. An hour after, any late wanderers along the road, seeing the mass of buildings standing out from the trees, darker even than the enveloping fog and as silent, would surely have thought that all within were sleeping soundly. But, save the farm-servant, all within were wide-awake.
Mathurin, greatly excited, had not ceased talking and turning restlessly. The light extinguished, talking still continued between father and son, whose beds were ranged, near each other, beside the wall. Not daring to speak of André's flight, the idea of which was ever present with him like a persistent nightmare, the cripple turned feverishly from one subject to another, and his father found it impossible to calm him.
"I assure you I did see the *Boquin*. I was some distance from him, but I detest him too much to make any mistake about the fellow; he has a sly way of running about like a ferret. He wore a brown suit, and had something tawny in his hat, like oak leaves."
"Go to sleep, Mathurin, you must be mistaken."
"Yes, of course they were oak leaves. When he was here he used to stick them in his hat every now and then out of bombast, to show that his province was richer and more wooded than ours. Ah, the *dannion*! If I could but have run!"
"You would not have found him, my poor boy! He is at home in his Bocage. What should have brought him to the Marquis' sale?"
"To see my sister, of course! He may even have spoken to her for all I know, for it was too dark for me to see Rousille plainly."

The father, lying in his large canopied bed, sighed, and said:
"Always your sister! You worry yourself too much about her. Go to sleep, Mathurin. They would not dare to speak to each other; they know I should not allow it."
The cripple was silent for a few seconds, then his mind reverted to the events of the day; he enumerated the neighbours who had spoken to him, and what they had said about the probable sale of La Fromentière; then, impelled by the one master-thought, he recapitulated the things to be done for the improvement of the farmstead, the conditions of the fresh lease to be arranged for with the owners, and added:
"You do think me better, don't you? My back is straighter. I am not so short of breath. Did yoo notice, as we came home to-night, how at every step I used my legs without needing my crutches?"
Several times in the middle of a sentence he had stopped short to listen, seeming to hear that which in imagination he never ceased to see; Driot for the last time leaving the room at the end of the house; Driot going stealthily through the courtyard that his footsteps might not be heard on the gravel; Driot passing the door close by, and going away for ever.
Towards eleven o'clock, Bas-Rouge, who had growled at times earlier in the night, began to bark violently to the right of the yard.
"What is the matter with him?" exclaimed Toussaint Lumineau; "one would think there were people moving about in our lane."
Mathurin, growing cold, silently raised himself on his elbows. After a minute the farmer resumed:
"Do you hear how our dog is barking? There certainly must be someone near."
"Father," returned Mathurin, "he is as mad as a March hare at this time of year. I think he sees bernacles flying in the air." The barking sounded nearer, not angry but joyous, as of a dog being taken for a walk. Then a footstep was distinctly heard, and the animal began to howl.
"They are throwing stones at Bas-Rouge," exclaimed the farmer. "I must go."
"No; do not go. I will not have you go! Stay, father, stay!"
"Why?" asked Toussaint Lumineau. "I have done it scores of times before, and have taken no harm."
Sitting on the side of his bed, the old peasant listened yet for a few seconds, before hastily putting on his breeches and running to the door. A thought flashed through Mathurin's mind:
"It is André. I have but to say one word, and my father will be with him in time. Shall I?" Six years of suffering and of being in subordinate position to the younger ones, answered: "No!" and letting himself fall back on his pillow, he said, as if reassured:
"It is not worth the trouble. The sounds are already further off."
And, in truth, Bas-Rouge must have run out into the lane towards the main road. His barks were more faintly heard and at intervals; he evidently was seeing the intruder off the premises.
The farmer lay down again, and no longer hearing Mathurin move, fell asleep. It was a little past midnight.
At that hour Rousille was still at work in her room, with doors bolted and window shut, waiting for him who had promised to come. The thought of seeing her lover once more, of what she should say to him, and the idea that there might be some danger to Jean Nesmy, were he surprised by her father, had occupied the long hours during which the murmur of voices from the adjoining room had not ceased to reach her. "What can they have to say to each other?" she thought. On the side towards the barn she had carefully closed the shutter of a narrow little window, cut in the thickness of the wall, breast high, and protected by an iron bar. Sitting on the chest at the foot of the bed, she was hemming some coarse kitchen aprons. The candle standing near lit up the bowed head of the young girl and the more distant panels of the five wardrobes, the polished pillars of the bedsteads, and the sides of the chests, each of which gave a different softened reflection; there was the violet of wild cherry wood, the dark-red of the cherry-tree, the golden-brown of walnut and oak, and finally the ghostly reflection of one, made for a somewhat eccentric great grandmother, of the finest ash wood; and in the same room and atmosphere that had surrounded her ancestresses, industrious as was their descendant, now sat Rousille, the last daughter of the Lumineaus, with eyes modestly bent upon her needlework.
Rousille was never idle. However, in this self-imposed night-watch, it sometimes happened that she would pause with thread outstretched, or would rise and go with slippered feet to listen at the door of the room nearest to the house-place whence voices were still audible.
When nothing more was heard, neither the barking of the dog, nor the vague sound of voices, she still listened, but she had ceased to ply her needle. Looking round the room with the eye of a housekeeper, she thought:
"Will he find it in good order, and as he would like his house to be kept?" Rousille tied the kerchief she wore as protection from the cold more closely; then a little shudder of fear ran through her at the thought that her father might suddenly appear; and her face grew grave and stern, as before, when she had had to do battle for Jean Nesmy; then, rising, she placed her candlestick on the deep window-sill, which by reason of the thickness of the wall was triangular, like the loophole of a fortress. After that she opened back the shutter on its hinges. A breath of icy fog enveloped the flame, nearly extinguishing it; almost on tip-toe, with both hands shading her eyes, Rousille endeavoured to distinguish objects from out the darkness. Was he there? She only saw the bare branches of two gooseberry-bushes trained against the wall. There was no sound of footsteps; no sign of anyone; she only heard the dull thud of mist-drops falling from the slates on to the turf beneath. A minute passed.
Suddenly the branches were pushed aside, a dark head emerging from the total darkness was framed in the window between the wall and the iron bar. The face was pale, but the eyes laughing, half-closed, dazzled by the candle-flame.
"I thought," said Jean Nesmy, "that you were not coming. I was chilled to the bone. I was going!" He looked so radiant as he said it, his eyes gradually opening, revealing the rapture of perfect delight.
Rousille, more grave, for she had within her the recollection of her past meditations, said:
"We must talk quickly. Father has only just fallen asleep. If he were to awake! If he were to come upon us!"
But Jean Nesmy seemed in nowise to share her fears. Nor did he look about the room to see if all was in order. He only looked at Rousille, so agitated under her little coif. The light placed between them illuminated their eyes to the very depths.
"You are as pretty as ever," replied the lad. "One might well walk miles to catch a sight of you! Mother Nesmy did not want me to come on account of the expense; but I said to her: 'I would rather go without my bread,' and it was true, my Rousille."
She could not help smiling.
"You always know how to pay compliments, Jean Nesmy; and really I see no change in you."
"There is none," he returned, showing his white teeth.

And now she forgot all her previous uneasiness, and it seemed to them both, as though they had never been apart, so natural was the interchange of ideas; the candle quivered under the mutual stream of question and answer.
"Tell me, Rousille, how are things going? Are you happy?"
"Not very. At La Fromentière we have more sorrow than happiness. Now, as you know, our master the Marquis has had all his furniture sold. Such a pity!"
"Our nobles of Le Bocage would not have done such a thing," said the *Boquin*, throwing back his head.
"Besides," resumed Rousille, "since François left us nothing goes right. Driot is inconsolable at his absence."
"Even now?"
"Even now. We thought him so lively when he first came home. Well, this evening he actually cried. Why could it have been? Was it fear that the farm would be sold over our heads? Was it anything else? With him one never knows."
"Perhaps he is thinking of a sweetheart about here?"
"I wish indeed it were so, Jean, for his sake and ours, because his marriage would be the signal for our own. You see, all our hope is in André. I have thought many a time, indeed why not tell you—every day since the one on which you went: If André does not marry, my poor Jean, I shall be quite white-haired before our banns are published in your church and mine. Father will not let me go unless there is a housekeeper here to take my place. And as for our coming to live here with Mathurin—he hates us both too much. There would be bad blood at La Fromentière. Father would never put us on the farm with Mathurin."
"Does he ever speak of me when he is ploughing?" asked Jean.
"I never go into the fields," replied Rousille. "But one evening I heard him say to my eldest brother, 'Do not speak ill of the *Boquin*, Lumineau! I refused him my daughter, and in that I did well; but he was a good worker, he had a love for soil.'"
Behind the iron bar the face of the former farm-hand coloured with pride.
"It is true that I loved everything about the place for your sake, Rousille. And so André will not marry?"
"I do not say that. He is still in such low spirits; but time will cure that. We shall have him on our side, that good André; he spoke so kindly to me the day of the letter. He promised to help me; but did not explain in what way."
"Did he mean soon?"
"I think so," said Rousille, "for his manner was very decided, and he was very sure about the step he was going to take."
Suddenly she lowered her voice—"Did you hear that?" she asked.
"No, nothing."
"Something moved in the bakery."
"Look at me, Rousille. Nothing moved," returned Jean.
Obedient, victorious over all fear for love of him, she bent once more towards the window, even began to laugh as she said:
"It is easy to see that you have no fear of anything. Where were you hidden, just now, before I opened the shutter?"
"Among the layers of straw. The wind was as keen as on one of my worst wild-fowl expeditions; it stupefied me, and seeing no light I must have fallen asleep for a while."
"Really? and what woke you?"
"Bas-Rouge, going after your farm-servant."
"Going after the farm-servant?" exclaimed Rousille in astonishment. "I heard the dog bark, but I thought he was after a tramp, there are so many about on these roads; or that he had recognised you——"
"You know very well, Rousille, that he never barks at me, since I used to take him out with me when I went shooting. No, I am certain that it was the farm-servant.... I heard the latch fall, and the distinct sound of footsteps on the gravel at the back of the house. I tell you it was the servant, or else your brother.... I am convinced that a man went out from here."
She blanched a little and then drew herself up:
"No!" she replied, "André does not go out shooting like you; nor does he go off to Chalons as François did! Can Mathurin have got up to spy upon us while father was asleep? Oh, do take care of yourself, Jean Nesmy! Listen!"
Seizing the candlestick from the window-sill, she held it out at arm's-length towards the other end of the room, the light shining on the polished furniture as she moved it.
"You are right, someone is moving about in the bakery," said Jean Nesmy. Now the door was gently pushed from the outer side, and the bolt shaken in its socket. Rousille grew white. But she had brave blood in her veins, and still holding the light as far forward as possible, she noiselessly crossed the room, cautiously slid back the bolt, and flung open the door.
A shadow moving about in the room sprang towards Rousille, and she saw it was Bas-Rouge. "What are you doing here—where do you come from?" she said.
A rush of air came whistling in from the adjoining room. Had the outer door not been fastened? The girl glanced towards the window, and saw Jean Nesmy still there; then she went into the bakery: the straw baskets, the kneading trough, the ladder reaching to the hayloft, the faggots for next baking day, all was there; but the door leading into the furthermost room, André's, was wide open. Rousille went on, the wind nearly extinguishing the light which she was obliged to shade with her hand. It blew in unimpeded from the courtyard. Yes, André had gone out.... She ran to the bed; it was untouched.... A doubt seized her that, at first, she repelled. She thought of François; of André's tears that evening—his agitation....
"Oh, my God," she murmured.
Rapidly she stooped and lowered the candle to see under the bed where André kept his boots and shoes; they had gone. She opened his trunk, it was empty. Going back into the bakery, she clambered up into the loft. There to the right, beside a heap of wheat, she ought to find a little black portmanteau he had brought home from Africa. She lifted the candle, the portmanteau was not there.
Everything pointed to the one fact. There was no manner of doubt concerning the misfortune that had befallen them. Terrified, she hastily descended the ladder, and unable to keep the secret, she screamed:
"Father!"
A voice, muffled by the intervening walls, replied:
"What is it?"
"Driot has gone!" she cried, as she ran through the rooms. Outside the barred window, her eyes seeking him, she thought she discerned a shadow.
"Farewell, Jean Nesmy," she called, without stopping. "Never come back any more. All is lost to us," and she

disappeared into the kitchen, to the door of her father's room.
Toussaint had sprung out of bed, and now came, barefoot, hurriedly buttoning his work-day clothes over his night-shirt. Startled out of his first sleep, only half understanding the purport of her words, stern of countenance, he came forth into the light shed by his daughter's candle.
"What are you screaming about?" he said. "He cannot be far off."
Then seeing her terrified face he, too, thought of François, and trembling, followed her.
They traversed the whole length of the house, and on into André's room; there Rousille made way for her father to enter first. He did not go far into the room; he looked at the undisturbed bed, and that sufficed to make him understand.
For a moment he remained motionless, tears blinding him; then, staggering, turned towards the courtyard, on the threshold, clinging to the doorposts for support, he took a long breath, as if to call into the night, but only a stifled, scarce audible sound escaped him:
"My Driot!"
And the noble old man, struck by the bitter cold, fell backwards in a swoon.
At that instant from the other end of the house Mathurin, swearing, and striking head and crutches against the walls and furniture, came struggling along.
"Lend me a hand, Rousille," he cried, "I must see what is going on!" Rousille was kneeling beside her father, kissing him amid her tears. The farm-servant, roused by the noise, came through the yard with a lantern.

CHAPTER XIV.

DWELLERS IN TOWNS.

The farmer soon recovered consciousness. Sitting up, he looked about him, and hearing Mathurin moaning and saying: "He is dead!" answered: "No, my boy, I am all right," then with the aid of the farm-servant he went back to his bed.
At dawn next morning, he started for a tour round the farms to try and learn particulars of his son. It seemed that neither Mathurin nor the man had had the least suspicion of André's flight; they had neither seen nor heard the slightest thing.
Thus Toussaint Lumineau went to make inquiries among the old and new friends frequented by André during the last few months, sons of farmers, gooseherds, or sailors. For three whole days he scoured the Marais from Saint Gervais to Fromentière, from Sallertaine to Saint Gilles. Those he asked knew but little, or were unwilling to betray confidence. All agreed in stating that André had often talked of making his fortune across the sea where the land was new and fertile. The best informed went on to say:
"Last Sunday he said good-bye to several of us, myself among the number. He told me he was off to South America, where, for a mere nothing, he would get a farm of seventy-four acres of virgin soil; but I do not remember the name of the place where he was going."
On the evening of the third day, when, having had this information, the farmer returned home, he found the cripple sitting by the fireside.
"Mathurin," he said, "you ought still to have some of those books where countries are sketched out, you know what I mean?"
"Geography books? Yes, there must be some left from old schooldays. Why?"
"I want to look at America," replied the old man. "It is there that your brother is going they all say."
Dragging himself to the chest, from under the clothes at the bottom the cripple brought forth a handful of school books, which had belonged to one or other of them as boys, and came back with a little elementary atlas, on the cover of which was written in a beginner's large handwriting: "This book belongs to Lumineau André, son of Lumineau Toussaint, of La Fromentière, Commune of Sallertaine, Vendée." The father stroked his hand over the writing, as if to caress it.
"It was his," he said.
Mathurin opened the atlas. It was all to pieces; the maps were rounded at the corners from wear, crumpled or torn, the edges frayed. The cripple's fingers turned the pages gingerly, and stopped at a map covered with ink-blots in which the two Americas, united by their isthmus, in deep orange colour, looked like a pair of huge spectacles. The two men bent over it. "This is South America," said Mathurin. "And here is the sea."
The farmer pondered for a considerable time over Mathurin's words, endeavouring to harmonise them with the inky map, then shook his head.
"I cannot picture to myself where he is," he said sadly, "but I see that there is sea, and that he is lost to us...."
Mathurin slowly shut his book and said:
"They were both bad sons; they have forsaken you."
The farmer did not seem to have heard him; turning to Rousille, he said gently, far more gently than was his wont: "Rousille, have a cup of coffee ready for me the first thing to-morrow morning. I will go and find out François." And accordingly at ten o'clock the next morning, the fourth day after Driot's departure, the farmer of La Fromentière alighted from the train at the station of La Roche-sur-Yon. The moment he set foot on the platform, he began looking for his son amongst the porters engaged in shutting the carriage doors, or taking the luggage from the van. Taller by a head than most of the passengers who were hurrying hither and thither, he would stop every ten paces to follow with his eyes some porter with young, full face like François. He wanted to see his son again, but was nervous at meeting him in so public a place. He, clad in his black cloth suit, with blue waistband, his new hat bound with velvet set well at the back of his head, free to come and go at his own time—he, the master of his working and leisure hours, felt a kind of shame at the thought that among that group of paid servants, hustled about by their superiors, clad in a uniform they had no right to exchange for ordinary clothes, was a Lumineau of La Fromentière.
Not finding François on the platform, he was proceeding to a part of the line where carriages were uncoupled, and was watching a gang of men push a loaded truck along with their shoulders, thinking the while, "Why, they are doing the

work of our oxen at home," when a voice called out:
"Hey! Where are you going?"
"To find my boy."
"Who is he?"
"You may perhaps know him," replied the farmer, touching the brim of his hat. "He is employed on the line; his name is François Lumineau."
The inspector said carelessly:
"Lumineau? Ah, yes, one of the men on the line. Been here four months?"
"Five," returned the father.
"Maybe. A stout, red-faced fellow, somewhat lazy. Do you want to speak to him?"
"Yes."
"Very well. If you know where he lives, go to him there. You can do your business with him when he goes home to his dinner. Foot passengers are not allowed on the lines, my good man." And as he went away, the inspector grumbled: "These peasants think they have the right to go anywhere, as if they were in their own fields."
The farmer controlling himself on François' account, made no reply. He left the railway station and began wandering among the broad, deserted streets with their rows of low-built houses on either side; rain had been falling since early morning. The people he stopped to inquire of did not know Café la Faucille, the name of which he had learned from the Maraîchins who came to the fairs of La Roche. At length, by means of the sign-board, he found it out for himself, in the outskirts of the town. Like the others in the street it was a little one-storied house, with one window. Pushing open the door, Toussaint Lumineau found himself in a coffee shop, furnished with deal tables, cane stools, and a glass cupboard, wherein were displayed bottles of wine and spirits, and on a counter at the foot were a few plates of cold meat, between two boxes of sweet biscuits. Nobody was there. Lumineau took his stand in the middle of the shop; the bell, set ringing by the farmer's entrance, continued to sound more and more feebly. Before it had altogether ceased, an inner door opposite opened, emitting a whiff of cookery, and a woman, without cap, her hair very much dressed, came forward in a mincing manner.
Although he stood with his back to the light she at once recognised the new-comer, coloured vividly, let fall the corner of her apron she was holding in both hands, and stopped short.
"Oh," she said, "it is you, father! What a surprise! How long it is since we have seen you!"
"Yes, true. A very long time."
She hesitated, glad to see her father, and not daring to say so, not knowing his object in coming, and whether she ought to ask him to sit down, to kiss him, or to keep her distance as one who may not hope to be forgiven.
Her eyes were fixed on him. However, the words, not hard, the gentle tones and voice that trembled, reassured her; and she asked:
"May I kiss you, father, despite all?"
He suffered her embrace, but did not return the kiss. Then sitting on a stool, while Eléonore went to the other side of the table, he looked at his daughter with melancholy curiosity to see in what way she had changed. Eléonore, standing near the wall, embarrassed by the penetrating gaze, began fastening the collar of her grey woollen dress, drawing down the sleeves over her bare arms, then twisted a ring she was wearing on her right hand.
"I did not expect," she stammered, casting down her eyes.... "It has quite startled me to see you again! François will be astonished too. He comes in at eleven every day, sometimes half-past. Father, you will have something to eat?"
He made a negative gesture.
"A glass of wine? You will not refuse that?"
For all answer, Toussaint Lumineau said:
"Do you know what has happened at home, Eléonore?"
Suddenly the slight amount of self-possession she had assumed left her. She drew back still further. Her light blue eyes assumed an expression of fear, while she glanced towards the street as if, perchance, the expected help were coming from that direction. Then, obliged to speak, leaning her head against the wall, with eyes downcast:
"Yes," she said. "He came to La Roche. He wanted to see François."
"What!" exclaimed Toussaint Lumineau, rising and pushing back the stool. "André? You have spoken to André?"
"Very early on Monday he came. His face had a look on it that is always coming back to me when I am alone. Oh! a look as of a world of sorrow. He pushed open the door, like you did, and said: 'François, I am going away from La Fromentière, because you are not there!' I am sure, father, it is a blow to you ... but do not be angry, for we said nothing to induce him to go. We were even sorry on your account."
She had put out her hand as if to ward the old man off; but she saw at once that there was nothing to fear, and the outstretched hand fell beside the dingy plastered wall. For Toussaint Lumineau was crying as he looked at her. The tears were coursing down his face, wrinkled by suffering. He wanted to know everything, and asked:
"Did he speak of me?"
"No."
"Did he speak of La Fromentière?"
"No."
"Did he at last say where he was going?"
"He would neither sit down nor stay. He kissed us both; but words neither came to him nor to us. François asked him: 'Where are you going, Driot?' and he answered: 'To Buenos Ayres, in America. I mean to try and make money. When I am a rich man you shall all hear of me. Good-bye, Lionore. Good-bye, François,' and he was gone."
"Gone," repeated Lumineau; "my last one gone!"
Eléonore's feelings were touched in sympathy, the corners of her eyes grew moist; but they still turned towards the street, while her father shut his.
"Father," she said, "will you mind coming into the kitchen with me? François will soon be coming in, and if he does not find his dinner ready, you know what it will be! He is not always easy to get on with." She went into the inner room, followed by her father. It was but a shed built on, quite dark even in broad daylight, whose only window looked on to a narrow yard built up on all sides. An iron stove, at present alight, three chairs, and a table took up nearly all the space. The farmer, taking a chair, sat down between the window and the open door, that he might see François when he came in. Eléonore busied herself with cookery, laid the table for two, went backwards and forwards from one room to the other, always in a hurry, never getting on much with what she had in hand. Toussaint Lumineau was silent. She felt it necessary to sigh as she passed him, and say:

"Things have gone sadly against you. And how melancholy it must be at La Fromentière now! Poor father, I am sorry for you!"
He, listening, took her empty words as words of pity.
"Lionore," he said, after a while, as she stooping was cutting the bread for the soup, "Lionore, you have given up the coif of La Vendée?"
"Yes, they ironed them so badly here at La Roche, and it cost so much. Besides, no one wears caps here."
"Humph! Well, since you have given up dressing as did your mother and grandmother, and all the women of the family I have ever known, are you any the happier? Are you content in your new circumstances?"
She went on cutting the bread into thin slices, and answered:
"It is not the same kind of work, but I cannot say but that I have as much to do as I had at home. There are the rooms to keep in order, marketing to do, my stones to wash every other day when it rains, as to-day, or snows; cooking at all times of the day, and that for people who are not always very civil, I assure you. Sometimes there are complaints that there are so few customers, for there was too high a price paid for the café—much too high. And then when men passing come in for a drink, I am often afraid of them. Indeed, if I had not neighbours——"
"And your brother, is he content?" interrupted the farmer.
"Half and half. The pay is so poor, you see. Two francs at La Fromentière go farther than three here."
The father hesitated a little. Then asked, lowering his voice:
"Tell me, perhaps he regrets what he has done? I have no son with me now, Lionore; I am wretched. Do you think that François would come back to his home?"
He forgave all, forgot all; he craved help from the children who had wronged him.
Eléonore's face changed abruptly. Drying her eyes with a corner of her handkerchief, she shook her pointed chignon, and replied drily:
"I do not think so, father. I would rather tell you so out straight. You will be seeing my brother—will talk it over with him, but I do not think——" And as if deeply hurt she turned abruptly away to the store.
The half-hour had struck, the door of the café opened noisily, a man came in. Without looking up, or moving from her place, the girl said:
"Here he is."
Despite the railway uniform and cap he was wearing, the farmer, in the semi-darkness of the shop, had already recognised his son by the downcast head, slouching gait, and habit of holding his arms out from his body. Soon François stood before him in the doorway of the kitchen, and a glance revealed the same heavy features as of old—russet-red complexion, drooping moustache, and look of stolid indifference.
On seeing his father a shade of emotion passed over his face.
"Good day, father," said he, holding out his hand. "So things are not going well by what I see?"
The farmer made a sign of acquiescence.
"You are in trouble. Yes, I understand. So should I be if I were you. André ought not to have done it; he was the last, he ought to have stayed."
Toussaint Lumineau had seized François' hand, and was pressing it between both of his with a tenderness that spoke volumes, and his eyes, which sought the eyes of his son, uttered the same entreaty. In measure, however, that his father's mute pleading entered his soul, François quickly recovered from his surprise, hardening himself against the momentary feeling of compassion. Presently, drawing back his hand, he retreated a step, saying with the air of a man defiant and on the defensive.
"I understand. You are not wanting to engage another servant, but would rather have Lionore and me back at Sallertaine?"
"If you could, François. I have no one else to look to."
A half-satisfied smile at the correctness of his surmise passed over François' face as he rejoined:
"Yet you see that the other has gone too; and that there is nothing more to be done with the land."
"You are mistaken. He has gone to cultivate it elsewhere, in America! It was because he missed you so sorely, François, that he lost heart at home."
"Yes," said François, drawing up a chair for himself and sitting down to the table. "It seems to be a wonderful country, America! But here with us it's too hard."
The farmer did not take up the words which had angered him before.
"Well!" he said, "I will give you help. I have no other son now, for you know that Mathurin is of no account in the management of a farm. You will soon be the master; the next lease shall be drawn up in your name, and there will still be a Lumineau at La Fromentière. Will you come back?"
François made a gesture of annoyance and gave no reply.
"You are making nothing," resumed the farmer, "by what Eléonore tells me."
"No, the pay is poor enough."
"The café has not many customers?"
"No; but we paid too much for it. We are not sure that it will answer." He turned to his sister who was listening passive and tearful. "But we scrape along, eh, Lionore? In time I may get a rise, so the sub-inspector tells me. Then I shall be better off. I don't want more. We have got to know people already; on Sundays I have my half-day off."
"You had the whole day at La Fromentière!"
"I don't say that I hadn't. But what you ask, father, can't be done."
A man, whose entrance they had not perceived, now called out from the adjoining room:
"Is no one here? Is there no dinner to be had?"
Eléonore, glad of the interruption, passed between her brother and father, and they heard her laugh to appease the customer. François drew the soup-tureen towards him, and put in the ladle.
"You must not mind my helping myself," he said to his father, who remained sitting at the window behind him, "I have only got a quarter of an hour; it's a long way to the station. I shall be fined," and between the mouthfuls of soup he asked in a softened voice: "You have not given me news of Rousille. Is she quite well? And Mathurin, does he still imagine that he will be all right again? He who always was so keen on being master at La Fromentière did nothing to keep André back, I suppose?"
Toussaint Lumineau rose abruptly, unable longer to control his anger.
"You are a couple of ungrateful children, both of you!" he exclaimed in a loud voice. "Stay in your town!" and going out of the kitchen, he crossed the café before the eyes of the sickly-looking mechanic, and of Eléonore, who, terrified, leant

forward:
"I told you so, poor father. I told you he would not! I knew it. Still, *au revoir*."
Then to François who was following him:
"You are going with him to the station."
He shook his head.
"Yes, go! It would look better; he would not then be able to say that we had not treated him kindly."
The farmer had opened the door into the street.
"I will go with you to the station, if you like," said François sheepishly.
"I did not ask you to go with me to the station, ungrateful son; I asked you to come back and save us all from ruin, and you have refused!" was the reply. They saw him stride down the street erect, his fine figure making two of the puny town mechanics, his silvery hair shining through the mist of rain. The door shut behind him.
"No easy customer, the old papa," said the man who was dining.
"Don't talk of it," exclaimed Eléonore; "I am quite ill."
"What was it he wanted?"
With a coarse laugh François said as he went back to the kitchen:
"Wanted me to go back and dig for him."
The mechanic, shrugging his shoulders, said with a self-satisfied air:
"A fine idea! The old gentleman was a bit unreasonable, I think."

CHAPTER XV.

THE EMIGRANT.

It was late afternoon when Toussaint Lumineau returned to La Fromentière. It had rained heavily all day. On the hearth in the house-place the largest pot was boiling full of potatoes for the men's supper, and to give food for the pigs. Sitting by the fireside Mathurin and the farm-servant, kept indoors by the inclement weather, were warming themselves and waiting for news. The cripple who had been very gloomy, and in a state of nervous excitement since André's departure, had not spoken a word the whole afternoon. Rousille could be heard folding linen and arranging it in piles in the cupboard of the adjacent room.
The farmer ascended the house steps and opened the door. Simultaneously the thought came into the minds of the three awaiting him: "What did they say? Will they come back? Did they let you go away without even a promise to return?" But no one dared to ask him.
With a curt greeting to his household the farmer went straight to his bedside, and began silently changing his Sunday garb for his working clothes. The best coat, new hat, shoes, were all laid away. The answer must have been unsatisfactory. An awkward silence reigned in the room; as the minutes went on Mathurin's irritation increased. Bent almost double in the chimney-corner, his face drawn, he, the eldest son, felt hurt at being treated like a servant or a woman. Why not have taken him apart? A sign would have sufficed. Why not have given it him?
His ill temper broke forth when his father, having changed his clothes, said peremptorily:
"Rousille, you will come with me and the man into the barn to make baskets. You, Mathurin, for once will take your sister's place, and watch the pot."
"So you think me of no use at all?" said the cripple.
Contrary to his usual habit, which was to give reasons and modify orders, the farmer, raising his voice, made answer:
"I am sole master here. Come, Rousille!" Followed by his daughter and the man, he crossed the yard in the front of the house, went into the barn, and threw open the double doors that separated it from the cart shed. There was the wine press, the red tilbury; and ranged against the walls were wheelbarrows, hen-coops, ladders, rafters, and poles; in the middle of the circle formed by this medley was a sandy space, where the fowls came to scratch and cover themselves with sand. The farmer sat down upon a joist beside a vat in which a bundle of osiers were steeping, his face turned towards the farmhouse. Rousille kneeling close to him, her back to the light, drew the twigs from the water one by one, peeled them with her pocket-knife and handed them to her father. He, taking the white stems, twisted them round the already prepared framework of the baskets. In a corner the man was chopping poles of chestnut wood with a hedge-bill.
The rain came down faster than ever, the air grew colder and more penetrating, spreading a veil of mist between the barn and the house. A fantastic twilight, coming from one knew not whither, uncertain as the rain and driven by the wind, cast a faint glimmer upon the workers. The ducks were quacking merrily in the Marais; sparrows were chirping in the gutters of the roof. Not a word passed between the father, his daughter, and the man. Toussaint Lumineau was looking at Rousille—looking at her more often and attentively than was his wont; his thought was: "She is all that is left to me." At times he stopped plaiting, the white osier remained motionless, and his hand sank nerveless to his side. Then it was that the remembrance of his other children was passing, like the rain, in a torrent over his soul. In the depths of his heart the father would cry, "François! André!" He tried to picture South America as he had seen it on map. Where was his youngest son now in the great wide world? Was he in a town, or wandering along unknown roads, or on the great ocean that sucks in so many victims? Toussaint Lumineau strove to get to him, but the effort was vain. All the scenes his imagination could picture were lost in the unknown.
At that same hour, far away, the heart of a young man was recalling with all the faithfulness of familiar scenes, La Fromentière and its elms, his father, Rousille, Mathurin, the meadows of the Marais and all the country round. It was the son of whom the old man was thinking with such poignant regret; he, whom all three in the barn were vainly trying to follow in their inexperience of travel.
Tired after a night passed in the train, and in going from one agent's office to the other, a stranger and unknown, André was sitting on a bundle of sheep-skins in the docks of a great seaport, awaiting the hour of embarkation in a steamer that was to bear him away to the new country. In front of him the waters of the River Scheldt dashed up against the

quay; emerging from the fog on one side they formed a kind of half circle, to be lost in deeper fog on the other, their broad expanse covered with shipping. André's weary eyes followed the moving panorama of sailing vessels, steamers, coasting and fishing boats all standing out grey in the fog and the fading light of day, now massed together, now disentangling and gliding away each to its own destination.

More often he looked beyond to the low-lying land round which the river curved, meadows half under water, deserted, immeasurable, seeming to float on the pale waters. How they reminded him of the province he had left! How they spoke to him! Neither the rolling of trucks, nor the whistle of commanding officers, nor the voices of the thousands of men of all nations unloading their ships round about him could draw away his thoughts. Nor did he feel any interest in the great city that extended behind him, and whence at times, amid the noise and bustle of the quay, came the sound of peals of bells such as he had never yet heard. But the time was drawing near. He knew this by the increasing agitation within him. The tramp of an approaching body of people made him turn his head; they were emigrants coming out of the sheds where they had been penned in by the agents, forming a long grey stream, seen through the mist. They come nearer, the foremost making their way through the casks and piles of sacks heaped upon the quay, and crossing the muddy gangway, hasten to secure the best places between decks; others follow, a confused mass of men, women, and children. Young and old are hard to distinguish; like tears, all look alike; all have the same sad look in their eyes; all are wearing their oldest clothes for the voyage: shapeless coats, jerseys, old mantles, kerchiefs over the women's heads, patched petticoats, odd garments in which they have worked and toiled many a day. They rub against André Lumineau, sitting on the bundle of skins, and pay no heed to him. They do not speak to one another, but in their hurried progress families form into distinct groups; mothers holding their children by the hand and shielding them from the wind, fathers with elbows extended protecting them from the pressure. All are carrying something: a bundle of clothing, a loaf of bread, a handbag tied together with string. All have made the same pause at the same place. As they turn in from the streets through the dock gates, they straighten themselves and stretch out their necks to look across, ever in the same direction, to the plains of the Scheldt, where a golden shimmer through the fog denotes the quarter of the setting sun; and, as though it were their own, they gaze upon a solitary little clock tower which rises out of the misty distance. Then they turn into the docks, find which is their boat, the steam already up, the windlass at work, the bridge black with emigrants. And their courage fails, they are afraid; many among them would fain turn back. But for them there is no turning back, they must embark, their tickets tremble in their shaking hands. In spirit only they return to the old country, to the poverty they have anathematized and now regret; to the deserted rooms, the suburbs, the factories, the country sides where once was "home." Pale and nerveless the living stream suffers itself to be swept on, and embarks.

For a long time André Lumineau looked on without joining the crowd. He was seeking a fellow-countryman. Seeing none, he at last put himself in line with the others; he was wearing his military cloak, the buttons of which had been changed, and was carrying the black portmanteau that five days ago reposed in the hayloft of Fromentière. His neighbours glanced at him with indifference, accepting him without remark.

Among them he crossed the quay, mounted the gangway, and stepped on board, the ship already swaying with the motion of the river. Then while others in the throng who had friends or relations with them were walking the decks in groups, or examining the machinery, or inspecting the cabins, he leaned over the side of the boat at the stern trying to distinguish the river and the grey meadow land, for memories were rushing thickly upon him, and his courage was nigh to deserting him. But doubtless the fog had deepened, for he saw nothing.

Beside him, hunched up upon the seat, was an old woman with still fresh complexion, wrapped in a black cloak with a cape to it, her coif fastened with a pair of gold pins, and rocking a child in her arms.

André took no notice of her. But she, unable to fix her eyes anywhere in the bustle and confusion of a ship on the point of departure, raised them every now and then to the stranger standing beside her, who so surely was thinking of the home he was leaving. Perhaps she had a son of the same age. The feeling of pity grew in her and albeit, well knowing that her neighbour would not understand her language, the old woman said:

"U heeft pyn."

After she had repeated it several times he understood by the word "pain" and the intonation with which it was said, that the woman asked, "You are in sorrow?" and answered:

"Yes, madame."

The old mother took Driot's hand in her soft shrivelled one, all cold and damp with the fog, and stroked it tenderly, and the young Vendéen broke down utterly and wept, thinking of bygone caresses from his old mother, who, too, had worn a white coif and gold pins on grand occasions.

Mist and fog were sweeping over the Marais of La Vendée, as over the plains of the Scheldt, driven by gusts of wind.

At times an expression of anguish crossed the face of Toussaint Lumineau as he followed with his eyes the quivering points of the osiers Rousille held out to him, as though they had been the masts of ships labouring in the ocean. At other times he would look long and lingeringly at his one remaining child, and Rousille knew that she was fair to look upon. A violent squall struck the elm-trees, stripping them clear of leaves, and beating their branches against the roof of La Fromentière. The rainspouts, the tiles, the rafters and walls, the very lizards in the barn groaned and creaked together —and the storm-cry groaned, wildly and madly, over the Marais.

Three hundred leagues away the melancholy whistle of a sirene awoke the echoes, the screw of a huge steamer parted the waters of the river and drew away slowly from shore, as though yet half inert and drifting. No sooner did the emigrants, outcasts of the old world, poor and hopelessly miserable, feel themselves afloat, than they were terrified. The thoughts of all on board flew back to their deserted homes. It was in the darkness of night that André Lumineau went forth.

The farmer threw back a handful of osiers into the vat, saying:

"Let us go in. My old hands can work no longer."

But he did not stir. The man, alone, ceased chopping the poles of chestnut wood, and left the barn. Rousille, seeing that her father made no movement to rise, stayed where she was.

CHAPTER XVI.

HER FATHER'S BIDDING.

Evening had come, the evening of a February day, which casts its shadow so soon. Through the door of the barn came only a deceptive gleam, like that of a smouldering cinder, blotting out all form. Toussaint Lumineau's arms had sunk on either side of his body; still sitting on the joist, his face uplifted in the dusk, he waited till the man should have crossed the yard. When he had seen the door of the house-place, where Mathurin was watching, open and shut, he lowered his eyes to his daughter.

"Rousille," he said, "are you still of the same mind concerning Jean Nesmy?"

The girl, kneeling on the ground, her profile indistinct in the darkness, slowly raised her head and stooped forward as though better to see him who spoke in so unexpected a manner. But she had nothing to conceal, she was not one of those who are timid and fearful; she only quieted her beating heart, which could have cried aloud with joy, and said, with apparent calm:

"Always, father. I have given him my love, and shall never withdraw it. Now that André is gone, I quite understand that I cannot leave you to go and live in the Bocage. But I shall never marry; I will stay with you and serve you."

"Then you will not forsake me as they have done?"

"No, father, never."

Her father rested his hand upon her shoulder, and the girl felt herself enveloped in a tenderness hitherto unknown. A hymn of thanksgiving passed from soul to soul. Around them the wind and rain were raging.

"Rousille," resumed the farmer, "I have no longer a son to lean upon. André was the last to betray me. François has refused to come back. And yet La Fromentière must continue ours."

A firm, sweet voice answered:

"It must."

"Then, little one," continued her father, "your wedding bells must ring!"

Rousille dared not understand. Still on her knees she drew a little closer so as to touch her father. She longed that daylight would come back to reveal the expression of the eyes fixed upon her. But the darkness was impenetrable.

"I had always hoped," continued the farmer, "that there would be one of my name to carry on the farm after me. God has refused me my desire. As for you, Rousille, I should have liked to have given you to a Maraîchin like ourselves; one in like position, and from our part. Perhaps it was pride. Things have not turned out according to my wishes. Do you think that Jean Nesmy will consent to come back to La Fromentière?"

"I am certain of it! I can answer for him. He will come back!"

"And his mother will not seek to offer us any affront?"

"No, no. She loves her son too well for that; she knows everything. But Mathurin!" and she stretched out her arm towards the house lying hidden in the darkness. "Mathurin would not have it. He hates us! He would make life so hard for us that we could not stay here."

"But I am still here, dear child, and I mean to gather the three of you about me."

Had Rousille heard aright? Had her father really in so many words given his consent to her marriage? Yes, for he was now standing upright, and in rising he had raised his daughter, and was holding her in close embrace, his tears falling so fast that he could not speak. But contact with her youthful happiness seemed to have lent him fresh courage.

"Do not fear Mathurin," he said, "I will reason with him, and he must obey. It was I who dismissed Jean Nesmy; it is now my will that he comes back to be my son and helper, and the master here when I am gone."

The girl listened in the darkness.

"It is my wish that he should come back as quickly as possible, for a place does not prosper in hired hands however good they may be. I have thought it all out for you, Rousille. You will go from here where we now are, straight to the Michelonnes."

"Yes, father."

"That will give me the time to speak to your brother. You will therefore go to them and say: 'My father cannot leave La Fromentière and Mathurin, who has not been well these last few days. He asks you to go for him to the Bocage, and to beg the mother of Jean Nesmy to let her son come back to be my husband. The sooner you start the better for us.'"

Now Rousille's tears were falling fast. Toussaint Lumineau continued:

"Go, my Rousille. Greet the Michelonnes from me ... tell them it is to save La Fromentière."

A whisper answered:

"Yes," and a pair of young arms were thrown round the old farmer's neck, and his face drawn down for a long, loving kiss. Then, going a little away from him, across the darkness through which they could not see each other, Rousille said:

"I am happy, father. I will go at once to the Michelonnes ... but, oh! how much better it would have been if we could have had all our people at my wedding!"

And she ran out into the night. Her father stood for a moment, proud and happy. She had said "our people," this little Rousille; she spoke like her ancestresses who had ruled in La Fromentière. She was a true descendant of the great-grandmothers she had never known, thorough housewives, who from the very day they were brought home as wives, staid and happy, seemed to bring with them as reading in an ever open book the sense of family cares and joys.

Rousille ran along the road, unheeding the stoniness of the way. Rain fell heavily, but she did not feel it. Sometimes she pressed her hand to her heart, to calm its beating. She thought, "I am happy," and with that she wept.

The windows of all the houses in Sallertaine were lighted when she reached the long street. The timid sisters Michelonne had already shut their shutters, and drawn their bolts.

"Aunts Michelonne!" she cried, knocking with her hand on the door, "please let me in quickly."

It was the work of a moment for Véronique to draw the bolt, open the door, and shut it behind the new-comer.

"How wet you are, Rousille!" she exclaimed, "and without cloak or kerchief in such weather! It has struck seven. What brings you out at such an hour?"

At the far end of the room, on a chest beside the bed nearest to the fireplace, Adelaide had stood the solitary tallow candle, its long smoky wick burnt to a thick glowing knob. By its dim light she was beginning to undress, and had

already taken off her apron. A corner of the sheet turned back upon the coverlet showed a patch of whiteness; the rest of the shop was in gloom—chairs, spinning wheels, the table, the other bedstead, and the clock beside it calmly ticking.
"Do not let me disturb you, Aunt Adelaide," said the girl going towards her; "I have news."
The eldest of the sisters taking the candlestick, held it up to Rousille's face, and seeing traces of tears upon it, said:
"Sad news, again, dear child?"
"No, aunts, glad news."
"Then let us sit down, and tell it quickly."
The old sisters sat on the oak chest and made Rousille take a chair facing them, close up that they might see her happy face, and each taking a hand in hers prepared to listen. The three faces were close together; the candle gave just light enough to reveal lip or eyes irradiated with a smile.
"My news is," said Rousille, "that my father, having no longer a son to help him, wishes Jean Nesmy to come back."
"What, Rousille, your sweetheart?"
"Aunt Michelonne, it is to save La Fromentière."
"Then you are going to be married, pet; you are going to be married?" exclaimed Aunt Adelaide enthusiastically, half rising; while her sister, on the contrary, bent lower to hide her emotion.
"Yes, father has said so. If you will help me."
"If! You know I will; you are my daughter. You have only to ask for what you want—but tell me, is it money?"
"No, aunt."
"A trousseau that we will both set about making?"
"Something far more difficult," said Rousille. "To make a journey—a long one."
"I, a journey?"
"You, or Aunt Véronique. As far as the Bocage. Father cannot leave home; you are to go in his stead to see Jean Nesmy's mother, and persuade her to let her son come away. Will you do it?"
Véronique sat upright. "You go to the Bocage, Adelaide, you are more active than I am."
"Is that any reason? So great a pleasure; to do Rousille so great a service, why should you not have the privilege?"
"Sister, you are the elder; you take the place of the mother."
"You are right," said Adelaide simply.
She was silent for a short time; in the agitation of the news and her decision, the pretty pink cheeks had paled. Then she said:
"You see, it is forty years since I have been beyond the town of Chalons. I never thought to make any journey again. Where is Jean Nesmy's country?"
With a pretty smile on her face at the recollections it evoked, Rousille touched Aunt Michelonne's black dress three times with the tip of her finger.
"Here," she said, "is the farm of Nouzillac, where he is employed; there, a parish called La Flocellière; and there Les Châtelliers, where is his house, called La Château."
"I do not know any of those names, pet."
"There are hills in all directions, some small, some large, and a great many trees. When the wind blows from Saint Michel it rains without ceasing. Pouzanges is not far."
"I have heard speak of Saint Michel and Pouzanges when I was quite a child by *Boquins*, who used in those days to come to our part to seek for fuel. And when must I go?"
Lowering her soft eyes, Rousille answered:
"Father is hard pressed. He said the sooner the better."
"Holy Virgin! But I cannot start to-night. Still, look at the clock, Véronique, your eyes are better than mine."
The younger sister rising, trotted to the foot of the tall clock which stood between the beds, and with difficulty read the time from the copper-clock face.
"Too late, sister. The last tramway for Chalons has just passed."
"Then," said Adelaide, "I will start to-morrow morning. I have good legs to carry me to Quatre-Moulins, and a good tongue to ask my way later from the shopkeepers at Chalons. I will go. All the way I shall be thinking of you, Rousille, and when I see La Mère Nesmy—you will say I am conceited—but I shall not be a bit embarrassed, I will tell her of you, and I shall have plenty to tell. Why are you getting up, little one?"
"To go home, Aunt Michelonne."
The two old sisters laughing, cried simultaneously:
"No, that you are not indeed! You have told us nothing. What did your father say when he gave you permission? And what about François? And what does Mathurin think of it all? Stay, dearie, and tell us all about everything; and what is to be the message for Jean Nesmy?"
As when night falls over the fields partridges cluster together in a furrow, feather to feather, so the three women again grouped themselves, in close vicinity, in the corner of the shop. Words, looks, smiles, gestures, sometimes tears, all that bespeaks deep feeling, found utterance, and was re-echoed by the two auditors. A joyous murmur floated through the dwelling of the two old maids. Adelaide was slightly fevered; Véronique, without wishing to confess it, was already nervous at the idea of being left alone. Time went on. The neighbours, as they extinguished their lamps said:
"Mademoiselles Michelonne are sitting up late to-night! Work seems plentiful in their trade!"
The town was sunk in darkness and silence under an icy rain when Rousille left her aunt's doorstep. On both sides the same words served for their parting. Adelaide said it first; Rousille repeated it. In one case it was a promise; in the other an expression of thanks.
"To-morrow morning!"
"To-morrow morning!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A FEBRUARY NIGHT.

When Rousille had crossed the courtyard and taken the road to Sallertaine, the farmer, having taken the pot off the fire, left the barn. He found the man sitting in the chimney-corner, pushing together the half-dead twigs that had fallen from the fire-dogs with the points of his sabots. At the far end of the room, Mathurin was moving restlessly about on his crutches, with crimsoned face, utterly unable to keep his nerves under control. He did not speak to his father, did not appear to have heard him enter. But after a minute, as the farmer, bending down, was speaking in a low voice to the man, he exclaimed violently:

"And Rousille, what had you to say to her that kept you so long in the barn?"

Before replying, Toussaint Lumineau followed with his eyes the movements of the unhappy young man, a prey to a species of madness produced by rage and pain, such as was too well known at La Fromentière—since André's departure the paroxysms had become more frequent—and the father was moved to pity. Ignoring the insolence of the question, he said simply:

"Your sister will come back later, Mathurin. Where she has gone I have sent her."

"I am not to know where she is, then?" cried the cripple still more violently. "Everything is hidden from me here, and she is told all!"

At a sign from the farmer the man took out a couple of potatoes with his knife from the saucepan, slipped them into his coat pocket, cut a slice of bread from the loaf on the table, and carrying off his supper, went out into the yard.

The father and son were alone. Toussaint Lumineau, standing erect in the firelight, said:

"On the contrary, you are going to know all, Mathurin. Your brother François refuses to come home to us."

"I thought so."

The cripple had drawn back into a dark corner between the two beds, out of the range of the lamplight; there, as though on the watch for the words spoken, he listened; his trembling hands resting on the crutches shook the bed-curtains.

"La Fromentière cannot go on as it is now," resumed the farmer. "I have bidden Rousille take a message to the Michelonnes. One or the other of the sisters, whether it be Adelaide or Véronique matters not, is to go to the Bocage to bring back Jean Nesmy."

"Ah! you are marrying Rousille?"

"Yes, my friend."

"To a dismissed farm-servant!"

"I am taking him back."

"A *Boquin*! A man not of these parts!"

"A good worker, Mathurin, and one who always loved our soil."

"And he is to live at La Fromentière?"

"Of course. I need help. I need a son to stand by me."

Mathurin's tawny head was thrust out from darkness.

"And me," he cried, "what are you going to do with me?"

In his look was a concentrated reproach, all pent-up suffering and wrath of years.

"So I, the eldest, the rightful heir, am only to bear my suffering and submit to the will of others?"

"My son," replied his father gently, "you will continue to live with us as now; you will do what you can, and no one will expect more. No work will be undertaken here without your having first been consulted, that I promise you. The farmstead will be your home after my death as now."

"No. I will not be ordered about by a man who does not bear my name. A Lumineau, and a Lumineau only, must be master here!"

"It is the sorrow of my life, Mathurin, that this cannot be."

"I could have borne with François, even with André," continued the cripple, with equal vehemence, "but Rousille and her *Boquin* shall never be the masters here. It is my home, and, I tell you, it is my turn!"

"But, my poor boy, you cannot take the management."

The serge curtains shook, and the unhappy man, suffocating with rage, made a few uncertain steps forward.

"I cannot tell what is good ploughing?" he gasped.

"Yes."

"I cannot buy a pair of oxen?"

"Yes."

"I cannot have myself drawn about in a cart, or punt a boat? Answer, if you please."

"Yes, my son."

"Then what further do I need for the management of a farm? Labourers I can hire. A wife?"

His father dared not say Yes.

"I will bring one!" Mathurin had reached the corner of the table and was now leaning upon it, the upper part of his body swaying and struggling to maintain its equilibrium. "One who has more heart than all of you put together! She knows that I shall get well. She has almost given me her promise to marry me as I am ... when I shall have persuaded her."

"Do not trust to what the girls tell you, my poor lad. It is only fathers and mothers who love and cherish those afflicted as you are.... You are ill this evening. See, your limbs are failing you. Come to bed, I will help you."

The cripple did not try to answer. His eyes closed, his head sank on to his shoulder; the crutches slipped from under the arms that stretched out as those of a drowning man seeking help. He would have fallen to the ground had not the farmer rushed forward to support him.

The giddiness did not last long. It was a sharp but short attack. Hardly had his father got him into a recumbent position on the chest at the foot his bed than Mathurin opened his eyes. He looked at his father, raised himself unaided, and putting hand to the back of his neck, said:

"You see, it is nothing. The pain you caused did it.... I am not ill."

All trace of anger had disappeared, but the misery in his face was the same, mingled with that kind of horror men experience when they have been at the very verge of death.

"Would you like me to help you?" asked his father.

With a shrug of the shoulders the cripple began to undress himself, and taking off his coat, folded it, and laid it on the chest.

"No. I will get to bed by myself. I want to be left in peace." His voice trembled as much as his hands. "You had better go to meet Rousille. She will have her news to tell you—and, moreover, it is pitch dark, the roads are not too safe——"
Toussaint Lumineau, who knew the danger of opposing his son in such an attack, made no demur.
"I will go as far as the road, Mathurin, and will tell the man to be at hand in the bakery in case you need him."
He did not go even as far as the road. He was too uneasy. He went some hundred yards along the wall of La Fromentière in the rain, turned back, and then not wishing to go in too soon as to allow Mathurin time to calm down, he went into the stables to look to the animals, and see that none had broken loose.
But, all unsuspected, Mathurin had slipped out after him. The farmer had not gone ten paces beyond the gate ere the cripple had come out into the courtyard, cautiously shut the outer door, and was making his way towards the threshing-floor in order to reach the meadow by the short cut.
His marvellous energy, and the diseased state of nervous excitability he was in, sustained him. A mad fancy, born of all his misery and all his dreams, forced him out on that cruel night to his doom. He would seek his lost love; would appeal by all the slights, all the suffering, all the affronts he had endured, to her who had been and still was the arbitress of his life; would say to her: "All forsake me; I have only you. Tell me that you love me, and they will scorn me no more. Save me, Félicité Gauvrit!"
Despite the dark night, the slippery ground, the two fences he had to climb, he went quickly along the track which bordered the park. Like a naughty child fearing pursuit, he turned his head every now and then to listen. Many a sound came to him, but it was only the whistling of the wind among the elms; the rain crashing down upon the slates; the roll of a distant train, probably on the way to Chalons. Mathurin descended the sloping meadow; the darkness was so dense that he had to turn back twice before he found the landing-stage. Feeling for a punt with his crutch he threw himself into the first one, and with a stroke of the pole pushed it out, not into the canal which led direct to Le Perrier and La Seulière, but to the left into a dyke rarely made use of by the occupants of the farm.
The bottom of the boat was full of water; at each movement it washed over the limbs of the cowering man, but he heeded it not. What mattered the wet boat, the icy rain that was falling, the pitch darkness, the weeds that checked his progress many a time, the length of the way, the fatigue. He must reach her, did he strain his last nerve and die in the effort.
The darkness was so great that Mathurin could scarce see the bow of his boat. Since sundown the wind had been driving the fog into the Marais; in its length and breadth it was full of it, covering whole spaces with its swaying mass; it lay over the inundated meadows, the embankments, and islets, shrouding them all in its malarial folds. It dripped in poisonous drops down poplars and willows, from the thatched roofs of hovels on the edge of the great sea shore where men, condemned to live in them, drank in fever without the power of struggling against it.
On such a deadly night was it that Mathurin, already a prey to the malady hanging over him, the blood surging to his head, found his strength ebbing away. In vain he threw himself from side to side of the punt, unable to distinguish which way to go. Sometimes his breath failed, he grew unconscious, and the puntsman would sit leaning forward motionless in the boat; then the cold would restore him, and with a shake he would continue his course.
As he went on further into the wildest part of the Marais, the shades of night grew peopled with forms. Birds, more and more numerous, rose as he brushed past the quivering willows. It was the time of their flight. Plovers, wild duck, bernacles, snipe, flew up, uttering their shrill or plaintive cry, soaring in invisible flocks, now high up in the icy fog, now close down to the sides of the boat. At each flight the cripple shuddered: "Why do you cry thus at me, ye birds of ill-omen?" he thought. "Leave me in peace, I am going to Félicité—she will consent—we shall make preparation again for our wedding—we will live at La Fromentière."
But his strength was exhausted. Little by little the torpor increased. His efforts relaxed; his sight failed. He continued touching the banks with the punt pole but fitfully, and not knowing where it struck. All suddenly the boat, which drifted across an embankment into the middle of a submerged meadow, stopped. Water was all around. Mathurin's hands relaxed their hold of the pole, his eyes opened wide with terror; he felt Death creeping up from limbs to brain. Raising himself, he cried out into the night with a loud voice: "Félicité! Father!" Then his body swayed backwards and forwards, his hand made the sign of the cross, and with mouth still open he sank lifeless to the bottom of the boat.
Through the labyrinth of dykes another punt was being rapidly propelled; at its bow a lantern was slung, just clearing the water, its tiny flame swaying with a rapid movement, and shaken by the wind. The farmer had discovered Mathurin's flight, and was seeking him.
Around him, too, coveys of birds arose. White wings fluttered in the light of the lantern.
"Ye birds," murmured the farmer, "tell me where to find him!"
Did the thousands of voices make answer?
At each crossway of the canals the father stood in the stern of his boat, and turning successively to the four winds of heaven, he called out with all his strength the name of his son. Twice men returning to their island homes from wild duck shooting, or belated farmers, had opened their windows to cry in the darkness:
"What do you want?"
"My son."
The voices had given no reply. The third time Toussaint Lumineau thought he distinguished a feeble cry, very distant, coming through the icy fog, and leaving the canal which runs straight to Perrier, he turned off to the left. From time to time he called again, but hearing no further sound, and fearing to have taken a wrong direction, he unfastened the lantern, and drew up to the side to see if there were traces of a punt pole. Some hundred yards further on he detected by newly-made marks in the mud that the bank had been grazed; a punt had certainly passed that way. Was it Mathurin's? He followed it. The punt had made the circuit of a meadow, but on which side had it gone out? In vain the farmer, forcing his way through the rushes, tried the different canals that cut it at right angles, each time he came back baffled; all traces had disappeared. He was about to turn back when, by the light of his lantern, he caught sight of a piece of floating wood. He stooped to catch it; a presentiment of the truth flashed across him; it was one of the Fromentière punt poles, drifting, carried by the wind towards the spot where the banks under water had converted meadow and dyke into one great lake.
The farmer thought his son's boat had upset.
"Hold on, Mathurin!" he cried. "I am coming. Hold on!" and with a stroke of the pole he pushed on into the channel. "Where are you, Mathurin?"
In the chopping waves of the open water he had made some thirty yards, when he was suddenly thrown forward. Stooping over the side, he felt about, and caught hold of another boat, which he drew alongside his own. Then turning the lantern upon it, he saw at the bottom of the punt his son, lying motionless. Toussaint Lumineau threw himself on his

knees, nearly sending the boat under water; he felt his son's temples, there was no pulsation; his hands, they were icy cold; he put his mouth to the dead man's ear, and twice called him by name.
"Answer me, my son," he implored. "Answer! Move but a finger to show me you are still living."
But his son's fingers did not move; the lips clothed by the tawny beard remained motionless, open as when the last cry proceeded from them.
"My God!" groaned Lumineau, still kneeling. "Grant that he may not be called away before his Easter Communion. Grant that he be not dead!" And taking off his coat he covered his son in it, like a bed, and leaving his own punt he got into the one where Mathurin lay, and pushed off. A shade of hope sustained him, giving renewed vigour to his old arms. He must find help. Standing upright, endeavouring to find out where he was in the pitch darkness, the father had punted on some distance before he detected the light of a farmhouse. Then, to the right, a ray of light pierced through the fog. The punt glided on more rapidly through the dyke, it neared the building, and Toussaint could make out that it was a farm from the shape of the doors and the lighted windows. Alas! it was La Seulière, and a dance was going in. The noise of laughter, songs, the muffled notes of an accordeon plainly audible within, died away in the wind without.
The farmer went on past the brown hillock, but even while he punted with all speed he watched to see if the great dark shade cast by Mathurin had not stirred; then seeing it motionless, thought to himself: "My son is dead!"
Some five hundred yards away on the other side of the canal, he knew now that there was another house, and he made all haste to reach it. For this time it was Terre-Aymont, the farm of Massonneau le Glorieux, his friend. And soon the farmer, throwing his boat-chain round a willow, had sprung to land, and going to the farmhouse door, was crying: "Glorieux! Glorieux! Help!"
Soon lights were moving along the muddy slopes between the farm and the willow to which the boat had been attached, and men and women were hurrying to and fro with tears, laments, and low-voiced prayers. The whole sleeping household had been quickly roused, and were assembled on the bank. Massonneau would have had Mathurin carried into the house-place of La Terre-Aymont and have sent to fetch the doctor of Chalons, but Toussaint Lumineau, having once more examined and felt over his son's body, said:
"No, Glorieux. His sufferings are at an end. I will take him back to La Fromentière."
Then the farmer of La Terre-Aymont turned to two young lads standing in the background, who with arms round each other's necks, their brown heads touching, seemed to be looking on death for the first time.
"My lads," he said, "go and fetch our large punt."
Disappearing in the fog, they ran to fetch the boat which was kept in a meadow close by La Seulière, and as they passed they told the merrymakers what had happened.
It was nearly ten at night when the body of Mathurin Lumineau was reverently placed by friendly hands in the great punt used for carrying forage, and which had so often been seen returning from the meadows laden with hay, one of the Terre-Aymont children perched on the top, singing.
The body was laid in the middle of the boat, covered with a white sheet by the hands of Mère Massonneau; on it she placed a copper crucifix.
Toussaint Lumineau took his place in the stern at his son's head. Standing in the bow with their punt poles were the two sons of Glorieux de la Terre-Aymont, two lanterns at their feet to light them on their way.
The boat left the bank amid the laments of those present, and proceeded slowly down the Grand Canal, the wind driving the mists of the Marais towards it as it advanced.
When at a short distance from La Seulière, a voice from land exclaimed:
"There it is! I hear the punt poles; I see the lights!"
The doors of both rooms were thrown open; the lamplight shone out, illuminating the hillock on which the house stood; the stunted trees on the edge of the dyke looked silvery out of the darkness. Now all those present at the dance, young men and maidens, came forth in long procession down to the bank to greet the mournful convoy. In their gala dresses they knelt on the muddy bank, their coifs and aprons blown about in the wind. Silently they watched the approach of the white shroud covering the remains of the cripple, their senior by so few years, and the poor old father sitting bent double in the stern, his head almost touching his knees, motionless as the dead son he was guarding.
Behind the others knelt a tall girl supported by two of her companions kneeling on either side of her, the blue kerchief and gold chain she wore conspicuous in the light that streamed from the house. All were silent. All followed with their eyes the boat as it slowly glided away again into the darkness. The sound of the punt poles, as they dipped the water, gradually died away; the ripples left on the smooth surface of the water subsided. The white shroud had passed away into the ever-deepening fog. There remained only a glimmer of light, the faint reflection of the lanterns passing across the meadows; soon nothing could be distinguished from out the enveloping darkness into which the punt had disappeared.
"Poor eldest Lumineau! the handsomest of us all!"
In the solitude of the Marais, whither the pity of his fellow creatures could not accompany him, the old father wept as he looked on the burden at his feet; he wept, too, when lifting up his head his eyes lighted on the stalwart lads plying the punt poles, who, faithful to their home and soil, were keeping on the straight course.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SPRINGTIDE.

The second week of April was extremely mild throughout the Marais of La Vendée; Spring was at hand. The first to announce its coming were the blackthorns and willows; they were not yet in blossom but in bud. And those buds which precede the blossoms have a perfume of their own—the whole country side was permeated with it. In the low-lying meadows, from which the water had retired, flowering moss was sending up its slender heads amid the fresh blades of grass. The plover was making its nest. Horses, turned out to grass, were enjoying their gallops on sunny banks, once

more dry and firm. Pools were blue as the clouds were white, because Spring was coming.
On an afternoon of that happy week when all life was young again, Toussaint Lumineau, standing at his gate, was awaiting the return of the eldest Michelonne, whom, a week ago, he had sent on a mission to the town of Châtelliers. For she had written him that her quest had been successful, and that she was bringing back from the Bocage the humble labourer who was to be Rousille's husband, the mainstay and eventually the master of La Fromentière. That morning Véronique had come to fetch Rousille to go and meet the travellers, and now the time was approaching when the tilted cart drawn by La Rousse should have rounded the corner and appeared at the foot of the hill between the two corn-fields swaying in the breeze.
The farmer stood waiting on his own domain, leaning on the gate which, alas! had opened to let forth, without return, all the sons of La Fromentière, and which he, himself, would now open to let in the new-comers. Truly his heart was sad. Life had treated him hardly; the future was not reassuring. Would not the land soon be sold and left to chance? At the very moment that he was about to welcome those who should succeed him, could Toussaint Lumineau chase away the thought that the long traditions of bygone generations were coming to an end, and that, inseparable for centuries, his family name and that of the farm would no longer be one and the same? However, he was too old, and came of too good a stock to surrender hope. The blood that coursed in his veins contained, like wheat, something of eternal youth. It might be deemed dead, it sprang to life again.
A dull, rapid thud, like the sound of men threshing, smote on the balmy air. Toussaint Lumineau recognised his mare's pace. She was coming at a gallop, as when returning from fairs, or fêtes, or weddings.
He raised his head. Once more he felt within him the courage to live on, and turning towards the road where the old trees were putting on their fresh glad verdure, knowing that beyond them joy was hastening to him, he took off his hat, and with outstretched arms said:
"Come, my Rousille, with your Jean Nesmy."

THE END.

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