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FROMONT AND RISLER

By ALPHONSE DAUDET

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRUE PEARL AND THE FALSE

"What can be the matter? What have I done to her?" Claire Fromont very often wondered when she thought of Sidonie.

She was entirely ignorant of what had formerly taken place between her friend and Georges at Savigny. Her own life was so upright, her mind so pure, that it was impossible for her to divine the jealous, mean-spirited ambition that had grown up by her side within the past fifteen years. And yet the enigmatical expression in that pretty face as it smiled upon her gave her a vague feeling of uneasiness which she could not understand. An affectation of politeness, strange enough between friends, was suddenly succeeded by an ill-dissembled anger, a cold, stinging tone, in presence of which Claire was as perplexed as by a difficult problem. Sometimes, too, a singular presentiment, the ill- defined

intuition of a great misfortune, was mingled with her uneasiness; for all women have in some degree a kind of second sight, and, even in the most innocent, ignorance of evil is suddenly illumined by visions of extraordinary lucidity.

From time to time, as the result of a conversation somewhat longer than usual, or of one of those unexpected meetings when faces taken by surprise allow their real thoughts to be seen, Madame Fromont reflected seriously concerning this strange little Sidonie; but the active, urgent duties of life, with its accompaniment of affections and preoccupations, left her no time for dwelling upon such trifles.

To all women comes a time when they encounter such sudden windings in the road that their whole horizon changes and all their points of view become transformed.

Had Claire been a young girl, the falling away of that friendship bit by bit, as if torn from her by an unkindly hand, would have been a source of great regret to her. But she had lost her father, the object of her greatest, her only youthful affection; then she had married. The child had come, with its thrice welcome demands upon her every moment. Moreover, she had with her her mother, almost in her dotage, still stupefied by her husband's tragic death. In a life so fully occupied, Sidonie's caprices received but little attention; and it had hardly occurred to Claire Fromont to be surprised at her marriage to Risler. He was clearly too old for her; but, after all, what difference did it make, if they loved each other?

As for being vexed because little Chebe had attained that lofty position, had become almost her equal, her superior nature was incapable of such pettiness. On the contrary, she would have been glad with all her heart to know that that young wife, whose home was so near her own, who lived the same life, so to speak, and had been her playmate in childhood, was happy and highly esteemed. Being most kindly disposed toward her, she tried to teach her, to instruct her in the ways of society, as one might instruct an attractive provincial, who fell but little short of being altogether charming.

Advice is not readily accepted by one pretty young woman from another. When Madame Fromont gave a grand dinner-party, she took Madame Risler to her bedroom, and said to her, smiling frankly in order not to vex her: "You have put on too many jewels, my dear. And then, you know, with a high dress one doesn't wear flowers in the hair." Sidonie blushed, and thanked her friend, but wrote down an additional grievance against her in the bottom of her heart.

In Claire's circle her welcome was decidedly cold. The Faubourg Saint-Germain has its pretensions; but do not imagine that the Marais has none! Those wives and daughters of mechanics, of wealthy manufacturers, knew little Chebe's story; indeed, they would have guessed it simply by her manner of making her appearance and by her demeanor among them.

Sidonie's efforts were unavailing. She retained the manners of a shop-girl. Her slightly artificial amiability, sometimes too humble, was as unpleasant as the spurious elegance of the shop; and her disdainful attitudes recalled the superb airs of the head saleswomen in the great dry-goods establishments, arrayed in black silk gowns, which they take off in the dressing-room when they go away at night—who stare with an imposing air, from the vantage-point of their mountains of curls, at the poor creatures who venture to discuss prices.

She felt that she was being examined and criticised, and her modesty was compelled to place itself upon a war footing. Of the names mentioned in her presence, the amusements, the entertainments, the books of which they talked to her, she knew nothing. Claire did her best to help her, to keep her on the surface, with a friendly hand always outstretched; but many of these ladies thought Sidonie pretty; that was enough to make them bear her a grudge for seeking admission to their circle. Others, proud of their husbands' standing and of their wealth, could not invent enough unspoken affronts and patronizing phrases to humiliate the little parvenue.

Sidonie included them all in a single phrase: "Claire's friends—that is to say, my enemies!" But she was seriously incensed against but one.

The two partners had no suspicion of what was taking place between their wives. Risler, continually engrossed in his press, sometimes remained at his draughting-table until midnight. Fromont passed his days abroad, lunched at his club, was almost never at the factory. He had his reasons for that.

Sidonie's proximity disturbed him. His capricious passion for her, that passion that he had sacrificed to his uncle's last wishes, recurred too often to his memory with all the regret one feels for the irreparable; and, conscious that he was weak, he fled. His was a pliable nature, without sustaining purpose, intelligent enough to appreciate his failings, too weak to guide itself. On the evening of Risler's wedding—he had been married but a few months himself—he had experienced anew, in that

woman's presence, all the emotion of the stormy evening at Savigny. Thereafter, without self-examination, he avoided seeing her again or speaking with her. Unfortunately, as they lived in the same house, as their wives saw each other ten times a day, chance sometimes brought them together; and this strange thing happened—that the husband, wishing to remain virtuous, deserted his home altogether and sought distraction elsewhere.

Claire was not astonished that it was so. She had become accustomed, during her father's lifetime, to the constant comings and goings of a business life; and during her husband's absences, zealously performing her duties as wife and mother, she invented long tasks, occupations of all sorts, walks for the child, prolonged, peaceful tarryings in the sunlight, from which she would return home, overjoyed with the little one's progress, deeply impressed with the gleeful enjoyment of all infants in the fresh air, but with a touch of their radiance in the depths of her serious eyes.

Sidonie also went out a great deal. It often happened, toward night, that Georges's carriage, driving through the gateway, would compel Madame Risler to step hastily aside as she was returning in a gorgeous costume from a triumphal promenade. The boulevard, the shop-windows, the purchases, made after long deliberation as if to enjoy to the full the pleasure of purchasing, detained her very late. They would exchange a bow, a cold glance at the foot of the staircase; and Georges would hurry into his apartments, as into a place of refuge, concealing beneath a flood of caresses, bestowed upon the child his wife held out to him, the sudden emotion that had seized him.

Sidonie, for her part, seemed to have forgotten everything, and to have retained no other feeling but contempt for that weak, cowardly creature. Moreover, she had many other things to think about.

Her husband had just had a piano placed in her red salon, between the windows.

After long hesitation she had decided to learn to sing, thinking that it was rather late to begin to play the piano; and twice a week Madame Dobson, a pretty, sentimental blonde, came to give her lessons from twelve o'clock to one. In the silence of the neighborhood the a-a-a and o-oo, persistently prolonged, repeated again and again, with windows open, gave the factory the atmosphere of a boarding-school.

And it was in reality a schoolgirl who was practising these exercises, an inexperienced, wavering little soul, full of unconfessed longings, with everything to learn and to find out in order to become a real woman. But her ambition confined itself to a superficial aspect of things.

"Claire Fromont plays the piano; I will sing. She is considered a refined and distinguished woman, and I intend that people shall say the same of me."

Without a thought of improving her education, Sidonie passed her life running about among milliners and dressmakers. "What are people going to wear this winter?" was her cry. She was attracted by the gorgeous displays in the shop-windows, by everything that caught the eye of the passers-by.

The one thing that Sidonie envied Claire more than all else was the child, the luxurious plaything, beribboned from the curtains of its cradle to its nurse's cap. She did not think of the sweet, maternal duties, demanding patience and self-abnegation, of the long rockings when sleep would not come, of the laughing awakenings sparkling with fresh water. No! she saw in the child naught but the daily walk. It is such a pretty sight, the little bundle of finery, with floating ribbons and long feathers, that follows young mothers through the crowded streets.

When she wanted company she had only her parents or her husband. She preferred to go out alone. The excellent Risler had such an absurd way of showing his love for her, playing with her as if she were a doll, pinching her chin and her cheek, capering about her, crying, "Hou! hou!" or staring at her with his great, soft eyes like an affectionate and grateful dog. That senseless love, which made of her a toy, a mantel ornament, made her ashamed. As for her parents, they were an embarrassment to her in presence of the people she wished to know, and immediately after her marriage she almost got rid of them by hiring a little house for them at Montrouge. That step had cut short the frequent invasions of Monsieur Chebe and his long frock-coat, and the endless visits of good Madame Chebe, in whom the return of comfortable circumstances had revived former habits of gossip and of indolence.

Sidonie would have been very glad to rid herself of the Delobelles in the same way, for their proximity annoyed her. But the Marais was a central location for the old actor, because the boulevard theatres were so near; then, too, Desiree, like all sedentary persons, clung to the familiar outlook, and her gloomy courtyard, dark at four o'clock in winter, seemed to her like a friend, like a familiar face which the sun lighted up at times as if it were smiling at her. As she was unable to get rid of them, Sidonie had adopted the course of ceasing to visit them.

In truth, her life would have been lonely and depressing enough, had it not been for the distractions

which Claire Fromont procured for her. Each time added fuel to her wrath. She would say to herself:

"Must everything come to me through her?"

And when, just at dinner-time, a box at the theatre or an invitation for the evening was sent to her from the floor below, while she was dressing, overjoyed at the opportunity to exhibit herself, she thought of nothing but crushing her rival. But such opportunities became more rare as Claire's time was more and more engrossed by her child. When Grandfather Gardinois came to Paris, however, he never failed to bring the two families together. The old peasant's gayety, for its freer expansion, needed little Sidonie, who did not take alarm at his jests. He would take them all four to dine at Philippe's, his favorite restaurant, where he knew all the patrons, the waiters and the steward, would spend a lot of money, and then take them to a reserved box at the Opera-Comique or the Palais-Royal.

At the theatre he laughed uproariously, talked familiarly with the box- openers, as he did with the waiters at Philippe's, loudly demanded footstools for the ladies, and when the performance was over insisted on having the topcoats and fur wraps of his party first of all, as if he were the only three-million parvenu in the audience.

For these somewhat vulgar entertainments, from which her husband usually excused himself, Claire, with her usual tact, dressed very plainly and attracted no attention. Sidonie, on the contrary, in all her finery, in full view of the boxes, laughed with all her heart at the grandfather's anecdotes, happy to have descended from the second or third gallery, her usual place in the old days, to that lovely proscenium box, adorned with mirrors, with a velvet rail that seemed made expressly for her light gloves, her ivory opera-glass, and her spangled fan. The tawdry glitter of the theatre, the red and gold of the hangings, were genuine splendor to her. She bloomed among them like a pretty paper flower in a filigree jardiniere.

One evening, at the performance of a successful play at the Palais-Royal, among all the noted women who were present, painted celebrities wearing microscopic hats and armed with huge fans, their rouge-besmeared faces standing out from the shadow of the boxes in the gaudy setting of their gowns, Sidonie's behavior, her toilette, the peculiarities of her laugh and her expression attracted much attention. All the opera-glasses in the hall, guided by the magnetic current that is so powerful under the great chandeliers, were turned one by one upon the box in which she sat. Claire soon became embarrassed, and modestly insisted upon changing places with her husband, who, unluckily, had accompanied them that evening.

Georges, youthful and elegant, sitting beside Sidonie, seemed her natural companion, while Risler Alle, always so placid and self-effacing, seemed in his proper place beside Claire Fromont, who in her dark clothes suggested the respectable woman incog. at the Bal de l'Opera.

Upon leaving the theatre each of the partners offered his arm to his neighbor. A box-opener, speaking to Sidonie, referred to Georges as "your husband," and the little woman beamed with delight.

"Your husband!"

That simple phrase was enough to upset her and set in motion a multitude of evil currents in the depths of her heart. As they passed through the corridors and the foyer, she watched Risler and Madame "Chorche" walking in front of them. Claire's refinement of manner seemed to her to be vulgarized and annihilated by Risler's shuffling gait. "How ugly he must make me look when we are walking together!" she said to herself. And her heart beat fast as she thought what a charming, happy, admired couple they would have made, she and this Georges Fromont, whose arm was trembling beneath her own.

Thereupon, when the blue-lined carriage drove up to the door of the theatre, she began to reflect, for the first time, that, when all was said, Claire had stolen her place and that she would be justified in trying to recover it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BREWERY ON THE RUE BLONDEL

After his marriage Risler had given up the brewery. Sidonie would have been glad to have him leave

the house in the evening for a fashionable club, a resort of wealthy, well-dressed men; but the idea of his returning, amid clouds of pipe-smoke, to his friends of earlier days, Sigismond, Delobelle, and her own father, humiliated her and made her unhappy. So he ceased to frequent the place; and that was something of a sacrifice. It was almost a glimpse of his native country, that brewery situated in a remote corner of Paris. The infrequent carriages, the high, barred windows of the ground floors, the odor of fresh drugs, of pharmaceutical preparations, imparted to that narrow little Rue Blondel a vague resemblance to certain streets in Basle or Zurich.

The brewery was managed by a Swiss and crowded with men of that nationality. When the door was opened, through the smoke-laden atmosphere, dense with the accents of the North, one had a vision of a vast, low room with hams hanging from the rafters, casks of beer standing in a row, the floor ankle-deep with sawdust, and on the counter great salad-bowls filled with potatoes as red as chestnuts, and baskets of pretzels fresh from the oven, their golden knots sprinkled with white salt.

For twenty years Risler had had his pipe there, a long pipe marked with his name in the rack reserved for the regular customers. He had also his table, at which he was always joined by several discreet, quiet compatriots, who listened admiringly, but without comprehending them, to the endless harangues of Chebe and Delobelle. When Risler ceased his visits to the brewery, the two last-named worthies likewise turned their backs upon it, for several excellent reasons. In the first place, M. Chebe now lived a considerable distance away. Thanks to the generosity of his children, the dream of his whole life was realized at last.

"When I am rich," the little man used to say in his cheerless rooms in the Marais, "I will have a house of my own, at the gates of Paris, almost in the country, a little garden which I will plant and water myself. That will be better for my health than all the excitement of the capital."

Well, he had his house now, but he did not enjoy himself in it. It was at Montrouge, on the road that runs around the city. "A small chalet, with garden," said the advertisement, printed on a placard which gave an almost exact idea of the dimensions of the property. The papers were new and of rustic design, the paint perfectly fresh; a water-butt planted beside a vine-clad arbor played the part of a pond. In addition to all these advantages, only a hedge separated this paradise from another "chalet with garden" of precisely the same description, occupied by Sigismond Planus the cashier, and his sister. To Madame Chebe that was a most precious circumstance. When the good woman was bored, she would take a stock of knitting and darning and go and sit in the old maid's arbor, dazzling her with the tale of her past splendors. Unluckily, her husband had not the same source of distraction.

However, everything went well at first. It was midsummer, and M. Chebe, always in his shirt-sleeves, was busily employed in getting settled. Each nail to be driven in the house was the subject of leisurely reflections, of endless discussions. It was the same with the garden. He had determined at first to make an English garden of it, lawns always green, winding paths shaded by shrubbery. But the trouble of it was that it took so long for the shrubbery to grow.

"I have a mind to make an orchard of it," said the impatient little man.

And thenceforth he dreamed of nothing but vegetables, long lines of beans, and peach-trees against the wall. He dug for whole mornings, knitting his brows in a preoccupied way and wiping his forehead ostentatiously before his wife, so that she would say:

"For heaven's sake, do rest a bit—you're killing yourself."

The result was that the garden was a mixture: flowers and fruit, park and kitchen garden; and whenever he went into Paris M. Chebe was careful to decorate his buttonhole with a rose from his rose-bushes.

While the fine weather lasted, the good people did not weary of admiring the sunsets behind the fortifications, the long days, the bracing country air. Sometimes, in the evening, when the windows were open, they sang duets; and in presence of the stars in heaven, which began to twinkle simultaneously with the lanterns on the railway around the city, Ferdinand would become poetical. But when the rain came and he could not go out, what misery! Madame Chebe, a thorough Parisian, sighed for the narrow streets of the Marais, her expeditions to the market of Blancs-Manteaux, and to the shops of the quarter.

As she sat by the window, her usual place for sewing and observation, she would gaze at the damp little garden, where the volubilis and the nasturtiums, stripped of their blossoms, were dropping away from the lattices with an air of exhaustion, at the long, straight line of the grassy slope of the fortifications, still fresh and green, and, a little farther on, at the corner of a street, the office of the Paris omnibuses, with all the points of their route inscribed in enticing letters on the green walls.

Whenever one of the omnibuses lumbered away on its journey, she followed it with her eyes, as a government clerk at Cayenne or Noumea gazes after the steamer about to return to France; she made the trip with it, knew just where it would stop, at what point it would lurch around a corner, grazing the shop-windows with its wheels.

As a prisoner, M. Chebe became a terrible trial. He could not work in the garden. On Sundays the fortifications were deserted; he could no longer strut about among the workmen's families dining on the grass, and pass from group to group in a neighborly way, his feet encased in embroidered slippers, with the authoritative demeanor of a wealthy landowner of the vicinity. This he missed more than anything else, consumed as he was by the desire to make people think about him. So that, having nothing to do, having no one to pose before, no one to listen to his schemes, his stories, the anecdote of the accident to the Duc d'Orleans—a similar accident had happened to him in his youth, you remember—the unfortunate Ferdinand overwhelmed his wife with reproaches.

"Your daughter banishes us—your daughter is ashamed of us!"

She heard nothing but that "Your daughter—your daughter—your daughter!" For, in his anger with Sidonie, he denied her, throwing upon his wife the whole responsibility for that monstrous and unnatural child. It was a genuine relief for poor Madame Chebe when her husband took an omnibus at the office to go and hunt up Delobelle—whose hours for lounging were always at his disposal—and pour into his bosom all his rancor against his son-in-law and his daughter.

The illustrious Delobelle also bore Risler a grudge, and freely said of him: "He is a dastard."

The great man had hoped to form an integral part of the new household, to be the organizer of festivities, the 'arbiter elegantiarum'. Instead of which, Sidonie received him very coldly, and Risler no longer even took him to the brewery. However, the actor did not complain too loud, and whenever he met his friend he overwhelmed him with attentions and flattery; for he had need of him.

Weary of awaiting the discerning manager, seeing that the engagement he had longed for so many years did not come, it had occurred to Delobelle to purchase a theatre and manage it himself. He counted upon Risler for the funds. Opportunely enough, a small theatre on the boulevard happened to be for sale, as a result of the failure of its manager. Delobelle mentioned it to Risler, at first very vaguely, in a wholly hypothetical form—"There would be a good chance to make a fine stroke." Risler listened with his usual phlegm, saying, "Indeed, it would be a good thing for you." And to a more direct suggestion, not daring to answer, "No," he took refuge behind such phrases as "I will see"—"Perhaps later"—"I don't say no"—and finally uttered the unlucky words "I must see the estimates."

For a whole week the actor had delved away at plans and figures, seated between his wife and daughter, who watched him in admiration, and intoxicated themselves with this latest dream. The people in the house said, "Monsieur Delobelle is going to buy a theatre." On the boulevard, in the actors' cafes, nothing was talked of but this transaction. Delobelle did not conceal the fact that he had found some one to advance the funds; the result being that he was surrounded by a crowd of unemployed actors, old comrades who tapped him familiarly on the shoulder and recalled themselves to his recollection—"You know, old boy." He promised engagements, breakfasted at the cafe, wrote letters there, greeted those who entered with the tips of his fingers, held very animated conversations in corners; and already two threadbare authors had read to him a drama in seven tableaux, which was "exactly what he wanted" for his opening piece. He talked about "my theatre!" and his letters were addressed, "Monsieur Delobelle, Manager."

When he had composed his prospectus and made his estimates, he went to the factory to see Risler, who, being very busy, made an appointment to meet him in the Rue Blondel; and that same evening, Delobelle, being the first to arrive at the brewery, established himself at their old table, ordered a pitcher of beer and two glasses, and waited. He waited a long while, with his eye on the door, trembling with impatience. Whenever any one entered, the actor turned his head. He had spread his papers on the table, and pretended to be reading them, with animated gestures and movements of the head and lips.

It was a magnificent opportunity, unique in its way. He already fancied himself acting—for that was the main point—acting, in a theatre of his own, roles written expressly for him, to suit his talents, in which he would produce all the effect of—

Suddenly the door opened, and M. Chebe made his appearance amid the pipe-smoke. He was as surprised and annoyed to find Delobelle there as Delobelle himself was by his coming. He had written to his son-in-law that morning that he wished to speak with him on a matter of very serious importance, and that he would meet him at the brewery. It was an affair of honor, entirely between themselves, from man to man. The real fact concerning this affair of honor was that M. Chebe had given notice of

his intention to leave the little house at Montrouge, and had hired a shop with an entresol in the Rue du Mail, in the midst of a business district. A shop? Yes, indeed! And now he was a little alarmed regarding his hasty step, anxious to know how his son-in-law would take it, especially as the shop cost much more than the Montrouge house, and there were some repairs to be made at the outset. As he had long been acquainted with his son-in-law's kindness of heart, M. Chebe had determined to appeal to him at once, hoping to lead him into his game and throw upon him the responsibility for this domestic change. Instead of Risler he found Delobelle.

They looked askance at each other, with an unfriendly eye, like two dogs meeting beside the same dish. Each divined for whom the other was waiting, and they did not try to deceive each other.

"Isn't my son-in-law here?" asked M. Chebe, eying the documents spread over the table, and emphasizing the words "my son-in-law," to indicate that Risler belonged to him and to nobody else.

"I am waiting for him," Delobelle replied, gathering up his papers.

He pressed his lips together, as he added with a dignified, mysterious, but always theatrical air:

"It is a matter of very great importance."

"So is mine," declared M. Chebe, his three hairs standing erect like a porcupine's quills.

As he spoke, he took his seat on the bench beside Delobelle, ordered a pitcher and two glasses as the former had done, then sat erect with his hands in his pockets and his back against the wall, waiting in his turn. The two empty glasses in front of them, intended for the same absentee, seemed to be hurling defiance at each other.

But Risler did not come.

The two men, drinking in silence, lost their patience and fidgeted about on the bench, each hoping that the other would tire of waiting.

At last their ill-humor overflowed, and naturally poor Risler received the whole flood.

"What an outrage to keep a man of my years waiting so long!" began M. Chebe, who never mentioned his great age except upon such occasions.

"I believe, on my word, that he is making sport of us," replied M. Delobelle.

And the other:

"No doubt Monsieur had company to dinner."

"And such company!" scornfully exclaimed the illustrious actor, in whose mind bitter memories were awakened.

"The fact is—" continued M. Chebe.

They drew closer to each other and talked. The hearts of both were full in respect to Sidonie and Risler. They opened the flood-gates. That Risler, with all his good-nature, was an egotist pure and simple, a parvenu. They laughed at his accent and his bearing, they mimicked certain of his peculiarities. Then they talked about his household, and, lowering their voices, they became confidential, laughed familiarly together, were friends once more.

M. Chebe went very far: "Let him beware! he has been foolish enough to send the father and mother away from their daughter; if anything happens to her, he can't blame us. A girl who hasn't her parents' example before her eyes, you understand—"

"Certainly—certainly," said Delobelle; "especially as Sidonie has become a great flirt. However, what can you expect? He will get no more than he deserves. No man of his age ought to—Hush! here he is!"

Risler had entered the room, and was walking toward them, distributing hand-shakes all along the benches.

There was a moment of embarrassment between the three friends. Risler excused himself as well as he could. He had been detained at home; Sidonie had company—Delobelle touched M. Chebe's foot under the table— and, as he spoke, the poor man, decidedly perplexed by the two empty glasses that awaited him, wondered in front of which of the two he ought to take his seat.

Delobelle was generous.

"You have business together, Messieurs; do not let me disturb you."

He added in a low tone, winking at Risler:

"I have the papers."

"The papers?" echoed Risler, in a bewildered tone.

"The estimates," whispered the actor.

Thereupon, with a great show of discretion, he withdrew within himself, and resumed the reading of his documents, his head in his hands and his fingers in his ears.

The two others conversed by his side, first in undertones, then louder, for M. Chebe's shrill, piercing voice could not long be subdued.—He wasn't old enough to be buried, deuce take it!—He should have died of ennui at Montrouge.—What he must have was the bustle and life of the Rue de Mail or the Rue du Sentier—of the business districts.

"Yes, but a shop? Why a shop?" Risler timidly ventured to ask.

"Why a shop?—why a shop?" repeated M. Chebe, red as an Easter egg, and raising his voice to its highest pitch. "Why, because I'm a merchant, Monsieur Risler, a merchant and son of a merchant. Oh! I see what you're coming at. I have no business. But whose fault is it? If the people who shut me up at Montrouge, at the gates of Bicetre, like a paralytic, had had the good sense to furnish me with the money to start in business—"

At that point Risler succeeded in silencing him, and thereafter only snatches of the conversation could be heard: "a more convenient shop— high ceilings—better air—future plans—enormous business—I will speak when the time comes—many people will be astonished."

As he caught these fragments of sentences, Delobelle became more and more absorbed in his estimates, presenting the eloquent back of the man who is not listening. Risler, sorely perplexed, slowly sipped his beer from time to time to keep himself, in countenance.

At last, when M. Chebe had grown calm, and with good reason, his son-in-law turned with a smile to the illustrious Delobelle, and met the stern, impassive glance which seemed to say, "Well! what of me?"

"Ah! Mon Dieu!—that is true," thought the poor fellow.

Changing at once his chair and his glass, he took his seat opposite the actor. But M. Chebe had not Delobelle's courtesy. Instead of discreetly moving away, he took his glass and joined the others, so that the great man, unwilling to speak before him, solemnly replaced his documents in his pocket a second time, saying to Risler:

"We will talk this over later."

Very much later, in truth, for M. Chebe had reflected:

"My son-in-law is so good-natured! If I leave him with this swindler, who knows what he may get out of him?"

And he remained on guard. The actor was furious. It was impossible to postpone the matter to some other day, for Risler told them that he was going the next day to spend the next month at Savigny.

"A month at Savigny!" exclaimed M. Chebe, incensed at the thought of his son-in-law escaping him. "How about business?"

"Oh! I shall come to Paris every day with Georges. Monsieur Gardinois is very anxious to see his little Sidonie."

M. Chebe shook his head. He considered it very imprudent. Business is business. A man ought to be on the spot, always on the spot, in the breach. Who could say?—the factory might take fire in the night. And he repeated sententiously: "The eye of the master, my dear fellow, the eye of the master," while the actor—who was little better pleased by this intended departure—opened his great eyes; giving them an expression at once cunning and authoritative, the veritable expression of the eye of the master.

At last, about midnight, the last Montrouge omnibus bore away the tyrannical father-in-law, and Delobelle was able to speak.

"Let us first look at the prospectus," he said, preferring not to attack the question of figures at once; and with his eyeglasses on his nose, he began, in a declamatory tone, always upon the stage: "When one considers coolly the decrepitude which dramatic art has reached in France, when one measures the distance that separates the stage of Moliere—"

There were several pages like that. Risler listened, puffing at his pipe, afraid to stir, for the reader looked at him every moment over his eyeglasses, to watch the effect of his phrases. Unfortunately, right in the middle of the prospectus, the cafe closed. The lights were extinguished; they must go.—And the estimates?—It was agreed that they should read them as they walked along. They stopped at every gaslight. The actor displayed his figures. So much for the hall, so much for the lighting, so much for poor-rates, so much for the actors. On that question of the actors he was firm.

"The best point about the affair," he said, "is that we shall have no leading man to pay. Our leading man will be Bibi." (When Delobelle mentioned himself, he commonly called himself Bibi.) "A leading man is paid twenty thousand francs, and as we have none to pay, it's just as if you put twenty thousand francs in your pocket. Tell me, isn't that true?"

Risler did not reply. He had the constrained manner, the wandering eyes of the man whose thoughts are elsewhere. The reading of the estimates being concluded, Delobelle, dismayed to find that they were drawing near the corner of the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes, put the question squarely. Would Risler advance the money, yes or no?

"Well!—no," said Risler, inspired by heroic courage, which he owed principally to the proximity of the factory and to the thought that the welfare of his family was at stake.

Delobelle was astounded. He had believed that the business was as good as done, and he stared at his companion, intensely agitated, his eyes as big as saucers, and rolling his papers in his hand.

"No," Risler continued, "I can't do what you ask, for this reason."

Thereupon the worthy man, slowly, with his usual heaviness of speech, explained that he was not rich. Although a partner in a wealthy house, he had no available funds. Georges and he drew a certain sum from the concern each month; then, when they struck a balance at the end of the year they divided the profits. It had cost him a good deal to begin housekeeping: all his savings. It was still four months before the inventory. Where was he to obtain the 30,000 francs to be paid down at once for the theatre? And then, beyond all that, the affair could not be successful.

"Why, it must succeed. Bibi will be there!" As he spoke, poor Bibi drew himself up to his full height; but Risler was determined, and all Bibi's arguments met the same refusal—"Later, in two or three years, I don't say something may not be done."

The actor fought for a long time, yielding his ground inch by inch. He proposed revising his estimates. The thing might be done cheaper. "It would still be too dear for me," Risler interrupted. "My name doesn't belong to me. It is a part of the firm. I have no right to pledge it. Imagine my going into bankruptcy!" His voice trembled as he uttered the word.

"But if everything is in my name," said Delobelle, who had no superstition. He tried everything, invoked the sacred interests of art, went so far as to mention the fascinating actresses whose alluring glances—Risler laughed aloud.

"Come, come, you rascal! What's that you're saying? You forget that we're both married men, and that it is very late and our wives are expecting us. No ill-will, eh?—This is not a refusal, you understand.—By the way, come and see me after the inventory. We will talk it over again. Ah! there's Pere Achille putting out his gas.—I must go in. Good-night."

It was after one o'clock when the actor returned home. The two women were waiting for him, working as usual, but with a sort of feverish activity which was strange to them. Every moment the great scissors that Mamma Delobelle used to cut the brass wire were seized with strange fits of trembling, and Desiree's little fingers, as she mounted an insect, moved so fast that it made one dizzy to watch them. Even the long feathers of the little birds scattered about on the table before her seemed more brilliant, more richly colored, than on other days. It was because a lovely visitor named Hope had called upon them that evening. She had made the tremendous effort required to climb five dark flights of stairs, and had opened the door of the little room to cast a luminous glance therein. However much you may have been deceived in life, those magic gleams always dazzle you.

"Oh! if your father could only succeed!" said Mamma Delobelle from time to time, as if to sum up a whole world of happy thoughts to which her reverie abandoned itself.

"He will succeed, mamma, never fear. Monsieur Risler is so kind, I will answer for him. And Sidonie is very fond of us, too, although since she was married she does seem to neglect her old friends a little. But we must make allowance for the difference in our positions. Besides, I never shall forget what she did for me."

And, at the thought of what Sidonie had done for her, the little cripple applied herself with even more feverish energy to her work. Her electrified fingers moved with redoubled swiftness. You would have said that they were running after some fleeing, elusive thing, like happiness, for example, or the love of some one who loves you not.

"What was it that she did for you?" her mother would naturally have asked her; but at that moment she was only slightly interested in what her daughter said. She was thinking exclusively of her great man.

"No! do you think so, my dear? Just suppose your father should have a theatre of his own and act again as in former days. You don't remember; you were too small then. But he had tremendous success, no end of recalls. One night, at Alencon, the subscribers to the theatre gave him a gold wreath. Ah! he was a brilliant man in those days, so lighthearted, so glad to be alive. Those who see him now don't know him, poor man, misfortune has changed him so. Oh, well! I feel sure that all that's necessary is a little success to make him young and happy again. And then there's money to be made managing theatres. The manager at Nantes had a carriage. Can you imagine us with a carriage? Can you imagine it, I say? That's what would be good for you. You could go out, leave your armchair once in a while. Your father would take us into the country. You would see the water and the trees you have had such a longing to see."

"Oh! the trees," murmured the pale little recluse, trembling from head to foot.

At that moment the street door of the house was closed violently, and M. Delobelle's measured step echoed in the vestibule. There was a moment of speechless, breathless anguish. The women dared not look at each other, and mamma's great scissors trembled so that they cut the wire crooked.

The poor devil had unquestionably received a terrible blow. His illusions crushed, the humiliation of a refusal, the jests of his comrades, the bill at the cafe where he had breakfasted on credit during the whole period of his managership, a bill which must be paid—all these things occurred to him in the silence and gloom of the five flights he had to climb. His heart was torn. Even so, the actor's nature was so strong in him that he deemed it his duty to envelop his distress, genuine as it was, in a conventional tragic mask.

As he entered, he paused, cast an ominous glance around the work-room, at the table covered with work, his little supper waiting for him in a corner, and the two dear, anxious faces looking up at him with glistening eyes. He stood a full minute without speaking—and you know how long a minute's silence seems on the stage; then he took three steps forward, sank upon a low chair beside the table, and exclaimed in a hissing voice:

"Ah! I am accursed!"

At the same time he dealt the table such a terrible blow with his fist that the "birds and insects for ornament" flew to the four corners of the room. His terrified wife rose and timidly approached him, while Desiree half rose in her armchair with an expression of nervous agony that distorted all her features.

Lolling in his chair, his arms hanging despondently by his sides, his head on his chest, the actor soliloquized—a fragmentary soliloquy, interrupted by sighs and dramatic hiccoughs, overflowing with imprecations against the pitiless, selfish bourgeois, those monsters to whom the artist gives his flesh and blood for food and drink.

Then he reviewed his whole theatrical life, his early triumphs, the golden wreath from the subscribers at Alencon, his marriage to this "sainted woman," and he pointed to the poor creature who stood by his side, with tears streaming from her eyes, and trembling lips, nodding her head dotingly at every word her husband said.

In very truth, a person who never had heard of the illustrious Delobelle could have told his history in detail after that long monologue. He recalled his arrival in Paris, his humiliations, his privations. Alas! he was not the one who had known privation. One had but to look at his full, rotund face beside the thin, drawn faces of the two women. But the actor did not look so closely.

"Oh!" he said, continuing to intoxicate himself with declamatory phrases, "oh! to have struggled so long. For ten years, fifteen years, have I struggled on, supported by these devoted creatures, fed by

them."

"Papa, papa, hush," cried Desiree, clasping her hands.

"Yes, fed by them, I say—and I do not blush for it. For I accept all this devotion in the name of sacred art. But this is too much. Too much has been put upon me. I renounce the stage!"

"Oh! my dear, what is that you say?" cried Mamma Delobelle, rushing to his side.

"No, leave me. I have reached the end of my strength. They have slain the artist in me. It is all over. I renounce the stage."

If you had seen the two women throw their arms about him then, implore him to struggle on, prove to him that he had no right to give up, you could not have restrained your tears. But Delobelle resisted.

He yielded at last, however, and promised to continue the fight a little while, since it was their wish; but it required many an entreaty and caress to carry the point.

CHAPTER IX

AT SAVIGNY

It was a great misfortune, that sojourn of the two families at Savigny for a month.

After an interval of two years Georges and Sidonie found themselves side by side once more on the old estate, too old not to be always like itself, where the stones, the ponds, the trees, always the same, seemed to cast derision upon all that changes and passes away. A renewal of intercourse under such circumstances must have been disastrous to two natures that were not of a very different stamp, and far more virtuous than those two.

As for Claire, she never had been so happy; Savigny never had seemed so lovely to her. What joy to walk with her child over the greensward where she herself had walked as a child; to sit, a young mother, upon the shaded seats from which her own mother had looked on at her childish games years before; to go, leaning on Georges's arm, to seek out the nooks where they had played together. She felt a tranquil contentment, the overflowing happiness of placid lives which enjoy their bliss in silence; and all day long her skirts swept along the paths, guided by the tiny footsteps of the child, her cries and her demands upon her mother's care.

Sidonie seldom took part in these maternal promenades. She said that the chatter of children tired her, and therein she agreed with old Gardinois, who seized upon any pretext to annoy his granddaughter. He believed that he accomplished that object by devoting himself exclusively to Sidonie, and arranging even more entertainments for her than on her former visit. The carriages that had been shut up in the carriage-house for two years, and were dusted once a week because the spiders spun their webs on the silk cushions, were placed at her disposal. The horses were harnessed three times a day, and the gate was continually turning on its hinges. Everybody in the house followed this impulse of worldliness. The gardener paid more attention to his flowers because Madame Risler selected the finest ones to wear in her hair at dinner. And then there were calls to be made. Luncheon parties were given, gatherings at which Madame Fromont Jeune presided, but at which Sidonie, with her lively manners, shone supreme. Indeed, Claire often left her a clear field. The child had its hours for sleeping and riding out, with which no amusements could interfere. The mother was compelled to remain away, and it often happened that she was unable to go with Sidonie to meet the partners when they came from Paris at night.

"You will make my excuses," she would say, as she went up to her room.

Madame Risler was triumphant. A picture of elegant indolence, she would drive away behind the galloping horses, unconscious of the swiftness of their pace, without a thought in her mind.

Other carriages were always waiting at the station. Two or three times she heard some one near her whisper, "That is Madame Fromont Jeune," and, indeed, it was a simple matter for people to make the mistake, seeing the three return together from the station, Sidonie sitting beside Georges on the back seat, laughing and talking with him, and Risler facing them, smiling contentedly with his broad hands spread flat upon his knees, but evidently feeling a little out of place in that fine carriage. The thought

that she was taken for Madame Fromont made her very proud, and she became a little more accustomed to it every day. On their arrival at the chateau, the two families separated until dinner; but, in the presence of his wife sitting tranquilly beside the sleeping child, Georges Fromont, too young to be absorbed by the joys of domesticity, was continually thinking of the brilliant Sidonie, whose voice he could hear pouring forth triumphant roudades under the trees in the garden.

While the whole chateau was thus transformed in obedience to the whims of a young woman, old Gardinois continued to lead the narrow life of a discontented, idle, impotent 'parvenu'. The most successful means of distraction he had discovered was espionage. The goings and comings of his servants, the remarks that were made about him in the kitchen, the basket of fruit and vegetables brought every morning from the kitchen- garden to the pantry, were objects of continual investigation.

For the purposes of this constant spying upon his household, he made use of a stone bench set in the gravel behind an enormous Paulownia. He would sit there whole days at a time, neither reading nor thinking, simply watching to see who went in or out. For the night he had invented something different. In the great vestibule at the main entrance, which opened upon the front steps with their array of bright flowers, he had caused an opening to be made leading to his bedroom on the floor above. An acoustic tube of an improved type was supposed to convey to his ears every sound on the ground floor, even to the conversation of the servants taking the air on the steps.

Unluckily, the instrument was so powerful that it exaggerated all the noises, confused them and prolonged them, and the powerful, regular ticking of a great clock, the cries of a paroquet kept in one of the lower rooms, the clucking of a hen in search of a lost kernel of corn, were all Monsieur Gardinois could hear when he applied his ear to the tube. As for voices, they reached him in the form of a confused buzzing, like the muttering of a crowd, in which it was impossible to distinguish anything. He had nothing to show for the expense of the apparatus, and he concealed his wonderful tube in a fold of his bed-curtains.

One night Gardinois, who had fallen asleep, was awakened suddenly by the creaking of a door. It was an extraordinary thing at that hour. The whole house hold was asleep. Nothing could be heard save the footsteps of the watch-dogs on the sand, or their scratching at the foot of a tree in which an owl was screeching. An excellent opportunity to use his listening-tube! Upon putting it to his ear, M. Gardinois was assured that he had made no mistake. The sounds continued. One door was opened, then another. The bolt of the front door was thrown back with an effort. But neither Pyramus nor Thisbe, not even Kiss, the formidable Newfoundland, had made a sign. He rose softly to see who those strange burglars could be, who were leaving the house instead of entering it; and this is what he saw through the slats of his blind:

A tall, slender young man, with Georges's figure and carriage, arm-in-arm with a woman in a lace mantilla. They stopped first at the bench by the Paulownia, which was in full bloom.

It was a superb moonlight night. The moon, silvering the treetops, made numberless flakes of light amid the dense foliage. The terraces, white with moonbeams, where the Newfoundlands in their curly coats went to and fro, watching the night butterflies, the smooth, deep waters of the ponds, all shone with a mute, calm brilliance, as if reflected in a silver mirror. Here and there glow-worms twinkled on the edges of the greensward.

The two promenaders remained for a moment beneath the shade of the Paulownia, sitting silent on the bench, lost in the dense darkness which the moon makes where its rays do not reach. Suddenly they appeared in the bright light, wrapped in a languishing embrace; then walked slowly across the main avenue, and disappeared among the trees.

"I was sure of it!" said old Gardinois, recognizing them. Indeed, what need had he to recognize them? Did not the silence of the dogs, the aspect of the sleeping house, tell him more clearly than anything else could, what species of impudent crime, unknown and unpunished, haunted the avenues in his park by night? Be that as it may, the old peasant was overjoyed by his discovery. He returned to bed without a light, chuckling to himself, and in the little cabinet filled with hunting- implements, whence he had watched them, thinking at first that he had to do with burglars, the moon's rays shone upon naught save the fowling- pieces hanging on the wall and the boxes of cartridges of all sizes.

Sidonie and Georges had taken up the thread of their love at the corner of the same avenue. The year that had passed, marked by hesitation, by vague struggles, by fruitless resistance, seemed to have been only a preparation for their meeting. And it must be said that, when once the fatal step was taken, they were surprised at nothing so much as the fact that they had postponed it so long. Georges Fromont especially was seized by a mad passion. He was false to his wife, his best friend; he was false to Risler, his partner, the faithful companion of his every hour.

He felt a constant renewal, a sort of overflow of remorse, wherein his passion was intensified by the magnitude of his sin. Sidonie became his one engrossing thought, and he discovered that until then he had not lived. As for her, her love was made up of vanity and spite. The thing that she relished above all else was Claire's degradation in her eyes. Ah! if she could only have said to her, "Your husband loves me—he is false to you with me," her pleasure would have been even greater. As for Risler, in her view he richly deserved what had happened to him. In her old apprentice's jargon, in which she still thought, even if she did not speak it, the poor man was only "an old fool," whom she had taken as a stepping-stone to fortune. "An old fool" is made to be deceived!

During the day Savigny belonged to Claire, to the child who ran about upon the gravel, laughing at the birds and the clouds, and who grew apace. The mother and child had for their own the daylight, the paths filled with sunbeams. But the blue nights were given over to sin, to that sin firmly installed in the chateau, which spoke in undertones, crept noiselessly behind the closed blinds, and in face of which the sleeping house became dumb and blind, and resumed its stony impassibility, as if it were ashamed to see and hear.

CHAPTER X

SIGISMOND PLANUS TREMBLES FOR HIS CASH-BOX

"Carriage, my dear Chorche?—I—have a carriage? What for?"

"I assure you, my dear Risler, that it is quite essential for you. Our business, our relations, are extending every day; the coupe is no longer enough for us. Besides, it doesn't look well to see one of the partners always in his carriage and the other on foot. Believe me, it is a necessary outlay, and of course it will go into the general expenses of the firm. Come, resign yourself to the inevitable."

It was genuine resignation. It seemed to Risler as if he were stealing something in taking the money for such an unheard-of luxury as a carriage; however, he ended by yielding to Georges's persistent representations, thinking as he did so:

"This will make Sidonie very happy!"

The poor fellow had no suspicion that Sidonie herself, a month before, had selected at Binder's the coupe which Georges insisted upon giving her, and which was to be charged to expense account in order not to alarm the husband.

Honest Risler was so plainly created to be deceived. His inborn uprightness, the implicit confidence in men and things, which was the foundation of his transparent nature, had been intensified of late by preoccupation resulting from his pursuit of the Risler Press, an invention destined to revolutionize the wall-paper industry and representing in his eyes his contribution to the partnership assets. When he laid aside his drawings and left his little work-room on the first floor, his face invariably wore the absorbed look of the man who has his life on one side, his anxieties on another. What a delight it was to him, therefore, to find his home always tranquil, his wife always in good humor, becomingly dressed and smiling.

Without undertaking to explain the change to himself, he recognized that for some time past the "little one" had not been as before in her treatment of him. She allowed him to resume his old habits: the pipe at dessert, the little nap after dinner, the appointments at the brewery with Chebe and Delobelle. Their apartments also were transformed, embellished.

A grand piano by a famous maker made its appearance in the salon in place of the old one, and Madame Dobson, the singing-teacher, came no longer twice a week, but every day, music-roll in hand.

Of a curious type was that young woman of American extraction, with hair of an acid blond, like lemon-pulp, over a bold forehead and metallic blue eyes. As her husband would not allow her to go on the stage, she gave lessons, and sang in some bourgeois salons. As a result of living in the artificial world of compositions for voice and piano, she had contracted a species of sentimental frenzy.

She was romance itself. In her mouth the words "love" and "passion" seemed to have eighty syllables, she uttered them with so much expression. Oh, expression! That was what Mistress Dobson placed before everything, and what she tried, and tried in vain, to impart to her pupil.

'Ay Chiquita,' upon which Paris fed for several seasons, was then at the height of its popularity. Sidonie studied it conscientiously, and all the morning she could be heard singing:

"On dit que tu te maries,
Tu sais que j'en puis mourir."

[They say that thou'rt to marry
Thou know'st that I may die.]

"Mouri-i-i-i-r!" the expressive Madame Dobson would interpose, while her hands wandered feebly over the piano-keys; and die she would, raising her light blue eyes to the ceiling and wildly throwing back her head. Sidonie never could accomplish it. Her mischievous eyes, her lips, crimson with fulness of life, were not made for such AEolian-harp sentimentalities. The refrains of Offenbach or Herve, interspersed with unexpected notes, in which one resorts to expressive gestures for aid, to a motion of the head or the body, would have suited her better; but she dared not admit it to her sentimental instructress. By the way, although she had been made to sing a great deal at Mademoiselle Le Mire's, her voice was still fresh and not unpleasing.

Having no social connections, she came gradually to make a friend of her singing-mistress. She would keep her to breakfast, take her to drive in the new coupe and to assist in her purchases of gowns and jewels. Madame Dobson's sentimental and sympathetic tone led one to repose confidence in her. Her continual repinings seemed too long to attract other repinings. Sidonie told her of Georges, of their relations, attempting to palliate her offence by blaming the cruelty of her parents in marrying her by force to a man much older than herself. Madame Dobson at once showed a disposition to assist them; not that the little woman was venal, but she had a passion for passion, a taste for romantic intrigue. As she was unhappy in her own home, married to a dentist who beat her, all husbands were monsters in her eyes, and poor Risler especially seemed to her a horrible tyrant whom his wife was quite justified in hating and deceiving.

She was an active confidant and a very useful one. Two or three times a week she would bring tickets for a box at the Opera or the Italiens, or some one of the little theatres which enjoy a temporary vogue, and cause all Paris to go from one end of Paris to the other for a season. In Risler's eyes the tickets came from Madame Dobson; she had as many as she chose to the theatres where operas were given. The poor wretch had no suspicion that one of those boxes for an important "first night" had often cost his partner ten or fifteen Louis.

In the evening, when his wife went away, always splendidly attired, he would gaze admiringly at her, having no suspicion of the cost of her costumes, certainly none of the man who paid for them, and would await her return at his table by the fire, busy with his drawings, free from care, and happy to be able to say to himself, "What a good time she is having!"

On the floor below, at the Fromonts', the same comedy was being played, but with a transposition of parts. There it was the young wife who sat by the fire. Every evening, half an hour after Sidonie's departure, the great gate swung open to give passage to the Fromont coupe conveying Monsieur to his club. What would you have? Business has its demands. All the great deals are arranged at the club, around the bouillotte table, and a man must go there or suffer the penalty of seeing his business fall off. Claire innocently believed it all. When her husband had gone, she felt sad for a moment. She would have liked so much to keep him with her or to go out leaning on his arm, to seek enjoyment with him. But the sight of the child, cooing in front of the fire and kicking her little pink feet while she was being undressed, speedily soothed the mother. Then the eloquent word "business," the merchant's reason of state, was always at hand to help her to resign herself.

Georges and Sidonie met at the theatre. Their feeling at first when they were together was one of satisfied vanity. People stared at them a great deal. She was really pretty now, and her irregular but attractive features, which required the aid of all the eccentricities of the prevailing style in order to produce their full effect, adapted themselves to them so perfectly that you would have said they were invented expressly for her. In a few moments they went away, and Madame Dobson was left alone in the box. They had hired a small suite on the Avenue Gabriel, near the 'rond-point' of the Champs Elysees—the dream of the young women at the Le Mire establishment—two luxuriously furnished, quiet rooms, where the silence of the wealthy quarter, disturbed only by passing carriages, formed a blissful surrounding for their love.

Little by little, when she had become accustomed to her sin, she conceived the most audacious whims. From her old working-days she had retained in the depths of her memory the names of public balls, of famous restaurants, where she was eager to go now, just as she took pleasure in causing the doors to be thrown open for her at the establishments of the great dressmakers, whose signs only she had known in her earlier days. For what she sought above all else in this liaison was revenge for the

sorrows and humiliations of her youth. Nothing delighted her so much, for example, when returning from an evening drive in the Bois, as a supper at the Cafe Anglais with the sounds of luxurious vice around her. From these repeated excursions she brought back peculiarities of speech and behavior, equivocal songs, and a style of dress that imported into the bourgeois atmosphere of the old commercial house an accurate reproduction of the most advanced type of the Paris cocotte of that period.

At the factory they began to suspect something. The women of the people, even the poorest, are so quick at picking a costume to pieces! When Madame Risler went out, about three o'clock, fifty pairs of sharp, envious eyes, lying in ambush at the windows of the polishing-shop, watched her pass, penetrating to the lowest depths of her guilty conscience through her black velvet dolman and her cuirass of sparkling jet.

Although she did not suspect it, all the secrets of that mad brain were flying about her like the ribbons that played upon her bare neck; and her daintily-shod feet, in their bronzed boots with ten buttons, told the story of all sorts of clandestine expeditions, of the carpeted stairways they ascended at night on their way to supper, and the warm fur robes in which they were wrapped when the coupe made the circuit of the lake in the darkness dotted with lanterns.

The work-women laughed sneeringly and whispered:

"Just look at that Tata Bebel! A fine way to dress to go out. She don't rig herself up like that to go to mass, that's sure! To think that it ain't three years since she used to start for the shop every morning in an old waterproof, and two sous' worth of roasted chestnuts in her pockets to keep her fingers warm. Now she rides in her carriage."

And amid the talc dust and the roaring of the stoves, red-hot in winter and summer alike, more than one poor girl reflected on the caprice of chance in absolutely transforming a woman's existence, and began to dream vaguely of a magnificent future which might perhaps be in store for herself without her suspecting it.

In everybody's opinion Risler was a dishonored husband. Two assistants in the printing-room—faithful patrons of the Folies Dramatiques— declared that they had seen Madame Risler several times at their theatre, accompanied by some escort who kept out of sight at the rear of the box. Pere Achille, too, told of amazing things. That Sidonie had a lover, that she had several lovers, in fact, no one entertained a doubt. But no one had as yet thought of Fromont jeune.

And yet she showed no prudence whatever in her relations with him. On the contrary, she seemed to make a parade of them; it may be that that was what saved them. How many times she accosted him boldly on the steps to agree upon a rendezvous for the evening! How many times she had amused herself in making him shudder by looking into his eyes before every one! When the first confusion had passed, Georges was grateful to her for these exhibitions of audacity, which he attributed to the intensity of her passion. He was mistaken.

What she would have liked, although she did not admit it to herself, would have been to have Claire see them, to have her draw aside the curtain at her window, to have her conceive a suspicion of what was passing. She needed that in order to be perfectly happy: that her rival should be unhappy. But her wish was ungratified; Claire Fromont noticed nothing and lived, as did Risler, in imperturbable serenity.

Only Sigismond, the old cashier, was really ill at ease. And yet he was not thinking of Sidonie when, with his pen behind his ear, he paused a moment in his work and gazed fixedly through his grating at the drenched soil of the little garden. He was thinking solely of his master, of Monsieur "Chorche," who was drawing a great deal of money now for his current expenses and sowing confusion in all his books. Every time it was some new excuse. He would come to the little wicket with an unconcerned air:

"Have you a little money, my good Planus? I was worsted again at bouillotte last night, and I don't want to send to the bank for such a trifle."

Sigismond Planus would open his cash-box, with an air of regret, to get the sum requested, and he would remember with terror a certain day when Monsieur Georges, then only twenty years old, had confessed to his uncle that he owed several thousand francs in gambling debts. The elder man thereupon conceived a violent antipathy for the club and contempt for all its members. A rich tradesman who was a member happened to come to the factory one day, and Sigismond said to him with brutal frankness:

"The devil take your 'Cercle du Chateau d'Eau!' Monsieur Georges has left more than thirty thousand francs there in two months."

The other began to laugh.

"Why, you're greatly mistaken, Pere Planus—it's at least three months since we have seen your master."

The cashier did not pursue the conversation; but a terrible thought took up its abode in his mind, and he turned it over and over all day long.

If Georges did not go to the club, where did he pass his evenings? Where did he spend so much money?

There was evidently a woman at the bottom of the affair.

As soon as that idea occurred to him, Sigismond Planus began to tremble seriously for his cash-box. That old bear from the canton of Berne, a confirmed bachelor, had a terrible dread of women in general and Parisian women in particular. He deemed it his duty, first of all, in order to set his conscience at rest, to warn Risler. He did it at first in rather a vague way.

"Monsieur Georges is spending a great deal of money," he said to him one day.

Risler exhibited no surprise.

"What do you expect me to do, my old Sigismond? It is his right."

And the honest fellow meant what he said. In his eyes Fromont jeune was the absolute master of the establishment. It would have been a fine thing, and no mistake, for him, an ex-draughtsman, to venture to make any comments. The cashier dared say no more until the day when a messenger came from a great shawl-house with a bill for six thousand francs for a cashmere shawl.

He went to Georges in his office.

"Shall I pay it, Monsieur?"

Georges Fromont was a little annoyed. Sidonie had forgotten to tell him of this latest purchase; she used no ceremony with him now.

"Pay it, pay it, Pere Planus," he said, with a shade of embarrassment, and added: "Charge it to the account of Fromont jeune. It is a commission intrusted to me by a friend."

That evening, as Sigismond was lighting his little lamp, he saw Risler crossing the garden, and tapped on the window to call him.

"It's a woman," he said, under his breath. "I have the proof of it now."

As he uttered the awful words "a woman" his voice shook with alarm and was drowned in the great uproar of the factory. The sounds of the work in progress had a sinister meaning to the unhappy cashier at that moment. It seemed to him as if all the whirring machinery, the great chimney pouring forth its clouds of smoke, the noise of the workmen at their different tasks—as if all this tumult and bustle and fatigue were for the benefit of a mysterious little being, dressed in velvet and adorned with jewels.

Risler laughed at him and refused to believe him. He had long been acquainted with his compatriot's mania for detecting in everything the pernicious influence of woman. And yet Planus's words sometimes recurred to his thoughts, especially in the evening when Sidonie, after all the commotion attendant upon the completion of her toilette, went away to the theatre with Madame Dobson, leaving the apartment empty as soon as her long train had swept across the threshold. Candles burning in front of the mirrors, divers little toilette articles scattered about and thrown aside, told of extravagant caprices and a reckless expenditure of money. Risler thought nothing of all that; but, when he heard Georges's carriage rolling through the courtyard, he had a feeling of discomfort at the thought of Madame Fromont passing her evenings entirely alone. Poor woman! Suppose what Planus said were true!

Suppose Georges really had a second establishment! Oh, it would be frightful!

Thereupon, instead of beginning to work, he would go softly downstairs and ask if Madame were visible, deeming it his duty to keep her company.

The little girl was always in bed, but the little cap, the blue shoes, were still lying in front of the fire. Claire was either reading or working, with her silent mother beside her, always rubbing or dusting with feverish energy, exhausting herself by blowing on the case of her watch, and nervously taking the same

thing up and putting it down again ten times in succession, with the obstinate persistence of mania. Nor was honest Risler a very entertaining companion; but that did not prevent the young woman from welcoming him kindly. She knew all that was said about Sidonie in the factory; and although she did not believe half of it, the sight of the poor man, whom his wife left alone so often, moved her heart to pity. Mutual compassion formed the basis of that placid friendship, and nothing could be more touching than these two deserted ones, one pitying the other and each trying to divert the other's thoughts.

Seated at the small, brightly lighted table in the centre of the salon, Risler would gradually yield to the influence of the warmth of the fire and the harmony of his surroundings. He found there articles of furniture with which he had been familiar for twenty years, the portrait of his former employer; and his dear Madame Chorche, bending over some little piece of needle work at his side, seemed to him even younger and more lovable among all those old souvenirs. From time to time she would rise to go and look at the child sleeping in the adjoining room, whose soft breathing they could hear in the intervals of silence. Without fully realizing it, Risler felt more comfortable and warmer there than in his own apartment; for on certain days those attractive rooms, where the doors were forever being thrown open for hurried exits or returns, gave him the impression of a hall without doors or windows, open to the four winds. His rooms were a camping-ground; this was a home. A care-taking hand caused order and refinement to reign everywhere. The chairs seemed to be talking together in undertones, the fire burned with a delightful sound, and Mademoiselle Fromont's little cap retained in every bow of its blue ribbons suggestions of sweet smiles and baby glances.

And while Claire was thinking that such an excellent man deserved a better companion in life, Risler, watching the calm and lovely face turned toward him, the intelligent, kindly eyes, asked himself who the hussy could be for whom Georges Fromont neglected such an adorable woman.

CHAPTER XI

THE INVENTORY

The house in which old Planus lived at Montrouge adjoined the one which the Chebes had occupied for some time. There was the same ground floor with three windows, and a single floor above, the same garden with its latticework fence, the same borders of green box. There the old cashier lived with his sister. He took the first omnibus that left the office in the morning, returned at dinner-time, and on Sundays remained at home, tending his flowers and his poultry. The old maid was his housekeeper and did all the cooking and sewing. A happier couple never lived.

Celibates both, they were bound together by an equal hatred of marriage. The sister abhorred all men, the brother looked upon all women with suspicion; but they adored each other, each considering the other an exception to the general perversity of the sex.

In speaking of him she always said: "Monsieur Planus, my brother!"—and he, with the same affectionate solemnity, interspersed all his sentences with "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister!" To those two retiring and innocent creatures, Paris, of which they knew nothing, although they visited it every day, was a den of monsters of two varieties, bent upon doing one another the utmost possible injury; and whenever, amid the gossip of the quarter, a conjugal drama came to their ears, each of them, beset by his or her own idea, blamed a different culprit.

"It is the husband's fault," would be the verdict of "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister."

"It is the wife's fault," "Monsieur Planus, my brother," would reply.

"Oh! the men—"

"Oh! the women—"

That was their one never-failing subject of discussion in those rare hours of idleness which old Sigismond set aside in his busy day, which was as carefully ruled off as his account-books. For some time past the discussions between the brother and sister had been marked by extraordinary animation. They were deeply interested in what was taking place at the factory. The sister was full of pity for Madame Fromont and considered her husband's conduct altogether outrageous; as for Sigismond, he could find no words bitter enough for the unknown trollop who sent bills for six-thousand-franc shawls

to be paid from his cashbox. In his eyes, the honor and fair fame of the old house he had served since his youth were at stake.

"What will become of us?" he repeated again and again. "Oh! these women—"

One day Mademoiselle Planus sat by the fire with her knitting, waiting for her brother.

The table had been laid for half an hour, and the old lady was beginning to be worried by such unheard-of tardiness, when Sigismond entered with a most distressed face, and without a word, which was contrary to all his habits.

He waited until the door was shut tight, then said in a low voice, in response to his sister's disturbed and questioning expression:

"I have some news. I know who the woman is who is doing her best to ruin us."

Lowering his voice still more, after glancing about at the silent walls of their little dining-room, he uttered a name so unexpected that Mademoiselle Planus made him repeat it.

"Is it possible?"

"It is the truth."

And, despite his grief, he had almost a triumphant air.

His old sister could not believe it. Such a refined, polite person, who had received her with so much cordiality!—How could any one imagine such a thing?

"I have proofs," said Sigismond Planus.

Thereupon he told her how Pere Achille had met Sidonie and Georges one night at eleven o'clock, just as they entered a small furnished lodging-house in the Montmartre quarter; and he was a man who never lied. They had known him for a long while. Besides, others had met them. Nothing else was talked about at the factory. Risler alone suspected nothing.

"But it is your duty to tell him," declared Mademoiselle Planus.

The cashier's face assumed a grave expression.

"It is a very delicate matter. In the first place, who knows whether he would believe me? There are blind men so blind that—And then, by interfering between the two partners, I risk the loss of my place. Oh! the women—the women! When I think how happy Risler might have been. When I sent for him to come to Paris with his brother, he hadn't a sou; and to-day he is at the head of one of the first houses in Paris. Do you suppose that he would be content with that? Oh! no, of course not! Monsieur must marry. As if any one needed to marry! And, worse yet, he marries a Parisian woman, one of those frowsy-haired chits that are the ruin of an honest house, when he had at his hand a fine girl, of almost his own age, a countrywoman, used to work, and well put together, as you might say!"

"Mademoiselle Planus, my sister," to whose physical structure he alluded, had a magnificent opportunity to exclaim, "Oh! the men, the men!" but she was silent. It was a very delicate question, and perhaps, if Risler had chosen in time, he might have been the only one.

Old Sigismond continued:

"And this is what we have come to. For three months the leading wall-paper factory in Paris has been tied to the petticoats of that good-for-nothing. You should see how the money flies. All day long I do nothing but open my wicket to meet Monsieur Georges's calls. He always applies to me, because at his banker's too much notice would be taken of it, whereas in our office money comes and goes, comes in and goes out. But look out for the inventory! We shall have some pretty figures to show at the end of the year. The worst part of the whole business is that Risler won't listen to anything. I have warned him several times: 'Look out, Monsieur Georges is making a fool of himself for some woman.' He either turns away with a shrug, or else he tells me that it is none of his business and that Fromont Jeune is the master. Upon my word, one would almost think—one would almost think—"

The cashier did not finish his sentence; but his silence was pregnant with unspoken thoughts.

The old maid was appalled; but, like most women under such circumstances, instead of seeking a remedy for the evil, she wandered off into a maze of regrets, conjectures, and retrospective lamentations. What a misfortune that they had not known it sooner when they had the Chebes for neighbors. Madame Chebe was such an honorable woman. They might have put the matter before her

so that she would keep an eye on Sidonie and talk seriously to her.

"Indeed, that's a good idea," Sigismond interrupted. "You must go to the Rue du Mail and tell her parents. I thought at first of writing to little Frantz. He always had a great deal of influence over his brother, and he's the only person on earth who could say certain things to him. But Frantz is so far away. And then it would be such a terrible thing to do. I can't help pitying that unlucky Risler, though. No! the best way is to tell Madame Chebe. Will you undertake to do it, sister?"

It was a dangerous commission. Mademoiselle Planus made some objections, but she never had been able to resist her brother's wishes, and the desire to be of service to their old friend Risler assisted materially in persuading her.

Thanks to his son-in-law's kindness, M. Chebe had succeeded in gratifying his latest whim. For three months past he had been living at his famous warehouse on the Rue du Mail, and a great sensation was created in the quarter by that shop without merchandise, the shutters of which were taken down in the morning and put up again at night, as in wholesale houses. Shelves had been placed all around the walls, there was a new counter, a safe, a huge pair of scales. In a word, M. Chebe possessed all the requisites of a business of some sort, but did not know as yet just what business he would choose.

He pondered the subject all day as he walked to and fro across the shop, encumbered with several large pieces of bedroom furniture which they had been unable to get into the back room; he pondered it, too, as he stood on his doorstep, with his pen behind his ear, and feasted his eyes delightedly on the hurly-burly of Parisian commerce. The clerks who passed with their packages of samples under their arms, the vans of the express companies, the omnibuses, the porters, the wheelbarrows, the great bales of merchandise at the neighboring doors, the packages of rich stuffs and trimmings which were dragged in the mud before being consigned to those underground regions, those dark holes stuffed with treasures, where the fortune of business lies in embryo—all these things delighted M. Chebe.

He amused himself guessing at the contents of the bales and was first at the fray when some passer-by received a heavy package upon his feet, or the horses attached to a dray, spirited and restive, made the long vehicle standing across the street an obstacle to circulation. He had, moreover, the thousand-and-one distractions of the petty tradesman without customers, the heavy showers, the accidents, the thefts, the disputes.

At the end of the day M. Chebe, dazed, bewildered, worn out by the labor of other people, would stretch himself out in his easy-chair and say to his wife, as he wiped his forehead:

"That's the kind of life I need—an active life."

Madame Chebe would smile softly without replying. Accustomed as she was to all her husband's whims, she had made herself as comfortable as possible in a back room with an outlook upon a dark yard, consoling herself with reflections on the former prosperity of her parents and her daughter's wealth; and, being always neatly dressed, she had succeeded already in acquiring the respect of neighbors and tradesmen.

She asked nothing more than not to be confounded with the wives of workingmen, often less poor than herself, and to be allowed to retain, in spite of everything, a petty bourgeois superiority. That was her constant thought; and so the back room in which she lived, and where it was dark at three in the afternoon, was resplendent with order and cleanliness. During the day the bed became a couch, an old shawl did duty as a tablecloth, the fireplace, hidden by a screen, served as a pantry, and the meals were cooked in modest retirement on a stove no larger than a foot-warmer. A tranquil life—that was the dream of the poor woman, who was continually tormented by the whims of an uncongenial companion.

In the early days of his tenancy, M. Chebe had caused these words to be inscribed in letters a foot long on the fresh paint of his shop-front:

COMMISSION—EXPORTATION

No specifications. His neighbors sold tulle, broadcloth, linen; he was inclined to sell everything, but could not make up his mind just what. With what arguments did his indecision lead him to favor Madame Chebe as they sat together in the evening!

"I don't know anything about linen; but when you come to broadcloth, I understand that. Only, if I go into broadcloths I must have a man to travel; for the best kinds come from Sedan and Elbeuf. I say nothing about calicoes; summer is the time for them. As for tulle, that's out of the question; the season is too far advanced."

He usually brought his discourse to a close with the words:

"The night will bring counsel—let us go to bed."

And to bed he would go, to his wife's great relief.

After three or four months of this life, M. Chebe began to tire of it. The pains in the head, the dizzy fits gradually returned. The quarter was noisy and unhealthy: besides, business was at a standstill. Nothing was to be done in any line, broadcloths, tissues, or anything else.

It was just at the period of this new crisis that "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister," called to speak about Sidonie.

The old maid had said to herself on the way, "I must break it gently." But, like all shy people, she relieved herself of her burden in the first words she spoke after entering the house.

It was a stunning blow. When she heard the accusation made against her daughter, Madame Chebe rose in indignation. No one could ever make her believe such a thing. Her poor Sidonie was the victim of an infamous slander.

M. Chebe, for his part, adopted a very lofty tone, with significant phrases and motions of the head, taking everything to himself as was his custom. How could any one suppose that his child, a Chebe, the daughter of an honorable business man known for thirty years on the street, was capable of Nonsense!

Mademoiselle Planus insisted. It was a painful thing to her to be considered a gossip, a hawker of unsavory stories. But they had incontestable proofs. It was no longer a secret to anybody.

"And even suppose it were true," cried M. Chebe, furious at her persistence. "Is it for us to worry about it? Our daughter is married. She lives a long way from her parents. It is for her husband, who is much older than she, to advise and guide her. Does he so much as think of doing it?"

Upon that the little man began to inveigh against his son-in-law, that cold-blooded Swiss, who passed his life in his office devising machines, refused to accompany his wife into society, and preferred his old- bachelor habits, his pipe and his brewery, to everything else.

You should have seen the air of aristocratic disdain with which M. Chebe pronounced the word "brewery!" And yet almost every evening he went there to meet Risler, and overwhelmed him with reproaches if he once failed to appear at the rendezvous.

Behind all this verbiage the merchant of the Rue du Mail—"Commission- Exportation"—had a very definite idea. He wished to give up his shop, to retire from business, and for some time he had been thinking of going to see Sidonie, in order to interest her in his new schemes. That was not the time, therefore, to make disagreeable scenes, to prate about paternal authority and conjugal honor. As for Madame Chebe, being somewhat less confident than before of her daughter's virtue, she took refuge in the most profound silence. The poor woman wished that she were deaf and blind—that she never had known Mademoiselle Planus.

Like all persons who have been very unhappy, she loved a benumbed existence with a semblance of tranquillity, and ignorance seemed to her preferable to everything. As if life were not sad enough, good heavens! And then, after all, Sidonie had always been a good girl; why should she not be a good woman?

Night was falling. M. Chebe rose gravely to close the shutters of the shop and light a gas-jet which illumined the bare walls, the empty, polished shelves, and the whole extraordinary place, which reminded one strongly of the day following a failure. With his lips closed disdainfully, in his determination to remain silent, he seemed to say to the old lady, "Night has come—it is time for you to go home." And all the while they could hear Madame Chebe sobbing in the back room, as she went to and fro preparing supper.

Mademoiselle Planus got no further satisfaction from her visit.

"Well?" queried old Sigismond, who was impatiently awaiting her return.

"They wouldn't believe me, and politely showed me the door."

She had tears in her eyes at the thought of her humiliation.

The old man's face flushed, and he said in a grave voice, taking his sister's hand:

"Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, I ask your pardon for having made you take this step; but the honor of the house of Fromont was at stake."

From that moment Sigismond became more and more depressed. His cash-box no longer seemed to him safe or secure. Even when Fromont Jeune did not ask him for money, he was afraid, and he summed up all his apprehensions in four words which came continually to his lips when talking with his sister:

"I ha no gonfidence," he would say, in his hoarse Swiss patois.

Thinking always of his cash-box, he dreamed sometimes that it had broken apart at all the joints, and insisted on remaining open, no matter how much he turned the key; or else that a high wind had scattered all the papers, notes, cheques, and bills, and that he ran after them all over the factory, tiring himself out in the attempt to pick them up.

In the daytime, as he sat behind his grating in the silence of his office, he imagined that a little white mouse had eaten its way through the bottom of the box and was gnawing and destroying all its contents, growing plumper and prettier as the work of destruction went on.

So that, when Sidonie appeared on the steps about the middle of the afternoon, in her pretty Parisian plumage, old Sigismond shuddered with rage. In his eyes it was the ruin of the house that stood there, ruin in a magnificent costume, with its little coupe at the door, and the placid bearing of a happy coquette.

Madame Risler had no suspicion that, at that window on the ground floor, sat an untiring foe who watched her slightest movements, the most trivial details of her life, the going and coming of her music-teacher, the arrival of the fashionable dressmaker in the morning, all the boxes that were brought to the house, and the laced cap of the employe of the Magasin du Louvre, whose heavy wagon stopped at the gate with a jingling of bells, like a diligence drawn by stout horses which were dragging the house of Fromont to bankruptcy at break-neck speed.

Sigismond counted the packages, weighed them with his eye as they passed, and gazed inquisitively into Risler's apartments through the open windows. The carpets that were shaken with a great noise, the jardinieres that were brought into the sunlight filled with fragile, unseasonable flowers, rare and expensive, the gorgeous hangings—none of these things escaped his notice.

The new acquisitions of the household stared him in the face, reminding him of some request for a large amount.

But the one thing that he studied more carefully than all else was Risler's countenance.

In his view that woman was in a fair way to change his friend, the best, the most upright of men, into a shameless villain. There was no possibility of doubt that Risler knew of his dishonor, and submitted to it. He was paid to keep quiet.

Certainly there was something monstrous in such a supposition. But it is the tendency of innocent natures, when they are made acquainted with evil for the first time, to go at once too far, beyond reason. When he was once convinced of the treachery of Georges and Sidonie, Risler's degradation seemed to the cashier less impossible of comprehension. On what other theory could his indifference, in the face of his partner's heavy expenditures, be explained?

The excellent Sigismond, in his narrow, stereotyped honesty, could not understand the delicacy of Risler's heart. At the same time, the methodical bookkeeper's habit of thought and his clear-sightedness in business were a thousand leagues from that absent-minded, flighty character, half-artist, half-inventor. He judged him by himself, having no conception of the condition of a man with the disease of invention, absorbed by a fixed idea. Such men are somnambulists. They look, but do not see, their eyes being turned within.

It was Sigismond's belief that Risler did see. That belief made the old cashier very unhappy. He began by staring at his friend whenever he entered the counting-room; then, discouraged by his immovable indifference, which he believed to be wilful and premeditated, covering his face like a mask, he adopted the plan of turning away and fumbling among his papers to avoid those false glances, and keeping his eyes fixed on the garden paths or the interlaced wires of the grating when he spoke to him. Even his words were confused and distorted, like his glances. No one could say positively to whom he was talking.

No more friendly smiles, no more reminiscences as they turned over the leaves of the cash-book together.

"This was the year you came to the factory. Your first increase of pay.

Do you remember? We dined at Douix's that day. And then the Cafe des Aveugles in the evening, eh? What a debauch!"

At last Risler noticed the strange coolness that had sprung up between Sigismond and himself. He mentioned it to his wife.

For some time past she had felt that antipathy prowling about her. Sometimes, as she crossed the courtyard, she was oppressed, as it were, by malevolent glances which caused her to turn nervously toward the old cashier's corner. This estrangement between the friends alarmed her, and she very quickly determined to put her husband on his guard against Planus's unpleasant remarks.

"Don't you see that he is jealous of you, of your position? A man who was once his equal, now his superior, he can't stand that. But why bother one's head about all these spiteful creatures? Why, I am surrounded by them here."

Risler looked at her with wide-open eyes:—"You?"

"Why, yes, it is easy enough to see that all these people detest me. They bear little Chebe a grudge because she has become Madame Risler Aine. Heaven only knows all the outrageous things that are said about me! And your cashier doesn't keep his tongue in his pocket, I assure you. What a spiteful fellow he is!"

These few words had their effect. Risler, indignant, but too proud to complain, met coldness with coldness. Those two honest men, each intensely distrustful of the other, could no longer meet without a painful sensation, so that, after a while, Risler ceased to go to the counting-room at all. It was not difficult for him, as Fromont Jeune had charge of all financial matters. His month's allowance was carried to him on the thirtieth of each month. This arrangement afforded Sidonie and Georges additional facilities, and opportunity for all sorts of underhand dealing.

She thereupon turned her attention to the completion of her programme of a life of luxury. She lacked a country house. In her heart she detested the trees, the fields, the country roads that cover you with dust. "The most dismal things on earth," she used to say. But Claire Fromont passed the summer at Savigny. As soon as the first fine days arrived, the trunks were packed and the curtains taken down on the floor below; and a great furniture van, with the little girl's blue bassinet rocking on top, set off for the grandfather's chateau. Then, one morning, the mother, grandmother, child, and nurse, a medley of white gowns and light veils, would drive away behind two fast horses toward the sunny lawns and the pleasant shade of the avenues.

At that season Paris was ugly, depopulated; and although Sidonie loved it even in the summer, which heats it like a furnace, it troubled her to think that all the fashion and wealth of Paris were driving by the seashore under their light umbrellas, and would make their outing an excuse for a thousand new inventions, for original styles of the most risque sort, which would permit one to show that one has a pretty ankle and long, curly chestnut hair of one's own.

The seashore bathing resorts! She could not think of them; Risler could not leave Paris.

How about buying a country house? They had not the means. To be sure, there was the lover, who would have asked nothing better than to gratify this latest whim; but a country house cannot be concealed like a bracelet or a shawl. The husband must be induced to accept it. That was not an easy matter; however, they might venture to try it with Risler.

To pave the way, she talked to him incessantly about a little nook in the country, not too expensive, very near Paris. Risler listened with a smile. He thought of the high grass, of the orchard filled with fine fruit-trees, being already tormented by the longing to possess which comes with wealth; but, as he was prudent, he said:

"We will see, we will see. Let us wait till the end of the year."

The end of the year, that is to say, the striking of the balance-sheet.

The balance-sheet! That is the magic word. All through the year we go on and on in the eddying whirl of business. Money comes and goes, circulates, attracts other money, vanishes; and the fortune of the firm, like a slippery, gleaming snake, always in motion, expands, contracts, diminishes, or increases, and it is impossible to know our condition until there comes a moment of rest. Not until the inventory shall we know the truth, and whether the year, which seems to have been prosperous, has really been so.

The account of stock is usually taken late in December, between Christmas and New Year's Day. As it

requires much extra labor to prepare it, everybody works far into the night. The whole establishment is alert. The lamps remain lighted in the offices long after the doors are closed, and seem to share in the festal atmosphere peculiar to that last week of the year, when so many windows are illuminated for family gatherings. Every one, even to the least important 'employee' of the firm, is interested in the results of the inventory. The increases of salary, the New Year's presents, depend upon those blessed figures. And so, while the vast interests of a wealthy house are trembling in the balance, the wives and children and aged parents of the clerks, in their fifth-floor tenements or poor apartments in the suburbs, talk of nothing but the inventory, the results of which will make themselves felt either by a greatly increased need of economy or by some purchase, long postponed, which the New Year's gift will make possible at last.

On the premises of Fromont Jeune and Risler Aine, Sigismond Planus is the god of the establishment at that season, and his little office a sanctuary where all the clerks perform their devotions. In the silence of the sleeping factory, the heavy pages of the great books rustle as they are turned, and names called aloud cause search to be made in other books. Pens scratch. The old cashier, surrounded by his lieutenants, has a businesslike, awe-inspiring air. From time to time Fromont Jeune, on the point of going out in his carriage, looks in for a moment, with a cigar in his mouth, neatly gloved and ready for the street. He walks slowly, on tiptoe, puts his face to the grating:

"Well!—are you getting on all right?"

Sigismond gives a grunt, and the young master takes his leave, afraid to ask any further questions. He knows from the cashier's expression that the showing will be a bad one.

In truth, since the days of the Revolution, when there was fighting in the very courtyard of the factory, so pitiable an inventory never had been seen in the Fromont establishment. Receipts and expenditures balanced each other. The general expense account had eaten up everything, and, furthermore, Fromont Jeune was indebted to the firm in a large sum. You should have seen old Planus's air of consternation when, on the 31st of December, he went up to Georges's office to make report of his labors.

Georges took a very cheerful view of the matter. Everything would go better next year. And to restore the cashier's good humor he gave him an extraordinary bonus of a thousand francs, instead of the five hundred his uncle used always to give. Everybody felt the effects of that generous impulse, and, in the universal satisfaction, the deplorable results of the yearly accounting were very soon forgotten. As for Risler, Georges chose to take it upon himself to inform him as to the situation.

When he entered his partner's little closet, which was lighted from above by a window in the ceiling, so that the light fell directly upon the subject of the inventor's meditations, Fromont hesitated a moment, filled with shame and remorse for what he was about to do.

The other, when he heard the door, turned joyfully toward his partner.

"Chorche, Chorche, my dear fellow—I have got it, our press. There are still a few little things to think out. But no matter! I am sure now of my invention: you will see—you will see! Ah! the Prochassons can experiment all they choose. With the Risler Press we will crush all rivalry."

"Bravo, my comrade!" replied Fromont Jeune. "So much for the future; but you don't seem to think about the present. What about this inventory?"

"Ah, yes! to be sure. I had forgotten all about it. It isn't very satisfactory, is it?"

He said that because of the somewhat disturbed and embarrassed expression on Georges's face.

"Why, yes, on the contrary, it is very satisfactory indeed," was the reply. "We have every reason to be satisfied, especially as this is our first year together. We have forty thousand francs each for our share of the profits; and as I thought you might need a little money to give your wife a New Year's present—"

Ashamed to meet the eyes of the honest man whose confidence he was betraying, Fromont jeune placed a bundle of cheques and notes on the table.

Risler was deeply moved for a moment. So much money at one time for him! His mind dwelt upon the generosity of these Fromonts, who had made him what he was; then he thought of his little Sidonie, of the longing which she had so often expressed and which he would now be able to gratify.

With tears in his eyes and a happy smile on his lips, he held out both hands to his partner.

"I am very happy! I am very happy!"

That was his favorite phrase on great occasions. Then he pointed to the bundles of bank notes spread out before him in the narrow bands which are used to confine those fugitive documents, always ready to fly away.

"Do you know what that is?" he said to Georges, with an air of triumph.
"That is Sidonie's house in the country!"

CHAPTER XII

A LETTER

"TO M. FRANTZ RISLER,

"Engineer of the Compagnie Francaise, "Ismailia, Egypt.

Frantz, my boy, it is old Sigismond who is writing to you. If I knew better how to put my ideas on paper, I should have a very long story to tell you. But this infernal French is too hard, and Sigismond Planus is good for nothing away from his figures. So I will come to the point at once.

"Affairs in your brother's house are not as they should be. That woman is false to him with his partner. She has made her husband a laughing-stock, and if this goes on she will cause him to be looked upon as a rascal. Frantz, my boy, you must come home at once. You are the only one who can speak to Risler and open his eyes about that little Sidonie. He would not believe any of us. Ask leave of absence at once, and come.

"I know that you have your bread to earn out there, and your future to assure; but a man of honor should think more of the name his parents gave him than of anything else. And I tell you that if you do not come at once, a time will come when the name of Risler will be so overwhelmed with shame that you will not dare to bear it.

SIGISMOND PLANUS,
"Cashier."

CHAPTER XIII

THE JUDGE

Those persons who live always in doors, confined by work or infirmity to a chair by the window, take a deep interest in the people who pass, just as they make for themselves a horizon of the neighboring walls, roofs, and windows.

Nailed to their place, they live in the life of the streets; and the busy men and women who pass within their range of vision, sometimes every day at the same hour, do not suspect that they serve as the mainspring of other lives, that interested eyes watch for their coming and miss them if they happen to go to their destination by another road.

The Delobelles, left to themselves all day, indulged in this sort of silent observation. Their window was narrow, and the mother, whose eyes were beginning to weaken as the result of hard usage, sat near the light against the drawn muslin curtain; her daughter's large armchair was a little farther away. She announced the approach of their daily passers-by. It was a diversion, a subject of conversation; and the long hours of toil seemed shorter, marked off by the regular appearance of people who were as busy as they. There were two little sisters, a gentleman in a gray overcoat, a child who was taken to school and taken home again, and an old government clerk with a wooden leg, whose step on the sidewalk had a sinister sound.

They hardly ever saw him; he passed after dark, but they heard him, and the sound always struck the

little cripple's ears like a harsh echo of her own mournful thoughts. All these street friends unconsciously occupied a large place in the lives of the two women. If it rained, they would say:

"They will get wet. I wonder whether the child got home before the shower." And when the season changed, when the March sun inundated the sidewalks or the December snow covered them with its white mantle and its patches of black mud, the appearance of a new garment on one of their friends caused the two recluses to say to themselves, "It is summer," or, "winter has come."

Now, on a certain evening in May, one of those soft, luminous evenings when life flows forth from the houses into the street through the open windows, Desiree and her mother were busily at work with needles and fingers, exhausting the daylight to its last ray, before lighting the lamp. They could hear the shouts of children playing in the yards, the muffled notes of pianos, and the voice of a street peddler, drawing his half-empty wagon. One could smell the springtime in the air, a vague odor of hyacinth and lilac.

Mamma Delobelle had laid aside her work, and, before closing the window, leaned upon the sill listening to all these noises of a great toiling city, taking delight in walking through the streets when its day's work was ended. From time to time she spoke to her daughter, without turning her head.

"Ah! there's Monsieur Sigismond. How early he leaves the factory to- night! It may be because the days are lengthening so fast, but I don't think it can be seven o'clock. Who can that man be with the old cashier?—What a funny thing!—One would say—Why, yes!—One would say it was Monsieur Frantz. But that isn't possible. Monsieur Frantz is a long way from here at this moment; and then he had no beard. That man looks like him all the same! Just look, my dear."

But "my dear" does not leave her chair; she does not even stir. With her eyes staring into vacancy, her needle in the air, arrested in its pretty, industrious movement, she has gone away to the blue country, that wonderful country whither one may go at will, without thought of any infirmity. The name "Frantz," uttered mechanically by her mother, because of a chance resemblance, represented to her a whole lifetime of illusions, of fervent hopes, ephemeral as the flush that rose to her cheeks when, on returning home at night, he used to come and chat with her a moment. How far away that was already! To think that he used to live in the little room near hers, that they used to hear his step on the stairs and the noise made by his table when he dragged it to the window to draw! What sorrow and what happiness she used to feel when he talked to her of Sidonie, sitting on the low chair at her knees, while she mounted her birds and her insects.

As she worked, she used to cheer and comfort him, for Sidonie had caused poor Frantz many little griefs before the last great one. His tone when he spoke of Sidonie, the sparkle in his eyes when he thought of her, fascinated Desiree in spite of everything, so that when he went away in despair, he left behind him a love even greater than that he carried with him—a love which the unchanging room, the sedentary, stagnant life, kept intact with all its bitter perfume, whereas his would gradually fade away and vanish in the fresh air of the outer world.

It grows darker and darker. A great wave of melancholy envelops the poor girl with the falling darkness of that balmy evening. The blissful gleam from the past dies away as the last glimmer of daylight vanishes in the narrow recess of the window, where her mother still stands leaning on the sill.

Suddenly the door opens. Some one is there whose features can not be distinguished. Who can it be? The Delobelles never receive calls. The mother, who has turned her head, thinks at first that some one has come from the shop to get the week's work.

"My husband has just gone to your place, Monsieur. We have nothing here. Monsieur Delobelle has taken everything."

The man comes forward without speaking, and as he approaches the window his features can be distinguished. He is a tall, solidly built fellow with a bronzed face, a thick, red beard, and a deep voice, and is a little slow of speech.

"Ah! so you don't know me, Mamma Delobelle?"

"Oh! I knew you at once, Monsieur Frantz," said Desiree, very calmly, in a cold, sedate tone.

"Merciful heavens! it's Monsieur Frantz."

Quickly Mamma Delobelle runs to the lamp, lights it, and closes the window.

"What! it is you, is it, my dear Frantz?" How coolly she says it, the little rascal! "I knew you at once." Ah, the little iceberg! She will always be the same.

A veritable little iceberg, in very truth. She is very pale, and her hand as it lies in Frantz's is white and cold.

She seems to him improved, even more refined than before. He seems to her superb, as always, with a melancholy, weary expression in the depths of his eyes, which makes him more of a man than when he went away.

His weariness is due to his hurried journey, undertaken immediately on his receipt of Sigismond's letter. Spurred on by the word dishonor, he had started instantly, without awaiting his leave of absence, risking his place and his future prospects; and, hurrying from steamships to railways, he had not stopped until he reached Paris. Reason enough for being weary, especially when one has travelled in eager haste to reach one's destination, and when one's mind has been continually beset by impatient thoughts, making the journey ten times over in incessant doubt and fear and perplexity.

His melancholy began further back. It began on the day when the woman he loved refused to marry him, to become, six months later, the wife of his brother; two terrible blows in close succession, the second even more painful than the first. It is true that, before entering into that marriage, Risler had written to him to ask his permission to be happy, and had written in such touching, affectionate terms that the violence of the blow was somewhat diminished; and then, in due time, life in a strange country, hard work, and long journeys had softened his grief. Now only a vast background of melancholy remains; unless, indeed, the hatred and wrath by which he is animated at this moment against the woman who is dishonoring his brother may be a remnant of his former love.

But no! Frantz Risler thinks only of avenging the honor of the Rislers. He comes not as a lover, but as a judge; and Sidonie may well look to herself.

The judge had gone straight to the factory on leaving the train, relying upon the surprise, the unexpectedness, of his arrival to disclose to him at a glance what was taking place.

Unluckily he had found no one. The blinds of the little house at the foot of the garden had been closed for two weeks. Pere Achille informed him that the ladies were at their respective country seats where the partners joined them every evening.

Fromont Jeune had left the factory very early; Risler Aine had just gone. Frantz decided to speak to old Sigismond. But it was Saturday, the regular pay-day, and he must needs wait until the long line of workmen, extending from Achille's lodge to the cashier's grated window, had gradually dispersed.

Although very impatient and very depressed, the excellent youth, who had lived the life of a Paris workingman from his childhood, felt a thrill of pleasure at finding himself once more in the midst of the animated scenes peculiar to that time and place. Upon all those faces, honest or vicious, was an expression of satisfaction that the week was at an end. You felt that, so far as they were concerned, Sunday began at seven o'clock Saturday evening, in front of the cashier's little lamp.

One must have lived among workmen to realize the full charm of that one day's rest and its solemnity. Many of these poor creatures, bound fast to unhealthful trades, await the coming of the blessed Sunday like a puff of refreshing air, essential to their health and their life. What an overflow of spirits, therefore, what a pressing need of noisy mirth! It seems as if the oppression of the week's labor vanishes with the steam from the machinery, as it escapes in a hissing cloud of vapor over the gutters.

One by one the workmen moved away from the grating, counting the money that glistened in their black hands. There were disappointments, mutterings, remonstrances, hours missed, money drawn in advance; and above the tinkling of coins, Sigismond's voice could be heard, calm and relentless, defending the interests of his employers with a zeal amounting to ferocity.

Frantz was familiar with all the dramas of pay-day, the false accents and the true. He knew that one man's wages were expended for his family, to pay the baker and the druggist, or for his children's schooling.

Another wanted his money for the wine-shop or for something even worse. And the melancholy, downcast shadows passing to and fro in front of the factory gateway—he knew what they were waiting for—that they were all on the watch for a father or a husband, to hurry him home with complaining or coaxing words.

Oh! the barefooted children, the tiny creatures wrapped in old shawls, the shabby women, whose tear-stained faces were as white as the linen caps that surmounted them.

Oh! the lurking vice that prowls about on pay-day, the candles that are lighted in the depths of dark alleys, the dirty windows of the wine-shops where the thousand-and-one poisonous concoctions of

alcohol display their alluring colors.

Frantz was familiar with all these forms of misery; but never had they seemed to him so depressing, so harrowing as on that evening.

When the last man was paid, Sigismond came out of his office. The two friends recognized each other and embraced; and in the silence of the factory, at rest for twenty-four hours and deathly still in all its empty buildings, the cashier explained to Frantz the state of affairs. He described Sidonie's conduct, her mad extravagance, the total wreck of the family honor. The Rislers had bought a country house at Asnieres, formerly the property of an actress, and had set up a sumptuous establishment there. They had horses and carriages, and led a luxurious, gay life. The thing that especially disturbed honest Sigismond was the self-restraint of Fromont jeune. For some time he had drawn almost no money from the strong-box, and yet Sidonie was spending more than ever.

"I haf no gonfidence!" said the unhappy cashier, shaking his head, "I haf no gonfidence!"

Lowering his voice he added:

"But your brother, my little Frantz, your brother? Who can explain his actions? He goes about through it all with his eyes in the air, his hands in his pockets, his mind on his famous invention, which unfortunately doesn't move fast. Look here! do you want me to give you my opinion?—He's either a knave or a fool."

They were walking up and down the little garden as they talked, stopping for a moment, then resuming their walk. Frantz felt as if he were living in a horrible dream. The rapid journey, the sudden change of scene and climate, the ceaseless flow of Sigismond's words, the new idea that he had to form of Risler and Sidonie—the same Sidonie he had loved so dearly—all these things bewildered him and almost drove him mad.

It was late. Night was falling. Sigismond proposed to him to go to Montrouge for the night; he declined on the plea of fatigue, and when he was left alone in the Marais, at that dismal and uncertain hour when the daylight has faded and the gas is still unlighted, he walked instinctively toward his old quarters on the Rue de Braque.

At the hall door hung a placard: Bachelor's Chamber to let.

It was the same room in which he had lived so long with his brother. He recognized the map fastened to the wall by four pins, the window on the landing, and the Delobelles' little sign: 'Birds and Insects for Ornament.'

Their door was ajar; he had only to push it a little in order to enter the room.

Certainly there was not in all Paris a surer refuge for him, a spot better fitted to welcome and console his perturbed spirit, than that hard-working familiar fireside. In his present agitation and perplexity it was like the harbor with its smooth, deep water, the sunny, peaceful quay, where the women work while awaiting their husbands and fathers, though the wind howls and the sea rages. More than all else, although he did not realize that it was so, it was a network of steadfast affection, that miraculous love-kindness which makes another's love precious to us even when we do not love that other.

That dear little iceberg of a Desiree loved him so dearly. Her eyes sparkled so even when talking of the most indifferent things with him. As objects dipped in phosphorus shine with equal splendor, so the most trivial words she said illuminated her pretty, radiant face. What a blissful rest it was for him after Sigismond's brutal disclosures!

They talked together with great animation while Mamma Delobelle was setting the table.

"You will dine with us, won't you, Monsieur Frantz? Father has gone to take back the work; but he will surely come home to dinner."

He will surely come home to dinner!

The good woman said it with a certain pride.

In fact, since the failure of his managerial scheme, the illustrious Delobelle no longer took his meals abroad, even on the evenings when he went to collect the weekly earnings. The unlucky manager had eaten so many meals on credit at his restaurant that he dared not go there again. By way of compensation, he never failed, on Saturday, to bring home with him two or three unexpected, famished guests—"old comrades"—"unlucky devils." So it happened that, on the evening in question, he appeared upon the stage escorting a financier from the Metz theatre and a comique from the theatre at Angers,

both waiting for an engagement.

The comique, closely shaven, wrinkled, shrivelled by the heat from the footlights, looked like an old street-arab; the financier wore cloth shoes, and no linen, so far as could be seen.

"Frantz!—my Frantz!" cried the old strolling player in a melodramatic voice, clutching the air convulsively with his hands. After a long and energetic embrace he presented his guests to one another.

"Monsieur Robricart, of the theatre at Metz.

"Monsieur Chauderon, of the theatre at Angers.

"Frantz Risler, engineer."

In Delobelle's mouth that word "engineer" assumed vast proportions!

Desiree pouted prettily when she saw her father's friends. It would have been so nice to be by themselves on a day like to-day. But the great man snapped his fingers at the thought. He had enough to do to unload his pockets. First of all, he produced a superb pie "for the ladies," he said, forgetting that he adored pie. A lobster next made its appearance, then an Arles sausage, marrons glacés and cherries, the first of the season!

While the financier enthusiastically pulled up the collar of his invisible shirt, while the comique exclaimed "gnouf! gnouf!" with a gesture forgotten by Parisians for ten years, Desiree thought with dismay of the enormous hole that impromptu banquet would make in the paltry earnings of the week, and Mamma Delobelle, full of business, upset the whole buffet in order to find a sufficient number of plates.

It was a very lively meal. The two actors ate voraciously, to the great delight of Delobelle, who talked over with them old memories of their days of strolling. Fancy a collection of odds and ends of scenery, extinct lanterns, and mouldy, crumbling stage properties.

In a sort of vulgar, meaningless, familiar slang, they recalled their innumerable triumphs; for all three of them, according to their own stories, had been applauded, laden with laurel-wreaths, and carried in triumph by whole cities.

While they talked they ate as actors usually eat, sitting with their faces turned three-fourths toward the audience, with the unnatural haste of stage guests at a pasteboard supper, alternating words and mouthfuls, seeking to produce an effect by their manner of putting down a glass or moving a chair, and expressing interest, amazement, joy, terror, surprise, with the aid of a skilfully handled knife and fork. Madame Delobelle listened to them with a smiling face.

One can not be an actor's wife for thirty years without becoming somewhat accustomed to these peculiar mannerisms.

But one little corner of the table was separated from the rest of the party as by a cloud which intercepted the absurd remarks, the hoarse laughter, the boasting. Frantz and Desiree talked together in undertones, hearing naught of what was said around them. Things that happened in their childhood, anecdotes of the neighborhood, a whole ill-defined past which derived its only value from the mutual memories evoked, from the spark that glowed in the eyes of both—those were the themes of their pleasant chat.

Suddenly the cloud was torn aside, and Delobelle's terrible voice interrupted the dialogue.

"Have you not seen your brother?" he asked, in order to avoid the appearance of neglecting him too much. "And you have not seen his wife, either? Ah! you will find her a Madame. Such toilettes, my dear fellow, and such chic! I assure you. They have a genuine chateau at Asnieres. The Chebes are there also. Ah! my old friend, they have all left us behind. They are rich, they look down on old friends. Never a word, never a call. For my part, you understand, I snap my fingers at them, but it really wounds these ladies."

"Oh, papa!" said Desiree hastily, "you know very well that we are too fond of Sidonie to be offended with her."

The actor smote the table a violent blow with his fist.

"Why, then, you do wrong. You ought to be offended with people who seek always to wound and humiliate you."

He still had upon his mind the refusal to furnish funds for his theatrical project, and he made no secret of his wrath.

"If you knew," he said to Frantz, "if you knew how money is being squandered over yonder! It is a great pity. And nothing substantial, nothing sensible. I who speak to you, asked your brother for a paltry sum to assure my future and himself a handsome profit. He flatly refused. Parbleu! Madame requires too much. She rides, goes to the races in her carriage, and drives her husband at the same rate as her little phaeton on the quay at Asnieres. Between you and me, I don't think that our good friend Risler is very happy. That woman makes him believe black is white."

The ex-actor concluded his harangue with a wink at the comique and the financier, and for a moment the three exchanged glances, conventional grimaces, 'ha-has!' and 'hum-hums!' and all the usual pantomime expressive of thoughts too deep for words.

Frantz was struck dumb. Do what he would, the horrible certainty assailed him on all sides. Sigismond had spoken in accordance with his nature, Delobelle with his. The result was the same.

Fortunately the dinner was drawing near its close. The three actors left the table and betook themselves to the brewery on the Rue Blondel. Frantz remained with the two women.

As he sat beside her, gentle and affectionate in manner, Desiree was suddenly conscious of a great outflow of gratitude to Sidonie. She said to herself that, after all, it was to her generosity that she owed this semblance of happiness, and that thought gave her courage to defend her former friend.

"You see, Monsieur Frantz, you mustn't believe all my father told you about your sister-in-law. Dear papa! he always exaggerates a little. For my own part, I am very sure that Sidonie is incapable of all the evil she is accused of. I am sure that her heart has remained the same; and that she is still fond of her friends, although she does neglect them a little. Such is life, you know. Friends drift apart without meaning to. Isn't that true, Monsieur Frantz?"

Oh! how pretty she was in his eyes, while she talked in that strain. He never had taken so much notice of the refined features, the aristocratic pallor of her complexion; and when he left her that evening, deeply touched by the warmth she had displayed in defending Sidonie, by all the charming feminine excuses she put forward for her friend's silence and neglect, Frantz Risler reflected, with a feeling of selfish and ingenuous pleasure, that the child had loved him once, and that perhaps she loved him still, and kept for him in the bottom of her heart that warm, sheltered spot to which we turn as to the sanctuary when life has wounded us.

All night long in his old room, lulled by the imaginary movement of the vessel, by the murmur of the waves and the howling of the wind which follow long sea voyages, he dreamed of his youthful days, of little Chebe and Desiree Delobelle, of their games, their labors, and of the Ecole Centrale, whose great, gloomy buildings were sleeping near at hand, in the dark streets of the Marais.

And when daylight came, and the sun shining in at his bare window vexed his eyes and brought him back to a realization of the duty that lay before him and to the anxieties of the day, he dreamed that it was time to go to the School, and that his brother, before going down to the factory, opened the door and called to him:

"Come, lazybones! Come!"

That dear, loving voice, too natural, too real for a dream, made him open his eyes without more ado.

Risler was standing by his bed, watching his awakening with a charming smile, not untinged by emotion; that it was Risler himself was evident from the fact that, in his joy at seeing his brother Frantz once more, he could find nothing better to say than, "I am very happy, I am very happy!"

Although it was Sunday, Risler, as was his custom, had come to the factory to avail himself of the silence and solitude to work at his press. Immediately on his arrival, Pere Achille had informed him that his brother was in Paris and had gone to the old house on the Rue de Braque, and he had hastened thither in joyful surprise, a little vexed that he had not been forewarned, and especially that Frantz had defrauded him of the first evening. His regret on that account came to the surface every moment in his spasmodic attempts at conversation, in which everything that he wanted to say was left unfinished, interrupted by innumerable questions on all sorts of subjects and explosions of affection and joy. Frantz excused himself on the plea of fatigue, and the pleasure it had given him to be in their old room once more.

"All right, all right," said Risler, "but I sha'n't let you alone now— you are coming to Asnieres at once. I give myself leave of absence today. All thought of work is out of the question now that you have come,

you understand. Ah! won't the little one be surprised and glad! We talk about you so often! What joy! what joy!"

The poor fellow fairly beamed with happiness; he, the silent man, chattered like a magpie, gazed admiringly at his Frantz and remarked upon his growth. The pupil of the Ecole Centrale had had a fine physique when he went away, but his features had acquired greater firmness, his shoulders were broader, and it was a far cry from the tall, studious-looking boy who had left Paris two years before, for Ismailia, to this handsome, bronzed corsair, with his serious yet winning face.

While Risler was gazing at him, Frantz, on his side, was closely scrutinizing his brother, and, finding him the same as always, as ingenuous, as loving, and as absent-minded as times, he said to himself:

"No! it is not possible—he has not ceased to be an honest man."

Thereupon, as he reflected upon what people had dared to imagine, all his wrath turned against that hypocritical, vicious woman, who deceived her husband so impudently and with such absolute impunity that she succeeded in causing him to be considered her confederate. Oh! what a terrible reckoning he proposed to have with her; how pitilessly he would talk to her!

"I forbid you, Madame—understand what I say—I forbid you to dishonor my brother!"

He was thinking of that all the way, as he watched the still leafless trees glide along the embankment of the Saint-Germain railway. Sitting opposite him, Risler chattered, chattered without pause. He talked about the factory, about their business. They had gained forty thousand francs each the last year; but it would be a different matter when the Press was at work. "A rotary press, my little Frantz, rotary and dodecagonal, capable of printing a pattern in twelve to fifteen colors at a single turn of the wheel—red on pink, dark green on light green, without the least running together or absorption, without a line lapping over its neighbor, without any danger of one shade destroying or overshadowing another. Do you understand that, little brother? A machine that is an artist like a man. It means a revolution in the wallpaper trade."

"But," queried Frantz with some anxiety, "have you invented this Press of yours yet, or are you still hunting for it?"

"Invented!—perfected! To-morrow I will show you all my plans. I have also invented an automatic crane for hanging the paper on the rods in the drying-room. Next week I intend to take up my quarters in the factory, up in the garret, and have my first machine made there secretly, under my own eyes. In three months the patents must be taken out and the Press must be at work. You'll see, my little Frantz, it will make us all rich— you can imagine how glad I shall be to be able to make up to these Fromonts for a little of what they have done for me. Ah! upon my word, the Lord has been too good to me."

Thereupon he began to enumerate all his blessings. Sidonie was the best of women, a little love of a wife, who conferred much honor upon him. They had a charming home. They went into society, very select society. The little one sang like a nightingale, thanks to Madame Dobson's expressive method. By the way, this Madame Dobson was another most excellent creature. There was just one thing that disturbed poor Risler, that was his incomprehensible misunderstanding with Sigismond. Perhaps Frantz could help him to clear up that mystery.

"Oh! yes, I will help you, brother," replied Frantz through his clenched teeth; and an angry flush rose to his brow at the idea that any one could have suspected the open-heartedness, the loyalty, that were displayed before him in all their artless spontaneity. Luckily he, the judge, had arrived; and he proposed to restore everything to its proper place.

Meanwhile, they were drawing near the house at Asnieres. Frantz had noticed at a distance a fanciful little turreted affair, glistening with a new blue slate roof. It seemed to him to have been built expressly for Sidonie, a fitting cage for that capricious, gaudy-plumaged bird.

It was a chalet with two stories, whose bright mirrors and pink-lined curtains could be seen from the railway, shining resplendent at the far end of a green lawn, where an enormous pewter ball was suspended.

The river was near at hand, still wearing its Parisian aspect, filled with chains, bathing establishments, great barges, and multitudes of little, skiffs, with a layer of coaldust on their pretentious, freshly-painted names, tied to the pier and rocking to the slightest motion of the water. From her windows Sidonie could see the restaurants on the beach, silent through the week, but filled to overflowing on Sunday with a motley, noisy crowd, whose shouts of laughter, mingled with the dull splash of oars, came from both banks to meet in midstream in that current of vague murmurs, shouts, calls, laughter, and singing that floats without ceasing up and down the Seine on holidays for a distance

of ten miles.

During the week she saw shabbily-dressed idlers sauntering along the shore, men in broad-brimmed straw hats and flannel shirts, women who sat on the worn grass of the sloping bank, doing nothing, with the dreamy eyes of a cow at pasture. All the peddlers, handorgans, harpists; travelling jugglers, stopped there as at a quarantine station. The quay was crowded with them, and as they approached, the windows in the little houses near by were always thrown open, disclosing white dressing-jackets, half-buttoned, heads of dishevelled hair, and an occasional pipe, all watching these paltry strolling shows, as if with a sigh of regret for Paris, so near at hand. It was a hideous and depressing sight.

The grass, which had hardly begun to grow, was already turning yellow beneath the feet of the crowd. The dust was black; and yet, every Thursday, the cocotte aristocracy passed through on the way to the Casino, with a great show of rickety carriages and borrowed postilions. All these things gave pleasure to that fanatical Parisian, Sidonie; and then, too, in her childhood, she had heard a great deal about Asnieres from the illustrious Delobelle, who would have liked to have, like so many of his profession, a little villa in those latitudes, a cozy nook in the country to which to return by the midnight train, after the play is done.

All these dreams of little Chebe, Sidonie Risler had realized.

The brothers went to the gate opening on the quay, in which the key was usually left. They entered, making their way among trees and shrubs of recent growth. Here and there the billiard-room, the gardener's lodge, a little greenhouse, made their appearance, like the pieces of one of the Swiss chalets we give to children to play with; all very light and fragile, hardly more than resting on the ground, as if ready to fly away at the slightest breath of bankruptcy or caprice: the villa of a cocotte or a pawnbroker.

Frantz looked about in some bewilderment. In the distance, opening on a porch surrounded by vases of flowers, was the salon with its long blinds raised. An American easy-chair, folding-chairs, a small table from which the coffee had not been removed, could be seen near the door. Within they heard a succession of loud chords on the piano and the murmur of low voices.

"I tell you Sidonie will be surprised," said honest Risler, walking softly on the gravel; "she doesn't expect me until tonight. She and Madame Dobson are practising together at this moment."

Pushing the door open suddenly, he cried from the threshold in his loud, good-natured voice:

"Guess whom I've brought."

Madame Dobson, who was sitting alone at the piano, jumped up from her stool, and at the farther end of the grand salon Georges and Sidonie rose hastily behind the exotic plants that reared their heads above a table, of whose delicate, slender lines they seemed a prolongation.

"Ah! how you frightened me!" said Sidonie, running to meet Risler.

The flounces of her white peignoir, through which blue ribbons were drawn, like little patches of blue sky among the clouds, rolled in billows over the carpet, and, having already recovered from her embarrassment, she stood very straight, with an affable expression and her everlasting little smile, as she kissed her husband and offered her forehead to Frantz, saying:

"Good morning, brother."

Risler left them confronting each other, and went up to Fromont Jeune, whom he was greatly surprised to find there.

"What, Chorche, you here? I supposed you were at Savigny."

"Yes, to be sure, but—I came—I thought you stayed at Asnieres Sundays. I wanted to speak to you on a matter of business."

Thereupon, entangling himself in his words, he began to talk hurriedly of an important order. Sidonie had disappeared after exchanging a few unmeaning words with the impassive Frantz. Madame Dobson continued her tremolos on the soft pedal, like those which accompany critical situations at the theatre.

In very truth, the situation at that moment was decidedly strained. But Risler's good-humor banished all constraint. He apologized to his partner for not being at home, and insisted upon showing Frantz the house. They went from the salon to the stable, from the stable to the carriage-house, the servants' quarters, and the conservatory. Everything was new, brilliant, gleaming, too small, and inconvenient.

"But," said Risler, with a certain pride, "it cost a heap of money!"

He persisted in compelling admiration of Sidonie's purchase even to its smallest details, exhibited the gas and water fixtures on every floor, the improved system of bells, the garden seats, the English billiard-table, the hydropathic arrangements, and accompanied his exposition with outbursts of gratitude to Fromont Jeune, who, by taking him into partnership, had literally placed a fortune in his hands.

At each new effusion on Risler's part, Georges Fromont shrank visibly, ashamed and embarrassed by the strange expression on Frantz's face.

The breakfast was lacking in gayety.

Madame Dobson talked almost without interruption, overjoyed to be swimming in the shallows of a romantic love-affair. Knowing, or rather believing that she knew her friend's story from beginning to end, she understood the lowering wrath of Frantz, a former lover furious at finding his place filled, and the anxiety of Georges, due to the appearance of a rival; and she encouraged one with a glance, consoled the other with a smile, admired Sidonie's tranquil demeanor, and reserved all her contempt for that abominable Risler, the vulgar, uncivilized tyrant. She made an effort to prevent any of those horrible periods of silence, when the clashing knives and forks mark time in such an absurd and embarrassing way.

As soon as breakfast was at an end Fromont Jeune announced that he must return to Savigny. Risler did not venture to detain him, thinking that his dear Madame Chorche would pass her Sunday all alone; and so, without an opportunity to say a word to his mistress, the lover went away in the bright sunlight to take an afternoon train, still attended by the husband, who insisted upon escorting him to the station.

Madame Dobson sat for a moment with Frantz and Sidonie under a little arbor which a climbing vine studded with pink buds; then, realizing that she was in the way, she returned to the salon, and as before, while Georges was there, began to play and sing softly and with expression. In the silent garden, that muffled music, gliding between the branches, seemed like the cooing of birds before the storm.

At last they were alone. Under the lattice of the arbor, still bare and leafless, the May sun shone too bright. Sidonie shaded her eyes with her hand as she watched the people passing on the quay. Frantz likewise looked out, but in another direction; and both of them, affecting to be entirely independent of each other, turned at the same instant with the same gesture and moved by the same thought.

"I have something to say to you," he said, just as she opened her mouth.

"And I to you," she replied gravely; "but come in here; we shall be more comfortable."

And they entered together a little summer-house at the foot of the garden.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Charm of that one day's rest and its solemnity

Clashing knives and forks mark time

Faces taken by surprise allow their real thoughts to be seen

Make for themselves a horizon of the neighboring walls and roofs

Wiping his forehead ostentatiously

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