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MONSIEUR DE CAMORS

By OCTAVE FEUILLET

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER IX

LOVE CONQUERS PHILOSOPHY

To M. de Camors, in principle it was a matter of perfect indifference whether France was centralized or decentralized. But his Parisian instinct induced him to prefer the former. In spite of this preference, he would not have scrupled to adopt the opinions of M. des Rameures, had not his own fine tact shown him that the proud old gentleman was not to be won by submission.

He therefore reserved for him the triumph of his gradual conversion. Be that as it might, it was neither of centralization nor of decentralization that the young Count proposed to speak to Madame de Teclc, when, at the appointed hour, he presented himself before her. He found her in the garden, which, like the house, was of an ancient, severe, and monastic style. A terrace planted with limetrees extended on one side of the garden. It was at this spot that Madame de Teclc was seated under a group

of lime-trees, forming a rustic bower.

She was fond of this place, because it recalled to her that evening when her unexpected apparition had suddenly inspired with a celestial joy the pale, disfigured face of her betrothed.

She was seated on a low chair beside a small rustic table, covered with pieces of wool and silk; her feet rested on a stool, and she worked on a piece of tapestry, apparently with great tranquillity.

M. de Camors, an expert in all the niceties and exquisite devices of the feminine mind, smiled to himself at this audience in the open air. He thought he fathomed its meaning. Madame de Teclé desired to deprive this interview of the confidential character which closed doors would have given it.

It was the simple truth. This young woman, who was one of the noblest of her sex, was not at all simple. She had not passed ten years of her youth, her beauty, and her widowhood without receiving, under forms more or less direct, dozens of declarations that had inspired her with impressions, which, although just, were not always too flattering to the delicacy and discretion of the opposite sex. Like all women of her age, she knew her danger, and, unlike most of them, she did not love it. She had invariably turned into the broad road of friendship all those she had surprised rambling within the prohibited limits of love. The request of M. de Camors for a private interview had seriously preoccupied her since the previous evening. What could be the object of this mysterious interview? She puzzled her brain to imagine, but could not divine.

It was not probable that M. de Camors, at the beginning of their acquaintance, would feel himself entitled to declare a passion. However vividly the famed gallantry of the young Count rose to her memory, she thought so noted a ladykiller as he might adopt unusual methods, and might think himself entitled to dispense with much ceremony in dealing with an humble provincial.

Animated by these ideas, she resolved to receive him in the garden, having remarked, during her short experience, that open air and a wide, open space were not favorable to bold wooers.

M. de Camors bowed to Madame de Teclé as an Englishman would have bowed to his queen; then seating himself, drew his chair nearer to hers, mischievously perhaps, and lowering his voice into a confidential tone, said: "Madame, will you permit me to confide a secret to you, and to ask your counsel?"

She raised her graceful head, fixed upon the Count her soft, bright gaze, smiled vaguely, and by a slight movement of the hand intimated to him, "You surprise me; but I will listen to you."

"This is my first secret, Madame—I desire to become deputy for this district."

At this unexpected declaration, Madame de Teclé looked at him, breathed a slight sigh of relief, and gravely awaited what he had to say.

"The General de Campvallón, Madame," continued the young man, "has manifested a father's kindness to me. He intends to resign in my favor, and has not concealed from me that the support of your uncle is indispensable to my success as a candidate. I have therefore come here, by the General's advice, in the hope of obtaining this support, but the ideas and opinions expressed yesterday by your uncle appear to me so directly opposed to my pretensions that I feel truly discouraged. To be brief, Madame, in my perplexity I conceived the idea—indiscreet doubtless—to appeal to your kindness, and ask your advice—which I am determined to follow, whatever it may be."

"But, Monsieur! you embarrass me greatly," said the young woman, whose pretty face, at first clouded, brightened up immediately with a frank smile.

"I have no special claims on your kindness—on the contrary perhaps—but I am a human being, and you are charitable. Well, in truth, Madame, this matter seriously concerns my fortune, my future, and my whole destiny. This opportunity which now presents itself for me to enter public life so young is exceptional. I should regret very much to lose it; would you therefore be so kind as to aid me?"

"But how can I?" replied Madame de Teclé. "I never interfere in politics, and that is precisely what you ask me."

"Nevertheless, Madame, I pray you not to oppose me."

"Why should I oppose you?"

"Ah, Madame! You have a right more than any other person to be severe. My youth was a little dissipated. My reputation, in some respects, is not over-good, I know, and I doubt not you may have heard so, and I can not help fearing it has inspired you with some dislike to me."

"Monsieur, we lived a retired life here. We know nothing of what passes in Paris. If we did, this would not prevent my assisting you, if I knew how, for I think that serious and elevated labors could not fail happily to change your ordinary habits."

"It is truly a delicious thing," thought the young Count, "to mystify so spiritual a person."

"Madame," he continued, with his quiet grace, "I join in your hopes, and as you deign to encourage my ambition, I believe I shall succeed in obtaining your uncle's support. You know him well. What shall I do to conciliate him? What course shall I adopt?—because I can not do without his assistance. Were I to renounce that, I should be compelled to renounce my projects."

"It is truly difficult," said Madame de Teclé, with a reflective air— "very difficult!"

"Is it not, Madame?"

Camors's voice expressed such confidence and submission that Madame de Teclé was quite touched, and even the devil himself would have been charmed by it, had he heard it in Gehenna.

"Let me reflect on this a little," she said, and she placed her elbows on the table, leaned her head on her hands, her fingers, like a fan, half shading her eyes, while sparks of fire from her rings glittered in the sunshine, and her ivory nails shone against her smooth brow. M. de Camors continued to regard her with the same submissive and candid air.

"Well, Monsieur," she said at last, smiling, "I think you can do nothing better than keep on."

"Pardon me, but how?"

"By persevering in the same system you have already adopted with my uncle! Say nothing to him for the present. Beg the General also to be silent. Wait quietly until intimacy, time, and your own good qualities have sufficiently prepared my uncle for your nomination. My role is very simple. I cannot, at this moment, aid you, without betraying you. My assistance would only injure you, until a change comes in the aspect of affairs. You must conciliate him."

"You overpower me," said Camors, "in taking you for my confidante in my ambitious projects, I have committed a blunder and an impertinence, which a slight contempt from you has mildly punished. But speaking seriously, Madame, I thank you with all my heart. I feared to find in you a powerful enemy, and I find in you a strong neutral, almost an ally."

"Oh! altogether an ally, however secret," responded Madame de Teclé, laughing. "I am glad to be useful to you; as I love General Campvallón very much, I am happy to enter into his views. Come here, Marie?" These last words were addressed to her daughter, who appeared on the steps of the terrace, her cheeks scarlet, and her hair dishevelled, holding a card in her hand. She immediately approached her mother, giving M. de Camors one of those awkward salutations peculiar to young, growing girls.

"Will you permit me," said Madame de Teclé, "to give to my daughter a few orders in English, which we are translating? You are too warm—do not run any more. Tell Rosa to prepare my bodice with the small buttons. While I am dressing, you may say your catechism to me."

"Yes, mother."

"Have you written your exercise?"

"Yes, mother. How do you say 'joli' in English for a man?" asked the little girl.

"Why?"

"That question is in my exercise, to be said of a man who is 'beau, joli, distingue.'"

"Handsome, nice, and charming," replied her mother.

"Very well, mother, this gentleman, our neighbor, is altogether handsome, nice, and charming."

"Silly child!" exclaimed Madame de Teclé, while the little girl rushed down the steps.

M. de Camors, who had listened to this dialogue with cool calmness, rose. "I thank you again, Madame," he said; "and will you now excuse me? You will allow me, from time to time, to confide in you my political hopes and fears?"

"Certainly, Monsieur."

He bowed and retired. As he was crossing the courtyard, he found himself face to face with

Mademoiselle Marie. He gave her a most respectful bow. "Another time, Miss Mary, be more careful. I understand English perfectly well!"

Mademoiselle Marie remained in the same attitude, blushed up to the roots of her hair, and cast on M. de Camors a startled look of mingled shame and anger.

"You are not satisfied, Miss Mary," continued Camors.

"Not at all," said the child, quickly, her strong voice somewhat husky.

M. Camors laughed, bowed again, and departed, leaving Mademoiselle Marie in the midst of the court, transfixed with indignation.

A few moments later Marie threw herself into the arms of her mother, weeping bitterly, and told her, through her tears, of her cruel mishap.

Madame de Teclc, in using this opportunity of giving her daughter a lesson on reserve and on convenance, avoided treating the matter too seriously and even seemed to laugh heartily at it, although she had little inclination to do so, and the child finished by laughing with her.

Camors, meanwhile, remained at home, congratulating himself on his campaign, which seemed to him, not without reason, to have been a masterpiece of stratagem. By a clever mingling of frankness and cunning he had quickly enlisted Madame de Teclc in his interest. From that moment the realization of his ambitious dreams seemed assured, for he was not ignorant of the incomparable value of woman's assistance, and knew all the power of that secret and continued labor, of those small but cumulative efforts, and of those subterranean movements which assimilate feminine influence with the secret and irresistible forces of nature. Another point gained—he had established a secret between that pretty woman and himself, and had placed himself on a confidential footing with her. He had gained the right to keep secret their clandestine words and private conversation, and such a situation, cleverly managed, might aid him to pass very agreeably the period occupied in his political canvass.

Camors on entering the house sat down to write the General, to inform him of the opening of his operations, and admonish him to have patience. From that day he turned his attention to following up the two persons who could control his election.

His policy as regarded M. des Rameures was as simple as it was clever. It has already been clearly indicated, and further details would be unnecessary. Profiting by his growing familiarity as neighbor, he went to school, as it were, at the model farm of the gentleman-farmer, and submitted to him the direction of his own domain. By this quiet compliment, enhanced by his captivating courtesy, he advanced insensibly in the good graces of the old man. But every day, as he grew to know M. de Rameures better, and as he felt more the strength of his character, he began to fear that on essential points he was quite inflexible.

After some weeks of almost daily intercourse, M. des Rameures graciously praised his young neighbor as a charming fellow, an excellent musician, an amiable associate; but, regarding him as a possible deputy, he saw some things which might disqualify him. Madame de Teclc feared this, and did not hide it from M. de Camors. The young Count did not preoccupy himself so much on this subject as might be supposed, for his second ambition had superseded his first; in other words his fancy for Madame de Teclc had become more ardent and more pressing than his desire for the deputyship. We are compelled to admit, not to his credit, that he first proposed to himself, to ensnare his charming neighbor as a simple pastime, as an interesting adventure, and, above all, as a work of art, which was extremely difficult and would greatly redound to his honor. Although he had met few women of her merit, he judged her correctly. He believed Madame de Teclc was not virtuous simply from force of habit or duty. She had passion. She was not a prude, but was chaste. She was not a devotee, but was pious. He discerned in her at the same time a spirit elevated, yet not narrow; lofty and dignified sentiments, and deeply rooted principles; virtue without rigor, pure and lambent as flame.

Nevertheless he did not despair, trusting to his own principles, to the fascinations of his manner and his previous successes. Instinctively, he knew that the ordinary forms of gallantry would not answer with her. All his art was to surround her with absolute respect, and to leave the rest to time and to the growing intimacy of each day.

There was something very touching to Madame de Teclc in the reserved and timid manner of this 'mauvais sujet', in her presence—the homage of a fallen spirit, as if ashamed of being such, in presence of a spirit of light.

Never, either in public or when *tete-a-tete*, was there a jest, a word, or a look which the most sensitive virtue could fear.

This young man, ironical with all the rest of the world, was serious with her. From the moment he turned toward her, his voice, face, and conversation became as serious as if he had entered a church. He had a great deal of wit, and he used and abused it beyond measure in conversations in the presence of Madame de Teclé, as if he were making a display of fireworks in her honor. But on coming to her this was suddenly extinguished, and he became all submission and respect.

Not every woman who receives from a superior man such delicate flattery as this necessarily loves him, but she does like him. In the shadow of the perfect security in which M. de Camors had placed her, Madame de Teclé could not but be pleased in the company of the most distinguished man she had ever met, who had, like herself, a taste for art, music, and for high culture.

Thus these innocent relations with a young man whose reputation was rather equivocal could not but awaken in the heart of Madame de Teclé a sentiment, or rather an illusion, which the most prudish could not condemn.

Libertines offer to vulgar women an attraction which surprises, but which springs from a reprehensible curiosity. To a woman of society they offer another, more noble yet not less dangerous—the attraction of reforming them. It is rare that virtuous women do not fall into the error of believing that it is for virtue's sake alone such men love them. These, in brief, were the secret sympathies whose slight tendrils intertwined, blossomed, and flowered little by little in this soul, as tender as it was pure.

M. de Camors had vaguely foreseen all this: that which he had not foreseen was that he himself would be caught in his own snare, and would be sincere in the role which he had so judiciously adopted. From the first, Madame de Teclé had captivated him. Her very puritanism, united with her native grace and worldly elegance, composed a kind of daily charm which piqued the imagination of the cold young man. If it was a powerful temptation for the angels to save the tempted, the tempted could not harbor with more delight the thought of destroying the angels. They dream, like the reckless Epicureans of the Bible, of mingling, in a new intoxication, the earth with heaven. To these sombre instincts of depravity were soon united in the feelings of Camors a sentiment more worthy of her. Seeing her every day with that childlike intimacy which the country encourages—enhancing the graceful movements of this accomplished person, ever self-possessed and equally prepared for duty or for pleasure—as animated as passion, yet as severe as virtue—he conceived for her a genuine worship. It was not respect, for that requires the effort of believing in such merits, and he did not wish to believe. He thought Madame de Teclé was born so. He admired her as he would admire a rare plant, a beautiful object, an exquisite work, in which nature had combined physical and moral grace with perfect proportion and harmony. His deportment as her slave when near her was not long a mere bit of acting. Our fair readers have doubtless remarked an odd fact: that where a reciprocal sentiment of two feeble human beings has reached a certain point of maturity, chance never fails to furnish a fatal occasion which betrays the secret of the two hearts, and suddenly launches the thunderbolt which has been gradually gathering in the clouds. This is the crisis of all love. This occasion presented itself to Madame de Teclé and M. de Camors in the form of an unpoetic incident.

It occurred at the end of October. Camors had gone out after dinner to take a ride in the neighborhood. Night had already fallen, clear and cold; but as the Count could not see Madame de Teclé that evening, he began only to think of being near her, and felt that unwillingness to work common to lovers—striving, if possible, to kill time, which hung heavy on his hands.

He hoped also that violent exercise might calm his spirit, which never had been more profoundly agitated. Still young and unpractised in his pitiless system, he was troubled at the thought of a victim so pure as Madame de Teclé. To trample on the life, the repose, and the heart of such a woman, as the horse tramples on the grass of the road, with as little care or pity, was hard for a novice.

Strange as it may appear, the idea of marrying her had occurred to him. Then he said to himself that this weakness was in direct contradiction to his principles, and that she would cause him to lose forever his mastery over himself, and throw him back into the nothingness of his past life. Yet with the corrupt inspirations of his depraved soul he foresaw that the moment he touched her hands with the lips of a lover a new sentiment would spring up in her soul. As he abandoned himself to these passionate imaginings, the recollection of young Madame Lescandé came back suddenly to his memory. He grew pale in the darkness. At this moment he was passing the edge of a little wood belonging to the Comte de Teclé, of which a portion had recently been cleared. It was not chance alone that had directed the Count's ride to this point. Madame de Teclé loved this spot, and had frequently taken him there, and on the preceding evening, accompanied by her daughter and her father-in-law, had visited it with him.

The site was a peculiar one. Although not far from houses, the wood was very wild, as if a thousand miles distant from any inhabited place.

You would have said it was a virgin forest, untouched by the axe of the pioneer. Enormous stumps

without bark, trunks of gigantic trees, covered the declivity of the hill, and barricaded, here and there, in a picturesque manner, the current of the brook which ran into the valley. A little farther up the dense wood of tufted trees contributed to diffuse that religious light half over the rocks, the brushwood and the fertile soil, and on the limpid water, which is at once the charm and the horror of old neglected woods. In this solitude, and on a space of cleared ground, rose a sort of rude hut, constructed by a poor devil who was a sabot-maker by trade, and who had been allowed to establish himself there by the Comte de Tecle, and to use the beech-trees to gain his humble living. This Bohemian interested Madame de Tecle, probably because, like M. de Camors, he had a bad reputation. He lived in his cabin with a woman who was still pretty under her rags, and with two little boys with golden curls.

He was a stranger in the neighborhood, and the woman was said not to be his wife. He was very taciturn, and his features seemed fine and determined under his thick, black beard.

Madame de Tecle amused herself seeing him make his sabots. She loved the children, who, though dirty, were beautiful as angels; and she pitied the woman. She had a secret project to marry her to the man, in case she had not yet been married, which seemed probable.

Camors walked his horse slowly over the rocky and winding path on the slope of the hillock. This was the moment when the ghost of Madame Lescande had risen before him, and he believed he could almost hear her weep. Suddenly this illusion gave place to a strange reality. The voice of a woman plainly called him by name, in accents of distress—"Monsieur de Camors!"

Stopping his horse on the instant, he felt an icy shudder pass through his frame. The same voice rose higher and called him again. He recognized it as the voice of Madame de Tecle. Looking around him in the obscure light with a rapid glance, he saw a light shining through the foliage in the direction of the cottage of the sabot-maker. Guided by this, he put spurs to his horse, crossed the cleared ground up the hillside, and found himself face to face with Madame de Tecle. She was standing at the threshold of the hut, her head bare, and her beautiful hair dishevelled under a long, black lace veil. She was giving a servant some hasty orders. When she saw Camors approach, she came toward him.

"Pardon me," she said, "but I thought I recognized you, and I called you. I am so much distressed—so distressed! The two children of this man are dying! What is to be done? Come in—come in, I beg of you!"

He leaped to the ground, threw the reins to his servant, and followed Madame de Tekle into the interior of the cabin.

The two children with the golden hair were lying side by side on a little bed, immovable, rigid, their eyes open and the pupils strangely dilated—their faces red, and agitated by slight convulsions. They seemed to be in the agony of death. The old doctor, Du Rocher, was leaning over them, looking at them with a fixed, anxious, and despairing eye. The mother was on her knees, her head clasped in her hands, and weeping bitterly. At the foot of the bed stood the father, with his savage mien—his arms crossed, and his eyes dry. He shuddered at intervals, and murmured, in a hoarse, hollow voice: "Both of them! Both of them!" Then he relapsed into his mournful attitude. M. Durocher, approached Camors quickly. "Monsieur," said he, "what can this be? I believe it to be poisoning, but can detect no definite symptoms: otherwise, the parents should know—but they know nothing! A sunstroke, perhaps; but as both were struck at the same time—and then at this season—ah! our profession is quite useless sometimes."

Camors made rapid inquiries. They had sought M. Durocher, who was dining with Madame de Tecle an hour before. He had hastened, and found the children already speechless, in a state of fearful congestion. It appeared they had fallen into this state when first attacked, and had become delirious.

Camors conceived an idea. He asked to see the clothes the children had worn during the day. The mother gave them to him. He examined them with care, and pointed out to the doctor several red stains on the poor rags. The doctor touched his forehead, and turned over with a feverish hand the small linen—the rough waistcoat—searched the pockets, and found dozens of a small fruit-like cherries, half crushed. "Belladonna!" he exclaimed. "That idea struck me several times, but how could I be sure? You can not find it within twenty miles of this place, except in this cursed wood—of that I am sure."

"Do you think there is yet time?" asked the young Count, in a low voice.
"The children seem to me to be very ill."

"Lost, I fear; but everything depends on the time that has passed, the quantity they have taken, and the remedies I can procure."

The old man consulted quickly with Madame de Tecle, who found she had not in her country pharmacy the necessary remedies, or counter-irritants, which the urgency of the case demanded. The

doctor was obliged to content himself with the essence of coffee, which the servant was ordered to prepare in haste, and to send to the village for the other things needed.

"To the village!" cried Madame de Teclé. "Good heavens! it is four leagues—it is night, and we shall have to wait probably three or four hours!"

Camors heard this: "Doctor, write your prescription," he said: "Trilby is at the door, and with him I can do the four leagues in an hour—in one hour I promise to return here."

"Oh! thank you, Monsieur!" said Madame de Teclé.

He took the prescription which Dr. Durocher had rapidly traced on a leaf of his pocketbook, mounted his horse, and departed.

The highroad was fortunately not far distant. When he reached it he rode like the phantom horseman.

It was nine o'clock when Madame de Teclé witnessed his departure—it was a few moments after ten when she heard the tramp of his horse at the foot of the hill and ran to the door of the hut. The condition of the two children seemed to have grown worse in the interval, but the old doctor had great hopes in the remedies which Camors was to bring. She waited with impatience, and received him like the dawn of the last hope. She contented herself with pressing his hand, when, breathless, he descended from his horse. But this adorable creature threw herself on Trilby, who was covered with foam and steaming like a furnace.

"Poor Trilby," she said, embracing him in her two arms, "dear Trilby— good Trilby! you are half dead, are you not? But I love you well. Go quickly, Monsieur de Camors, I will attend to Trilby"—and while the young man entered the cabin, she confided Trilby to the charge of her servant, with orders to take him to the stable, and a thousand minute directions to take good care of him after his noble conduct. Dr. Durocher had to obtain the aid of Camors to pass the new medicine through the clenched teeth of the unfortunate children. While both were engaged in this work, Madame de Teclé was sitting on a stool with her head resting against the cabin wall. Durocher suddenly raised his eyes and fixed them on her.

"My dear Madame," he said, "you are ill. You have had too much excitement, and the odors here are insupportable. You must go home."

"I really do not feel very well," she murmured.

"You must go at once. We shall send you the news. One of your servants will take you home."

She raised herself, trembling; but one look from the young wife of the sabot-maker arrested her. To this poor woman, it seemed that Providence deserted her with Madame de Teclé.

"No!" she said with a divine sweetness; "I will not go. I shall only breathe a little fresh air. I will remain until they are safe, I promise you;" and she left the room smiling upon the poor woman. After a few minutes, Durocher said to M. de Camors:

"My dear sir, I thank you—but I really have no further need of your services; so you too may go and rest yourself, for you also are growing pale."

Camors, exhausted by his long ride, felt suffocated by the atmosphere of the hut, and consented to the suggestion of the old man, saying that he would not go far.

As he put his foot outside of the cottage, Madame de Teclé, who was sitting before the door, quickly rose and threw over his shoulders a cloak which they had brought for her. She then reseated herself without speaking.

"But you can not remain here all night," he said.

"I should be too uneasy at home."

"But the night is very cold—shall I make you a fire?"

"If you wish," she said.

"Let us see where we can make this little fire. In the midst of this wood it is impossible—we should have a conflagration to finish the picture. Can you walk?"

"Then take my arm, and we shall go and search for a place for our encampment."

She leaned lightly on his arm, and took a few steps with him toward the forest.

"Do you think they are saved?" she asked.

"I hope so," he replied. "The face of Doctor Durocher is more cheerful."

"Oh! how glad I am!"

Both of them stumbled over a root, and laughed like two children for several minutes.

"We shall soon be in the woods," said Madame de Tecle, "and I declare I can go no farther: good or bad, I choose this spot."

They were still quite close to the hut, but the branches of the old trees which had been spared by the axe spread like a sombre dome over their heads. Near by was a large rock, slightly covered with moss, and a number of old trunks of trees, on which Madame de Tecle took her seat.

"Nothing could be better," said Camors, gayly. "I must collect my materials."

A moment after he reappeared, bringing in his arms brushwood, and also a travelling-rug which his servant had brought him.

He got on his knees in front of the rock, prepared the fagots, and lighted them with a match. When the flame began to flicker on the rustic hearth Madame de Tecle trembled with joy, and held out both hands to the blaze.

"Ah! how nice that is!" she said; "and then it is so amusing; one would say we had been shipwrecked."

"Now, Monsieur, if you would be perfect go and see what Durocher reports."

He ran to the hut. When he returned he could not avoid stopping half way to admire the elegant and simple silhouette of the young woman, defined sharply against the blackness of the wood, her fine countenance slightly illuminated by the firelight. The moment she saw him:

"Well!" she cried.

"A great deal of hope."

"Oh! what happiness, Monsieur!" She pressed his hand.

"Sit down there," she said.

He sat down on a rock contiguous to hers, and replied to her eager questions. He repeated, in detail, his conversation with the doctor, and explained at length the properties of belladonna. She listened at first with interest, but little by little, with her head wrapped in her veil and resting on the boughs interlaced behind her, she seemed to be uncomfortably resting from fatigue.

"You are likely to fall asleep there," he said, laughing.

"Perhaps!" she murmured—smiled, and went to sleep.

Her sleep resembled death, it was so profound, and so calm was the beating of her heart, so light her breathing.

Camors knelt down again by the fire, to listen breathlessly and to gaze upon her. From time to time he seemed to meditate, and the solitude was disturbed only by the rustling of the leaves. His eyes followed the flickering of the flame, sometimes resting on the white cheek, sometimes on the grove, sometimes on the arches of the high trees, as if he wished to fix in his memory all the details of this sweet scene. Then his gaze rested again on the young woman, clothed in her beauty, grace, and confiding repose.

What heavenly thoughts descended at that moment on this sombre soul—what hesitation, what doubt assailed it! What images of peace, truth, virtue, and happiness passed into that brain full of storm, and chased away the phantoms of the sophistries he cherished! He himself knew, but never told.

The brisk crackling of the wood awakened her. She opened her eyes in surprise, and as soon as she saw the young man kneeling before her, addressed him:

"How are they now, Monsieur?"

He did not know how to tell her that for the last hour he had had but one thought, and that was of her. Durocher appeared suddenly before them.

"They are saved, Madame," said the old man, brusquely; "come quickly, embrace them, and return home, or we shall have to treat you to-morrow. You are very imprudent to have remained in this damp wood, and it was absurd of Monsieur to let you do so."

She took the arm of the old doctor, smiling, and reentered the hut. The two children, now roused from the dangerous torpor, but who seemed still terrified by the threatened death, raised their little round heads. She made them a sign to keep quiet, and leaned over their pillow smiling upon them, and imprinted two kisses on their golden curls.

"To-morrow, my angels," she said. But the mother, half laughing, half crying, followed Madame de Tecle step by step, speaking to her, and kissing her garments.

"Let her alone," cried the old doctor, querulously. "Go home, Madame. Monsieur de Camors, take her home."

She was going out, when the man, who had not before spoken, and who was sitting in the corner of his but as if stupefied, rose suddenly, seized the arm of Madame de Tecle, who, slightly terrified, turned round, for the gesture of the man was so violent as to seem menacing; his eyes, hard and dry, were fixed upon her, and he continued to press her arm with a contracted hand.

"My friend!" she said, although rather uncertain.

"Yes, your friend," muttered the man with a hollow voice; "yes, your friend."

He could not continue, his mouth worked as if in a convulsion, suppressed weeping shook his frame; he then threw himself on his knees, and they saw a shower of tears force themselves through the hands clasped over his face.

"Take her away, Monsieur," said the old doctor.

Camors gently pushed her out of the but and followed her. She took his arm and descended the rugged path which led to her home.

It was a walk of twenty minutes from the wood. Half the distance was passed without interchanging a word. Once or twice, when the rays of the moon pierced through the clouds, Camors thought he saw her wipe away a tear with the end of her glove. He guided her cautiously in the darkness, although the light step of the young woman was little slower in the obscurity. Her springy step pressed noiselessly the fallen leaves—avoided without assistance the ruts and marshes, as if she had been endowed with a magical clairvoyance. When they reached a crossroad, and Camors seemed uncertain, she indicated the way by a slight pressure of the arm. Both were no doubt embarrassed by the long silence—it was Madame de Tecle who first broke it.

"You have been very good this evening, Monsieur," she said in a low and slightly agitated voice.

"I love you so much!" said the young man.

He pronounced these simple words in such a deep impassioned tone that Madame de Tecle trembled and stood still in the road.

"Monsieur de Camors!"

"What, Madame?" he demanded, in a strange tone.

"Heavens!—in fact—nothing!" said she, "for this is a declaration of friendship, I suppose—and your friendship gives me much pleasure."

He let go her arm at once, and in a hoarse and angry voice said—
"I am not your friend!"

"What are you then, Monsieur?"

Her voice was calm, but she recoiled a few steps, and leaned against one of the trees which bordered the road. The explosion so long pent up burst forth, and a flood of words poured from the young man's lips with inexpressible impetuosity.

"What I am I know not! I no longer know whether I am myself—if I am dead or alive—if I am good or bad—whether I am dreaming or waking. Oh, Madame, what I wish is that the day may never rise again—that this night would never finish—that I should wish to feel always—always—in my head, my heart, my entire being—that which I now feel, near you—of you—for you! I should wish to be stricken with some sudden illness, without hope, in order to be watched and wept for by you, like those children—

and to be embalmed in your tears; and to see you bowed down in terror before me is horrible to me! By the name of your God, whom you have made me respect, I swear you are sacred to me—the child in the arms of its mother is not more so!"

"I have no fear," she murmured.

"Oh, no!—have no fear!" he repeated in a tone of voice infinitely softened and tender. "It is I who am afraid—it is I who tremble—you see it; for since I have spoken, all is finished. I expect nothing more—I hope for nothing—this night has no possible tomorrow. I know it. Your husband I dare not be—your lover I should not wish to be. I ask nothing of you—understand well! I should like to burn my heart at your feet, as on an altar—this is all. Do you believe me? Answer! Are you tranquil? Are you confident? Will you hear me? May I tell you what image I carry of you in the secret recesses of my heart? Dear creature that you are, you do not—ah, you do not know how great is your worth; and I fear to tell you; so much am I afraid of stripping you of your charms, or of one of your virtues. If you had been proud of yourself, as you have a right to be, you would be less perfect, and I should love you less. But I wish to tell you how lovable and how charming you are. You alone do not know it. You alone do not see the soft flame of your large eyes—the reflection of your heroic soul on your young but serene brow. Your charm is over everything you do—your slightest gesture is engraven on my heart. Into the most ordinary duties of every-day life you carry a peculiar grace, like a young priestess who recites her daily devotions. Your hand, your touch, your breath purifies everything—even the most humble and the most wicked beings—and myself first of all!

"I am astonished at the words which I dare to pronounce, and the sentiments which animate me, to whom you have made clear new truths. Yes, all the rhapsodies of the poets, all the loves of the martyrs, I comprehend in your presence. This is truth itself. I understand those who died for their faith by the torture—because I should like to suffer for you—because I believe in you—because I respect you—I cherish you—I adore you!"

He stopped, shivering, and half prostrating himself before her, seized the end of her veil and kissed it.

"Now," he continued, with a kind of grave sadness, "go, Madame, I have forgotten too long that you require repose. Pardon me—proceed. I shall follow you at a distance, until you reach your home, to protect you—but fear nothing from me."

Madame de Tecle had listened, without once interrupting him even by a sigh. Words would only excite the young man more. Probably she understood, for the first time in her life, one of those songs of love— one of those hymns alive with passion, which every woman wishes to hear before she dies. Should she die because she had heard it? She remained without speaking, as if just awakening from a dream, and said quite simply, in a voice as soft and feeble as a sigh, "My God!" After another pause she advanced a few steps on the road.

"Give me your arm as far as my house, Monsieur," she said.

He obeyed her, and they continued their walk toward the house, the lights of which they soon saw. They did not exchange a word—only as they reached the gate, Madame de Tecle turned and made him a slight gesture with her hand, in sign of adieu. In return, M. de Camors bowed low, and withdrew.

CHAPTER X

THE PROLOGUE TO THE TRAGEDY

The Comte de Camors had been sincere. When true passion surprises the human soul, it breaks down all resolves, sweeps away all logic, and crushes all calculations.

In this lies its grandeur, and also its danger. It suddenly seizes on you, as the ancient god inspired the priestess on her tripod—speaks through your lips, utters words you hardly comprehend, falsifies your thoughts, confounds your reason, and betrays your secrets. When this sublime madness possesses you, it elevates you—it transfigures you. It can suddenly convert a common man into a poet, a coward into a hero, an egotist into a martyr, and Don Juan himself into an angel of purity.

With women—and it is to their honor—this metamorphosis can be durable, but it is rarely so with

men. Once transported to this stormy sky, women frankly accept it as their proper home, and the vicinity of the thunder does not disquiet them.

Passion is their element—they feel at home there. There are few women worthy of the name who are not ready to put in action all the words which passion has caused to bubble from their lips. If they speak of flight, they are ready for exile. If they talk of dying, they are ready for death. Men are far less consistent with their ideas.

It was not until late the next morning that Camors regretted his outbreak of sincerity; for, during the remainder of the night, still filled with his excitement, agitated and shaken by the passage of the god, sunk into a confused and feverish reverie, he was incapable of reflection. But when, on awakening, he surveyed the situation calmly and by the plain light of day, and thought over the preceding evening and its events, he could not fail to recognize the fact that he had been cruelly duped by his own nervous system. To love Madame de Tecle was perfectly proper, and he loved her still—for she was a person to be loved and desired— but to elevate that love or any other as the master of his life, instead of its plaything, was one of those weaknesses interdicted by his system more than any other. In fact, he felt that he had spoken and acted like a school-boy on a holiday. He had uttered words, made promises, and taken engagements on himself which no one demanded of him. No conduct could have been more ridiculous. Happily, nothing was lost. He had yet time to give his love that subordinate place which this sort of fantasy should occupy in the life of man. He had been imprudent; but this very imprudence might finally prove of service to him. All that remained of this scene was a declaration—gracefully made, spontaneous, natural— which subjected Madame de Tecle to the double charm of a mystic idolatry which pleased her sex, and to a manly ardor which could not displease her.

He had, therefore, nothing to regret—although he certainly would have preferred, from the point of view of his principles, to have displayed a somewhat less childish weakness.

But what course should he now adopt? Nothing could be more simple. He would go to Madame de Tecle—implore her forgiveness—throw himself again at her feet, promising eternal respect, and succeed. Consequently, about ten o'clock, M. de Camors wrote the following note:

"MADAME

"I can not leave without bidding you adieu, and once more demanding your forgiveness.

"Will you permit me?

"CAMORS."

This letter he was about despatching, when he received one containing the following words:

"I shall be happy, Monsieur, if you will call upon me to-day, about four o'clock.

"ELISE DE TECLE."

Upon which M. de Camors threw his own note in the fire, as entirely superfluous.

No matter what interpretation he put upon this note, it was an evident sign that love had triumphed and that virtue was defeated; for, after what had passed the previous evening between Madame de Tecle and himself, there was only one course for a virtuous woman to take; and that was never to see him again. To see him was to pardon him; to pardon him was to surrender herself to him, with or without circumlocution. Camors did not allow himself to deplore any further an adventure which had so suddenly lost its gravity. He soliloquized on the weakness of women. He thought it bad taste in Madame de Tecle not to have maintained longer the high ideal his innocence had created for her. Anticipating the disenchantment which follows possession, he already saw her deprived of all her prestige, and ticketed in the museum of his amorous souvenirs.

Nevertheless, when he approached her house, and had the feeling of her near presence, he was troubled. Doubt—and anxiety assailed him. When he saw through the trees the window of her room, his heart throbbed so violently that he had to sit down on the root of a tree for a moment.

"I love her like a madman!" he murmured; then leaping up suddenly he exclaimed, "But she is only a woman, after all—I shall go on!"

For the first time Madame de Tecle received him in her own apartment. This room M. de Camors had never seen. It was a large and lofty apartment, draped and furnished in sombre tints.

It contained gilded mirrors, bronzes, engravings, and old family jewelry lying on tables—the whole

presenting the appearance of the ornamentation of a church.

In this severe and almost religious interior, however rich, reigned a vague odor of flowers; and there were also to be seen boxes of lace, drawers of perfumed linen, and that dainty atmosphere which ever accompanies refined women.

But every one has her personal individuality, and forms her own atmosphere which fascinates her lover. Madame de Teclé, finding herself almost lost in this very large room, had so arranged some pieces of furniture as to make herself a little private nook near the chimneypiece, which her daughter called, "My mother's chapel." It was there Camors now perceived her, by the soft light of a lamp, sitting in an armchair, and, contrary to her custom, having no work in her hands. She appeared calm, though two dark circles surrounded her eyes. She had evidently suffered much, and wept much.

On seeing that dear face, worn and haggard with grief, Camors forgot the neat phrases he had prepared for his entrance. He forgot all except that he really adored her.

He advanced hastily toward her, seized in his two hands those of the young woman and, without speaking, interrogated her eyes with tenderness and profound pity.

"It is nothing," she said, withdrawing her hand and bending her pale face gently; "I am better; I may even be very happy, if you wish it."

There was in the smile, the look, and the accent of Madame de Teclé something indefinable, which froze the blood of Camors.

He felt confusedly that she loved him, and yet was lost to him; that he had before him a species of being he did not understand, and that this woman, saddened, broken, and lost by love, yet loved something else in this world better even than that love.

She made him a slight sign, which he obeyed like a child, and he sat down beside her.

"Monsieur," she said to him, in a voice tremulous at first, but which grew stronger as she proceeded, "I heard you last night perhaps with a little too much patience. I shall now, in return, ask from you the same kindness. You have told me that you love me, Monsieur; and I avow frankly that I entertain a lively affection for you. Such being the case, we must either separate forever, or unite ourselves by the only tie worthy of us both. To part:—that will afflict me much, and I also believe it would occasion much grief to you. To unite ourselves:—for my own part, Monsieur, I should be willing to give you my life; but I can not do it, I can not wed you without manifest folly. You are younger than I; and as good and generous as I believe you to be, simple reason tells me that by so doing I should bring bitter repentance on myself. But there is yet another reason. I do not belong to myself, I belong to my daughter, to my family, to my past. In giving up my name for yours I should wound, I should cruelly afflict, all the friends who surround me, and, I believe, some who exist no longer. Well, Monsieur," she continued, with a smile of celestial grace and resignation, "I have discovered a way by which we yet can avoid breaking off an intimacy so sweet to both of us—in fact, to make it closer and more dear. My proposal may surprise you, but have the kindness to think over it, and do not say no, at once."

She glanced at him, and was terrified at the pallor which overspread his face. She gently took his hand, and said:

"Have patience!"

"Speak on!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Monsieur," she continued, with her smile of angelic charity, "God be praised, you are quite young; in our society men situated as you are do not marry early, and I think they are right. Well, then, this is what I wish to do, if you will allow me to tell you. I wish to blend in one affection the two strongest sentiments of my heart! I wish to concentrate all my care, all my tenderness, all my joy on forming a wife worthy of you—a young soul who will make you happy, a cultivated intellect of which you can be proud. I will promise you, Monsieur, I will swear to you, to consecrate to you this sweet duty, and to consecrate to it all that is best in myself. I shall devote to it all my time, every instant of my life, as to the holy work of a saint. I swear to you that I shall be very happy if you will only tell me that you will consent to this."

His answer was an impatient exclamation of irony and anger: then he spoke:

"You will pardon me, Madame," he said, "if so sudden a change in my sentiments can not be as prompt as you wish."

She blushed slightly.

"Yes," she said, with a faint smile; "I can understand that the idea of my being your mother-in-law may seem strange to you; but in some years, even in a very few years' time, I shall be an old woman, and then it will seem to you very natural."

To consummate her mournful sacrifice, the poor woman did not shrink from covering herself, even in the presence of the man she loved, with the mantle of old age.

The soul of Camors was perverted, but not base, and it was suddenly touched at this simple heroism. He rendered it the greatest homage he could pay, for his eyes suddenly filled with tears. She observed it, for she watched with an anxious eye the slightest impression she produced upon him. So she continued more cheerfully:

"And see, Monsieur, how this will settle everything. In this way we can continue to see each other without danger, because your little affianced wife will be always between us. Our sentiments will soon be in harmony with our new thoughts. Even your future prospects, which are now also mine, will encounter fewer obstacles, because I shall push them more openly, without revealing to my uncle what ought to remain a secret between us two. I can let him suspect my hopes, and that will enlist him in your service. Above all, I repeat to you that this will insure my happiness. Will you thus accept my maternal affection?"

M. de Camors, by a powerful effort of will, had recovered his self-control.

"Pardon me, Madame," he said, with a faint smile, "but I should wish at least to preserve honor. What do you ask of me? Do you yourself fully comprehend? Have you reflected well on this? Can either of us contract, without imprudence, an engagement of so delicate a nature for so long a time?"

"I demand no engagement of you," she replied, "for I feel that would be unreasonable. I only pledge myself as far as I can, without compromising the future fate of my daughter. I shall educate her for you. I shall, in my secret heart, destine her for you, and it is in this light I shall think of you for the future. Grant me this. Accept it like an honest man, and remain single. This is probably a folly, but I risk my repose upon it. I will run all the risk, because I shall have all the joy. I have already had a thousand thoughts on this subject, which I can not yet tell you, but which I shall confess to God this night. I believe— I am convinced that my daughter, when I have done all that I can for her, will make an excellent wife for you. She will benefit you, and be an honor to you, and will, I hope, one day thank me with all her heart; for I perceive already what she wishes, and what she loves. You can not know, you can not even suspect—but I—I know it. There is already a woman in that child, and a very charming woman—much more charming than her mother, Monsieur, I assure you."

Madame de Teclé stopped suddenly, the door opened, and Mademoiselle Marie entered the room brusquely, holding in each hand a gigantic doll.

M. Camors rose, bowed gravely to her, and bit his lip to avoid smiling, which did not altogether escape Madame de Teclé.

"Marie!" she cried out, "really you are absurd with your dolls!"

"My dolls! I adore them!" replied Mademoiselle Marie.

"You are absurd! Go away with your dolls," said her mother.

"Not without embracing you," said the child.

She laid her dolls on the carpet, sprang on her mother's neck, and kissed her on both cheeks passionately, after which she took up her dolls, saying to them:

"Come, my little dears!" and left the room.

"Good heavens!" said Madame de Teclé, laughing, "this is an unfortunate incident; but I still insist, and I implore you to take my word. She will have sense, courage, and goodness. Now," she continued in a more serious tone, "take time to think over it, and return to give me your decision, should it be favorable. If not, we must bid each other adieu."

"Madame," said Camors, rising and standing before her, "I will promise never to address a word to you which a son might not utter to his mother. Is it not this which you demand?"

Madame de Teclé fixed upon him for an instant her beautiful eyes, full of joy and gratitude, then suddenly covered her face with her two hands.

"I thank you!" she murmured, "I am very happy!" She extended her hand, wet with her tears, which

he took and pressed to his lips, bowed low, and left the room.

If there ever was a moment in his fatal career when the young man was really worthy of admiration, it was this. His love for Madame de Teclé, however unworthy of her it might be, was nevertheless great. It was the only true passion he had ever felt. At the moment when he saw this love, the triumph of which he thought certain, escape him forever, he was not only wounded in his pride but was crushed in his heart.

Yet he took the stroke like a gentleman. His agony was well borne. His first bitter words, checked at once, alone betrayed what he suffered.

He was as pitiless for his own sorrows as he sought to be for those of others. He indulged in none of the common injustice habitual to discarded lovers.

He recognized the decision of Madame de Teclé as true and final, and was not tempted for a moment to mistake it for one of those equivocal arrangements by which women sometimes deceive themselves, and of which men always take advantage. He realized that the refuge she had sought was inviolable. He neither argued nor protested against her resolve. He submitted to it, and nobly kissed the noble hand which smote him. As to the miracle of courage, chastity, and faith by which Madame de Teclé had transformed and purified her love, he cared not to dwell upon it. This example, which opened to his view a divine soul, naked, so to speak, destroyed his theories. One word which escaped him, while passing to his own house, proved the judgment which he passed upon it, from his own point of view. "Very childish," he muttered, "but sublime!"

On returning home Camors found a letter from General Campvallón, notifying him that his marriage with Mademoiselle d'Estrelles would take place in a few days, and inviting him to be present. The marriage was to be strictly private, with only the family to assist at it.

Camors did not regret this invitation, as it gave him the excuse for some diversion in his thoughts, of which he felt the need. He was greatly tempted to go away at once to diminish his sufferings, but conquered this weakness. The next evening he passed at the chateau of M. des Rameures; and though his heart was bleeding, he piqued himself on presenting an unclouded brow and an inscrutable smile to Madame de Teclé. He announced the brief absence he intended, and explained the reason.

"You will present my best wishes to the General," said M. des Rameures. "I hope he may be happy, but I confess I doubt it devilishly."

"I shall bear your good wishes to the General, Monsieur."

"The deuce you will! 'Exceptis excipiendis', I hope," responded the old gentleman, laughing.

As for Madame de Teclé, to tell of all the tender attentions and exquisite delicacies, that a sweet womanly nature knows so well how to apply to heal the wounds it has inflicted—how graciously she glided into her maternal relation with Camors—to tell all this would require a pen wielded by her own soft hands.

Two days later M. de Camors left Reuilly for Paris. The morning after his arrival, he repaired at an early hour to the General's house, a magnificent hotel in the Rue Vanneau. The marriage contract was to be signed that evening, and the civil and religious ceremonies were to take place next morning.

Camors found the General in a state of extraordinary agitation, pacing up and down the three salons which formed the ground floor of the hotel. The moment he perceived the young man entering—"Ah, it is you!" he cried, darting a ferocious glance upon him. "By my faith, your arrival is fortunate."

"But, General!"

"Well, what! Why do you not embrace me?"

"Certainly, General!"

"Very well! It is for to-morrow, you know!"

"Yes, General."

"Sacrebleu! You are very cool! Have you seen her?"

"Not yet, General. I have just arrived."

"You must go and see her this morning. You owe her this mark of interest; and if you discover anything, you must tell me."

"But what should I discover, General?"

"How do I know? But you understand women much better than I! Does she love me, or does she not love me? You understand, I make no pretensions of turning her head, but still I do not wish to be an object of repulsion to her. Nothing has given me reason to suppose so, but the girl is so reserved, so impenetrable."

"Mademoiselle d'Estrelles is naturally cold," said Camors.

"Yes," responded the General. "Yes, and in some respects I—but really now, should you discover anything, I rely on your communicating it to me. And stop!—when you have seen her, have the kindness to return here, for a few moments—will you? You will greatly oblige me!"

"Certainly, General, I shall do so."

"For my part, I love her like a fool."

"That is only right, General!"

"Hum—and what of Des Rameures?"

"I think we shall agree, General!"

"Bravo! we shall talk more of this later. Go and see her, my dear child!"

Camors proceeded to the Rue St. Dominique, where Madame de la Roche-Jugan resided.

"Is my aunt in, Joseph?" he inquired of the servant whom he found in the antechamber, very busy in the preparations which the occasion demanded.

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte, Madame la Comtesse is in and will see you."

"Very well," said Camors; and directed his steps toward his aunt's chamber. But this chamber was no longer hers. This worthy woman had insisted on giving it up to Mademoiselle Charlotte, for whom she manifested, since she had become the betrothed of the seven hundred thousand francs' income of the General, the most humble deference. Mademoiselle d'Estrelles had accepted this change with a disdainful indifference. Camors, who was ignorant of this change, knocked therefore most innocently at the door. Obtaining no answer, he entered without hesitation, lifted the curtain which hung in the doorway, and was immediately arrested by a strange spectacle. At the other extremity of the room, facing him, was a large mirror, before which stood Mademoiselle d'Estrelles. Her back was turned to him.

She was dressed, or rather draped, in a sort of dressing-gown of white cashmere, without sleeves, which left her arms and shoulders bare. Her auburn hair was unbound and floating, and fell in heavy masses almost to her feet. One hand rested lightly on the toilet-table, the other held together, over her bust, the folds of her dressing-gown.

She was gazing at herself in the glass, and weeping bitterly.

The tears fell drop by drop on her white, fresh bosom, and glittered there like the drops of dew which one sees shining in the morning on the shoulders of the marble nymphs in the gardens.

Then Camors noiselessly dropped the portiere and noiselessly retired, taking with him, nevertheless, an eternal souvenir of this stolen visit. He made inquiries; and finally received the embraces of his aunt, who had taken refuge in the chamber of her son, whom she had put in the little chamber formerly occupied by Mademoiselle d'Estrelles. His aunt, after the first greetings, introduced her nephew into the salon, where were displayed all the pomps of the trousseau. Cashmeres, laces, velvets, silks of the finest quality, covered the chairs. On the chimneypiece, the tables, and the consoles, were strewn the jewel-cases.

While Madame de la Roche-Jugan was exhibiting to Camors these magnificent things—of which she failed not to give him the prices—Charlotte, who had been notified of the Count's presence, entered the salon.

Her face was not only serene—it was joyous. "Good morning, cousin!" she said gayly, extending her hand to Camors. "How very kind of you to come! Well, you see how the General spoils me?"

"This is the trousseau of a princess, Mademoiselle!"

"And if you knew, Louis," said Madame de la Roche, "how well all this suits her! Dear child! you

would suppose she had been born to a throne. However, you know she is descended from the kings of Spain."

"Dear aunt!" said Mademoiselle, kissing her on the forehead.

"You know, Louis, that I wish her to call me aunt now?" said the Countess, affecting the plaintive tone, which she thought the highest expression of human tenderness.

"Ah, indeed!" said Camors.

"Let us see, little one! Only try on your coronet before your cousin."

"I should like to see it on your brow," said Camors.

"Your slightest wishes are commands," replied Charlotte, in a voice harmonious and grave, but not untouched with irony.

In the midst of the jewelry which encumbered the salon was a full marquise's coronet set in precious stones and pearls. The young girl adjusted it on her head before the glass, and then stood near Camors with majestic composure.

"Look!" she said; and he gazed at her bewildered, for she looked wonderfully beautiful and proud under her coronet.

Suddenly she darted a glance full into the eyes of the young man, and lowering her voice to a tone of inexpressible bitterness, said:

"At least I sell myself dearly, do I not?" Then turning her back to him she laughed, and took off her coronet.

After some further conversation Camors left, saying to himself that this adorable person promised to become very dangerous; but not admitting that he might profit by it.

In conformity with his promise he returned immediately to the General, who continued to pace the three rooms, and cried out as he saw him:

"Eh, well?"

"Very well indeed, General, perfect—everything goes well."

"You have seen her?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And she said to you—"

"Not much; but she seemed enchanted."

"Seriously, you did not remark anything strange?"

"I remarked she was very lovely!"

"Parbleu! and you think she loves me a little?"

"Assuredly, after her way—as much as she can love, for she has naturally a very cold disposition."

"Ah! as to that I console myself. All that I demand is not to be disagreeable to her. Is it not so? Very well, you give me great pleasure. Now, go where you please, my dear boy, until this evening."

"Adieu until this evening, General!"

The signing of the contract was marked by no special incident; only when the notary, with a low, modest voice read the clause by which the General made Mademoiselle d'Estrelles heiress to all his fortune, Camors was amused to remark the superb indifference of Mademoiselle Charlotte, the smiling exasperation of Mesdames Bacquiere and Van-Cuyp, and the amorous regard which Madame de la Roche-Jugan threw at the same time on Charlotte, her son, and the notary. Then the eye of the Countess rested with a lively interest on the General, and seemed to say that it detected with pleasure in him an unhealthy appearance.

The next morning, on leaving the Church of St. Thomas daikon, the young Marquise only exchanged her wedding-gown for a travelling-costume, and departed with her husband for Campvallon, bathed in

the tears of Madame de la Roche-Jugan, whose lacrimal glands were remarkably tender.

Eight days later M. de Camors returned to Reuilly. Paris had revived him, his nerves were strong again.

As a practical man he took a more healthy view of his adventure with Madame de Teclé, and began to congratulate himself on its denouement. Had things taken a different turn, his future destiny would have been compromised and deranged for him. His political future especially would have been lost, or indefinitely postponed, for his liaison with Madame de Teclé would have been discovered some day, and would have forever alienated the friendly feelings of M. des Rameures.

On this point he did not deceive himself. Madame de Teclé, in the first conversation she had with him, confided to him that her uncle seemed much pleased when she laughingly let him see her idea of marrying her daughter some day to M. de Camors.

Camors seized this occasion to remind Madame de Teclé, that while respecting her projects for the future, which she did him the honor to form, he had not pledged himself to their realization; and that both reason and honor compelled him in this matter to preserve his absolute independence.

She assented to this with her habitual sweetness. From this moment, without ceasing to exhibit toward him every mark of affectionate preference, she never allowed herself the slightest allusion to the dear dream she cherished. Only her tenderness for her daughter seemed to increase, and she devoted herself to the care of her education with redoubled fervor. All this would have touched the heart of M. de Camors, if the heart of M. de Camors had not lost, in its last effort at virtue, the last trace of humanity.

His honor set at rest by his frank avowals to Madame de Teclé, he did not hesitate to profit by the advantages of the situation. He allowed her to serve him as much as she desired, and she desired it passionately. Little by little she had persuaded her uncle that M. de Camors was destined by his character and talents for a great future, and that he would, one day, be an excellent match for Marie; that he was becoming daily more attached to agriculture, which turned toward decentralization, and that he should be attached by firmer bonds to a province which he would honor. While this was going on General Campvallon brought the Marquise to present her to Madame de Teclé; and in a confidential interview with M. des Rameures unmasked his batteries. He was going to Italy to remain some time, but desired first to tender his resignation, and to recommend Camors to his faithful electors.

M. des Rameures, gained over beforehand, promised his aid; and that aid was equivalent to success. Camors had only to make some personal visits to the more influential electors; but his appearance was as seductive as it was striking, and he was one of those fortunate men who can win a heart or a vote by a smile. Finally, to comply with the requisitions, he established himself for several weeks in the chief town of the department. He made his court to the wife of the prefect, sufficiently to flatter the functionary without disquieting the husband. The prefect informed the minister that the claims of the Comte de Camors were pressed upon the department by an irresistible influence; that the politics of the young Count appeared undecided and a little suspicious, but that the administration, finding it useless to oppose, thought it more politic to sustain him.

The minister, not less politic than the prefect, was of the same opinion.

In consequence of this combination of circumstances, M. de Camors, toward the end of his twenty-eighth year, was elected, at intervals of a few days, member of the Council-General, and deputy to the Corps Legislatif.

"You have desired it, my dear Elise," said M. des Rameures, on learning this double result "you have desired it, and I have supported this young Parisian with all my influence. But I must say, he does not possess my confidence. May we never regret our triumph. May we never have to say with the poet: 'Vita Dais oxidated Malians.'"—[The evil gods have heard our vows.]

CHAPTER XI

NEW MAN OF THE NEW EMPIRE

It was now five years since the electors of Reuilly had sent the Comte de Camors to the Corps Legislatif, and they had seen no cause to regret their choice. He understood marvellously well their little local interests, and neglected no occasion of forwarding them. Furthermore, if any of his constituents, passing through Paris, presented themselves at his small hotel on the Rue de l'Imperatrice—it had been built by an architect named Lescande, as a compliment from the deputy to

his old friend—they were received with a winning affability that sent them back to the province with softened hearts. M. de Camors would condescend to inquire whether their wives or their daughters had borne them company; he would place at their disposal tickets for the theatres and passes into the Legislative Chamber; and would show them his pictures and his stables. He also trotted out his horses in the court under their eyes. They found him much improved in personal appearance, and even reported affectionately that his face was fuller and had lost the melancholy cast it used to wear. His manner, once reserved, was now warmer, without any loss of dignity; his expression, once morose, was now marked by a serenity at once pleasing and grave. His politeness was almost a royal grace; for he showed to women—young or old, rich or poor, virtuous or otherwise—the famous suavity of Louis the Fourteenth.

To his equals, as to his inferiors, his urbanity was perfection; for he cultivated in the depths of his soul—for women, for his inferiors, for his equals, and for his constituents—the same contempt.

He loved, esteemed, and respected only himself; but that self he loved, esteemed, and respected as a god! In fact, he had now, realized as completely as possible, in his own person, that almost superhuman ideal he had conceived in the most critical hour of his life.

When he surveyed himself from head to foot in the mental mirror before him, he was content! He was truly that which he wished to be. The programme of his life, as he had laid it down, was faithfully carried out.

By a powerful effort of his mighty will, he succeeded in himself adopting, rather than disdaining in others, all those animal instincts that govern the vulgar. These he believed fetters which bound the feeble, but which the strong could use. He applied himself ceaselessly to the development and perfection of his rare physical and intellectual gifts, only that he might, during the short passage from the cradle to the tomb, extract from them the greatest amount of pleasure. Fully convinced that a thorough knowledge of the world, delicacy of taste and elegance, refinement and the point of honor constituted a sort of moral whole which formed the true gentleman, he strove to adorn his person with the graver as well as the lighter graces. He was like a conscientious artist, who would leave no smallest detail incomplete. The result of his labor was so satisfactory, that M. de Camors, at the moment we rejoin him, was not perhaps one of the best men in the world, but he was beyond doubt one of the happiest and most amiable. Like all men who have determined to cultivate ability rather than scrupulousness, he saw all things developing to his satisfaction. Confident of his future, he discounted it boldly, and lived as if very opulent. His rapid elevation was explained by his unfailing audacity, by his cool judgment and neat finesse, by his great connection and by his moral independence. He had a hard theory, which he continually expounded with all imaginable grace: "Humanity," he would say, "is composed of speculators!"

Thoroughly imbued with this axiom, he had taken his degree in the grand lodge of financiers. There he at once made himself an authority by his manner and address; and he knew well how to use his name, his political influence, and his reputation for integrity. Employing all these, yet never compromising one of them, he influenced men by their virtues, or their vices, with equal indifference. He was incapable of meanness; he never wilfully entrapped a friend, or even an enemy, into a disastrous speculation; only, if the venture proved unsuccessful, he happened to get out and leave the others in it. But in financial speculations, as in battles, there must be what is called "food for powder;" and if one be too solicitous about this worthless pabulum, nothing great can be accomplished. So Camors passed as one of the most scrupulous of this goodly company; and his word was as potential in the region of "the rings," as it was in the more elevated sphere of the clubs and of the turf.

Nor was he less esteemed in the Corps Legislatif, where he assumed the curious role of a working member until committees fought for him. It surprised his colleagues to see this elegant young man, with such fine abilities, so modest and so laborious—to see him ready on the driest subjects and with the most tedious reports. Ponderous laws of local interest neither frightened nor mystified him. He seldom spoke in the public debates, except as a reporter; but in the committee he spoke often, and there his manner was noted for its grave precision, tinged with irony. No one doubted that he was one of the statesmen of the future; but it could be seen he was biding his time.

The exact shade of his politics was entirely unknown. He sat in the "centre left;" polite to every one, but reserved with all. Persuaded, like his father, that the rising generation was preparing, after a time, to pass from theories to revolution—and calculating with pleasure that the development of this periodical catastrophe would probably coincide with his fortieth year, and open to his blase maturity a source of new emotions—he determined to wait and mold his political opinions according to circumstances.

His life, nevertheless, had sufficient of the agreeable to permit him to wait the hour of ambition. Men respected, feared, and envied him. Women adored him.

His presence, of which he was not prodigal, adorned an entertainment: his intrigues could not be gossiped about, being at the same time choice, numerous, and most discreetly conducted.

Passions purely animal never endure long, and his were most ephemeral; but he thought it due to himself to pay the last honors to his victims, and to inter them delicately under the flowers of his friendship. He had in this way made many friends among the Parisian women—a few only of whom detested him. As for the husbands—they were universally fond of him.

To these elegant pleasures he sometimes added a furious debauch, when his imagination was for the moment maddened by champagne. But low company disgusted him, and he shunned it; he was not a man for frequent orgies, and economized his health, his energies, and his strength. His tastes were as thoroughly elevated as could be those of a being who strove to repress his soul. Refined intrigues, luxury in music, paintings, books, and horses—these constituted all the joy of his soul, of his sense, and of his pride. He hovered over the flowers of Parisian elegance; as a bee in the bosom of a rose, he drank in its essence and revelled in its beauty.

It is easy to understand that M. de Camors, relishing this prosperity, attached himself more and more to the moral and religious creed that assured it to him; that he became each day more and more confirmed in the belief that the testament of his father and his own reflection had revealed to him the true evangel of men superior to their species. He was less and less tempted to violate the rules of the game of life; but among all the useless cards, to hold which might disturb his system, the first he discarded was the thought of marriage. He pitied himself too tenderly at the idea of losing the liberty of which he made such agreeable use; at the idea of taking on himself gratuitously the restraints, the tedium, the ridicule, and even the danger of a household. He shuddered at the bare thought of a community of goods and interest; and of possible paternity.

With such views he was therefore but little disposed to encourage the natural hopes in which Madame de Teclé had entombed her love. He determined so to conduct himself toward her as to leave no ground for the growth of her illusion. He ceased to visit Reully, remaining there but two or three weeks in each year, as such time as the session of the Council-General summoned him to the province.

It is true that during these rare visits Camors piqued himself on rendering Madame de Teclé and M. des Rameures all the duties of respectful gratitude. Yet avoiding all allusion to the past, guarding himself scrupulously from confidential converse, and observing a frigid politeness to Mademoiselle Marie, there remained doubt in his mind that, the fickleness of the fair sex aiding him, the young mother of the girl would renounce her chimerical project. His error was great: and it may be here remarked that a hard and scornful scepticism may in this world engender as many false judgments and erroneous calculations as candor or even inexperience can. He believed too much in what had been written of female fickleness; in deceived lovers, who truly deserved to be such; and in what disappointed men had judged of them.

The truth is, women are generally remarkable for the tenacity of their ideas and for fidelity to their sentiments. Inconstancy of heart is the special attribute of man; but he deems it his privilege as well, and when woman disputes the palm with him on this ground, he cries aloud as if the victim of a robber.

Rest assured this theory is no paradox; as proven by the prodigies of patient devotion—tenacious, inviolable—every day displayed by women of the lower classes, whose natures, if gross, retain their primitive sincerity. Even with women of the world, depraved though they be by the temptations that assail them, nature asserts herself; and it is no rarity to see them devote an entire life to one idea, one thought, or one affection! Their lives do not know the thousand distractions which at once disturb and console men; and any idea that takes hold upon them easily becomes fixed. They dwell upon it in the crowd and in solitude; when they read and while they sew; in their dreams and in their prayers. In it they live—for it they die.

It was thus that Madame de Teclé had dwelt year after year on the project of this alliance with unalterable fervor, and had blended the two pure affections that shared her heart in this union of her daughter with Camors, and in thus securing the happiness of both. Ever since she had conceived this desire—which could only have had its birth in a soul as pure as it was tender—the education of her child had become the sweet romance of her life. She dreamed of it always, and of nothing else.

Without knowing or even suspecting the evil traits lurking in the character of Camors, she still understood that, like the great majority of the young men of his day, the young Count was not overburdened with principle. But she held that one of the privileges of woman, in our social system, was the elevation of their husbands by connection with a pure soul, by family affections, and by the sweet religion of the heart. Seeking, therefore, by making her daughter an amiable and lovable woman, to prepare her for the high mission for which she was destined, she omitted nothing which could

improve her. What success rewarded her care the sequel of this narrative will show. It will suffice, for the present, to inform the reader that Mademoiselle de Tecle was a young girl of pleasing countenance, whose short neck was placed on shoulders a little too high. She was not beautiful, but extremely pretty, well educated, and much more vivacious than her mother.

Mademoiselle Marie was so quick-witted that her mother often suspected she knew the secret which concerned herself. Sometimes she talked too much of M. de Camors; sometimes she talked too little, and assumed a mysterious air when others spoke of him.

Madame de Tecle was a little disturbed by these eccentricities. The conduct of M. de Camors, and his more than reserved bearing, annoyed her occasionally; but when we love any one we are likely to interpret favorably all that he does, or all that he omits to do. Madame de Tecle readily attributed the equivocal conduct of the Count to the inspiration of a chivalric loyalty. As she believed she knew him thoroughly, she thought he wished to avoid committing himself, or awakening public observation, before he had made up his mind.

He acted thus to avoid disturbing the repose of both mother and daughter. Perhaps also the large fortune which seemed destined for Mademoiselle de Tecle might add to his scruples by rousing his pride.

His not marrying was in itself a good augury, and his little fiancee was reaching a marriageable age. She therefore did not despair that some day M. de Camors would throw himself at her feet, and say, "Give her to me!"

If God did not intend that this delicious page should ever be written in the book of her destiny, and she was forced to marry her daughter to another, the poor woman consoled herself with the thought that all the cares she lavished upon her would not be lost, and that her dear child would thus be rendered better and happier.

The long months which intervened between the annual apparition of Camors at Reully, filled up by Madame de Tecle with a single idea and by the sweet monotony of a regular life, passed more rapidly than the Count could have imagined. His own life, so active and so occupied, placed ages and abysses between each of his periodical voyages. But Madame de Tecle, after five years, was always only a day removed from the cherished and fatal night on which her dream had begun. Since that period there had been no break in her thoughts, no void in her heart, no wrinkle on her forehead. Her dream continued young, like herself. But in spite of the peaceful and rapid succession of her days, it was not without anxiety that she saw the approach of the season which always heralded the return of Camors.

As her daughter matured, she preoccupied herself with the impression she would make on the mind of the Count, and felt more sensibly the solemnity of the matter.

Mademoiselle Marie, as we have already stated, was a cunning little puss, and had not failed to perceive that her tender mother chose habitually the season of the convocation of the Councils-General to try a new style of hair-dressing for her. The same year on which we have resumed our recital there passed, on one occasion, a little scene which rather annoyed Madame de Tecle. She was trying a new coiffure on Mademoiselle Marie, whose hair was very pretty and very black; some stray and rebellious portions had frustrated her mother's efforts.

There was one lock in particular, which in spite of all combing and brushing would break away from the rest, and fall in careless curls. Madame de Tecle finally, by the aid of some ribbons, fastened down the rebellious curl:

"Now I think it will do," she said sighing, and stepping back to admire the effect of her work.

"Don't believe it," said Marie, who was laughing and mocking. "I do not think so. I see exactly what will happen: the bell rings—I run out—my net gives way—Monsieur de Camors walks in—my mother is annoyed—tableau!"

"I should like to know what Monsieur de Camors has to do with it?" said Madame de Tecle.

Her daughter threw her arms around her neck—"Nothing!" she said.

Another time Madame de Tecle detected her speaking of M. de Camors in a tone of bitter irony. He was "the great man"—"the mysterious personage"—"the star of the neighborhood"—"the phoenix of guests in their woods"—or simply "the Prince!"

Such symptoms were of so serious a nature as not to escape Madame de

Teclé.

In presence of "the Prince," it is true, the young girl lost her gayety; but this was another cross. Her mother found her cold, awkward, and silent—brief, and slightly caustic in her replies. She feared M. de Camors would misjudge her from such appearances.

But Camors formed no judgment, good or bad; Mademoiselle de Teclé was for him only an insignificant little girl, whom he never thought of for a moment in the year.

There was, however, at this time in society a person who did interest him very much, and the more because against his will. This was the Marquise de Campvallón, nee de Luc d'Estrelles.

The General, after making the tour of Europe with his young wife, had taken possession of his hotel in the Rue Vanneau, where he lived in great splendor. They resided at Paris during the winter and spring, but in July returned to their chateau at Campvallón, where they entertained in great state until the autumn. The General invited Madame de Teclé and her daughter, every year, to pass some weeks at Campvallón, rightly judging that he could not give his young wife better companions. Madame de Teclé accepted these invitations cheerfully, because it gave her an opportunity of seeing the elite of the Parisian world, from whom the whims of her uncle had always isolated her. For her own part, she did not much enjoy it; but her daughter, by moving in the midst of such fashion and elegance could thus efface some provincialisms of toilet or of language; perfect her taste in the delicate and fleeting changes of the prevailing modes, and acquire some additional graces. The young Marquise, who reigned and scintillated like a bright star in these high regions of social life, lent herself to the designs of her neighbor. She seemed to take a kind of maternal interest in Mademoiselle de Teclé, and frequently added her advice to her example. She assisted at her toilet and gave the final touches with her own dainty hands; and the young girl, in return, loved, admired, and confided in her.

Camors also enjoyed the hospitalities of the General once every season, but was not his guest as often as he wished. He seldom remained at Campvallón longer than a week. Since the return of the Marquise to France he had resumed the relations of a kinsman and friend with her husband and herself; but, while trying to adopt the most natural manner, he treated them both with a certain reserve, which astonished the General. It will not surprise the reader, who recollects the secret and powerful reasons which justified this circumspection.

For Camors, in renouncing the greater part of the restraints which control and bind men in their relations with one another, had religiously intended to preserve one—the sentiment of honor. Many times, in the course of this life, he had felt himself embarrassed to limit and fix with certainty the boundaries of the only moral law he wished to respect.

It is easy to know exactly what is in the Bible; it is not easy to know exactly what the code of honor commands.

CHAPTER XII

CIRCE

But there exists, nevertheless, in this code one article, as to which M. de Camors could not deceive himself, and it was that which forbade his attempting to assail the honor of the General under penalty of being in his own eyes, as a gentleman, a felon and foresworn. He had accepted from this old man confidence, affection, services, benefits—everything which could bind one man inviolably to another man—if there be beneath the heavens anything called honor. He felt this profoundly.

His conduct toward Madame de Campvallón had been irreproachable; and all the more so, because the only woman he was interdicted from loving was the only woman in Paris, or in the universe, who naturally pleased him most. He entertained for her, at once, the interest which attaches to forbidden fruit, to the attraction of strange beauty, and to the mystery of an impenetrable sphinx. She was, at this time, more goddess-like than ever. The immense fortune of her husband, and the adulation which it brought her, had placed her on a golden car. On this she seated herself with a gracious and native majesty, as if in her proper place.

The luxury of her toilet, of her jewels, of her house and of her equipages, was of regal magnificence. She blended the taste of an artist with that of a patrician. Her person appeared really to be made divine

by the rays of this splendor. Large, blonde, graceful, the eyes blue and unfathomable, the forehead grave, the mouth pure and proud it was impossible to see her enter a salon with her light, gliding step, or to see her reclining in her carriage, her hands folded serenely, without dreaming of the young immortals whose love brought death.

She had even those traits of physiognomy, stern and wild, which the antique sculptors doubtless had surprised in supernatural visitations, and which they have stamped on the eyes and the lips of their marble gods. Her arms and shoulders, perfect in form, seemed models, in the midst of the rosy and virgin snow which covered the neighboring mountains. She was truly superb and bewitching. The Parisian world respected as much as it admired her, for she played her difficult part of young bride to an old man so perfectly as to avoid scandal. Without any pretence of extraordinary devotion, she knew how to join to her worldly pomps the exercise of charity, and all the other practices of an elegant piety. Madame de la Roche-Jugan, who watched her closely, as one watching a prey, testified, herself, in her favor; and judged her more and more worthy of her son. And Camors, who observed her, in spite of himself, with an eager curiosity, was finally induced to believe, as did his aunt and all the world, that she conscientiously performed her difficult duties, and that she found in the eclat of her life and the gratification of her pride a sufficient compensation for the sacrifice of her youth, her heart, and her beauty; but certain souvenirs of the past, joined to certain peculiarities, which he fancied he remarked in the Marquise, induced him to distrust.

There were times, when recalling all that he had once witnessed—the abysses and the flame at the bottom of that heart—he was tempted to suspect the existence of many storms under all this calm exterior, and perhaps some wickedness. It is true she never was with him precisely as she was before the world. The character of their relations was marked by a peculiar tone. It was precisely that tone of covert irony adopted by two persons who desired neither to remember nor to forget. This tone, softened in the language of Camors by his worldly tact and his respect, was much more pointed, and had much more of bitterness on the side of the young woman.

He even fancied, at times, that he discovered a shade of coquetry under this treatment; and this provocation, vague as it was, coming from this beautiful, cold, and inscrutable creature, seemed to him a game fearfully mysterious, that at once attracted and disturbed him.

This was the state of things when the Count came, according to custom, to pass the first days of September at the chateau of Campvallon, and met there Madame de Tecle and her daughter. The visit was a painful one, this year, for Madame de Tecle. Her confidence deserted her, and serious concern took its place. She had, it is true, fixed in her mind, as the last point of her hopes, the moment when her daughter should have reached twenty years of age; and Marie was only eighteen.

But she already had had several offers, and several times public rumor had already declared her to be betrothed.

Now, Camors could not have been ignorant of the rumors circulating in the neighborhood, and yet he did not speak. His countenance did not change. He was coldly affectionate to Madame de Tecle, but toward Marie, in spite of her beautiful blue eyes, like her mother's, and her curly hair, he preserved a frozen indifference. For Camors had other anxieties, of which Madame de Tecle knew nothing. The manner of Madame Campvallon toward him had assumed a more marked character of aggressive raillery. A defensive attitude is never agreeable to a man, and Camors felt it more disagreeable than most men—being so little accustomed to it.

He resolved promptly to shorten his visit at Campvallon.

On the eve of his departure, about five o'clock in the afternoon, he was standing at his window, looking beyond the trees at the great black clouds sailing over the valley, when he heard the sound of a voice that had power to move him deeply—"Monsieur de Camors!" He saw the Marquise standing under his window.

"Will you walk with me?" she added.

He bowed and descended immediately. At the moment he reached her:

"It is suffocating," she said. "I wish to walk round the park and will take you with me."

He muttered a few polite phrases, and they began walking, side by side, through the alleys of the park.

She moved at a rapid pace, with her majestic motion, her body swaying, her head erect. One would have looked for a page behind her, but she had none, and her long blue robe—she rarely wore short skirts—trailed on the sand and over the dry leaves with the soft rustle of silk.

"I have disturbed you, probably?" she said, after a moment's pause.
"What were you dreaming of up there?"

"Nothing—only watching the coming storm."

"Are you becoming poetical, cousin?"

"There is no necessity for becoming, for I already am infinitely so!"

"I do not think so. Shall you leave to-morrow?"

"I shall."

"Why so soon?"

"I have business elsewhere."

"Very well. But Vau—Vautrot—is he not there?"

Vautrot was the secretary of M. de Camors.

"Vautrot can not do everything," he replied.

"By the way, I do not like your Vautrot."

"Nor I. But he was recommended to me by my old friend, Madame d'Oilly, as a freethinker, and at the same time by my aunt, Madame de la Roche- Jugan, as a religious man!"

"How amusing!"

"Nevertheless," said Camors, "he is intelligent and witty, and writes a fine hand."

"And you?"

"How? What of me?"

"Do you also write a good hand?"

"I will show you, whenever you wish!"

"Ah! and will you write to me?"

It is difficult to imagine the tone of supreme indifference and haughty persiflage with which the Marquise sustained this dialogue, without once slackening her pace, or glancing at her companion, or changing the proud and erect pose of her head.

"I will write you either prose or verse, as you wish," said Camors.

"Ah! you know how to compose verses?"

"When I am inspired!"

"And when are you inspired?"

"Usually in the morning."

"And we are now in the evening. That is not complimentary to me."

"But you, Madame, had no desire to inspire me, I think."

"Why not, then? I should be happy and proud to do so. Do you know what I should like to put there?" and she stopped suddenly before a rustic bridge, which spanned a murmuring rivulet.

"I do not know!"

"You can not even guess? I should like to put an artificial rock there."

"Why not a natural one? In your place I should put a natural one!"

"That is an idea," said the Marquise, and walking on she crossed the bridge.

"But it really thunders. I like to hear thunder in the country. Do you?"

"I prefer to hear it thunder at Paris."

"Why?"

"Because then I should not hear it."

"You have no imagination."

"I have; but I smother it."

"Possibly. I have suspected you of hiding your merits, and particularly from me."

"Why should I conceal my merits from you?"

"Why should I conceal my merits' is good!" said the Marquise, ironically. "Why? Out of charity, Monsieur, not to dazzle me, and in regard for my repose! You are really too good, I assure you. Here comes the rain."

Large drops of rain began to fall on the dry leaves, and on the yellow sand of the alley. The day was dying, and the sudden shower bent the boughs of the trees.

"We must return," said the young woman; "this begins to get serious."

She took, in haste, the path which led to the chateau; but after a few steps a bright flash broke over her head, the noise of the thunder resounded, and a deluge of rain fell upon the fields.

There was fortunately, near by, a shelter in which the Marquise and her companion could take refuge. It was a ruin, preserved as an ornament to the park, which had formerly been the chapel of the ancient chateau. It was almost as large as the village chapel—the broken walls half concealed under a thick mantle of ivy. Its branches had pushed through the roof and mingled with the boughs of the old trees which surrounded and shaded it. The timbers had disappeared. The extremity of the choir, and the spot formerly occupied by the altar, were alone covered by the remains of the roof. Wheelbarrows, rakes, spades, and other garden tools were piled there.

The Marquise had to take refuge in the midst of this rubbish, in the narrow space, and her companion followed her.

The storm, in the mean time, increased in violence. The rain fell in torrents through the old walls, inundating the soil in the ancient nave. The lightning flashed incessantly. Every now and then fragments of earth and stone detached themselves from the roof, and fell into the choir.

"I find this magnificent!" said Madame de Campvallion.

"I also," said Camors, raising his eyes to the crumbling roof which half protected them; "but I do not know whether we are safe here!"

"If you fear, you would better go!" said the Marquise.

"I fear for you."

"You are too good, I assure you."

She took off her cap and brushed it with her glove, to remove the drops of rain which had fallen upon it. After a slight pause, she suddenly raised her uncovered head and cast on Camors one of those searching looks which prepares a man for an important question.

"Cousin!" she said, "if you were sure that one of these flashes of lightning would kill you in a quarter of an hour, what would you do?"

"Why, cousin, naturally I should take a last farewell of you."

"How?"

He regarded her steadily, in his turn. "Do you know," he said, "there are moments when I am tempted to think you a devil?"

"Truly! Well, there are times when I am tempted to think so myself—for example, at this moment. Do you know what I should wish? I wish I could control the lightning, and in two seconds you would cease to exist."

"For what reason?"

"Because I recollect there was a man to whom I offered myself, and who refused me, and that this

man still lives. And this displeases me a little—a great deal—passionately."

"Are you serious, Madame?" replied Camors.

She laughed.

"I hope you did not think so. I am not so wicked. It was a joke—and in bad taste, I admit. But seriously now, cousin, what is your opinion of me? What kind of woman has time made me?"

"I swear to you I am entirely ignorant."

"Admitting I had become, as you did me the honor to suppose, a diabolical person, do you think you had nothing to do with it? Tell me! Do you not believe that there is in the life of a woman a decisive hour, when the evil seed which is cast upon her soul may produce a terrible harvest? Do you not believe this? Answer me! And should I not be excusable if I entertained toward you the sentiment of an exterminating angel; and have I not some merit in being what I am—a good woman, who loves you well — with a little rancor, but not much—and who wishes you all sorts of prosperity in this world and the next? Do not answer me: it might embarrass you, and it would be useless."

She left her shelter, and turned her face toward the lowering sky to see whether the storm was over.

"It has stopped raining," she said, "let us go."

She then perceived that the lower part of the nave had been transformed into a lake of mud and water. She stopped at its brink, and uttered a little cry:

"What shall I do?" she said, looking at her light shoes. Then, turning toward Camors, she added, laughing:

"Monsieur, will you get me a boat?"

Camors, himself, recoiled from stepping into the greasy mud and stagnant water which filled the whole space of the nave.

"If you will wait a little," he said, "I shall find you some boots or sabots, no matter what."

"It will be much easier," she said abruptly, "for you to carry me to the door;" and without waiting for the young man's reply, she tucked up her skirts carefully, and when she had finished, she said, "Carry me!"

He looked at her with astonishment, and thought for a moment she was jesting; but soon saw she was perfectly serious.

"Of what are you afraid?" she asked.

"I am not at all afraid," he answered.

"Is it that you are not strong enough?"

"Mon Dieu! I should think I was."

He took her in his arms, as in a cradle, while she held up her skirts with both hands. He then descended the steps and moved toward the door with his strange burden. He was obliged to be very careful not to slip on the wet earth, and this absorbed him during the first few steps; but when he found his footing more sure, he felt a natural curiosity to observe the countenance of the Marquise.

The uncovered head of the young woman rested a little on the arm with which he held her. Her lips were slightly parted with a half-wicked smile that showed her fine white teeth; the same expression of ungovernable malice burned in her dark eyes, which she riveted for some seconds on those of Camors with persistent penetration—then suddenly veiled them under the fringe of her dark lashes. This glance sent a thrill like lightning to his very marrow.

"Do you wish to drive me mad?" he murmured.

"Who knows?" she replied.

The same moment she disengaged herself from his arms, and placing her foot on the ground again, left the ruin.

They reached the chateau without exchanging a word. Just before entering the house the young Marquise turned toward Camors and said to him:

"Be sure that at heart I am very good, really."

Notwithstanding this assertion, Camors was yet more determined to leave the next morning, as he had previously decided. He carried away the most painful impression of the scene of that evening.

She had wounded his pride, inflamed his hopeless passion, and disquieted his honor.

"What is this woman, and what does she want of me? Is it love or vengeance that inspires her with this fiendish coquetry?" he asked himself. Whatever it was, Camors was not such a novice in similar adventures as not to perceive clearly the yawning abyss under the broken ice. He resolved sincerely to close it again between them, and forever. The best way to succeed in this, avowedly, was to cease all intercourse with the Marquise. But how could such conduct be explained to the General, without awakening his suspicion and lowering his wife in his esteem? That plan was impossible. He armed himself with all his courage, and resigned himself to endure with resolute soul all the trials which the love, real or pretended, of the Marquise reserved for him.

He had at this time a singular idea. He was a member of several of the most aristocratic clubs. He organized a chosen group of men from the elite of his companions, and formed with them a secret association, of which the object was to fix and maintain among its members the principles and points of honor in their strictest form. This society, which had only been vaguely spoken of in public under the name of "Societe des Raffines," and also as "The Templars" which latter was its true name— had nothing in common with "The Devourers," illustrated by Balzac. It had nothing in it of a romantic or dramatic character. Those who composed this club did not, in any way, defy ordinary morals, nor set themselves above the laws of their country. They did not bind themselves by any vows of mutual aid in extremity. They bound themselves simply by their word of honor to observe, in their reciprocal relations, the rules of purest honor.

These rules were specified in their code. The text it is difficult to give; but it was based entirely on the point of honor, and regulated the affairs of the club, such as the card-table, the turf, duelling, and gallantry. For example, any member was disqualified from belonging to this association who either insulted or interfered with the wife or relative of one of his colleagues. The only penalty was exclusion: but the consequences of this exclusion were grave; for all the members ceased thereafter to associate with, recognize, or even bow to the offender. The Templars found in this secret society many advantages. It was a great security in their intercourse with one another, and in the different circumstances of daily life, where they met continually either at the opera, in salons, or on the turf.

Camors was an exception among his companions and rivals in Parisian life by the systematic decision of his doctrine. It was not so much an embodiment of absolute scepticism and practical materialism; but the want of a moral law is so natural to man, and obedience to higher laws so sweet to him, that the chosen adepts to whom the project of Camors was submitted accepted it with enthusiasm. They were happy in being able to substitute a sort of positive and formal religion for restraints so limited as their own confused and floating notions of honor. For Camors himself, as is easily understood, it was a new barrier which he wished to erect between himself and the passion which fascinated him. He attached himself to this with redoubled force, as the only moral bond yet left him. He completed his work by making the General accept the title of President of the Association. The General, to whom Honor was a sort of mysterious but real goddess, was delighted to preside over the worship of his idol. He felt flattered by his young friend's selection, and esteemed him the more.

It was the middle of winter. The Marquise Campvallon had resumed for some time her usual course of life, which was at the same time strict but elegant. Punctual at church every morning, at the Bois and at charity bazaars during the day, at the opera or the theatres in the evening, she had received M. de Camors without the shadow of apparent emotion. She even treated him more simply and more naturally than ever, with no recurrence to the past, no allusion to the scene in the park during the storm; as if she had, on that day, disclosed everything that had lain hidden in her heart. This conduct so much resembled indifference, that Camors should have been delighted; but he was not—on the contrary he was annoyed by it. A cruel but powerful interest, already too dear to his blase soul, was disappearing thus from his life. He was inclined to believe that Madame de Campvallon possessed a much less complicated character than he had fancied; and that little by little absorbed in daily trifles, she had become in reality what she pretended to be—a good woman, inoffensive, and contented with her lot.

He was one evening in his orchestra-stall at the opera. They were singing *The Huguenots*. The Marquise occupied her box between the columns. The numerous acquaintances Camors met in the passages during the first entr'acte prevented his going as soon as usual to pay his respects to his cousin. At last, after the fourth act, he went to visit her in her box, where he found her alone, the General having descended to the parterre for a few moments. He was astonished, on entering, to find traces of tears on the young woman's cheeks. Her eyes were even moist. She seemed displeased at being surprised in the very act of sentimentality.

"Music always excites my nerves," she said.

"Indeed!" said Camors. "You, who always reproach me with hiding my merits, why do you hide yours? If you are still capable of weeping, so much the better."

"No! I claim no merit for that. Oh, heavens! If you only knew! It is quite the contrary."

"What a mystery you are!"

"Are you very curious to fathom this mystery? Only that? Very well—be happy! It is time to put an end to this."

She drew her chair from the front of the box out of public view, and, turning toward Camors, continued: "You wish to know what I am, what I feel, and what I think; or rather, you wish to know simply whether I dream of love? Very well, I dream only of that! Have I lovers, or have I not? I have none, and never shall have, but that will not be because of my virtue. I believe in nothing, except my own self-esteem and my contempt of others. The little intrigues, the petty passions, which I see in the world, make me indignant to the bottom of my soul. It seems to me that women who give themselves for so little must be base creatures. As for myself, I remember having said to you one day—it is a million years since then!—that my person is sacred to me; and to commit a sacrilege I should wish, like the vestals of Rome, a love as great as my crime, and as terrible as death. I wept just now during that magnificent fourth act. It was not because I listened to the most marvellous music ever heard on this earth; it was because I admire and envy passionately the superb and profound love of that time. And it is ever thus—when I read the history of the glorious sixteenth century, I am in ecstasies. How well those people knew how to love and how to die! One night of love—then death. That is delightful. Now, cousin, you must leave me. We are observed. They will believe we love each other, and as we have not that pleasure, it is useless to incur the penalties. Since I am still in the midst of the court of Charles Tenth, I pity you, with your black coat and round hat. Good-night."

"I thank you very much," replied Camors, taking the hand she extended to him coldly, and left the box. He met M. de Campvallon in the passage.

"Parbleu! my dear friend," said the General, seizing him by the arm. "I must communicate to you an idea which has been in my brain all the evening."

"What idea, General?"

"Well, there are here this evening a number of charming young girls. This set me to thinking of you, and I even said to my wife that we must marry you to one of these young women!"

"Oh, General!"

"Well, why not?"

"That is a very serious thing—if one makes a mistake in his choice—that is everything."

"Bah! it is not so difficult a thing. Take a wife like mine, who has a great deal of religion, not much imagination, and no fancies. That is the whole secret. I tell you this in confidence, my dear fellow!"

"Well, General, I will think of it."

"Do think of it," said the General, in a serious tone; and went to join his young wife, whom he understood so well.

As to her, she thoroughly understood herself, and analyzed her own character with surprising truth.

Madame de Campvallon was just as little what her manner indicated as was M. de Camors on his side. Both were altogether exceptional in French society. Equally endowed by nature with energetic souls and enlightened minds, both carried innate depravity to a high degree. The artificial atmosphere of high Parisian civilization destroys in women the sentiment and the taste for duty, and leaves them, nothing but the sentiment and the taste for pleasure. They lose in the midst of this enchanted and false life, like theatrical fairyland, the true idea of life in general, and Christian life in particular. And we can confidently affirm that all those who do not make for themselves, apart from the crowd, a kind of Thebaid—and there are such—are pagans. They are pagans, because the pleasures of the senses and of the mind alone interest them, and they have not once, during the year, an impression of the moral law, unless the sentiment, which some of them detest, recalls it to them. They are pagans, like the beautiful, worldly Catholics of the fifteenth century—loving luxury, rich stuffs, precious furniture, literature, art, themselves, and love. They were charming pagans, like Marie Stuart, and capable, like her, of

remaining true Catholics even under the axe.

We are speaking, let it be understood, of the best of the elite—of those that read, and of those that dream. As to the rest, those who participate in the Parisian life on its lighter side, in its childish whirl, and the trifling follies it entails, who make rendezvous, waste their time, who dress and are busy day and night doing nothing, who dance frantically in the rays of the Parisian sun, without thought, without passion, without virtue, and even without vice—we must own it is impossible to imagine anything more contemptible.

The Marquise de Campvallon was then—as she truly said to the man she resembled—a great pagan; and, as she also said to herself in one of her serious moments when a woman's destiny is decided by the influence of those they love, Camors had sown in her heart a seed which had marvellously fructified.

Camors dreamed little of reproaching himself for it, but struck with all the harmony that surrounded the Marquise, he regretted more bitterly than ever the fatality which separated them.

He felt, however, more sure of himself, since he had bound himself by the strictest obligations of honor. He abandoned himself from this moment with less scruple to the emotions, and to the danger against which he believed himself invincibly protected. He did not fear to seek often the society of his beautiful cousin, and even contracted the habit of repairing to her house two or three times a week, after leaving the Chamber of Deputies. Whenever he found her alone, their conversation invariably assumed a tone of irony and of raillery, in which both excelled. He had not forgotten her reckless confidences at the opera, and recalled it to her, asking her whether she had yet discovered that hero of love for whom she was looking, who should be, according to her ideas, a villain like Bothwell, or a musician like Rizzio.

"There are," she replied, "villains who are also musicians; but that is imagination. Sing me, then, something apropos."

It was near the close of winter. The Marquise gave a ball. Her fetes were justly renowned for their magnificence and good taste. She did the honors with the grace of a queen. This evening she wore a very simple costume, as was becoming in the courteous hostess. It was a gown of dark velvet, with a train; her arms were bare, without jewels; a necklace of large pearls lay on her rose-tinted bosom, and the heraldic coronet sparkled on her fair hair.

Camors caught her eye as he entered, as if she were watching for him. He had seen her the previous evening, and they had had a more lively skirmish than usual. He was struck by her brilliancy—her beauty heightened, without doubt, by the secret ardor of the quarrel, as if illuminated by an interior flame, with all the clear, soft splendor of a transparent alabaster vase.

When he advanced to join her and salute her, yielding, against his will, to an involuntary movement of passionate admiration, he said:

"You are truly beautiful this evening. Enough so to make one commit a crime."

She looked fixedly in his eyes, and replied:

"I should like to see that," and then left him, with superb nonchalance.

The General approached, and tapping the Count on the shoulder, said:

"Camors! you do not dance, as usual. Let us play a game of piquet."

"Willingly, General;" and traversing two or three salons they reached the private boudoir of the Marquise. It was a small oval room, very lofty, hung with thick red silk tapestry, covered with black and white flowers. As the doors were removed, two heavy curtains isolated the room completely from the neighboring gallery. It was there that the General usually played cards and slept during his fetes. A small card-table was placed before a divan. Except this addition, the boudoir preserved its every-day aspect. Woman's work, half finished, books, journals, and reviews were strewn upon the furniture. They played two or three games, which the General won, as Camors was very abstracted.

"I reproach myself, young man," said the former, "in having kept you so long away from the ladies. I give you back your liberty—I shall cast my eye on the journals."

"There is nothing new in them, I think," said Camors, rising. He took up a newspaper himself, and placing his back against the mantelpiece, warmed his feet, one after the other. The General threw himself on the divan, ran his eye over the 'Moniteur de l'Armee', approving of some military promotions, and criticising others; and, little by little, he fell into a doze, his head resting on his chest.

But Camors was not reading. He listened vaguely to the music of the orchestra, and fell into a reverie. Through these harmonies, through the murmurs and warm perfume of the ball, he followed, in thought, all the evolutions of her who was mistress and queen of all. He saw her proud and supple step—he heard her grave and musical voice—he felt her breath.

This young man had exhausted everything. Love and pleasure had no longer for him secrets or temptations; but his imagination, cold and blase, had arisen all inflamed before this beautiful, living, palpitating statue. She was really for him more than a woman—more than a mortal. The antique fables of amorous goddesses and drunken Bacchantes—the superhuman voluptuousness unknown in terrestrial pleasures—were in reach of his hand, separated from him only by the shadow of this sleeping old man. But a shadow was ever between them—it was honor.

His eyes, as if lost in thought, were fixed straight before him on the curtain opposite the chimney. Suddenly this curtain was noiselessly raised, and the young Marquise appeared, her brow surmounted by her coronet. She threw a rapid glance over the boudoir, and after a moment's pause, let the curtain fall gently, and advanced directly toward Camors, who stood dazzled and immovable. She took both his hands, without speaking, looked at his steadily—throwing a rapid glance at her husband, who still slept—and, standing on tiptoe, offered her lips to the young man.

Bewildered, and forgetting all else, he bent, and imprinted a kiss on her lips.

At that very moment, the General made a sudden movement and woke up; but the same instant the Marquise was standing before him, her hands resting on the card-table; and smiling upon him, she said, "Good-morning, my General!"

The General murmured a few words of apology, but she laughingly pushed him back on his divan.

"Continue your nap," she said; "I have come in search of my cousin, for the last cotillon." The General obeyed.

She passed out by the gallery. The young man; pale as a spectre, followed her.

Passing under the curtain, she turned toward him with a wild light burning in her eyes. Then, before she was lost in the throng, she whispered, in a low, thrilling voice:

"There is the crime!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIRST ACT OF THE TRAGEDY

Camors did not attempt to rejoin the Marquise, and it seemed to him that she also avoided him. A quarter of an hour later, he left the Hotel Campvallon.

He returned immediately home. A lamp was burning in his chamber. When he saw himself in the mirror, his own face terrified him. This exciting scene had shaken his nerves.

He could no longer control himself. His pupil had become his master. The fact itself did not surprise him. Woman is more exalted than man in morality. There is no virtue, no devotion, no heroism in which she does not surpass him; but once impelled to the verge of the abyss, she falls faster and lower than man. This is attributable to two causes: she has more passion, and she has no honor. For honor is a reality and must not be underrated. It is a noble, delicate, and salutary quality. It elevates manly attributes; in fact, it constitutes the modesty of man. It is sometimes a force, and always a grace. But to think that honor is all-sufficient; that in the face of great interests, great passions, great trials in life, it is a support and an infallible defence; that it can enforce the precepts which come from God—in fact that it can replace God—this is a terrible mistake. It exposes one in a fatal moment to the loss of one's self-esteem, and to fall suddenly and forever into that dismal ocean of bitterness where Camors at that instant was struggling in despair, like a drowning man in the darkness of midnight.

He abandoned himself, on this evil night, to a final conflict full of agony; and he was beaten.

The next evening at six o'clock he was at the house of the Marquise. He found her in her boudoir, surrounded by all her regal luxury. She was half buried in a fauteuil in the chimney-corner, looking a

little pale and fatigued. She received him with her usual coldness and self-possession.

"Good-day," she said. "How are you?"

"Not very well," replied Camors.

"What is the matter?"

"I fancy that you know."

She opened her large eyes wide with surprise, but did not reply.

"I entreat you, Madame," continued Camors, smiling—"no more music, the curtain is raised, and the drama has begun."

"Ah! we shall see."

"Do you love me?" he continued; "or were you simply acting, to try me, last night? Can you, or will you, tell me?"

"I certainly could, but I do not wish to do so."

"I had thought you more frank."

"I have my hours."

"Well, then," said Camors, "if your hours of frankness have passed, mine have begun."

"That would be compensation," she replied.

"And I will prove it to you," continued Camors.

"I shall make a fete of it," said the Marquise, throwing herself back on the sofa, as if to make herself comfortable in order to enjoy an agreeable conversation.

"I love you, Madame; and as you wish to be loved. I love you devotedly and unto death—enough to kill myself, or you!"

"That is well," said the Marquise, softly.

"But," he continued in a hoarse and constrained tone, "in loving you, in telling you of it, in trying to make you share my love, I violate basely the obligations of honor of which you know, and others of which you know not. It is a crime, as you have said. I do not try to extenuate my offence. I see it, I judge it, and I accept it. I break the last moral tie that is left me; I leave the ranks of men of honor, and I leave also the ranks of humanity. I have nothing human left except my love, nothing sacred but you; but my crime elevates itself by its magnitude. Well, I interpret it thus: I imagine two beings, equally free and strong, loving and valuing each other beyond all else, having no affection, no loyalty, no devotion, no honor, except toward each other—but possessing all for each other in a supreme degree.

"I give and consecrate absolutely to you, my person, all that I can be, or may become, on condition of an equal return, still preserving the same social conventionalities, without which we should both be miserable.

"Secretly united, and secretly isolated; though in the midst of the human herd, governing and despising it; uniting our gifts, our faculties, and our powers, our two Parisian royalties—yours, which can not be greater, and mine, which shall become greater if you love me and living thus, one for the other, until death. You have dreamed, you told me, of strange and almost sacrilegious love. Here it is; only before accepting it, reflect well, for I assure you it is a serious thing. My love for you is boundless. I love you enough to disdain and trample under foot that which the meanest human being still respects. I love you enough to find in you alone, in your single esteem, and in your sole tenderness, in the pride and madness of being yours, oblivion and consolation for friendship outraged, faith betrayed, and honor lost. But, Madame, this is a sentiment which you will do well not to trifle with. You should thoroughly understand this. If you desire my love, if you consent to this alliance, opposed to all human laws, but grand and singular also, deign to tell me so, and I shall fall at your feet. If you do not wish it, if it terrifies you, if you are not prepared for the double obligation it involves, tell me so, and fear not a word of reproach. Whatever it might cost me—I would ruin my life, I would leave you forever, and that which passed yesterday should be eternally forgotten."

He ceased, and remained with his eyes fixed on the young woman with a burning anxiety. As he went on speaking her air became more grave; she listened to him, her head a little inclined toward him in an

attitude of overpowering interest, throwing upon him at intervals a glance full of gloomy fire. A slight but rapid palpitation of the bosom, a scarcely perceptible quivering of the nostrils, alone betrayed the storm raging within her.

"This," she said, after a moment's silence, "becomes really interesting; but you do not intend to leave this evening, I suppose?"

"No," said Camors.

"Very well," she replied, inclining her head in sign of dismissal, without offering her hand; "we shall see each other again."

"But when?"

"At an early day."

He thought she required time for reflection, a little terrified doubtless by the monster she had evoked; he saluted her gravely and departed.

The next day, and on the two succeeding days, he vainly presented himself at her door.

The Marquise was either dining out or dressing.

It was for Camors a whole century of torment. One thought which often disquieted him revisited him with double poignancy. The Marquise did not love him. She only wished to revenge herself for the past, and after disgracing him would laugh at him. She had made him sign the contract, and then had escaped him. In the midst of these tortures of his pride, his passion, instead of weakening, increased.

The fourth day after their interview he did not go to her house. He hoped to meet her in the evening at the Viscountess d'Oilly's, where he usually saw her every Friday. This lady had been formerly the most tender friend of the Count's father. It was to her the Count had thought proper to confide the education of his son.

Camors had preserved for her a kind of affection. She was an amiable woman, whom he liked and laughed at.

No longer young, she had been compelled to renounce gallantry, which had been the chief occupation of her youth, and never having had much taste for devotion, she conceived the idea of having a salon. She received there some distinguished men, savants and artists, who piqued themselves on being free-thinkers.

The Viscountess, in order to fit herself for her new position, resolved to enlighten herself. She attended public lectures and conferences, which began to be fashionable. She spoke easily about spontaneous generation. She manifested a lively surprise when Camors, who delighted in tormenting her, deigned to inform her that men were descended from monkeys.

"Now, my friend," she said to him, "I can not really admit that. How can you think your grandfather was a monkey, you who are so handsome?"

She reasoned on everything with the same force.

Although she boasted of being a sceptic, sometimes in the morning she went out, concealed by a thick veil, and entered St. Sulpice, where she confessed and put herself on good terms with God, in case He should exist. She was rich and well connected, and in spite of the irregularities of her youth, the best people visited her house.

Madame de Campvallon permitted herself to be introduced by M. de Camors. Madame de la Roche-Jugan followed her there, because she followed her everywhere, and took her son Sigismund. On this evening the reunion was small. M. de Camors had only been there a few moments, when he had the satisfaction of seeing the General and the Marquise enter. She tranquilly expressed to him her regret at not having been at home the preceding day; but it was impossible to hope for a more decided explanation in a circle so small, and under the vigilant eye of Madame de la Roche-Jugan. Camors interrogated vainly the face of his young cousin. It was as beautiful and cold as usual. His anxiety increased; he would have given his life at that moment to hear her say one word of love.

The Viscountess liked the play of wit, as she had little herself. They played at her house such little games as were then fashionable. Those little games are not always innocent, as we shall see.

They had distributed pencils, pens, and packages of paper—some of the players sitting around large tables, and some in separate chairs—and scratched mysteriously, in turn, questions and answers.

During this time the General played whist with Madame de la Roche-Jugan. Madame Campvallon did not usually take part in these games, as they fatigued her. Camors was therefore astonished to see her accept the pencil and paper offered her.

This singularity awakened his attention and put him on his guard. He himself joined in the game, contrary to his custom, and even charged himself with collecting in the basket the small notes as they were written.

An hour passed without any special incident. The treasures of wit were dispensed. The most delicate and unexpected questions—such as, "What is love?" "Do you think that friendship can exist between the sexes?" "Is it sweeter to love or to beloved?"—succeeded each other with corresponding replies. All at once the Marquise gave a slight scream, and they saw a drop of blood trickle down her forehead. She laughed, and showed her little silver pencil-case, which had a pen at one end, with which she had scratched her forehead in her abstraction.

The attention of Camors was redoubled from this moment—the more so from a rapid and significant glance from the Marquise, which seemed to warn him of an approaching event. She was sitting a little in shadow in one corner, in order to meditate more at ease on questions and answers. An instant later Camors was passing around the room collecting notes. She deposited one in the basket, slipping another into his hand with the cat-like dexterity of her sex. In the midst of these papers, which each person amused himself with reading, Camors found no difficulty in retaining without remark the clandestine note of the Marquise. It was written in red ink, a little pale, but very legible, and contained these words:

"I belong, soul, body, honor, riches, to my best-beloved cousin,
Louis de Camors, from this moment and forever.

"Written and signed with the pure blood of my veins, March 5, 185-.

"CHARLOTTE DE LUC. D'ESTRELLES."

All the blood of Camors surged to his brain—a cloud came over his eyes—he rested his hand on the marble table, then suddenly his face was covered with a mortal paleness. These symptoms did not arise from remorse or fear; his passion overshadowed all. He felt a boundless joy. He saw the world at his feet.

It was by this act of frankness and of extraordinary audacity, seasoned by the bloody mysticism so familiar to the sixteenth century, which she adored, that the Marquise de Campvallon surrendered herself to her lover and sealed their fatal union.

CHAPTER XIV

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER

Nearly six weeks had passed after this last episode. It was five o'clock in the afternoon and the Marquise awaited Camors, who was to come after the session of the Corps Legislatif. There was a sudden knock at one of the doors of her room, which communicated with her husband's apartment. It was the General. She remarked with surprise, and even with fear, that his countenance was agitated.

"What is the matter with you, my dear?" she said. "Are you ill?"

"No," replied the General, "not at all."

He placed himself before her, and looked at her some moments before speaking, his eyes rolling wildly.

"Charlotte!" he said at last, with a painful smile, "I must own to you my folly. I am almost mad since morning—I have received such a singular letter. Would you like to see it?"

"If you wish," she replied.

He took a letter from his pocket, and gave it to her. The writing was evidently carefully disguised, and it was not signed.

"An anonymous letter?" said the Marquise, whose eyebrows were slightly raised, with an expression of disdain; then she read the letter, which was as follows:

"A true friend, General, feels indignant at seeing your confidence and your loyalty abused. You are deceived by those whom you love most.

"A man who is covered with your favors and a woman who owes everything to you are united by a secret intimacy which outrages you. They are impatient for the hour when they can divide your spoils.

"He who regards it as a pious duty to warn you does not desire to calumniate any one. He is sure that your honor is respected by her to whom you have confided it, and that she is still worthy of your confidence and esteem. She wrongs you in allowing herself to count upon the future, which your best friend dates from your death. He seeks your widow and your estate.

"The poor woman submits against her will to the fascinations of a man too celebrated for his successful affairs of the heart. But this man, your friend—almost your son—how can he excuse his conduct? Every honest person must be shocked by such behavior, and particularly he whom a chance conversation informed of the fact, and who obeys his conscience in giving you this information."

The Marquise, after reading it, returned the letter coldly to the General.

"Sign it Eleanore-Jeanne de la Roche-Jugan!" she said.

"Do you think so?" asked the General.

"It is as clear as day," replied the Marquise. "These expressions betray her—'a pious duty to warn you'—'celebrated for his successful affairs of the heart'—'every honest person.' She can disguise her writing, but not her style. But what is still more conclusive is that which she attributes to Monsieur de Camors—for I suppose it alludes to him—and to his private prospects and calculations. This can not have failed to strike you, as it has me, I suppose?"

"If I thought this vile letter was her work," cried the General, "I never would see her again during my life."

"Why not? It is better to laugh at it!"

The General began one of his solemn promenades across the room. The Marquise looked uneasily at the clock. Her husband, intercepting one of these glances, suddenly stopped.

"Do you expect Camors to-day?" he inquired.

"Yes; I think he will call after the session."

"I think he will," responded the General, with a convulsive smile. "And do you know, my dear," he added, "the absurd idea which has haunted me since I received this infamous letter?—for I believe that infamy is contagious."

"You have conceived the idea of observing our interview?" said the Marquise, in a tone of indolent raillery.

"Yes," said the General, "there—behind that curtain—as in a theatre; but, thank God! I have been able to resist this base intention. If ever I allow myself to play so mean a part, I should wish at least to do it with your knowledge and consent."

"And do you ask me to consent to it?" asked the Marquise.

"My poor Charlotte!" said the General, in a sad and almost supplicating tone, "I am an old fool—an overgrown child—but I feel that this miserable letter will poison my life. I shall have no more an hour of peace and confidence. What can you expect? I was so cruelly deceived before. I am an honorable man, but I have been taught that all men are not like myself. There are some things which to me seem as impossible as walking on my head, yet I see others doing these things every day. What can I say to you? After reading this perfidious letter, I could not help recollecting that your intimacy with Camors has greatly increased of late!"

"Without doubt," said the Marquise, "I am very fond of him!"

"I remembered also your tete-a-tete with him, the other night, in the boudoir, during the ball. When I awoke you had both an air of mystery. What mysteries could there be between you two?"

"Ah, what indeed!" said the Marquise, smiling.

"And will you not tell me?"

"You shall know it at the proper time."

"Finally, I swear to you that I suspect neither of you—I neither suspect you of wronging me—of disgracing me—nor of soiling my name . . . God help me!

"But if you two should love each other, even while respecting my honor: if you love each other and confess it—if you two, even at my side, in my heart—if you, my two children, should be calculating with impatient eyes the progress of my old age—planning your projects for the future, and smiling at my approaching death—postponing your happiness only for my tomb you may think yourselves guiltless, but no, I tell you it would be shameful!"

Under the empire of the passion which controlled him, the voice of the General became louder. His common features assumed an air of sombre dignity and imposing grandeur. A slight shade of paleness passed over the lovely face of the young woman and a slight frown contracted her forehead.

By an effort, which in a better cause would have been sublime, she quickly mastered her weakness, and, coldly pointing out to her husband the draped door by which he had entered, said:

"Very well, conceal yourself there!"

"You will never forgive me?"

"You know little of women, my friend, if you do not know that jealousy is one of the crimes they not only pardon but love."

"My God, I am not jealous!"

"Call it yourself what you will, but station yourself there!"

"And you are sincere in wishing me to do so?"

"I pray you to do so! Retire in the interval, leave the door open, and when you hear Monsieur de Camors enter the court of the hotel, return."

"No!" said the General, after a moment's hesitation; "since I have gone so far"—and he sighed deeply "I do not wish to leave myself the least pretext for distrust. If I leave you before he comes, I am capable of fancying—"

"That I might secretly warn him? Nothing more natural. Remain here, then. Only take a book; for our conversation, under such circumstances, can not be lively."

He sat down.

"But," he said, "what mystery can there be between you two?"

"You shall hear!" she said, with her sphinx-like smile.

The General mechanically took up a book. She stirred the fire, and reflected. As she liked terror, danger, and dramatic incidents to blend with her intrigues, she should have been content; for at that moment shame, ruin, and death were at her door. But, to tell the truth, it was too much for her; and when she looked, in the midst of the silence which surrounded her, at the true character and scope of the perils which surrounded her, she thought her brain would fail and her heart break.

She was not mistaken as to the origin of the letter. This shameful work had indeed been planned by Madame de la Roche-Jugan. To do her justice, she had not suspected the force of the blow she was dealing. She still believed in the virtue of the Marquise; but during the perpetual surveillance she had never relaxed, she could not fail to see the changed nature of the intercourse between Camors and the Marquise. It must not be forgotten that she dreamed of securing for her son Sigismund the succession to her old friend; and she foresaw a dangerous rivalry—the germ of which she sought to destroy. To awaken the distrust of the General toward Camors, so as to cause his doors to be closed against him, was all she meditated. But her anonymous letter, like most villainies of this kind, was a more fatal and murderous weapon than its base author imagined.

The young Marquise, then, mused while stirring the fire, casting, from time to time, a furtive glance at the clock.

M. de Camors would soon arrive—how could she warn him? In the present state of their relations it was not impossible that the very first words of Camors might immediately divulge their secret: and once betrayed, there was not only for her personal dishonor, a scandalous fall, poverty, a convent—but for her husband or her lover—perhaps for both—death!

When the bell in the lower court sounded, announcing the Count's approach, these thoughts crowded into the brain of the Marquise like a legion of phantoms. But she rallied her courage by a desperate effort and strained all her faculties to the execution of the plan she had hastily conceived, which was her last hope. And one word, one gesture, one mistake, or one carelessness of her lover, might overthrow it in a second. A moment later the door was opened by a servant, announcing M. de Camors. Without speaking, she signed to her husband to gain his hiding-place. The General, who had risen at the sound of the bell, seemed still to hesitate, but shrugging his shoulders, as if in disdain of himself, retired behind the curtain which faced the door.

M. de Camors entered the room carelessly, and advanced toward the fireplace where sat the Marquise; his smiling lips half opened to speak, when he was struck by the peculiar expression on the face of the Marquise, and the words were frozen on his lips. This look, fixed upon him from his entrance, had a strange, weird intensity, which, without expressing anything, made him fear everything. But he was accustomed to trying situations, and as wary and prudent as he was intrepid. He ceased to smile and did not speak, but waited.

She gave him her hand without ceasing to look at him with the same alarming intensity.

"Either she is mad," he said to himself, "or there is some great peril!"

With the rapid perception of her genius and of her love, she felt he understood her; and not leaving him time to speak and compromise her, instantly said:

"It is very kind of you to keep your promise."

"Not at all," said Camors, seating himself.

"Yes! For you know you come here to be tormented." There was a pause.

"Have you at last become a convert to my fixed idea?" she added after a second.

"What fixed idea? It seems to me you have a great many!"

"Yes! But I speak of a good one—my best one, at least—of your marriage!"

"What! again, cousin?" said Camors, who, now assured of his danger and its nature, marched with a firmer foot over the burning soil.

"Yes, again, cousin; and I will tell you another thing—I have found the person."

"Ah! Then I shall run away!"

She met his smile with an imperious glance.

"Then you still adhere to that plan?" said Camors, laughing.

"Most firmly! I need not repeat to you my reasons—having preached about it all winter—in fact so much so as to disturb the General, who suspects some mystery between us."

"The General? Indeed!"

"Oh, nothing serious, you must understand. Well, let us resume the subject. Miss Campbell will not do—she is too blonde—an odd objection for me to make by the way; not Mademoiselle de Silas—too thin; not Mademoiselle Rolet, in spite of her millions; not Mademoiselle d'Esgrigny—too much like the Bacquieres and Van-Cuyps. All this is a little discouraging, you will admit; but finally everything clears up. I tell you I have discovered the right one—a marvel!"

"Her name?" said Camors.

"Marie de Teclé!"

There was silence.

"Well, you say nothing," resumed the Marquise, "because you can have nothing to say! Because she unites everything—personal beauty, family, fortune, everything—almost like a dream. Then, too, your properties join. You see how I have thought of everything, my friend! I can not imagine how we never came to think of this before!"

M. de Camors did not reply, and the Marquise began to be surprised at his silence.

"Oh!" she exclaimed; "you may look a long time—there can not be a single objection—you are caught this time. Come, my friend, say yes, I implore you!" And while her lips said "I implore you," in a tone of gracious entreaty, her look said, with terrible emphasis, "You must!"

"Will you allow me to reflect upon it, Madame?" he said at last.

"No, my friend!"

"But really," said Camors, who was very pale, "it seems to me you dispose of the hand of Mademoiselle de Tecle very readily. Mademoiselle de Tecle is rich and courted on all sides—also, her great-uncle has ideas of the province, and her mother, ideas of religion, which might well—"

"I charge myself with all that," interrupted the Marquise.

"What a mania you have for marrying people!"

"Women who do not make love, cousin, always have a mania for matchmaking."

"But seriously, you will give me a few days for reflection?"

"To reflect about what? Have you not always told me you intended marrying and have been only waiting the chance? Well, you never can find a better one than this; and if you let it slip, you will repent the rest of your life."

"But give me time to consult my family!"

"Your family—what a joke! It seems to me you have reached full age; and then—what family? Your aunt, Madame de la Roche-Jugan?"

"Doubtless! I do not wish to offend her:"

"Ah, my dear cousin, don't be uneasy; suppress this uneasiness; I assure you she will be delighted!"

"Why should she?"

"I have my reasons for thinking so;" and the young woman in uttering these words was seized with a fit of sardonic laughter which came near convulsion, so shaken were her nerves by the terrible tension.

Camors, to whom little by little the light fell stronger on the more obscure points of the terrible enigma proposed to him, saw the necessity of shortening a scene which had overtaken her faculties to an almost insupportable degree. He rose:

"I am compelled to leave you," he said; "for I am not dining at home. But I will come to-morrow, if you will permit me."

"Certainly. You authorize me to speak to the General?"

"Well, yes, for I really can see no reasonable objection."

"Very good. I adore you!" said the Marquise. She gave him her hand, which he kissed and immediately departed.

It would have required a much keener vision than that of M. de Campvallon to detect any break, or any discordance, in the audacious comedy which had just been played before him by these two great artists.

The mute play of their eyes alone could have betrayed them; and that he could not see.

As to their tranquil, easy, natural dialogue there was not in it a word which he could seize upon, and which did not remove all his inquietude, and confound all his suspicions. From this moment, and ever afterward, every shadow was effaced from his mind; for the ability to imagine such a plot as that in which his wife in her despair had sought refuge, or to comprehend such depth of perversity, was not in the General's pure and simple spirit.

When he reappeared before his wife, on leaving his concealment, he was constrained and awkward. With a gesture of confusion and humility he took her hand, and smiled upon her with all the goodness and tenderness of his soul beaming from his face.

At this moment the Marquise, by a new reaction of her nervous system, broke into weeping and sobbing; and this completed the General's despair.

Out of respect to this worthy man, we shall pass over a scene the interest of which otherwise is not sufficient to warrant the unpleasant effect it would produce on all honest people. We shall equally pass over without record the conversation which took place the next day between the Marquise and M. de Camors.

Camors had experienced, as we have observed, a sentiment of repulsion at hearing the name of Mademoiselle de Tecle appear in the midst of this intrigue. It amounted almost to horror, and he could not control the manifestation of it. How could he conquer this supreme revolt of his conscience to the point of submitting to the expedient which would make his intrigue safe? By what detestable sophistries he dared persuade himself that he owed everything to his accomplice—even this, we shall not attempt to explain. To explain would be to extenuate, and that we wish not to do. We shall only say that he resigned himself to this marriage. On the path which he had entered a man can check himself as little as he can check a flash of lightning.

As to the Marquise, one must have formed no conception of this depraved though haughty spirit, if astonished at her persistence, in cold blood, and after reflection, in the perfidious plot which the imminence of her danger had suggested to her. She saw that the suspicions of the General might be reawakened another day in a more dangerous manner, if this marriage proved only a farce. She loved Camors passionately; and she loved scarcely less the dramatic mystery of their liaison. She had also felt a frantic terror at the thought of losing the great fortune which she regarded as her own; for the disinterestedness of her early youth had long vanished, and the idea of sinking miserably in the Parisian world, where she had long reigned by her luxury as well as her beauty, was insupportable to her.

Love, mystery, fortune—she wished to preserve them all at any price; and the more she reflected, the more the marriage of Camors appeared to her the surest safeguard.

It was true, it would give her a sort of rival. But she had too high an opinion of herself to fear anything; and she preferred Mademoiselle de Tecle to any other, because she knew her, and regarded her as an inferior in everything.

About fifteen days after, the General called on Madame de Tecle one morning, and demanded for M. de Camors her daughter's hand. It would be painful to dwell on the joy which Madame de Tecle felt; and her only surprise was that Camors had not come in person to press his suit. But Camors had not the heart to do so. He had been at Reuilly since that morning, and called on Madame de Tecle, where he learned his overture was accepted. Once having resolved on this monstrous action, he was determined to carry it through in the most correct manner, and we know he was master of all social arts.

In the evening Madame de Tecle and her daughter, left alone, walked together a long time on their dear terrace, by the soft light of the stars—the daughter blessing her mother, and the mother thanking God—both mingling their hearts, their dreams, their kisses, and their tears—happier, poor women, than is permitted long to human beings. The marriage took place the ensuing month.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A defensive attitude is never agreeable to a man
Believing that it is for virtue's sake alone such men love them
Determined to cultivate ability rather than scrupulousness
Disenchantment which follows possession
Have not that pleasure, it is useless to incur the penalties
Inconstancy of heart is the special attribute of man
Knew her danger, and, unlike most of them, she did not love it
Put herself on good terms with God, in case He should exist
Two persons who desired neither to remember nor to forget

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