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FROMONT AND RISLER

By ALPHONSE DAUDET

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER XIV

EXPLANATION

By slow degrees Sidonie sank to her former level, yes, even lower. From the rich, well-considered bourgeoise to which her marriage had raised her, she descended the ladder to the rank of a mere toy. By dint of travelling in railway carriages with fantastically dressed courtesans, with their hair worn over their eyes like a terrier's, or falling over the back 'a la Genevieve de Brabant', she came at last to resemble them. She transformed herself into a blonde for two months, to the unbounded amazement of Rizer, who could not understand how his doll was so changed. As for Georges, all these eccentricities amused him; it seemed to him that he had ten women in one. He was the real husband, the master of the house.

To divert Sidonie's thoughts, he had provided a simulacrum of society for her—his bachelor friends, a

few fast tradesmen, almost no women, women have too sharp eyes. Madame Dobson was the only friend of Sidonie's sex.

They organized grand dinner-parties, excursions on the water, fireworks. From day to day Risler's position became more absurd, more distressing. When he came home in the evening, tired out, shabbily dressed, he must hurry up to his room to dress.

"We have some people to dinner," his wife would say. "Make haste."

And he would be the last to take his place at the table, after shaking hands all around with his guests, friends of Fromont Jeune, whom he hardly knew by name. Strange to say, the affairs of the factory were often discussed at that table, to which Georges brought his acquaintances from the club with the tranquil self-assurance of the gentleman who pays.

"Business breakfasts and dinners!" To Risler's mind that phrase explained everything: his partner's constant presence, his choice of guests, and the marvellous gowns worn by Sidonie, who beautified herself in the interests of the firm. This coquetry on his mistress's part drove Fromont Jeune to despair. Day after day he came unexpectedly to take her by surprise, uneasy, suspicious, afraid to leave that perverse and deceitful character to its own devices for long.

"What in the deuce has become of your husband?"

Pere Gardinois would ask his grand-daughter with a cunning leer. "Why doesn't he come here oftener?"

Claire apologized for Georges, but his continual neglect began to disturb her. She wept now when she received the little notes, the despatches which arrived daily at the dinner-hour: "Don't expect me to-night, dear love. I shall not be able to come to Savigny until to-morrow or the day after by the night-train."

She ate her dinner sadly, opposite an empty chair, and although she did not know that she was betrayed, she felt that her husband was becoming accustomed to living away from her. He was so absent-minded when a family gathering or some other unavoidable duty detained him at the chateau, so silent concerning what was in his mind. Claire, having now only the most distant relations with Sidonie, knew nothing of what was taking place at Asnieres: but when Georges left her, apparently eager to be gone, and with smiling face, she tormented her loneliness with unavowed suspicions, and, like all those who anticipate a great sorrow, she suddenly became conscious of a great void in her heart, a place made ready for disasters to come.

Her husband was hardly happier than she. That cruel Sidonie seemed to take pleasure in tormenting him. She allowed everybody to pay court to her. At that moment a certain Cazabon, alias Cazaboni, an Italian tenor from Toulouse, introduced by Madame Dobson, came every day to sing disturbing duets. Georges, jealous beyond words, hurried to Asnieres in the afternoon, neglecting everything, and was already beginning to think that Risler did not watch his wife closely enough. He would have liked him to be blind only so far as he was concerned.

Ah! if he had been her husband, what a tight rein he would have kept on her! But he had no power over her and she was not at all backward about telling him so. Sometimes, too, with the invincible logic that often occurs to the greatest fools, he reflected that, as he was deceiving his friend, perhaps he deserved to be deceived. In short, his was a wretched life. He passed his time running about to jewellers and dry-goods dealers, inventing gifts and surprises. Ah! he knew her well. He knew that he could pacify her with trinkets, yet not retain his hold upon her, and that, when the day came that she was bored—

But Sidonie was not bored as yet. She was living the life that she longed to live; she had all the happiness she could hope to attain. There was nothing passionate or romantic about her feeling for Georges. He was like a second husband to her, younger and, above all, richer than the other. To complete the vulgarization of their liaison, she had summoned her parents to Asnieres, lodged them in a little house in the country, and made of that vain and wilfully blind father and that affectionate, still bewildered mother a halo of respectability of which she felt the necessity as she sank lower and lower.

Everything was shrewdly planned in that perverse little brain, which reflected coolly upon vice; and it seemed to her as if she might continue to live thus in peace, when Frantz Risler suddenly arrived.

Simply from seeing him enter the room, she had realized that her repose was threatened, that an interview of the gravest importance was to take place between them.

Her plan was formed on the instant. She must at once put it into execution.

The summer-house that they entered contained one large, circular room with four windows, each looking out upon a different landscape; it was furnished for the purposes of summer siestas, for the hot hours when one seeks shelter from the sunlight and the noises of the garden. A broad, very low divan ran all around the wall. A small lacquered table, also very low, stood in the middle of the room, covered with odd numbers of society journals.

The hangings were new, and the Persian pattern-birds flying among bluish reeds—produced the effect of a dream in summer, ethereal figures floating before one's languid eyes. The lowered blinds, the matting on the floor, the Virginia jasmine clinging to the trellis-work outside, produced a refreshing coolness which was enhanced by the splashing in the river near by, and the lapping of its wavelets on the shore.

Sidonie sat down as soon as she entered the room, pushing aside her long white skirt, which sank like a mass of snow at the foot of the divan; and with sparkling eyes and a smile playing about her lips, bending her little head slightly, its saucy coquettishness heightened by the bow of ribbon on the side, she waited.

Frantz, pale as death, remained standing, looking about the room. After a moment he began:

"I congratulate you, Madame; you understand how to make yourself comfortable."

And in the next breath, as if he were afraid that the conversation, beginning at such a distance, would not arrive quickly enough at the point to which he intended to lead it, he added brutally:

"To whom do you owe this magnificence, to your lover or your husband?"

Without moving from the divan, without even raising her eyes to his, she answered:

"To both."

He was a little disconcerted by such self-possession.

"Then you confess that that man is your lover?"

"Confess it!—yes!"

Frantz gazed at her a moment without speaking. She, too, had turned pale, notwithstanding her calmness, and the eternal little smile no longer quivered at the corners of her mouth.

He continued:

"Listen to me, Sidonie! My brother's name, the name he gave his wife, is mine as well. Since Risler is so foolish, so blind as to allow the name to be dishonored by you, it is my place to defend it against your attacks. I beg you, therefore, to inform Monsieur Georges Fromont that he must change mistresses as soon as possible, and go elsewhere to ruin himself. If not—"

"If not?" queried Sidonie, who had not ceased to play with her rings while he was speaking.

"If not, I shall tell my brother what is going on in his house, and you will be surprised at the Risler whose acquaintance you will make then— a man as violent and ungovernable as he usually is inoffensive. My disclosure will kill him perhaps, but you can be sure that he will kill you first."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Very well! let him kill me. What do I care for that?"

This was said with such a heartbroken, despondent air that Frantz, in spite of himself, felt a little pity for that beautiful, fortunate young creature, who talked of dying with such self-abandonment.

"Do you love him so dearly?" he said, in an indefinably milder tone. "Do you love this Fromont so dearly that you prefer to die rather than renounce him?"

She drew herself up hastily.

"I? Love that fop, that doll, that silly girl in men's clothes?
Nonsense!—I took him as I would have taken any other man."

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't help it, because I was mad, because I had and still have in my heart a criminal love, which I am determined to tear out, no matter at what cost."

She had risen and was speaking with her eyes in his, her lips near his, trembling from head to foot.

A criminal love?—Whom did she love, in God's name?

Frantz was afraid to question her.

Although suspecting nothing as yet, he had a feeling that that glance, that breath, leaning toward him, were about to make some horrible disclosure.

But his office of judge made it necessary for him to know all.

"Who is it?" he asked.

She replied in a stifled voice:

"You know very well that it is you."

She was his brother's wife.

For two years he had not thought of her except as a sister. In his eyes his brother's wife in no way resembled his former fiancee, and it would have been a crime to recognize in a single feature of her face the woman to whom he had formerly so often said, "I love you."

And now it was she who said that she loved him.

The unhappy judge was thunderstruck, dazed, could find no words in which to reply.

She, standing before him, waited.

It was one of those spring days, full of heat and light, to which the moisture of recent rains imparts a strange softness and melancholy. The air was warm, perfumed by fresh flowers which, on that first day of heat, gave forth their fragrance eagerly, like violets hidden in a muff. Through its long, open windows the room in which they were inhaled all those intoxicating odors. Outside, they could hear the Sunday organs, distant shouts on the river, and nearer at hand, in the garden, Madame Dobson's amorous, languishing voice, sighing:

"On dit que tu te maries;
Tu sais que j'en puis mouri-i-i-r!"

"Yes, Frantz, I have always loved you," said Sidonie. "That love which I renounced long ago because I was a young girl—and young girls do not know what they are doing—that love nothing has ever succeeded in destroying or lessening. When I learned that Desiree also loved you, the unfortunate, penniless child, in a great outburst of generosity I determined to assure her happiness for life by sacrificing my own, and I at once turned you away, so that you should go to her. Ah! as soon as you had gone, I realized that the sacrifice was beyond my strength. Poor little Desiree! How I cursed her in the bottom of my heart! Will you believe it? Since that time I have avoided seeing her, meeting her. The sight of her caused me too much pain."

"But if you loved me," asked Frantz, in a low voice, "if you loved me, why did you marry my brother?"

She did not waver.

"To marry Risler was to bring myself nearer to you. I said to myself: 'I could not be his wife. Very well, I will be his sister. At all events, in that way it will still be allowable for me to love him, and we shall not pass our whole lives as strangers.' Alas! those are the innocent dreams a girl has at twenty, dreams of which she very soon learns the impossibility. I could not love you as a sister, Frantz; I could not forget you, either; my marriage prevented that. With another husband I might perhaps have succeeded, but with Risler it was terrible. He was forever talking about you and your success and your future—Frantz said this; Frantz did that—He loves you so well, poor fellow! And then the most cruel thing to me is that your brother looks like you. There is a sort of family resemblance in your features, in your gait, in your voices especially, for I have often closed my eyes under his caresses, saying to myself, 'It is he, it is Frantz.' When I saw that that wicked thought was becoming a source of torment to me, something that I could not escape, I tried to find distraction, I consented to listen to this Georges, who had been pestering me for a long time, to transform my life to one of noise and excitement. But I swear to you, Frantz, that in that whirlpool of pleasure into which I then plunged, I never have ceased to think of you, and if any one had a right to come here and call me to account for my conduct, you certainly are not the one, for you, unintentionally, have made me what I am."

She paused. Frantz dared not raise his eyes to her face. For a moment past she had seemed to him too lovely, too alluring. She was his brother's wife!

Nor did he dare speak. The unfortunate youth felt that the old passion was despotically taking possession of his heart once more, and that at that moment glances, words, everything that burst forth from it would be love.

And she was his brother's wife!

"Ah! wretched, wretched creatures that we are!" exclaimed the poor judge, dropping upon the divan beside her.

Those few words were in themselves an act of cowardice, a beginning of surrender, as if destiny, by showing itself so pitiless, had deprived him of the strength to defend himself. Sidonie had placed her hand on his. "Frantz—Frantz!" she said; and they remained there side by side, silent and burning with emotion, soothed by Madame Dobson's romance, which reached their ears by snatches through the shrubbery:

"Ton amour, c'est ma folie.
Helas! je n'en puis guei-i-i-r."

Suddenly Risler's tall figure appeared in the doorway.

"This way, Chebe, this way. They are in the summerhouse."

As he spoke the husband entered, escorting his father-in-law and mother- in-law, whom he had gone to fetch.

There was a moment of effusive greetings and innumerable embraces. You should have seen the patronizing air with which M. Chebe scrutinized the young man, who was head and shoulders taller than he.

"Well, my boy, does the Suez Canal progress as you would wish?"

Madame Chebe, in whose thoughts Frantz had never ceased to be her future son-in-law, threw her arms around him, while Risler, tactless as usual in his gayety and his enthusiasm, waved his arms, talked of killing several fatted calves to celebrate the return of the prodigal son, and roared to the singing-mistress in a voice that echoed through the neighboring gardens:

"Madame Dobson, Madame Dobson—if you'll allow me, it's a pity for you to be singing there. To the devil with sadness for to-day! Play us something lively, a good waltz, so that I can take a turn with Madame Chebe."

"Risler, Risler, are you crazy, my son-in-law?"

"Come, come, mamma! We must dance."

And up and down the paths, to the strains of an automatic six-step waltz- a genuine valse de Vaucanson—he dragged his breathless mamma-in-law, who stopped at every step to restore to their usual orderliness the dangling ribbons of her hat and the lace trimming of her shawl, her lovely shawl bought for Sidonie's wedding.

Poor Risler was intoxicated with joy.

To Frantz that was an endless, indelible day of agony. Driving, rowing on the river, lunch on the grass on the Ile des Ravageurs—he was spared none of the charms of Asnieres; and all the time, in the dazzling sunlight of the roads, in the glare reflected by the water, he must laugh and chatter, describe his journey, talk of the Isthmus of Suez and the great work undertaken there, listen to the whispered complaints of M. Chebe, who was still incensed with his children, and to his brother's description of the Press. "Rotary, my dear Frantz, rotary and dodecagonal!" Sidonie left the gentlemen to their conversation and seemed absorbed in deep thought. From time to time she said a word or two to Madame Dobson, or smiled sadly at her, and Frantz, not daring to look at her, followed the motions of her blue-lined parasol and of the white flounces of her skirt.

How she had changed in two years! How lovely she had grown!

Then horrible thoughts came to his mind. There were races at Longchamps that day. Carriages passed theirs, rubbed against it, driven by women with painted faces, closely veiled. Sitting motionless on the box, they held their long whips straight in the air, with doll-like gestures, and nothing about

them seemed alive except their blackened eyes, fixed on the horses' heads. As they passed, people turned to look. Every eye followed them, as if drawn by the wind caused by their rapid motion.

Sidonie resembled those creatures. She might herself have driven Georges' carriage; for Frantz was in Georges' carriage. He had drunk Georges' wine. All the luxurious enjoyment of that family party came from Georges.

It was shameful, revolting! He would have liked to shout the whole story to his brother. Indeed, it was his duty, as he had come there for that express purpose. But he no longer felt the courage to do it. Ah! the unhappy judge!

That evening after dinner, in the salon open to the fresh breeze from the river, Risler begged his wife to sing. He wished her to exhibit all her newly acquired accomplishments to Frantz.

Sidonie, leaning on the piano, objected with a melancholy air, while Madame Dobson ran her fingers over the keys, shaking her long curls.

"But I don't know anything. What do you wish me to sing?"

She ended, however, by being persuaded. Pale, disenchanted, with her mind upon other things, in the flickering light of the candles which seemed to be burning incense, the air was so heavy with the odor of the hyacinths and lilacs in the garden, she began a Creole ballad very popular in Louisiana, which Madame Dobson herself had arranged for the voice and piano:

"Pauv' pitit Mam'zelle Zizi,
C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne la tete a li."

["Poor little Mam'zelle Zizi,
'Tis love, 'tis love that turns her head."]

And as she told the story of the ill-fated little Zizi, who was driven mad by passion, Sidonie had the appearance of a love-sick woman. With what heartrending expression, with the cry of a wounded dove, did she repeat that refrain, so melancholy and so sweet, in the childlike patois of the colonies:

"C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne la tete...."

It was enough to drive the unlucky judge mad as well.

But no! The siren had been unfortunate in her choice of a ballad. For, at the mere name of Mam'zelle Zizi, Frantz was suddenly transported to a gloomy chamber in the Marais, a long way from Sidonie's salon, and his compassionate heart evoked the image of little Desiree Delobelle, who had loved him so long. Until she was fifteen, she never had been called anything but Ziree or Zizi, and she was the pauv' pitit of the Creole ballad to the life, the ever-neglected, ever-faithful lover. In vain now did the other sing. Frantz no longer heard her or saw her. He was in that poor room, beside the great armchair, on the little low chair on which he had sat so often awaiting the father's return. Yes, there, and there only, was his salvation. He must take refuge in that child's love, throw himself at her feet, say to her, "Take me, save me!" And who knows? She loved him so dearly. Perhaps she would save him, would cure him of his guilty passion.

"Where are you going?" asked Risler, seeing that his brother rose hurriedly as soon as the last flourish was at an end.

"I am going back. It is late."

"What? You are not going to sleep here? Why your room is ready for you."

"It is all ready," added Sidonie, with a meaning glance.

He refused resolutely. His presence in Paris was necessary for the fulfilment of certain very important commissions intrusted to him by the Company. They continued their efforts to detain him when he was in the vestibule, when he was crossing the garden in the moonlight and running to the station, amid all the divers noises of Asnieres.

When he had gone, Risler went up to his room, leaving Sidonie and Madame Dobson at the windows of the salon. The music from the neighboring Casino reached their ears, with the "Yo-ho!" of the boatmen and the footsteps of the dancers like a rhythmical, muffled drumming on the tambourine.

"There's a kill-joy for you!" observed Madame Dobson.

"Oh, I have checkmated him," replied Sidonie; "only I must be careful. I shall be closely watched now. He is so jealous. I am going to write to Cazaboni not to come again for some time, and you must tell Georges to-morrow morning to go to Savigny for a fortnight."

CHAPTER XV

POOR LITTLE MAM'ZELLE ZIZI

Oh, how happy Desiree was!

Frantz came every day and sat at her feet on the little low chair, as in the good old days, and he no longer came to talk of Sidonie.

As soon as she began to work in the morning, she would see the door open softly. "Good morning, Mam'zelle Zizi." He always called her now by the name she had borne as a child; and if you could know how prettily he said it: "Good morning, Mam'zelle Zizi."

In the evening they waited for "the father" together, and while she worked he made her shudder with the story of his adventures.

"What is the matter with you? You're not the same as you used to be," Mamma Delobelle would say, surprised to see her in such high spirits and above all so active. For instead of remaining always buried in her easy- chair, with the self-renunciation of a young grandmother, the little creature was continually jumping up and running to the window as lightly as if she were putting out wings; and she practised standing erect, asking her mother in a whisper:

"Do you notice IT when I am not walking?"

From her graceful little head, upon which she had previously concentrated all her energies in the arrangement of her hair, her coquetry extended over her whole person, as did her fine, waving tresses when she unloosed them. Yes, she was very, very coquettish now; and everybody noticed it. Even the "birds and insects for ornament" assumed a knowing little air.

Ah, yes! Desiree Delobelle was happy. For some days M. Frantz had been talking of their all going into the country together; and as the father, kind and generous as always, graciously consented to allow the ladies to take a day's rest, all four set out one Sunday morning.

Oh! the lovely drive, the lovely country, the lovely river, the lovely trees!

Do not ask her where they went; Desiree never knew. But she will tell you that the sun was brighter there than anywhere else, the birds more joyous, the woods denser; and she will not lie.

The bouquet that the little cripple brought back from that beautiful excursion made her room fragrant for a week. Among the hyacinths, the violets, the white-thorn, was a multitude of nameless little flowers, those flowers of the lowly which grow from nomadic seed scattered everywhere along the roads.

Gazing at the slender, pale blue and bright pink blossoms, with all the delicate shades that flowers invented before colorists, many and many a time during that week Desiree took her excursion again. The violets reminded her of the little moss-covered mound on which she had picked them, seeking them under the leaves, her fingers touching Frantz's. They had found these great water-lilies on the edge of a ditch, still damp from the winter rains, and, in order to reach them, she had leaned very heavily on Frantz's arm. All these memories occurred to her as she worked. Meanwhile the sun, shining in at the open window, made the feathers of the hummingbirds glisten. The springtime, youth, the songs of the birds, the fragrance of the flowers, transfigured that dismal fifth-floor workroom, and Desiree said in all seriousness to Mamma Delobelle, putting her nose to her friend's bouquet:

"Have you noticed how sweet the flowers smell this year, mamma?"

And Frantz, too, began to fall under the charm. Little by little Mam'zelle Zizi took possession of his heart and banished from it even the memory of Sidonie. To be sure, the poor judge did all that he could to accomplish that result. At every hour in the day he was by Desiree's side, and clung to her like a child. Not once did he venture to return to Asnieres. He feared the other too much.

"Pray come and see us once in a while; Sidonie keeps asking for you," Risler said to him from time to time, when his brother came to the factory to see him. But Frantz held firm, alleging all sorts of business engagements as pretexts for postponing his visit to the next day. It was easy to satisfy Risler, who was more engrossed than ever with his press, which they had just begun to build.

Whenever Frantz came down from his brother's closet, old Sigismond was sure to be watching for him, and would walk a few steps with him in his long, lute-string sleeves, quill and knife in hand. He kept the young man informed concerning matters at the factory. For some time past, things seemed to have changed for the better. Monsieur Georges came to his office regularly, and returned to Savigny every night. No more bills were presented at the counting-room. It seemed, too, that Madame over yonder was keeping more within bounds.

The cashier was triumphant.

"You see, my boy, whether I did well to write to you. Your arrival was all that was needed to straighten everything out. And yet," the good man would add by force of habit, "and yet I haf no gonfidence."

"Never fear, Monsieur Sigismond, I am here," the judge would reply.

"You're not going away yet, are you, my dear Frantz?"

"No, no—not yet. I have an important matter to finish up first."

"Ah! so much the better."

The important matter to which Frantz referred was his marriage to Desiree Delobelle. He had not yet mentioned it to any one, not even to her; but Mam'zelle Zizi must have suspected something, for she became prettier and more lighthearted from day to day, as if she foresaw that the day would soon come when she would need all her gayety and all her beauty.

They were alone in the workroom one Sunday afternoon. Mamma Delobelle had gone out, proud enough to show herself for once in public with her great man, and leaving friend Frantz with her daughter to keep her company. Carefully dressed, his whole person denoting a holiday air, Frantz had a singular expression on his face that day, an expression at once timid and resolute, emotional and solemn, and simply from the way in which the little low chair took its place beside the great easy-chair, the easy-chair understood that a very serious communication was about to be made to it in confidence, and it had some little suspicion as to what it might be.

The conversation began with divers unimportant remarks, interspersed with long and frequent pauses, just as, on a journey, we stop at every baiting-place to take breath, to enable us to reach our destination.

"It is a fine day to-day."

"Oh! yes, beautiful."

"Our flowers still smell sweet."

"Oh! very sweet."

And even as they uttered those trivial sentences, their voices trembled at the thought of what was about to be said.

At last the little low chair moved a little nearer the great easy-chair; their eyes met, their fingers were intertwined, and the two, in low tones, slowly called each other by their names.

"Desiree!"

"Frantz!"

At that moment there was a knock at the door.

It was the soft little tap of a daintily gloved hand which fears to soil itself by the slightest touch.

"Come in!" said Desiree, with a slight gesture of impatience; and Sidonie appeared, lovely, coquettish, and affable. She had come to see her little Zizi, to embrace her as she was passing by. She had been meaning to come for so long.

Frantz's presence seemed to surprise her greatly, and, being engrossed by her delight in talking with

her former friend, she hardly looked at him. After the effusive greetings and caresses, after a pleasant chat over old times, she expressed a wish to see the window on the landing and the room formerly occupied by the Rislers. It pleased her thus to live all her youth over again.

"Do you remember, Frantz, when the Princess Hummingbird entered your room, holding her little head very straight under a diadem of birds' feathers?"

Frantz did not reply. He was too deeply moved to reply. Something warned him that it was on his account, solely on his account, that the woman had come, that she was determined to see him again, to prevent him from giving himself to another, and the poor wretch realized with dismay that she would not have to exert herself overmuch to accomplish her object. When he saw her enter the room, his whole heart had been caught in her net once more.

Desiree suspected nothing, not she! Sidonie's manner was so frank and friendly. And then, they were brother and sister now. Love was no longer possible between them.

But the little cripple had a vague presentiment of woe when Sidonie, standing in the doorway and ready to go, turned carelessly to her brother-in-law and said:

"By the way, Frantz, Risler told me to be sure to bring you back to dine with us to-night. The carriage is below. We will pick him up as we pass the factory."

Then she added, with the prettiest smile imaginable:

"You will let us have him, won't you, Ziree? Don't be afraid; we will send him back."

And he had the courage to go, the ungrateful wretch!

He went without hesitation, without once turning back, whirled away by his passion as by a raging sea, and neither on that day nor the next nor ever after could Mam'zelle Zizi's great easy-chair learn what the interesting communication was that the little low chair had to make to it.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WAITING-ROOM

> "Well, yes, I love you, I love you, more than ever and for ever! What is the use of struggling and fighting against fate? Our sin is stronger than we. But, after all, is it a crime for us to love? We were destined for each other. Have we not the right to come together, although life has parted us? So, come! It is all over; we will go away. Meet me to-morrow evening, Lyon station, at ten o'clock. The tickets are secured and I shall be there awaiting you.
>
> **FRANTZ."**

For a month past Sidonie had been hoping for that letter, a month during which she had brought all her coaxing and cunning into play to lure her brother-in-law on to that written revelation of passion. She had difficulty in accomplishing it. It was no easy matter to pervert an honest young heart like Frantz's to the point of committing a crime; and in that strange contest, in which the one who really loved fought against his own cause, she had often felt that she was at the end of her strength and was almost discouraged. When she was most confident that he was conquered, his sense of right would suddenly rebel, and he would be all ready to flee, to escape her once more.

What a triumph it was for her, therefore, when that letter was handed to her one morning. Madame Dobson happened to be there. She had just arrived, laden with complaints from Georges, who was horribly bored away from his mistress, and was beginning to be alarmed concerning this brother-in-law, who was more attentive, more jealous, more exacting than a husband.

"Oh! the poor, dear fellow, the poor, dear, fellow," said the sentimental
American, "if you could see how unhappy he is!"

And, shaking her curls, she unrolled her music-roll and took from it the poor, dear fellow's letters, which she had carefully hidden between the leaves of her songs, delighted to be involved in this love-

story, to give vent to her emotion in an atmosphere of intrigue and mystery which melted her cold eyes and suffused her dry, pale complexion.

Strange to say, while lending her aid most willingly to this constant going and coming of love-letters, the youthful and attractive Dobson had never written or received a single one on her own account.

Always on the road between Asnieres and Paris with an amorous message under her wing, that odd carrier-pigeon remained true to her own dovecot and cooed for none but unselfish motives.

When Sidonie showed her Frantz's note, Madame Dobson asked:

"What shall you write in reply?"

"I have already written. I consented."

"What! You will go away with that madman?"

Sidonie laughed scornfully.

"Ha! ha! well, hardly! I consented so that he may go and wait for me at the station. That is all. The least I can do is to give him a quarter of an hour of agony. He has made me miserable enough for the last month. Just consider that I have changed my whole life for my gentleman! I have had to close my doors and give up seeing my friends and everybody I know who is young and agreeable, beginning with Georges and ending with you. For you know, my dear, you weren't agreeable to him, and he would have liked to dismiss you with the rest."

The one thing that Sidonie did not mention—and it was the deepest cause of her anger against Frantz—was that he had frightened her terribly by threatening to tell her husband her guilty secret. From that moment she had felt decidedly ill at ease, and her life, her dear life, which she so petted and coddled, had seemed to her to be exposed to serious danger. Yes, the thought that her husband might some day be apprized of her conduct positively terrified her.

That blessed letter put an end to all her fears. It was impossible now for Frantz to expose her, even in the frenzy of his disappointment, knowing that she had such a weapon in her hands; and if he did speak, she would show the letter, and all his accusations would become in Risler's eyes calumny pure and simple. Ah, master judge, we have you now!

"I am born again—I am born again!" she cried to Madame Dobson. She ran out into the garden, gathered great bouquets for her salon, threw the windows wide open to the sunlight, gave orders to the cook, the coachman, the gardener. The house must be made to look beautiful, for Georges was coming back, and for a beginning she organized a grand dinner-party for the end of the week.

The next evening Sidonie, Risler, and Madame Dobson were together in the salon. While honest Risler turned the leaves of an old handbook of mechanics, Sidonie sang to Madame Dobson's accompaniment. Suddenly she stopped in the middle of her aria and burst into a peal of laughter. The clock had just struck ten.

Risler looked up quickly.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing-an idea that came into my head," replied Sidonie, winking of
Madame Dobson and pointing at the clock.

It was the hour appointed for the meeting, and she was thinking of her lover's torture as he waited for her to come.

Since the return of the messenger bringing from Sidonie the "yes" he had so feverishly awaited, a great calm had come over his troubled mind, like the sudden removal of a heavy burden. No more uncertainty, no more clashing between passion and duty.

Not once did it occur to him that on the other side of the landing some one was weeping and sighing because of him. Not once did he think of his brother's despair, of the ghastly drama they were to leave behind them. He saw a sweet little pale face resting beside his in the railway train, a blooming lip within reach of his lip, and two fathomless eyes looking at him by the soft light of the lamp, to the soothing accompaniment of the wheels and the steam.

Two hours before the opening of the gate for the designated train, Frantz was already at the Lyon

station, that gloomy station which, in the distant quarter of Paris in which it is situated, seems like a first halting-place in the provinces. He sat down in the darkest corner and remained there without stirring, as if dazed.

Instinctively, although the appointed hour was still distant, he looked among the people who were hurrying along, calling to one another, to see if he could not discern that graceful figure suddenly emerging from the crowd and thrusting it aside at every step with the radiance of her beauty.

After many departures and arrivals and shrill whistles, the station suddenly became empty, as deserted as a church on weekdays. The time for the ten o'clock train was drawing near. There was no other train before that. Frantz rose. In a quarter of an hour, half an hour at the least, she would be there.

Frantz went hither and thither, watching the carriages that arrived. Each new arrival made him start. He fancied that he saw her enter, closely veiled, hesitating, a little embarrassed. How quickly he would be by her side, to comfort her, to protect her!

The hour for the departure of the train was approaching. He looked at the clock. There was but a quarter of an hour more. It alarmed him; but the bell at the wicket, which had now been opened, summoned him. He ran thither and took his place in the long line.

"Two first-class for Marseilles," he said. It seemed to him as if that were equivalent to taking possession.

He made his way back to his post of observation through the luggage-laden wagons and the late-comers who jostled him as they ran. The drivers shouted, "Take care!" He stood there among the wheels of the cabs, under the horses' feet, with deaf ears and staring eyes. Only five minutes more. It was almost impossible for her to arrive in time.

At last she appeared.

Yes, there she is, it is certainly she—a woman in black, slender and graceful, accompanied by another shorter woman—Madame Dobson, no doubt.

But a second glance undeceived him. It was a young woman who resembled her, a woman of fashion like her, with a happy face. A man, also young, joined them. It was evidently a wedding-party; the mother accompanied them, to see them safely on board the train.

Now there is the confusion of departure, the last stroke of the bell, the steam escaping with a hissing sound, mingled with the hurried footsteps of belated passengers, the slamming of doors and the rumbling of the heavy omnibuses. Sidonie comes not. And Frantz still waits.

At that moment a hand is placed on his shoulder.

Great God!

He turns. The coarse face of M. Gardinois, surrounded by a travelling- cap with ear-pieces, is before him.

"I am not mistaken, it is Monsieur Risler. Are you going to Marseilles by the express? I am not going far."

He explains to Frantz that he has missed the Orleans train, and is going to try to connect with Savigny by the Lyon line; then he talks about Risler Aine and the factory.

"It seems that business hasn't been prospering for some time. They were caught in the Bonnardel failure. Ah! our young men need to be careful. At the rate they're sailing their ship, the same thing is likely to happen to them that happened to Bonnardel. But excuse me, I believe they're about to close the gate. Au revoir."

Frantz has hardly heard what he has been saying. His brother's ruin, the destruction of the whole world, nothing is of any further consequence to him. He is waiting, waiting.

But now the gate is abruptly closed like a last barrier between him and his persistent hope. Once more the station is empty. The uproar has been transferred to the line of the railway, and suddenly a shrill whistle falls upon the lover's ear like an ironical farewell, then dies away in the darkness.

The ten o'clock train has gone!

He tries to be calm and to reason. Evidently she missed the train from Asmeres; but, knowing that he

is waiting for her, she will come, no matter how late it may be. He will wait longer. The waiting-room was made for that.

The unhappy man sits down on a bench. The prospect of a long vigil brings to his mind a well-known room in which at that hour the lamp burns low on a table laden with humming-birds and insects, but that vision passes swiftly through his mind in the chaos of confused thoughts to which the delirium of suspense gives birth.

And while he thus lost himself in thought, the hours passed. The roofs of the buildings of Mazas, buried in darkness, were already beginning to stand out distinctly against the brightening sky. What was he to do? He must go to Asnieres at once and try to find out what had happened. He wished he were there already.

Having made up his mind, he descended the steps of the station at a rapid pace, passing soldiers with their knapsacks on their backs, and poor people who rise early coming to take the morning train, the train of poverty and want.

In front of one of the stations he saw a crowd collected, rag-pickers and countrywomen. Doubtless some drama of the night about to reach its denouement before the Commissioner of Police. Ah! if Frantz had known what that drama was! but he could have no suspicion, and he glanced at the crowd indifferently from a distance.

When he reached Asnieres, after a walk of two or three hours, it was like an awakening. The sun, rising in all its glory, set field and river on fire. The bridge, the houses, the quay, all stood forth with that matutinal sharpness of outline which gives the impression of a new day emerging, luminous and smiling, from the dense mists of the night. From a distance he descried his brother's house, already awake, the open blinds and the flowers on the window-sills. He wandered about some time before he could summon courage to enter.

Suddenly some one hailed him from the shore:

"Ah! Monsieur Frantz. How early you are today!"

It was Sidonie's coachman taking his horses to bathe in the river.

"Has anything happened at the house?" inquired Frantz tremblingly.

"No, Monsieur Frantz."

"Is my brother at home?"

"No, Monsieur slept at the factory."

"No one sick?"

"No, Monsieur Frantz, no one, so far as I know."

Thereupon Frantz made up his mind to ring at the small gate. The gardener was raking the paths. The house was astir; and, early as it was, he heard Sidonie's voice as clear and vibrating as the song of a bird among the rose-bushes of the facade.

She was talking with animation. Frantz, deeply moved, drew near to listen.

"No, no cream. The 'cafe parfait' will be enough. Be sure that it's well frozen and ready at seven o'clock. Oh! about an entree—let us see—"

She was holding council with her cook concerning the famous dinner-party for the next day. Her brother-in-law's sudden appearance did not disconcert her.

"Ah! good-morning, Frantz," she said very coolly. "I am at your service directly. We're to have some people to dinner to-morrow, customers of the firm, a grand business dinner. You'll excuse me, won't you?"

Fresh and smiling, in the white ruffles of her trailing morning-gown and her little lace cap, she continued to discuss her menu, inhaling the cool air that rose from the fields and the river. There was not the slightest trace of chagrin or anxiety upon that tranquil face, which was a striking contrast to the lover's features, distorted by a night of agony and fatigue.

For a long quarter of an hour Frantz, sitting in a corner of the salon, saw all the conventional dishes of a bourgeois dinner pass before him in their regular order, from the little hot pates, the sole

Normande and the innumerable ingredients of which that dish is composed, to the Montreuil peaches and Fontainebleau grapes.

At last, when they were alone and he was able to speak, he asked in a hollow voice:

"Didn't you receive my letter?"

"Why, yes, of course."

She had risen to go to the mirror and adjust a little curl or two entangled with her floating ribbons, and continued, looking at herself all the while:

"Yes, I received your letter. Indeed, I was charmed to receive it. Now, should you ever feel inclined to tell your brother any of the vile stories about me that you have threatened me with, I could easily satisfy him that the only source of your lying tale-bearing was anger with me for repulsing a criminal passion as it deserved. Consider yourself warned, my dear boy—and au revoir."

As pleased as an actress who has just delivered a telling speech with fine effect, she passed him and left the room smiling, with a little curl at the corners of her mouth, triumphant and without anger. And he did not kill her!

CHAPTER XVII

AN ITEM OF NEWS

In the evening preceding that ill-omened day, a few moments after Frantz had stealthily left his room on Rue de Braque, the illustrious Delobelle returned home, with downcast face and that air of lassitude and disillusionment with which he always met untoward events.

"Oh! mon Dieu, my poor man, what has happened?" instantly inquired Madame Delobelle, whom twenty years of exaggerated dramatic pantomime had not yet surfeited.

Before replying, the ex-actor, who never failed to precede his most trivial words with some facial play, learned long before for stage purposes, dropped his lower lip, in token of disgust and loathing, as if he had just swallowed something very bitter.

"The matter is that those Rislers are certainly ingrates or egotists, and, beyond all question, exceedingly ill-bred. Do you know what I just learned downstairs from the concierge, who glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, making sport of me? Well, Frantz Risler has gone! He left the house a short time ago, and has left Paris perhaps ere this, without so much as coming to shake my hand, to thank me for the welcome he has received here. What do you think of that? For he didn't say good-by to you two either, did he? And yet, only a month ago, he was always in our rooms, without any remonstrance from us."

Mamma Delobelle uttered an exclamation of genuine surprise and grief. Desiree, on the contrary, did not say a word or make a motion. She was always the same little iceberg.

Oh! wretched mother, turn your eyes upon your daughter. See that transparent pallor, those tearless eyes which gleam unwaveringly, as if their thoughts and their gaze were concentrated on some object visible to them alone. Cause that poor suffering heart to open itself to you. Question your child. Make her speak, above all things make her weep, to rid her of the burden that is stifling her, so that her tear-dimmed eyes can no longer distinguish in space that horrible unknown thing upon which they are fixed in desperation now.

For nearly a month past, ever since the day when Sidonie came and took Frantz away in her coupe, Desiree had known that she was no longer loved, and she knew her rival's name. She bore them no ill-will, she pitied them rather. But, why had he returned? Why had he so heedlessly given her false hopes? How many tears had she devoured in silence since those hours! How many tales of woe had she told her little birds! For once more it was work that had sustained her, desperate, incessant work, which, by its regularity and monotony, by the constant recurrence of the same duties and the same motions, served as a balance-wheel to her thoughts.

Lately Frantz was not altogether lost to her. Although he came but rarely to see her, she knew that he

was there, she could hear him go in and out, pace, the floor with restless step, and sometimes, through the half-open door, see his loved shadow hurry across the landing. He did not seem happy. Indeed, what happiness could be in store for him? He loved his brother's wife. And at the thought that Frantz was not happy, the fond creature almost forgot her own sorrow to think only of the sorrow of the man she loved.

She was well aware that it was impossible that he could ever love her again. But she thought that perhaps she would see him come in some day, wounded and dying, that he would sit down on the little low chair, lay his head on her knees, and with a great sob tell her of his suffering and say to her, "Comfort me."

That forlorn hope kept her alive for three weeks. She needed so little as that.

But no. Even that was denied her. Frantz had gone, gone without a glance for her, without a parting word. The lover's desertion was followed by the desertion of the friend. It was horrible!

At her father's first words, she felt as if she were hurled into a deep, ice-cold abyss, filled with darkness, into which she plunged swiftly, helplessly, well knowing that she would never return to the light. She was suffocating. She would have liked to resist, to struggle, to call for help.

Who was there who had the power to sustain her in that great disaster?

God? The thing that is called Heaven?

She did not even think of that. In Paris, especially in the quarters where the working class live, the houses are too high, the streets too narrow, the air too murky for heaven to be seen.

It was Death alone at which the little cripple was gazing so earnestly.
Her course was determined upon at once: she must die. But how?

Sitting motionless in her easy-chair, she considered what manner of death she should choose. As she was almost never alone, she could not think of the brazier of charcoal, to be lighted after closing the doors and windows. As she never went out she could not think either of poison to be purchased at the druggist's, a little package of white powder to be buried in the depths of the pocket, with the needle-case and the thimble. There was the phosphorus on the matches, too, the verdigris on old sous, the open window with the paved street below; but the thought of forcing upon her parents the ghastly spectacle of a self-inflicted death-agony, the thought that what would remain of her, picked up amid a crowd of people, would be so frightful to look upon, made her reject that method.

She still had the river. At all events, the water carries you away somewhere, so that nobody finds you and your death is shrouded in mystery.

The river! She shuddered at the mere thought. But it was not the vision of the deep, black water that terrified her. The girls of Paris laugh at that. You throw your apron over your head so that you can't see, and pouf! But she must go downstairs, into the street, all alone, and the street frightened her.

Yes, it was a terrible thing to go out into the street alone. She must wait until the gas was out, steal softly downstairs when her mother had gone to bed, pull the cord of the gate, and make her way across Paris, where you meet men who stare impertinently into your face, and pass brilliantly lighted cafes. The river was a long distance away. She would be very tired. However, there was no other way than that.

"I am going to bed, my child; are you going to sit up any longer?"

With her eyes on her work, "my child" replied that she was. She wished to finish her dozen.

"Good-night, then," said Mamma Delobelle, her enfeebled sight being unable to endure the light longer. "I have put father's supper by the fire. Just look at it before you go to bed."

Desire did not lie. She really intended to finish her dozen, so that her father could take them to the shop in the morning; and really, to see that tranquil little head bending forward in the white light of the lamp, one would never have imagined all the sinister thoughts with which it was thronged.

At last she takes up the last bird of the dozen, a marvellously lovely little bird whose wings seem to have been dipped in sea-water, all green as they are with a tinge of sapphire.

Carefully, daintily, Desiree suspends it on a piece of brass wire, in the charming attitude of a frightened creature about to fly away.

Ah! how true it is that the little blue bird is about to fly away! What a desperate flight into space!

How certain one feels that this time it is the great journey, the everlasting journey from which there is no return!

By and by, very softly, Desiree opens the wardrobe and takes a thin shawl which she throws over her shoulders; then she goes. What? Not a glance at her mother, not a silent farewell, not a tear? No, nothing! With the terrible clearness of vision of those who are about to die, she suddenly realizes that her childhood and youth have been sacrificed to a vast self-love. She feels very sure that a word from their great man will comfort that sleeping mother, with whom she is almost angry for not waking, for allowing her to go without a quiver of her closed eyelids.

When one dies young, even by one's own act, it is never without a rebellious feeling, and poor Desiree bids adieu to life, indignant with destiny.

Now she is in the street. Where is she going? Everything seems deserted already. Desiree walks rapidly, wrapped in her little shawl, head erect, dry-eyed. Not knowing the way, she walks straight ahead.

The dark, narrow streets of the Marais, where gas-jets twinkle at long intervals, cross and recross and wind about, and again and again in her feverish course she goes over the same ground. There is always something between her and the river. And to think that, at that very hour, almost in the same quarter, some one else is wandering through the streets, waiting, watching, desperate! Ah! if they could but meet. Suppose she should accost that feverish watcher, should ask him to direct her:

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur. How can I get to the Seine?"

He would recognize her at once.

"What! Can it be you, Mam'zelle Zizi? What are you doing out-of-doors at this time of night?"

"I am going to die, Frantz. You have taken away all my pleasure in living."

Thereupon he, deeply moved, would seize her, press her to his heart and carry her away in his arms, saying:

"Oh! no, do not die. I need you to comfort me, to cure all the wounds the other has inflicted on me."

But that is a mere poet's dream, one of the meetings that life can not bring about.

Streets, more streets, then a square and a bridge whose lanterns make another luminous bridge in the black water. Here is the river at last. The mist of that damp, soft autumn evening causes all of this huge Paris, entirely strange to her as it is, to appear to her like an enormous confused mass, which her ignorance of the landmarks magnifies still more. This is the place where she must die.

Poor little Desiree!

She recalls the country excursion which Frantz had organized for her. That breath of nature, which she breathed that day for the first time, falls to her lot again at the moment of her death. "Remember," it seems to say to her; and she replies mentally, "Oh! yes, I remember."

She remembers only too well. When it arrives at the end of the quay, which was bedecked as for a holiday, the furtive little shadow pauses at the steps leading down to the bank.

Almost immediately there are shouts and excitement all along the quay:

"Quick—a boat—grappling-irons!" Boatmen and policemen come running from all sides. A boat puts off from the shore with a lantern in the bow.

The flower-women awake, and, when one of them asks with a yawn what is happening, the woman who keeps the cafe that crouches at the corner of the bridge answers coolly:

"A woman just jumped into the river."

But no. The river has refused to take that child. It has been moved to pity by so great gentleness and charm. In the light of the lanterns swinging to and fro on the shore, a black group forms and moves away. She is saved! It was a sand-hauler who fished her out. Policemen are carrying her, surrounded by boatmen and lightermen, and in the darkness a hoarse voice is heard saying with a sneer: "That water-hen gave me a lot of trouble. You ought to see how she slipped through my fingers! I believe she wanted to make me lose my reward." Gradually the tumult subsides, the bystanders disperse, and the black group moves away toward a police-station.

Ah! poor girl, you thought that it was an easy matter to have done with life, to disappear abruptly. You did not know that, instead of bearing you away swiftly to the oblivion you sought, the river would drive you back to all the shame, to all the ignominy of unsuccessful suicide. First of all, the station, the hideous station, with its filthy benches, its floor where the sodden dust seems like mud from the street. There Desiree was doomed to pass the rest of the night.

At last day broke with the shuddering glare so distressing to invalids. Suddenly aroused from her torpor, Desiree sat up in her bed, threw off the blanket in which they had wrapped her, and despite fatigue and fever tried to stand, in order to regain full possession of her faculties and her will. She had but one thought—to escape from all those eyes that were opening on all sides, to leave that frightful place where the breath of sleep was so heavy and its attitudes so distorted.

"I implore you, messieurs," she said, trembling from head to foot, "let me return to mamma."

Hardened as they were to Parisian dramas, even those good people realized that they were face to face with something more worthy of attention, more affecting than usual. But they could not take her back to her mother as yet. She must go before the commissioner first. That was absolutely necessary. They called a cab from compassion for her; but she must go from the station to the cab, and there was a crowd at the door to stare at the little lame girl with the damp hair glued to her temples, and her policeman's blanket which did not prevent her shivering. At headquarters she was conducted up a dark, damp stairway where sinister figures were passing to and fro.

When Desiree entered the room, a man rose from the shadow and came to meet her, holding out his hand.

It was the man of the reward, her hideous rescuer at twenty-five francs.

"Well, little-mother," he said, with his cynical laugh, and in a voice that made one think of foggy nights on the water, "how are we since our dive?"

The unhappy girl was burning red with fever and shame; so bewildered that it seemed to her as if the river had left a veil over her eyes, a buzzing in her ears. At last she was ushered into a smaller room, into the presence of a pompous individual, wearing the insignia of the Legion of Honor, Monsieur le Commissaire in person, who was sipping his 'cafe au lait' and reading the 'Gazette des Tribunaux.'

"Ah! it's you, is it?" he said in a surly tone and without raising his eyes from his paper, as he dipped a piece of bread in his cup; and the officer who had brought Desiree began at once to read his report:

"At quarter to twelve, on Quai de la Megisserie, in front of No. 17, the woman Delobelle, twenty-four years old, flower-maker, living with her parents on Rue de Braque, tried to commit suicide by throwing herself into the Seine, and was taken out safe and sound by Sieur Parcheminet, sand-hauler of Rue de la Butte-Chaumont."

Monsieur le Commissaire listened as he ate, with the listless, bored expression of a man whom nothing can surprise; at the end he gazed sternly and with a pompous affectation of virtue at the woman Delobelle, and lectured her in the most approved fashion. It was very wicked, it was cowardly, this thing that she had done. What could have driven her to such an evil act? Why did she seek to destroy herself? Come, woman Delobelle, answer, why was it?

But the woman Delobelle obstinately declined to answer. It seemed to her that it would put a stigma upon her love to avow it in such a place. "I don't know—I don't know," she whispered, shivering.

Testy and impatient, the commissioner decided that she should be taken back to her parents, but only on one condition: she must promise never to try it again.

"Come, do you promise?"

"Oh! yes, Monsieur."

"You will never try again?"

"Oh! no, indeed I will not, never—never!"

Notwithstanding her protestations, Monsieur le Commissaire de Police shook his head, as if he did not trust her oath.

Now she is outside once more, on the way to her home, to a place of refuge; but her martyrdom was not yet at an end.

In the carriage, the officer who accompanied her was too polite, too affable. She seemed not to

understand, shrank from him, withdrew her hand. What torture! But the most terrible moment of all was the arrival in Rue de Braque, where the whole house was in a state of commotion, and the inquisitive curiosity of the neighbors must be endured. Early in the morning the whole quarter had been informed of her disappearance. It was rumored that she had gone away with Frantz Risler. The illustrious Delobelle had gone forth very early, intensely agitated, with his hat awry and rumpled wristbands, a sure indication of extraordinary preoccupation; and the concierge, on taking up the provisions, had found the poor mother half mad, running from one room to another, looking for a note from the child, for any clew, however unimportant, that would enable her at least to form some conjecture.

Suddenly a carriage stopped in front of the door. Voices and footsteps echoed through the hall.

"M'ame Delobelle, here she is! Your daughter's been found."

It was really Desiree who came toiling up the stairs on the arm of a stranger, pale and fainting, without hat or shawl, and wrapped in a great brown cape. When she saw her mother she smiled at her with an almost foolish expression.

"Do not be alarmed, it is nothing," she tried to say, then sank to the floor. Mamma Delobelle would never have believed that she was so strong. To lift her daughter, take her into the room, and put her to bed was a matter of a moment; and she talked to her and kissed her.

"Here you are at last. Where have you come from, you bad child? Tell me, is it true that you tried to kill yourself? Were you suffering so terribly? Why did you conceal it from me?"

When she saw her mother in that condition, with tear-stained face, aged in a few short hours, Desiree felt a terrible burden of remorse. She remembered that she had gone away without saying good-by to her, and that in the depths of her heart she had accused her of not loving her.

Not loving her!

"Why, it would kill me if you should die," said the poor mother. "Oh! when I got up this morning and saw that your bed hadn't been slept in and that you weren't in the workroom either!—I just turned round and fell flat. Are you warm now? Do you feel well? You won't do it again, will you—try to kill yourself?"

And she tucked in the bed-clothes, rubbed her feet, and rocked her upon her breast.

As she lay in bed with her eyes closed, Desiree saw anew all the incidents of her suicide, all the hideous scenes through which she had passed in returning from death to life. In the fever, which rapidly increased, in the intense drowsiness which began to overpower her, her mad journey across Paris continued to excite and torment her. Myriads of dark streets stretched away before her, with the Seine at the end of each.

That ghastly river, which she could not find in the night, haunted her now.

She felt that she was besmirched with its slime, its mud; and in the nightmare that oppressed her, the poor child, powerless to escape the obsession of her recollections, whispered to her mother: "Hide me—hide me—I am ashamed!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SHE PROMISED NOT TO TRY AGAIN

Oh! no, she will not try it again. Monsieur le Commissaire need have no fear. In the first place how could she go as far as the river, now that she can not stir from her bed? If Monsieur le Commissaire could see her now, he would not doubt her word. Doubtless the wish, the longing for death, so unmistakably written on her pale face the other morning, are still visible there; but they are softened, resigned. The woman Delobelle knows that by waiting a little, yes, a very little time, she will have nothing more to wish for.

The doctors declare that she is dying of pneumonia; she must have contracted it in her wet clothes. The doctors are mistaken; it is not pneumonia. Is it her love, then, that is killing her? No. Since that

terrible night she no longer thinks of Frantz, she no longer feels that she is worthy to love or to be loved. Thenceforth there is a stain upon her spotless life, and it is of the shame of that and of nothing else that she is dying.

Mamma Delobelle sits by Desiree's bed, working by the light from the window, and nursing her daughter. From time to time she raises her eyes to contemplate that mute despair, that mysterious disease, then hastily resumes her work; for it is one of the hardest trials of the poor that they can not suffer at their ease.

Mamma Delobelle had to work alone now, and her fingers had not the marvellous dexterity of Desiree's little hands; medicines were dear, and she would not for anything in the world have interfered with one of "the father's" cherished habits. And so, at whatever hour the invalid opened her eyes, she would see her mother, in the pale light of early morning, or under her night lamp, working, working without rest.

Between two stitches the mother would look up at her child, whose face grew paler and paler:

"How do you feel?"

"Very well," the sick girl would reply, with a faint, heartbroken smile, which illumined her sorrowful face and showed all the ravages that had been wrought upon it, as a sunbeam, stealing into a poor man's lodging, instead of brightening it, brings out more clearly its cheerlessness and nudity.

The illustrious Delobelle was never there. He had not changed in any respect the habits of a strolling player out of an engagement. And yet he knew that his daughter was dying: the doctor had told him so. Moreover, it had been a terrible blow to him, for, at heart, he loved his child dearly; but in that singular nature the most sincere and the most genuine feelings adopted a false and unnatural mode of expression, by the same law which ordains that, when a shelf is placed awry, nothing that you place upon it seems to stand straight.

Delobelle's natural tendency was, before everything, to air his grief, to spread it abroad. He played the role of the unhappy father from one end of the boulevard to the other. He was always to be found in the neighborhood of the theatres or at the actors' restaurant, with red eyes and pale cheeks. He loved to invite the question, "Well, my poor old fellow, how are things going at home?" Thereupon he would shake his head with a nervous gesture; his grimace held tears in check, his mouth imprecations, and he would stab heaven with a silent glance, overflowing with wrath, as when he played the 'Medecin des Enfants;' all of which did not prevent him, however, from bestowing the most delicate and thoughtful attentions upon his daughter.

He also maintained an unalterable confidence in himself, no matter what happened. And yet his eyes came very near being opened to the truth at last. A hot little hand laid upon that pompous, illusion-ridden head came very near expelling the bee that had been buzzing there so long. This is how it came to pass.

One night Desiree awoke with a start, in a very strange state. It should be said that the doctor, when he came to see her on the preceding evening, had been greatly surprised to find her suddenly brighter and calmer, and entirely free from fever. Without attempting to explain this unhoped-for resurrection, he had gone away, saying, "Let us wait and see"; he relied upon the power of youth to throw off disease, upon the resistless force of the life-giving sap, which often engrafts a new life upon the very symptoms of death. If he had looked under Desiree's pillow, he would have found there a letter postmarked Cairo, wherein lay the secret of that happy change. Four pages signed by Frantz, his whole conduct confessed and explained to his dear little Zizi.

It was the very letter of which the sick girl had dreamed. If she had dictated it herself, all the phrases likely to touch her heart, all the delicately worded excuses likely to pour balm into her wounds, would have been less satisfactorily expressed. Frantz repented, asked forgiveness, and without making any promises, above all without asking anything from her, described to his faithful friend his struggles, his remorse, his sufferings.

What a misfortune that that letter had not arrived a few days earlier. Now, all those kind words were to Desiree like the dainty dishes that are brought too late to a man dying of hunger.

Suddenly she awoke, and, as we said a moment since, in an extraordinary state.

In her head, which seemed to her lighter than usual, there suddenly began a grand procession of thoughts and memories. The most distant periods of her past seemed to approach her. The most trivial incidents of her childhood, scenes that she had not then understood, words heard as in a dream, recurred to her mind.

From her bed she could see her father and mother, one by her side, the other in the workroom, the door of which had been left open. Mamma Delobelle was lying back in her chair in the careless attitude of long- continued fatigue, heeded at last; and all the scars, the ugly sabre cuts with which age and suffering brand the faces of the old, manifested themselves, ineffaceable and pitiful to see, in the relaxation of slumber. Desiree would have liked to be strong enough to rise and kiss that lovely, placid brow, furrowed by wrinkles which did not mar its beauty.

In striking contrast to that picture, the illustrious Delobelle appeared to his daughter through the open door in one of his favorite attitudes. Seated before the little white cloth that bore his supper, with his body at an angle of sixty-seven and a half degrees, he was eating and at the same time running through a pamphlet which rested against the carafe in front of him.

For the first time in her life Desiree noticed the striking lack of harmony between her emaciated mother, scantily clad in little black dresses which made her look even thinner and more haggard than she really was, and her happy, well-fed, idle, placid, thoughtless father. At a glance she realized the difference between the two lives. What would become of them when she was no longer there? Either her mother would work too hard and would kill herself; or else the poor woman would be obliged to cease working altogether, and that selfish husband, forever engrossed by his theatrical ambition, would allow them both to drift gradually into abject poverty, that black hole which widens and deepens as one goes down into it.

Suppose that, before going away—something told her that she would go very soon—before going away, she should tear away the thick bandage that the poor man kept over his eyes wilfully and by force?

Only a hand as light and loving as hers could attempt that operation.
Only she had the right to say to her father:

"Earn your living. Give up the stage."

Thereupon, as time was flying, Desire Delobelle summoned all her courage and called softly:

"Papa-papa"

At his daughter's first summons the great man hurried to her side. He entered Desiree's bedroom, radiant and superb, very erect, his lamp in his hand and a camellia in his buttonhole.

"Good evening, Zizi. Aren't you asleep?"

His voice had a joyous intonation that produced a strange effect amid the prevailing gloom. Desiree motioned to him not to speak, pointing to her sleeping mother.

"Put down your lamp—I have something to say to you."

Her voice, broken by emotion, impressed him; and so did her eyes, for they seemed larger than usual, and were lighted by a piercing glance that he had never seen in them.

He approached with something like awe.

"Why, what's the matter, Bichette? Do you feel any worse?"

Desiree replied with a movement of her little pale face that she felt very ill and that she wanted to speak to him very close, very close. When the great man stood by her pillow, she laid her burning hand on the great man's arm and whispered in his ear. She was very ill, hopelessly ill. She realized fully that she had not long to live.

"Then, father, you will be left alone with mamma. Don't tremble like that. You knew that this thing must come, yes, that it was very near. But I want to tell you this. When I am gone, I am terribly afraid mamma won't be strong enough to support the family just see how pale and exhausted she is."

The actor looked at his "sainted wife," and seemed greatly surprised to find that she did really look so badly. Then he consoled himself with the selfish remark:

"She never was very strong."

That remark and the tone in which it was made angered Desiree and strengthened her determination. She continued, without pity for the actor's illusions:

"What will become of you two when I am no longer here? Oh! I know that you have great hopes, but it takes them a long while to come to anything. The results you have waited for so long may not arrive for

a long time to come; and until then what will you do? Listen! my dear father, I would not willingly hurt you; but it seems to me that at your age, as intelligent as you are, it would be easy for you—I am sure Monsieur Risler Aine would ask nothing better."

She spoke slowly, with an effort, carefully choosing her words, leaving long pauses between every two sentences, hoping always that they might be filled by a movement, an exclamation from her father. But the actor did not understand.

"I think that you would do well," pursued Desiree, timidly, "I think that you would do well to give up —"

"Eh?—what?—what's that?"

She paused when she saw the effect of her words. The old actor's mobile features were suddenly contracted under the lash of violent despair; and tears, genuine tears which he did not even think of concealing behind his hand as they do on the stage, filled his eyes but did not flow, so tightly did his agony clutch him by the throat. The poor devil began to understand.

She murmured twice or thrice:

"To give up—to give up—"

Then her little head fell back upon the pillow, and she died without having dared to tell him what he would do well to give up.

CHAPTER XIX

APPROACHING CLOUDS

One night, near the end of January, old Sigismond Planus, cashier of the house of Fromont Jeune and Risler Aine, was awakened with a start in his little house at Montrouge by the same teasing voice, the same rattling of chains, followed by that fatal cry:

"The notes!"

"That is true," thought the worthy man, sitting up in bed; "day after to- morrow will be the last day of the month. And I have the courage to sleep!"

In truth, a considerable sum of money must be raised: a hundred thousand francs to be paid on two obligations, and at a moment when, for the first time in thirty years, the strong-box of the house of Fromont was absolutely empty. What was to be done? Sigismond had tried several times to speak to Fromont Jeune, but he seemed to shun the burdensome responsibility of business, and when he walked through the offices was always in a hurry, feverishly excited, and seemed neither to see nor hear anything about him. He answered the old cashier's anxious questions, gnawing his moustache:

"All right, all right, my old Planus. Don't disturb yourself; I will look into it." And as he said it, he seemed to be thinking of something else, to be a thousand leagues away from his surroundings. It was rumored in the factory, where his liaison with Madame Risler was no longer a secret to anybody, that Sidonie deceived him, made him very unhappy; and, indeed, his mistress's whims worried him much more than his cashier's anxiety. As for Risler, no one ever saw him; he passed his days shut up in a room under the roof, overseeing the mysterious, interminable manufacture of his machines.

This indifference on the part of the employers to the affairs of the factory, this absolute lack of oversight, had led by slow degrees to general demoralization. Some business was still done, because an established house will go on alone for years by force of the first impetus; but what ruin, what chaos beneath that apparent prosperity?

Sigismond knew it better than any one, and as if to see his way more clearly amid the multitude of painful thoughts which whirled madly through his brain, the cashier lighted his candle, sat down on his bed, and thought, "Where were they to find that hundred thousand francs?"

"Take the notes back. I have no funds to meet them."

No, no! That was not possible. Any sort of humiliation was preferable to that.

"Well, it's decided. I will go to-morrow," sighed the poor cashier.

And he tossed about in torture, unable to close an eye until morning.

Notwithstanding the late hour, Georges Fromont had not yet retired. He was sitting by the fire, with his head in his hands, in the blind and dumb concentration due to irreparable misfortune, thinking of Sidonie, of that terrible Sidonie who was asleep at that moment on the floor above. She was positively driving him mad. She was false to him, he was sure of it,—she was false to him with the Toulousan tenor, that Cazabon, alias Cazaboni, whom Madame Dobson had brought to the house. For a long time he had implored her not to receive that man; but Sidonie would not listen to him, and on that very day, speaking of a grand ball she was about to give, she had declared explicitly that nothing should prevent her inviting her tenor.

"Then he's your lover!" Georges had exclaimed angrily, his eyes gazing into hers.

She had not denied it; she had not even turned her eyes away.

And to think that he had sacrificed everything to that woman— his fortune, his honor, even his lovely Claire, who lay sleeping with her child in the adjoining room—a whole lifetime of happiness within reach of his hand, which he had spurned for that vile creature! Now she had admitted that she did not love him, that she loved another. And he, the coward, still longed for her. In heaven's name, what potion had she given him?

Carried away by indignation that made the blood boil in his veins, Georges Fromont started from his armchair and strode feverishly up and down the room, his footsteps echoing in the silence of the sleeping house like living insomnia. The other was asleep upstairs. She could sleep by favor of her heedless, remorseless nature. Perhaps, too, she was thinking of her Cazaboni.

When that thought passed through his mind, Georges had a mad longing to go up, to wake Risler, to tell him everything and destroy himself with her. Really that deluded husband was too idiotic! Why did he not watch her more closely? She was pretty enough, yes, and vicious enough, too, for every precaution to be taken with her.

And it was while he was struggling amid such cruel and unfruitful reflections as these that the devil of anxiety whispered in his ear:

"The notes! the notes!"

The miserable wretch! In his wrath he had entirely forgotten them. And yet he had long watched the approach of that terrible last day of January. How many times, between two assignations, when his mind, free for a moment from thoughts of Sidonie, recurred to his business, to the realities of life-how many times had he said to himself, "That day will be the end of everything!" But, as with all those who live in the delirium of intoxication, his cowardice convinced him that it was too late to mend matters, and he returned more quickly and more determinedly to his evil courses, in order to forget, to divert his thoughts.

But that was no longer possible. He saw the impending disaster clearly, in its full meaning; and Sigismond Planus's wrinkled, solemn face rose before him with its sharply cut features, whose absence of expression softened their harshness, and his light German-Swiss eyes, which had haunted him for many weeks with their impassive stare.

Well, no, he had not the hundred thousand francs, nor did he know where to get them.

The crisis which, a few hours before, seemed to him a chaos, an eddying whirl in which he could see nothing distinctly and whose very confusion was a source of hope, appeared to him at that moment with appalling distinctness. An empty cash-box, closed doors, notes protested, ruin, are the phantoms he saw whichever way he turned. And when, on top of all the rest, came the thought of Sidonie's treachery, the wretched, desperate man, finding nothing to cling to in that shipwreck, suddenly uttered a sob, a cry of agony, as if appealing for help to some higher power.

"Georges, Georges, it is I. What is the matter?"

His wife stood before him, his wife who now waited for him every night, watching anxiously for his return from the club, for she still believed that he passed his evenings there. That night she had heard him walking very late in his room. At last her child fell asleep, and Claire, hearing the father sob, ran to him.

Oh! what boundless, though tardy remorse overwhelmed him when he saw her before him, so deeply moved, so lovely and so loving! Yes, she was in very truth the true companion, the faithful friend. How

could he have deserted her? For a long, long time he wept upon her shoulder, unable to speak. And it was fortunate that he did not speak, for he would have told her all, all. The unhappy man felt the need of pouring out his heart—an irresistible longing to accuse himself, to ask forgiveness, to lessen the weight of the remorse that was crushing him.

She spared him the pain of uttering a word:

"You have been gambling, have you not? You have lost—lost heavily?"

He moved his head affirmatively; then, when he was able to speak, he confessed that he must have a hundred thousand francs for the day after the morrow, and that he did not know how to obtain them.

She did not reproach him. She was one of those women who, when face to face with disaster, think only of repairing it, without a word of recrimination. Indeed, in the bottom of her heart she blessed this misfortune which brought him nearer to her and became a bond between their two lives, which had long lain so far apart. She reflected a moment. Then, with an effort indicating a resolution which had cost a bitter struggle, she said:

"Not all is lost as yet. I will go to Savigny tomorrow and ask my grandfather for the money."

He would never have dared to suggest that to her. Indeed, it would never have occurred to him. She was so proud and old Gardinois so hard! Surely that was a great sacrifice for her to make for him, and a striking proof of her love.

"Claire, Claire—how good your are!" he said.

Without replying, she led him to their child's cradle.

"Kiss her," she said softly; and as they stood there side by side, their heads leaning over the child, Georges was afraid of waking her, and he embraced the mother passionately.

CHAPTER XX

REVELATIONS

"Ah! here's Sigismond. How goes the world, Pere Sigismond? How is business? Is it good with you?"

The old cashier smiled affably, shook hands with the master, his wife, and his brother, and, as they talked, looked curiously about. They were in a manufactory of wallpapers on Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the establishment of the little Prochassons, who were beginning to be formidable rivals. Those former employes of the house of Fromont had set up on their own account, beginning in a very, small way, and had gradually succeeded in making for themselves a place on 'Change. Fromont the uncle had assisted them for a long while with his credit and his money; the result being most friendly relations between the two firms, and a balance—between ten or fifteen thousand francs—which had never been definitely adjusted, because they knew that money was in good hands when the Prochassons had it.

Indeed, the appearance of the factory was most reassuring. The chimneys proudly shook their plumes of smoke. The dull roar of constant toil indicated that the workshops were full of workmen and activity. The buildings were in good repair, the windows clean; everything had an aspect of enthusiasm, of good-humor, of discipline; and behind the grating in the counting-room sat the wife of one of the brothers, simply dressed, with her hair neatly arranged, and an air of authority on her youthful face, deeply intent upon a long column of figures.

Old Sigismond thought bitterly of the difference between the house of Fromont, once so wealthy, now living entirely upon its former reputation, and the ever-increasing prosperity of the establishment before his eyes. His stealthy glance penetrated to the darkest corners, seeking some defect, something to criticise; and his failure to find anything made his heart heavy and his smile forced and anxious.

What embarrassed him most of all was the question how he should approach the subject of the money due his employers without betraying the emptiness of the strongbox. The poor man assumed a jaunty, unconcerned air which was truly pitiful to see. Business was good—very good. He happened to be passing through the quarter and thought he would come in a moment—that was natural, was it not? One likes to see old friends.

But these preambles, these constantly expanding circumlocutions, did not bring him to the point he wished to reach; on the contrary, they led him away from his goal, and imagining that he detected surprise in the eyes of his auditors, he went completely astray, stammered, lost his head, and, as a last resort, took his hat and pretended to go. At the door he suddenly bethought himself:

"Ah! by the way, so long as I am here—"

He gave a little wink which he thought sly, but which was in reality heartrending.

"So long as I am here, suppose we settle that old account."

The two brothers and the young woman in the counting-room gazed at one another a second, unable to understand.

"Account? What account, pray?"

Then all three began to laugh at the same moment, and heartily too, as if at a joke, a rather broad joke, on the part of the old cashier. "Go along with you, you sly old Pere Planus!" The old man laughed with them! He laughed without any desire to laugh, simply to do as the others did.

At last they explained. Fromont Jeune had come in person, six months before, to collect the balance in their hands.

Sigismond felt that his strength was going. But he summoned courage to say:

"Ah! yes; true. I had forgotten. Sigismond Planus is growing old, that is plain. I am failing, my children, I am failing."

And the old man went away wiping his eyes, in which still glistened great tears caused by the hearty laugh he had just enjoyed. The young people behind him exchanged glances and shook their heads. They understood.

The blow he had received was so crushing that the cashier, as soon as he was out-of-doors, was obliged to sit down on a bench. So that was the reason why Georges did not come to the counting-room for money. He made his collections in person. What had taken place at the Prochassons' had probably been repeated everywhere else. It was quite useless, therefore, for him to subject himself to further humiliation. Yes, but the notes, the notes!—that thought renewed his strength. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and started once more to try his luck with a customer in the faubourg. But this time he took his precautions and called to the cashier from the doorway, without entering:

"Good-morning, Pere So-and-So. I want to ask you a question."

He held the door half open, his hand upon the knob.

"When did we settle our last bill? I forgot to enter it."

Oh! it was a long while ago, a very long while, that their last bill was settled. Fromont Jeune's receipt was dated in September. It was five months ago.

The door was hastily closed. Another! Evidently it would be the same thing everywhere.

"Ah! Monsieur Chorche, Monsieur Chorche," muttered poor Sigismond; and while he pursued his journey, with bowed head and trembling legs, Madame Fromont Jeune's carriage passed him close, on its way to the Orleans station; but Claire did not see old Planus, any more than she had seen, when she left her house a few moments earlier, Monsieur Chebe in his long frock-coat and the illustrious Delobelle in his stovepipe hat, turning into the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes at opposite ends, each with the factory and Risler's wallet for his objective point. The young woman was much too deeply engrossed by what she had before her to look into the street.

Think of it! It was horrible. To go and ask M. Gardinois for a hundred thousand francs—M. Gardinois, a man who boasted that he had never borrowed or loaned a sou in his life, who never lost an opportunity to tell how, on one occasion, being driven to ask his father for forty francs to buy a pair of trousers, he had repaid the loan in small amounts. In his dealings with everybody, even with his children, M. Gardinois followed those traditions of avarice which the earth, the cruel earth, often ungrateful to those who till it, seems to inculcate in all peasants. The old man did not intend that any part of his colossal fortune should go to his children during his lifetime.

"They'll find my property when I am dead," he often said.

Acting upon that principle, he had married off his daughter, the elder Madame Fromont, without one

sou of dowry, and he never forgave his son- in-law for having made a fortune without assistance from him. For it was one of the peculiarities of that nature, made up of vanity and selfishness in equal parts, to wish that every one he knew should need his help, should bow before his wealth. When the Fromonts expressed in his presence their satisfaction at the prosperous turn their business was beginning to take, his sharp, cunning, little blue eye would smile ironically, and he would growl, "We shall see what it all comes to in the end," in a tone that made them tremble. Sometimes, too, at Savigny, in the evening, when the park, the avenues, the blue slates of the chateau, the red brick of the stables, the ponds and brooks shone resplendent, bathed in the golden glory of a lovely sunset, this eccentric parvenu would say aloud before his children, after looking about him:

"The one thing that consoles me for dying some day is that no one in the family will ever be rich enough to keep a chateau that costs fifty thousand francs a year to maintain."

And yet, with that latter-day tenderness which even the sternest grandfathers find in the depths of their hearts, old Gardinois would gladly have made a pet of his granddaughter. But Claire, even as a child, had felt an invincible repugnance for the former peasant's hardness of heart and vainglorious selfishness. And when affection forms no bonds between those who are separated by difference in education, such repugnance is increased by innumerable trifles. When Claire married Georges, the grandfather said to Madame Fromont:

"If your daughter wishes, I will give her a royal present; but she must ask for it."

But Claire received nothing, because she would not ask for anything.

What a bitter humiliation to come, three years later, to beg a hundred thousand francs from the generosity she had formerly spurned, to humble herself, to face the endless sermons, the sneering raillery, the whole seasoned with Berrichon jests, with phrases smacking of the soil, with the taunts, often well-deserved, which narrow, but logical, minds can utter on occasion, and which sting with their vulgar patois like an insult from an inferior!

Poor Claire! Her husband and her father were about to be humiliated in her person. She must necessarily confess the failure of the one, the downfall of the house which the other had founded and of which he had been so proud while he lived. The thought that she would be called upon to defend all that she loved best in the world made her strong and weak at the same time.

It was eleven o'clock when she reached Savigny. As she had given no warning of her visit, the carriage from the chateau was not at the station, and she had no choice but to walk.

It was a cold morning and the roads were dry and hard. The north wind blew freely across the arid fields and the river, and swept unopposed through the leafless trees and bushes. The chateau appeared under the low-hanging clouds, with its long line of low walls and hedges separating it from the surrounding fields. The slates on the roof were as dark as the sky they reflected; and that magnificent summer residence, completely transformed by the bitter, silent winter, without a leaf on its trees or a pigeon on its roofs, showed no life save in its rippling brooks and the murmuring of the tall poplars as they bowed majestically to one another, shaking the magpies' nests hidden among their highest branches.

At a distance Claire fancied that the home of her youth wore a surly, depressed air. It seemed to het that Savigny watched her approach with the cold, aristocratic expression which it assumed for passengers on the highroad, who stopped at the iron bars of its gateways.

Oh! the cruel aspect of everything!

And yet not so cruel after all. For, with its tightly closed exterior, Savigny seemed to say to her, "Begone—do not come in!" And if she had chosen to listen, Claire, renouncing her plan of speaking to her grandfather, would have returned at once to Paris to maintain the repose of her life. But she did not understand, poor child! and already the great Newfoundland dog, who had recognized her, came leaping through the dead leaves and sniffed at the gate.

"Good-morning, Francoise. Where is grandpapa?" the young woman asked the gardener's wife, who came to open the gate, fawning and false and trembling, like all the servants at the chateau when they felt that the master's eye was upon them.

Grandpapa was in his office, a little building independent of the main house, where he passed his days fumbling among boxes and pigeonholes and great books with green backs, with the rage for bureaucracy due to his early ignorance and the strong impression made upon him long before by the office of the notary in his village.

At that moment he was closeted there with his keeper, a sort of country spy, a paid informer who apprised him as to all that was said and done in the neighborhood.

He was the master's favorite. His name was Fouinat (polecat), and he had the flat, crafty, blood-thirsty face appropriate to his name.

When Claire entered, pale and trembling under her furs, the old man understood that something serious and unusual had happened, and he made a sign to Fouinat, who disappeared, gliding through the half-open door as if he were entering the very wall.

"What's the matter, little one? Why, you're all 'perlute'," said the grandfather, seated behind his huge desk.

Perlute, in the Berrichon dictionary, signifies troubled, excited, upset, and applied perfectly to Claire's condition. Her rapid walk in the cold country air, the effort she had made in order to do what she was doing, imparted an unwonted expression to her face, which was much less reserved than usual. Without the slightest encouragement on his part, she kissed him and seated herself in front of the fire, where old stumps, surrounded by dry moss and pine needles picked up in the paths, were smouldering with occasional outbursts of life and the hissing of sap. She did not even take time to shake off the frost that stood in beads on her veil, but began to speak at once, faithful to her resolution to state the object of her visit immediately upon entering the room, before she allowed herself to be intimidated by the atmosphere of fear and respect which encompassed the grandfather and made of him a sort of awe-inspiring deity.

She required all her courage not to become confused, not to interrupt her narrative before that piercing gaze which transfixed her, enlivened from her first words by a malicious joy, before that savage mouth whose corners seemed tightly closed by premeditated reticence, obstinacy, a denial of any sort of sensibility. She went on to the end in one speech, respectful without humility, concealing her emotion, steadying her voice by the consciousness of the truth of her story. Really, seeing them thus face to face, he cold and calm, stretched out in his armchair, with his hands in the pockets of his gray swansdown waistcoat, she carefully choosing her words, as if each of them might condemn or absolve her, you would never have said that it was a child before her grandfather, but an accused person before an examining magistrate.

His thoughts were entirely engrossed by the joy, the pride of his triumph. So they were conquered at last, those proud upstarts of Fromonts! So they needed old Gardinois at last, did they? Vanity, his dominating passion, overflowed in his whole manner, do what he would. When she had finished, he took the floor in his turn, began naturally enough with "I was sure of it—I always said so—I knew we should see what it would all come to"—and continued in the same vulgar, insulting tone, ending with the declaration that, in view of his principles, which were well known in the family, he would not lend a sou.

Then Claire spoke of her child, of her husband's name, which was also her father's, and which would be dishonored by the failure. The old man was as cold, as implacable as ever, and took advantage of her humiliation to humiliate her still more; for he belonged to the race of worthy rustics who, when their enemy is down, never leave him without leaving on his face the marks of the nails in their sabots.

"All I can say to you, little one, is that Savigny is open to you.
Let your husband come here. I happen to need a secretary. Very well,
Georges can do my writing for twelve hundred francs a year and board for
the whole family. Offer him that from me, and come."

She rose indignantly. She had come as his child and he had received her as a beggar. They had not reached that point yet, thank God!

"Do you think so?" queried M. Gardinois, with a savage light in his eye.

Claire shuddered and walked toward the door without replying. The old man detained her with a gesture.

"Take care! you don't know what you're refusing. It is in your interest, you understand, that I suggest bringing your husband here. You don't know the life he is leading up yonder. Of course you don't know it, or you'd never come and ask me for money to go where yours has gone. Ah! I know all about your man's affairs. I have my police at Paris, yes, and at Asnieres, as well as at Savigny. I know what the fellow does with his days and his nights; and I don't choose that my crowns shall go to the places where he goes. They're not clean enough for money honestly earned."

Claire's eyes opened wide in amazement and horror, for she felt that a terrible drama had entered

her life at that moment through the little low door of denunciation. The old man continued with a sneer:

"That little Sidonie has fine, sharp teeth."

"Sidonie!"

"Faith, yes, to be sure. I have told you the name. At all events, you'd have found it out some day or other. In fact, it's an astonishing thing that, since the time—But you women are so vain! The idea that a man can deceive you is the last idea to come into your head. Well, yes, Sidonie's the one who has got it all out of him—with her husband's consent, by the way."

He went on pitilessly to tell the young wife the source of the money for the house at Asnieres, the horses, the carriages, and how the pretty little nest in the Avenue Gabriel had been furnished. He explained everything in detail. It was clear that, having found a new opportunity to exercise his mania for espionage, he had availed himself of it to the utmost; perhaps, too, there was at the bottom of it all a vague, carefully concealed rage against his little Chebe, the anger of a senile passion never declared.

Claire listened to him without speaking, with a smile of incredulity. That smile irritated the old man, spurred on his malice. "Ah! you don't believe me. Ah! you want proofs, do you?" And he gave her proofs, heaped them upon her, overpowered her with knife-thrusts in the heart. She had only to go to Darches, the jeweller in the Rue de la Paix. A fortnight before, Georges had bought a diamond necklace there for thirty thousand francs. It was his New Year's gift to Sidonie. Thirty thousand francs for diamonds at the moment of becoming bankrupt!

He might have talked the entire day and Claire would not have interrupted him. She felt that the slightest effort would cause the tears that filled her eyes to overflow, and she was determined to smile to the end, the sweet, brave woman. From time to time she cast a sidelong glance at the road. She was in haste to go, to fly from the sound of that spiteful voice, which pursued her pitilessly.

At last he ceased; he had told the whole story. She bowed and walked toward the door.

"Are you going? What a hurry you're in!" said the grandfather, following her outside.

At heart he was a little ashamed of his savagery.

"Won't you breakfast with me?"

She shook her head, not having strength to speak.

"At least wait till the carriage is ready—some one will drive you to the station."

No, still no.

And she walked on, with the old man close behind her. Proudly, and with head erect, she crossed the courtyard, filled with souvenirs of her childhood, without once looking behind. And yet what echoes of hearty laughter, what sunbeams of her younger days were imprinted in the tiniest grain of gravel in that courtyard!

Her favorite tree, her favorite bench, were still in the same place. She had not a glance for them, nor for the pheasants in the aviary, nor even for the great dog Kiss, who followed her docilely, awaiting the caress which she did not give him. She had come as a child of the house, she went away as a stranger, her mind filled with horrible thoughts which the slightest reminder of her peaceful and happy past could not have failed to aggravate.

"Good-by, grandfather."

"Good-by, then."

And the gate closed upon her harshly. As soon as she was alone, she began to walk swiftly, swiftly, almost to run. She was not merely going away, she was escaping. Suddenly, when she reached the end of the wall of the estate, she found herself in front of the little green gate, surrounded by nasturtiums and honeysuckle, where the chateau mail-box was. She stopped instinctively, struck by one of those sudden awakenings of the memory which take place within us at critical moments and place before our eyes with wonderful clearness of outline the most trivial acts of our lives bearing any relation to present disasters or joys. Was it the red sun that suddenly broke forth from the clouds, flooding the level expanse with its oblique rays in that winter afternoon as at the sunset hour in August? Was it the silence that surrounded her, broken only by the harmonious sounds of nature, which are almost alike at all seasons?

Whatever the cause she saw herself once more as she was, at that same spot, three years before, on a

certain day when she placed in the post a letter inviting Sidonie to come and pass a month with her in the country. Something told her that all her misfortunes dated from that moment. "Ah! had I known—had I only known!" And she fancied that she could still feel between her fingers the smooth envelope, ready to drop into the box.

Thereupon, as she reflected what an innocent, hopeful, happy child she was at that moment, she cried out indignantly, gentle creature that she was, against the injustice of life. She asked herself: "Why is it? What have I done?"

Then she suddenly exclaimed: "No! it isn't true. It can not be possible. Grandfather lied to me." And as she went on toward the station, the unhappy girl tried to convince herself, to make herself believe what she said. But she did not succeed.

The truth dimly seen is like the veiled sun, which tires the eyes far more than its most brilliant rays. In the semi-obscurity which still enveloped her misfortune, the poor woman's sight was keener than she could have wished. Now she understood and accounted for certain peculiar circumstances in her husband's life, his frequent absences, his restlessness, his embarrassed behavior on certain days, and the abundant details which he sometimes volunteered, upon returning home, concerning his movements, mentioning names as proofs which she did not ask. From all these conjectures the evidence of his sin was made up. And still she refused to believe it, and looked forward to her arrival in Paris to set her doubts at rest.

No one was at the station, a lonely, cheerless little place, where no traveller ever showed his face in winter. As Claire sat there awaiting the train, gazing vaguely at the station-master's melancholy little garden, and the debris of climbing plants running along the fences by the track, she felt a moist, warm breath on her glove. It was her friend Kiss, who had followed her and was reminding her of their happy romps together in the old days, with little shakes of the head, short leaps, capers of joy tempered by humility, concluding by stretching his beautiful white coat at full length at his mistress's feet, on the cold floor of the waiting-room. Those humble caresses which sought her out, like a hesitating offer of devotion and sympathy, caused the sobs she had so long restrained to break forth as last. But suddenly she felt ashamed of her weakness. She rose and sent the dog away, sent him away pitilessly with voice and gesture, pointing to the house in the distance, with a stern face which poor Kiss had never seen. Then she hastily wiped her eyes and her moist hands; for the train for Paris was approaching and she knew that in a moment she should need all her courage.

Claire's first thought on leaving the train was to take a cab and drive to the jeweller in the Rue de la Paix, who had, as her grandfather alleged, supplied Georges with a diamond necklace. If that should prove to be true, then all the rest was true. Her dread of learning the truth was so great that, when she reached her destination and alighted in front of that magnificent establishment, she stopped, afraid to enter. To give herself countenance, she pretended to be deeply interested in the jewels displayed in velvet cases; and one who had seen her, quietly but fashionably dressed, leaning forward to look at that gleaming and attractive display, would have taken her for a happy wife engaged in selecting a bracelet, rather than an anxious, sorrow-stricken soul who had come thither to discover the secret of her life.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. At that time of day, in winter, the Rue de la Paix presents a truly dazzling aspect. In that luxurious neighborhood, life moves quickly between the short morning and the early evening. There are carriages moving swiftly in all directions, a ceaseless rumbling, and on the sidewalks a coquettish haste, a rustling of silks and furs. Winter is the real Parisian season. To see that devil's own Paris in all its beauty and wealth and happiness one must watch the current of its life beneath a lowering sky, heavy with snow. Nature is absent from the picture, so to speak. No wind, no sunlight. Just enough light for the dullest colors, the faintest reflections to produce an admirable effect, from the reddish-gray tone of the monuments to the gleams of jet which bespangle a woman's dress. Theatre and concert posters shine resplendent, as if illumined by the effulgence of the footlights. The shops are crowded. It seems that all those people must be preparing for perpetual festivities. And at such times, if any sorrow is mingled with that bustle and tumult, it seems the more terrible for that reason. For five minutes Claire suffered martyrdom worse than death. Yonder, on the road to Savigny, in the vast expanse of the deserted fields, her despair spread out as it were in the sharp air and seemed to enfold her less closely. Here she was stifling. The voices beside her, the footsteps, the heedless jostling of people who passed, all added to her torture.

At last she entered the shop.

"Ah! yes, Madame, certainly—Monsieur Fromont. A necklace of diamonds and roses. We could make you one like it for twenty-five thousand francs."

That was five thousand less than for him.

"Thanks, Monsieur," said Claire, "I will think it over."

A mirror in front of her, in which she saw her dark-ringed eyes and her deathly pallor, frightened her. She went out quickly, walking stiffly in order not to fall.

She had but one idea, to escape from the street, from the noise; to be alone, quite alone, so that she might plunge headlong into that abyss of heartrending thoughts, of black things dancing madly in the depths of her mind. Oh! the coward, the infamous villain! And to think that only last night she was speaking comforting words to him, with her arms about him!

Suddenly, with no knowledge of how it happened, she found herself in the courtyard of the factory. Through what streets had she come? Had she come in a carriage or on foot? She had no remembrance. She had acted unconsciously, as in a dream. The sentiment of reality returned, pitiless and poignant, when she reached the steps of her little house. Risler was there, superintending several men who were carrying potted plants up to his wife's apartments, in preparation for the magnificent party she was to give that very evening. With his usual tranquillity he directed the work, protected the tall branches which the workmen might have broken: "Not like that. Bend it over. Take care of the carpet."

The atmosphere of pleasure and merry-making which had so revolted her a moment before pursued her to her own house. It was too much, after all the rest! She rebelled; and as Risler saluted her, affectionately and with deep respect as always, her face assumed an expression of intense disgust, and she passed without speaking to him, without seeing the amazement that opened his great, honest eyes.

From that moment her course was determined. Wrath, a wrath born of uprightness and sense of justice, guided her actions. She barely took time to kiss her child's rosy cheeks before running to her mother's room.

"Come, mamma, dress yourself quickly. We are going away. We are going away."

The old lady rose slowly from the armchair in which she was sitting, busily engaged in cleaning her watch-chain by inserting a pin between every two links with infinite care.

"Come, come, hurry. Get your things ready."

Her voice trembled, and the poor monomaniac's room seemed a horrible place to her, all glistening as it was with the cleanliness that had gradually become a mania. She had reached one of those fateful moments when the loss of one illusion causes you to lose them all, enables you to look to the very depths of human misery. The realization of her complete isolation, between her half-mad mother, her faithless husband, her too young child, came upon her for the first time; but it served only to strengthen her in her resolution.

In a moment the whole household was busily engaged in making preparations for this abrupt, unexpected departure. Claire hurried the bewildered servants, and dressed her mother and the child, who laughed merrily amid all the excitement. She was in haste to go before Georges' return, so that he might find the cradle empty and the house deserted. Where should she go? She did not know as yet. Perhaps to her aunt at Orleans, perhaps to Savigny, no matter where. What she must do first of all was-go, fly from that atmosphere of treachery and falsehood.

At that moment she was in her bedroom, packing a trunk, making a pile of her effects—a heartrending occupation. Every object that she touched set in motion whole worlds of thoughts, of memories. There is so much of ourselves in anything that we use. At times the odor of a sachet-bag, the pattern of a bit of lace, were enough to bring tears to her eyes. Suddenly she heard a heavy footstep in the salon, the door of which was partly open; then there was a slight cough, as if to let her know that some one was there. She supposed that it was Risler: for no one else had the right to enter her apartments so unceremoniously. The idea of having to endure the presence of that hypocritical face, that false smile, was so distasteful to her that she rushed to close the door.

"I am not at home to any one."

The door resisted her efforts, and Sigismond's square head appeared in the opening.

"It is I, Madame," he said in an undertone. "I have come to get the money."

"What money?" demanded Claire, for she no longer remembered why she had gone to Savigny.

"Hush! The funds to meet my note to-morrow. Monsieur Georges, when he went out, told me that you would hand it to me very soon."

"Ah! yes—true. The hundred thousand francs."

"I haven't them, Monsieur Planus; I haven't anything."

"Then," said the cashier, in a strange voice, as if he were speaking to himself, "then it means failure."

And he turned slowly away.

Failure! She sank on a chair, appalled, crushed. For the last few hours the downfall of her happiness had caused her to forget the downfall of the house; but she remembered now.

So her husband was ruined! In a little while, when he returned home, he would learn of the disaster, and he would learn at the same time that his wife and child had gone; that he was left alone in the midst of the wreck.

Alone—that weak, easily influenced creature, who could only weep and complain and shake his fist at life like a child! What would become of the miserable man?

She pitied him, notwithstanding his great sin.

Then the thought came to her that she would perhaps seem to have fled at the approach of bankruptcy, of poverty.

Georges might say to himself:

"Had I been rich, she would have forgiven me!"

Ought she to allow him to entertain that doubt?

To a generous, noble heart like Claire's nothing more than that was necessary to change her plans. Instantly she was conscious that her feeling of repugnance, of revolt, began to grow less bitter, and a sudden ray of light seemed to make her duty clearer to her. When they came to tell her that the child was dressed and the trunks ready, her mind was made up anew.

"Never mind," she replied gently. "We are not going away."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Abundant details which he sometimes volunteered
Exaggerated dramatic pantomime
Void in her heart, a place made ready for disasters to come
Would have liked him to be blind only so far as he was concerned

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FROMONT AND RISLER — VOLUME 3 ***

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