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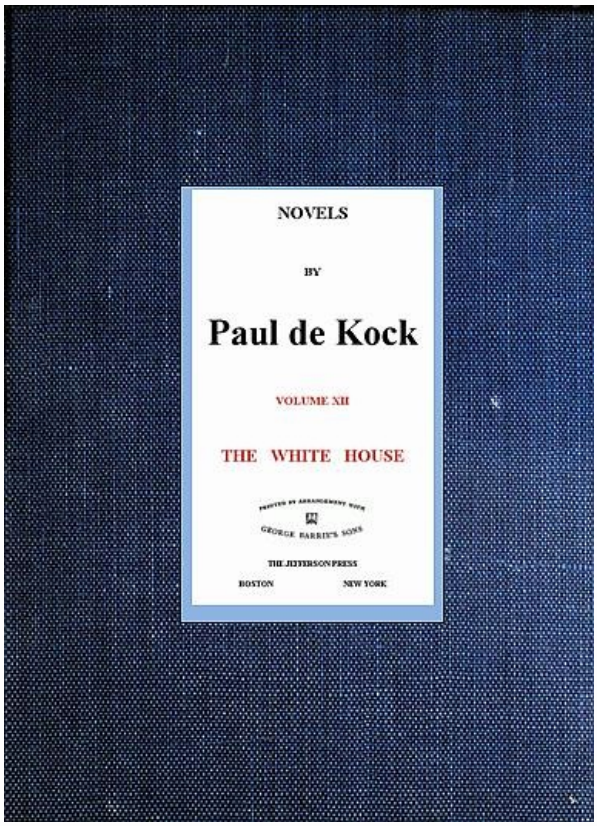

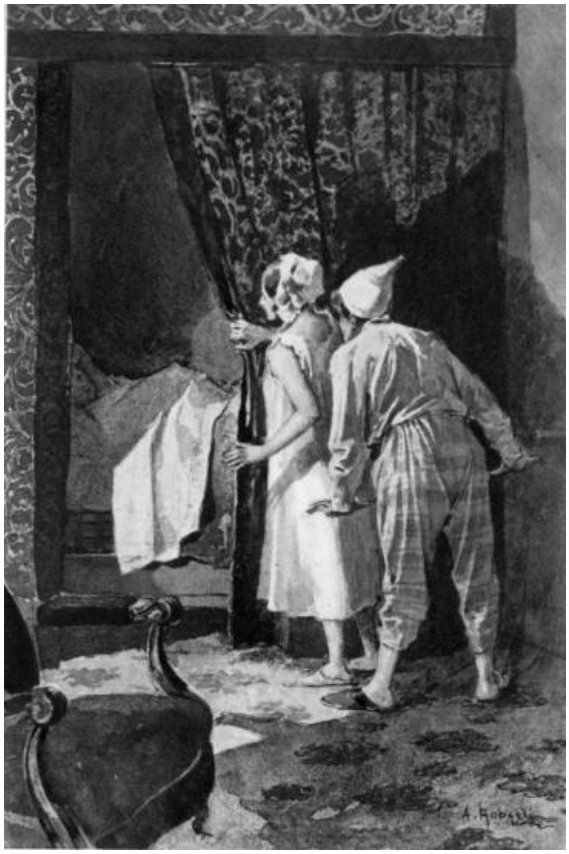

AN UNLOOKED-FOR INTRUDER
As Cornélie was about to draw the curtains aside, she stopped, fell back a step or two, turned pale and said: ... "It seems to me that I hear someone breathing."

NOVELS

BY

Paul de Kock

VOLUME XII

THE WHITE HOUSE

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THE WHITE HOUSE

CONTENTS

I

THREE YOUNG MEN

It was mid-July in the year eighteen hundred and twenty-five. The clock on the Treasury building had just struck four, and the clerks, hastily closing the drawers of their desks, replacing documents in their respective boxes and pens on their racks, lost no time in taking their hats and laying aside the work of the State, to give all their attention to private business or pleasure.

Amid the multitude of persons of all ages who thronged the long corridors, a gentleman of some twenty-seven or twenty-eight years, after arranging his knives, his pencils and his eraser much more methodically than young men are accustomed to do, and after carefully brushing his hat and coat, placed under his arm a large green portfolio, which at a little distance might have been mistaken for that of the head of a department, and assuming an affable, smiling expression, he joined the crowd that was hurrying toward the door, saluting to right and left those of his colleagues who, as they passed him, said:

"Bonjour, Robineau!"

Monsieur Robineau—we know his name now—when he was a hundred yards or more from the department, suddenly adopted an altogether different demeanor; he seemed to swell up in his coat, raised his head and ostentatiously quickened his pace; the amiable smile was replaced by a busy, preoccupied air; he held the great portfolio more closely to his side and glanced with a patronizing expression at the persons who passed him. His manner was no longer that of a simple clerk at fifteen hundred francs; it was that of a chief of bureau at least.

However, despite his haughty bearing, Robineau bent his steps toward a modest restaurant, where a dinner was served for thirty-two sous, which he considered delicious, because his means did not allow him to procure a better one. Herein, at all events, Robineau displayed great prudence; to be able to content oneself with what one has, is the best way to be happy; and since we hear the rich complain every day, the poor must needs appear to be satisfied.

But as he crossed the Palais-Royal garden on the way to his restaurant, Robineau was halted by two very fashionably dressed young men who laughingly barred his path. One, who seemed to be about twenty-four years of age, was tall and thin and stooped slightly, as tall men who are not in the military service are likely to do. Despite this trifling defect in his figure he bore himself gracefully; there was in his manners and in his slightest movements an *abandon* instinct with frankness, and a fascinating vivacity. His attractive face, his large blue eyes, and his golden hair, which fell gracefully about his high, aristocratic forehead, combined to make of this young man a most comely cavalier; but his pallor, the strongly marked lines under his eyes, and the customary expression of his features, denoted a young man who had taken a great deal out of life and who was already old in the matter of sensations and pleasures.

His companion was shorter and his features were less regular, but he would have been called perhaps a comelier youth. His hair was black, his eyes, albeit very dark brown, had an attractively sweet expression, and his voice and his smile finished what his eyes had begun. There was less joviality, less vivacity in his manners than in his friend’s; but he did not appear, like him, to be already sated with all the enjoyments that life offers.

At sight of the two young men, the clerk’s face became amiable once more; he eagerly grasped the hand that the taller, fair-haired one offered him, and cried:

"Ah! it is Alfred de Marcey! Delighted to meet you.—And Monsieur Edouard! You are both well, I see.—You are going to dine, doubtless; and so am I."

That one of the two young men whose hand Robineau continued to shake, and whose noble and intelligent face denoted none the less a slight tendency to raillery, looked at our clerk with a smile; and there was in that smile a lurking expression of mischief at which a very sensitive person might have taken offence, had it not been that he instantly exclaimed in a cordial, merry tone:

"Dear Robineau!—Where on earth have you been of late?—My friend, such high-crowned hats are not worn now. Fie! that is last year’s style; but I suppose you wear it to add to your height, eh? And those coat-tails!—Ha! ha! You look like a *noble father*. Who in the devil makes your clothes? Do you know that you are half a century behind the times?"

Robineau took all these jesting remarks in very good part; and, releasing the young man’s hand at last, he rejoined good-humoredly:

"It’s a very easy matter for you gentlemen, rich as you are, with your fifty, or a hundred thousand francs a year, to follow all the fashions, to be on the watch for the slightest change in the cut of a coat or the shape of a hat; but a simple government clerk, who has only his salary of a hundred louis!—However, I must be promoted soon.—You can see that one must be orderly and economical, if one doesn’t want to run into debt. And then, I never paid much attention to my dress! I am not coquettish myself. Mon Dieu! so long as a man is dressed decently, what does it matter, after all, that a coat is a little longer or shorter?"

"Ah! you play the philosopher, Robineau! But what about those most symmetrical curls which you arrange so carefully on each side of your face?"

"Oh! those are natural! I never touch them."

"Nonsense! I'll wager that you never go to bed without rolling your hair in curl-papers!"

"Well! upon my word!"

"Oh! I know you—with your assumption of indifference! It's just as it used to be at school: it made little difference to you what you had for dinner; but the next day you would play sick in order to get soup."

As he spoke, the tall young man turned toward his friend, who could not help smiling; while Robineau, to change the subject, hastily addressed the latter.

"Well, Monsieur Edouard, how goes the literary career, the drama? Successful as always, of course? You are used to that."

Edouard made a faint grimace, and Alfred roared with laughter, crying:

"Ah! you were well-advised to talk to him of success! You have no idea what chord you have touched!—What, Robineau! have you not divined from that long face, that frowning brow, a poet who has met with an *accident*? who has been victimized by a *cabal*? That, in a word, you are looking upon a fallen author?"

"The deuce! is it so?—What! Monsieur Edouard, have you had a fall?"

"Yes, monsieur," Edouard replied, with a faint sigh.

"Ah! that is amusing!"

"You consider it amusing, do you?"

"I meant to say, extraordinary—for you have sometimes succeeded.—Was it very bad then?—that is to say, didn't it take?"

"It seems not, as it was hissed."

"Faith! I don't know what sort of a play yours was, but I am sure that it couldn't be any worse than the one I saw the day before yesterday at Feydeau. Fancy! a perfect rigmarole! all entrances and exits; in fact, it was so stupid, that I, who almost never hiss, could not help doing as the others did. I hissed like a rattlesnake."

Alfred, who for several minutes had been restraining a fresh inclination to laugh, dropped his friend's arm and gave full vent to his hilarity, while Edouard said to Robineau, with an expression which he strove to render resigned:

"I thank you, monsieur, for having helped to bury my work."

"What? can it be that it was yours?" said Robineau, opening his little black eyes as wide as possible.

"Yes, indeed!" said Alfred, "it was his play that you hissed like a rattlesnake."

"Oh! mon Dieu! how sorry I am! If I could have guessed! But it's your own fault too; if you had sent me a ticket, it would not have happened. I remember now that there were some very clever *mots*—some pretty scenes. I am really distressed, Monsieur Edouard."

"And I assure you that I am not in the least offended. What do a few hisses more or less matter?—And in my opinion, a good hard fall is better than to drag along through two or three performances."

"Then you bear me no grudge?"

"Why, no," said Alfred, "you have proved your friendship! he who loves well, chastises soundly! Moreover, the best general sometimes loses a battle. Isn't that so, Edouard?—Look you, I'll wager that that has been said to you at least fifty times since the night before last."

Edouard smiled—but this time with a good heart; and he once more took his friend's arm, who looked at Robineau again, while a mocking smile played about his lips.

"You are still very busy, Robineau?"

"Oh, yes! always! We have an infernal amount of work to do. My chief relies on me; he knows that in moments of stress I am always on hand."

"What have you in that big portfolio that you hold so tight under your arm? Are you to play the part of a notary to-night?"

"Oh! it has nothing to do with acting; it's work I am taking home."

"The devil!"

"Very important work. I sometimes spend a good part of the night on it. But I am certain of promotion."

Alfred made no reply to this; he bit his lips and glanced at Edouard, and a moment later he continued:

"And the love-affairs, Robineau—how do they come on? How many mistresses have you at this moment?"

"Oh! I am virtuous, very virtuous.—In the first place, my means do not permit me to keep women; in the second place, even if I had the means, I wouldn't do it—my tastes don't run that way. I insist upon being loved for myself!"

"You certainly deserve to be adored, monsieur."

"I don't say that I wish to be adored precisely; but I desire to find that sympathy—that sweet unreserve—that—Oh! you are laughing! You don't believe in true love!"

"I? on the contrary, I believe in whatever you choose; and the proof of it is that I really believe myself to be in love with all the pretty women I meet—eh, Edouard?—Oh! but we mustn't mention women to him now."

"What's that? has he had a fall with them too?" said Robineau, chuckling as if well pleased with his jest.

"No; but his latest passion has just executed a *fugue* with an Englishman; so that Edouard swears that he will never become attached to another sempstress."

"Aha! so she was a sempstress?—And I'll be bound that you denied her nothing; for you are very open-handed. And then she planted you for some wretched Englishman who promised her a carriage. That is the reward of wasting one's substance on a woman!"

"On whom would you have us waste it, pray, Robineau? So far as I am concerned, women have often deceived me; but I bear them no ill-will. For, after all, a woman, when she throws us over, leaves us at liberty to take another; whereas we often don't know how to rid ourselves of one who is faithful."

"That is the reasoning of a jilt!" said Edouard. "Ah! my dear Alfred, you will always be lucky in love, for you will never love!"

"That is so," said Robineau; "he cares nothing for sentiment, he is all for pleasure; and when one is in his position, rich, of noble birth and an only son, with a father who lets him do whatever he pleases, there is no lack of pleasure.

For my part, messieurs, I know how to restrict myself; and then, as I told you, I have simple tastes—I care neither for luxury, nor for honors.—What do I need, to be happy?—What I have: a good place—a little fatiguing, to be sure, but I am fond of work—and pending the time when I shall marry, a pretty, emotional, loving mistress, who doesn't cost me a sou, and on whose fidelity I can rely; for I am horribly jealous."

"And where do you find such a treasure, Robineau?"

"They are easily found; to be sure, I do not apply to grisettes or working-girls.—But I beg pardon, messieurs; while chatting with you, I forget that I am expected to dine at a house to which I was invited a week ago. They will not sit down without me, and I do not wish to keep them waiting too long."

As he spoke, Robineau stepped toward Alfred to shake hands. The latter seized the opportunity to take possession of the portfolio which the clerk held under his arm.

"My portfolio! my portfolio!" cried Robineau; "the devil! no practical jokes!"

"I'll bet you that it contains nothing but blank paper," said Alfred, still retaining possession of the portfolio. "Come, Robineau; will you bet a dinner at Véry's?"

"I won't bet any dinner. I am in a hurry; give it back to me. I don't want you to look inside; they are secret papers."

But Alfred paid no heed; he untied the strings of the portfolio, and exhibited to Edouard four packages of letter paper, three sticks of sealing wax, a pencil and two papers of pins.

"So this is what you work at all night?" observed Alfred; while Edouard laughed heartily at the expense of the man who had hissed his play.

Robineau feigned surprise, crying:

"Mon Dieu! I must have made a mistake! I took one package for another! I have so many files before me!—This vexes me terribly, I assure you; and if I were not expected at dinner, I would go back to my desk."

"Monseigneur, I restore your secret documents," said Alfred, handing the large portfolio, with an air of profound respect, to Robineau, who replaced it under his arm and was about to take his leave, to escape the witticisms of the two young men. But the taller one detained him.

"You are not angry, I trust, Robineau?"

"I! angry!—Why so, pray? You like to laugh and joke, and so do I, when I have time."

"Yes, I know that you are a good fellow at bottom. Look you—to prove to me that you bear me no grudge because I insisted upon casting a profane eye into the administrative portfolio, you must come to my house this evening; my father gives a large reception—I don't quite know on what occasion; but this much I do know—that there will be cards and dancing and some very pretty women. Despite your little every-day passion, you are a connoisseur of the sex, and you must come. Edouard will be with us—he has promised me; we will win his money at écarté, and that will help him to forget his last failure. And then, who knows? perhaps he will find among the company a beauty who will wipe from his heart the memory of his faithless fair.—Well! will you come?"

Robineau's face fairly beamed while Alfred proffered his invitation; he grasped his hand again and shook it hard, as he replied:

"My dear friend—certainly—I am deeply touched. This courteous invitation——"

"Enough fine phrases! Is there any need of ceremony between us? I intended to write to you; but you know how thoughtless I am, and I forgot all about it.—Then you will come?"

"I most certainly shall have that honor, and I am——"

"All right, it's understood; until this evening, then; and we will try to enjoy ourselves, which is not always easy at grand functions."

With that the young man and his companion, after nodding to the Treasury clerk, walked rapidly away, leaving Robineau in the garden of the Palais-Royal, so engrossed by the invitation he had just received and by the prospect of passing the evening at the Baron de Marcey's, that, if his feet had not been arrested by the raised rim of the basin, he would have walked straight into the water on the way to his favorite restaurant.

II

THE MILLINER.—ROBINEAU'S TOILET

Robineau arrived at last at his modest restaurant, the public rooms of which were, as usual, full of people; for small purses are more common than large fortunes; which does not mean that only the wealthy frequent the best restaurants. But one thing is certain, namely, that at thirty-two sou places, the patrons eat with heartier appetites than one sometimes has in the gilded salons of the others. As bread is supplied in unlimited quantities, the consumers do not stint themselves with respect to it; and the cry of: "Some bread, waiter!" is heard constantly from every part of the room.

Robineau, who, under ordinary circumstances, was not of the number of small eaters, had less appetite than usual on this day; he swallowed his soup without complaining that it was too clear or too salt, to the waiter's great surprise; and when the latter inquired what he wished to eat after the soup, Robineau replied:

"Whatever you please, but make haste. I am in a great hurry. I am going to the Baron de Marcey's this evening, and I must dress with great care."

"In that case, monsieur, a beefsteak and potatoes," said the waiter, who cared very little whether his customer was going to a baron's that evening, while Robineau looked about with an air of importance to see whether anyone had noticed what he had just said, and whether people were looking at him with more respect. But to no purpose did he cast his eyes over the neighboring tables; the persons who surrounded him were too busily occupied in putting out of sight what was on their plates, to amuse themselves staring at their neighbors; a thirty-two sou restaurant is not the place in which to put on airs.

Robineau, seeing that no one paid any attention to him, although he mentioned the baron's name once more,

hastened to eat the three courses which followed the soup. When the waiter came with the dessert, which consisted of nuts and raisins, Robineau's customary order, the clerk sprang to his feet, and, placing his portfolio under his arm, left the table, saying to the waiter:

"That's for you; it's your *pourboire*."

Then he walked hurriedly through the dining-room, elbowing such customers as stood in his path, who grumbled at his lack of ceremony; while the waiter looked with a wry face at the nuts and raisins which were bestowed upon him as *pourboire*.

Robineau hastened to Rue Saint-Honoré, where his lodgings were situated. As he drew near the house, the ground floor of which was occupied by a milliner's shop, he slackened his pace and his eyes seemed to try to pierce the yellow silk curtains which concealed the shop girls from the eyes of passers-by.

"The devil!" muttered Robineau; "it's only six o'clock, and Fifine isn't ready to leave the shop. But I am in extreme need of her assistance. If that thoughtless Alfred had written me a few days beforehand, I might have prepared for his grand reception, and I should have everything that I need. These rich people never remember that other people aren't rich!—I don't know whether I have a white waistcoat to wear, and silk stockings.—Have I any silk stockings?—Mon Dieu! I lent them to Fifine the last night we went to the theatre, and she hasn't returned them yet. That woman will end by stripping me of everything! I am too generous. But if she has worn holes in them I'll make a terrible scene!—With fifteen hundred francs a year, when one has to feed and lodge oneself, and when one wishes to cut some figure in society, one cannot swim in silk stockings—it's impossible!—and with all the rest, I have had no luck at écarté for some time past. Mon Dieu! when shall I be rich?—I certainly will not put on airs then; I will be neither haughty nor insolent. But at all events, when I receive an invitation to go into the best society, I shall not be driven to expedients to procure silk stockings."

While indulging in these reflections, Robineau had arrived in front of the shop; but the door was closed. To be sure, the curtains afforded a glimpse of the lower part of a face, an arm, or a profile; but there were six young women who worked in the shop; and when the mistress was present they kept their eyes on their work and did not attempt to look out of the windows. Robineau passed the door and decided to enter the passageway leading to his rooms, at the end of which was a door opening into the back shop. He walked to and fro for some time, coughing loudly when he was near the door at the end, and glancing impatiently at his silver watch, which he carried in his fob, at the end of a dainty blue ribbon of watered silk passed about his neck.

All six of the young women who worked in the milliner's shop slept in the house; two in a room adjoining the mistress's apartment, and the other four in a room on the fifth floor, above Robineau's. Mademoiselle Fifine was one of the four. Robineau was well aware that, in order to go to her room, Fifine must pass through the passageway; but she did not ordinarily go up until nine o'clock, and he could not wait until that hour to speak to the girl. Much the simplest way would have been to go into the shop and ask Mademoiselle Fifine to step outside for a moment; but that would have meant an irrevocable quarrel with his fair one; for, like all milliner's apprentices, Fifine had her own code of morals; if she had lovers, it was only because all her companions had their pleasant little acquaintances, and because they would have made fun of her if she too had not had someone to take her out to walk on Sunday. But during the week, madame—that was the title that they bestowed on the mistress of the establishment—was very strict with her young ladies, and she was responsible for their virtue from eight in the morning till nine at night.

After coughing vainly in the passage, Robineau decided to go up to his room, in order to put away his portfolio and make preparations for his toilet. He climbed the four flights of a dark and dusty staircase, of a type not uncommon on Rue Saint-Honoré; he entered his apartment, which consisted of two small rooms, one of which served as waiting-room, wardrobe and kitchen, the other as bedroom, dressing-room and salon. The first was scantily furnished, but the second was decorated with more or less taste, and it was orderly and clean; in fact, everything was in its place—a rare thing in a bachelor's quarters.

Robineau opened one of the drawers of his commode, took out his black dress coat and his dancing trousers, and to his delight, found a spotlessly white piqué waistcoat. He spread them all on the bed, then looked at himself complacently in the mirror over the mantel; and his mirror showed him, as usual, a coarse, bloated face, small black eyes, a large round nose, a small mouth, a low forehead, very thick light hair, and thin, compressed lips. Robineau considered it a charming face; he smiled at himself, assumed affected poses, bowed to himself, and exclaimed:

"I am very good-looking, and in full-dress I ought to produce a great effect."

After looking at himself in the mirror for several minutes, he returned to his commode, fumbled in the drawers, turned everything upside down, and cried:

"Evidently I have no silk stockings. If worse comes to worst, I might buy a pair—I still have twenty-three francs left from my month's pay; but that would straiten me; if I want to risk a little at écarté, I can't do it. I know well enough that if I should ask Alfred to lend me money, he wouldn't refuse; but I don't want to appear to be short, and, in truth, as I have some very fine silk stockings, I don't see why I should buy others. Mademoiselle Fifine simply must return them; if not, it's all over, we are out, and I give her no more guitar lessons. She will think twice; a girl doesn't find every day a lover who plays the guitar and who is obliging enough to teach his sweetheart how to play."

Robineau took down a guitar that hung in a corner of the room, went to the open window looking on the courtyard, and hummed a ballad, accompanying himself on the instrument. When Fifine was in her room on the fifth floor, the guitar was ordinarily the signal which notified her that Robineau awaited her; but it was hardly possible to hear the music in the shop.

After he had sung for some time, Robineau looked again at his watch; he stamped the floor impatiently and was about to go down to the passage, when someone rang at his door.

"It is she! She must have heard me!" he cried as he ran to open the door. But instead of his charmer, he found a young solicitor's clerk, whom he knew as the friend of one of Fifine's shopmates.

"Have they come up?" inquired the young man, not entering the room, but simply thrusting his head forward to look.

"What do you mean? have who come up?"

"The young ladies. I simply must speak to Thénaïs; I went up to their room at all risks and knocked; no one answered, but, as I came down, I heard your guitar; and knowing that you gave lessons to Mademoiselle Fifine, I thought that they were in your room."

"Alas, no! they are still in the shop; they won't come up for a good hour at least; it is most annoying to me, for I have something very important to ask Fifine."

"Well! isn't there any way to let them know that we are here?"

"Oh! if we should go to the shop, they would be angry; it's expressly forbidden; and then I don't care to do it myself; when one is in one of the departments of the government, one has to maintain a certain decorum; especially just now, we have to be moral; the rules are very strict on that point."

"We can get the young ladies to come out without going to the shop."

"Faith! it's an hour since I came in, and began trying to think of a way to do it."

"Wait! I am never at a loss.—There's no concierge in this house, is there?"

"No."

"So much the better—we can do what we please.—Have you two or three plates?"

"Plates? hardly; I very rarely eat in my room."

"No matter—a salad-bowl, a vase, anything you please."

Robineau looked in his buffet and returned with a porcelain preserve dish and one plate, saying:

"These are all I can find."

"Excellent," said the solicitor's clerk, taking the two objects.

"What do you propose to do with them?"

"You will see; follow me, and shout as I do, with all your lungs, when we are near the shop."

The young man went slowly down stairs, holding the plate in one hand and the preserve dish in the other. Robineau followed, curious to see what he was going to do. When they reached the first floor, the clerk began to shout: "Stop thief!" and Robineau followed suit. Then the young man hurled the plate into the passage; whereupon Robineau ran after him to stop him.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, "that will do; don't throw my preserve dish!"

But it was too late; the dish had already followed the plate; it broke into a thousand pieces, and at the crash all the young women rushed from the shop to inquire what was going on.

At sight of them, the solicitor's clerk roared with laughter.

"I knew that I'd make you leave your work," he cried.

"Oh! it was a sell!" cried the shop-girls, with a laugh, while Robineau gazed sadly at the ruins of his preserve dish and murmured:

"Yes, it's a very pretty scheme! But I won't entrust any more of my dishes to this fellow."

The girls laughed uproariously; the young clerk was already talking with Mademoiselle Thénaïs, and Robineau was about to approach Fifine, when there was a cry of "Here's madame!" whereupon the young milliners vanished like a flock of swallows, and the young men were once more alone in the passage.

"Well! now they have gone back again!" said Robineau.

"I told Thénaïs what I wanted to tell her," replied the other; and he left the house, enchanted with his ruse, while Robineau, who was minus a plate and preserve dish, and had not even spoken to Fifine, went upstairs to his room, consigning clerks and milliners to the devil. He arranged once more all the component parts of his costume, and had almost determined to go out to buy some silk stockings, when he heard two little taps at his door, and Mademoiselle Fifine appeared at last.

Fifine was a buxom, jovial wench of twenty-four, whose coloring was a little high, whose fair hair was of rather a doubtful shade, whose eyes were a little too prominent, and whose figure was a little too short; but there was a touch of decision in her manner which indicated a young woman of character, whom one might have taken for a roisterer, had she worn trousers.

"Well! what's in the wind, my friend? What's all this business of smashing dishes in order to see us? Dieu! what extravagance indeed! The girls called that very gallant!"

As she spoke, Fifine threw herself on a couch opposite the bed, and continued to eat cherries, which she carried in a handkerchief.

"If you think that it was an invention of mine, you are much mistaken!" rejoined Robineau sourly; "it was that little clerk, who, without a word to me—Don't throw your stones all over my room, I beg you."

"I'll sweep your room! Mon Dieu! Monsieur Neatness! Pray take care! he would rather have me swallow the stones, no matter what the result might be—eh, my dear friend?—What on earth is the matter with you to-night, Raoul? your nose is longer than usual; have you some secret trouble?"

"Oh! it's nothing to laugh at."

"Well, I'm not inclined to cry. If you want me to cry, play me an act of melodrama; play me Monsieur Truguelin in *Cœlina*. When you come to the suicide, I'll throw a cherry-stone at you."

"Come, Fifine, let us talk sense, I beg you."

"Come then and sit down beside me, so that I can pinch you. You see, I feel tremendously like pinching something to-night."

"I have no time to fool."

"Dieu! how agreeable this lover of mine is!"

"I am going to a reception this evening at my intimate friend Alfred de Marcey's, son of the Baron de Marcey, who has nearly a hundred thousand francs a year."

"Ah! so that's the reason one can't look you in the face, and the reason you threw your dishes downstairs. Exactly! when one visits a baron, one shouldn't eat next day. You've grown two inches already."

"Fifine, listen to me, I entreat you!"

"Are you going to cry?"

"To go to the Baron de Marcey's, I must wear full evening dress."

"Ah! I see what you're coming at—you want me to put on your curl-papers."

"Curl-papers—I shall be glad if you will, it is true; for you do it to perfection."

"Ah! the lion is quieting down!"

"But there is something else of which I am in urgent need, and that is my black silk stockings, which I lent you the last Sunday that it rained."

"Your silk stockings?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"The deuce! but they're a long way off, if they're still going!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I lent them to Fœdora, to play in private theatricals, and she admitted that she let her best friend wear them the next day, to a wedding; but as his calves are exceptionally big, he ripped a few stitches when he took them off."

"Mon Dieu! this is what comes of lending your things!"

"Is a person to presume that her lover will ask her to return what he lends her?"

"Mademoiselle, I am not a capitalist, a dealer in novelties. I have never pretended to play the *grand seigneur* with you."

"Oh! anyone can see that!—Catch it, Raoul."

"Don't throw cherry-stones at me, please.—What am I to do? It's eight o'clock already; to be sure, I know that people go very late to large receptions."

"Sometimes they don't go till the next day; it's more *comme il faut*."

"But I counted on those stockings."

"You must buy some more; there's a place across the street where they sell them."

"Buy some? Oh, yes! that's very easy to say.—You shouldn't have made me spend twelve francs at the restaurant last Sunday."

"We will spend fifteen next Sunday, my dear friend."

"You always want to eat the things that cost most."

"Nothing's too good for me."

"Well, if I buy stockings, it's adieu to our country excursion for Sunday, I warn you."

"That begins to move me.—Come, be calm, *loulou*; you're very lucky to have a sweetheart with some imagination. Stay here and begin to dress at the top; I'll go to look after the lower part!"[1]

"Oh! my dear Fifine, how good you will be to do that!"

"Give me five or six sheets of note paper—vellum."

"Here they are; as it happens, I have just brought some home from my office. Do you want some sealing-wax—three sticks?"

"Yes, yes, give it to me; I secure madame's good graces with these things; otherwise she wouldn't have let me come away so early; but I said that I had a sick-headache, and as I'm her favorite, she said: 'Go upstairs to bed.'"

Fifine took the paper and sealing-wax, and skipped out of Robineau's room; whereupon he began to undress, saying to himself:

"She is really an excellent girl, and as bright as a button, this Fifine! She's a little hasty, and a bit of a glutton; but still she is mad over me and would jump into the fire for me. She has refused marquises, beet-sugar manufacturers and brokers for me; and yet I simply take her out on Sundays—that's all. She isn't like Monsieur Edouard's sempstress, who left him for an Englishman.—Ha! ha! I am not so very sorry, for he seems rather inclined to put on airs. He has about three thousand francs a year, I believe; that's not so much! But he writes plays, opéra-comiques, vaudevilles—that is to say, fragments of vaudevilles.—Mon Dieu! if I had the time, I would write plays, too; and I flatter myself they'd be done rather better than his. But when a man has to be at his desk from nine o'clock till four, and always working, how is he to cultivate the Muses? When I am chief of a bureau, or even deputy chief, then it will be different—I shall have some time to myself. That Alfred's the lucky fellow! An only son, his father a baron, and about a hundred thousand francs a year!—And just see how it all came about: Alfred lost his mother when he was very young; his father married again some years later, and might have had other children; but he didn't; instead of that, his wife, whom he adored, died three years after their marriage, and the baron, overwhelmed with grief by the loss of his second wife, swore that he would never marry again; and he has kept his oath, although he is still a young man.—How well it has all turned out for Alfred! Dieu! nothing like that will ever happen to me! And yet I have an uncle somewhere or other, careering round the world, according to what my mother told me before she died; an uncle who was determined to make his fortune, and who started for the Indies, or Peru—in fact, no one knows where. But psha! he has probably tried to leap Niagara! It's only on the stage that uncles arrive just in time for the dénouement, in order to save innocence from going to prison. After all, I am not ambitious—I'm a philosopher, I am satisfied with what I have. If I had some silk stockings, though, I should be even better satisfied. But just let a fortune fall into my hands, and people will see how coolly, how phlegmatically I will receive it.—Well! here I am all undressed, and Mademoiselle Fifine doesn't return.—I can't put on my cravat before my feet are shod and my hair curled. Luckily it's July, and I shan't take cold."

To kill time, Robineau, being weary of walking about his room dressed like a person who is about to make bread, concluded to take his guitar. He had reached the second stanza of the romanza from *Bélisaire*, when he was interrupted by a burst of laughter. Fifine, having left the door ajar, had entered the room without making any noise, and was holding her sides as she contemplated Belisarius in his shirt.

"O Dieu! how handsome you are like that, my boy!" she said, still laughing; "I am tempted to call the girls to look at the picture."

"Call no one, I beg; although, without flattery, I believe I have a figure that wouldn't frighten them."

"You look like a fat Bacchus."

"Let me see the stockings, please."

"Here they are, troubadour; and I think that they'll make a handsome leg."

And Fifine tossed a pair of black silk stockings on Robineau's knee. He examined them for some time, then cried:

"They're a woman's stockings!"

"To be sure, as it was Adeline who lent them to me."

"Men don't wear openwork things like these."

"Bah! men wear something else, and it doesn't prevent their dancing."

"But——"

"But these are all I could find, and it seems to me that you ought to be well satisfied."

Robineau concluded at last to put on the stockings.

"They'll think that it's a new style I am trying to introduce," he said.

While he began to dress, Fifine took the guitar and hummed a tune.

"So I shan't have any lesson to-night, my friend?"

"You must see, my dear, that it's impossible.—They fit me very well, these stockings—exceedingly well—it's surprising! I have a leg that adapts itself to anything."

"By the way, do you remember the way we behaved last night?—Well! we had a most extraordinary scene! You know madame won't let us read in bed, because she's afraid of fire."

"She is quite right; as to that, I agree with her."

"That's all right, but we girls don't care a fig for her orders. Last night, after Fœdora had dictated a note to Thénaïs, and when Adeline had finished telling us how she detected her lover's treachery—Oh! by the way, I never told you that story; it's terribly funny!"

"My dear, if you would be good enough to put on my curl-papers now, I should——"

"The iron isn't hot yet; it's on the stove upstairs; no matter—give me some tissue paper, I'll arrange you."

"Put on fifteen."

"Why not thirty-six, like another Ninon?—Look out now, don't move!—Just imagine that Fidélio—that's Adeline's lover's name—has a business agency office, and always keeps pretty little maid servants, who, they say, he's in the habit of making love to. It's so well known in the quarter, that they always tell a girl of it beforehand when she enters his service, so that she may know what to expect——"

"The iron——"

"Nonsense! don't bother me with your iron!—Adeline didn't know all that. The rascal had introduced himself to her under a false name. Ah! what villains men are! Instead of putting on curl-papers for you, I ought to tear all your hairs out, one by one!"

"Fifine—I beg you——"

"Don't move.—But that isn't all: Monsieur Fidélio, not satisfied with having a pretty blonde of twenty in his service, was making love to a married woman; and this married woman, it seems——"

"You are pulling my hair!"

"Oh! that, you know, is very bad! That a woman who is free should do what she pleases—that's all right. But one either is bound or one isn't—that's all I know; that is to say, unless the husband's a tyrant or a miser."

"It's after nine o'clock, Fifine!"

"What's the odds? you will have time enough to make conquests.—Now then, the servant noticed that the lady came very often to see Fidélio on business, and that Fidélio, instead of being pleasant with his maid, as he usually was, did nothing but scold her. But one can be a servant and still have lively passions; such things have been known. To revenge herself, the girl goes one fine day to the lady's husband and offers to make him a witness of a meeting between his wife and her man of business. The husband was frantic; he accepted, sent for a cab, and got in with the little blonde, who was to tell the driver to stop at the proper time. But on the way—and this is the funniest part of it!—the husband began to find the little maid much to his liking and proposed to transfer his passion to her.—'We are both deceived,' says he; 'let's take our revenge together.'—She didn't take to that scheme; she resisted and the man persisted. Tired of being urged by him,—he had entirely forgotten his wife,—she told the coachman to stop, opened the door, and jumped out of the cab. The gentleman jumped after her and broke his nose on the ground. The girl, to escape his attentions, entered the first house she came to. It happened to be ours; and who do you suppose she found in the passage?—who but Fidélio colloguing with Adeline!—Then there was an explosion, explanation, confusion, and——"

"The iron must be red hot!"

"I'll go and fetch it; but if it isn't hot, I won't come down again."

Robineau looked at himself in the mirror, saying:

"When Fifine is in the mood for chattering, there's no way to stop her. But she puts on curl-papers like an angel; I shall have the best dressed hair at the ball."

Fifine returned, carrying the curling-iron, smoking hot.

"Come quick; it isn't too hot."

"It looks all red to me. My dear love, be careful not to burn me, I beseech you."

"Dieu! he's a perfect little lamb when he's frightened!—To return to our scene of last night: we had just gone to bed, and I was reading—because, without flattering myself, I am the best reader. Auguste had lent us the *Barons von Felsheim*, and we were devouring it—that is the word—when, in the middle of a charming chapter, someone knocked at our door, and we heard madame's voice calling:—'Mesdemoiselles, why have you a light burning so late?'—At that the most profound silence replaced our bursts of laughter, and to hide the light,—for we didn't propose to put it out—it occurred to me to put a vessel—you know, a night vessel,—over the candle-stick. That worked very well; she couldn't see anything. Madame called again, and we didn't answer. Then madame went away; and when we thought she was back in her room, I took off the protecting vessel.—What do you suppose? The light was really out. We were in despair; we didn't feel like sleeping, and we didn't want to be left in the middle of a very interesting chapter, in which there's something about truffles—and not a match, because we haven't as yet saved up a sufficient sum to purchase that commodity, for milliner's apprentices aren't in the habit of patronizing savings banks. However, we

were determined to have a light, and for my own part, I would have gone out and unhooked the street lantern rather than not finish my chapter. Just at that moment we heard your guitar and your voice. Ah! my dear, you have no idea of the effect that produced on us! You were an Orpheus, a demigod!—'Not in bed yet!' we shouted all together, and in an instant I was out of bed; I put on the petticoat of modesty, because love of reading shouldn't carry one so far as to go about naked, and I ran to the door and opened it; but I hadn't taken two steps on the landing when I felt someone seize my arm, and madame, who was watching at the door, cried:

"'Aha! so this is the way you sleep, mesdemoiselles! But I propose to find out who it is that dares to leave the room in spite of my orders—to light her candle, I suppose.—I knew too much to make any answer. Madame called to Julie to come up with a light. I got away from her; and while she stood in the doorway to keep me from going back, I ran down to her apartment, put out the candles, and threw the matches out of the window. So madame couldn't find out who it was that came out, and we passed the time feeling around for each other.—There! your hair's all done, my friend."

"Thank God!—I remember that you made noise enough.—I must wait till they're cold before I take them off.—Fifine! you're a perfect devil! But no matter—I love you sincerely, and if I should ever be rich like Alfred—"

"Ah! then we should see some fine things, shouldn't we?"

"Yes; you would see—In the first place, wealth wouldn't make me any different; it's so absurd to be proud and self-satisfied just because one has a few more yellow boys in one's pocket! Does it increase one's merit? I ask you that, Fifine?"

"It is certain that if you were a millionaire, your eyes wouldn't be any larger."

"Bah! unkind girl! they are large enough to admire you.—Oh! stop that!"

"I have never heard you speak of this Alfred, whose party you are going to."

"He's a boarding-school friend; he always used to play leap-frog with me. Since then, we have rather lost sight of each other; he is always in his carriage or in the saddle, and I go on foot."

"That's better for the health."

"Well, with all his fortune Alfred is bored. Anyone can see that he doesn't know what to do with himself. He is weary of pleasure; and then, he's a rake, a libertine, a man incapable of true love."

"For a friend of yours, you give him a pretty character!"

"A friend of mine! oh! simply a boarding-school acquaintance, I tell you."

"Is he good-looking?"

"Yes, rather; that is to say, an ordinary face, but already worn and lined."

"Introduce him to me."

Robineau rose with an offended air and went to the mirror to remove his curl-papers.

"If I knew that he would make you happy, mademoiselle," he said, "I certainly would not hesitate! But I doubt if you would find in Alfred the profound and sincere affection which I feel for you."

"Dieu! my friend, how you do adore me to-night!"

"Because I've no carriage, you talk jestingly of abandoning me. But just let me get wealthy, and my only revenge will be to give you a magnificent country house."

"You must supply it with rabbits, understand, because I am very fond of rabbit stew. But meantime, while monsieur goes to his dance, I'm going to trim a cap."

"Downstairs?"

"No, upstairs."

"Is the shop closed already?"

"What, at nine o'clock? Don't you follow the example of those evil tongues across the street, who say that the best part of our business is done when the shop is closed. Pretty shopkeepers they are, to talk about other people! The chief partner is bargaining for a place as box-opener at a theatre."

"There! How does my hair look?"

"Delicious, my friend! You'll suffocate all rivals."

"Oh! all I care for is to be decent, presentable. You see, I make no pretensions."

"That is why you stand hours in front of your glass, practising smiles."

"For you alone, Fifine.—Ah! now where are my gloves?"

"I say, there'll be a supper, no doubt, where you're going? Bring me something."

"You expect me to put ices in my pocket, I suppose?"

"There'll be other things besides ices; I want you to bring me some sweetmeats, or I'll never put on curl-papers for you again."

"All right—we will see."

"Is monsieur going very far?"

"Rue du Helder."

"The milords' quarter!—You mean to take a cab, no doubt?"

"I surely shan't go on foot in this costume.—Let me see—it's half past nine; I shall be at the Baron de Marcey's at quarter to ten. That will do."

"Then it wasn't worth while to make such a terrible fuss, my friend."

"There's a cabstand almost in front of the house. I wonder if you would be kind enough to go down with me and call one?"

"That's it; the only thing left for me to do will be to ride behind. But no matter; this is one of my good-natured days; forward!"

Robineau locked his door; Fifine went downstairs with him and called a cab, into which Robineau jumped after pressing the young milliner's hand affectionately. She watched him go and called to him once more:

"Don't forget to bring me something good!"

III

RECEPTION AT THE BARON DE MARCEY'S.--A SUPPER PARTY OF YOUNG MEN AND ITS RESULTS

The cab halted in front of a handsome hôtel. There was a long line of private carriages waiting to enter the courtyard; one would have thought that they were taking their owners to the Bouffes, or to see the English actors. There is not so large an audience at the Français when they are playing Molière or Racine; but our actors have not made a special study of the death agony of a moribund; they do not exhibit to us all the dying convulsions of a man who is being murdered, nor make us hear all the hiccoughs of a princess who is starving to death; those pretty little episodes are very pleasant to witness, they excite the nerves of people who need such tableaux to arouse the slightest emotion. And yet there are some people who claim that it is more difficult to act well a scene from *Tartufe* or *Le Misanthrope*, than to imitate a scene from the Place de Grève. But let us allow every one to follow his or her taste, and let us be content to congratulate him who still enjoys a play that does not last forty years, and who is moved by a scene in which no one dies.

When he saw the throng of carriages and the brilliantly lighted salons, Robineau said to himself:

"This will be a very numerous, very fashionable and very well assorted affair!"

He at once alighted from his cab, and hurried toward the entrance, passing his hand over his curls and putting on his second glove. Then he went up to the first floor, reflecting thus:

"After all, I am as good as all these people—better perhaps. Even if they do have carriages—what difference does it make to me?"

Robineau said this to himself in order that he might not seem embarrassed and intimidated when he entered the salons; but it did not prevent his being red of face and stiff and awkward when he found himself in the midst of the guests, where he vainly sought Alfred for some time. At last his friend came to him, and, taking his arm, began by indulging in some jesting remarks concerning divers persons present. This gave Robineau time to recover himself; he resumed his self-assurance, his customary smile, and began to cast his eyes upon the ladies, thinking only of making conquests.

"By the way, your father, Monsieur le Baron de Marcey—I have not yet had the honor of paying my respects to him," said Robineau, as he gazed admiringly at some very pretty young ladies who had just entered the salon.

"My father has seen you before; must I present you to him again? It's the same ceremony every time!"

"It's a long time since he saw me, my dear fellow, and——"

"That makes no difference; you have one of those faces that no one ever forgets."

As he spoke, Alfred walked away to speak to some ladies, and Robineau murmured:

"I certainly have a face that—I wonder if he meant that for an epigram? that would be very becoming in him.—Ah! there is Monsieur de Marcey."

A man of some forty-eight years was passing Robineau at that moment; he was of tall stature and his carriage was noble and imposing; his strongly marked features were still very handsome, although they seemed to be already fatigued by too intense emotions rather than by years. He was a little bald in front, although his hair was still dark; lastly, his face was habitually serious and almost stern. But to those persons who could read his countenance more understandingly, the expression of his somewhat sombre glance was rather melancholy than severe. However, his black eyes grew softer, and a faint smile played about his lips whenever he looked at his son. Such was the Baron de Marcey.

"Monsieur de Marcey,—I have the honor—I am much flattered——"

The baron glanced at Robineau for an instant, then exclaimed:

"Ah! this is Monsieur Robineau, I believe?"

"Yes, monsieur, an intimate friend of your son, who invited me to come; and I took advantage of——"

"My son's friends will always be mine, monsieur, and they confer a favor on me by coming to my house."

As he spoke, Monsieur de Marcey bowed to Robineau, and passed on to speak with other guests, while the government clerk puffed himself up and sauntered through the throng, saying to himself:

"Monsieur de Marcey is always extremely amiable to me; indeed I consider him more amiable than his son, because he hasn't always that mocking air.—Ah! there's the music; they are going to dance. I think I will dance, too; but with a pretty woman, for I can never keep in step with an ugly one,—it's no use for me to try."

The orchestra had given the signal; one of Tolbecque's lovely strains drew the dancers together from all sides, and charmed the ears of those who did not dance, but who, as they watched beauty and innocence *chasser* and *balancer*, listened with delight to airs selected from our best composers' prettiest operas.

Robineau addressed himself too late to several comely young ladies who were already engaged; he was forced to take a partner who had naught in her favor save her youth and a very stylish costume. He heard somebody call her madame la comtesse, and that made him desirous to distinguish himself as her partner; but she seemed to pay very little heed to his airs and graces, and replied only by monosyllables to the complimentary remarks he addressed to her.

"She's a prude!" Robineau muttered, after he had escorted the countess to her seat; and he proceeded to invite a very attractive young person to whom also he essayed to play the amiable; but she contented herself with smiling at what he said to her, and seemed wholly intent on the dance.

"She's a fool!" thought Robineau, as he carried his homage elsewhere. But finding that he created no sensation, despite his energetic movements and the smiles he lavished on his partners, he left the ball-room.

"After all," he muttered, "among all these fine ladies there isn't one who comes up to Fifine! And if Fifine had a tulle gown, and a wreath in her hair, and some of those great bracelets with antique cameos—ah! what a sensation she'd make!—I'll take a look at the écarté table. I will carelessly bet a five-franc piece.—Ah! the deuce! there are ices; I'll begin by seizing one on the wing."

Robineau took an ice, and, in order to eat in comfort, seated himself behind two gentlemen of mature years, who

were talking together in a small salon between the ball-room and the card-room.

"How he has changed!" observed one of the two gentlemen, looking at Monsieur de Marcey, who happened to pass through the salon.

"Changed! whom do you mean?"

"De Marcey."

"Oh! do you think so?"

"If you had known De Marcey twenty-five years ago, as I did, my dear Dolmont——"

"Parbleu! that's just it—twenty-five years ago; and it seems to you that it was only yesterday—and that he ought to appear the same to-day."

"No, no, I don't say that.—Dear De Marcey! We made the Austerlitz campaign together."

"Oho! were you at Austerlitz?"

"Yes, indeed; I am proud to say that I was; and I have been in almost every battle that has been fought since. Now, I am resting."

Robineau took his eyes from his vanilla ice for an instant, to look at the speaker. He saw a man of fifty, whose frank and intelligent face bore more than one scar; his buttonhole was decorated with several orders, and Robineau said to himself:

"This gentleman has well earned his decorations—that is sure!"

"To be sure," rejoined the old soldier's companion a moment later, "De Marcey is not old; he entered the service early in life, as you did; but so many things have happened since that it always seems as if centuries had passed over our heads."

"For my part, when I think of my campaigns, it seems as if it had all happened no longer ago than yesterday, for I fancy that I am still in the field!"

"He is like me," thought Robineau, "when I think of my first fancy. And yet it was ten years ago. She was a *figurante* at the Porte-Saint-Martin, and on the day of our first rendezvous we dined at the Vendanges de Bourgogne, Faubourg du Temple. It wasn't a fashionable restaurant then as it is to-day, and there was no canal to cross to get there; but they served delicious *sheep's-trotters*. It seems to me that I am there still. I was eighteen years old then. Ah me! one grows old without perceiving it!"

And Robineau heaved a sigh—which did not prevent his finishing his ice.

"When I say, Dolmont, that De Marcey seems changed to me, I refer to his temperament rather than to his physical aspect. If you had known him long ago—he was always in high spirits and a jovial companion; he used to laugh and joke with us. He was fond of the ladies—oh! he was a great lady's man. But he was jealous of his mistresses, very jealous! I recall that on various occasions that tendency led him into quarrels; and indeed it was on account of it, I believe, that they married him at twenty-three to a young lady for whom he cared very little. His parents maintained that, with his jealous disposition, if he married for love he would be unhappy. And in fact his marriage began very auspiciously. I knew De Marcey's first wife; she was a very attractive woman, and I believe that she would have made her husband very happy; unfortunately she died, a year after giving birth to a son. I learned that De Marcey married again after six years; but I was not in Paris then, and De Marcey had left the army. I never knew his second wife."

"He didn't marry the second time in Paris, but somewhere in the neighborhood of Bordeaux. It seems that his wife's family had an estate there, and the marriage took place on that property. Indeed, I think that he did not return to Paris with his wife until long after his second marriage."

"And what sort of person was his second wife?"

"Charming! One of those exquisite faces such as the painters succeed in producing occasionally, but which we see much less frequently in the world."

"The deuce!"

"But she had a sad, melancholy air; when she smiled, the smile seemed to conceal a secret grief. I never saw her dance, although she was very young, eighteen at most; but she seemed to shun the pleasures suited to her age, and to go into society solely to please her husband."

"And De Marcey was very fond of her?"

"Oh! he adored her; he seized every opportunity of giving her pleasure. He was untiring in his devotion to her."

"Did he have any children by her?"

"No; but the lovely Adèle—that was the second wife's name—loved little Alfred dearly, and manifested all a mother's affection for him. She died after three years; De Marcey's grief was so violent that for a long time his life was in danger. At last, the sight of his son, meditation, lapse of time——"

"Yes, time! that is the all-powerful remedy. But for all that, I am no longer surprised that his humor is so changed from what it was! One may overcome the most profound sorrow, but it always leaves its traces. It is like the severe wounds, which heal, but of which one always carries the scars."

With that the old soldier rose, his companion did the same, leaving Robineau alone on his chair, which he at once quitted, saying to himself:

"It is very entertaining to listen to other people's conversation, and it's instructive, too; you seem to be paying no attention, but you listen; especially when people talk loud, for that means that they are not saying anything that they wish to conceal. Ah! I must listen to the conversation of some of the ladies; that will be even more amusing, because they always sprinkle their talk with wit; when I say always, I mean of course those who have wit.—Yonder are two ladies who seem to be engaged in a most interesting conversation, for they are talking with great animation. There's a vacant chair beside them."

Robineau nonchalantly took his seat beside two pretty women, and turning his ear toward them as if without design, caught some fragments of their conversation.

"Yes, my dear love, I judged him rightly. I was wise, as you see, to distrust his protestations of love, his ardent oaths, his profound sighs! And yet you cannot conceive with what an air of sincerity he told me that he proposed to be virtuous and faithful henceforth, and to love no one but me! It is ghastly to lie like that!"

Robineau turned his head so that he could see the speaker's face; and he saw a lovely brunette, whose vivacious and intelligent features expressed at that moment a sentiment of vexation which she tried to conceal beneath a forced smile.

"My dear Jenny, I believe that you are a little annoyed because you put Alfred's love to the proof."

"Annoyed! on the contrary, I am delighted. I did not believe in it for an instant; his reputation with respect to women is too well established for——"

At that point she lowered her voice and Robineau could not hear the rest of her sentence; but he thought:

"They are talking about Alfred—this is delightful!—She is a person he has been making love to, no doubt. Gad! how amusing it is!"

The other lady, who also was young and pretty, replied after a moment:

"I am inclined to think that I should have more confidence in his friend, Monsieur Edouard Beaumont; he has a less frivolous, less heedless air than Alfred; and he is very good-looking, is Edouard; he has a very pretty figure."

"Mon Dieu! my dear love, I'll wager that he is no better than other men. It is safer to distrust those cold, reserved manners, too. Nobody is worse than such men, when it comes to deceiving us poor women. With a scapegrace who makes no pretence of concealing what he is, one knows what to expect at all events."

"And that is why you have a weakness for Alfred, I suppose?"

"Oh! never! never! I laughed at his oaths of love. Perhaps it amused me a little to listen to him.—But, although he is agreeable and bright—as to loving him, oh! I promise you that I never dreamed of such a thing. Pray do not think that!"

"If you defend yourself so eagerly, Jenny, I shall end by believing that you adore him."

"Oh! upon my word, I——"

She lowered her voice again. Robineau tilted his chair a little in order to hear; but for several minutes the two friends spoke in such low tones that he could not catch a word. At last the charming Jenny observed aloud:

"You did well, very well. I am sure that it puzzles him tremendously to see us talking together, for he thought that we were at odds. Did he never talk to you about me?"

"Why, no; he talked about nobody but myself."

"Ah, yes! of course. I assure you, Clara, that I shall remain a widow; I shall never marry again!"

"Can anyone be sure of that, my dear? Remember that you are only twenty-two years old."

"An additional reason for not endangering the happiness of my life. Is not what I have known of marriage likely to make me avoid it? Monsieur de Gerville married me when I was eighteen, having never paid court to me; without any idea whether I liked him or not, he asked my parents for my hand. He was rich, so they gave me to him. However, Monsieur de Gerville was young and good-looking. I might have loved him if he had taken the trouble to try to win my love, if he had simply tried to make me think that he loved me. I was such a little idiot then! I believed whatever anyone chose. But no—I was his wife, and he would have considered that he disgraced himself by making love to me, by paying me any attention. He had two or three mistresses who deceived him; but that was much better than loving his wife, who did not deceive him. However, he is dead, and it is my duty to forget the suffering he caused me; but I confess that that taste of married life left me with a very poor opinion of men in general. I believe them to be, as a rule, selfish, inconstant, unjust to women: they must have everything, and we must do without everything; they are pleased to be unfaithful, but they demand constancy from us; they are good-humored so long as we are fortunate enough to please them, but as soon as they begin to sigh for another woman, they do not give us another thought; instead of trying to conceal their unfaithfulness by redoubling their attentions and consideration for us, they become sulky, capricious, bad-tempered; and if we are so unfortunate as to manifest any regret at the change in their treatment of us, they accuse us of being jealous and exacting!"

"O Jenny! Jenny!"

"You will find out, my dear Clara, that it is all true. In fact, what happy couples can you mention? Only those where the wives close their eyes to their husbands' infidelities. Oh! when we let them do whatever they choose, go in and out and run after other women, without ever calling them to account for their actions, then we are what they call good wives, and they deign to offer us an arm once a month."

"I see that Alfred's inconstancy has soured you!"

"What do I care for Monsieur Alfred's inconstancy? I tell you again, I listened to him only for the fun of it, and I never took his declarations of love seriously. However, I am very glad that I know—that I conceived the idea of——"

Here they lowered their voices once more; and as they had reached a very interesting point, and as Robineau was most desirous to learn what the idea was that had occurred to Madame de Gerville, he tilted his chair a little more in the hope of hearing. But the weight of his body overturned it, and before he could recover himself, he rolled at the feet of the two friends.

As they had paid no attention to their neighbor, they were not a little surprised when that gentleman fell almost on their laps. But Robineau rose hastily, stammered an apology and walked away, muttering:

"They polish their floors a great deal too much! It's almost too slippery to stand up! I don't understand why all the dancers don't fall on top of one another. To be sure, they walk instead of dancing.—Curse that chair! I was just going to learn the idea of that pretty brunette—Madame Jenny de Gerville. I will remember the name, and I'll drive Alfred crazy. Ah! it's very amusing!"

Robineau returned to the ball-room and looked about for other groups of people conversing. He heard laughter near at hand, and found that it came from two ladies who were not dancing; there happened to be a vacant chair behind them and Robineau took possession of it.

"These ladies are laughing," he said to himself; "I'll wager that they are making fun of some other women among the company. I mustn't miss this! I didn't have time to look at them, but I will scrutinize them when they turn.—Attention!"

"Oh! what a ridiculous creature that man must be, and how I would have liked to see him dancing with you! You must point him out to me when you see him."

"Oh, yes! never fear; he is easily recognizable. I can't imagine where Monsieur de Marcey found him!"

"Good!" thought Robineau; "they are making fun of someone—I was sure of it."

And he moved nearer to them, taking care not to tilt his chair.

"Just imagine, my dear love, a short, fat, heavy, awkward man, with a big nose, stupid little eyes, lips that he presses together when he talks, and hair curled so tight that he looks like a negro!"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"And with it all, such a pretentious manner! He asked me to dance—they were just forming for the first contra-dance; I accepted, and during the dance he tried to play the amiable, but he had nothing to say except the most commonplace things, all so flat and wornout that it made me very sorry for him!—When he found that I made no reply to those entertaining remarks, he took the liberty to squeeze my hand while we were dancing!—Ha! ha! ha!"

At that point, the lady who was speaking turned, and Robineau recognized the countess with whom he had danced the first contra-dance. The blood rushed to his face. Meanwhile, the lady, who instantly recognized the gentleman of whom she was speaking, with difficulty restrained an inclination to laugh, and gently touched her friend’s knee. But before the latter had time to turn, Robineau was already far away. He was beside himself with rage, and glared furiously about, muttering:

"Well, upon my word! that woman must be a great joker! I don’t know whether it was I she was talking about, but in any event, I hope she may find many of my kind!—But she’s too ugly to have any attention.—To say that I squeezed her hand! that is false! These ugly women are forever slandering us men; it’s because they are furious at not finding any lovers."

Having lost his desire to listen to conversations, Robineau bent his steps toward the card-room, making such a horrible grimace that Alfred, meeting him beside one of the tables, stopped him and said:

"Mon Dieu! what a face you are making, my dear Robineau! Have you been having hard luck?"

"I have lost three hundred francs!"

"That’s nothing; you will win them back." And Alfred walked away, while Robineau said to himself:

"He takes things easily! That’s nothing, he says! If I had lost three hundred francs, I should never get over it! But I am very sure not to lose any such sum, as I have only twenty-one francs fifty. I must risk that. I will try to win; but they say that it isn’t very prudent to play écarté at these large parties. However, at Monsieur le Baron de Marcey’s there can’t be any but honest people. No matter; I am going to bet on the one who is winning—that’s the best thing to do.—Who is having the luck?" asked Robineau as he drew near the card-table.

Unluckily for him, the luck changed; in a very short time he lost his twenty-one francs. Thereupon, making every effort to conceal his ill-humor, he turned away from the table.

"Good-bye to the trip into the country and the dinner at the restaurant on Sunday!" he thought. "Fifine will have to dine at her aunt’s, and I will play the guitar. It was well worth while for me to put myself out, dress in my best clothes and hire a cab, to come to a grand party!—It is very amusing, isn’t it? Women who laugh at you; men who stare at you as if they would like to walk on you; gamblers who win your money without giving you time to see where you are! Fifine is right: one has much more fun at Madame Saqui’s or at the Funambules when they play *Le Fantôme Armé*.—Let us take a look at the buffet. If I can’t put ices in my pocket, I can put some oranges and cakes."

Robineau went to the refreshment room; there were no oranges left, but there was an abundance of cakes. He stuffed his pockets with them while the servants brought refreshments, and he was about to make for the stairway when Edouard appeared in front of him. The young author stopped.

"Good evening, Monsieur Robineau," he said; "I haven’t seen you before—there are so many people here!"

"True; and look you, between ourselves, I don’t consider these enormous crushes very amusing; I confess that I have had enough of it, and I am going away."

"Already? Why, it’s only two o’clock. Oh! you must stay; Alfred wants us to take supper in his apartment after the party, and talk nonsense."

"Oh! I didn’t know. That makes a difference, if we are to have supper. The devil! if I had known, I wouldn’t have eaten so much sweet stuff. But no matter—I will stay."

"Let us walk about and look for pretty partners."

"I will gladly walk about; but as to dancing, I am done."

Robineau slapped his pockets softly, to flatten them, and followed Edouard, saying to himself:

"I am not sorry to be seen talking with an author; I will talk theatre with him, and people will think that he and I are working together on a play.—I will bet that you prefer the play to an evening party, eh, Monsieur Edouard?"

"That depends; there are pleasant parties and very tiresome plays."

"Oh! of course; but I mean to say that it is very pleasant to be an author.—I must tell you of a plot—I say a plot, but I have a dozen in my desk!—Oh! I have some astonishingly good ones!"

"I believe it."

"Plots for grand operas, opéra-comiques, vaudevilles, melodramas. Oh! I do a little of everything; I have an inexhaustible imagination, and if I had time——"

"Yes, time is always what those people lack who produce nothing."

"That is so, isn’t it? But I will show them to you. What I should like more than anything would be to have free admission to the theatres.—Ah! to be able to go behind the scenes, to see the actresses at close quarters, and the ballet-dancers, who make pirouettes, so they say, as they bid you good-evening! What a lot of conquests one might make!"

"Not so many as you think; you get accustomed to the wings, as you do to the auditorium, and you talk with a Turk or a Polish girl without noticing their costumes."

"Of course; habit—I understand; but to produce a play, to superintend the rehearsals and the performance."

"It is delightful when one succeeds; but even so, what vexations have to be undergone before that point is reached! Rehearsals where people are never prompt, where they talk instead of studying their parts, which makes it necessary to rehearse forty times what they should have learned in fifteen; actors who want to make over their parts, managers who want to rewrite your plays, actresses who don’t like their costumes, claqueurs who want all your

tickets, and last of all the public, that will have none of your play: such is often the result of six weeks of discomfort, annoyances and hard work!"

"He says all this to take away any inclination on my part to write plays," thought Robineau. "All authors are like that; they try to disgust beginners. I won't show him my plots; he would steal my ideas, and then say they were his own.—You are rather inclined to look at the dark side of things now, Monsieur Edouard," he said aloud, "because you are still sore from your failure."

"Oh! I assure you that I have forgotten all about it."

"Bah! nonsense! For my part, if I should be hissed, I think that I should be in a horrible humor.—By the way, have you seen your little sempstress again? But I suppose that she is already replaced, is she not?"

"Faith, no! I am beginning to be tired of these *bonnes fortunes*, in which, as Larochefoucauld says, there is everything except love. I think that I should prefer a little love and less pleasure."

"That is like me, I am for sentiment, for what is called pure sentiment. I have adored all the women I ever knew, even my *figurante* at the Porte-Saint-Martin; and on their side, they have all treated me with peculiar favor; I am their spoiled child."

"You are very fortunate, Monsieur Robineau!—For my part, I would like to find—I don't know just how to express it, but it seems to me that there should be a secret sympathy acting at the same time on two hearts that are made for each other."

"Yes, I understand you; that is what happened to me with my first inclination, whom I met at the Bal du Colisée. We fell while waltzing, both at the same time. I instantly discovered a secret sympathy therein."

Edouard allowed a faint smile to escape him, and drew near to a quadrille in which some very pretty women were performing.

"What do you think of that little blonde, Monsieur Robineau?"

"Why, nothing extraordinary; a good complexion, and youth; but she doesn't turn her feet out enough."

"You are hard to suit! I think her very attractive; her eyes are lovely, her bearing full of grace. She does not seem to have made a careful study of dancing, but anyone can see that she enjoys it.—And what of the tall one, opposite?"

"She is not pretty; her nose is much too long, and there seems to be no end to her arms; her hair is badly arranged ——"

"Well, I think that she has a very bright face, and it seems to me that, while she is not pretty, she must be attractive. I will wager that her conversation is very agreeable—And that stout brunette that's dancing now?"

"She is a perfect bundle, and she tears about like one possessed."

"But see how light she is, despite her stoutness! What vivacity gleams in her eyes!"

"I say, Monsieur Edouard, you claim to be weary of *bonnes fortunes*, and yet you find all women to your liking; they all attract you!"

"Although I am weary of ephemeral liaisons, I did not say that I proposed to love no more; on the contrary, I am at present in search of an opportunity to fall in love in earnest."

"Well, well! so am I, messieurs," cried Alfred, who had stopped beside his two friends and had overheard Edouard's last words. "I have a heart to place, and may the devil take me if I have known what to do with it for the last fortnight!—Here are plenty of good-looking women, however!"

"Faith! messieurs," said Robineau, throwing out his chest, "I protest that I contemplate all the ladies with a most indifferent eye. I am a philosopher, you see; besides, I have what I need, and it would be difficult for me to find anything better."

"Aha! Robineau, then you must show her to us. You must ask us to dine with her."

"Upon my word! do you mean to say that you think that she's a woman for mixed parties? a woman to be taken where there are men?"

"Are you trying to make us think that she's a duchess?"

"Why—look you—that might be."

"Ha! ha!—What on earth have you got in your pockets, Robineau? Are you wearing false hips to please your Dulcinea?"

Robineau blushed and put his hands over his pockets as he replied:

"It's some papers that I forgot to take out of my coat."

"If you danced with such pockets as that, you must have produced a tremendous effect!—Ha! ha! it's worse than Mère Gigogne!—Are these ministerial papers, too?"

Robineau turned away in a pet and threw himself on a sofa, heedless of the fact that he was crushing his cakes; and there he remained until the end of the ball, when Alfred came to him and said:

"We are going up to my rooms, Robineau; we are going to finish the night at the table, with a few faithful friends. Will you join us?"

"Yes, to be sure."

"Then make up your mind to leave your couch, to which you seem to be glued like a pasha."

Robineau followed Alfred. Young De Marcey's apartment was above his father's, and contained everything that luxury, refinement and variety could suggest. It was a retreat that any petite-maitresse might have envied.

Four young men, as heedless and reckless as the master of the place, soon appeared in response to their friend's invitation, and with Edouard and Robineau completed the party.

"Messieurs," said Alfred, presenting Robineau to his young friends, "allow me to introduce an old school-mate, a very good fellow, albeit slightly irascible when you talk to him of his conquests or his employment. Do not pay any attention to the size of his pockets; he maintains that it makes him more graceful. He is a little out of temper now because he lost some money at écarté; but we will make him tipsy and he will be a delightful companion."

All the young men laughed, and Robineau followed their example, crying:

"That devilish Alfred! always joking! But, as for making me tipsy, I defy you to do it, messieurs. I have a hard head, I tell you; I have never been known to get drunk."

"On my honor, Alfred, your quarters are delightful. Everything is so fresh and bright, and decorated with such taste! It is an enchanting spot," said one of the young men, as he walked about the apartment.

"Faith, messieurs, if you like it, so much the better. But I have nothing to do with it; my father looks after everything that concerns me, and he has lately had all the furnishings of my apartments replaced, saying that what I had was not handsome enough. I let him do as he pleases."

"Nobody can deny, Alfred, that you have a most agreeable father!"

"Oh! as to that, messieurs, I do him full justice. He is so kind that I am sometimes tempted to reproach him for indulging me too much. If I incur debts, he pays them; if I want money, he gives it to me; if I express a fear that my follies displease him, he embraces me, saying: 'You are young, and you must enjoy yourself; be happy, my dear boy—that is all I desire.' And I give you my word, he is so kind that I often pause in the act of committing some extravagance; for I have no secrets from my father, and I should be terribly distressed if I did anything that grieved him. Yes, messieurs, his indulgence will keep me in the paths of prudence, whereas, if he had thwarted me, if he had been harsh toward me, I should have done a hundred times as many wild and foolish things."

"In short, each of you loves the other dearly," said Edouard; "and it seems to me that one should always be happy to have one's father for a friend."

"My father was very fond of me too," said Robineau; "however, he broke a cane over my back one day because I had lost my handkerchief. He was orderly to the last degree, was my father, but he loved me dearly all the same."

"To the table, messieurs, to the table, and let us see who can say the most foolish things! After an evening of dignified behavior, it is pleasant to take one's ease for a while."

They took their seats at the table, and attacked a fine fowl and a ham roasted in currant jelly. Those who had danced a great deal were hungry; the others were incited by their example, and Robineau forgot that he had stuffed himself with cakes, in order to do honor to the sugar-cured ham, which he considered delicious. Bordeaux and chambertin circulated freely; the conversation became more and more animated, and as they drank they laughed and jested; each had his anecdote to tell, each had some love-making adventure with which he was anxious to regale his friends; the subject of women is inexhaustible, and men are always glad to return to it, for there is no man to whom it does not recall pleasant memories.

"Messieurs," said a young man, who seemed to be rather inflammable, "there is one incontestable truth, and that is that if we wish to be loved by the women, we must not love anyone of them."

"Oh! upon my word!"

"I leave it to Alfred; am I not right?"

"Faith! I am inclined to think just the opposite; for I am rather fortunate with the fair sex, and yet I love them all."

"Very good; you love them all, therefore you love none of them; which is just what I said."

"It would be a great pity, messieurs," said Edouard, "to think that a deeply rooted sentiment may not be reciprocated; and that as soon as we are really in love with a woman, she will cease to love us."

"When a man is in love, he loses all his advantages, and he is stupid enough to be carved."

"That is true," said Robineau, "he is terribly stupid."

"The woman we love doesn't think us stupid, when she returns our love."

"Monsieur Edouard is right," said Robineau, tossing off a glass of chambertin; "when she returns our love, why, that is another matter! it is altogether different!"

"But when she doesn't return it," said one of the young men, "then she makes sport of us and laughs at our sighs; she makes us look like downright jackasses, and we don't discover it."

"We don't even suspect it," said Robineau, filling his glass with chambertin again, "and that's the amusing part of it."

"A woman, messieurs," rejoined Edouard, "who laughs at a man because he is really in love with her, such a woman is a flirt, and it seems to me that society is not made up entirely of flirts. How many passionate, loving hearts there are, ready to respond to our love! How many women who cannot help loving a scapegrace in secret, and who exert every effort to conceal what they feel!"

"They are innumerable," said Robineau.

"Faith! coquettish or sentimental, artless or passionate, they are fascinating," said Alfred; "except, however, when they run after us, follow us and set spies to watch all our movements."

"Oh! the devil! a woman who follows a man is a horrible creature! In the first place, it's very bad form! But such a thing is never seen now."

"Yes it is, sometimes."

"For my part, messieurs," said Robineau, who persisted in talking constantly, although his tongue was beginning to thicken, "when a woman follows me, and I discover it—for when I don't discover it, I close my eyes—but when she follows me, I say to her: 'My dear love, you are following me about and I don't like it. When I choose to be with you, I will tell you so; but if I choose to speak to another woman, I don't need your presence in order to make myself agreeable; on the contrary, it paralyzes my faculties.'"

"Bravo! bravo!" laughed the young men; "he talks like Cicero."

"Now for the champagne, messieurs," said Alfred.

"Champagne it is!"

"Yes, champagne!" cried Robineau, "and let's see who will drink the most; I never get drunk."

The corks popped, they partook freely of the champagne, and soon everybody was speaking at the same moment and each imagined that he was being listened to. But amid the uproar and the outbursts of laughter, Robineau succeeded in making himself heard because he shouted louder than all the others, and the tipsier he grew, the more he insisted upon arguing to prove that wine did not go to his head.

"My dear friend," he said, addressing Alfred, "you haven't a suspicion that I am in the secret of your love-affairs, of your conquests; that is to say, a sweet little brunette, a widow; I don't propose to mention her name, because we must be discreet, but it seems that you made love to her in great shape, and that the said Madame de Gerville set out

to put your constancy to the test——"

"Madame de Gerville! how do you know that? How do you know Madame de Gerville?"

"In the first place, I haven't said that it was Madame de Gerville; I didn't mention any names, did I, messieurs?"

"No, no!" cried the young men, laughing heartily; "oh, no! he knows too much for that! anybody can see that he never gets tight!"

"Why, messieurs," said Robineau, putting a glass of champagne to his lips, "I swallow this like milk; I have a head of iron!—But all the same, Alfred, the young widow says that you're a monster! a perfidious wretch! It would seem that she was really taken with you."

"I don't know whether Madame de Gerville was taken with me; but I confess that I was deeply in love with her,—so much so that for a moment I thought it was serious. Jenny is lively, amiable, clever; but one fine day I met a certain Clara at her house; I didn't know that she was her particular friend; there are many women who see one another every day, but don't love one another. This Clara is very attractive too; I told her that I considered her a charming creature—the most natural thing in the world; but it seems that she repeated it to Madame de Gerville, and that Madame de Gerville didn't like it. Faith! it matters little to me. To the devil with constancy! I know nothing but pleasure myself!—Let us drink to the health of all pretty women!"

"Ah! messieurs, everybody must live! here's to the ladies in general!" said Edouard.

"Yes," said Robineau, holding out his glass to touch Edouard's, "the ladies in general! and in particular, too; for I have a particular one—ha! ha!—and a solid one, too! Virtue personified, with a wanton air, and plenty of morals—the whole disguised as a milliner."

"Aha! so your duchess is only a milliner now!" said Alfred! "and you wouldn't invite her to dine with us!"

"Well, messieurs, what's the odds, after all? What does rank amount to when beauty is in question?"

"He is right. Haven't kings been known to marry shepherdesses? The ancients weren't so proud as we are. Did not Shechem, the son of King Hamor, marry Dinah, the shepherd Jacob's daughter? Did not one of the Pharaohs of Egypt fall in love with Sarah, a shepherd's sister?"

"Very good! in that case, long live the grisettes! I know of no one like a grisette for the combination of love and dancing; for patching your breeches when you tear them, for keeping your breakfast hot in the morning and lighting your lamp at night. Just go and ask some fine lady of fashion, such as I saw here to-night, to sew on a button or mend your suspenders—you'd be well received, wouldn't you?—Long live the grisettes! I stick to that!"

"Long live the grisettes!" echoed the young men, laughing; and they plied Robineau with drink, because he was beginning not to know what he was saying, and that greatly entertained the young men, especially Alfred, who was not sorry to hear him contradict, when he was drunk, the lies into which his self-conceit had led him when he was sober.—Liars should never drink too much. The old proverb, *in vino veritas*, is true. How many people there are who would make fools of themselves in their cups, if they did not take care to keep sober! What reckless admissions, what piquant confessions we should hear, if—But the ladies never get tipsy!

"So it seems, Robineau, you've a very pretty milliner for a mistress?" said Alfred, filling his friend's glass.

"Pretty, messieurs! Why, I don't mean to say that her face is absolutely beyond criticism; and there are some defects in the contour, too. But her figure! oh! it's like a model! If she was here, I'd have her stand up on this table, so that you could admire her. In short, she is Fifine! that tells the whole story!"

"Ah! her name is Fifine, is it?"

"Yes, messieurs; a charming girl! a regular dragon! who has never been able to resist an invitation to drink,—that is when she took a fancy to the man."

"And she took a fancy to you at once, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes! instantly; that is to say, she made me run about a good deal. And the boxes I carried! and the rolls I paid for! How I did pay for them! She is decidedly fond of rolls, is Fifine.—No matter; here's her health, messieurs!"

"Fifine's health!" replied the young men. This toast moved Robineau to tears; he took out his handkerchief to wipe his eyes, and pulled from his pocket with it, and scattered about the floor and on the table, all the cakes he had purloined, which had became as flat as pie crust. The young men roared with laughter, and Alfred emptied Robineau's other pocket on his plate, crying:

"Here's a provident fellow, messieurs; he put his dessert in his pocket."

"It was for my canary, messieurs," faltered Robineau, dumfounded for an instant by the spectacle of the little cakes; "for Fifine's canary, I mean, who says 'kiss me quick' like a starling.—Still, you understand, it was only a joke, a wager; I am not reduced to that means of getting bird food. Not that the loss of my twenty-one francs doesn't embarrass me a good deal; but——"

"I thought you had lost more than three hundred?" said Alfred.

"The deuce! three hundred francs! A copying clerk at fifteen hundred francs a year! Why, that would be more than two months' salary!"

"You are mistaken; you earn a hundred louis, and you are soon to have an increase."

"Nonsense! A hundred louis! And as for getting an increase, my deputy-chief, who rules the roost, told me only this morning that, if I didn't write better, they would be obliged to discharge me. That sounds well from him, when his writing is like fly tracks, and he earns six thousand francs! It seems to me that he ought to write better than me.—Well, messieurs, you don't seem to be drinking; I was sure that I would beat you all!"

The young men were, in fact, beginning to yawn; Alfred tried in vain to wake them up—he too was overcome with drowsiness. The young men took their hats and bade one another good-night, pretending to be very firm on their legs.

It was broad daylight, and the streets were already alive with workingmen on their way to work; the peasants were returning leisurely to the country from the market, where they had been to sell their vegetables. The fresh, ruddy faces of the husbandman and the mechanic formed a striking contrast to the pallid faces of our young rakes; but the former had slept, while the latter had been up all night and were about to retire when the others were already beginning their day's work.

Robineau left the hôtel with the young men. When he was alone in the street, he had some difficulty in making up

his mind what to do; the houses seemed to be moving about, and the very earth to be unstable beneath his feet. He gazed with a frightened expression at the people who passed; and it is probable that they detected something peculiar in his face or his costume, for they laughed as they looked at him. Determined, however, to overcome what he took for a passing dizziness, Robineau pulled his hat over his eyes, and, exerting himself to the utmost to maintain the perpendicular, ran all the way home without stopping, and arrived there completely exhausted.

The first person Robineau met on the staircase was Fifine, who was going down to buy some milk for her breakfast.

"What! have you just come home?" she asked Robineau, who was trying vainly to put his key in the lock.

"Yes, my dear love, the party is just done."

"The party! why, it's been daylight a long while; it's after six o'clock.—Well! what makes you fumble at your door like that?"

"I don't know what's got into my key, Fifine, but it simply won't go into the lock."

"Give it to me; I'll find a way to unlock it."

Fifine opened the door, and exclaimed, after looking at Robineau more attentively:

"Mon Dieu! what a face! Your eyes are coming out of your head!"

"I don't know what's the matter with me, my dear; but this much is certain, that I don't feel very well."

"Oh! I see well enough what the matter is; it seems to me that you have been having a good bout!"

Robineau had thrown himself into a chair, and was sighing piteously. Fifine followed him and stood gazing at him with a scornful shrug. At last, finding that he said nothing, but continued to sigh, she exclaimed:

"How much longer are you going to groan like that? You seem to have come back from your ball in fine spirits!"

"Ah! Fifine, that is because I consider a ball a very foolish thing!—These great parties—the trouble one has to take in dressing—all for the sake of being bored to death!—Ah! I should have done much better to keep my money to go into the country with you."

"Oho! I see how it is; monsieur has lost his money at écarté; and then morality comes to the front."

"Yes, my darling girl, I have lost my all! I have nothing left!"

"I wish all your écarté players had the jaundice, and you too!"

"I don't know if I have the jaundice, but I feel very sick at my stomach."

"Oh! I believe you; your disappointment evidently didn't interfere with your eating and drinking."

"I took almost nothing, I assure you; but there was a magnificent supper."

"Did you bring me any good things?"

"I had my pockets full; and I don't know how it happened, but I haven't anything at all now!"

"Ah! I recognize you there! How kind of you!"

"Fifine, if you find fault with me, I shall be ill."

"That means that your supper was too much for you. What a charming creature—a lover like this, who goes off to enjoy himself with other people, and comes home with an attack of indigestion!"

"Don't abandon me, Fifine, I implore you!"

"That's it! I must nurse him now!—Well, stay there; keep quiet, and I'll make you some tea."

"Oh, yes! make me some tea; I don't want to drink anything else."

The young milliner hastened downstairs and bought all that she needed for Robineau, who had a severe attack of indigestion. But Fifine was active, quick-witted and skilful; in an instant she lighted a fire, heated some water and gave the sick man a cup of tea. Thanks to her attentions, he felt better after a little, and at each cup of tea that the girl gave him, he cried:

"Ah! I shall remember your kindness, Fifine; I won't spend my money with anybody but you. I wish I had a crown to offer you, and even then I should not think that I had paid you for your devotion.—As for these big parties, I shan't go to any more of them. Society offers no temptations to me;—a cottage and you—that is true happiness!"

IV

UNEXPECTED FORTUNE.—A RIDE.—THE EFFECTS OF WEALTH

A week had passed since the ball at Monsieur de Marcey's. The baron had left Paris on the following day, to visit one of his estates some leagues from the capital. He was in the habit of absenting himself quite often, either to visit some friend, or to inspect his various estates, or simply in search of diversion; but his absences did not ordinarily last more than ten or twelve days. When Monsieur de Marcey set out upon one of these little trips, his son very rarely accompanied him. Alfred, on his side, followed all his own fancies; he went wherever he chose, stayed in the city or in the country, untrammelled by the baron in any respect.

Alfred was in his own apartment, dressing—a very serious occupation for a dandy; but he was doing it carelessly, because for the moment there was no one whom he was especially desirous to please. To be sure he still gave a thought to Madame de Gerville from time to time, for the vivacious Jenny had really attracted him; but she had taken offence because he had thought Clara pretty and had told her so. Alfred, who could not understand how a woman could take offence at anything so natural, had done nothing to appease Jenny's anger; and as he dressed, he said to himself:

"Women are becoming unreasonably exacting! They would like us not to notice that a woman we happen to have on our arm is pretty; but they are very willing that we should think ugly women pretty. Oh! they are exceedingly kind to those who are ugly; they persist in assuring us that they are good-looking; 'you are too particular,' they will say; 'that woman is not bad-looking.'—But when we say: 'Look! there's a lovely woman!' they cry: 'Mon Dieu! where in heaven's name are your eyes? I thought that you had better taste than that. What good points do you see in her?'—

Mon Dieu! mesdames, why don’t you remember that one is never a just judge in his own cause? You may say what you please, but men will always be better able than you to detect in a woman that indefinable something that imparts charm to a face which you consider very ordinary; and, by the same token, you should be more just to men than we are."

Alfred was disturbed in his reflections by a great noise in his salon, and an instant later the door of his dressing-room was suddenly thrown open, and Robineau, rushing in like a bombshell, threw himself into his arms so violently that he overturned a very dainty washstand, at which Albert was performing his ablutions.

"Oh! my friend! my dear friend!" cried Robineau, whose face was transfigured by excitement, "how happy I am! Pray embrace me! No, it is my place to embrace you!—Ah! you don’t know,—you have no suspicion!"

"What I do know is that you rush in here like a madman," rejoined Alfred, "and that you have broken a most exquisite washstand from Jacob’s—a perfectly beautiful thing."

"I don’t care for that, my friend; I’ll give you another—two, three, if you choose! I’ll give you anything you want!"

Alfred scrutinized Robineau and tried to read in his eyes, while Robineau tried to calm himself a little and to make himself understood.

"My dear Alfred, my joy, my bewilderment must seem extraordinary to you—I can understand that; they produce the same effect on me, and there are times when I think I am dreaming. But it isn’t a dream, thank God!—When I left you a week ago, after your ball, what was I?"

"Faith! you were drunk."

"That isn’t what I mean.—I was still a mere clerk, a humble copyist at fifteen hundred francs a year."

"Are you the chief of a bureau now?"

"Better than that, my friend!—I have consigned the bureau to all the devils!—I have twenty-five thousand francs a year!"

"Twenty-five thousand?"

"Yes, my friend! yes, I, Jules-Raoul Robineau! I am going to set up a carriage! I am rich—almost as rich as you; not quite so rich yet to be sure, but it may come. When one is on the road to wealth—Yes—wait a minute, till I sit down. I am exhausted! Since I have had twenty-five thousand francs a year, I have suffered from palpitations; indeed, there are times when I really can’t breathe!"

Robineau threw himself on a couch, took out his handkerchief, wiped his face, loosened the waistband of his trousers so that he could breathe more easily, in fact, made himself perfectly comfortable. It was plain that money had already produced its effect, and that he was no longer the humble government clerk who bowed to the floor before he ventured to take a chair in the salons of his friend the Baron de Marcey. But wealth long ago proved its power to change the temper, the disposition, the aspect and manners of a person, and it is probable that the lessons of the past will always be thrown away, because men will be no better to-morrow than they were yesterday.

Alfred, who considered that there was no reason why his friend’s newly acquired wealth should prevent him from washing, had resumed his suddenly interrupted occupation, and waited tranquilly for Robineau to explain himself more at length. At last, after putting one foot on a stool, and looking about for a chair on which to put the other, the ex-clerk continued:

"My dear fellow, you must have heard me say that I had an uncle who sailed for the Indies when he was very young."

"Oh, yes! and you have never heard from him, and he has come home enormously rich. That’s what happens in all the vaudevilles."

"I am not talking about vaudevilles.—This uncle, my father’s brother, left home.—My dear parents never heard of him again.—They died, leaving me nothing but an education, which, I venture to say, is——"

"Go on, go on! I was at school with you, and I know that somebody else always had to write your translations and your themes; but no matter!"

"Yes; let us drop the Latin.—Yesterday, my dear fellow, when I returned from the department, I found a letter at my rooms. I opened it; it was from a notary, inviting me to call at once at his office, provided with my papers, certificate of baptism, etc. I didn’t quite know what to expect from a letter from a notary; but I complied with his invitation instantly. The notary asked me if I had any parents, and all sorts of details about my family; at last, my dear Alfred, when I had answered all his questions, and proved that I was really Jules-Raoul Robineau, son of Benoît-Etienne Robineau and Cécile Desboulloir, he said to me without any other preamble:

"‘Monsieur, your uncle, Gratien Robineau, has recently deceased at Havre, where he had just landed. He had turned all his fortune into cash, and proposed to pass the rest of his life in Paris, when death, which he had defied a hundred times in distant lands, struck him down as he reached the haven. Your uncle has left you all his property, and it amounts to about five hundred thousand francs.’"

"Five hundred thousand francs!"

"Ah! my friend, you can imagine my delight, my amazement. I almost fainted, and the notary had to give me vinegar and salts."

"What! you, Robineau, a philosopher, a bachelor without ambition, who despised riches,—you fainted when you learned that you had inherited a fortune?"

"Oh! my dear fellow, a man may be a philosopher, you know—that’s all right; indeed it’s the best thing one can do when one has to endure privations; but he may have a heart all the same, and be easily moved; and five hundred thousand francs! I thought at first that that meant a million a year, but, on figuring it out, I found that it was only twenty-five thousand francs at five per cent.—But when a man is sharp and knows how to go about it, he can make his money bring in six or eight or ten per cent.—Isn’t that so, my friend?"

"My dear Robineau, I know very well how to spend money, but I know absolutely nothing about investing it."

"Of course not! You have never been a clerk in the Treasury!"

"However, if I should give you any advice, it would be to invest your money in solid securities, consols or real estate. It seems to me that a man who has been accustomed to live on fifteen hundred francs a year may do very well with twenty thousand; and it would be better to have no more than that and have it perfectly safe, than to expose

your fortune to the risks of business. That is my opinion, my dear Robineau; a man may be very heedless about his own concerns and yet advise others wisely; so you will do well to——"

Robineau, who seemed to grew impatient toward the end of Alfred's harangue, had risen and was walking about the room humming; at last he interrupted his friend.

"All right! all right!" he cried; "I thank you for your advice, but I flatter myself that I shall be able to manage my fortune as well as any other man. Let us drop the subject, my friend, and think only of pleasures, of merry-making. In my opinion, when a man is rich, life should be simply a torrent of enjoyments.—Finish your dressing and let's go out to breakfast; I invite you to breakfast with me at the Café Anglais, or the Café de la Bourse, or Véry's, if you choose."

"You come too late, my dear Robineau; I have breakfasted."

"What's the odds? You can begin again."

"No indeed! Do you think that because one is rich, one can eat every minute of the day without making one's self sick?"

"The devil! that's a pity. I have already had some coffee and tea, but I want a déjeuner à la fourchette—that's better form.—By the way, my dear Alfred, as to form I will take your advice. I know that you follow the fashions, and I propose to follow them too, strictly.—Twenty-five thousand francs a year! Why, just imagine my joy!"

"Faith, I congratulate you; for you are a good fellow at bottom."

"If you knew how many plans I already have in my head! I mean to do so many things that I don't know where to begin!—But let us go to breakfast, I beg; you can pretend to eat."

The two young men were about to go out when Edouard appeared. Robineau did not give him time to bid his friend good-morning, but threw his arms about his neck, embraced him and apprized him of the change that had taken place in his fortune. Edouard quietly congratulated him, and Robineau could not understand why the news did not produce a greater effect on him; he conceived that all those who were about him ought to be equally excited and enchanted on learning that he had twenty-five thousand francs a year.

"I came to ask you to breakfast with me," Edouard said to Alfred.

Giving the latter no time to reply, Robineau seized Edouard's arm and cried:

"I am going to take you with us; we will breakfast together, yes, and dine too, if you have time; and while we are at the table, I'll tell you my plans, my ideas.—Look, here's a coat that I bought yesterday ready-made; I was in a hurry to have a new one. It fits me rather well, eh?—Let us go downstairs, and I'll show you my cabriolet."

"What! have you bought a cabriolet and horses, already?"

"No, I have hired until I can buy them. I must have other lodgings; I can't keep my cabriolet in my present fourth floor apartment; I am going to look for one with a stable and carriage house.—Mon Dieu! how many things I have to do! Really, I had no idea that wealth kept one so busy."

Alfred and Edouard glanced at each other with a smile; then they followed Robineau, who could not keep still, but ran through the rooms puffing like an ox.

They went downstairs, Robineau in the lead; he called his servant and shouted to him to get up behind his carriage.

"We shall founder your horse," said Alfred; "I might take my own cabriolet for Edouard and myself."

"No, no," said Robineau, "I prefer to go together. My horse is strong; at all events, if he isn't a good one, I'll make them give me another to-morrow. Oh! I see to it that I am well served, I do!—Get up behind, François; I will drive."

They all entered Robineau's cabriolet; he seated himself in the middle, took the reins and essayed to drive, because he was convinced that as soon as one is rich, one knows everything by instinct. He plied the whip vigorously, pulled the reins this way and that, and tormented his horse, who grazed curbstones and pedestrians every instant; and while his companions laughed at his exertions and at his manner of driving, he locked his wheel in the wheel of a cab, while trying to avoid a dray.

The cabman swore and said that he must be a duffer to run into his wheel; Robineau swore too, in order not to seem to be in the wrong; but his oaths did not suffice to extricate him from the fix in which he had involved himself; and, realizing that he would never get out of the tangle himself, he handed the reins to Alfred, saying:

"Do me the favor to drive, my dear fellow, for I am so engrossed by my affairs that I might mistake the road."

Thanks to Alfred, they cut loose from the cab and arrived without other mishaps at the Palais-Royal. They went to Beauvilliers', and Robineau ordered all the most expensive dishes; if his two companions had not checked him, he would have provided a breakfast for twenty and would have shouted at the top of his lungs that he had twenty-five thousand francs a year.

"By the way," said Alfred, "what of Fifine? you don't mention her. She must be much pleased by what has happened to you, isn't she?"

"Fifine!" repeated Robineau, with a distraught air; "oh! I haven't had time yet to see her since I went to my notary's.—*My notary!* I say, messieurs, how that rings in the ear! My notary!"

"Do you mean to say, Monsieur Robineau," said Edouard, "that you have not yet imparted your good news to her who was so dear to you a week since? Pray consider that when a woman has loved you for yourself alone, you owe her a debt of gratitude; and the least that you can do is to let her share your pleasure in what has happened to you."

"Edouard is right," said Alfred; "when you have had the good luck to fall in with a good, sensible, loyal woman, it seems to me, my friend, that you can hardly do too much for her."

"Messieurs, messieurs," replied Robineau, nibbling at the wing of a chicken, "it is very easy for you to talk; perhaps you would like me to make Mademoiselle Fifine my wife; that would be very pretty!"

"We know very well that you won't do that; but——"

"But I can't keep that little milliner for my mistress either. You must agree that when one has a considerable fortune, one may fly at higher game, more distinguished. And then, messieurs, between ourselves, Mamzelle Fifine isn't exactly a model of virtue; indeed she falls very far short of it. I have noticed several times that—you understand—but I have always pretended not to see anything, because I wasn't in love with her. And then, she has a flighty disposition, a very quick temper; she's a perfect dragon. For my part, I like mild-mannered women. I am accustomed to her face; but the fact is that she isn't pretty; she has a bold look and that's all."

"Oh! I say, Robineau, you don't propose to tell us now that she hasn't a good figure; she was a Venus the other night."

"Oh, yes! a strange kind of Venus! And she made me spend all my money on little parties of two; two-thirds of my salary went that way."

"What, man! a woman who loved you for yourself alone?"

"Yes. Oh! I know that she loved me; but that didn't prevent her being as gluttonous as a cat. However, messieurs, I have no desire to speak ill of her; I shall certainly buy her something; I am too generous to—But let us drop Fifine and talk about my plans. My dear friends, you have no idea what I have in my head—well! it's a château!"

"A château!" exclaimed Alfred; "why, my poor Robineau, you are mad; if you buy a château you won't have anything left to keep it up!"

"Bah! I know how to calculate. There are châteaux and châteaux! Why can't I put a hundred thousand francs into a nice little estate, an estate with a house on it, built in the old style? My notary assures me that he can find such a one very readily; and then, my dear friends, I can assume the name of my estate. That is done every day; and, between ourselves, Robineau is a very vulgar name for a man with twenty-five thousand francs a year."

"What, Monsieur Robineau!" said Edouard; "you, who declared that you should never change, whatever might happen, and whose discourse reminded one of Socrates and Cincinnatus!"

"As I have told you, my friends, I have my plans. I look a long way ahead. I buy a small château, an estate, no matter where, and I assume its name; that gives me at once an air of nobility; then I find a rich heiress, I present myself, I make a favorable impression, and I marry. What do you say to that? It seems to me that's not a bad scheme; and if I had no other name than Robineau, I could never become allied to a distinguished family! Mon Dieu! my dear Uncle Gratien, what a noble use I will make of your wealth!"

"And to begin with, you propose to discard his name."

"You must see that I do it from policy. It is decided: I shall buy an estate, I shall have peasants and vassals, and they will call me monseigneur!"

"They won't call you monseigneur, my poor Robineau, because in these days the man who owns lands, houses and farms is not on that account at liberty to dispose at his pleasure of the people who till his fields; and those delightful little prerogatives of *cuissage, jambage, marquette, prélibation,* and the like, which made the plight of vassals worse than that of beasts of burden, and degraded mankind by exalting one man at the expense of his fellowman—those prerogatives no longer exist; because men love a kind and virtuous master and no longer tremble before an arrogant and dissipated lord; because all men are under the protection of the laws, which ordain obedience and not humiliation; and finally because there are no more serfs except in Russia, where I advise you to go to buy your château, if you want to be called monseigneur. But I really believe, Robineau, that if you were left to your own devices, you would become one of the petty tyrants of the olden time, or at least a wolf, like the one in Little Red Riding Hood."

"I say, messieurs, to my mind, that was a very pretty little prerogative that entitled the lord to be the first man to put his legs into a newly married woman's bed.—But I will make *rosières*[2]—that will be just the same thing."

"Pending the time when you make rosières, pay the bill and let us go."

"Already?"

"Do you propose to pass your life in restaurants?"

"No, of course not; but it's only half-past twelve, messieurs.—What does one do all day long when one is rich?"

"Attends to his business, when he has any, and enjoys himself when he has an opportunity—and that doesn't happen every day."

"I don't propose to leave you to-day, my friends. I will take you wherever you would like to go; to the Bouffes if you please; there's a performance there to-day. That's the rich man's theatre, and I shall go nowhere else; but it isn't one o'clock, and we can't go to the Bouffes in the morning."

"Edouard and I are going for a ride," said Alfred, "and we shall probably take a turn in the Bois de Boulogne."

"To ride!" cried Robineau; "the devil! that's my style; I'll go with you!"

"Do you know how to sit a horse?"

"Never fear. It would be a great joke if a man with twenty-five thousand francs a year shouldn't know how to sit on a horse!"

"In that case, come with us; I'll lend you a mare that has a very gentle trot."

"That's the thing; and I'll make her gallop all the time. By the way, my friends, another word before we go: do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"After this, don't call me Robineau any more, but call me by my Christian name—Jules; that is more *distingué,* it has a pleasanter sound."

"I will call you Monsieur le Marquis Jules, if you choose," laughed Edouard.

"As for me," said Alfred, "I shall call you whatever comes into my head."

"Try to let nothing come into it but Jules, I entreat you."

They returned to Alfred's house, on foot this time, because, despite Robineau's entreaties, the two friends did not care to crowd themselves into his cabriolet again. The *nouveau riche* decided therefore to dismiss his carriage, and accompanied his friends on foot; but on the way he assumed airs and graces which caused his companions much amusement. He did not deign to glance at the multitude, he refused to turn aside for anyone, for in his opinion everybody should have been eager to give way to him. But such was not the case; and as his impertinent air did not prepossess people in his favor, they did not make way for him; some even ventured to jostle him, and he received more than one blow for persisting in blocking the path.

"It's very foolish to go on foot when you have a carriage!" he exclaimed; while Alfred and Edouard observed in an undertone:

"There's something more foolish than that."

They arrived at the hôtel De Marcey. The two friends were soon in the saddle, and Alfred's groom led out for Robineau's use a pretty little mare which pawed the ground and displayed a noble ardor for the road. Robineau began to frown and walked around the horse, saying:

"It seems to me that this horse is a vicious-looking animal."

"On the contrary she is the gentlest creature you can imagine; she's a lady's horse."

"Then she will do for me. But why does she stamp so?"

"Because she's impatient for a gallop."

"The devil! if she's impatient, she'll run away; I don't want to ride like a madman!"

"Don't be alarmed! Don't you know how to mount?"

"Yes, yes; but when one has just breakfasted, one should go gently; that's a principle of mine."

"If you don't wish to go at all, you are at liberty not to do so; let us go without you."

"No—par Dieu! I am with you! Oh! you will see how gracefully I ride—what a seat I have!"

"Mount then."

"Which side do I mount?"

"What! you don't know on which side to mount?"

"I have forgotten; it was a long while ago that I learned."

"My dear Robineau, you'll have a fall."

"Jules! I told you to call me Jules; why won't you do it?—I say, Germain, just hold the stirrup for me—that's right."

"Boldly now! Ah! how heavy you are!"

Robineau succeeded at last in placing his right leg on the other side of the saddle; he was fairly mounted and he glanced triumphantly about.

"Let us be off," said Alfred; and he gave the rein to his horse; but Robineau, bounding up from the saddle, cried:

"Stop! stop! I am not ready. What the devil! you fellows start off without giving me time to get settled; my stirrup leathers are too long, my toes hardly reach the stirrup."

"That is the way to have them; you will rise less."

"Why, I came just within an ace of going over my horse's head. I like my stirrup leathers very short; that gives one a much firmer seat.—Take them up a little for me, Germain—a little more; that's right.—There—now I am glued to my saddle."

"Well! may we start now?"

"Yes, yes; let us start."

Alfred and Edouard rode off and Robineau followed them. Despite the shortened stirrup leathers, he bumped and rolled about on his saddle, although he had grasped the pommel with his right hand. As they were in Paris, they went no faster than a slow trot, and Robineau succeeded in keeping pace with them, calling out from time to time:

"Not so fast, messieurs! galloping in the streets of Paris is forbidden."

"But we are not galloping, are we?"

"Never mind—don't go so fast, I beg you; I am not used to it yet, and then it's more amusing to go slowly."

When they reached the Champs-Elysées, Robineau was already drenched with perspiration, and his hat, which the jolting had displaced, was so far back on his head that his hair flew about unconfined over his brow.

"Come on, Monsieur Jules," said Edouard, "let us have a bit of a canter here; it's a superb road."

"Yes, yes, the road's very nice; but it seems to me that my breakfast rises a little higher with each step that this infernal beast takes; she has a terribly hard trot, this mare of yours!"

"Bah! you are joking; let her canter then."

"One moment; my stirrup leathers are still too long."

"You don't mean that; your knees are on the level of your horse's ears!"

"Never mind; I learned to ride in accordance with certain principles."

"Very pretty, your principles are!"

"There—now I am ready."

"Off we go then!"

The two friends set off at a gallop. Robineau had no desire to ride at that pace; but the mare he bestrode was determined to follow the other horses, and her rider was fain to gallop whether he would or not. As he had never ridden at such a pace, he did not know what to do; he threw himself forward and backward, pulled the reins tight, then suddenly dropped them. He was convinced that his steed had taken the bit in her teeth, and he shouted with all the strength of his lungs:

"Stop her! stop her, I say!"

But Alfred replied:

"Don't be afraid, Robineau, let her go."

And Edouard called back to him:

"Come on, Monsieur Jules; steady, sit straighter; you should be a little more graceful than that!"

The unskilled equestrian answered to neither name; he was utterly bewildered; he lost his hat, and ere long he himself lay sprawling in the dust; and Alfred, who was far ahead with Edouard, suddenly saw the little mare by his side without a rider.

The young men concluded that some accident had befallen their companion; so they turned back, leading Robineau's horse. He had picked himself up and found that he had escaped with a few bruises, and after going back to get his hat, he had entered a café, where his friends found him.

"How is this? did you allow yourself to be thrown?" queried Alfred, smiling when he saw that Robineau was not hurt.

"Yes, messieurs. Parbleu! it's a most surprising thing! You went off like the wind! My horse tried to follow you, and

ran away. You told me to let her go, and I did let her go to such good purpose that I fell off. You see, I didn't tell you that I could ride like Franconi or Paul!"

"We have discovered that!—Well! will you remount?"

"No, thanks; I have had enough for to-day. Besides, I am rather sore. Go and finish your ride; I will wait here for you and read the Petites-Affiches while you are having your canter; as I want to buy an estate, you will understand that the Petites-Affiches interests me more than the Bois de Boulogne."

The little mare was stabled, and the two friends rode away. Robineau, sipping a glass of sweetened water the while, as a restorative after his fall, ran through the Petites-Affiches, and read all the advertisements of estates for sale; but he constantly shrugged his shoulders, with such muttered comments as:

"These are too small! twenty thousand francs! forty thousand francs! They must be mere hovels! I want something better than that!—Dovecotes!—gardens in full bearing! What do I care for that?—I am not buying an estate in order to have pigeons and plums to eat; but in order to be called Monsieur de la—that is to say, by the name of my estate.—Ah! eighty thousand francs; that's better; but pastures—farm lands—I can't give balls and be a great lord in a farmhouse.—Aha! a château—two châteaux—twelve guest-rooms! That is what I want. Let's see what the price is—three hundred thousand francs—two hundred and forty thousand francs. It's absurd to fix such a price as that for a château! It seems to me that there ought to be cheaper ones for amateurs."

Robineau knew the Petites-Affiches by heart when the two young men returned from their ride. As he absolutely refused to mount his horse again, Alfred led the little mare by the bridle, and Robineau followed in a hired cabriolet. They returned to the hôtel De Marcey; but it was only half-past three, and they could not dine until six. Alfred went to his study to write some letters, Edouard went out to pay some visits, and Robineau, who did not understand that the days last twice as long when one does not know what to do to amuse one's self as when one is at work, betook himself to his notary's to pass the time.

At six o'clock, the three young men were together once more, and they went to a restaurant. Alfred and Edouard, who had concocted the scheme beforehand, persuaded Robineau that it was good form to eat very little and to send away most of the dishes ordered without touching them. So Robineau sent away several dishes which he was very desirous to eat, sacrificing his appetite to what he believed to be the acme of good form.

In the evening they attended the Bouffes. Robineau, who listened to music without appreciating it, dissembled as well as he could his overpowering desire to yawn.

"Bravi! brava! bravissima!" he cried; then looked at his watch to see if the play would soon be done. It came to an end at last; Alfred returned home, Edouard to his lodgings, and Robineau reëntered the cab that awaited him at the door, to take him to Rue Saint-Honoré.

Robineau stood in front of his abode, where he hoped not to sojourn long; for the house seemed to him a wretched place, and the entrance disgusting. However, he must needs sleep there once more. But before entering, he ordered François, his new servant, to call for him early the next morning with the cabriolet.

"Early to-morrow morning with the cabriolet!" cried a person who happened to be in the passage just as Robineau entered. And he recognized Fifine, whom he had not seen since the change in his fortunes.

Fifine held in her hand a candle wrapped in a half sheet of brown paper, and lighted; she had stopped and was waiting for Robineau, who did not quicken his pace.

"Hallo! is it you, my dear friend?"

"Yes, to be sure it's I."

"What has become of you since the day before yesterday, that I haven't laid eyes on you, monsieur? And all this style? this cabriolet? Have you made yourself a duke and peer while riding?"

"Let us go upstairs, Fifine; I can't endure to talk in the hall—it's very bad form!"

"Oh! mon Dieu! His Highness is afraid of compromising himself! Ha! ha! ha! Pardon me, Your Excellency; if I had known at what hour you would return, I would have cut my candle in four pieces to illuminate the staircase."

Robineau went upstairs, and entered his room, followed by the young milliner, who still held her candle in her hand. Robineau threw himself carelessly on a chair, and Fifine held her light to his face, saying:

"I say—what is the meaning of this coat? I didn't know that you had any coat except the one that used to be black, and the threadbare gray."

"Well! now you know that I have another—that's all."

"And this gold chain! these watch charms!—Ah! something must have happened."

"Yes, Fifine, there has been a very great change in my circumstances since the day before yesterday."

"Really! Have they given you a bonus of a hundred crowns?"

"A hundred crowns! Mon Dieu! a mere trifle!" said Robineau with a smile of contempt.

"What's that? a trifle! Do me the favor to give me a dozen trifles like that, and I'll go up in a balloon to-morrow morning."

"Fifine, listen to me attentively."

"Wait till I sit down, for what you are going to tell me may produce a deep impression on me."

Fifine put her candle in a candle-stick, and seated herself in front of Robineau, who tried to assume an important air before he began.

"Mademoiselle, I——"

"What! *mademoiselle?* are you talking to me?"

"Certainly."

"And you call me mademoiselle!—Try first to be a little more decent than that! What a fool you make of yourself with your *demoiselle*!"

"Well, then, Fifine—I must tell you that you no longer see before you the young man whose salary of fifteen hundred francs composed his whole fortune; the hopes that I have mentioned to you more than once are realized. I knew that my uncle would end by enriching me. Dear Uncle Gratien! he is dead and has left me twenty-five thousand francs a year."

"The deuce! really? isn't it a joke?"

"No, Fifine, nothing can be truer. I am immensely rich and I shall soon have a château, because I am determined to have one."

"What! you are rich, and you didn't tell me right away! you keep me on the anxious seat two hours!—Well, well! won't we have some fun! Let's dance and jump and raise a rumpus!—You are rich, and you sit there like a mummy!"

And Fifine seized Robineau's arm and compelled him to dance around the room with her; but he shook himself free at last and resumed his seat, while Fifine continued to dance and jump over the chairs and the furniture.

"Assuredly, Fifine," said Robineau, sitting very erect, "I desire that you should enjoy yourself; indeed I shall be delighted to be of service to you when the opportunity presents itself, and you may rely on my interest; but as to your continuing to be my mistress, you must see that it is impossible, and that my social position will not permit me to see you as—as before."

Fifine, who was standing on the commode at that moment, in the attitude of Psyche, landed at Robineau's side with one leap, crying:

"What's that you're mumbling?—your social position—you don't propose to see me as before?—Do me the favor to explain yourself a little better."

"It seems to me to be clear enough, my dear Fifine. I still have the utmost regard for you; indeed I propose to prove it to you to-morrow by making you a present of a beautiful shawl of unspun silk—whatever color you choose—I don't care. But I say that I can no longer be your lover, nor go out with you, because my present circumstances and my new position in society forbid."

Fifine, who had listened attentively, did not move for some seconds; then she went to the mantel, took her candle from the candlestick, and, before leaving the room, took her stand in front of its tenant, who still sat in his chair.

"I thought that you were only a stupid fool, but I see that you are an ingrate!" she said, smiling bitterly. "You don't propose to see me, because a fortune has fallen into your hands. That is very noble! It is a resolution worthy of you! As for the present you mean to give me, keep it for the women who will sponge on you and make fun of you all the time—you'll find that you'll never have too much for them."

"Mademoiselle," said Robineau, rising angrily, "what you say is very indecorous. However, that doesn't surprise me, from one who has such bad manners as you."

"Hold your tongue, you miserable counterfeit!" said Fifine, turning suddenly on Robineau, who intrenched himself behind an armchair; "you deserve to be made to swallow this candle all lighted!"

"Mademoiselle Fifine!"

"Hold your tongue! you make me sick!—Go with your duchesses and your princesses; keep ballet-dancers and miladies; but when you are drunk, wait for them to give you tea and dose you, and you'll be likely to die of indigestion!"

With that, Fifine made a low curtsy to her former lover, and went out of the room, leaving him in utter darkness.

"What a spitfire!" cried Robineau when she had gone;" she didn't even light my candle!—Oh! these women! That a man with twenty-five thousand francs a year should have to use a flint and steel!—Faith, I won't do it; I prefer to go to bed without a light.—Think of that Fifine presuming to—But that's how it always is! the more you do for women, the more they abuse it.—But it won't be so any longer with me; I propose to set a terribly high figure on my favors; and to make a conquest of me will require something more than a turned-up nose."

Robineau went to bed, and, forgetting Fifine, fell asleep and dreamed of his future château.

V

PURCHASE OF A CHÂTEAU.—DEPARTURE FOR AUVERGNE

Robineau did not sleep very long, for when a man's mind is running on a château, lands, titles, a carriage and servants, it must necessarily cause him some excitement. There are insomnias more pleasant than those caused by ambition and a longing for grandeur; it is sweet in the silence of the night to think of the person we love, to be in thought, in memory, in hopes, with her from whom we are separated. At such times we yield without question to the fondest illusions, we fashion our own dreams, and we dread to sleep, because sleep does not always present to us the images that are most dear to our hearts. But Robineau, who had no such thoughts as these, weary of tossing and turning in his bed, and of looking for a château, first on the right ear and then on the left, rose early and began to dress, saying to himself:

"My cabriolet and my servant may be waiting for me already at the door; I have too much to do to waste my time in bed."

Having dressed, he left his room on tiptoe, because he was not at all desirous to be overheard by Fifine, who was also a very early riser; but he met no one in the hall, and arrived safely in the street, where he looked in vain for his cabriolet.

"The devil! not here yet!" he muttered, looking at his watch. "Ah! it's only six o'clock; but no matter: if I choose to go to drive at six o'clock, I am at perfect liberty to do it."

He went back into the passage, uncertain whether he should sally forth on foot or wait for his carriage; but, hearing a noise on the stairs, and fearing that it might be Fifine, he decided to go out.

Robineau bent his steps toward his notary's, but when he reached the house the concierge was just rising.

"I am going to the office!" he called out as he hurried across the courtyard.

"There's nobody there," the concierge replied. And so it proved; Robineau found the office door locked and went back to the concierge.

"What does this mean? Haven't the clerks arrived yet?"

"Why, it's too early, monsieur; the clerks never come to the office at six in the morning."

"Is monsieur le notaire at home?"

"He certainly hasn't gone out yet. I suppose he's asleep with his wife."

"Asleep! nonsense! Why, it's two hours since I woke up. I am going up to his apartment."

"But, monsieur, nobody goes up so early as this."

"When a man proposes to buy a château, he should be at liberty to call whenever he pleases."

The concierge, thinking that Robineau's business must be of great importance, allowed him to go upstairs, and he jangled the bell at the door of the notary's apartment.

In a few minutes a maid opened the door with a terrified air, saying:

"Mon Dieu! whatever has happened?"

"It's I, my dear child," replied Robineau; "I want to speak with your master."

"What for, monsieur?" inquired the servant, still thinking that some event of great importance must have happened.

"What for? Parbleu! about the château, the estate I instructed him to find for me."

The maid became calmer and stared at Robineau as she replied:

"Monsieur is still asleep; he isn't in the habit of attending to business so early."

"Go tell him, my dear, that it's his client Jules-Raoul Robineau, who has just inherited twenty-five thousand francs a year from his uncle Gratien; that will wake him up at once."

"Oh! I don't think so, monsieur. Besides, monsieur and madame haven't been married very long, and I don't know whether I can go into their room like this."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Oh, no! wait a moment, monsieur, while I go and see."

The servant decided to deliver the message entrusted to her, and Robineau meanwhile paced the floor of an enormous dining-room.

"When the notary knows that it's I," he thought, "I am sure that he'll get up immediately."

But the maid soon returned and said with a mocking air:

"Monsieur swore because I woke him, and sent me about my business; he says you must come again."

"Did you give him my name?"

"Yes, monsieur, but that didn't do any good."

"Ah! that didn't do any good? Very well, I will call again."

And Robineau went away in a very ill humor, saying to himself:

"If that man had paid over all my money, I would change notaries instantly. Let's go to Alfred's."

He arrived at the hôtel De Marcey before seven o'clock and found the servants walking about the courtyard. Alfred's valet stopped Robineau, saying:

"My master is asleep, monsieur."

"Bah! that doesn't matter; he won't be sorry to see me, he expects me," was the reply; and Robineau went upstairs, walked through various rooms and arrived at last in Alfred's bedroom, where he found his friend fast asleep. He shook him violently, crying:

"Well, my friend! aren't we ever going to get up? Come, come, lazybones!"

Alfred opened his eyes, looked up at Robineau, and exclaimed:

"Hallo! is it you? What in the devil do you want of me?"

"I have come to talk business with you. If I am not mistaken, you told me yesterday that you had seen a very fine estate near Mantes, which——"

"Eh! the devil take you and your estates! I was having the most delicious dream; I was coasting with Madame de Gerville, and the sled broke; but instead of being hurt, we were hugging each other so tight, we fell so softly; and I felt the pressure of her body. I touched——"

"I beg your pardon for waking you, my friend," said Robineau, "but——"

"And I," said Alfred, "beg you to pardon me if I go to sleep again."

And he paid no further heed to Robineau, who cried:

"What, my friend! you are going to sleep again just on account of a dream of coasting and such nonsense?"

Seeing that it was useless to speak to him, Robineau decided to take his leave.

"Let's go to Monsieur Edouard Beaumont's," he said to himself. "A poet, an author ought to rise early; genius should be up with the lark. At all events, I'll ask him to breakfast with me, and they say that authors are very susceptible to such invitations."

So he betook himself to Edouard's lodgings, where he had never been. He knew the address, however, and succeeded in finding it. The young author did not live at a hotel, nor did he occupy a first floor apartment; but he had lodgings in a pleasant house in Rue d'Enghien. The concierge did not stop Robineau, but merely said to him:

"Go up to the fourth floor."

"The fourth floor—that's rather high," said Robineau to himself. "To be sure, the staircase is very clean and very pleasant. But a poet—there's no law compelling them to be rich. And yet I have heard Alfred say that Edouard was in comfortable circumstances, that he had about four thousand francs a year. That used to seem a fortune to me."

On reaching the fourth floor Robineau rang once, twice; no answer. Not discouraged, he rang a third time, and at last heard Edouard's voice, calling:

"Who's there?"

"It's I—Jules—you know. I have come to ask you to breakfast. Let me in."

"Oh! I beg a thousand pardons, Monsieur Robineau, but I worked far into the night, and I should like to sleep a little longer. Au revoir."

He walked away from the door, and Robineau stood on the landing for some moments.

"What in the devil have all these people eaten," he said to himself, "that they're so anxious to sleep? it's a most extraordinary thing!"

He went downstairs and looked at his watch; it was about half-past seven, and it occurred to him that his cabriolet should be waiting for him. So he returned to Rue Saint-Honoré and uttered a cry of joy when he saw in the distance the carriage standing at his door. He quickened his pace and discovered Fifine and the other young milliners standing in the doorway of the shop. He marched proudly by them and jumped into the cabriolet amid shouts of laughter from the young ladies, saying to himself:

"They laugh at me! Very good! I will try to splash them."

He drove about for an hour through the streets of Paris, then returned to his notary's office. That gentleman, who was already tired of seeing him four times a day, and who did not care to be roused from sleep by him often, concluded that he had better find an estate for him in short order, as the best way to be rid of him. And so, as soon as he saw him, he said:

"I have what you want."

"Is it possible? An estate?"

"Better than that—a small château."

"A château?—You are a delightful man!"

"With towers, too, and battlements."

"Battlements!—Allow me to embrace you!"

"And moats—they are dry, to be sure."

"I will have them filled with water."

"Plenty of rooms, many guest chambers, stable for twenty horses."

"I will stable asses there."

"A park, a forest, and enormous gardens where you can lose yourself!"

"Lose myself—that is delicious!"

"Outlying land where you can hunt."

"I will do nothing else."

"A little stream abundantly supplied with fish."

"And I am very fond of *matelote*!"

"And the château is all furnished—in rather old-fashioned style, to be sure; but you will find there all that you need for immediate occupancy, except linen."

"My dear notary, this is enchanting. Furnished in antique style! Why, it is all the more noble for that!"

"However, you will obtain with the deeds an exact inventory of everything that the château contains."

"This is all very fine; I am simply afraid that this charming property is too dear."

"Eighty thousand francs."

"Eighty thousand francs! that is a mere nothing. I will buy it."

"It is my duty to warn you that the property does not produce much revenue; the appurtenant estates are not well kept up."

"I don't care for that."

"There will be some repairs to be made on the buildings."

"I will do whatever is necessary."

"And then, it's some distance from here."

"What difference does that make to me? I shan't go there on foot. But where is it?"

"In Auvergne, near Saint-Amand-Talende and Clermont—nearly ninety leagues from Paris."

Robineau reflected for some moments.

"In Auvergne!" he said; "ninety leagues from Paris! The devil! I shan't be able to breakfast at the Café Anglais and return to my château at night."

"But consider too, monsieur, that an estate near Paris soon becomes ruinous by the number of visitors you receive; one person comes to pass a week with you, another a fortnight; you are never free; you need a large fortune to meet the expense that that occasions."

"That is true; and in Auvergne people won't drive out to breakfast with me.—I am not familiar with Auvergne; is it a pleasant country?"

"Oh! it's a most interesting, most picturesque region, monsieur. The little town of Saint-Amand and its neighborhood form one of the most remarkable districts of the Limagne d'Auvergne. You will see mountains in all directions and green fields. Nature abounds in accidents of rare beauty."

"There are accidents, you say?"

"I am speaking as an artist; I mean that you will be surprised, on emerging from a rugged mountain chain, to see before you vine-covered hillsides, and valleys where the most luscious fruits and the most nutritious vegetables grow in abundance."

"That's what comes of not travelling! I imagined that there was nothing to see in Auvergne but mountain-rats."

"The little village of Talende is supplied with water by one of the most noteworthy and most abundant springs of living water known. Julius Cæsar called Talende the bed of the gods!"

"In that case the people ought to sleep very comfortably."

"Lastly, Auvergne has given birth to more than one famous man: at Aigueperse the Chancellor de l'Hôpital was born; Riom was the birthplace of Anne Dubourg, Issoire of Cardinal Duprat; and the little hamlet of Chanonat witnessed the birth of the amiable Delille, and has been celebrated in song by that poet."

"This is all very fine; but what is the name of the château? I care a great deal about the name."

"The estate is known as La Roche-Noire."

"La Roche-Noire! superb! And when it is mine, can I assume that name?"

"There is nothing to prevent."

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire! Jules de la Roche-Noire!—Magnificent!—It is settled, monsieur le notaire; I will buy the château."

"You might go to see the place before coming to a decision, and——"

"No! no! It would surely be sold to someone else meanwhile, and the name of La Roche-Noire would escape me! It is decided, it's a bargain, I will buy the château.—When can I have my papers? When will you have the deed ready? I am in a great hurry to take possession of my château!"

"I must write to my brother notary at Saint-Amand; and then the deeds—oh! it will be a matter of a week at most."

"A week! dear me! that's a long while!—But no matter; do whatever is necessary, so that no one can dispute my title. By the way, if you are writing to Auvergne, I should be glad to have the people at my château know that I shall be there soon, and to have them prepare a little reception for me. There are servants at La Roche-Noire, no doubt?"

"A concierge and a gardener at most."

"Very good; there'll be no harm in letting them know that their new master proposes to visit his château very soon; that will give them time to prepare a little complimentary greeting, eh, monsieur le notaire?"

"To be sure, if they wish to offer you one."

"A new lord! Why, I should say that that was the regular thing."

"At the Opéra-Comique, yes."

"And even more in Auvergne, for those people must still retain the patriarchal customs.—Well, I will leave you. Hasten my business, I beg you; remember that my life, my happiness, all my hopes are already centred on my château."

Robineau left the notary's office, beside himself with joy; and inasmuch as joy, like grief, longs to find a vent, he returned to Alfred, who was no longer in bed, and to whom he shouted from the reception-room:

"It's all settled! I am a landed proprietor, I own a château, the Château de la Roche-Noire, nothing less,—with towers, battlements, moats,—and cannon perhaps. Nothing is lacking! My dear De Marcey, I am the happiest of men!"

Alfred smiled at the intense excitement produced in the parvenu by the possession of a château; he bade him sit beside him, urged him to be calm, and asked him where his estate was situated.

"In Auvergne," replied Robineau; "a magnificent country! the land of mountains, of great men, of the most picturesque accidents—the bed of the gods according to Julius Cæsar; and that fellow should have known what he was talking about, for the Romans were great voluptuaries when they chose to take the trouble."

"In that case how does it happen that the natives of such a beautiful region come in crowds to Paris to mend kettles or carry water?"

"What does that prove? Haven't men always loved to travel? The most ancient peoples, the Jews, Chaldæans, the Phœnicians, set us the example; and when a patriarch like Abraham journeys with his family, his household and his flocks, from the Euphrates to Palestine, and then to Egypt, it seems to me that an Auvergnat may well take the trouble to travel to Paris."

"That is true; however, I don't know Auvergne, but I have heard that it is a very interesting country. Of course you will go down and inspect the château before purchasing?"

"No, I shall purchase it at once and inspect it afterward; I propose to make my entry as lord, as proprietor. The domain of La Roche-Noire! and only eighty thousand francs! You must agree, my dear De Marcey, that it's a great find."

"More probably some old Gothic structure, in a ruinous, dilapidated condition, where you will have to lay out a lot of money just in repairs."

"I shall repair nothing; I love ruins myself! And a park! a forest! hunting and fishing!"

"Do you hunt as well as you ride?"

"Oh! you wicked joker! Look you, I am sure that you have formed a very false idea of my château."

"I assure you that I am very glad that you have one, because now you will at least let me sleep in peace."

"Oh! my friend! my dear friend! I have a delightful idea!"

"To buy another château?"

"No, one is enough; I am not ambitious, you see. But you have just said that you don't know Auvergne; here's a superb opportunity to become acquainted with it. I take you with me to see my property; I compel you to agree that I have made a fine purchase; and you give me some advice as to establishing my household, you teach me to hunt. We will give fêtes, which you will arrange and manage.—Well! what do you say to it? don't you like the scheme?"

"Faith! I should like well enough to go to Auvergne; but I remember that I am to take a little trip this summer through Switzerland with Edouard; our plans are all laid."

"Instead of going to Switzerland, you may as well come to Auvergne, which is the Switzerland of France; you will see mountains and snow there as well as in Switzerland, and we will take Edouard with us."

"The deuce! do you propose to take everybody?"

"No, but I should like to take Edouard, because he's a poet, and a poet is often useful, especially when a person means, as I do, to give banquets, entertain ladies and be gallant."

"Ah! I understand; you want Edouard to go, in order to write occasional verses?"

"He will do only what he pleases; but it seems to me that an author, a poet, should not be sorry to visit a picturesque region—a country where there are cliffs and precipices. He will procure material for ten plays! Snow, mountains, torrents—there's nothing like them to inspire genius. I am sure that Edouard will write a poem about my château, or a tragedy which he will call *La Roche-Noire*.—Urge him to come, Alfred, I beseech you."

"I promise to suggest it to him, and if he agrees, it's a bargain; we will go with you and install you in your château."

Robineau left Alfred, in order to attend to the preparations for his departure. Alfred, as he reflected on the

proposal that had been made to him, concluded that the trip to Auvergne might furnish him with frequent opportunities for amusement; indeed the bare idea of seeing the Château de la Roche-Noire and Robineau playing the grand seigneur was most diverting; and as he and Edouard had formed the plan of going to Switzerland solely to obtain a brief respite from the fatiguing life and dissipations of Paris, he thought that his friend, like himself, would be inclined to accept Robineau's invitation.

It rarely happened that Edouard and Alfred passed more than two days without meeting. Although they had not precisely the same tastes and the same temperament, they were fond of each other and suited each other. The sympathy that draws two persons together is not always born of similarity of temper and mental characteristics. We see gayety attached to melancholy; and the gravest and most sedate persons seek the company of the most inveterate jokers and find enjoyment with the greatest buffoons. The sluggish nature requires something to rouse it; the mind needs contrasts. How many people there are who are contented only with those with whom they are forever disputing! Two persons may be congenial without loving each other; to inspire the latter sentiment, there must be in the bottom of the heart, despite external differences, that secret sympathy which we feel but cannot define.

Alfred was more frivolous, more heedless, more hilarious perhaps, than Edouard; the latter, however, was hardly more virtuous than most young men of his age; but, as he was not rich, like young De Marcey, he did not carry his follies so far, and he was sensible enough to be determined not to run into debt. His habit of careful expenditure, of reflecting before agreeing to join a party of pleasure, had led his friend to dub him Monsieur le Prudent; but Edouard was no more prudent than Alfred when his heart was engaged. Both were pleasant fellows: Alfred because he said whatever came into his mind, and his natural merriment often suggested some most amusing conceits; Edouard because he said only what he felt, and his thoughts were generally judicious. However, Edouard laughed at the follies that Alfred uttered, and Alfred applauded his friend's sage reflections.

On the evening of the day when Robineau roused them both from their slumbers, Edouard and Alfred were together, and the latter informed his friend of the proposal of the new purchaser of La Roche-Noire.

Edouard reflected for several minutes; whereupon Alfred lost patience and urged him to decide.

"Go to visit Monsieur Jules Robineau!" said Edouard at last; "why, don't you know that your friend Robineau is an awful ass?"

"Certainly I know it; but what does it matter? Don't we visit asinine people every day?"

"If he were only that, it would be nothing; but he is full of absurd pretensions."

"So much the better! that's the most amusing part of it. Think of the airs he will put on in his château! and the commotion it will make in the neighborhood! and the amusing scenes that will result! You, being a dramatic author, will find innumerable tableaux of manners there, and comical incidents——"

"That is all very well; but we cannot go with the poor fellow for the sole purpose of amusing ourselves at his expense."

"What harm would there be in that? But don't you see that, while amusing ourselves, we shall be rendering a genuine service to Robineau? He will need our advice in a thousand matters. He means to give fêtes, balls, and he is already thinking of asking you to write verses for marriages and baptisms."

"Indeed! much obliged!"

"However, if we should be bored at his château, we could go away. I don't expect to pass my life at La Roche-Noire."

"How shall we make the journey?"

"Mon Dieu! just as you choose. By post, I presume; and divide the expense,—that goes without saying. I do not propose that Monsieur Robineau shall pay our travelling expenses; but we shall spend no more than we should in Switzerland.—Well! you are still reflecting. Does your prudence descry some obstacle? With your four thousand francs a year and your savings, you will end by being richer than I am!"

"I do not desire great wealth, I ask for nothing but happiness."

"You are not exacting! you want nothing but the best.—Well, what is your decision?"

"Whatever you wish; let us go to Auvergne, and visit Monsieur Robineau's château."

"That is settled then. Poor Robineau! he will be in raptures when he knows that we are going with him. He is a good enough fellow at heart; I greatly fear that he will ruin himself with his château, and we will try to prevent him, unless he is really obstinate about it.—We will go and have a look at Auvergne and the little Auvergnates! I am not sure, but I have an idea that we shall find some pretty faces there."

"Ah! thinking of the women already!"

"You are an excellent one to preach! Why, my dear fellow, a country where there were no women, and consequently no hope of a love-affair, though it were as beautiful as Eden, as rich as Eldorado, and of as mild a climate as Araby the Blest, would be in my eyes a dreary solitude. That is why I have always pitied poor Crusoe, who, instead of a woman, had only his man Friday for company."

Robineau did not fail to come the next day to learn the decision of the two friends; and when he heard that they proposed to accompany him to his château, he was in raptures. He bought a post-chaise for the journey and wanted to buy horses as well. Alfred had much difficulty in making him understand that it would be much better to use post-horses as far as Clermont-Ferrand.

"Why not all the way to my château?" asked Robineau.

"Did you not tell me that your château was only a league or two from that town?"

"Yes."

"Very well! as we are going to Auvergne to see something of the country, I opine that we may very well do a couple of leagues on foot."

"But——"

"But, if you continue to oppose our wishes, we shall leave you to go alone."

Robineau yielded, although it would have seemed to him much more noble to drive in a post-chaise into the very courtyard of his château; but he reflected that he would easily find other horses at Clermont to carry him the rest of the way and to transport his baggage; for he had laid in an ample stock of clothes and toilet articles, desiring to

introduce in Auvergne the latest Parisian styles.

By dint of pestering his notary, Robineau succeeded in having his purchase completed promptly; and at the end of six days he was ready to leave Paris, attended by his new servant, named François, who had driven his cabriolet, and whom he had promoted to be his valet, because he had instantly detected his master's weakness; and never spoke to him except with downcast eyes and hat in hand.

Alfred did not consider it necessary to take any servant with him; but as the Baron de Marcey had not returned to Paris at the time of their departure, he left with Germain, his valet, a letter for his father, in which he said simply:

"I am going for a little journey with Edouard and Robineau; I am sorry not to have had an opportunity to embrace you before starting, but I will make up for it when we return. Keep well and enjoy yourself. I am going to try to get some diversion."

The careless fellow did not even mention the part of the country to which he was going; he thought that it made no difference to his father, and moreover he intended to write to him if he should stay with Robineau for any length of time.

On the day fixed for their departure, Robineau took his seat in the post-chaise before the horses were harnessed; he sent François thrice to meet Alfred and Edouard. At last his two companions arrived; the valises were stored away, the trunks strapped on behind, the horses saddled, and the postilion cracked his whip. They were off for Auvergne, and Robineau said to himself:

"Here I am *en route* for my château!"

VI

THE MAN OF CLERMONT-FERRAND

The sun had just risen over the pretty town of Clermont-Ferrand, and the toiling portion of its people had already betaken themselves to their work. In front of the post-house servants were plucking chickens, farm-hands threshing grain, children leading horses to drink, some travellers drinking the stirrup-cup, dealers, who made regular visits to Clermont, clinking glasses with the inn-keeper, and postilions kissing the maid-servants, who struggled and submitted as the custom is in all lands.

About two hundred paces from the inn, a man was carelessly reclining on a stone bench, surveying with cold indifference the scene before him; and, as he turned his eyes this way and that, his mind seemed rather engrossed by memories of the past than awake to impressions of the present. This man, whose costume denoted poverty, aye, vagabondage, seemed to be from forty-five to fifty years old; but the disorder of his costume, a beard of more than a month's growth, and unkempt black hair, some of which fell over his face, made it difficult to divine his age. However, despite his disordered hair, and beneath the dilapidated hat that covered his head, one could distinguish features that must once have been handsome: a well-shaped nose, a mouth of medium size, but almost entirely toothless, gracefully arched black eyebrows, and large brown eyes, the usual expression of which was ironical and harmonized with the mocking smile which, from time to time, played about his lips. His figure was tall and shapely. In short, although clad in a pair of shabby gray trousers, a red waistcoat covered with stains, and a full nut-colored redingote, patched in several places with a different material; with worn-out boots, full of holes, on his feet, and a blue kerchief twisted carelessly about his neck for a cravat, there was something in the man's aspect which indicated that he was not of vulgar birth, and in his whole manner, a suggestion of ease, almost of pride, which formed a striking contrast to his costume.

After remaining for some minutes stretched out on the stone bench, the stranger rose, pushed his hair back under his hat, and, taking up a huge knotted stick which stood by his side, walked with a decided step toward the inn, which he entered with head erect, like a man travelling for pleasure. He turned into the common room, seated himself at an oilcloth-covered table, and knocked loudly thereon with his stick.

A maid answered his call. Although inn-keepers are accustomed to entertain all sorts and conditions of men, the traveller's costume was not prepossessing, and as it is not customary to stand on ceremony with guests who appear to be unfortunate, the girl began by asking sharply why he made so much noise banging the table with his stick.

"Because I choose to, my dear," replied the newcomer in a loud voice, with a threatening glance at the servant. "You should come more quickly to wait on me, and then I should not need to knock so loud. You saw me come in, as you were in the doorway. Why didn't you come at once to ask me what I wanted?"

The servant, not expecting to be taken to task thus by a man so shabbily dressed, was covered with confusion, and replied, twisting her apron:

"Why! because—because——"

"Parbleu! because I didn't arrive in a carriage, and because I am not dressed with great care! But what does that matter! So long as I pay for what I order, there is nothing for you to say. Come, bring me some bread and cheese, and a jug of wine—quickly, for I am hungry."

The girl turned away, muttering:

"What a fuss he makes for bread and cheese!"

However, she made haste to serve the stranger, who breakfasted with a hearty appetite and demeaned himself before his bit of cheese as if he were feasting on truffled turkey. But the other travellers in the common room, who were breakfasting more sumptuously, did not venture to turn their eyes too often in the direction of the latest arrival, for there was something in his expression which seemed to indicate that he would not take malicious jests in too good part. There is a species of poverty which is able to impose respect, just as there is a sort of opulence which is never respectable.

Meanwhile the servant had told her master about their latest guest, and the host, who was a very inquisitive and very loquacious individual, and gave himself a great many airs, although he was not so tall as his wife, even with his nightcap, came trotting into the room with a smiling face. He spoke a word with several of the travellers, eying the stranger askance all the while; then, after walking around him three times, decided to accost him, and said, leaning

against the table at which he was taking his repast:

"Well! you don't find my light wine very bad, I fancy?"

The stranger, without looking at his host, replied after a moment, with the mocking smile familiar to him:

"Whether I find it good or bad, I must drink it, I suppose?"

"Oh! to be sure! Still, if you wanted something better, I might——"

"If I wanted other wine, I shouldn't have waited for your permission to order it."

"True; but——"

"But I am not so particular now!"

"Not so particular now?—Ah! I understand: that means that you used to be—eh?"

The stranger looked up at the inn-keeper, and after gazing fixedly at him for several seconds, observed:

"There is something that you used to be, still are, and probably always will be!"

Thereupon the inn-keeper fastened his little red eyes on the strange guest's, as if trying to understand him; but, after cudgelling his brains in vain, he said:

"I don't catch your meaning at all. Are you a fortune teller?"

The stranger shrugged his shoulders and returned to his bread and cheese, making no further reply.

"Do you expect to stay for some time in our town?" continued the inn-keeper after a moment. "I have no idea; if it amuses me to stay here, I shall stay."

"To be sure!—Oh! you will see some pretty things here: a magnificent botanical garden, a fine college, and our bridge, formed by the calcareous deposits from the water of a spring!—I say nothing of our apricot pies; you don't seem to care for sweetmeats. But you will be surprised, amazed, by the beauty of the neighborhood!"

"Nothing surprises or amazes me now."

"Oh! that makes a difference.—By the way, do you intend to sleep here?"

The stranger did not answer this question; he passed his hand across his brow and seemed to reflect; at last he asked the landlord:

"Are there none of the Granval family left in this town?"

"The Granval family!" rejoined the astonished host; "what! did you ever know them? They were very rich people, the Granvals! very highly esteemed and——"

"I know what they were; I ask you if there are any of the family still here?"

"No, not one. Monsieur Granval the elder died about five years ago, leaving a son and a daughter. The son enjoyed very poor health; it didn't do him any good to take the waters at Mont d'Or—they didn't make him any stouter. He took it into his head to marry, and that finished him; he died two years ago. As for the daughter, she married a merchant and went to Italy with him."

The stranger listened with his elbows on the table and his head resting on his hands. When the inn-keeper had ceased to speak, he uttered a fierce oath, then muttered:

"Some are dead, the others have left the country! How everything changes in a few years, how everybody disappears!"

"Did you have a commission for the Granval family?" inquired the landlord, seating himself opposite the traveller, who, without heeding the question, said a moment later:

"After all, even if I had found him, he would have been no better than the rest. Everyone for himself—that's the natural order. So much the worse for those who make fools of themselves, who allow themselves to be fleeced! It is no more than right to laugh at them.—But I defy them now! I am above them, I despise them all! And I shall be able to do without them."

"You will do without them?" said the inn-keeper, thinking that his guest was addressing him. "Oh! that's all right, if you can. But I didn't quite understand who you said that——"

"How much do I owe you?" demanded the stranger, rising abruptly.

"How much do you owe? Oh! it won't take long to reckon: bread, cheese, wine—that makes twelve sous in all."

The stranger took twelve sous from a pocket of his jacket, and tossed them on the table; then, producing a pipe and tobacco from a coat pocket, he filled his pipe and said to the inn-keeper:

"Where is there a light?"

"A light—to light your pipe?"

"Apparently."

"Parbleu! there's fire in the kitchen; it's never cold here.—But you haven't told me whether——"

The stranger was not listening. He went into the kitchen, lighted his pipe and placed it in his mouth; then he walked slowly from the inn and resumed his seat on the stone bench, where he smoked as placidly as a Mussulman seated luxuriously on soft cushions.

"That's a devil of a fellow!" said the inn-keeper as he watched him walk away. "He smokes—I should say that he's an old soldier. What the devil did he want of the Granvals? He ended by saying that he despised them!—Never mind; I did well to sit down with him; if he comes back, I'll make him talk some more."

The stranger, having passed the whole morning on the stone bench, did in fact return to the inn about two o'clock. He ordered bread and cheese once more, but drank only water. The inn-keeper hovered about him and asked him several questions, trying to enter into conversation; but the stranger seemed indisposed to talk. He ate his bread and cheese without answering the questions, paid for his meagre repast, filled his pipe, lighted it, and left the inn; but this time he went down the street instead of returning to the stone bench.

"He's a wretched customer!" said the inn-keeper when he had gone.

"And for all that," said the servant, "he puts on as many airs as a marquis! He gives his orders and talks as if he owned the place! He'd do well to shave, instead of stuffing himself with cheese!"

"Is he still sitting on the stone bench opposite, Marie?"

"No, monsieur, he went down the street."

"Then we probably shan’t see him again."

"Good riddance!"

The inn-keeper was mistaken; about eight in the evening he saw the poorly dressed stranger reënter the common room, with his knotted stick.

"Hallo! here’s the cheese-man again!" muttered the servant. But her master motioned to her to hold her peace, for he feared to offend the traveller. The latter seated himself at a table, and ordered bread, cheese and a small glass of eau-de-vie. He was served promptly and ate his bread and cheese without speaking; but when he asked how much he owed, the landlord, who was burning to question him, stepped forward and said, courteously removing his cap:

"Do you not intend to sleep here?"

"Sleep here!" echoed the stranger; "no, that isn’t necessary; I can sleep quite as well in the fields, and it costs nothing; whereas, if I slept in your house, I should have to pay, should I not?"

"Why, that’s the custom; you understand of course that we can’t supply our——"

"Very good! very good! Have I asked you to give me anything for nothing?"

"No, monsieur, I didn’t say that; but——"

"But keep your tongue still then, and let me rest in peace."

The inn-keeper angrily replaced his cap, and the stranger took his leave, after paying his bill.

"I begin to believe that this eater of cheese is nothing but a vagrant," said the host, when he was certain that the stranger was at a safe distance. "A man who sleeps in the fields—that’s rather suspicious. I am sorry he didn’t take a room here, because then he would have had to tell me his name."

"Oh! he’s all right," said a little man who had entered the common room just as the traveller went out. "When he arrived in town he went at once to monsieur le maire, to show his papers."

"Ah! so you know that man, do you, Monsieur Benoît?" asked the inn-keeper, walking toward the newcomer.

Monsieur Benoît caressed his chin, shook his head to give himself importance, and replied:

"Yes, I have met him several times about the town; he has been here at least a week."

"What’s his name?"

"I don’t know that; but I think that he’s a man who has been rich, who has squandered everything and has nothing left."

"And what does he do now?"

"Why, you have seen: he walks about, rests and smokes; but he talks very little."

"Oh! I have no questions to ask him; he has paid for everything he has had here; but he’s very shabbily dressed.—I say, Monsieur Benoît, you must agree that that isn’t the costume of a man who owns consols."

"I didn’t say that he was rich now; I said that I believed that he had been rich, which is a very different matter."

They discussed the stranger for some time longer; but the arrival of new guests caused them to forget the man of meagre repasts.

The next morning, at daybreak, the stranger was stretched out on the stone bench once more, opposite the inn. He seemed less engrossed by his own thoughts and watched the travellers who arrived from time to time; more than once, indeed, he started up, as if he would accost one of them; but he soon fell back on the bench, and his features assumed an expression of distress.

About noon he entered the inn and ate as sparingly as on the previous day. Then he took his head in his hands, and remained at the table as if buried in thought. He had been a long while in that posture, even the host himself not daring to disturb him, when there was a great uproar in front of the inn. A post-chaise had arrived. Three young men and a servant alighted, and the servants of the inn, as well as the host, ran out to welcome Robineau and his two travelling companions; for they were the new arrivals.

"Ah! Bless my soul! but I am stiff!" said Robineau; "it’s quite right to talk about travelling fast by post. How we did go, messieurs! The towns and villages fled behind us!"

"It would be more accurate to say that we fled before them."

"It’s fine, it’s great fun to travel fast.—Oh! my legs!—Take good care of my trunks and parcels, François!"

"Well, monsieur l’aubergiste, give us something good to eat—the best you have. I am as hungry as a hawk! What do you say, Edouard?"

"So am I. The air in this part of the country seems most invigorating."

"And you, Robineau—aren’t you in appetite?"

Robineau pulled Alfred’s coat-tail and said in an undertone:

"Pray don’t call me Robineau again, my friend; you know very well that it is no longer my name. I am Jules de la Roche-Noire."

"The devil! as if I could remember that! Well, Monsieur Jules Robineau de la Roche-Noire, do you not feel disposed to adjourn to the table?"

"I shall have no appetite, my dear fellow, until I reach my château."

"This château of yours will end by making you ill, my poor boy."

The three young men having entered the common room, their loud conversation caused the stranger to raise his eyes, and he examined them without changing his position.

"Messieurs, messieurs, don’t sit down here, for heaven’s sake!" said Robineau, who had just discovered the stranger; "we can’t stay in this room—people like us! Don’t you see? Pretty company, isn’t it?"

"Faith!" said Alfred, taking a seat, "when I travel, I am philosophical; and so long as the dinner is good——"

But Robineau shouted, called, made an uproar, and the host appeared, cap in hand.

"Give us a private room," said Robineau; "it seems to me, monsieur l’aubergiste, that you should be more careful and not put us with—with everybody."

"Your table is being laid on the first floor, messieurs; and if you will walk upstairs——"

"Yes, to be sure."

"Will the gentlemen sleep here?"

"No! no, indeed! we sleep at my estate of La Roche-Noire."

At that name the stranger raised his head and looked closely at Robineau, who continued:

"You must know that château, monsieur l'aubergiste?"

"La Roche-Noire? no, monsieur. I know the village of La Roche-Blanche, which is about two leagues from here."

"I say, Robineau," laughed Alfred, "perhaps you are mistaken; maybe you're lord of La Roche-Blanche."

"Not at all; I have my title deeds; I am perfectly sure that it's *Noire*.—However, what estates are there at La Roche-Blanche?"

"Oh! most of the people live in caves, monsieur; in a sort of caverns, dug out of the cliffs."

"You see, messieurs, that there's no resemblance—caverns! And I have a magnificent château!—You know the town of Saint-Amand, I trust?"

"Saint-Amand-Talende? Yes, messieurs; it's but a few leagues from here."

"Well, my château is near there; it must be visible from a distance, because——"

"Oh! let us go to our dinner, for God's sake!" cried Alfred. "Your château has given me indigestion already, before I have seen it."

"Yes, yes, let us not stay here."

As he spoke, Robineau cast a contemptuous glance at the stranger, who, instead of lowering his eyes, frowned and looked after the Seigneur de la Roche-Noire. That gentleman made haste to leave the room, saying to the inn-keeper:

"Why do you have people like that in your house?"

"Like what, monsieur?"

"Parbleu! like that beggar who is sitting in your common room, and who didn't even rise when we came in."

"He is not a beggar, monsieur, he's a traveller."

"Well, he's a very neat, attractive person, your traveller! He has a most insolent air, too; and if I hadn't been afraid of—of compromising myself, I would have taught him that that isn't the way to look at a man like me."

"Oh! Robineau, don't play the fire-eater, I beg," said Alfred, seating himself at the table; "since you have had a château, you want to intimidate and crush everybody. Do you think that wealth gives you the right to play the master everywhere?"

"There's no question of that. I want to be treated politely, that's all. It seems to me that that isn't too much to ask."

"But were you very polite yourself, Monsieur Jules, to that poor fellow?" asked Edouard. "As soon as you saw him, you insisted on leaving the room. He probably noticed the scornful glances you cast at him. The unfortunate are more sensitive than other people, because they constantly dread humiliation."

"Bah! let us not talk about that man any more. In truth, I have too many things on my mind to pay attention to such creatures. Let us eat quickly, messieurs, so that we may arrive at my place the sooner."

"Choke yourself to death, if you choose; I propose to dine quietly. Remember that it's only two o'clock! we have plenty of time!"

"But why go on foot? Let us keep the carriage, and we will hire other horses."

"Oh! we are tired of being in a carriage; it will be much pleasanter to walk these last two or three leagues and admire the landscape and the peasant women; for you must find out what sort of neighbors you have to deal with."

"Then we will leave the chaise and our luggage here, and I will send my people to fetch them to-morrow.—However, messieurs, I am going to send François ahead, to have our apartments made ready."

"Send François ahead, if you choose."

Robineau left the table and went in search of his valet; he led him aside and said to him:

"François, you are to go on to my château in advance of us."

"Yes, monsieur. Where is it, monsieur?"

"Take the Saint-Amand road and inquire. Parbleu! it must be well known."

"Oh, yes! I will find it, monsieur."

"You will tell the concierge that his new master will soon arrive, with two young gentlemen of his acquaintance."

"Yes, monsieur."

"You will tell him to make all preparations to receive us—in a fitting manner."

"Yes, monsieur; I will tell him to make the beds."

"You will give him to understand, as if it were your own idea, that I am not insensible to compliments, and that it would be well for him to make me a speech."

"Yes, monsieur, I will tell him that you told me you would not be insensible to a speech."

"No, you idiot! Don't say that I told you that, but that you guessed it."

"Oh! I understand, monsieur."

"Then, François, you will go about the neighborhood, to all the peasants, and tell them also of my arrival; you will impress upon them that I am very rich, a very great man."

"Must I say that you are great?"

"I mean generous; that I intend to make *rosières*."

"Yes, monsieur, I will tell them that you intend to have *rosières* made for them."

"And that if they should bring me bouquets, if they should give me a little reception, with a discharge of firearms and shouts and dances, it could not fail to give me pleasure."

"Very well, monsieur; I will tell them that you want a reception that you don't know anything about."

"Yes, that's just it; in short, François, stir all the people up."

"Yes, monsieur, never fear; you shall be satisfied."

François started for La Roche-Noire, and Robineau, enchanted with his idea, went upstairs again to his two

companions, rubbing his hands. He hurried them so that at last they left the table and went down to the courtyard. The stranger was filling his pipe.

"We are going," said Robineau; "we leave my travelling chaise here, with our trunks and luggage, monsieur l'aubergiste. François, my valet, will come to-morrow to get everything, with a horse to draw the carriage; these gentlemen wish to walk the rest of the way."

"Oh! you are going to see a beautiful country, messieurs."

"Yes, but it would be well for us to know in which direction we must go."

"There's a pleasant crossroad through the mountains to Saint-Saturnin, which is only half a league from Saint-Amand; and then there's the main road to Issoire and Saint-Flour."

"No; no main roads," said Edouard; "we want something varied, picturesque, even terrible!"

"One moment, messieurs; I don't propose to walk on the brink of precipices, myself! Perhaps it would be wiser to take a guide through this region, with which we are entirely unacquainted."

The stranger, having overheard Robineau's last words, suddenly approached the three young men, and said, without removing his hat:

"If you need a guide, messieurs, I can serve you; for I have done nothing but stroll about the neighborhood for a week, and I am beginning to know it well."

Alfred and Edouard hesitated; but Robineau, to whom the stranger's face was most unpleasant, replied hastily:

"No, no, we don't need anybody. I was joking; we are big enough to find our way ourselves."

"As you please," the stranger replied; and, putting his pipe in his mouth, he walked away from the inn. A few moments later, the three young men, having commended their effects to the inn-keeper's care, left Clermont, and took the crossroad said to lead to Saint-Amand.

VII

A WALK THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS

On leaving Clermont, the three travellers followed at first the road that had been pointed out to them as leading to the little town of Saint-Amand. But they had walked barely half a league into the mountains, when the desire to obtain a fine view, to climb a rock, or to take a more picturesque path, led them insensibly away from the road they should have followed. In vain did Robineau, who did not share the enthusiasm of his companions for the varied beauties of the landscape, sometimes wild and sometimes cultivated, stop again and again, and exclaim angrily:

"That isn't the way, messieurs! You're going astray; we shall lose our road and walk a hundred times farther than we need."

But Alfred and Edouard did not listen to him; they continued to go their own way, and, pausing a moment on the summit of some hill, they would cry:

"What a picturesque country! What a variety of scenery! On one side steep rocks, barren mountains, and a calcareous soil, of volcanic origin; at our feet green pastures, vineyards, fields, trees laden with fruit!"

"Let us go higher," Edouard said, "to the top of yonder hill; it seems to me that I see a field of grain."

"Oh! that would be curious, we must see that," Alfred replied, following Edouard; and they scaled the rocks, running and jumping, and laughing all the time; while Robineau, who had remained behind, made a horrible grimace, saying:

"It seems to me, messieurs, that my château isn't perched up there. You will have time enough to make excursions in the neighborhood when we are settled in my château. It's ridiculous to tire yourselves out climbing so high!"

The two friends continued their ascent; they reached the top, which seemed to be more than a league in circumference, and there in fact they found a large field of grain. Engrossed by the pleasure which that magnificent prospect afforded them, Alfred and Edouard stopped. They smiled at each other; they were happy! And when one is conscious of a sentiment of pleasure, one tries to make it last a long while, to detain it in one's soul. It is rare that one is happy in the present! We almost always rejoice in dreams of the future.

Robineau seated himself with a distressed air on a block of stone, and watched his companions, who were more than a hundred feet above him. Alfred beckoned to him to join them.

"Come up here!" he shouted; "it's superb! You can see the whole country!"

"Can you see my château?" shouted Robineau.

"Oh! we can see a dozen!"

These words induced the new landed proprietor to climb the hill. He reached the top drenched with perspiration, and mopped his brow as he looked about.

"Well! are you sorry that you came up?" said Alfred.

"Isn't it worth while to tire oneself a bit for this, eh, Monsieur Jules?"

"It is very pretty, messieurs, I agree; you can see a long distance. But I have seen just as much in Messieurs Daguerre and Bouton's Diorama."

"The Diorama is certainly a beautiful thing, my friend; it is impossible to carry illusion and perfection of detail any farther; but art should not interfere with our admiration of nature."

"You may say what you please, messieurs, but I prefer the Diorama; there at least I have an explanation of what I see; but here I have no idea what I am looking at.—There's a village yonder, and I don't know what village it is."

"Wait a moment! here comes a worthy peasant who will be our cicerone."

A villager approached, with a spade and pickaxe over his shoulder. He was about to descend the hill. Alfred called him and he came toward them touching his hat. The peasants are much more polite in Auvergne than in the suburbs of Paris.

"Will you be kind enough to tell us, my good man, the name of the little town we see yonder, between two streams?"

"That is Saint-Amand, messieurs. It's a pretty little town. The little stream you see over here is the Veyre, which rises at Pagnia, a village over in this direction; it runs into the Mone, and they both run into the Allier. The Mone comes from Saint-Saturnin, half a league from Saint-Amand. See, where I'm pointing."

"What sort of a place is Saint-Saturnin?"

"Oh! it's a big village; it used to be a town, and a fortified town too."

"Is there a château thereabout?" inquired Robineau.

"Oh, yes, monsieur; there's a castle."

"Called La Roche-Noire?"

"No, monsieur, no; that one's the Château of Saint-Saturnin."

"And La Roche-Noire, where is that?"

"You mean La Roche-Blanche, I suppose, don't you?—That's that little village over there."

"I am not talking about your Roche-Blanche!—What astonishing creatures these Auvergnats are! they absolutely insist that black and white (*noir* and *blanc*) are the same thing!"

"*Dame!* then I don't know, monsieur."

"And in this direction, my good man?"

"That's the village of Chanonat, monsieur."

"Chanonat!" cried Edouard; "where Delille was born?"

"Delille?" replied the peasant; "as to that, I can't say, monsieur. What did this Delille do? Wasn't he a vine-dresser? Didn't he make wine?"

"No, my good man; he made something better than wine; he was a poet! But he loved the fields; and, like another Virgil, he sang the praises of agriculture in his noble verses!"

"I never knew him, monsieur."

Robineau turned away with a shrug, muttering:

"What fools these bright men are! The idea of talking about a poet to this countryman who doesn't know about anything except his ducks and his wife and children! I shall never do anything so stupid as that!"

Then, turning to the peasant once more, he said:

"My dear friend, these gentlemen have asked you to name all these places—that's all right, but they forget the most essential thing, which is to ask the shortest way to Saint-Amand, and consequently to my château, which is close by."

"Oh! messieurs, you want to go down the hill first, then bear to your left; you'll see Le Crest, and it ain't far from there to Saint-Amand.—Good-day, messieurs."

"Thanks, my good man."

The peasant went his way, and Robineau, after looking at his watch, cried:

"Come, come, messieurs, forward! Do you know what time it is? Half-past five—think of that!"

"Well! it's light until almost nine now."

"Light! Oh! that depends on what sort of road you are on. At all events, we haven't arrived yet."

"Adieu then, delightful spot!" said Edouard with a sigh; "how I should have liked to see the sunset from here!"

"That's it! and we should sleep in the open air!"

"Upon my word, this place inspires me! I feel in the mood for writing; I could compose some verses on this view."

"You can write a poem some other time, my dear Edouard; you can come here again and gaze at the sun and moon and whatever you please; but for the moment, I entreat you, let us go in search of my château, which I am beginning to be very much worried about."

As he spoke, Robineau seized Edouard's arm and led him away, calling Alfred, and trying to take his arm as well.

"Why in the devil do you cling to us like this?" demanded Alfred, pulling away from Robineau's grasp.

"Because, my dear fellow, if we three hold on to one another, we are firmer on our feet and less in danger of slipping."

"Do you imagine that we are walking on ice?—Say rather that you're afraid we shall escape from you again."

"Suppose that I were, messieurs? Isn't it quite natural that I should be impatient to see my property?"

"What do a few hours sooner or later matter?"

"My dear Alfred, you talk like a man with a hundred thousand francs a year, who is accustomed to wealth, who is even surfeited with the pleasures it affords; but I am still a perfect novice as to that; I am in haste to be happy, and to me the loveliest situations, the most wonderful views will never possess the charm that I shall feel at the first sight of the domain I have purchased."

"I can understand that," said Edouard; "forward, messieurs."

For some time they went on without stopping; but soon a winding path appeared, between perpendicular rocks whereon they saw goats quickly leaping wide spaces, then standing motionless for several minutes on the very brink of a precipice. Edouard could not refrain from stopping once more to contemplate that picture.

"Oh! messieurs, you must agree that this is superb," he cried; "that there is something most majestic in this wild spot. One would think that we were a long, long distance from the world!"

"And so we are, for I don't see a person or a house," said Robineau, looking gloomily about.

"There is something indescribably grand, something antique about this narrow path between these crags; it carries me back to other ages; it seems to me that I shall see Œdipus and Laius meet in this fatal road!"

"Ah! if we fall foul of the Greeks we shall never have done with them," said Robineau, stamping the ground impatiently.

"For my part, messieurs," said Alfred, "I think that it would be very pleasant to walk here with a pretty woman. We

have not met a soul for quarter of an hour! It is delightful! When you come to an attractive spot, you could stop and exchange kisses and dilate on the beauties of nature, and you need not fear to be surprised, as you are likely to be in all the country districts about Paris, where those infernal peasants spring up from a potato field just when you least expect it.—Don't you agree with me, Robineau? I say—suppose you had Fifine here?"

"If I had Fifine, I would make her walk at all events! and she wouldn't stop every minute to look at a little pile of moss, or a stone that has broken off the cliff and threatens to fall on our heads!"

"So Fifine is not romantic, eh?—Still, my friend, ladies in general are very fond of making love in the open fields. The turf, the green leaves, a nice soft, dark spot—all these things inspire one and arouse one's emotions; it's astonishing how amorous the country makes me!"

"Oh! messieurs, how young you are, what children!"

"May we long be children! The sweetest sensations are always those that remind us of our youth!"

"Let us go on, messieurs, let us go on, I beg. I see nothing very pretty in this rocky road.—Well! Monsieur Edouard, what are you looking at in the air?"

"Why, don't you see that goat standing on the very edge of the precipice? It seems to me that its feet hardly touch the ground; and it puts out its head and gazes undismayed into the vast space over which it is almost suspended!"

"Oh! this is too much, messieurs! As if you had never seen goats before! The idea of wasting your time watching them! Parbleu! they're not made any differently here from those at the Jardin des Plantes; indeed, they're not so handsome. If you should see a bear now, or a lion, why, you might very well stop to gaze at him!"

"Oh! I am very sure that you wouldn't stop even for that!"

"This infernal road will never come to an end! That peasant must have directed us wrong. We shall end by going astray, by losing ourselves in these mountains.—Ah! how sorry I am now that we didn't take a guide!"

"It's your own fault; why did you refuse to accept the services of that man who offered?"

"Whom do you mean? that beggar, that miserable fellow who didn't even take off his hat when he spoke to us?"

"Is it necessary for a guide to study good manners?"

"At least it is necessary that he shouldn't have the manners of a brigand; and that's the impression that man produced on me. Didn't you notice those underhand glances that he gave us? and that big stick that he carried in his hand?"

"What! you were afraid of that man, when there were three of us?"

"No, it isn't a question of being afraid! But how do you know that he hasn't friends, confederates in the mountains? He could have taken us wherever he chose, and all of a sudden a dozen gentlemen of his stamp would have fallen upon us."

"Oh! my poor Robineau! I see that you will never take a walking trip around the world!"

"Faith! I confess that I prefer riding in a carriage to walking; you go forward, at all events—you make some progress. But with you, I have to stop every second; and with all this I see no more of a château than there is in my hand!—Here it is almost seven o'clock, and I am beginning to be very tired."

"And I to be very hungry," said Alfred; "evidently the air in these mountains is good for the digestion."

The two friends could not help laughing at Robineau's face, as he stared about, sighing dolefully. However, they went on, left the path behind, and seeing a village on the shore of a lake, bent their steps in that direction.

"We will ask about my château in this village," said Robineau.

"We will have something to eat there, too," said Alfred, "for the walk we have taken has given me an appetite."

"Yes, this walk has been very pleasant! I am sure that we have gone more than six leagues out of our way!"

They drew near the shore of the lake on which the village was built. The peasants sat in front of their cottages; there were old women spinning, young women sewing, and children playing and rolling about on the ground.

"They are a little dark," said Alfred as he scrutinized the young women; "however they are not bad-looking—bright eyes and white teeth; their method of arranging their hair is original; and with the little straw hats, set back and tied under the chin, one would almost take them for Englishwomen.—Come, messieurs, let us go on; I fancy that there are no inns in this place, so that we must ask hospitality at the hands of these good people, like the chevaliers of old; with this difference, that we will pay for what we consume—which is less chivalrous, perhaps, but which seems to me more natural."

They entered one of the most pretentious cottages; the inmates gazed at the three young men with an expression of curiosity blended with kindliness and good humor.

"Can you give us something to eat?" inquired Alfred; "to be well paid for, of course."

"Oh, yes! messieurs, right away; and even if you shouldn't pay, it would be all the same."

"You see, messieurs," said Edouard, "that hospitality is not a lost art; these good people do not know us, yet they would entertain us gratis!"

"Oh! that's because they see that we will pay," said Robineau.

"Don't you believe in the virtues of the ancient patriarchs, pray, Monsieur Jules?"

"I will believe in whatever you please when I have seen my château, messieurs!" said Robineau.—"Where are we, my good people, if you please?"

"At Ayda, monsieur."

"Is it far to Saint-Amand?"

"Two good leagues, monsieur."

"Which proves that, although we walk, we make little progress!—To table, messieurs!"

A table was laden with eggs, fresh cheese, old cheese, milk and fruit; the three young men seated themselves on stools, and the villagers remained standing around them. In vain did Alfred urge them to sit—the honest Auvergnats would do nothing of the sort, and Robineau said to himself:

"That is very well done—these peasants are respectful; I am very glad that I have bought an estate in Auvergne."

Two girls of fifteen or sixteen waited upon the travellers, filled their glasses, and served them zealously with fruit,

bread and milk, smiling all the while, and making a slight courtesy each time.

"They are very pretty," said Alfred, "and I consider that it's much more agreeable to see such amiable children behind one's chair, with a smile always on their faces, than to have a dozen prying, talkative footmen hanging over one's shoulder. Look you, Robineau, I advise you to set up your establishment with girls like these; you will be served like a sultan!"

"Oh! messieurs, you see only the trivial side! But I cannot have a woman for coachman, for groom, for valet de chambre. A coachman in petticoats—that would be very pretty!"

"You could dress them as men."

"Oh, no!" said Edouard, "they are so charming as they are!"

"'Nothing so lovely as the true,
The true alone is lovable.'"

"The pleasantest thing," said Robineau, seizing a bowl of milk; "would be to have arrived at our destination.—I say, Monsieur l'Auvergnat, do you know the estate of La Roche-Noire in this neighborhood?"

The peasant whom Robineau addressed reflected a moment, then replied:

"Oh, yes! monsieur—La Roche-Noire—I know it well—–"

"He knows it!" cried Robineau; and in an ecstasy of delight he threw his arms in the air and dashed into Alfred's face almost all the milk contained in the cup he held in his hand.

"The devil take you and your château!" cried Alfred, rising from the table to take off his cravat, which was drenched with milk, while Edouard roared with laughter.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, my dear fellow!" said Robineau; "but really I was beginning to be anxious about my château! This excellent man has restored me to life."

"Were you afraid that your house had flown away?"

"I'll give you another cravat, Alfred.—Tell me, worthy villager, who knows La Roche-Noire, is it a fine estate?"

"Oh, yes! it's very large, monsieur! It's a sort of château, as they say, and it's got some big towers. They say that in old times they used to fight there, and it was besieged."

"Besieged!" cried Robineau, springing to his feet and overturning his stool, in his haste to run to the peasant's side. "My friend, here's a five-franc piece; now tell me, I beg you, all you know about La Roche-Noire."

"You are very generous, monsieur, that's sure!"

"I am more than that: I am the owner, the new châtelain of the château which you tell me was once besieged.—I promise you that there'll be some more wonderful doings there! I will give tournaments, jousts, and—and—But let us return to my domain. Can it be seen from a distance?"

"Yes, monsieur, it's on a hill."

"It's on a hill! Delightful!—And the park and gardens?"

"The park is still very large, so they say; I don't know it, but I was in the gardens once.—Oh! they're fine! There's marble fountains—they're a little damaged, but that's no matter. And splendid *estatues*! with men and women all naked—why, it gives you a fright!"

"Statues!"—And Robineau took the peasant in his arms; he would have kissed him but for his fear of compromising his newly acquired dignity. He tried to calm himself and continued: "Now, my good man, let us come to the essential point: in which direction is my château?"

"La Roche-Noire? Bless me! monsieur, it's about a league from Saint-Amand."

"In that case, as Saint-Amand is only two leagues from here, we are within a league of my estate."

"Oh! excuse me, monsieur! you're much more than that, because La Roche-Noire ain't in this direction at all. If you came from Clermont, you didn't take the best way to get there."

"There! I knew it! We have gone astray! Do you hear, messieurs?"

Robineau turned and looked about for his friends; but they had left the cottage while he was talking with the peasant.

"Well done! I'll bet they have gone off to walk now! They have sworn to kill me with vexation!—But at all events my mind is more at rest about my estate.—Tell me, my good man, how far are we from La Roche-Noire?"

"Why, three short leagues, monsieur, at most."

"Three leagues more! What road must we take?"

"Why! you must go by crossroads now. First to Chadrat; then you will see Saint-Amand, and you can inquire there."

"If we get there before dark, we shall be very lucky!—Well! I'll run after those gentlemen and then we'll be off."

Robineau left the cottage and asked some peasants in which direction his companions had gone; they pointed to the lake and he hastened thither and soon discovered Edouard sitting on the shore, writing on his tablets, while Alfred, a little farther on, was dancing with a girl to the strains of a fife played by a small boy.

"Let's be off, messieurs, it will soon be dark!" cried Robineau.

But Alfred continued to dance and Edouard to write.

"They have the very devil in them!" muttered Robineau; and he walked up to Edouard and tapped him on the shoulder as he was reading over the lines he had written.

"We must start, Monsieur Edouard!"

Edouard looked up at Robineau, and declaimed:

"Que j'aime ce séjour! près de cette onde pure,
Qu'il est doux, sur le soir, d'admirer la nature!"

"I tell you that it will soon be dark."

"Né sous cet humble toit, l'habitant de ces lieux,
D'un œil indifférent, voit ces monts sourcilleux!"

"We have three good leagues to travel through these frowning mountains, monsieur."

"Mais, pour un cœur sensible à la mélancolie,
Ce site romantique est plein de poésie!
Ces rochers escarpés, ces limpides ruisseaux,
Ces sentiers tortueux, ces flexibles roseaux."

"It is almost eight o'clock, and we shall break our necks on these winding paths."

"Tout m'agite, m'émeut, et cet endroit sauvage
À mes sens étonnés parle un nouveau langage."[3]

"Oh! if the streams speak to you, they must make some poor joke, Monsieur Edouard!"

"Well, my dear Jules, what say you to those lines?" said Edouard, as he rose and put his tablets in his pocket.

"I say that they are charming, admirable; but I say also that, with your poetry, you will make us pass the night in these mountains, which will not amuse me in the least."

"Would you like me to repeat them to you?"

"No, I want to push on.—And there is Alfred dancing like one possessed!—A young man of his rank, a baron, dancing *flicflacs* with a buxom Auvergnate!—Alfred! Alfred!"

"One minute! she's teaching me a *bourrée*," said Alfred, continuing his dance, and whirling his partner about in his arms.

The dance came to an end at last; Alfred kissed the peasant girl and joined his companions, saying:

"Messieurs, the Auvergnat dance is not light and ethereal, but I assure you that it has its merits. So, my dear Robineau, I promise to dance with all your female vassals."

"Have you finished, messieurs?"

"Yes, we are ready to go with you."

"I am not sorry for that! Let us walk faster, I beg you. This road should take us to Chadrat, and thence, if God please, we will go to La Roche-Noire."

The three travellers waved their hands to the people of the village and resumed their journey, Alfred practising the step of the *bourrée*, Edouard reading over his verses, and Robineau looking at his watch every instant.

VIII

THE WHITE HOUSE

They had been walking for a considerable time through the mountains when they descried a small village in the distance. It was growing dark; Alfred was obliged to cease dancing, because he was in danger of stepping into some hole; Edouard could read no longer, and Robineau could not see the time by his watch. It soon became impossible to see even the village toward which they were walking, whereupon Robineau wrung his hands in despair. Alfred laughed and Edouard uttered poetry.

"I foresaw what has happened!" said Robineau with a dismal groan. "Here it is dark, and we are in the midst of the mountains, in a region of which we know nothing! At every step we are in danger of falling over some precipice, or at least of plunging down some horribly steep slope! Instead of finding my château, we may be going farther and farther away from it—and that makes you laugh, messieurs! I can't understand that!"

"Do you want us to weep, Robineau? would that please you? Come, come, O châtelain of La Roche-Noire, recall your high-born courage. When one is about to take up one's abode in an ancient château, one should possess the heart of a paladin, eh, Edouard?"

Edouard's only reply was to declaim:

"Tout repose dans l'ombre, et le seul Idamore
Des mues de Bénarès s'échappe avant l'aurore.
Quel est ce bois antique où vos pas m'ont conduit?
Mais j'entrevois un temple, et l'astre de la nuit!"[4]

"You see a temple?" cried Robineau. "Where, in heaven's name? I can't see anything at all."

"Ha! ha! ha! Do you mean to say, Robineau, that you don't recognize Casimir Delavigne's beautiful verses? Don't you realize that Edouard is declaiming *Le Paria*?"

"Faith, messieurs, I didn't suspect that you were going to begin on tragedy!—Oh! that's all right! laugh away! you don't know what you lose by not reaching my estate before dark. You fancy that we should have been received by the concierge alone. But you would have seen something very different!—The bouquets and the dancing and the congratulations that awaited us—we are missing all those!"

"Why, how do you know they would have celebrated our arrival?" asked Edouard.

"Ah! I can guess!" cried Alfred; "François didn't go on before for nothing.—Oh! I understand: Robineau had ordered an extemporaneous reception—that his people should surprise him with cries of *Vive monseigneur!* and bombs, after the style of popular celebrations."

"No, messieurs, no; I ordered nothing; but I know François's zeal, he is certain not to have concealed the fact that I should soon arrive, and it seems to me quite natural to think that the news would make some sensation in the

neighborhood."

"Well! don't be disheartened; if we don't arrive until to-morrow morning, the fête will be all the better for the delay; they will have had time to prepare, to commit complimentary speeches to memory, and to wash their faces, which is never a disadvantage. To be sure, if they have a display of fireworks for you, it will be in the daylight; but that's the fashion in China, and the Seigneur de la Roche-Noire cannot object to bear some resemblance to a great Mandarin."

"And poor François! how anxious he will be when we don't appear! You forget that, messieurs."

"Oh! my dear Robineau, it isn't on François's account that you are so annoyed!—But, after all, there is some hope left, we are sure to arrive somewhere!"

"Yes! somewhere! in some excavation into which we shall tumble without a branch to hold on to! You can't see your hand before your face."

"It's becoming more romantic; you don't feel the beauty of our situation—travelling at night among the mountains."

"It is certain that I don't see the beautiful side of it; if we only had weapons—but you left your pistols in my post-chaise!"

"We need only lances, to have the aspect of genuine knights-errant."

"We haven't even a stick, which would be much better!—Monsieur Edouard! where on earth are you? Don't go so fast, or you'll lose us! that would be the last straw—to be separated! I can't walk fast when I don't see where I am going.—Hello! Monsieur Edouard!"

Edouard halted and exclaimed in a sepulchral tone:

"Où suis-je? Quelle nuit
Couvre d'un voile affreux la clarte qui nous luit?
Ces murs sont teints de sang! je vois les Euménides
Secouer leurs flambeaux vengeurs des parricides!
Le tonnerre en éclats semble fondre sur moi,
L'enfer s'ouvre!"[5]

"Monsieur Edouard! don't joke like that, I beg! What do you see?"

As he spoke, Robineau overtook Edouard and passed his arm through his.

"I don't see anything at all, I am waiting for you," replied Edouard calmly.

"Fear must have deprived you of memory, Robineau, since you don't remember what you have heard so often at the Français."

"Fear?—You are unique, messieurs, to accuse a man of fear because he doesn't care to pass the night out of doors! My constitution is not of iron, and I am sure that it would do me much harm!"

"I advise you to complain; you're as plump as a partridge!"

"That proves nothing; one may be stout and still be delicate.—Come, let us all three go arm-in-arm; I will walk in the middle and guide you."

"You are trembling, Robineau."

"Because I am cold."

"Cold, in the beginning of August?"

"In the mountains there is frost all the year."

"Ha! ha! that is too absurd!"

"Yes, it is absurd, in very truth! Why did I trust to you to take me to my château?"

"Monsieur Jules, Saint-Grégoire said: 'When any great calamity happens to you, search carefully and you will always find that it is in some measure your own fault.'"

"Saint-Grégoire was quite right!—Oh! mon Dieu! I thought I heard a roar quite close to us!"

"Bah! a bleat, you mean! We must be approaching a farm."

"Or a cavern!"

"Ah! victory, messieurs! I see a light—a very small one, to be sure, but still it's a light."

"Really? I can't see anything myself."

"Look where I am pointing."

"I can't even see your finger. Ah, yes! I see it; let us go toward it."

"Suppose we should find ourselves at the ogre's house?"

"As you are the smallest, Robineau, you shall be Hop-o'-my-Thumb, and steal the seven-leagued boots."

Robineau, who kept his eyes fixed on the light, soon exclaimed:

"Two, three, four, ten lights! we are saved! It's a village; it's Cha—Cha—Mon Dieu! what do they call it?"

"Chadrat."

"That's it. Forward."

Five minutes later the three travellers found themselves among buildings in which lights were shining; but they were simply wretched hovels built of earth and straw, compared with which the humble cottages of Ayda might have passed for châteaux. Robineau stopped and gazed at his companions in dismay, saying in an undertone:

"Mon Dieu! where are we?"

"In a village, as you see."

"A pretty village, on my word! One would say that we had fallen among savages."

"The place certainly does not seem prosperous; but the inhabitants may be very worthy folk."

"They may be something else too—people who live in mole-hills like these!"

"Let us knock and call; they can't be asleep yet as their lights aren't out."

"One moment, messieurs," said Robineau, running after Alfred, who was walking toward the largest of the huts. "One moment—let us consult first; is it quite prudent to place ourselves in the power of these people in this way?"

"Nonsense, Robineau; let us alone!"

"At least, messieurs, conceal your watch chains, I entreat you, and don't say that you have money about you; opportunity makes the thief."

Alfred knocked at a low, ill-jointed door, above which was a round hole that answered the purpose of a window. It was some time before there was any reply; at last a hoarse, but loud voice was heard, asking with a sort of drawl:

"Well! who's there?"

"Say nobody," cried Robineau, whom the tone of the voice did not reassure.

"Three travellers who have gone astray in the mountains," said Alfred.

"Three beggars who have had no supper," added Robineau.

"If you don't keep quiet I'll push you to the bottom of this hill," said Alfred testily.

As there was no reply from the hovel, Edouard stepped forward and said:

"Admit us, good people; we will pay you handsomely for your trouble and for the guide you give us."

"That is to say, we will pray for you," added Robineau, "for we have forgotten to bring our purses."

The door opened at last, and a man clad in a goatskin jacket, like the Swiss shepherds, came out and gazed stupidly at the three young men.

"Oh! mon Dieu! what in heaven's name is that?" exclaimed Robineau, stepping behind his companions; "it's either an orang-outang or a counterfeiter!"

The peasant, after contemplating the young men in silence, pointed to the doorway of his hovel, saying:

"Will you come into our house, messieurs?"

"With pleasure," said Alfred; and he walked in, followed by Edouard; whereupon Robineau, who had no desire to be left alone, was obliged also to enter the shepherd's abode.

The interior was larger than one would have supposed from the outside. The roughly built structure was cone-shaped, and received light from above. The ground floor was divided into two parts; but the partition, made of rough planks not fastened together, seemed intended rather to support the walls and prevent their falling in upon the inmates, than to keep them apart.

There was a fire in one corner of the first room; a huge earthenware kettle was set upon some crackling twigs; a woman of some forty years, seated, or rather crouching, in front of the fire, was stirring the contents of the kettle with a wooden spoon, and by her side knelt three tall, sturdy boys, gazing at what was on the fire. Farther on, an old man, still hale and hearty, sat upon a bunch of straw, patting an old he-goat that lay on the floor beside him. This picture was lighted but dimly by a lamp standing on a small wooden table, because the smoke from the fire formed dense clouds which emerged very slowly through the vent in the roof.

The three travellers, having entered the hovel, stopped to examine the curious scene before their eyes. The occupants scrutinized them in their turn, but with a sort of stupid amazement, and without moving.

"This is very original!" said Alfred to his friends.

"It is very ugly!" said Robineau.

"It is a most picturesque interior, strongly tinged with local color," said Edouard.

"I don't know whether it has any color," muttered Robineau, "but this same picturesque interior smells horribly!"

"Where are we, please, good people?" inquired Alfred.

"At Chadrat," the old man replied.

"At Chadrat!" cried Robineau; "what! this is Chadrat! and they dare to call this a village! I wouldn't take it to stable my horses in."

Apparently paying no attention to Robineau, the shepherd, who had entered with the travellers, made an imperative sign to the boys kneeling by the fire; whereupon they decided, although with regret, to rise, and brought forward some small wooden benches for the travellers.

"Sit down, messieurs, and rest yourselves," said the Auvergnat.

Alfred and Edouard seated themselves, while Robineau gazed in alarm at the three tall youths who had risen, and glanced out of the corner of his eye toward the doorway of the hovel. But his companions paid no heed to the signs he made them, so he decided at last to take a seat.

"We were anxious to arrive to-night at a château called La Roche-Noire," said Alfred; "do you know it?"

The peasants looked at one another and shook their heads.

"Parbleu! how does he suppose that these clowns, these idiots should know my château?" said Robineau to himself.

"But you know the town of Saint-Amand?" said Edouard.

"Saint-Amand-Talende—oh, yes, monsieur!"

"Are we far from it?"

"Not very—still, it's some distance."

"Look you, my good man—these three tall fellows are your sons, I'll wager."

The peasant made an affirmative movement with his head.

"Well! as they must know these mountains by heart, do us the favor to give us one of them for a guide—all three, if they prefer; we will pay them well."

"Yes," said Robineau, "we'll pay them at the town; our money is there."

The peasants looked at one another for some time without speaking; then the father asked his sons:

"Do you want to go, young 'uns?"

The boys seemed to hesitate; at last the oldest one said in an undertone:

"We should have to pass the White House!"

"The White House!" said Alfred, "what's that? Is it an inn?"

The peasants shook their heads.

"Is it a farm-house, or a wine-shop?" asked Edouard.

The peasants still said nothing, and Robineau muttered between his teeth:

"These clowns are terribly stupid!"

At last the old man drew nearer to the travellers and said in a low voice:

"The White House is a place that I don't much like in the daytime, and still less at night! It's a dangerous place! All the accidents happen near there! in fact, it's a bewitched place!"

"Ha! ha! Do you mean to say, good people, that you believe in witches?" exclaimed Alfred; while the peasants, amazed that anyone should dare to laugh while speaking of the White House, recoiled from the travellers and gazed at them with mingled surprise and terror.

Robineau, having discovered that the people of whom he had been afraid were themselves very timid, sprang suddenly to his feet, and exclaimed, pacing the floor with a firm tread:

"What! are you so stupid as all that, you unfortunate peasants? You believe in stories of magic and devils? such stout fellows as you, of five feet six! It makes me feel sorry for you; it—oh!"

In the heat of his harangue Robineau had barely escaped overturning the kettle, and he had just discovered that he was walking on burning brands.

"Messieurs," said Edouard, "it does not seem very surprising to me that the people of a small village among the mountains, far from frequented roads, who seem to retain the manners and customs of primitive times, should place faith in errors of which we ourselves have not been cured so very long—indeed, are we fully cured even now? In Paris, the centre of the enlightenment and civilization of our era, Mademoiselle Le Normand made a fortune, and fortune-tellers and necromancers are patronized by the very highest classes of society. Men have a decided penchant for error; the Romans had *haruspices* and sibyls; the Greeks, oracles and pythonesses; the Gauls, Druids; the Egyptians, their mysteries of Isis, Eleusis, Apis and Anubis; and the Jewish prophets were far superior to all the magicians of the Middle Ages!—And lastly, messieurs, I find that some great men, men of vast intellect, have been superstitious; and, without believing as Plato did in the existence of sorcerers, I see nothing extraordinary in the fact that the people of a poor hamlet have a weakness toward which men of culture show so much inclination."

"My dear Edouard, I don't attribute their ignorance as a crime to these poor people; I shall not undertake to cure them of their superstition, because I think that that might be too long a task; but I will call your attention to the fact that we are not now interested in knowing whether all nations have entertained a belief in magic, but simply whether these young men, who seem to be from fourteen to sixteen years of age, will consent to act as our guides, so that we may reach the town nearby, to-night."

"Yes, that's it," said Robineau; "it's no time for exhibiting knowledge—we must come to the point.—Tell us, young Auvergnats, will you take us to Saint-Amand? I am the Seigneur de la Roche-Noire, and I will reward you handsomely."

But neither the entreaties nor the promises of Robineau availed to induce anyone of the inhabitants of the hovel to undertake the task of guiding the travellers; the dread aroused by the White House, which it was necessary to pass, was stronger than their desire to oblige.

"Faith, messieurs," said Alfred, "as these mountaineers have decided not to guide us before morning, we have but one course to pursue, and that is to pass the night here."

"Let us pass the night here," said Edouard.

"J'en ai l'heureuse promesse,
Vers le milieu de la nuit,
L'amour m'ouvrira sans bruit
L'alcôve de ma maîtresse!"[6]

"Oh, yes!" said Robineau; "if you find an alcove here, you'll be very clever! For my part, messieurs, it seems to me that before making up our minds to sleep in this stifling mouse-trap—to say nothing of the fact that it doesn't smell like the rose—we should apply to some others of the villagers; perhaps they are not all such cowards as these people!"

"Oh! they are all quite as superstitious, my dear fellow!—As you see, this White House is to them what the White Lady is to the people of Glendearg in Sir Walter Scott's *Monastery*."

"This is no question of novels—we are not in Scotland; I tell you that I don't propose to sleep here myself, and I'll show you that I know how to get out of the fix we are in."

As he spoke, Robineau strode to the door of the hovel, opened it, and thrust his head out; but, terrified by the dense darkness which reigned in the mountains, there being no moon, and unable to discover a single light in the neighboring houses, he quickly drew in his head, closed the door, and returned crestfallen to his friends, saying:

"Well, if that suits you, let us sleep here; I am willing."

Alfred asked the head of the family if it would disturb him to allow them to pass the night under his roof. Far from that, the Auvergnat, his wife, his father and his children united in assuring the young men that the house was at their service. Our travellers concluded that, although the people of Chadrat might be dull-witted and stupid, they were humane, kindly and hospitable; virtues which we do not always find among refined, clever and well-educated people.

As soon as it was decided that our travellers were to pass the night in the abode of the Auvergnats, they thought of nothing but making themselves comfortable and acting as if they belonged to the family. Alfred and Edouard gayly made the best of it; they laughed and sang and chatted with the peasants; Robineau alone continued to scowl, and viewed everything with a pessimistic eye.

"What is your name, my good man?" Alfred asked the shepherd.

"My name is Claude, monsieur, and my wife's name is Claudine."

"And I'll bet that the children are called Claudinet," muttered Robineau with a shrug.

"What do you do?"

"I am a shepherd."

"And your children?"

"They work in the fields; we have a small field close by."

"And your father?"

"Oh! he don’t do anything now, he’s taking his rest.—As to our wife, she makes the soup and brings it to us in the fields."

"Are you satisfied with your lot?"

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"I mean to ask if you are happy."

"Pardi! what more would we want? We have enough to eat and clothes to wear, and a good house to live in; ain’t that enough?"

"My friend," said Edouard to Alfred, "this is man in his primitive state, without ambition, without desires; nature has given him none but pure and simple tastes, he has no vision of happiness outside of the place where he was born, and his desires never pass the summits of the mountains that surround his dwelling place. I maintain that this is such a man as Diogenes wished to find, but sought in vain among a people addicted to all sorts of pleasures, over-refined in its tastes and enslaved by its passions."

"If this is Diogenes’s man," said Robineau, tilting his bench, "he’s a clean, gentlemanlike person!"

"What is there in that kettle? Your supper, I presume?" said Alfred.

"Yes, monsieur, the soup."

"Well, my friends, we will eat it with you. We had our supper at Ayda; but no matter, we will sup again, eh, Edouard?"

"Yes, to be sure; we will keep our hosts company. And then there is an indefinable attraction about such a meal in my eyes."

"They’re not easily disgusted!" thought Robineau.

The soup being ready, the huge kettle was placed in the centre of the company; as the table was too small for the whole party to sit around it, the mountaineers considered it the simplest way to sit on the ground. Alfred and Edouard did the same, and Robineau alone remained on his bench.

"What, messieurs," he said to his friends, "you mean to sit on the floor?"

"Why not?" said Alfred; "we must do as these good people do."

"It’s the most natural seat," said Edouard.

"You look like savages!"

"The savages are the children of nature, my dear fellow, and we are the children of prejudices."

"In that case, messieurs, I will go from here to-morrow without trousers and declare that that is the most natural costume."

"Oh! Robineau, that’s very different! Decency is of all times—the fig-leaf dates from a long way back!—However, you are absolutely at liberty to show your posteriors to the people of Chadrat and to those on your own estate too, if it will give you any pleasure. As you have just bought the château, they will think that it’s an ancient custom which you mean to revive, and it is possible that they will decide to imitate you, which would be extremely interesting, especially on the days of large parties."

During this colloquy the mistress of the hut distributed wooden plates and spoons to everybody, and the aged father cut slices of rye bread. Despite his repugnance, Robineau accepted a plate of soup and ended by eating it like the others, although he muttered that it was too thick and too salt, and swore at the wine, which he considered too new. But the mountaineers did not notice his ill humor; they kept putting more soup into his plate, although he said that he had had enough. And the old man shared his bowlful with the old goat by his side, which seemed to be an old friend of the family.

During the supper Edouard returned to the subject of the White House, because the little that had been said about it had roused his curiosity.

"Pray tell us, good people," he said, "what you know about this place that frightens you so. How long has this White House been the terror of the country?"

"Oh, yes! do tell us that," said Alfred. "I like ghost stories; they make you shudder; it’s delicious!"

Robineau said nothing, but he drew his seat a little nearer to the circle formed by the others.

"Well! messieurs," said the old man, "it ain’t so very long that the White House has been such a scarecrow to all of us. I must tell you first that it ain’t very far from here, to the left, at the foot of the mountains. You go down into a pretty little valley, where there’s vines and lucern and some fine walnut trees, and the White House in the midst of it all."

"It doesn’t seem to have made the land sterile at all events.—To whom does the house belong?"

"Oh! that’s just what nobody don’t know, monsieur, for it ain’t ever been lived in, in the twenty years since it was built, unless the devil’s been living there lately. You see, messieurs, that there’s a pretty little cottage just about a hundred yards from the White House; it’s a kind of a little farm house that used to belong to a man named André Sarpiotte. André was pretty well off; he had some good-sized flocks and some cash; so he went to work and built this house that we call the White House, because when it was new, it was just as pretty and white, and finer than any house hereabout. So André Sarpiotte built the house, thinking he’d sell it to some one as might want it; but, bless me! it’s a big house, with a fine garden with walls all round it, and it was too high-priced for us poor folks!—So André, he couldn’t get rid of it; but he took comfort for his disappointment with his little wife, for he was married, André was, and his wife had just give him a little boy."

"But, my good man, I don’t see what connection all this has with the terror inspired by that spot?"

"Oh! yes, monsieur! Oh, yes! It’s all connected, and that’s what I’m coming to. One fine morning, we heard say in the village that André’s wife had took another child to nurse, with hers. It was a little girl. No one in this region had

ever seen her parents, but André, he said that they was folks as lived some distance off and wasn't rich; but still we took notice that André's wife was better dressed and had lots of fine things to wear, and that André had a better time than ever. As he was in a lucky streak, he sold his White House six months after to a stranger who was travelling through here. The deeds was passed at the notary's at Saint-Amand. The man's name, they say, was Gervais, and that's all anybody knows about him; for the most surprising thing is that this gentleman sent for furniture and everything he needed to run the house, but he didn't never live in it. He went right off again, and he ain't been seen again since; and that's what makes folks think that the devil had got possession of the cursed house, and the poor man that bought it found it out and swore he wouldn't never come back to it. Still, nobody didn't notice nothing, only folks thought it was a strange thing that the owner of the house shouldn't come to live in it. Time passed, and the little girl André and his wife had took in was still with 'em. After two years they said as how her parents was dead and that they'd adopted the child; but, my word! that good deed didn't bring 'em luck. Their own child died, and about a year after, André, who had a way of drinking a little too much, fell into a hole on his way home from the fêtes at Saint-Gall, and he wa'n't alive when they took him out. So then there wa'n't nobody left at the farm but André's widow and little Isaure—that's the name of the little girl they adopted. That was when folks began to notice strange goings on in the White House. In the first place there wa'n't nobody in the house, and yet there used to be lights going to and fro sometimes at night; then someone heard stamping in the garden—like horses' feet!—You may be quite certain that that gave folks a bad fright. If it had been the owner of the house come back, somebody'd have seen him; he wouldn't have kept out of sight and never come except at night. All these doings began to make people talk, to give 'em strange ideas; and then that house, with all the doors and windows shut and locked all the time, and yet noises and lights inside—you see that wa'n't clear at all!"

"And André's widow, who lived very near the White House, must have been more frightened than the others, I suppose?"

"Not a bit of it, monsieur; and that's another thing that wa'n't clear either; when anyone spoke to the widow Sarpiotte about them noises and lights, she'd just answer that we was all idiots, and that it wa'n't none of our business anyway."

"It would seem that the widow Sarpiotte was strong-minded."

"My word, monsieur, I don't know whether it was her mind, but it didn't prevent her going to join her husband—twelve years afterward, to be sure!"

"Ah! so the farmer's wife is dead too?"

"Yes, monsieur; she died nigh onto three years ago, and left her farm and cows and goats, everything she had, in fact, to little Isaure, who was fifteen years old then."

"And did this girl continue to live near the White House?"

"Bless my soul! yes, monsieur! And not a bit more scared than if she was in the middle of the village; and yet we noticed that the noises and lights came much oftener in the abandoned house after André's widow's death. Before that, we often went six months without hearing a sound; but now there ain't hardly ever two months goes by without someone being in that house at night, for sure. And it wa'n't long ago that Jacques, who went by the house before sunset and saw that all the shutters was shut, went by again the next day just as it was light, and saw two shutters open on the first floor! They didn't come open of themselves, you know. The next night they was shut again. And that little girl, who ain't eighteen years old yet, if I'm right, lives all alone close by a fearful place like that! a place we men don't dare to pass after dark!—Oh! that's mighty queer, I tell you!—So the old men of the neighborhood, and I'm one of 'em, we put this and that together, and we come to this conclusion: that little girl ain't no common girl!"

"What's that? do you think that she's a boy?" asked Alfred with a laugh.

"Nay, nay, monsieur; that ain't it at all. But you see I took notice that it was just about the time she come to André's that these strange things that have been happening begun. The sale of the White House to a man as we never see again; the house always locked up, but with lights in it sometimes—and then a sort of black ghost that's been seen prowling round the farm!"

"Ah! there's a ghost, is there?" asked Edouard.

"A ghost!" echoed Robineau, who during the old man's narrative had gradually moved his bench so far that he was now in the centre of the circle formed by the audience.

"Yes, messieurs, yes, there's a ghost—or an imp—that shows himself in the valley now and then."

"Have you seen it, excellent old man?"

"No, monsieur, oh, no! but Claude's seen it."

"I ain't seen it myself," said Claude, "but my oldest son Pierre, he's seen it."

"It wasn't me," said Pierre, "it was Joseph."

"I didn't just exactly see it myself," said Joseph, "but I was along with Nicolas, and he said he thought he saw something."

"Oh! according to that," exclaimed Alfred, "the existence of the ghost is abundantly proved.—But let us return to little Isaure, who is neither a boy nor a girl, you say, which would give her more or less resemblance to an imp."

"Well, monsieur, to go back to her, we folks think that, if she ain't afraid of the devil, it must be because she's in league with him; and we say—but we don't say it out loud—that the girl may be bewitched, or at any rate have some sly tricks we don't know about, for snapping her fingers at evil spirits. For just see! take the family that took her in—they all died——"

"Yes, in the space of fifteen years."

"But does this girl live absolutely alone now?"

"Yes, messieurs, all alone and close by the White House, where folks like us wouldn't like to live in a crowd!—It's a very strange thing. And then, you see, this young Isaure, she ain't like the other girls here in our mountains; and yet, as she was brought up here, there ain't no reason why she should know more'n we do; for André and his wife wa'n't no scholars, although they was well off."

"What do you say? that this girl is better educated than the people of these mountains?"

"I should say so! she knows lots of things! In the first place she knows how to read printed books, and they say as

how she reads ’em right off, too! And yet André Sarpiotte wasn’t very smart at that! How is it that she knows more’n her master?"

"That happens every day, my good man; but what else?"

"Why, she sings lots of songs that we don’t know and that don’t belong to this part of the country.—I ask you who can have taught her them? And then, when she talks to you, she smiles and curtsies just like a fine city young lady!"

"And you don’t tell it all, father," said Claudine, who thus far had maintained a respectful silence and allowed the old man to talk; "Isaure knows a lot too about planting trees and raising flowers and sowing grain; she knows an amazing deal about that! You ought to see the garden at her farm-house; everything grows there, and it’s wonderful to look at! And she has medicines for doctoring animals."

"She has medicines for animals?" exclaimed Robineau with a stupefied air.

"Yes, monsieur; it ain’t long ago that she cured her cow that looked like she was going to die, with some herb or other she give her to eat; and Jeannette’s goat, as had a swelling under her stomach—why, Isaure went an’ cured her too, with some drug or other she made her take."

"What’s that? she cured Jeannette’s she-goat?" cried the shepherd. "Well! I tell you, all my goats could just die before I’d let little Isaure touch ’em.—Seems to me, messieurs, we’ve told you things enough to prove that the girl has dealings with Satan."

"If she cures cows and goats," muttered Robineau, "she must certainly know a lot."

"In fact, messieurs, for a girl brought up among these mountains—why, she ain’t our sort, not a bit; she talks to us sometimes in words we can’t understand; in short, she has a kind of a silver-gilt, honey-sweet language that ain’t like what our goatherds use."

"Parbleu! I am very curious to see this girl," said Alfred.

"So am I," said Edouard.

"Faith," added Robineau, "I give you my word that she doesn’t tempt me in the least!"

"But let us come to the most interesting point," said Alfred; "what sort of looking girl is this Isaure? You have not described her. Is there anything devilish in her face, her features?"

"Well! messieurs, as for that," said the shepherd, "I can’t deny that she ain’t bad-looking—there’s even some folks hereabout who say she’s pretty."

"Oh! yes, father," said Claude’s three sons, "she’s very pretty, Isaure is, and her smile is very sweet!"

"Hold your tongue, little ones!" said Claudine; "you don’t know what you’re talking about! I tell you that there’s something wicked in her blue eyes—something that covers up treachery; and her soft voice is just a cheat to trap people. Besides, as if a little witch like her could be pretty!"

"No," said Robineau, "I agree with the Auvergnate; a witch is always frightful."

"Pretty or not," said the shepherd, "this much is certain, that everybody in this neighborhood keeps out of her way instead of seeking her. When they see her in one direction they go in the other. When she takes her goats to the mountain, they hurry down into the valley; and bless me! they’re quite right, for she’s capable of throwing a spell on you, of bringing you bad luck!"

"Yes, yes," said Claudine; "and if Bastien’s sheep is dead, I know well enough it’s because Isaure patted her the other day."

"Oh, mother!" interposed one of the young Auvergnats, "Bastien’s sheep fell fifty feet."

"That may be," rejoined Claudine, "but what made her fall? because Isaure had touched her; do you suppose she’d have lost her footing if it hadn’t been for that?"

"True," said the old man.

"These are the arguments of ignorance," said Edouard; "the simplest things become supernatural in the eyes of these honest folk! They do not care to seek causes, they refer everything to the first idea that strikes them; and behold a girl, who is perhaps a pretty, gentle creature, becomes an object of terror to these mountaineers, because she lives quietly in a place which they imagine to be inhabited by the devil! But these peasants never leave their hovels, so they are excusable! Think how many people there are in our large cities in whom education has not destroyed superstition!"

"I say, Edouard, you, who have all the sentiments of a paladin of old,—fidelity excepted,—ought to do as they do in the *Château du Diable*, an old play that was formerly acted in the Cité—visit this haunted mansion and deliver young Isaure, who may be a princess in disguise, from the spell which keeps her with her cows and goats! For my own part, I propose to see the girl to-morrow; I wish with all my heart that she might prove to be a witch; for, having never seen one, I should be enchanted to know how they are made. You will go with us to see the White House, won’t you, Robineau?"

"Oh! messieurs, it’s to be hoped that I shall be in my château to-morrow; then you can wander where you choose, but the deuce take me if I go with you! I shall remember too long our journey through the mountains!"

The young men laughed at their companion’s ill humor. But the evening meal was at an end and the Auvergnats were already thinking of going to rest.

"Messieurs," said Claude, "I wish I had beds to offer you, but we sleep on plain straw, and that’s all we’ve got to give you, with some sheepskins I keep for the winter."

"We shall be very comfortable," said Alfred; "besides, a night is soon passed."

"If you have no bed," said Robineau, with a grimace, "at least give me the sheepskins; they’ll be softer than your straw!"

"Yes, monsieur; I’ll go fix ’em for you."

They made a bed with the sheepskins in one corner of the hovel; but Alfred and Edouard preferred to lie on the straw, whereon they stretched themselves, laughing good-humoredly; while the three young Auvergnats did the same near by. The old man followed the example of his grandchildren and lay down beside his he-goat. Claude and his wife retired to the other compartment of the hovel, to which a rough sort of curtain served as a door. But, before joining his wife, Claude blew out the lamp, and only an occasional fitful gleam from the fire lighted the interior.

"Why do you put out the light?" cried Robineau.

"Oh! because it wouldn't be safe to keep it lighted all night, monsieur. If the house should catch fire, we should all be baked like coals."

With that, he threw water on the remains of the fire, to extinguish it completely.

"How amusing this is!" said Robineau; "to go to bed without a light—I, who always have my night light in Paris!—By the way, mountaineer, are you sure you locked the door of your cottage?"

The shepherd made no reply; he had gone to join his wife, by whom he lay down, and ere long their prolonged snoring, reinforced by that of the old man and the three boys, announced that the whole family was enjoying sound sleep.

"How pleasant!" muttered Robineau, throwing himself testily on his sheepskins; "the idea of sleeping in the midst of an uproar like this! It seems to me as if I were at a funeral, with six bass horns tooting in my ears!—I say, my friends, can you sleep?"

Alfred and Edouard in reply made a pretence of snoring with the rest.

"They're asleep! they're very lucky!—But that peasant didn't answer my question about the door; I'll just go and make sure that we're safe."

Robineau rose, felt his way to the door, found the latch, raised it, opened the door, and discovered to his horror that it could be opened as easily from the outside.

"How imprudent these peasants are!" he cried; "a door that can be opened from outside! We're about as safe as we should be on the high road! I say! Monsieur Claude! boys! Hallo! old grandpa! why don't you answer?"

Robineau's outcries and the uproar he made roused the old man.

"What's the matter with you, monsieur?" he said.

"The matter with me! Why, I think it's an outrage that there isn't so much as a bolt on your door! The first thief that passes can come in and murder us."

"Oh! monsieur, there ain't no thieves in this part of the country! Besides, we ain't got anything to steal!"

"You haven't! that's just it! There's selfishness for you! They think only of themselves.—But, old peasant, I shouldn't be pleased if they stole no more than my hat.—I say, old man——"

The old man had fallen asleep again, and Alfred said to Robineau:

"For heaven's sake, let these good people sleep in peace! Are you going to make this noise much longer?"

"Ah! so you're not asleep either?"

"Parbleu! with such a row as you are making!"

"But there's no sense in lying in bed at the mercy of every passer-by!"

"Do you suppose anyone is passing at this hour?"

"Nobody knows.—However, I'll put the table in front of the door; that will offer some little resistance."

"Why don't you put yourself there?"

"Oh, of course! to act as *chevaux de frise* for you! God! what a pleasant night I am going to have! I trust that I can find the table."

Robineau felt his way about the room, and, having found the table, placed it against the door; then, feeling a little more at ease in his mind, he threw himself on his sheepskins again, and exclaimed with a long-drawn sigh:

"Was it worth while to buy a château, to be rich, to inherit Uncle Gratien's fortune, in order to lie on sheepskins like an Indian? I shall be able to say that I have known the vicissitudes of fortune.—It is stifling in this damned hovel. Not even a pillow or a bolster to put one's head on! God! how I will make up for this to-morrow at La Roche-Noire! I will lie in cotton!—I shall never be able to sleep in this bed; it smells horribly of game.—I say, Alfred! Alfred! are you comfortable on your straw?"

"My dear Robineau," replied Alfred with a yawn, "it's the novelty of the position that makes its charm; it seems so amusing to me to lie on straw!—Only it's a pity not to have a little Auvergnate—because—oh——"

"Because what?" said Robineau.—"Well! he's asleep.—I say, Monsieur Edouard, are you asleep, too?—It seems that the poet sleeps; I will try to follow his example. If only I could dream of my poor château, at which I have so much difficulty in arriving!—God grant that that witch may not come here to-night and cast a spell on us! With their White House—they'll give me bad dreams!"

However, fatigue triumphed over fear, and Robineau fell into a deep sleep, like his companions.

The new landed proprietor had a most delectable dream: he was at his château at last; he was called monseigneur, and was being fêted and congratulated, when he was suddenly and painfully awakened by a heavy weight resting on his chest.

"Who's that?" he cried, trying to escape from the burden that weighed upon him. But there was no reply, and he felt an additional weight on his shoulder. A cold perspiration stood out on his forehead; he no longer had the strength to cry out, but said in a faltering, trembling voice:

"Who—who is it? In heaven's name—what do you—want of me?"

There was no reply; the weight did not move but continued to rest on the traveller's chest and shoulder. Several minutes passed thus. Robineau no longer had the strength to cry out, but waited until he should be at liberty to move, praying fervently meanwhile. But, after some time, surprised to find that the intruder did not stir, he softly raised his head to try to free himself, and his face came in contact with a long beard which seemed to cover almost the whole of his bedfellow's face. Robineau uttered a loud shriek, thinking that he had the devil upon him, and in his terror threw himself to one side; whereupon he found that he was clear of the object that had held him down, and he sprang to his feet and ran to the middle of the room. But he fancied that he heard footsteps and he was convinced that the devil was pursuing him. In his terror, he ran about at random, came in contact with the curtain that separated the two parts of the room, caught his feet in the straw, fell headlong into it and lay there all huddled up, praying to heaven to protect him.

Meanwhile, tranquillity was reestablished; Robineau concluded that the devil had lost trace of him and had gone to torment one of his companions; so, after remaining a quarter of an hour under the straw, where he was nearly

stifled, he turned over to try to get a little air.

When he turned, Robineau's face found itself once more in contact with something, which, however, did not resemble a beard, for it was large and fat and smooth, soft to the touch, and endowed with a pleasant warmth. Robineau drew back his head and put out his hand to ascertain whether his suspicions were well-founded; but at the same instant the person to whom that plump object belonged turned over, and stretching out an arm and a leg, enlaced Robineau, who was thus caught anew and dared not stir.

This time Robineau was less alarmed than before, for he realized whom he had to do with; he had no doubt that it was Madame Claude who was lying upon him, and he preferred to feel the weight of Madame Claude rather than of the devil. However, he reflected that, if he remained there, the shepherd would find him there, and that he might not be gratified to see him lying under his wife. On the other hand he feared that, if he went away, he would fall once more into the clutches of the long-bearded creature who had waked him; and the fear of the devil was stronger than the fear of the shepherd. So he decided to retain his position until daybreak, when demons cease to be dangerous.

It was decidedly difficult to remain quiet in such a posture. Robineau instinctively remembered that the Auvergnate was still very comely, albeit a little dark; but all women are fair at night, when we choose to consider them so, and Robineau, still instinctively, put out his arms and let his hands run over everything that they came in contact with, until his fear gradually vanished, and his ideas became much less black.

By dint of toying with the Auvergnate, Robineau finally woke her; she supposed that it was her husband who was dallying with her, and like a woman who knew what that meant, she gave him a hearty kiss. Robineau submitted to the caress; he rather liked it; moreover, he did not choose to undeceive the Auvergnate, and to avoid that, it was necessary for him to play the part of the husband. He had been doing so for several minutes, when the same object which had driven him from his bed, came gambolling over the straw and jumped upon the couple who were not asleep. Again Robineau felt the long beard, and he cried out, thinking that the devil meant to punish him for his incontinence. Claude's wife cried out in her turn; she discovered, rather tardily it is true, that it was not her husband whom she was kissing. The shepherd woke and cried out to ascertain what the matter was with his wife.

This uproar awoke the other inmates of the hovel. Alfred and Edouard rose to find out what was happening; the old man managed to find a little fire and lighted the lamp. The three boys alone continued to snore.

Those in the outer room went with the light to inquire as to the cause of the outcries, and they saw the husband and wife holding Robineau, who was trying to bury himself under the straw anew, while the goat jumped upon all the company impartially.

Robineau was gazing with a terrified expression at the goat and the shepherd. Alfred and Edouard began by laughing at his face, while the old man cried:

"What's got into you all?"

"Why, Claudine woke me up by yelling like one possessed," said the shepherd.

"Pardi!" said Claudine, "I cried for I felt something—I mean someone, and I wanted to find out what it was."

"What were you there for, so close to my wife?" the shepherd asked Robineau; "what made you leave your sheepskins?"

"Faith, my dear friends," said Robineau, emerging entirely from beneath the straw, "I really don't know just how it happened; but something woke me up,—I felt a long beard and something walked on me."

"Ha! ha! it was the old goat that woke you, Robineau, and you took him for the devil or the little sorceress, I'll bet!"

Robineau opened his eyes to their fullest extent, stared at the goat and cried:

"What! was it that infernal beast? That's what comes of sleeping in a Noah's Ark!"

"Well, well!" said Claudine, "I don't see as there's any great harm done after all. You got frightened, that's all."

"That is all, absolutely!" rejoined Robineau, with a furtive glance at Claudine, who cried:

"Pardi! it wa'n't worth while to wake up the whole house for such a little thing! But look you, monsieur, next time you'd better try not to throw yourself down on us so sudden like; because it—it surprises a body, you see."

Robineau apologized anew and returned to his sheepskins, happy to have escaped so cheaply. The Auvergnats went to bed again, and so did Alfred and Edouard, laughing over the adventure of the goat; and this time Robineau laughed with them.

The rest of the night was uneventful. At daybreak everybody was out of bed. The young men accepted a jug of milk and prepared to resume their journey. Claude himself offered to serve as their guide and to show them the White House, for he was brave enough to pass it in broad daylight.

Our three travellers left the house therefore, after rewarding the Auvergnats for their hospitality. As she bowed to Robineau, Claudine bestowed upon him a furtive little smile of which many a city coquette would not have been ashamed.

IX

ISAURE

The three friends walked gayly on, admiring the dawn, which is much finer in the mountains than when seen from a window in Paris, or from the gravelled path of a garden. Claude went ahead to lead the way; and Robineau, his spirits lightened by the certainty that he would soon see his château, rubbed his hands and smiled, apparently at his thoughts. Alfred and Edouard joked their companion on the smile he had received from the Auvergnate on taking his leave of her; and, as they recalled the equivocal situation in which they had found him in the middle of the night, they put forward certain conjectures. Robineau defended himself smilingly, with an air of gratified self-esteem; then pointed to the shepherd who was ahead of them, saying:

"Hush, messieurs, I beg; you will compromise me!"

Suddenly the shepherd halted and called out to them:

"There’s the White House!"

They were on the slope of a hill, and at the point where the mountaineer had stopped, the road made a bend, disclosing a lovely valley, with vineyards and fields, and with many tall shade-giving trees which added variety to the picture.

Alfred and Edouard hastened to the shepherd’s side. They saw in the centre of the valley a pretty house, built after the modern style, having a ground floor and an upper-story with a mansard roof. A wall of considerable length, beginning at the left side of the house, enclosed the garden, which was evidently very large.

"What! is that the haunted house?" Alfred asked the shepherd. "Why, really, it is not terrifying to look at. The location is delightful; this valley is a charming spot, and if the devil has taken up his abode here, we must agree that he has excellent taste."

The shepherd made no reply, but contented himself with looking at the house with a timid expression. Robineau, who had remained behind, cried:

"I’d much rather see La Roche-Noire than all your peasants’ hovels!"

"Where is young Isaure’s house?" Edouard asked.

"Yonder, messieurs, near the White House. Don’t you see? here on your right."

"Oh, yes! A rustic house of most attractive aspect, surrounded by fine trees, and with flowers in the windows.—So that is where the little sorceress lives!—But let us go on, let us go down into the valley; we shall have a better view at close quarters."

They kept on to the foot of the hill; but the mountaineer no longer walked ahead; he remained near the travellers, and they observed that he was guiding them toward a road which, while it led through the valley, did not directly pass the White House.

"I will act as guide now," said Alfred, "for I see, my good man, that you are leading us away from the place we wish to see."

"Why, messieurs, I’m taking you by the road that leads to Saint-Amand, and you don’t need to go right by the White House."

"Worthy Claude is right," said Robineau; "for after all, messieurs, it isn’t this house, where nobody lives, that we’re going to, but my château."

"And I tell you I don’t propose to pass through this valley, close by this famous habitation, without having a good look at it.—Come, Edouard, let us go to the right."

Alfred and Edouard walked rapidly in the direction of the White House; the shepherd followed them with a hesitating step, and Robineau brought up the rear, consigning his companions to the devil.

They arrived in front of that house, which the mountaineers never mentioned without a thrill of terror. Claude halted ten paces away, having no inclination to go any nearer. Robineau remained with Claude and seated himself on the grass, saying:

"Go on, messieurs, satisfy your curiosity, although I don’t see anything very curious about the house. It was not worth while to turn aside from our road for this. Upon my word, you act like schoolboys."

Paying no heed to Robineau, Alfred and Edouard went close to the house. The ground-floor windows were closed by shutters, those on the first floor by blinds only. The young men examined everything with interest; and, when they came to the front door, where there was an iron knocker, Alfred cried:

"Parbleu! we must make sure whether there is anyone in this pretty little house."

As he spoke, he seized the knocker and was about to knock, when the shepherd, who had not lost sight of him, cried out in dismay:

"Monsieur! monsieur! don’t knock! oh! don’t do anything like that!"

"Why not, pray, my friend?" said Alfred with a laugh; "if there’s no one here, what difference does it make whether I knock or not? And if there are people here, we shall make the acquaintance of the proprietor, and he will excuse travellers for so trifling a liberty."

"No matter!" cried Robineau, "it’s most improper to knock; indeed, it’s absurd, and——"

Robineau’s sentence was interrupted by the sound of the knocker, with which Alfred was belaboring the door. At the sound the shepherd retreated even farther, in dire alarm; he evidently expected that some terrifying creature would open the door. Robineau turned pale and hummed a tune. Alfred and Edouard listened; but the blows of the knocker echoed inside the house and finally died away, unanswered.

"No one!" said Edouard.

"Let us try again," said Alfred. He knocked twice more in quick succession, louder than before; but the blows were followed by the same silence.

"You are wasting your time, you see, messieurs!" said Robineau, rising; "you might knock until to-morrow, to no purpose, as there’s no one there!"

"Or else they won’t answer," muttered the shepherd, who had drawn a little nearer.

"It’s a pity!" said Alfred; "I would have liked to see a legion of phantoms come out—just to see what sort of a face Sire de la Roche-Noire would have made."

"My face would not have changed, messieurs; I don’t believe in these old grandmothers’ tales, as you do; that is why I don’t see the need of knocking at doors when I know there’s no one inside."

"Oh! you wouldn’t have to knock like that at midnight!" said the shepherd, shaking his head. "You’d find a difference then, I tell you!"

"Well," said Alfred, "as we can’t get into the White House unless by scaling the walls, which would be a little too much after the style of the sons of Aymon or Ogier the Dane, let us try the cottage; perhaps we shall be more fortunate there."

"Oh! you won’t find anybody there either, messieurs," said Claude, "for at this time of day Isaure always drives her goats to pasture in the mountain."

"In that case," said Robineau, "it seems to me that we might dispense with knocking at every door we see."

Alfred and Edouard left their companion to confide his reflections to the shepherd. They walked toward the cottage, which was surrounded by fine trees and by small squares of ground in which flowers were cultivated with care.

"This place looks like a palace beside the hovel where we slept last night," said Alfred; "we may look upon this cottage as the château of Chadrat."

"Yes, it's a charming spot," said Edouard, stopping to examine the rustic structure. "These beautiful trees whose shade seems to protect this modest abode—and the flowers—and the turf!—Do you know, my dear Alfred, I would gladly pass my life here!"

"Your life! oh! that is too long; but a week, with a lovely woman—I don't say no to that.—But let us see if the mistress of this cottage corresponds with the idea I have formed of her."

The door was closed and locked. Alfred knocked, called, looked in the windows; no one appeared, but they heard on the other side of the door the barking of a dog who seemed anxious to interview the visitors.

"The house is well guarded, at all events," said Alfred.

"What's that?" exclaimed Robineau.

"It's Isaure's dog," said the shepherd; "he's a big fellow, I tell you! and I'll bet no two men could handle him! He's a—wait—he's a dog of some kind of a land—what do you call it?"

"Do you mean Newfoundland?"

"Yes, monsieur, Newfoundland, that's it."

"And how does it happen that this girl has a dog of that breed, which is so rare in this country?"

"Oh! monsieur, that's another one of those mysterious things that proves that there's something crooked. Isaure's had this big dog since André's widow's death; somebody asked her where she got him, and she said a traveller made her a present of him because she took him in and gave him something to eat. I ask you if it's likely that a traveller would deprive himself of his trusty companion?"

"No, it isn't conceivable," said Robineau, "and I begin to agree with the shepherd, that this young girl—It's a most extraordinary thing."

"Do you know what the dog's name is?" Edouard asked the shepherd.

"Yes, monsieur, he goes out with his mistress sometimes, and we hear her calling him 'Vaillant' here and 'Vaillant' there."

Edouard walked to the door and tapped softly, calling Vaillant. The dog at once replied, but his bark was less loud; he seemed to ask what was wanted rather than to threaten the strangers.

The two friends listened to the dog with interest, and the shepherd with attention; but Robineau, who was striding to and fro, stamping the ground angrily, cried:

"Messieurs, I don't know whether you came to Auvergne to talk with dogs and to knock at every door.—As for myself, as I have a different object, I am going to have the honor of bidding you adieu if you don't choose to go forward."

"Nonsense, Robineau! don't get excited; we are coming right along. I confess that I would have liked to see this girl."

"So would I!" said Edouard.

"But since she is absent, and you don't feel like taking another little walk into the mountains, we will go with you, reserving the right to come back without you to see the little sorceress."

"There she is! there she is!" cried the shepherd at that moment, pointing toward the mountain. The young men at once turned their eyes in that direction and saw a young girl, who was coming quickly down into the valley, driving a herd of goats before her.

Alfred and Edouard remained where they stood and followed the girl with their eyes. Her gait was light and active; sometimes she ran after her goats, again she turned to call the stragglers. When she descended a steep slope, her feet seemed hardly to touch the ground, and she leaped as if in sport over deep excavations. At last she reached the valley, where they were better able to distinguish her features: her great deep-blue eyes were shaded by long black lashes, and her eyelids, often half lowered, added to the sweetness of her expression, which was at once artless and shy. Her nose was small and well shaped, her mouth, which was rather large, revealed when she smiled teeth as white as ivory; her fair hair fell in great curls over her brow, and was arranged with taste and with more care than is usual among the women of the mountains; her complexion was but slightly darkened by the sun, from which it was sheltered by a broad-brimmed straw hat. She was of medium height, but slender and graceful; her foot and hand were small and shapely. A brown skirt and a waist of the same material, with a little red and white apron, comprised her whole costume; but there was in her manner of wearing them a grace that did not at all resemble the heavy and awkward carriage of the women of Auvergne.

"She is charming!" said Alfred.

Edouard said nothing, but his eyes followed Isaure's every movement.

"Yes," said Robineau, "she's very pretty for a peasant."

The little goatherd approached her dwelling. Ere long she stopped in surprise and made a gesture which implied that she had just discovered the strangers. But she walked on after a moment, and came cheerily toward them. Alfred and Edouard stepped forward to meet her.

"Have you been knocking at my door, messieurs?" she asked, in a very sweet voice, with a curtsy to the travellers.

"Yes, my lovely child," Alfred replied.

"I was not mistaken! I heard Vaillant. You see, he warns me instantly when anyone comes. But you wish to step in and rest, no doubt, and have something to eat? Come, messieurs, I will let you in."

"You are too kind," said Edouard; "but we are sorry to have brought you home."

"Why so? As if I had not time enough to pasture my goats! And is it not a pleasure to be useful to travellers?"

As she spoke, the girl ran ahead to unlock the door.

"My friend, she is pretty enough to paint!" said Alfred in an undertone.

"Yes; everything about her charms and interests one!"

"What drivelling idiots these mountaineers must be to be afraid of such a lovely child! For my part, I would gladly sell myself to the devil with her!"

"Well, messieurs! do you propose to go in here?" inquired Robineau, walking toward his companions.

"Oh! my dear Robineau, you must certainly agree that we cannot refuse this sweet child's invitation. Besides, we have had nothing but milk this morning, and it seems to me that a little fruit would not do us any harm."

"But, messieurs, at my château you will have chickens and——"

"I am fully persuaded that we shall have geese and turkeys at your château; but, pending the time when we shall enjoy their society, let us make this young woman's acquaintance. Come, Robineau, just this one concession—it will be the last."

"Great God! how many concessions I have made since yesterday!—You are making me pay very dear for my château!"

"I will write you a poem for your installation, Monsieur Jules."

"Well, if you insist upon it, let us go into the girl's house for a minute; but beware of her dog!"

Isaure had opened the door. A superb dog, with long silky white hair, leaped upon her, then smelt each one of the visitors—a formality which did not please Robineau.

As they entered the cottage, Alfred turned and exclaimed:

"Why, where's our guide? I don't see him."

The shepherd had departed as soon as the girl appeared.

"He seems to have left us," said Edouard.

"Still another delay!" muttered Robineau.

"We can do without him quite well, and I will guarantee that we will be at your house within two hours. Meanwhile, let us enter the abode of the little sorceress, whose lovely eyes have turned my head already."

The young men entered a room on the ground floor, furnished with common articles, but spotlessly clean. At the rear could be seen a small yard, with the garden beyond.

"Would you like to see my garden while I am getting your breakfast ready, messieurs?" asked Isaure.

"With pleasure," said Alfred.

"Come, Vaillant, escort these gentlemen to the garden."

Vaillant understood his mistress's signs and led the way. The young men followed him, Robineau saying to himself:

"It seems that it's the dog who does the honors of the house."

They passed through the yard, where there were hens and pigeons, and Vaillant led them into the garden; it was small, but tastefully arranged, with fruit, vegetables and flowers all growing there without the least confusion. Edouard gazed at everything with deep interest, and Alfred with surprise; he could not understand how so pretty a girl could live alone in that cottage, where everything seemed to point to comfortable circumstances and orderly habits.

The dog walked in front of them; when they stopped, he did the same, and turned to look at them; then he would walk on, turning his head from time to time, to see if they were following him. He led the travellers thus to every nook and corner of the garden; then took them back to the house.

"This dog is an extraordinary creature," said Edouard; "a peasant could not have played the cicerone better."

"He is magnificent," said Alfred, "a genuine Newfoundland. He seems to be young still; I'll wager that his like cannot be found in the whole district; he is worth more than six hundred francs."

"You must agree, messieurs," said Robineau, "that it's surprising to find such a fine animal in a peasant girl's house. For my part, I agree with the shepherd, that it's very strange that a traveller should have given him to her,—unless the little one, in exchange, gave him her most precious possession."

"Oh! Monsieur Robineau, what an idea!" cried Edouard angrily. "To assume evil at once! to cast a slur upon this child's virtue."

"Faith, my dear fellow," said Alfred, "it may well be that Robineau is right; we do not know this girl, but she lives alone, and——"

"And that's a very suspicious circumstance," said Robineau; "but these poets are amazing creatures—they are determined to find prodigies of innocence and virtue everywhere."

"No, monsieur; poets feed on chimeras less than other men; for they are surfeited with all forms of fiction; they know how a romance is made, and they often go behind the scenes, where it is difficult to retain one's illusions; but that is no reason for never believing in virtue, and I do not believe that an innocent girl is a prodigy in this part of the country."

At that moment Isaure appeared at the door and said:

"When you wish to breakfast, messieurs, everything is ready."

They returned to the cottage, where they found a table laden with fruit, bread and milk, and butter, all arranged with a daintiness and neatness that charmed the eye.

"This is more appetizing than the soup of our good friends of Chadrat," said Alfred, as he and his companions seated themselves at the table.

"Won't you sit down with us?" Edouard asked Isaure.

"Oh, no! I have already breakfasted, monsieur; but I will stay to wait on you, if you require anything."

As she spoke, Isaure seated herself at some little distance from the table, took some work, and began to sew. Vaillant at once lay down in front of his mistress, with his face turned toward the visitors, from whom he did not take his eyes for an instant, like a sentinel stationed to guard an important post, who never relaxes his watchfulness, so that he may defend it if attacked.

While they ate, the young men frequently glanced at the girl. There was on her features an impressible, gentle expression, to which her ingenuous and candid glance imparted an indefinable charm.

"I agree with Edouard now," said Alfred after a moment, "and I believe that Robineau is wrong."

"Do you occupy this house all alone?" Edouard asked the girl.

"Yes, monsieur, all alone, for the three years since my dear mother died."

"Was André's widow your mother?"

"She took the place of a mother to me, for I never knew my own parents, who died a long time ago; but kind André and his wife adopted me as their child. When he died I was very small; but his wife—it's only three years since I lost her, and I think of her every day."

The girl's voice trembled, and she lowered her head over her work; the young men looked at her and saw tears falling from her lovely eyes. Vaillant noticed the change in his mistress's tone; he raised his head, stood up, and looked at Isaure; then turning his eyes on the strangers, he gave a low growl as if calling them to account for the girl's tears; but she instantly put her hand on him, patted and caressed him, whereupon the dog became quiet once more and lay down at her feet.

"Forgive us for reviving your grief by our questions," said Alfred; "but travellers are inquisitive—and you are so pretty, you know!—But you must be bored, living all alone?"

"Bored? oh! no, monsieur! I have no time for that; I have so many things to do! My garden requires a great deal of care; and then, have I not company? my dog, my hens, my goats, and my cow?"

"She calls that company!" exclaimed Robineau with a smile of pity. "But you must be afraid here, aren't you?" he asked Isaure.

"Afraid? no, monsieur; there are no thieves in our mountains; and even if anyone should try to harm me, have I not my faithful Vaillant? Oh! he would defend me stoutly!"

"I certainly wouldn't want to fight with him," said Robineau.

"True," said Alfred, "that's a magnificent dog of yours, and of a very valuable breed. They are the dogs that help the good monks on Mont Cenis and Mont Saint-Bernard to find lost travellers, who are often almost dead in the snow."

"Ah! I am sure that Vaillant would do as much!"

"Did you pay a high price for him?" inquired Robineau with a sarcastic smile.

The girl did not reply for some seconds; then she lowered her eyes and said:

"He was given to me—he cost me nothing. The person who made me the gift told me that he could not give me a more faithful guardian."

"Had I been in his place," said Edouard, "I would have done the same. Your situation is not without danger, and fidelity is assuredly the greatest safeguard of innocence and beauty."

Isaure looked up at Edouard and seemed to thank him with a smile; while Robineau shook his head and stuffed himself with bread and butter.

"But," said Alfred, "you live near a place against which all of Vaillant's vigilance would be of no avail, assuming the reports that are current hereabout to be true."

"Ah! do you mean the house across the way?" said Isaure smiling, "where the people of the mountains declare that there are ghosts?"

"Exactly.—So you are not afraid of these ghosts?"

"Oh! no, monsieur! I know very well that it's all nonsense. In my dear mother's time, the mountaineers used to tell us sometimes that we ought to go away from this dangerous valley. But that only made us laugh. We knew that there was no danger here; for nothing ever happened to us."

"And don't you ever see lights in the White House at night," asked Robineau, "or hear noises? Don't you ever see the black ghost?"

A mischievous smile played about the girl's lips as she replied:

"I have never seen anything out of the common course, monsieur."

"Faith," said Alfred, "we tried to find out whether the house was really unoccupied; and before coming here we went there and knocked, to the great scandal of the mountaineer who acted as our guide."

"You knocked at the White House?" said Isaure hastily; "did anyone answer?"

"No, of course not, as there's no one there."

The girl seemed more or less excited; but she recovered herself and said:

"To be sure; it was of no use to knock."

Edouard looked closely at Isaure and tried to read her eyes; but Robineau sprang to his feet and cried:

"I think you must have eaten enough, messieurs, and it's time for us to be going on."

Alfred and Edouard rose regretfully; they realized that it would not be well to prolong their visit then. Alfred drew his purse and was about to take out a piece of money, when the girl stayed his hand, saying:

"You owe me nothing, messieurs; my adopted parents never took pay from strangers who stopped at their house, and I should consider that I failed in respect to their memory if I did not do in everything as they did."

"Well, I must obey you, my lovely child," said Alfred; "but I expect to stay in this neighborhood for some time, and I warn you that I shall come again to ask you for some breakfast."

"Whenever you please, monsieur," said Isaure, with a little curtsy, while the young man tried to take her hand. But she hastily drew it back, with a smile to the three travellers.

Robineau had already left the cottage, and Edouard waited for Alfred to go before taking his leave. He said nothing to Isaure, but he gazed long at her, and his eyes found it difficult to leave her.

X

ROBINEAU’S ENTRY INTO HIS DOMAIN

They took the road which the shepherd had attempted to take, and which was supposed to lead them to Saint-Amand. This time it was Robineau who walked ahead; he tried to hurry his companions, by running forward and then returning to them. Alfred and Edouard said nothing and paid little heed to any of Robineau’s manœuvres; they were thinking of Isaure and the memory of the young goatherd caused them to forget their destination.

"Upon my word, she is charming!" cried Alfred at last; "I would never have believed that in these mountains—in a mere cottage—one could find so many charms and attractions. The shepherd was quite right—she doesn’t resemble any of the women of Auvergne we have seen hitherto; and still the girl I danced with at Ayda was not bad-looking—but so heavy and awkward! She was a genuine mountaineer, whereas this child—Don’t you agree with me, Edouard?"

"Yes, the girl is very pretty."

"Very pretty! How coldly you say that, for a poet! Say rather that she is adorable, enchanting—that she would drive people wild in Paris!"

Edouard did not answer, but Alfred’s enthusiasm seemed to annoy him.

"You take fire on account of that little shepherdess, messieurs," said Robineau; "but mon Dieu! you’ll see a different sort on my domain! They say that there are some very buxom village girls near my château."

"I don’t care for buxom women, my dear Robineau!"

"I mean well-built—robust."

"I don’t care for robust women."

"But I mean well-shaped, wanton creatures."

"I don’t care for wantons."

"Oh! go to walk!"[7]

"Why, that is what we have been doing for a long while."

The young men passed divers lovely hillsides covered with vines. The landscape was charming—fields, pastures, orchards everywhere. Soon they saw before them a small town most delightfully situated on the banks of a winding stream. Some peasants informed them that they were at Saint-Amand.

"And La Roche-Noire?" inquired Robineau.

"Oh! that ain’t very far away, monsieur; but you don’t want to go through Saint-Amand. Turn off here—to Saint-Saturnin; you’ll find the way easy enough."

"Good!" said Robineau; "my property is evidently known here; forward, messieurs."

"Why, you go like a stag, Robineau! Give us a little chance to breathe."

"I shan’t breathe until I am at my château."

And Robineau hastened forward, although the perspiration was streaming from his brow and he was as red as a boiled lobster. After walking another quarter of an hour, the young men overtook two young peasants who were driving a laden ass.

"Where are you going, my friends?" asked Robineau.

"Home, monsieur."

"Where do you live?"

"About a half a league from here, near the Château de la Roche-Noire."

"Near La Roche-Noire!" cried Robineau, in an ecstasy of delight. "They are two of my vassals!"

"Your vassals are slightly soiled," observed Alfred.

"Parbleu! in the morning; but I consider them charming, myself. Listen, my little Cupids."

The two peasants, who had no idea that they were the ones who were called Cupids, continued to urge their ass forward; but Robineau overtook them again and stopped them.

"Listen, my children: you say that you live near La Roche-Noire?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then of course you know the château?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Is it a fine château?"

"Oh! yes, monsieur, it’s very fine! It’s just like a prison—there’s towers and barred windows!"

Alfred roared with laughter; but Robineau continued his examination.

"My friends, it is well that you should know that I am the new lord, the proprietor of that magnificent estate."

The little peasants stared at him with a stupid expression, still plying their stick; and Alfred observed with a laugh:

"How strange; that doesn’t seem to produce any effect at all."

"My children," pursued Robineau, "you probably didn’t understand what I said—I am the proprietor of La Roche-Noire."

"Yes, monsieur, we understand. But they looked for you last night, monsieur."

"They looked for me!—You see, messieurs, they expected me—I was sure of it!—Poor children! You had a fête all prepared, I suppose?"

"Oh! I don’t know, monsieur; all I know is that a gentleman came to our place yesterday, and sung out that his master was coming and we must dance and enjoy ourselves because he’d treat us well. Then my brother and me, we went in front of the château to play the bagpipes, and we waited for the man as was going to treat us. But there didn’t nobody come, and so our father, who was mad because we’d been to the château, he wouldn’t give us no supper when we got home, and he said that would teach us to make fools of ourselves."

"You shall have two suppers to-day, my children, I promise you, and your father shall see what kind of man I am! But you must do something for me. Just run ahead; you’re not tired, you boys! You will reach the château before we

do, and you must ask for François, my valet, and tell him I am coming. Go on; leave your ass with me; I'll mount him and that will rest me a little. He isn't a very noble steed; but when one has been walking twenty-four hours, one takes what one finds.—Go on."

The boys looked at each other and did not stir.

"Didn't you hear me?" asked Robineau.

"Yes, monsieur; but we can't leave our donkey with you like that; all you'd have to do would be to ride off on him and we'd never see you again!"

"What, you little rascals! you take your lord for a thief?"

"My dear Robineau," said Alfred, "these boys are quite right not to leave their ass in your hands; for, after all, they don't know you, and you haven't the least idea how to play the *seigneur*. Do you suppose that all you have to do is to say: 'I am the man?'—Prove it; draw your purse; that's always the way to make people recognize you."

"Ah! to be sure, I didn't think of that!" cried Robineau; and he immediately produced a five-franc piece and gave it to one of the small boys. The sight of the coin produced much more effect on the peasants than all the titles in the world. The elder consented to run on ahead to the château, and the younger allowed Robineau to ride the ass, on condition that he himself should remain to drive him.

The ass was a large, strong animal; he wore no saddle, so that the new landed proprietor was obliged to ride bareback, and in default of stirrups, to cling to the mane, confining his mount to a foot pace. But he sat proudly erect on the beast, requesting the boy not to make him go too fast, and Alfred declared that Robineau could not find a nobler animal on which to make his entry into the château.

"I certainly shall not ride into the courtyard on the ass," said Robineau, "but I am very glad to use him until we arrive there. You have kept me walking since yesterday noon, messieurs.—Don't urge the ass, my boy, let him go quietly, I am not in such a hurry now; there will be no harm done if your brother arrives some time before us."

Thereupon the little peasant fell back and left Robineau to guide the ass as he chose. Alfred and Edouard could not help smiling whenever they glanced at the cavalier, who called to them from time to time:

"We are drawing near my château, messieurs; I feel it in the beating of my heart."

"I smell[8] nothing but an odor of barnyard," said Alfred.

"Oh! that comes from Monsieur Cheval's—he keeps cows and oxen," said the boy.

"Who is this Monsieur Cheval, little one?"

"He's the horse-doctor and farrier of these parts; he doctors animals."

"The deuce! he must be one of the authorities of the neighborhood!"

"Messieurs! messieurs! I believe I see it!" cried Robineau, taking out his handkerchief and wiping his eyes.

"What—Monsieur Cheval?"

"My château! my estate! See—on that hill yonder.—Is that my château, boy?"

"Yes, monsieur, yes, that's La Roche-Noire."

"Ah! what rapture, messieurs! Do you see a tower—I mean towers, ramparts, and—Stop the ass a minute, boy.—Wait, my friends—my joy, my emotion are—I believe I am going to fall."

They gathered around Robineau, who was almost fainting. At last he loosened his cravat, took a pinch of snuff, and returned to himself, only to turn his eyes once more upon his property, crying:

"Ah! messieurs, it makes me ill, but it makes me very happy!—Dieu! how large it looks! how beautiful! what a noble structure!"

"It looks to me like an old ruin," said Alfred.

"It reminds me of Anne Radcliffe's novels," said Edouard.

"Oh! messieurs, how far it extends! What a superb building! and windows! Heavens! what a lot of windows! It's like the Château of Chambord!"

"So far as I can see, there is no glass in all those windows."

"Perhaps it wasn't the custom to have glass in old times, my friend. Besides, I was told that there were some small repairs to be made.—But let us push on, messieurs, let us push on, I cannot contain myself; it seems to me that my château is holding out its arms to me.—Above all things, no more Robineau here, I entreat you; I shall not answer to that name again. Come, my boy; urge your donkey a bit, so that we may arrive sooner at yonder beautiful greensward."

The boy switched the beast, which, realizing that it was nearing home, asked nothing better than to fall into a trot. Robineau, a little surprised at first by that rapid pace, allowed the ass to trot on, for the pleasure due to the fact that he was approaching his château gave him courage to retain his seat.

They drew near the lawn in front of the château, and saw on the right and left a number of cottages of rather attractive appearance. Soon they were near enough to La Roche-Noire to distinguish a number of persons who seemed to be on the lookout in front of the château. They were François and all the people whom he, having been notified by the little peasant, had found disposed to leave their work in order to witness the new proprietor's arrival. The number was not large: there were three peasants and five peasant women, together with Monsieur Cheval, the veterinary, who hoped to obtain the custom of the château, and Monsieur Férulus, who kept a small school in the neighborhood, and who also counted upon being tutor to the newcomer's family. But in addition to these ten persons, there were a score or so of children, the majority very small, whom François easily collected, because children are never scarce in the country districts; and in order to make them useful, the valet had given to each of them a cowherd's horn, the only instrument they were capable of playing. François wished the peasants to fire muskets in honor of his master's arrival; but they had been unable to find any that were in condition to be fired, either in the château or anywhere in the neighborhood. In default of firearms the Auvergnats had armed themselves with their bagpipes; Monsieur Cheval had taken his drum from its hook—he was a very skilful performer on the drum, and played at all the fêtes and merrymakings in the neighborhood; and Monsieur Férulus, who played upon no instrument, but sang as if he had been dismissed from the Opéra, had composed a chorus, which he would be obliged to sing by himself, as the five peasant women refused to join in this.

François had stationed the concierge and the gardener at the windows of their respective lodges, looking on the road, to watch; they were to notify him as soon as they saw anyone, when he would give the signal to his party. At last the concierge, who was usually half seas over, and who had been considerably more than that since the preceding night, in order to receive his new master more becomingly—the concierge exclaimed with an ominous hiccough:

"Here comes some one! Here comes a donkey first of all!"

"It's monseigneur!" said François; "now, my friends, all together, and make as much noise as you can!"

Instantly the air was filled with the noise of bagpipes, horns, drums and voices,—François, the concierge and the gardener adding to the uproar with a prolonged *Vive monseigneur!* The ass that bore the person thus noisily welcomed continued at a fast trot across the greensward, for it saw at the left the entrance to its stable, beside a small cottage, where a cow and divers geese seemed also to be awaiting the new lord of the manor. But the infernal uproar which suddenly rent the air caused the donkey, which was not fond of music, to prick up its ears; it broke into a gallop in order to reach its quarters more quickly. Robineau tried to hold it back, but he had too much to do to hold himself in his seat. In vain did he call out to the peasants, to François, to stop the ass; the strains of the instruments drowned his voice. The ass shot through the midst of the villagers like an arrow, as they stood respectfully aside and saluted the new proprietor, who entered upon his domain at a gallop, clinging to the tail and mane of his mount. But the ass, instead of going to the château, made for its own quarters, and did not stop till it reached the stable, where it immediately rolled on the floor with its rider. Monseigneur shrieked for help, while the ass brayed lustily, in order to have its share in the concert that was being given on the lawn.

Meanwhile, François and some of the peasants, surprised that monseigneur preferred to dismount in the stable of one of his vassals instead of in the courtyard of his château, went thither after him, and not without much difficulty did they succeed in extricating Monsieur de la Roche-Noire from beneath the ass. At last Robineau stood erect once more; he had fallen into the mire, which was in his hair and over one eye, and with which one side of his coat was besmeared. But his pleasure in having arrived and in hearing the tumult that was being made in his honor prevented him from observing the disarray of his costume. He strode proudly forth from the stable, and bent his steps, limping slightly, toward the peasants; he bowed to right and left and was intoxicated for some moments by the loud strains of the cowherds' horns; he considered that Monsieur Cheval beat the drum as well as the wild Indian at the Palais-Royal, and that the peasant women had voices as good as choristers'.

But Monsieur Férulus stepped forward to meet him; he made a gesture with his left arm, whereupon François immediately made another with his right, and everybody was quiet. Thereupon Monsieur Férulus, having saluted as if he were about to dance a minuet, passed his tongue over his lips and addressed Robineau thus:

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire:—*Albo dies notanda lapillo!*—The Romans marked with white and black stones their happy and unhappy days; we shall make a cross for this day which brings you among us. Long has this domain been deserted. You will be the sun, which is more than perfect (*pluperfect*), you will be the *future*, which is *indefinite*, and these peasants will enjoy a happiness which will not be *conditional*."

Alfred and Edouard, who were behind the recipient of this complimentary address, bit their lips to avoid laughing in Monsieur Férulus's face, and moved away from the new landholder, whose garments did not exhale a pleasant odor. But Monsieur Férulus took snuff and continued his harangue:

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, *vitam impendere vero*; I have never declined compliments or flatteries; but it is very pleasant to me to be the first to salute the new owner of this château. May you be able to say of this castle: *Inveni portum!* or, if you prefer, to settle in Auvergne! If I am to credit public report, which has spoken to me through the medium of your valet de chambre, you combine in a single person the wisdom of Socrates, the justice of Aristides, the grandeur of Themistocles and the eloquence of Cicero; may you add to these the good fortune of Polycrates, the wealth of Crœsus, and the length of days of Methuselah!"

Monsieur Férulus ceased to speak, wiped his forehead and took more snuff. Robineau, who had listened with keen delight to his harangue, bowed low and replied:

"Certainly, monsieur! I beg your pardon—your name, if you please?"

"Férulus."

"Well, Monsieur Férulus, I am deeply touched. For my own part, I propose to live as long as possible.—But come whenever you choose, to eat a plate of soup at the château; even to-day."

"With great pleasure, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire," said Férulus, eagerly. He had never been known to refuse an invitation to dinner.

And Robineau returned to his friends, saying:

"That's a very learned man! deuce take it! he knows a lot!"

François, when he saw that Monsieur Férulus had finished his speech, ordered the music to strike up anew. Monsieur Cheval, who was no speaker, but who was equally anxious to secure the newcomer's patronage, left his drum for a moment and went to his house, whence he soon returned leading a little horse, which he presented to Robineau, saying:

"Here, monsieur, is a stout nag, that won't throw you down like Nicolas's donkey; get on his back; he was newly shod this morning."

Robineau would have liked quite as well to make his entry on foot, but he dared not refuse Monsieur Cheval's offer, so he climbed to the nag's back, on condition that he should be allowed to go at a walk. They proceeded toward the château, around which could still be seen some vestiges of the ancient moats, wherein children were playing and tumbling about. At the right hand and the left were two towers which were in imminent danger of falling; but the buildings in the centre seemed to be in better condition. A large courtyard, where weeds were growing unchecked, preceded the buildings and was entered through a broad gateway with a small lodge on each side, occupied by the concierge and the gardener. Those worthies had remained at their windows awaiting their master's entrance to carry out a little surprise which François had devised.

At last the proprietor arrived; they heard the hullabaloo caused by the shouts, the cowherds' horns, the drum and the bagpipes; the children came first, then the peasants. The procession was swelled by Alfred and Edouard, laughing till the tears came; and Monsieur Férulus walked solemnly beside the horse. At the moment that they

entered the courtyard of the château, the gardener hurled the wreath of flowers which he had prepared for his master; but instead of falling upon Robineau, it landed on the ears of his steed, who was thus crowned with flowers. At the same moment, the concierge leaned from the window to present the keys of the château, which he had placed in a salad-bowl, in default of a salver. He held this out with one hand, while with the other he raised a glass of wine, crying:

"*Vive monseigneur! vive not' bourgeois!*"

The bourgeois did not inquire what there might be in the salad-bowl that was offered him. But, as he was rather inquisitive, he said to the concierge:

"Give it to me, my friend."

The concierge, who was drunk, thinking that his master wished to drink, held out the glass and spilled on his head a large part of its contents, while Monsieur Férulus exclaimed:

"O thrice happy day! I fancy that I am present at the ceremonies of the Corybantes! I seem to enter the Temple of Cybele! Music, flowers, libations—everything is here!"

"Yes, everything, absolutely," said Robineau, wiping his face; but, as he was not anxious to receive any further libations, he urged his begarlanded nag, and covered with wine and cow-dung, entered La Roche-Noire amid the cries and plaudits of all the little brats in the neighborhood.

Robineau dismounted, and as he still had some difficulty in walking, as a result of the fall under the donkey, he did not feel in condition to inspect his domain at once. After tossing with noble indifference a handful of small coins to the children, who grovelled in the dirt to scramble for them, which, according to Monsieur Férulus, recalled the tournaments of old, Robineau bade the concierge provide the whole company with refreshments; then, having saluted them all, he followed François to his bedroom, where he threw himself, tired out, on his bed, crying:

"Dieu! how pleasant it is to be a seigneur! to be harangued—ow!—and complimented!—Ah! my ribs! It's a little fatiguing, but I shall get used to it.—François, while I take a little rest, cause a magnificent repast to be prepared, and inform the peasants that there will be a ball at the château this evening. I have been too well received not to show my gratitude."

XI

THE CHÂTEAU DE LA ROCHE-NOIRE.—A VILLAGERS' FÊTE

Alfred and Edouard followed Robineau's example; they seized the opportunity to rest from the fatigue of the journey. François showed them to two large rooms where there were bedsteads and mattresses; the beds in the château lacked bedclothes only; but François had already sent servants to Clermont to bring linen, with the carriage and the luggage of his master and his friends.

After three hours' rest Robineau woke. He lay beneath a crimson canopy; ancient silk curtains surrounded the bed on which he had thrown himself and which was decidedly hard. But Robineau said to himself as he rose:

"I will have the mattresses stuffed."

Then he glanced about the room which was to be his bedroom. The cornice was gilded; the ceiling was adorned with Cupids, whose features were not clearly distinguishable; and the apartment was hung with old tapestry representing the story of the Chaste Susannah.

"This is magnificent!" thought Robineau; "it's after the style of Versailles and Saint-Germain!—Gilt fillets over the doors! mouldings everywhere! beautiful mirrors!—To be sure, there are some cracks in the wall here and there, and a few holes in the floor; but I'll have all those things repaired. I will have workmen here to-morrow."

Robineau saw a cord hanging over the mantel; he pulled it, a bell rang in the distance, and François appeared.

"Did monsieur ring?" he asked.

"Faith, yes, I rang without meaning to.—But no matter; where are the gentlemen, François?"

"They did like monsieur, they lay down; but I think they're awake."

"François, we must have complete beds for to-night; it would not be decent to sleep at La Roche-Noire without sheets.—Send for dealers and buy some; I appoint you my factotum, my steward."

"Very good, monsieur."

"By the way, I should be glad to inspect my servants. How many are there here besides yourself?"

"The concierge and the gardener, monsieur, that's all."

"That is not enough; I must have a good-sized staff of servants. But no matter, tell my people to come to me; I will give them my orders."

François left the room, and Alfred and Edouard joined Robineau, who stood at the window overlooking the gardens and rapturously surveyed his property.

"Well, Robi—I mean La Roche-Noire, are you satisfied?" said Alfred as he entered the room; "here you are in your château!"

"Agree, messieurs, that such rooms as this are beautiful, majestic!"

"Yes, this is very large.—But aren't we going to inspect the house?"

"In a moment. I am waiting for my people, I have some orders to give them; then we will inspect the château from cellar to eaves."

The concierge and the gardener made their appearance; they were both drunk, but the concierge especially found it difficult to stand erect, because he was already tipsy when his master ordered him to treat the peasants, and he had felt bound to keep them company.

"Our master sent for us," said the gardener, speaking slowly in order not to confuse his words; while the concierge leaned against a venerable easy-chair, in order not to fall.

"Ah! here is my household!" said Robineau.

"It doesn’t seem very firm on its legs," said Alfred.

"What position do you fill here?" Robineau asked the gardener.

"What position, bourgeois? do you mean what do I do?"

"Exactly."

"I am Vincent, the gardener of the château—by your leave. And there’s work enough, God knows! You wait till you see the garden! You wouldn’t know where you were!"

"Is the garden large?"

"I should say so! It’s so big that I’ve only been taking care of half of it for a long while, because, you see, I can’t do everything."

"Why do you allow the courtyard to get all choked up with weeds, master gardener?" inquired Alfred.

"Oh! I can’t do everything, monsieur; besides, the courtyard ain’t the garden."

"He is right," said Robineau; "he should confine himself to his duties.—And you, behind him—what do you do on my property? Stand forward."

The concierge, forced to abandon the chair that supported him, staggered forward, and pulling out a red handkerchief filled with snuff to wipe his inflamed face, began by hiccoughing, then he commenced to laugh, and said:

"I’m the man—I’m the man as keeps you, master.—You see before you a buck who eats and drinks enough for six."

"You must not have ten servants like him, Robineau,—they’d ruin you," said Alfred.

"Ah! you are my concierge, are you, my man?"

"Yes, master—monseigneur, I mean; for your valet told us it amused you to be called monseigneur—and it don’t make any difference to me, you know; I’ll call you whatever you say—that’s me!"

"I believe this knave is drunk!" said Robineau. "What is your name, concierge?"

"My name’s Cunette, master, saving your presence."

"You have been drinking a good deal, Monsieur Cunette, it seems to me!"

"Always to your health, my venerable lord and master—and all ready to begin again when you say the word."

"By the way, who prepares dinner here? I don’t see any cook anywhere."

"I can’t do everything," muttered the gardener; "the kitchen ain’t in the garden."

"Oh! it’s all the same to me," stammered the concierge, clutching the easy-chair once more; "if you’d like to have me, master, I’ll go into the kitchen and I’ll fix you up something as if it was for myself!"

"My dear fellow," said Alfred to Robineau, "I trust that you will send Messieurs Vincent and Cunette to bed, and that they are not to do your cooking. If they are, I shall not eat a mouthful."

"This is very embarrassing!" said Robineau, running to the bell-cord and pulling it violently. François answered the summons, carrying a broom and a feather duster.

"What are you doing, François?"

"I am sweeping and cleaning the dining-room, monsieur. You should have seen the dust and cobwebs there! Bless my soul! the spiders I have killed!"

"And who is attending to the dinner?"

François looked at Vincent, who looked at Cunette, who looked at nothing, because he could no longer see.

"Well, knaves! do you mean to answer?" cried Robineau angrily. "Do you intend to give me spiders for dinner?"

"My dear fellow," said Alfred, "you chose to come here to occupy your château without warning, without securing a staff of servants and having whatever was necessary done in this old house; so you must expect not to find the service well regulated at the outset.—However, as we must dine, and as you have invited Monsieur Férulus, who certainly will not fail to come, we must try to find a cook in the vicinity, which can hardly be impossible.—Come, Monsieur Vincent, tell us—at what house hereabout do they live best?"

"Oh! bless me, monsieur, they live pretty well, everywhere; but best of all at Monsieur Cheval, the veterinary’s. He has a daughter, you see, who’s been in service at Clermont, at a rich merchant’s house."

"Well! that’s what we want to know.—François, go at once to Monsieur Cheval’s, and ask his daughter to be good enough to come to the château to do the cooking; she won’t refuse. Pick up provisions wherever you go; send to Talende for them, as it’s only a league and a half; lastly, arrange matters so that we shall not be obliged to go to bed without candles and without sheets."

François went to carry out Alfred’s orders, and Robineau said to the gardener and the concierge:

"Return to your work, and never come before me again in such a condition."

"We’ll go and drink your health again, monseigneur," said Cunette.

"No, you have drunk quite enough."

"Never mind, bourgeois; when we’re celebrating your arrival, we won’t hold back and look at the others; and everybody coming here to-night to dance, too!"

"I don’t want them to come to dance to-night; let them come some other time."

"But you invited all the good people who gave you such a fine concert," said Alfred, "and you must receive them. You have chosen to play the seigneur, so you must submit to the consequences.—Now let us inspect the château."

"I am going to guide my master," said Cunette.

"You’d do better by going to bed, drunkard!"

"I know my duties, monseigneur."

Robineau and his friends left the bedroom. Monsieur Cunette, who was exceedingly pig-headed in his cups, and who considered that the concierge should be present at the inspection of the château, followed his master, supporting himself against the walls.

They walked through long, venerable galleries, lighted by great ogive windows, through which the light found its way with difficulty, however, because the glass was coated with dust. They entered enormous rooms, all decorated in

the same general style as Robineau's bedroom, where the eye could hardly reach the ceiling.

"This château must have been in existence in the time of King Pepin," said Edouard.

"It is all superb," said Robineau, who gazed in admiration at every landscape painted over the doors and mirrors.

"Say rather that it must have been very beautiful two centuries ago!—But now!"

"Mirrors are still mirrors, my dear Alfred."

"Very good! but the gilding is no longer gilding, and the paintings look like old fans!"

"For a baron, you seem rather indifferent to the value of what is venerable. I am certain that Monsieur Edouard appreciates the beauties of this château better than you do."

"To my mind," said Edouard, "there is a touch of romance, of vagueness about it."

"Isn't there? It's magnificent! There's room enough to lodge a regiment!"

"There's just as many rooms on the second floor, master," mumbled Monsieur Cunette, standing at the door of the room in which the young men were. "It's the same thing over again, except perhaps the ceilings are a little lower and there ain't such pretty pictures as there is here."

"In that case it is unnecessary for us to inspect the second floor."

"Ah! messieurs, this gallery opens on a terrace from which we can see the whole neighborhood."

"The terrace is in rather bad condition."

"What are those slits in the wall?"

"They are loop-holes," said Edouard; "and there are machicoulis, I believe, in those sally-ports."

"Gachicoulis—that's right," stammered the concierge.

"The devil!" said Robineau, "this was a stronghold! I am sure that it has sustained sieges. It's strange that there's no drawbridge."

"Oh! there was one, monsieur, a few years ago; but as the last owner had planted sugar-beets, for an experiment, in the garden yonder, it sickened me to do nothing but raise and lower the drawbridge for a few beets; so it occurred to me to fill up the ditch, and the bourgeois thought it was a good idea, and he just had a simple gate put up."

"That bourgeois could not have descended from the ancient owners of this château, if he had such commonplace ideas."

"I don't know where he descended from, monsieur; but he bought this château for a factory, to carry on business in; but I suppose it didn't suit, as he offered the estate for sale again."

"But to whom did this château formerly belong?"

"Who? Wait a bit—I don't know the name, but it was an old dowager of a very old family. The old lady, who lived in the château, wouldn't have any repairs made, they say, for fear of spoiling it.—So you see it's just as it used to be."

"Some old dowager, I suppose," said Alfred, "who preferred to let the building fall to pieces, rather than let a profane hand touch these crumbling walls!"

"Well, I didn't know her," said Cunette; "I was put here by the beet-sugar man, who left me here with my friend Vincent."

"Now, let us look at the tower.—Take care, messieurs, as you go down this staircase; almost all the steps are broken. My dear Robineau—I beg pardon, I mean Monsieur de la Roche-Noire—if you follow the old dowager's system, it will be difficult soon to take a step in your château without running the risk of breaking your neck."

"Oh! I shall have everything repaired, made over new, messieurs. I've no desire to have my château crumble and fall on me.—Concierge, where does this long corridor lead?"

"To the North Tower, master. Oh! wait till you see—it's splendid! There's trapdoors, and—what do you call 'em—places you fall into? *gimblettes!*"

"*Oubliettes*, you mean, do you not?"

"Yes, monsieur, oubliettes."

"I don't want to go where we're likely to fall," cried Robineau; "go ahead, concierge, and guide us."

Cunette went forward, hugging the wall. They reached the door of the tower, whence a dark, narrow, winding staircase led to the rooms above.

"I should think that I was in the Castle of Udolpho," said Edouard as he ascended the stairs.

"I expect every moment to see a cavalier armed at all points," said Alfred.

Robineau said nothing; he was examining the old walls, blackened by time, which had seen the coming and going of so many generations. When the concierge attempted to open the door of the first floor, it shrieked on its hinges and the sound echoed through the empty apartments of the old tower.

"You must put oil on all these doors, concierge," said Robineau; "I don't like that noise. Where are we? Are there trapdoors under our feet? Be careful to warn us."

"No, monsieur, this was the chevalier's room, so they say."

"What chevalier?"

"Why! the chevalier who was the old dowager's nephew, so far as I can understand."

"I won't take it for my room, it's too dark."

On the second floor Cunette showed them the room where the *oubliettes*—dungeons—were. But the sugar manufacturer had had all the trapdoors removed, and Robineau considered that he had done very well. Above was the arsenal of the château; but all that they found there were a few rusty cuirasses, a few hiltless swords, a few hammerless muskets, and a few headless lances. At last they arrived at the platform of the tower, whence there was a very beautiful prospect. The young men admired the view of the neighboring mountains, and of the pretty town of Saint-Amand, surrounded by water. While they were looking at the landscape, Monsieur Cunette prudently seated himself in the centre of the platform, saying:

"I can't look from such a height myself; it always makes me dizzy."

They were about to leave the tower when Edouard cried:

"Look, Alfred, on that little mound just by the edge of the moat; do you see that man who is looking at the château

so closely? do you recognize him?"

"Why, yes! It's the man who was at the inn at Clermont-Ferrand, and who offered to be our guide. He has a face and a costume which render him easily recognizable."

"What!" said Robineau, walking toward them, "that evil-looking fellow here!—Yes, on my word! it's he; I recognize that thick stick he is leaning on. How he stares at my château! He doesn't move; one would say that he was a statue!—I would like right well to know why he stares at my property so!"

"There is really something very strange in that man's expression and in his whole aspect," said Edouard.

"Strange! you are very moderate; say rather, suspicious, threatening, wicked. Why, he doesn't take his eyes off my château!—I say, concierge!"

The concierge was nearly asleep; he raised his head, and said in an uncertain voice:

"What do you want?"

"What do you say, villain? To whom are you speaking?" cried Robineau angrily.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, monseigneur and master," said Cunette, struggling to his feet; "I thought I was talking with my friend Vincent, and that is why——"

"Try not to have any more such fits of abstraction, and tell me if you know that vagabond who has planted himself like a post in front of the tower, and is looking so earnestly in this direction?"

Cunette staggered forward; Alfred and Edouard each held an arm to keep him from falling over the rail, and the concierge put out his head to look for the man in question.

"Well?" said Robineau after a moment.

"Well, what?" rejoined Cunette, gazing about with a drunken stare.

"Do you know that man?"

"I don't see a man any more than I do a bottle!"

"What do you say, you blockhead? Don't you see him at the foot of the tower?"

"Oh! what a fool I am! saving your presence, monseigneur, I took him for a vine."

"Well! now that you do see him, do you recognize him?"

"That fellow? Wait a bit—ain't it Vincent?"

"Why, no, idiot!"

"Then perhaps it's Monsieur Flutanus, the schoolmaster."

"Evidently the rascal can't see," said Robineau. "Come, messieurs, let us leave this tower; we have still another one to visit."

They left the North Tower, which did not seem destined to be the new owner's favorite resort. Monsieur Cunette proposed that they should visit the dungeons underneath; but Robineau did not care to do so. They went to the other tower, where the apartments, being in a better state of preservation, had a less gloomy appearance. They found there a library, a bath-room, a music-room and a number of beds in reasonably good condition. At last they went out into the gardens.

Robineau was distressed to find that the sugar manufacturer had planted beets in three-fourths of the gardens; and Monsieur Vincent, who had admitted that he took care of only half of them, had allowed nettles and thistles to grow in the paths and under the shrubbery. Fruits, flowers and vegetables were planted pell-mell in the beds which had escaped the beets. The statues scattered here and there were in no better condition than the gardens. Hercules had lost his club, Venus had but one arm, Mercury was lame, the Graces were sadly maimed, Apollo had no nose, Hebe but one ear; Cupid alone was intact; that god sometimes resists the attacks of time.

Robineau heaved a sigh as he passed in front of each statue, saying:

"What a pity! such a lovely piece of work! That infernal manufacturer didn't care for beautiful things!"

At the end of the gardens they entered the park, which was very large, but in which the brambles caught one's feet at every step. At last, weary of walking, the young men returned to the château, inspected the stables, greenhouse and dairy, then adjourned to a salon on the ground floor for a little rest.

"Well, messieurs," said Robineau, "what do you think of my property?"

"It is very extensive," said Alfred, "but, if you follow my advice, you will pull down this old château, which it will ruin you to keep, and with the materials, build a pretty modern house, which it won't take you three hours to walk over; then you will be able to make some profitable use of all the land that belongs to the estate."

"My dear Alfred," said Robineau, "I didn't buy a château to have a mere bourgeois house; I should be a vandal if I followed your advice."

"You will ruin yourself if you don't follow it."

"I will ruin myself if I choose, but I shall keep my château."

"Keep what you please, but don't ask me again for my advice."

"And you, Monsieur Edouard," said Robineau, approaching the young poet, who seemed absorbed in thought, "what do you think of my château?"

"I like this country very much," said Edouard absent-mindedly.

"Look you, La Roche-Noire, I believe that we have done nothing but talk about your château since this morning, and it's almost five o'clock. It's beginning to be a little tiresome. Don't you intend ever to dine in your house?"

"Pardon me, my friends, pardon me!—Holà! François!"

François obeyed the summons, dressed this time as a scullion, because he was obliged to fill many positions.

"Is somebody getting dinner for us, François?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Who?"

"Mademoiselle Cheval, who asked nothing better than to be useful to monsieur. Her father insisted on coming with her to help her."

"What! does the horse doctor do cooking also?" said Alfred.

"Oh! Monsieur Cheval says that he knows how to do everything, and that he could prepare a prescription and a *ragoût* at the same time; but he couldn't come, because somebody sent for him to go to see a mare with the colic."

"That's very lucky for us," said Alfred; "I am not at all anxious to partake of a dish prepared by the veterinary."

At that moment Monsieur Férulus, dressed from head to foot in serge dyed black, and carrying under his arm a hat that was entirely without shape, entered the room where the young men were and executed a low reverence, accompanied by a *salutem omnibus*.

Robineau stepped forward cordially to greet his guest, and shook his hand heartily; he had not forgotten the speech of the morning.

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, I have come in response to your honorable invitation," said Férulus, clinging to Robineau's hand.

"Monsieur Férulus, you give me great pleasure. To-day we shall have a simple little dinner; I have not yet had time to arrange my household."

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, the honor of dining with you will be the most delicious seasoning of the repast."

"Monsieur Férulus, I hope that you will come often to take——"

"Every day if such is your wish, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire. Is it possible, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, for me to refuse such society as yours; to deprive myself of the advantage of your conversation, and to fall behind you in making advances?—No, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, *lapides clamabunt* before I refuse to dine with you."

Robineau had never been so plied with *La Roche-Noire*, and when he uttered that name Monsieur Férulus opened his mouth as if he would swallow the château. So Robineau continued to shake his hand; Férulus did the same by him, and each seemed determined not to relax his hold first. Luckily for them, François announced dinner, and this enabled them to separate.

They went to the dining room, where the table was laid. François had placed at one end of the table an old armchair on castors, which was a foot higher than the other chairs. It had been used by the old dowager, who was evidently very short. Robineau thought that his dignity called upon him to occupy it; so he perched himself on it and towered above his guests; whereupon Monsieur Férulus exclaimed: *"Sic itur ad astra!"*—But it was impossible for him to serve from that elevated seat, because he was too far from the dishes. After the soup, he decided to take a chair like the others, and he said to François:

"Move the armchair away; I will use it on state occasions."

The dinner, composed in large part of chickens, seemed not ill prepared; the new occupants of the château had acquired sharp appetites by their tour of inspection, and Monsieur Férulus ate as if he had walked twenty leagues.

"Monsieur Férulus," said Robineau, "have you lived long in this neighborhood?"

"Ten years or more, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire!"

"Did you know the late owner of the château—the sugar manufacturer?"

"Very little; he was a fool, an ignoramus; he never received his friends, never entertained! He was wrapped up in his beets!"

"Well! I mean to entertain, to receive my friends.—Are there any distinguished people in the neighborhood?"

"Not many; a few countrymen, a few obtuse creatures, who do not even send their children to my school."

"Ah! do you keep a school?"

"Yes, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, a school for males. I take children from the age of two to the age of twenty-five; I teach them everything, no matter what! When they leave my hands, they strike everybody dumb with amazement; they floor all their adversaries by the force of their logic! Belles-lettres, philosophy, physics, philology, chemistry, mathematics, dead languages, living languages, English handwriting, round-hand and copying-hand. I teach all these to my day scholars for six francs a month!"

"That's nothing at all," said Edouard.

"Is it not, monsieur?—Well! these Auvergnats prefer to let their children play tip-cat rather than send them to me!—*O tempora, O mores!*"

"Is the society of Saint-Amand select?" inquired Robineau.

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, at Saint-Amand, as at all small towns, there are some agreeable and some original people. There is a market there every Saturday, for wine, hemp, paper and cheese.—I have only two children from the town in my school, but they belong to the best families."

"I have a letter for the local notary," said Robineau. "I shall go to see him to-morrow, and ask him to invite all the best people in the town to a fête, in my name."

Alfred and Edouard, who, albeit they did not admit it to each other, were engrossed by the same subject, tried to lead the conversation in another direction.

"Do you know the village of Chadrat?" Alfred asked.

"Chadrat! yes, it's a vile hole—a wretched hamlet! I haven't a child from Chadrat in my school! The natives, like the Tartars, are brought up in ignorance and in contempt of shirts. They don't even know how to spell!"

"Have you ever heard of the White House?" asked Edouard.

"The White House?—That's a female boarding-school, isn't it?"

"No, it's an unoccupied house that is the terror of the neighborhood."

"Oh, yes! I think I remember. I had some talk about it with my pupils, and we took a walk to the valley, where we saw nothing extraordinary.—Indeed, messieurs, I ask you whether people brought up in an atmosphere of knowledge can possibly believe in ghosts?—*Non est hic locus!*—I believe in fools, in idiots, in numskulls;—I have the honor to drink to the health of Monsieur de la Roche-Noire;—but ghosts!—*Retro Satanas!*—They don't enter into my system of education."

"So I say," assented Robineau; "I call it nonsense—old women's tales."

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, you think like Tacitus, and you express your thoughts like Livy. I have the honor to drink to your health."

There were still several bottles of good wine in the cellars of the old castle. Monsieur Cunette had not dared to

drink them, because an account had been taken before he was left in charge. Robineau caused a number of them to be produced; the young men did full justice to them, and Monsieur Férulus did nothing but hold out his glass and drain it. As they voted the dinner very good, it occurred to them, at dessert, to express their acknowledgments to Mademoiselle Cheval, whom Robineau wished to retain as cook at the château. François was told to send her in, and soon a tall, stoutly built damsel, with plump red cheeks, appeared and curtsied to the company.

"Mademoiselle Cheval," said Robineau, "I am very well pleased with the culinary talent you possess. I take you into my service as *cordon bleu* if that is agreeable to you."

Mademoiselle Cheval coughed, bowed, wiped her forehead, and replied in a hoarse voice:

"Pardi! if I didn’t know how to cook, it would be funny—when I used to work for a master who had twenty thousand francs a year to spend and drank nothing but the best wines!—Dieu! wasn’t I well-fixed there! Always dressed in *Ségrovie* wool! I’d be there still if I hadn’t fallen in love with one of the Swiss bodyguards!"

The cook was about to tell the story of her love affairs when the strains of bagpipe, fife and tambourine announced the arrival of the peasants. Robineau realized that it was his duty to go out and receive the guests to whom he had promised a ball. So they left the table, to the great regret of Monsieur Férulus, who seemed disposed to pass the evening there, and went into the courtyard, where the Auvergnats were assembled. Robineau tried to assume a seignorial air as he saluted the good people, who were glad to come to his house to dance. Alfred and Edouard accosted the prettiest of the peasant girls, to obtain a moment’s distraction; for one must needs divert one’s thoughts, even when one is in love, and especially when one is not certain of being loved in return. The two young men were not yet at that point; they thought a great deal about little Isaure, it is true, but they did not choose to avow to themselves that there was anything more than curiosity in their desire to see her again. When we begin to love, we play with our sentiments; and when we try to overcome them, we discover that it is too late to remedy the mischief.

They went to the garden, and selected the place where the beets were fewest and stationed an orchestra there on empty casks; that was not very dignified, but as the notabilities of the neighborhood were not present, they could afford to be less particular. The orchestra consisted of bagpipes, drums and fifes. The peasants took their places in high glee. Robineau considered it incumbent on him to open the ball, and, his two friends having already invited the prettiest girls, he selected the one who wore the best clothes. Monsieur Férulus, seeing that monseigneur proposed to dance, hastened to take a partner and to stand opposite Monsieur de la Roche-Noire.

The ball began; the Auvergnat music was not melodious, but it was noisy, and the dancers, male and female, were accustomed to accompany their steps with shouts and clapping of hands. It was difficult to remain indifferent amid such an uproar. Alfred and Edouard capered and twirled about with their partners, and laughingly struck the great hands that the peasant girls held out to them. Monsieur Férulus never ceased to say to his partner:

"You are opposite Monsieur de la Roche-Noire; be careful of your steps, stand straight, lower your eyes, and watch your partner."

The Auvergnate followed her own devices, shouting, stamping and clapping her hands. As the Auvergne *bourrées* never come to an end, Robineau danced for half an hour, until he could hold out no longer. Monsieur Férulus was drenched, but he thought that politeness forbade him to leave the ball before Monsieur de la Roche-Noire. Luckily for them both, the concierge and the gardener appeared laden with hampers of wine, and the orchestra spontaneously paused to partake of refreshments.

They drank, then the dancing began again; they stopped again to drink, then returned to their capering. This lasted four hours, for the Auvergnats are indefatigable drinkers and dancers.

But it was after eleven o’clock; the open-air ball-room, which had been indifferently well lighted with candle ends, began to grow dark. Alfred and Edouard had taken their partners to walk in the garden, and the village maidens had returned to the dance in some slight disarray. Some papas and mammas were sleeping on the benches; Monsieur Férulus had taken his leave long before, and Robineau, who was anxious to retire, was thinking that he would be glad to show his guests to the door, when he heard outcries and loud oaths from one part of the assemblage.

Messieurs Vincent and Cunette did not dance, but they had not stopped drinking since the opening of the ball. The concierge had finished himself, and the gardener had attained the level reached by his comrade. But Monsieur Vincent was ugly in his cups; it took very little to anger him, and then he always wanted to fight everybody. He had fallen into a dispute with an Auvergnat, and they had already come to blows, Cunette, like a staunch friend, taking Vincent’s part, when Robineau, who was very angry that anyone should presume to fight on his premises, appeared on the scene, not doubting for an instant that his presence would suffice to restore tranquillity.

"What! is it my concierge and my gardener who are making all this noise?" he said as he drew near. "Why are you fighting, knaves?"

"Go to the devil! Let us alone!" said Cunette, not recognizing his master. "I am defending my friend Vincent, and ——"

"Villain! do you dare to speak thus to me?"

"I’ll hit you if you come any nearer!" cried Vincent, striking to right and left; and the new seigneur, being in the midst of the *mêlée*, was in imminent danger of receiving a storm of blows, when Mademoiselle Cheval succeeded in forcing her way through the crowd, and taking her master in her arms as easily as if she were lifting a child, she bore him away, clearing a passage by distributing fisticuffs on every side.

Meanwhile François, Alfred and Edouard, each armed with a broomstick, succeeded in driving all the guests outside the walls. Messieurs Cunette and Vincent went to bed, and peace finally reigned once more within the château.

"That was a very nice party!" said Alfred, as he and Edouard returned, laughing heartily, from expelling the peasants.

"Oh, yes!" replied Robineau, feeling his ribs, "I shan’t forget my ball! If ever I ask those worthies to dance here again!—Ouf! what an infernal racket! I came near being beaten to death!—And how disrespectful my servants were. I will discharge them to-morrow."

"Why, my dear fellow, they were drunk! You must forgive them."

"They will simply get drunk again!"

"But you won't employ them every day distributing provisions and entertaining the peasants!"

"No! God forbid!"

"You chose to begin on a large scale; one must pay for one's apprenticeship in everything."

"Good-night, Monsieur Jules," said Edouard.

"Good-night, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire," said Alfred, following Edouard from the room.

Robineau was left alone. It was nearly midnight; his bedroom was lighted only by a single candle and three-fourths of it was in darkness. Robineau called François to help him to undress, and ordered him to sleep in the adjoining room, so that he might come to him at once if he should call.

At last Robineau climbed into bed, after placing a lamp by the bedside. The man of Clermont-Ferrand recurred to his mind. His bedroom began to seem too large; the hangings to be very gloomy, and Susannah's face, which he had admired in the morning, frightened him at night. He was no longer so much in love with the antique, and he did not go to sleep until he had determined to begin on the morrow to give a more modern aspect to his domain.

XII

A VISIT TO ISAURE

Edouard rose with the dawn. He had no desire to pass another day roaming about the Château of La Roche-Noire, but he promised himself a much sweeter pleasure—he was determined to see the little goatherd again, to revisit the valley where Isaure lived; he had not forgotten the girl for an instant, and, although he had had less to say about her than his friend, he had certainly been more engrossed by thoughts of her. In love as in politics, those who talk little are more to be feared than chatterers.

Edouard went down into the courtyard, where he found the concierge and the gardener, entirely sober, awaiting their master's waking to make their excuses to him. Paying no heed to those worthies' assurances of repentance, Edouard left the château, crossed the green and inquired of the first person he met the shortest road to Chadrat. Then he started for that village, climbing the hills and mountains at a rapid pace. In an hour he covered the distance which had taken them twice as long on the preceding day. He soon recognized his surroundings; he saw the valley, the White House, and Isaure's cottage. Not until then did he stop to take breath before going down into the valley at a more leisurely pace and looking all about.

He halted a few yards from the cottage, at which he gazed for some time, saying to himself:

"There, far from the world, she lives alone. She is as lovely as the angels are painted; she seems virtuous, and as artless as innocence itself! But it is impossible that she should not turn some mountaineer's head ere long. They are afraid of her, the idiots! But the travellers, the people from the city who see her! It is unreasonable to leave that young girl thus exposed to innumerable perils.—But why should I worry about her? I have seen the child but once; I hardly spoke to her. Am I going to take fire at the first glance, like Alfred? Oh, no! I am more sensible. It would be shocking to try to seduce that sweet girl! But one may come to see her without instantly falling in love with her.—Let us see if she is at home."

Edouard walked to the cottage; but the door was closed, and only the yelping of Vaillant answered the young man, who was sorely disappointed not to find the girl at home. He remembered that she drove her goats to pasture on the neighboring mountain, and he walked in that direction. He soon discovered Isaure seated on a low mound, reading, while her goats cropped the grass nearby.

"These mountaineers are not altogether wrong," thought Edouard, as he watched from a distance the little goatherd, who had not seen him. "It is no common thing to see goatherds reading, and this girl expresses herself altogether too well to be confounded with the ordinary peasant. Someone must have taught her what the other young women in these mountains do not know; and that someone cannot have been either of the peasants who took care of her when she was a child. There is something very strange, mysterious, in everything connected with this girl—doubtless that is why she interests me. How pretty she is, leaning over her book, with her head resting on one of her hands! If I were a painter, how I should like to paint that picture!"

After contemplating her for several minutes more, Edouard approached Isaure. He walked softly in order not to disturb her; but he stumbled over a stone, and at the noise the girl turned quickly. She started in surprise when she discovered a young man near her; but he soon saw that she recognized him, and a faint smile came to her lips. She rose as Edouard drew nearer.

"Remain seated, pray; I do not mean to disturb you," said Edouard, walking to her side awkwardly enough; for we are often most awkward when we wish to appear least so. "I was taking a walk among the hills. I saw you, so I came this way.—But you were reading, were you not?"

"Yes, monsieur, I am very fond of reading!"

"That is a pleasure with which most of the people of these mountains are unacquainted, I fancy."

"True, monsieur; but I thank heaven that I know more than they do; for, as I am almost always alone, I rest myself with a book when I have been working hard."

"May I venture to ask what you are reading?"

"Why not, monsieur?"

Isaure handed Edouard her book, which proved to be a volume of Florian. He stared at the girl in surprise, then returned the book, saying:

"You certainly are not a village girl like the others."

"Because I can read?" rejoined Isaure, with a smile.

"Not that only; but your refined manners, your way of expressing yourself."

"I speak like other people, monsieur."

"Not like the people who live about you; the very choice of this book——"

"I did not choose it; it was given to me."

Edouard was on the point of asking: "By whom?" But he dared not; he checked the impulse because he felt that his acquaintance with Isaure was of too recent date to justify such a question. He was conscious of a certain dissatisfaction, and it occurred to him that if Robineau were there, he would say that the girl received a good many presents.

"Mon Dieu! perhaps you have not breakfasted, monsieur?" exclaimed the young goatherd suddenly. "Will you come to the house? I never thought of it!"

"No, no, I do not care for anything," said Edouard, detaining her; "I only wish to talk with you, if it doesn't bore you."

"Bore me! far from it, monsieur! People talk with me so seldom! The shepherds drive their flocks as far as possible from mine, the shepherdesses avoid me, and yet I have never injured anybody; have I a wicked look, monsieur?"

"Oh, no! quite the opposite!" cried Edouard, on the point of taking her hand and squeezing it tenderly; but again he restrained himself.

"Since my dear mother's death, I have noticed that people avoid me, that they hardly speak to me. At first that made me unhappy—it seemed very sad to be all alone in the world, at my age—but since I have had Vaillant, I am no longer alone. He loves me dearly, Vaillant does! He doesn't turn away when I want to caress him!"

There was in Isaure's tone and language a blending of innocence and charm, whose fascination it was hard to resist. It was the language of a well-educated girl with the ingenuous tone of a native of the mountains. As he listened to her Edouard felt that his suspicions faded away.

"You have no objection, then," he said, "to my coming sometimes to talk with you?"

"Whenever you please, monsieur. Do you live near?"

"Why—yes—at La Roche-Noire; within two short leagues."

"Two leagues! that seems a long way to me. I have never been beyond the tops of these hills."

"Have you never been to the next town? to Saint-Amand?"

"Oh! no, monsieur! I am strictly forbidden ever to leave my mountains."

"Who forbids you, pray, as you are all alone in the world, and have no relations?"

Isaure made no reply for some seconds; at last she said:

"It was my dear mother who forbade me."

"But now that she is no more—are you not at liberty to follow your own inclinations?"

"To be sure, monsieur; but I have no desire to go to the town. Why should I go there?—Oh, no! I shall never leave dear, kind André's house, where my childhood was passed."

Edouard was silent for a moment. Isaure ran after one of her goats, which had strayed away; he watched her run lightly up the cliff, then seated himself near where she had been sitting and awaited her return. The beauty of the spot, the perfect peace that reigned among the mountains, which the sun was just beginning to bathe with light, the solitude which surrounded himself and the pretty shepherdess—everything coincided to suggest numberless thoughts to Edouard's mind. He realized that his heart beat more violently than usual, that his breath came faster, that his imagination was perturbed by a longing for love, or rather for pleasure.

But Isaure returned; she ran up and seated herself beside him, saying with a smile: "Here I am at last!" And there was such perfect innocence, and trust in her action and in her glance, that Edouard blushed inwardly at the thoughts that had come to him; his brain became calm, his heart less agitated; and not until then did he dare to look at Isaure.

"My goats sometimes make me run quite a long way," continued the girl; "I know that I might take Vaillant with me, and that he would watch them; but someone must watch the house."

"Do none of your neighbors in the mountains ever come to chat with you, Isaure?"

"No, monsieur, never."

"And among all the travellers who pass through the valley, has there never been one who, like myself, has returned to the mountains to see you?"

"No, monsieur; but it very rarely happens that strangers come here, for the valley is not on any well-travelled route, and the mountaineers who act as guides to travellers always avoid passing the White House."

For a moment there was silence between the two young people. Edouard scrutinized the girl more closely; she watched her goats wandering about the hillside, and when from time to time she looked at Edouard, she smiled artlessly. It was not the smile of a coquette seeking to beguile, it was the smile of innocence which sees no peril in the pleasure to which it gives birth.

"I was told at Chadrat that reading is not your sole talent," said Edouard; "you sing also."

"Yes, monsieur, I often sing; I have nothing better to do! But I sing very badly, I imagine."

"Who can have taught you songs that are unknown in these mountains?"

A faint flush rose to Isaure's cheeks as she replied, lowering her eyes:

"It was a traveller who stayed some time with us."

"When your mother was alive?"

"Oh! yes, monsieur!"

Edouard said no more; in spite of himself vague suspicions assailed his mind. To dissipate them he glanced at the girl, whose every feature was so instinct with innocence. After several minutes passed thus, he realized that he ought to return to the château, for he wished that his absence should not be noticed, or, at all events, to conceal the fact that he had been to Chadrat. So he rose and said to Isaure:

"I must leave you now."

"Already, monsieur?" said the girl ingenuously.

"What!" cried Edouard; "may I hope that my presence has given you some pleasure?"

"As I have told you, monsieur, I very seldom have an opportunity to talk with anyone here in the mountains."

"Oh! to be sure," said Edouard more coldly; "and that is the only reason?"

He interrupted himself, thinking:

"Well! one would suppose that I expected this girl to be in love with me already?—I preach at Alfred, and I am no better than he is."

"I will go down the mountain with you," said Isaure; "it is time for me to go home—my poor Vaillant must be tired."

She ran at once to collect her herd, and drove it toward the valley, skipping about and laughing heartily at every antic of her goats. Edouard followed her, saying to himself:

"Her heart is calm and undisturbed; this frank gayety, this sweet unrestraint show that her mind is not burdened with thoughts of love. Poor child! for her own good, I pray that she may never know that passion, which causes more sorrow than pleasure!"

Edouard sighed; something whispered to him that he would be very glad to make that sorrow and that pleasure known to Isaure.

They reached the cottage, Isaure opened her door, and her dog ran out and leaped upon her; then he looked at Edouard and walked around him, but showed no temper.

"I believe that he recognizes you already," said the girl.

Edouard walked up to Vaillant and patted him a moment; the dog made no objection, but kept his eyes fixed on his mistress, as if to ask her whether the young man was a friend of hers.

"Good!" said Edouard, "I see that we shall be very good friends before long.—Adieu, charming Isaure! until to-morrow morning."

"Until to-morrow, Monsieur—Pardon me, but I do not know your name."

"My name is Edouard."

"Very well; until to-morrow, Monsieur Edouard, as you will not rest a moment under my roof to-day."

As she spoke, the girl curtsied gracefully to Edouard, then entered the house singing. The young man retraced his steps to La Roche-Noire, dreaming of the little goatherd.

"She is charming!" he said to himself again and again; "her manners, her voice, her artlessness—all are fascinating!—Oh! I am not going to fall in love with her—that would be foolish; but she is so interesting that I wish it were to-morrow morning already.—I won't tell Alfred that I have been to see her; he would be quite capable of doing the same thing. Alfred is a reckless fellow; he would begin making love to the child at once. That would be an outrage, and I certainly would not permit it."

Poor Edouard! he did not propose to fall in love, and he was jealous already!—Ah! what is the sense of trying to resist a passion so natural at his age? Only when the age of reason comes must we be on our guard against love, which, like the smallpox, is the more virulent the later in life it attacks you.

XIII

THE VAGRANT AGAIN

Edouard returned to the Château of La Roche-Noire, unmindful of the length of the walk he had taken. When a man is falling in love, he is so preoccupied that he is never bored; that is some slight recompense, at all events, for the torments which love sometimes causes.

Edouard met Alfred in the courtyard.

"You went out very early, did you not?" observed young De Marcey, gazing fixedly at his friend; "when I got up I asked for you, and they told me that you had been gone more than an hour. The devil! you are an early bird! I confess that last night's ball tired me a little; there's no end to those *bourrées*, and the damsels of Auvergne are no light weights.—I'll wager that I can guess where you've been—toward the White House, eh? You wanted to see little Isaure again?"

"No, I haven't been in that direction; I have been walking about the neighborhood; it's a lovely country.—Indeed, what is the sense of trying to see that young girl again? It seems to me that it is useless, to say the least."

"Useless to see a girl who's as pretty as the Loves! For my part, I think on the contrary that it's a most excellent way to employ one's time."

"It is just because she is so pretty that it may be a dangerous business. You especially, Alfred, who take fire so easily, would be capable of falling in love, that is to say, of taking a fancy to this village maiden.—I cannot think, however, that you intend to seduce her."

"You cannot think!—you cannot think!—Look here, my dear Edouard, do you propose to give me a course of moral lectures?—So far as I am concerned, I have no plans as yet; but still that little girl is pretty—I mean to see her again, and if she takes to me—faith, come what come may!—Where would be the harm, after all?"

"That girl is virtuous and innocent, and you would disturb her tranquillity! You would seek to arouse a sentiment which you will not feel a week, and then you would abandon her to her grief! That would be ghastly!"

"You are becoming romantic, Edouard.—In the first place, you say that this girl is virtuous—which is not absolutely demonstrated. Her peculiar situation—what people say about her—and the difference between her manners and those of her neighbors, give rise to many conjectures. But still, assume that she is virtuous—at any moment, some peasant, some clown, may fall in love with her and attract her; why then are you unwilling that I should try to be as fortunate as one of these country bumpkins? Furthermore, my dear fellow, if we were always guided by such reflections, we should never have the least little love affair, and we should always go about with downcast eyes for fear of meeting a charming woman and of conceiving evil thoughts!—It would be magnificent, I agree; but what can you expect? perfection is not in human nature; our first parents yielded to temptation, and I shall never have the self-command to be more virtuous than they were!"

Edouard said no more; he would have liked to be able to conceal the vexation he felt, and he was about to leave Alfred, when Robineau appeared, followed by several workmen whom François had brought from the town.

"The thing to be done, my boys," said Robineau, "is to make this château over new—or, at least, something like it. The rooms are certainly too dark, the hangings too old, the windows too small, and the stairways too rickety. Repair, replace, pull down, paint, paste; and, above all things, work fast. I will pay you—like a grand seigneur.—François, show these fellows where to begin; you know my plans."

"What, my friend!" said Alfred; "are you going to repair the whole château?"

"No, not the whole of it; but at all events the part I shall occupy, and where I shall receive company. As for the North Tower, that may remain as it is; I shall never go there.—Next, we must dig up the whole garden and replant it. Do you suppose that I can receive the best society of Saint-Amand, and take them to walk among beet greens? I should give them a fine idea of my taste!—I am going to spend a lot of money, to be sure, but a rich marriage will repay it all."

"Are you thinking of marriage already?"

"Faith, yes! In my opinion, marriage gives a man ballast, consideration. However, we will see about that.—But I am going to Saint-Amand; you will come with me, I hope?"

Alfred hesitated—he had another plan in mind. Edouard, observing his hesitation, made haste to say:

"Yes, yes; let's go to Saint-Amand. They say it's a very pretty town, and we must become acquainted with the townspeople."

After a moment's reflection, Alfred agreed to go. Monsieur Cunette came forward, bowing to the ground before his master, whose feet he was ready to kiss, and announced that the cabriolet was ready.

"What's that? have you a cabriolet?"

"Yes—that is to say, a sort of little carriole. Monsieur Cheval procured it for me; it is very neat, and it will be better than to go such a short distance in a post-chaise."

"Where did you find a horse?"

"Monsieur Férulus has lent me one belonging to the father of one of his pupils."

"That is to say, the father of the pupil lends it to you."

"I mean to buy some horses at once. Come, messieurs, let us breakfast at once, and start for Saint-Amand. I have notified the notary of my visit, and I am sure that the whole town expects us."

Breakfast over, they got into the carriole, which jolted them somewhat; but the horse was strong and it was not long before they espied the ruins of the fortifications that surrounded Saint-Amand; soon after, they entered the town, but to Robineau's astonishment the inhabitants were not standing at their doorways.

While the new landed proprietor betook himself to the notary's, Alfred and Edouard strolled about the town, of which they soon made the circuit. Robineau joined them on the public square; his face was radiant with joy. The notary had told him that people were talking a great deal about him in the neighborhood, and had invited him to dine on the following day because he wished to introduce him to the most notable people of the town. Lastly, he had his pockets full of letters of introduction, and as he had already told the notary that it was his intention to marry, the notary had promised him three balls and four large receptions for the following week.

"I did not forget you, my friends," said Robineau in conclusion.

"Do you propose to find wives for us, too?" said Alfred.

"That isn't what I mean. Although if you wish it—it seems that in the provinces there is a good deal of marrying; but I said that I had brought two young men with me from Paris, one very wealthy, and the other very bright."

"Which means that the one who is rich is a stupid fool, I suppose?"

"No, not that! But I was asked if you were bachelors, too, and upon my replying in the affirmative, I was strongly urged to bring you to dinner with me, and——"

"You are very kind, Monsieur Jules; but we have no desire to play a scene or two from *La Petite Ville*; you will have to dine without us."

"As you please, messieurs. But there is nothing further to keep us here; let us return to my château. I must go back and hurry up my workmen. I have already told the notary that before long I would give a large party, dinner, ball, fire-works and Bengal fire, like the Tivoli at Paris. I must go back and have the beets pulled up."

They entered the carriage once more and drove back to the château. Robineau was in raptures; he dreamed of nothing but balls, parties, weddings; he imagined all the women in the town disputing for his favors, and all the unmarried girls making soft eyes at him. While he imagined all this, he did not notice that his two companions were not listening to him, but that, absorbed by their own reflections, Alfred and Edouard were thinking of something very different from the parties he proposed to give, at which he had no idea of dancing and drinking with the peasants of the neighborhood.

They were near the château, when Robineau uttered an exclamation which roused his companions from their reflections.

"That man again! always that man! He is my *bête noire*! I don't know why, but I would rather see a wolf than that tall vagabond!"

The young men looked up and saw the poverty-stricken traveller seated on the ground a short distance from the château, at which he seemed to be gazing as attentively as on the day before.

"Ah, it is the man with the knotted stick!" said Alfred, with a smile.

"It is that poor devil who was at Clermont," said Edouard.

"Yes, it is that fine fellow who is so ugly to look at. For heaven's sake, see how he stares at my château! He does it ostentatiously; one would say that he wanted to pick a quarrel with the workmen he sees there. I will have the rascal driven away from my moat."

"I do not believe that your lordship has that right, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire. Monsieur Férulus would tell you that that man is *extra muros* and consequently cannot be disturbed."

"But why does he look at my property like that? I don't like it."

"Ask him."

"What! Speak to that vagabond! Compromise myself by addressing him! Certainly not. However, I should be glad

to know what he is doing here."

"Very well," said Edouard, "as I am not afraid of compromising myself, I propose to try to talk a little with the man. I have an idea that he is an unfortunate fellow looking for work. Couldn't you give him something to do in your château, as you are just setting up housekeeping?"

"Take that man into my house! No, indeed! I should be afraid that he would rob me."

"Oh! do you think it is always safe to judge by appearances, monsieur? and because this poor fellow's coat is shabbier than those of the peasants hereabout, is it necessary to refuse him a chance to earn his living? That's the way the unfortunate are forced into crime."

"After all, what you say is reasonable. Well! go to him and ask him what he can do. I might employ him to pull up beets, or to groom the horses which I propose to buy; we will see. But first of all find out what he is; I am determined to have only respectable people in my service."

The carriage drove into the courtyard. Monsieur Férulus, who had already arrived for dinner, joined the young men. Edouard, while the rest went into the château, went out again and walked toward the place where they had seen the man from Clermont-Ferrand.

The stranger was still seated a short distance from the North Tower, to which his glances seemed more attracted than to the other parts of the château; his staff was between his legs, and his head rested on one of his hands.

Edouard approached the stranger, but he did not look up at him, and remained in the same position. Edouard saw that he must begin the conversation, and, taking his stand almost in front of the stranger he said to him in an indifferent tone:

"You seem to be examining this venerable château with much interest, monsieur?"

The stranger raised his eyes, glanced angrily at Edouard for a moment, then answered abruptly:

"Am I not at liberty to look where I please?"

"No one denies you that right. I simply thought that perhaps the sight of this château recalled bygone memories to you; that you may have known someone here formerly."

The stranger cast a piercing glance at the young man, and a bitter smile played about his lips, but he made no reply.

After a moment's silence, Edouard continued:

"This is a charming country; I am delighted that I came here; it presents a most picturesque blending of wild and cheerful scenery.—Do you belong hereabout, monsieur?"

The stranger gazed earnestly at Edouard, and replied:

"If I should ask you where you came from, what you have been doing, and what you have come here for, would you consider it any of my business, and would you answer?"

"Perhaps so, monsieur; moreover, I may have reasons for questioning you which you would not have for questioning me."

"That is to say, that because I am poorly clad, because I look like an unfortunate devil, you, who are well dressed, and have money in your pocket, no doubt, think that you are vastly superior to me, and that that gives you the right to question me."

"You are mistaken, monsieur; and although your exterior may have led me to think that you are not wealthy, that thought has made me desirous to do something for you, to be useful to you, and that is what led me to ask you these questions."

The stranger looked at Edouard for some seconds, then shook his head, saying:

"You must be very different from other men then!"

"I came here with the person who has bought this château, and whom you may have seen with us."

The stranger indulged in a mocking smile, as he muttered:

"Yes, yes, I have seen him! and it seems that he has already begun to upset everything in the château."

"This property needs repairs; he proposes to make more modern the part of the building that he occupies. He also proposes to set up a household; he has not enough servants, and there are various positions to be filled. As you seem to look at the house with interest, I thought that perhaps it would be agreeable to you——"

"And you have come to offer me a chance to be the new owner's footman!" exclaimed the stranger, with a frown.

Amazed at the expression which the other's face assumed, Edouard replied hesitatingly:

"Footman—or something else; I know of no occupation that is degrading to him who fills it uprightly."

The stranger seemed to reflect for some moments, then exclaimed sarcastically:

"Upon my word, that would be very amusing! It would, indeed! I know that Jacob was a servant to Laban, that Apollo was a farmhand, that David kept flocks, that Cincinnatus drove the plough, and that the Prodigal Son was reduced to herding swine! After all, what does one's employment matter, provided that one is happy? Is a man in an embroidered coat more worthy of esteem than one in a jacket and clogs? No. But he who is richly clad is able to procure all the pleasures of life, to satisfy his desires and his passions—that is the advantage that he has over the other. The form changes, but the substance is always the same. To prove it, just give money, wealth, to some poor wretch whose simple life and pure morals have been extolled to you, and he will very soon plunge into folly like the others. I know but one class of really wise people, and they are those who do not allow themselves to be tricked!"

Edouard listened to the stranger with no less surprise than interest. His speech proved that he, Edouard, was not in error in thinking that that man had not always been in such wretched plight. Apparently regardless of the person who stood beside him, the stranger took from his pocket a pipe and a flint, and as he struck the flint to obtain a light, continued his reflections:

"What a curious thing life is! When one is rich, happy, highly esteemed, one exposes it recklessly and plays with danger; one makes it a point of honor to defy perils. To be sure, we generally do it solely from self-esteem; then comes adversity, poverty, old age, and then we generally begin to tremble for our lives. We act like fools! For my own part, I have taken the wise course: I worry about nothing; I hold myself superior to everything. I still have a few coins in my pocket, and when they are gone, we will see. It won't be the first time that I have found myself in an

embarrassing position, and there is something piquant in the reflections to which such a condition gives rise. Moreover, the Auvergnats are good fellows; they will always give me a crust of bread, and with that I can walk where I please from morning till night. That is something. Ah! If we were at Athens or Sparta, people might find something to criticise in my mode of life, I know. By Solon's law it was justifiable to denounce every citizen who had no occupation. But other times, other manners!"

The stranger, having lighted his pipe, put it in his mouth, and turned toward Edouard with a mocking laugh; then blew a puff of smoke into his face.

"Monsieur," said Edouard, "it is easy to see from your speech that you have had an education, that you were not born in the lower ranks of society. Misfortunes, which I do not ask to know, must have brought adversity upon you. You seem to hold a low opinion of your fellowmen, undoubtedly because you have reasons to complain of them; but misfortune embitters us and sometimes makes us unjust; so far as I am concerned, I sincerely desire to be of use to you, and to extricate you from a situation which I see you ought not to occupy."

"Which I ought not to occupy! Why, you see that I ought, since I am in it! But have I asked you for anything? Who told you that I am not contented as I am?"

"A man may become hardened to misfortune, to poverty; but whatever strength of mind he may have, it is impossible to banish entirely from his thoughts the memory of a happier time."

The stranger stretched himself out carelessly on the turf and looked at Edouard.

"Ah! you believe that, do you? How do you know that I do not deserve the misfortune of which you suppose me to be the victim; that it is not my misbehavior, my passions, which have put me where I am?"

"If that were so, I should see in it simply an additional motive for trying to oblige you. A man must be much more unhappy when his unhappiness is due to his own fault."

"Do you think that I follow the creed of Zoroaster, that I regale myself by reading the *Sadder*, which demands that a man should make a rigid examination of his conscience at the end of every day? No, indeed; for a long time my conscience and myself have been the best friends in the world, and for a very good reason, namely, that we never speak to each other.—Have you any snuff about you?"

"No, I never use it."

"That is a pity; it is deuced hard to find any about here! Never mind,—I will do without it; a man becomes accustomed to everything! Formerly I would never believe that one could sleep as well in the open air as in a bed; now I enjoy it immensely. I confess, however, that the bread of these mountaineers is a little heavy; it cannot come up to a truffled turkey or a roasted pheasant; but one must needs be sober when one cannot be otherwise."

"Why do you refuse me then when I offer you the means to be more comfortable? A servant's place would humiliate you; but we might be able to find some place for you which would not be exactly that, some occupation in which there would be nothing distressing to you."

"No, no, it isn't the name of servant that offends me; I tell you again, I look upon all men with the same eye! But to be a servant in this château—that is impossible!"

"Why so?"

"It is impossible, I tell you!" As he said this the stranger sprang to his feet; then he continued with a smile: "You must agree that the new owner has every appearance of an egregious idiot!"

Edouard smiled too, as he replied:

"He is a very good fellow at bottom."

"Oh, yes! A good fellow! I have known a deuced lot of men who seem to be that! They borrowed my money and never returned it. However, I did the same myself, later; it is natural; but it is much more difficult to live with fools than with intelligent people. Wealth makes the former even more absurd than ever, because it gives them assurance, self-sufficiency, which they parade on all occasions, and with which they drive one mad!—Ah! I feel by my stomach that dinner time has come; the stomach acts as a watch, you see; good-night, monsieur."

"May I not at least know your name? If any opportunity to oblige you should present itself, which were more agreeable to you than the idea of taking service at the château, I should like to be able to find you."

"To find me! That is not a very easy matter. I am everywhere and nowhere, like the *free judges* of old times. However, I think that I have chosen my place of abode in these mountains for some time. As for my name, I have no desire to tell you the name which really belongs to me; but I will tell you what the Auvergnats call me, who meet me on the roads and who are beginning to know me; they call me the tall vagabond. That is not such a sonorous name as Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, but after all it is as good a name as another. Good-night."

With that, the stranger walked away whistling, and Edouard returned to the château, thinking of the strange individual with whom he had been talking. They were awaiting Edouard to adjourn to the table. Monsieur Férulus was in despair, for fear that the soup would be cold; but Robineau was very curious to know who the man was with the knotted stick, and as soon as he espied Edouard, he cried: "Well! did you talk with him?"

"Yes, we had quite a long conversation."

"You must tell us about it."

"Cannot monsieur tell us about it at the table?" said Monsieur Férulus.

They took their seats at the table, and Edouard told the result of his conversation with the stranger.

"So he won't enter my service?" said Robineau.

"No, he refuses."

"I am not at all sorry."

"It must be that that fellow is a little cracked," said Monsieur Férulus, "to prefer the bread of the mountaineers to Monsieur de la Roche-Noire's *cuisine*."

"I don't agree with you," said Edouard. "That man has had a good education, and has held high rank in society; he can't make up his mind to wait upon other men, and that seems to me natural enough."

"What makes you think that that vagabond has been received in good society?" said Robineau. "I have discovered nothing distinguished in his appearance."

"If you had heard him talk, you would be certain that he has not always worn such shabby clothes."

"My dear friend," said Alfred, "you are a little inclined to be romantic. Everything that seems in the least degree strange or extraordinary, attracts you, and you are very glad to transform this vagabond into one of those mysterious characters whom we find only in novels."

"Messieurs," said Monsieur Férulus, filling everybody's glass, "Monsieur Edouard is a man of letters; he may have been—I will say more, he must have been flattered to hear a few scholastic words come from the mouth of so vulgar a person. But what does that prove? That he has received an education? I am not of that opinion. Are we not told that in ancient times animals spoke?"

"Such things are seen in our day, too," said Alfred.

"Ah, yes! you mean parrots. They have had education; but Livy reports that an ox cried in the marketplace: 'Rome, beware!' Pliny says that a dog spoke when Tarquin was expelled from the throne; and if we are to believe Suetonius, a crow cried in the Capitol when Domitian was about to be assassinated: 'That is well done!' One of the horses of Achilles, named Xanthus, predicted to his master that he would die before Troy. Lastly, Phryxus's ram spoke, as did the cows on Mount Olympus; and yet, messieurs, none of these beasts had ever received any education. Surely a man may do as much. My conclusion is that this vagabond has been in the service of some scholar, and that something of what he heard has stuck in his memory; for we masters of arts are like the sun, whose beams penetrate palace and garret alike.—Mademoiselle Cheval's salmis is excellent.—I have the honor to drink to the health of Monsieur de la Roche-Noire."

Alfred and Edouard had ceased to take part in the conversation; they were both absorbed by their thoughts. But Monsieur Férulus, who seemed to have made up his mind to eat and drink and talk for the whole party, did not let the conversation flag, and took pains at every turn to throw some flattery or some compliment into the face of Robineau, who received it all with delight, and considered Monsieur Férulus much more agreeable than his two friends. The schoolmaster had already attained his end; the atmosphere of the château was much pleasanter to him than that of his school, and toward the close of the dinner, in the fulness of his heart, he said:

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, I feel that I have imbibed a very strong attachment for you."

"Monsieur Férulus," said Robineau bowing, "I beg you to believe that on my side——"

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, it came to me immediately when I saw you approaching on your donkey. There exists a secret sympathy between great men; and if you are great in birth and in worldly wealth, I flatter myself that I am in knowledge. I am a veritable well in the matter of learning! You must have a library in your château."

"I have one in the South Tower."

"In that case you absolutely must have a librarian."

"But the fact is that there are no books in the library."

"Never mind, we will put some in it. I will bring mine, all classical works. You must realize, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, that a château without a library is like a dinner without soup, like a handsome man with only one eye, or a pretty woman who limps. Look you, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, do you know what I am capable of doing for you?—I have the honor of drinking to your health."

Robineau thought for some time, then replied:

"Faith, no, I can't imagine."

"If you can't imagine, I must explain to you; that is the way that the Sibyls always answered those who consulted them; and when they had expounded their oracle, ordinarily it was understood no better. But to return to the subject: you absolutely must have a librarian."

"But I thought that as——"

"No, you must have one first of all; and to be the depository of the learning which the Château of La Roche-Noire must contain, requires a profound, erudite, scholarly and modest man. Now I look about in vain over all the country within ten leagues, I see no other than myself who combines all these qualities; *consequentia consequentium*, I will be your librarian."

"Oh! Monsieur Férulus——"

"I have the honor to drink to the health of Monsieur de la Roche-Noire. Yes, I will leave everything, I will turn my pupils over to my sub-master; and I have five at this moment. But no matter! Money is nothing to me. Moreover, I have taken it into my head to make your name immortal, and I will do it. I will compose in your honor Greek, Latin, French and Hebrew verses; you shall be a Mæcenas, an Augustus; I will be your Horace, your Virgil; and to make you immortal, I ask simply a salary of four hundred francs, with board and lodging."

Robineau considered that four hundred francs a year was not a high price to pay for becoming immortal, so he shook hands with Monsieur Férulus and the bargain was concluded. The new librarian promised to come and take up his quarters at the château next day. They drank more bumpers to the pleasure that they anticipated in each other's society; and by dint of arguing about the advantages of knowledge, and of drinking to the health of the great men of antiquity, they ended by not knowing what they were saying. Alfred and Edouard had retired long since, and Robineau concluded to follow their example; but on attempting to rise from the table, he was surprised to find that he was dizzy and that his legs gave way. He rang for François to take him to his apartment, saying: "This is strange! Anyone would say that I was a little bit tipsy."

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire," said Férulus, trying to find his hat, "there is no harm in getting a little fuddled; Alexander the Great got tipsy sometimes, and our ancestors used to drink hard. In Germany, a man did not think that he had treated his guest in a friendly fashion, if he did not send him home drunk; and in Russia the Muscovites used to be so frantically fond of wine that when they could no longer swallow it, they took injections of it. When I become your house-guest, I hope that we shall reintroduce some of the customs of antiquity.—Until to-morrow, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire!"

Monsieur Férulus left the château in almost the same condition in which Cunette and Vincent had left the ball; and Robineau flung himself upon his bed, with his head in a whirl, but overjoyed to think that there was some point of resemblance between himself and Alexander the Great.

XIV

LOVE HURTS FRIENDSHIP

The wish to see Isaure again had made both of the young men early risers; Robineau was still sleeping soundly when Edouard left his room and stole softly down the stairs leading to the courtyard. He made as little noise as possible, for he was afraid of waking Alfred; indeed, he was afraid of meeting him; he did not suspect that this time the young baron had stolen a march on him, and that he had left the château half an hour before.

On reaching the courtyard Edouard was stopped by François, who dared not wake his master and did not know what answer to make to the workmen who applied to him for orders concerning different repairs. Edouard spent a moment examining the work, gave some instructions, and succeeded at last in ridding himself of them all. But François had no sooner left him than the gardener came toward him, and begged him to take a look at the improvements which he had planned in the garden. There was no way to get rid of Monsieur Vincent without doing what he wished. Edouard went into the garden, declared everything charming, admirable, delightful; and while the gardener was still talking, left him there and hurried back from the garden to the courtyard. There the concierge was awaiting him; Monsieur Cunette was not tipsy, but he had already breakfasted, and he was in a loquacious mood; he absolutely insisted upon showing Edouard the cellars of the château; he had the keys in his hand and had already lighted the lantern.

"I don’t want to see your cellars," said Edouard, pushing him aside, "show them to your master all you please, but I care nothing about making their acquaintance."

"Then monsieur must have changed his mind," said the concierge, putting the keys into his pocket.

"What do you mean by changed my mind?"

"Why, this morning your friend, Monsieur de Marcey, told us that you were determined to see the cellars, the gardens, and the works that were going on. He told us that we must show you everything."

"What! you have seen Alfred already? Where is he, pray?"

"Oh! he must be a long way off by this time if he is still going. To be sure, he took the big horse that was in the carriage yesterday, you know. Bless my soul! how he made him go!"

Edouard saw that it was Alfred who had set everybody upon him, to detain him in the château; he divined his motive, and his heart beat faster. Alfred had determined to arrange for himself a tête-à-tête with Isaure, and he had feared that Edouard might find him there. What could he have to say in secret to that girl? Edouard guessed only too well, and he would have gladly given all that he possessed to be at the White House at that moment.

"Is there no way to find another horse?" he asked the concierge who was blowing out his lantern.

"A horse—to put in the carriage?"

"Why, no, to ride."

"Ah, I see what it is; monsieur wishes to join his friend. You will have hard work, for he has a long start, and then, you see, he rode so fast!"

"I ask you for a horse."

"Let me see; there is Nicolas, he has his little mare, that’s lame. But never mind; she still has three legs that she works very handily."

"Go, fetch her for me! Here, take this money; but I beg you to make him hurry."

"So you really don’t want to see the cellars to-day?"

"No, no! for heaven’s sake, bring me a horse!"

The concierge hurried away, and Edouard paced the courtyard excitedly. He realized how difficult it would be for him to prevent Alfred from going to see Isaure without him; he had no right, no reason to be offended with him; and yet his heart sank and his brain was in a whirl at the thought that another than himself was with the pretty goatherd and that that other might be making love to her.

Cunette returned at last, with Nicolas’s mare, and Edouard jumped upon her back. As he was about to leave the château, Monsieur Férulus entered it, carrying under one arm a small bundle containing his effects, and under the other a score of volumes, tied together with a cord, with which he proposed to start the library of the château.

"In the saddle already, my dear confrère!" said Monsieur Férulus, stopping beside Edouard. "Oho! we are starting out very early in search of rhymes."

"‘Oh! you who, burning with an ardor danger-fraught,
Follow the thorny path of literature,
Go not—’"

"Stand aside, Monsieur Férulus, stand aside, I beg you! I am in a great hurry."

"I simply wanted to show you a very valuable book which I have under my arm. I found it among some old trash; it is a precious pearl for a scholar. But you must know it: *Aurum ex stercore Ennii*."

Edouard was not listening to Monsieur Férulus; he urged his horse, and left the scholar untying his books in the middle of the courtyard. Spurred on vigorously by her rider, Nicolas’s mare made very good speed. The more heated she became, the less she limped, and Edouard did not allow her to slacken her pace. The road soon became difficult for a horse; but they drew nearer the valley, and soon he would see Isaure’s abode; that thought calmed Edouard’s excitement a little. He longed to know how the girl had received Alfred, and if she had manifested more liking for him than for himself. But how was he to learn what they had said to each other? Suddenly he heard a noise; it was made by the big carriage horse, which was tied near at hand. Edouard at once dismounted, fastened his steed near Alfred’s, and then walked down into the valley, with a weight at his heart, thinking bitterly how short a time the happiness had endured which he had enjoyed in that spot only the day before.

When the young man was in the valley, he looked restlessly about in every direction; he had not yet discovered those whom he wished, and at the same time feared, to see. He went up on the hill where he had sat beside Isaure on

the previous day; he found the spot that they had occupied; but the hill was deserted, the goatherd had not brought her flock thither. Therefore they must be in her cottage. Edouard, more agitated than ever, walked hastily toward the house, which on the day before he had not dared to enter, because it had seemed to him more proper not to enter her abode the first time he was with her. But Alfred evidently had not been so considerate. He was in the girl's house, and perhaps had been there a long while.

Edouard soon reached the cottage; he ran to the door, which yielded to his touch, and entered abruptly. Isaure was seated and working, with Vaillant at her feet. A short distance away was Alfred, seated by a table on which was fruit which he had not touched, and his eyes were amorously fastened on the girl, who kept her own lowered.

At the noise which Edouard made on entering the room, she raised her head, and a pleased smile added to the beauty of her face. Vaillant walked around the young man without growling. But Alfred's features contracted, and an angry expression gleamed in his eyes.

"I beg pardon!" said Edouard, stopping in the doorway; "I entered rather suddenly, but I came—I was looking——"

"Why all this beating about the bush?" said Alfred; "you came here in search of the mistress of this house, and you came in a great hurry because you suspected that I was with her."

Edouard made no reply, but Isaure rose and offered him a chair, saying with a charming grace:

"You will breakfast with me too, will you not?"

"With pleasure," said Edouard, "you invite me so graciously, that I cannot decline."

As he spoke he seated himself opposite Alfred, who thereupon decided to eat. Isaure, after bringing them the best that her garden afforded, returned to her work. She seemed less cheerful, less at her ease than usual. Edouard noticed it, but he dared not question her. Alfred looked at them both, and several moments passed in this mutual constraint, the two young men seeming eagerly intent upon watching each other. At last Alfred said to Edouard:

"Tell me why you did not confess the truth yesterday, when I asked you where you had been? Were you not at perfect liberty to come here if you chose? Why make a mystery of it with me? Had you promised anyone to keep it secret? At all events she has been more discreet than you."

"Since when have I been obliged to account to you for all my actions?" inquired Edouard angrily; "What difference does it make to you whether I came or did not come to this valley? A friend may receive our confidences, but he should not try to pry into what we choose to keep secret from him."

"A friend!" exclaimed Alfred sarcastically; "that name is as common as it is rarely deserved!"

"True enough! A man is no longer our friend when he seeks to open our eyes to the consequences of our passions, or to prevent us from doing some new foolish thing!"

"It is very fine to give advice to others, when one needs similar advice oneself!"

Again the young men were silent. Isaure looked from one to the other with amazement mingled with anxiety, but she dared not speak to them.

After a little time, Alfred burst out laughing as he looked at Edouard, and then exclaimed:

"Upon my word, my dear Edouard, we are like two great children! The idea of having a row, of being sulky with each other, just for a pretty face, for a pair of lovely eyes; in short, for this lovely child, who perhaps will not listen to either of us."

"Alfred," cried Edouard, "is it decent to speak thus before her?"

"Bah! why not? For I do not conceal what I think! Ask Isaure; I have already told her that I adore her, that I am mad over her, that I wish to make her happy, that I can't get her pretty little face out of my head.—Is it not true, Isaure, that I have told you all that?"

The girl blushed, and without raising her eyes, said:

"I don't remember what you said to me."

"The deuce! In that case it would seem that my declaration did not produce a very deep impression upon your heart."

"Alfred, how can you talk so frivolously to this girl? You think that you are dealing with one of your Parisian ladies. But the solitude in which Isaure lives should make us consider it a duty to treat her with the greater respect. Remember that we are under her roof, that she receives us here trustfully, and that it would be shocking to abuse her trust."

"Oh! you assume to preach, and yet you heave sighs and cast languishing glances! My dear Edouard, every man has his own way of making love, and with an innocent girl, yours is the more dangerous, I believe. For my part, I don't beat about the bush, I say instantly whatever I feel. What harm is there, pray, in thinking Isaure lovely, in loving her? Is she not her own mistress? Is she not free to dispose of her heart? Why should I not try to make it my own? However, Isaure is safer than you think. I tried to kiss her—just a little kiss, that isn't much to ask. But deuce take it! that attempt came near costing me dear; mademoiselle defended herself—and her dog—he saw it all, and for a moment I thought that he was going to swallow me whole! Parbleu! if I ever marry, I'll have such a dog to leave with my wife!"

Isaure hung her head over her work and said nothing. Edouard rose angrily and paced the floor for several minutes; but on looking at the girl he saw that tears were rolling down her cheeks, although she lowered her eyes to conceal them.

"See, see, Alfred! This is your work!" cried Edouard; "here you hardly know her, and already you make her weep!"

"What do you say? She is weeping! Is it possible? And I am the cause of it! Isaure, dear Isaure, tell me that you forgive me."

As he spoke, Alfred ran and threw himself at the girl's feet and seized one of her hands, although Vaillant raised his head and uttered a low growl of evil omen.

"How distressed I am to have made you unhappy!" continued Alfred; "I swear to be more considerate in the future! Edouard is right; I am a thoughtless fellow; I don't know what I do. But you are so pretty! you fairly turn my head; really it isn't my fault."

"Now you are beginning again, Alfred," said Edouard, who was not in the least amused by this scene.

"No, no, let me alone! I must excuse myself, I must try to obtain forgiveness."

"Rise, monsieur," said Isaure in a sad, soft tone; "I bear you no ill will, it was not you who made me weep; but I was thinking of my situation, I was thinking that I have no parents, that I have lost my adopted mother. When she was with me, no one tried to kiss me."

"There! you see that it was I who caused you to make these melancholy reflections!" said Alfred, rising. "Well, I realize that I was wrong, but I will not distress you again. Look you—in order to be more certain of behaving myself, which is not always easy for me, I will not come again alone to see you. Edouard shall always be with me. That I trust is a praiseworthy resolution."

"Oh, yes! that is very satisfactory," said Edouard.

"Very satisfactory—yes! But it is coupled with one little condition, and that is, my dear friend, that you will not come without me to see this charming child."

Edouard was no longer so well pleased at Alfred's project; but Isaure looked at him as if she feared that he would refuse, and he answered with a sigh:

"Well, yes, I agree; we will come together."

"Good!" said Alfred; "that is a resolution worthy of our chivalrous ancestors. But I am inclined to think that it's time for us to say adieu to the lady of our thoughts for to-day.—Come, Edouard, let us return to the château.—Au revoir, my sweet child; we shall see you again to-morrow, but I trust that those lovely eyes will shed no more tears."

Isaure bestowed a gentle smile on the two young men as they left her abode and returned to their horses.

"Ha! ha!" said Alfred; "you followed my example, and took a horse. Faith, we are equally well mounted. It is agreed that everything is common between us, until the little one has made her choice, and that cannot be long. It would be a deuced strange thing, agreeable and comely as we both are, if one of us should not succeed in pleasing a peasant girl, after making so many conquests at Paris!"

Edouard did not share Alfred's merriment; he did not treat so lightly as his friend the sentiment that he felt for Isaure.

"My friend," said he, "I am really sorry that you are thinking of that girl."

"What's that? Why so? You are thinking of her yourself."

"But I am thinking of her in rather a different way."

"Oh! my dear Edouard, you can't make me believe that you have formed a plan of marrying this little goatherd! You would like perhaps to have me suppose so, so that then,—respecting so pure and spotless a love, I would not go again to talk nonsense to the girl. That would be very clever!"

"Alfred, you judge your friend very ill!"

"I know that friends cease to be friends as soon as love comes in between them. However, because you pretend to love this girl seriously, why should you not believe that I may love her too?"

"Look you, Alfred, a very bright woman said to me not long ago, at Paris: 'There's a vast difference between *desire* and love'; you desire to possess Isaure, but you do not really love her."

"My dear Edouard, your lady friend told you nothing new; I learned long ago that to desire and to love are not synonymous; but because one loves, that is no reason for not desiring; and the fact that one desires does not prove that one does not love. You may say that to the lady from me, when you see her.—However, how do you know that Isaure won't prefer me to you?"

"Oh! I don't know it, of course!" Edouard replied, forcing back a sigh.

After that they were both silent, and returned, deep in thought, to the château.

XV

WHICH PROMISES SOMETHING

Several days had passed, during which Alfred and Edouard had not failed to pass every morning with Isaure. Faithful to their agreement, they started together from the château and returned together. It was easy to see, however, that the compact was displeasing to both, but neither dared to break it; each was very glad to accompany his rival when he went into the mountains, but would have liked to return thither alone, to see the young woman.

Isaure, being accustomed to see the two friends every morning, had resumed her happy and trustful demeanor with them. She laughed and romped with Alfred, whose pranks and nonsense seemed to amuse her; then she would return to Edouard and ask him innocently:

"Why don't you play with us?"

Whereupon, Edouard would say nothing, but would try to smile; the more merry Alfred was, the less inclined he felt to share his enjoyment; he suffered in secret; it seemed to him that Isaure showed a greater preference for Alfred, that it was he at whom she looked and smiled most frequently. He tried to conceal the suffering that he felt, but jealousy was already rending his heart. This condition of affairs could not last long. Alfred flattered himself that he pleased the girl, but he desired to acquire the actual certainty of that fact. Edouard was in despair, but he was determined to avow his suffering to her who was the cause of it, and to learn from her mouth whether he must abandon the hope of being loved by her. Isaure, alone at ease in the presence of the two young men, who had ceased to speak to her of love, passed a certain part of every day with them, with no suspicion of the danger to herself which was likely to result from their frequent visits.

Several times on leaving the valley, the young men had noticed the vagabond, who, sometimes seated on a cliff, sometimes standing in the middle of a field, would cast a mocking glance at them, and then turn his head away in order to avoid entering into conversation.

"There's that extraordinary man with whom you talked," said Alfred one day as they left Isaure's house. "What the deuce is he doing here? I begin to agree with Robineau that that fellow has evil designs. But the little one must know him; I am curious to know if he has ever spoken to her. I propose also that the rascal shall tell me why he presumes

to smile when he looks at us; there's something sarcastic in his expression which I am going to ask him to explain."

"The man is unfortunate," said Edouard; "we must overlook eccentricities in him which are perhaps the consequence of the troubles he has undergone."

"Troubles! He doesn't seem to have had any; he whistles and sings and laughs all to himself."

"But with all that, Alfred, one can detect a bitter expression, which indicates that his gayety is not altogether genuine!"

The next day the young men asked Isaure if she knew the man who was wandering about the mountains. From the portrait which they drew of him the girl remembered that she had seen him once or twice; but he had never spoken to her and had never entered her house.

"If he ever should come here," said Alfred, "I advise you to be on your guard."

"Why so?" said Isaure; "is he a bad man?"

"I don't know, but I am not prepossessed in his favor. However, if he should venture to offer you the slightest affront——"

"Why on earth should he want to injure me? I have never injured anybody!"

"That's not always a reason, but I hope that Vaillant will defend you. I remember the way in which he receives those who try to kiss you."

As he said this, Alfred smiled and took the girl's hand; she blushed; Edouard, who was some yards away, said nothing, but his features betrayed all the suffering of his heart. Isaure glanced at him, and instantly taking her hand from Alfred's, she ran to Edouard and said in a tone which went to his very heart:

"What is the matter, pray? One would think that you were suffering. Can it be that I have pained you?"

That sweet, tender voice, and the way in which Isaure looked at him, revived hope in Edouard's heart, while it produced an entirely contrary effect upon Alfred. He frowned, moved about impatiently, and exclaimed:

"Let us go, it's time!"

And he instantly left the cottage, much less satisfied than when he had entered, dragging away Edouard, who would gladly have remained longer.

Only a word, a glance, a smile from beauty is necessary to make us happy or to destroy our hopes.

On leaving the cottage the young men saw the stranger seated on the ground a few yards away. According to his custom, he was watching them, and his face wore its habitual mocking expression. Alfred dropped Edouard's arm and walked toward the vagabond, who remained calmly in his place. When he stood in front of him, Alfred said to him in a haughty tone:

"You seem to spy upon all our actions, and you look at us with an expression that I don't like. I am not fond of insolent or inquisitive people, I give you fair warning."

The stranger leaned back, and merely replied:

"I am like you: I am not fond of insolent or inquisitive people. I have always avoided the latter and have found a way to punish the former."

"Do you mean that for a challenge?" said Alfred, with a contemptuous glance at the stranger.

"A challenge! Oh! dear me, no! I no longer amuse myself in that way. Other times, other manners. As for your actions, it isn't necessary to watch them long to understand them, as well as your schemes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Parbleu! when young men go to see a young girl, anyone knows what the result is likely to be, and one need not be very shrewd to guess it. But, after all, I assure you that it makes no difference to me; I see nothing out of the common course in it."

"I consider you very presumptuous to dare to indulge in such reflections. If you were not constantly at our heels, how would you know where we go? But if you presume to say another word about that girl, I shall find a way to chastise such insolence!"

The vagabond's only reply was to stretch himself out on the turf with a sneering laugh; then he took a snuffbox from his pocket, and after dipping his own fingers in it, handed it to Alfred, saying very calmly:

"Do you use it? It's fresh, I bought it this morning at Saint-Amand."

The stranger's placidity upset all Alfred's ideas; his wrath redoubled, and he was on the point of resorting to some act of violence; but Edouard held him back and stepped between him and the stranger.

"My dear De Marcey, what are you thinking about? and why are you so incensed with this poor fellow?"

Alfred stopped, blushing as if ashamed because he had been unable to control himself. But at the name of Marcey, which Edouard had pronounced, the stranger acted as if he had been struck by lightning; and a sudden change took place in his whole aspect. His face no longer wore an expression of indifference or irony, but of surprise, interest and disquietude. He rose suddenly and walked up to Alfred, scrutinizing him anxiously; then he said to him:

"I beg pardon, monsieur, but your name, please?"

The stranger's voice was no longer the same; it had lost the harsh, stern accent which seemed natural to it and had taken on an entirely new tone; his changed manner of address was that of a man who is accustomed to good society.

Alfred and Edouard were struck by the change which had taken place in the poor devil's aspect. But he repeated his question and Alfred replied:

"My name—why, you have just heard it,—Alfred de Marcey."

"Are you the son of the Baron de Marcey who was a colonel of cavalry?"

"Yes, he is my father. How do you know? Did you ever know him?"

"Yes,—that is to say, I have often heard him spoken of. But how old are you?"

"How old!" said Alfred in surprise; "twenty-four years."

The stranger seemed to reflect and to try to collect his memories; then he muttered in an undertone:

"Twenty-four years! Oh, yes! I remember, he had a son by his first wife—I heard that. And have you any brothers

or sisters?"

"No, I have none," replied Alfred, whose curiosity was keenly aroused. "But might I know what interest you can possibly have in knowing about my family?"

The stranger evidently tried to assume his usual air of indifference as he replied:

"Oh! I asked you that just for the sake of talking, that is all. Is your father still alive?"

"To be sure he is."

"But he isn't in this region?"

"No, he is in Paris. Did you ever serve in his regiment?"

"No; not in his regiment exactly; but I did serve in the army once."

"You have defended your country, and now you are unfortunate and a vagrant!" cried Alfred. "Oh! forgive me, monsieur! I spoke to you rather hastily just now; I am a thoughtless fellow; I often make mistakes and am sorry for them afterward; but Edouard will tell you that my heart is in the right place. Come, prove that you bear me no grudge by accepting this purse, and let me have the pleasure of helping an old soldier."

As he spoke, Alfred handed the traveller a purse filled with gold; he glared at it with covetous eyes, but still his hand repulsed the hand that was held out to him, and he answered with something like bitterness in his tone:

"No, I don't want your money; I am not in need of anything."

"You refuse me," said Alfred; "I see, you bear me ill will for my hasty speech of a moment ago. Well! as you have known my father, I offer you this trifling sum in his name."

"In his name!" cried the stranger; and his eye gleamed with repressed rage. But soon, seeming to obtain control of himself, he continued:

"I say again, I am not in need of anything now; later, it is possible that your money may be of use to me. Adieu, young man; we shall meet again."

And the vagabond walked away, after casting upon Alfred a glance of strange meaning. The young men returned to their horses and rode back to the château, discussing this meeting, which caused them to forget Isaure and their rivalry for the moment.

XVI

PREPARATIONS FOR FESTIVITIES

While the two friends spent their time making love to the pretty goatherd, while Monsieur Férulus placed his grammars and his dictionaries on the dusty shelves of the library, while Mademoiselle Cheval exercised her talents in the kitchen and Cunette in the cellar, while the gardener was digging up the garden and the workmen were repairing the whole domain of La Roche-Noire, Robineau passed his time at the dinners and other parties which were given him at Saint-Amand, whither he went every day. Like all small provincial towns, the little town of Saint-Amand contained its proportion of originals, gossips, pretentious folk, and heads of families who had daughters to marry. Robineau was rich, he had just purchased a château, and he proposed taking a wife; that was more than was necessary for him to be fêted, made much of and invited everywhere.

Robineau created a sensation in every house that he visited; people said to themselves: "That is Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, the new owner of the château; he is rich and he means to marry; he told his notary, who told his clients, who told the rest of the town." All the young ladies glanced furtively at Robineau and assumed pretty little airs to attract that gentleman, who was not particularly fascinating; but it is so cruel to remain unmarried, and on the other hand so pleasant to have a château, and to be called Madame de la Roche-Noire, that those young ladies were very excusable for trying to captivate the newcomer. Their mammas also heaped attentions upon him; they applauded what he said and smiled at what he did. Even the widows darted at the new landed proprietor an occasional flashing or tender glance, accompanied by a stifled sigh; for many widows are not at all sorry to contract a second marriage, in order to divert their minds from their grief, if they have had a good husband; to recompense themselves, if they have had a bad one; or to draw distinctions, if they have had a passable one. Amid all these allurements, Robineau hardly knew where he was; he considered the soirées at Saint-Amand far preferable to the balls in Paris; he deemed himself at once an Apollo and a Voltaire, and did not reflect that it was his twenty-five thousand francs a year, which, in the eyes of many people, endowed him with charm, wit and learning; whereas in reality he was still as dull and as great a fool as ever! Bridoison declares that that is the sort of thing which people say to themselves; but there are many people still, who never do.

Robineau, thus fawned upon, flattered and courted as an oracle, and at a loss to know in which direction to throw the handkerchief, determined meanwhile to return the courtesies which he had received from the society of the town; he spurred the workmen on when he was at the château, and when he left it, he instructed his librarian to take his place and to hurry the work along. The librarian, who had as yet succeeded in collecting only twenty-three volumes in the library, was not sorry to have another position to fill and to be monseigneur's man of business as well. Through his efforts, two young Auvergnats were placed under Mademoiselle Cheval's orders, as scullions; for the scholar began his improvements in the culinary department. Next he inspected the cellars, and required the keys to be placed in his hands, to the intense disgust of Monsieur Cunette. But Monsieur Férulus had read somewhere that the great noblemen had *officiers de bouche*, and he declared that butlers were just that; consequently, he took that position upon himself also. He hired two new servants, who were to act as coachman and as footman; he suggested to Robineau to purchase a small horse and a chaise, in which he made his daily visits to the town. Lastly, a stout girl of twenty years was retained as assistant to Monsieur Vincent, who was forever saying that he could not do everything; and the new gardener was expected, when she should be called upon, to warm the beds and warm Monsieur de la Roche-Noire's feet. This clause was expressly stipulated by Monsieur Férulus when he engaged the peasant girl; "for," said he, "servants used to do that for their masters, when they needed it; and Monsieur de la Roche-Noire and I have agreed to reëstablish the praiseworthy customs of ancient times."

The stout girl, who had engaged to do everything,—like the young ladies who advertise in the Petites-Affiches,—

promised to do whatever was wanted, and the librarian-man of business-butler installed Jeannette at the château.

After a few days, the château assumed a much more attractive aspect; one could ascend the staircase without the risk of falling; the walls were repaired, and fresh papers replaced those blackened by time; the windows were provided with glass, the doors could be closed, and the wind could not be felt in every corner. Robineau concluded that he could safely give the party which he had promised to the swell society of the town. His household was established, his cellar supplied, the servants had their livery, the garden was despoiled of beets in a large measure, and embellished with new flowers; and lastly, Monsieur Férulus had written some poetry for the occasion. Robineau fixed the day, and despatched his invitations, and everything was made ready at the château for that grand event, in which the new proprietor proposed to demonstrate at once his good taste, his refinement and his magnificence.

On returning from the valley of Chadrat, Alfred and Edouard were not a little surprised to find everything up in arms at the château; servants were running hither and thither, setting up in the courtyard posts upon which lamps were fixed; stringing cords, with colored lanterns attached, along the garden paths; and in the midst of it all, Monsieur Férulus, holding a book in one hand and a corkscrew in the other, went from this person to that person, issuing orders and wiping his brow with the end of his sleeve, because, presumably, he had not yet taken charge of the handkerchief department.

"Bless my soul! what is going to happen here?" asked Alfred.

"Can it be that Monsieur Jules de la Roche-Noire is going to be married?" said Edouard.

"Messieurs," said Férulus, "I have read in some Italian author—as he said this he waved his corkscrew—'*Lontano dagli occhi, lontano dal cuore!*' You, messieurs, are away from the château all day, and consequently you cannot know what is in preparation here. But here is Monseigneur de la Roche-Noire, who will inform you."

Robineau was in fact coming toward the young men at that moment.

"Upon my word, messieurs," he said, "you are very agreeable! I never see you now; you start off in the morning to go—I have a shrewd idea where! If I had not had Monsieur Férulus, this estimable scholar who has established my household upon a magnificent footing, I should never have got through with it. I hope that to-morrow at least you will be kind enough not to absent yourselves. I am giving a party—a magnificent dinner, a ball, and games of all sorts; the entertainment will begin at noon precisely; is that not so, Monsieur Férulus?"

"Yes, monseigneur; at noon the cannon, that is to say, three muskets fired spontaneously, will give the signal for the party."

"Mon Dieu! it is after the style of the Tivoli at Paris," said Alfred.

"First of all," continued Férulus, "a foot race in the gardens, followed by homage to the ladies."

"What is this homage to the ladies to be, Monsieur Férulus?"

"A bouquet presented to each one of them, monseigneur, in which there will be a little compliment in verse, of my composition."

"That will be very gallant."

"In order that there may be no jealousy, I shall put the same compliment in each bouquet. Next, a foot race through the apartments of the château."

"Ah! Monsieur Férulus," said Alfred, "you should have made it a horse race; it would have been more exciting."

"Next, refreshments of all sorts, consisting of red wine and water, distributed to all the company; then a little concert, performed under the windows of the balcony."

"Monsieur Férulus," said Robineau, "I won't have bagpipes. The villagers hereabout are very obliging, but I remember my first party, and I don't propose that those fellows shall dance here again."

"Never fear, monseigneur, they will not dance; they will come into the courtyard simply to be present at the games and to see the greased pole."

"Ah! We are to have a greased pole, are we?"

"Yes, monseigneur, we shall have two, in fact; I thought that it would be courteous to have one for the men and one for the ladies."

"Parbleu!" said Alfred, "I have never yet seen women climbing a greased pole; but it cannot fail to be very amusing. You will supply them with drawers, I presume, Monsieur Férulus?"

"I have not gone into those details, monsieur; but in order that it may be easier for the ladies to reach the top, I have conceived rather a happy idea: while the men's pole will be greased and rubbed with soap, I shall have the ladies' pole rubbed with honey from top to bottom; in that way, they will be able to ascend as easily as if it were a ladder."

"That is altogether novel!" said Robineau; "and what are the prizes to be?"

"Superb, monseigneur! a *Syntax* and the *De Viris Illustribus* for the men; the *Explanation of Participles* and the *Cuisinière Bourgeoise* for the ladies."

"The Auvergnats who win those will be well pleased!" said Edouard.

"What next, my dear friend?" said Robineau.

"Next, monseigneur, to take the place of tournaments, which we could not give for lack of knights, it occurred to me that you would not be sorry to have an imitation of the gymnastic games, as they used to be performed at the festival of Eleusis, and even before the Roman Emperors. Consequently, some Auvergnats, to whom I have given full instructions, will execute in the courtyard such sports as throwing the discus, foot-races, wrestling and boxing."

"You won't serve them with anything to drink beforehand, I trust!"

"No, monseigneur! Next, flourishes, executed by the three musicians whom I have hired in the town, will announce that the banquet is served. At dessert, I shall sing couplets in your honor, and you will be kind enough to encore the last—that is always done."

"Very well, that is understood."

"Next, monseigneur, we shall go to the ball room, which will be decorated as the Greeks used to decorate the places devoted to such assemblages: flowers, garlands, and mottoes everywhere."

"You will have the mottoes written in French, won't you, Monsieur Férulus?"

"No, monseigneur, in Latin and Greek, that is more dignified."

"Never mind, do me the favor to write them in French; otherwise, if the ladies should ask me for their meaning, it might embarrass me."

"If you absolutely insist upon it——"

"Yes, I insist upon it. What next?"

"Next, monseigneur, a bomb, fired in your courtyard, will announce the fireworks, which will crown that beautiful day by a rain of fire."

"A rain of fire! The deuce! You will take care that it doesn't rain on the company."

"I will answer for everything, monseigneur; I, myself, shall handle the fireworks, and I am as expert at it as if I had invented powder."

"Well, messieurs, what do you think of this fête?" said Robineau, rubbing his hands in high glee.

"I hope that you will distribute programmes," said Alfred. "But who are to be your guests to-morrow, pray?"

"All the best people of Saint-Amand: nobles, people of great wealth, and men of great merit. You will see, messieurs, that all the agreeable people are not in Paris. And the women too! Dieu! you will see women of all colors!"

"What! do you mean that you expect to have Africans, mulattoes?"

"No, not that; I mean that you will see beauties of all types; and such wit! and such style! It's a pity that we haven't adopted the custom of Turkey; if we had, I would marry twelve wives instead of one, for upon my word, there are more than twelve of whom I have made the conquest. But above all, there is a certain Mademoiselle de la Pincerie. Ah! as for her, I believe that I have dealt her the fatal blow, and she has excited my imagination considerably, too!"

"Who is this Mademoiselle de la Pincerie?"

"She is a charming young lady: tall, well-built and stately, and dances like a fairy! In short, she is Mademoiselle Cornélie de la Pincerie, daughter of Monsieur le Marquis de la Pincerie, of one of the oldest families in Poitou, who settled in Auvergne because they found that butter was cheaper here. It was the father who told me that; he is a very profound thinker, a great political economist. For forty-three years he has been working at a philanthropic project, tending to prove that one can make soup with nothing but a calf's foot, which would effect a great saving in soup stock!"

"Deuce take it! It is very unfortunate for the oxen that he has not finished that work yet!"

"There's another daughter too, but she is a widow: very good-looking still, but rather a flirt, I am inclined to think. And then there is a brother of the marquis; and he is good nature personified! However, messieurs, you will see the whole family to-morrow; indeed, I intend to ask them to pass some time at my château."

The young men were about to leave the courtyard, when Monsieur Férulus, who had disappeared for a moment, ran back and detained Robineau, saying:

"You know, Monseigneur de la Roche-Noire, that I have engaged a full staff of servants; but you have not yet had the opportunity to see them all. By the way, I have deemed it proper to give them names more befitting their employment than those which they formerly bore. I have just called your household together in the large gallery; do you care to pass them in review?"

"It seems to me that that is the correct thing to do," said Robineau; "I ought at least to know all the people who are in my pay. Let us go to pass my servants in review."

They went to the gallery, where all the domestics of the château were assembled. Monsieur Férulus, who was very fond of ceremonials, had drawn up all the servants in a line, ordering each of them to hold in his hand some implement of his profession. The concierge had his keys, the gardener a spade, François a switch for beating clothes, the coachman a whip, the groom a cap, the scullions larding-needles, Mademoiselle Cheval a saucepan, and Jeannette, who had found no warming pan in the château, held a foot-warmer under her arm.

"Excellent! this looks exceedingly well," said Robineau, halting in front of them; "nine servants, to say nothing of the horses and dogs; that is very nice."

"Allow me, monseigneur, to tell you the new name of each one," said Férulus; and taking his stand before one after another, and pointing to them with a stick, as if he were exhibiting wax figures, he began with the concierge.

"This, monseigneur, is your concierge. Instead of Cunette, an unseemly name, which suggests a rebus, we will call him, with your permission, Custos, which, as you well know, is the Latin for guardian;—you hear, your name is Custos."

"My name is Cunette," cried the concierge; "and I maintain that it is a better name than your Cudechausse."

"I tell you it is Custos, you ignoramus."

"But——"

"Silence!—This, monseigneur, who is your gardener, is named Olitor, the real name of his profession. Olitor, present your spade."

"What nonsense is that you are talking?" said the gardener angrily; "my name is Vincent. What have you to say against that name? Do you suppose that at my age you are going to stuff a new one into my ears?"

"Olitor, my dear fellow, is very easy to say."

"Catch me answer that name! It's a dog's name."

"It's a gardener's name; just look in the dictionary."

"Oh! let me alone! Do you suppose dictionaries grow in my garden?"

"I tell you that you are called Olitor by monseigneur's orders."

"And I tell you that our master can't order such silly nonsense as that!"

"Silly nonsense! The fruit of my long investigation!"

"My dear Férulus," said Robineau, stepping forward majestically, "I do justice to your learning, and I know that so far as erudition is concerned you could swallow all these fellows without winking; but I shall not give new names to my servants; it would be likely to mix me all up; so I shall simply call them by the name of their profession, that is to say, concierge, gardener, valet; I like that better."

"*Vive monseigneur!*" said Cunette, tossing his hat in the air; while Férulus turned away, muttering between his

teeth:

"This is what comes of taking pains to establish a household with taste! This is the way learning is encouraged! *Numerus stultorum est infinitus!*"

Robineau, having made the acquaintance of all the rest of his new servants, came to Jeannette, who was the last in the line, and who presented the foot-warmer to him.

"What is that thing, my dear?" said Robineau, as he looked at it.

"Why, monseigneur, it is an *attribute*, as that gentleman all dressed in black called it, who engaged me to work for you."

"What, do you mean that you have entered my service to hand me foot-warmers? It seems to me that in summer you might find something better to do than that."

"Monseigneur de la Roche-Noire, that is a figure of speech," said Férulus, stepping forward; "this girl is here to do everything, and principally to warm the bed when you want it done; but as I could find no warming pan at the moment, she offers you the implement of her duties."

"Yes, monseigneur, I will warm you," said Jeannette with a curtsy.

"Monseigneur," continued Férulus, "Agar performed that service for Abraham, Ruth for Boaz, Bathsheba for David, and I do not see why Jeannette should not perform it for your lordship."

"I don't see either," said Robineau, "and I highly approve the creation of this position in my château.—Well, my friends, be zealous and active, and above all things see to it that to-morrow you work with redoubled zest and do not get drunk."

As he said this, Robineau walked away with his two friends. The servants returned to their work, and Monsieur Férulus went to Jeannette and whispered in her ear:

"You will warm my bed this evening."

"What, monsieur, already? in such warm weather as this? it's early in September."

"That proves nothing; it may be hot and still be damp."

"But, monsieur, I can't find any warming pan."

"Never mind, my dear girl, at your age the centre of gravity should be warm enough to take the place of one."

"What's the centre of gravity, monsieur?"

"What you sit down on, Jeannette."

"What, monsieur,—you want me to warm your bed with my——"

"Even so, my dear; that is the way beds were always warmed in ancient times, for in ancient times there were no warming pans."

"Then it's all right, monsieur."

"Oh! by the way, Jeannette, you will be careful to leave the warming pan in the bed, so that I shall find it there when I retire."

Jeannette opened her eyes and curtsied, while Monsieur Férulus walked away playing with his corkscrew.

XVII

THE MAIDEN AND THE STRANGER

While everybody at the Château of La Roche-Noire was engrossed by the great festivity which was to take place on the morrow, the most profound tranquillity reigned about Isaure's dwelling. When the young men had left her, the little goatherd had taken her flock onto the mountain. On the way, she often turned her eyes toward the White House; she seemed to gaze inquiringly at it; then she went on, and from time to time a faint sigh escaped from her breast. Isaure had unconsciously become pensive since she began to receive the visits of Alfred and Edouard; she frequently thought of the two young men. Alone in her cottage, or among the mountains, Isaure had abundance of time to think; and when love makes her heart beat fast, the busiest woman finds leisure to think of the man she loves, or rather she thinks of him all the time. Even in the midst of society and of the restraints to which it subjects us, the image of the person we love follows us everywhere. It is our veritable sylph, or guardian angel.

Alfred and Edouard were both made to be loved, and they both did their utmost to please Isaure. A heart that has never known love is certain to surrender more easily and to receive more quickly the impressions of that passion. The girl whom the mountaineers and the shepherds had avoided, experienced a novel pleasure with those persons who seemed so happy in her presence; but that pleasure was inevitably attended with risk; and already fits of musing announced the birth of a new sentiment in Isaure's heart.

Reading was no longer a sufficient distraction for the little goatherd. Still, she had carried a book upon the mountain with her, to occupy her time; but although she opened it and looked at it, she did not read; her distraught eyes sought the road by which the two young men always came to the valley.

"I shall see them to-morrow," she said to herself; "they are not afraid of me! they do not run away at sight of me; they do not think me wicked. Ah! I begin to feel that it is very melancholy to live alone, not to have a single friend with one. And yet, a little while ago I never thought of that; I was perfectly happy. What can it be that I lack now?"

Isaure let her head sink upon her breast; the book was thrown aside. Her mind abandoned itself to a delicious reverie; it is so sweet to dream, when the image of one we love is mingled with all our thoughts! And yet how many people live and die without knowing the most blissful sensations of love!

Suddenly the girl raised her head, put aside with her hand the long fair curls which fell over her great eyes, and turning her head anxiously, looked once more at the White House, with her head bent forward, as if she were listening, waiting, hoping.

But nothing disturbed the absolute calm that reigned all about; and that house, an object of terror to the credulous mountaineers, seemed to be as usual entirely deserted.

At last Isaure ceased to look in that direction; but, having glanced about, as if to make sure that no one could see her, she took from her breast a little locket, put it to her lips, and kissed it fervently; and a tear or two, which glistened in her eyes, fell upon that object upon which she lavished so many manifestations of affection.

After a few minutes she carefully replaced the locket in her breast, wiped her eyes, rose, assembled her goats and walked slowly back to her cottage.

Vaillant came rushing out to jump and fawn upon his mistress.

"My poor Vaillant," said Isaure, passing her hand over the head of her faithful companion, "you are not pleased with me; I am sure of it; I do not play with you as often as I used; I fondle you less; and yet I still love you, you are my faithful companion; but I don't know what is the matter with me, Vaillant; and sometimes it really seems to me as if I were angry with myself for not being so merry as I used to be."

The dog pricked up his ears and looked in the girl's face; one would have thought that he was seeking some means of raising her spirits. Several moments passed, and Vaillant, overjoyed to be caressed by his young mistress, did not stir from her side. But suddenly he lowered his head, walked away from Isaure, and took his stand close to the house door, uttering a low, prolonged growl.

"What is it, Vaillant? What's the matter with you?" said the girl, calling him back to her. But he remained near the door, and would not leave it; he continued to growl, while his eyes expressed his ill humor and an uneasy curiosity.

"Is there anyone there?" continued Isaure. "Can it be that they have come back to see me? or perhaps only one of them?"

At the thought, a deep blush overspread the girl's cheeks. She ran to the door and hastily threw it open; but instead of her young friends, she saw the man who had been wandering about the mountains standing a few yards from her house.

He was standing perfectly still, leaning upon his stout stick; he seemed to be scrutinizing the cottage in every part, and at the same time to be deep in thought; when the door opened and the dog went to him, he did not move; but his piercing black eyes rested upon the girl, who had remained in the doorway.

The stranger's appearance and the expression of his face had at that moment a tinge of gloom, which, combined with the shabbiness of his clothes, inspired a sort of distrust. Isaure had never been so near that man; she had only seen him passing at a distance; but now he was only a few yards away from her, and his glances, spanning that distance, seemed by the smouldering fire that gleamed in them to seek to read the very bottom of the girl's soul.

The vivid blush which tinged the little goatherd's cheeks gave place to a sudden pallor; Isaure felt her heart sink, and she began to tremble. Never before had she had such a feeling of oppression as that which seized her at the sight of the stranger. However, ashamed of having given way to a feeling of alarm, she tried to recover herself, and said to him in a voice which she did her utmost to make steady:

"Monsieur—do you wish for anything?"

The vagabond gazed at her a long while, then replied:

"Faith, no, I do not want anything. However, as I happen to be in front of your house, I would be glad to eat a bit if it were possible."

"Oh, yes! that is very easy, monsieur. Come in."

From that moment Isaure saw in the stranger only an unfortunate, and the pleasure that she felt in doing good speedily dissipated her terror. Still, while the stranger entered and seated himself in the living room, Isaure, as she went to and fro to fetch what she had to offer him, kept Vaillant constantly by her side; and her voice, as she spoke a few affectionate words to her faithful guardian from time to time, seemed to urge him to watch over her more heedfully than ever.

The stranger threw himself upon a chair, put aside his hat and his stick, and examined with interest the interior of the cottage. When the girl returned to the living room, he scrutinized her again, and the more he looked at her the more amazement his eyes seemed to express.

Isaure, having placed the food upon a table which she moved to her guest's side, said to him pleasantly:

"There, monsieur, is all that I have to offer you, but I do it gladly."

"There is much more than I need, and it is a most sumptuous repast, compared with those which I have had for some time past," said the stranger, seating himself at the table. "But I warn you, my child, that I shall not be able to pay you for what I consume in your house."

"Pay me, monsieur! Oh! I am not in the habit of asking pay for such trifling services as I can render. Is not one too fortunate to be able to be of use sometimes to one's fellow creatures?"

"That is a most beautiful reflection, my child!" said the stranger ironically; "but I doubt whether your fellow creatures would do so much for you, if the opportunity should offer! You are still young; it will be well for you to learn thus early never to rely upon the gratitude of those whom you have obliged."

"I do not need their gratitude to take pleasure in doing good; my reward is in my heart." As she said this, Isaure raised her blue eyes with a touching expression of sincerity, and her whole face seemed lovelier than ever. The stranger gazed at her constantly while he ate.

"Young woman," said he, "it was not among your goats and your dull-witted mountaineers that you learned to express yourself thus."

Isaure blushed and faltered:

"What! do you think, monsieur, that the people in our mountains are not so hospitable as I am?"

"Hospitable! yes, indeed! But there are so many ways of being hospitable; and I see by your manner, by your speech—yes, yes, I know what I am talking about, and hereafter I think it would be difficult to deceive me.—Come, sit down here, and keep me company. I don't frighten you, I trust?"

"No, monsieur," replied the girl timidly, as she seated herself a few steps from the table, taking care to keep Vaillant beside her.

After eating and drinking for some time, the stranger rested his elbows on the table, placed his head on his hands, and, gazing steadfastly at Isaure, said to her:

"People talk much about you in the neighborhood."

"About me, monsieur?"

"Yes, about you. The mountaineers declare that you are a witch."

"A witch?"

"Yes. That makes you smile and you are right; these idiots deserve nothing but pity; and yet in the old days such a reputation might have been most disastrous to you. In the days when people did not take the trouble to reason, they burned those who were accused of witchcraft; that was the quickest way. The goodwomen of those times did not doubt that witches rode to their revels on broomsticks; and there were people interested in having three-fourths of the human race become as foolish as the goodwomen. We have got beyond all that, and you will not be burned. But I begin to think that the peasants may well have been surprised at the difference between you and themselves, although I do not imagine that it is due to any but a perfectly natural cause. You will say that this is none of my business, I suppose; and that if you express yourself in better language than the mountaineers, it is, presumably, because your education was looked after. That is all very well; but you must agree, my child, that it was absurd to fit you for something better than tending goats, and then leave you in these mountains to follow that trade."

Isaure made no reply; she lowered her eyes, feeling intimidated by the tone of the stranger, whose glance, fixed constantly upon her, caused her an embarrassment which she could not overcome.

"You are pretty, my child!" continued the vagabond; "very pretty, on my word, and much more so than I thought before I had such a good look at you. But this beauty will lead you into adventures. Men adore pretty women, or at least, if they do not really adore them, they pay assiduous court to them. For my part, that seems to me no more than right; it is more natural to offer incense to a lovely woman than to adore oxen, stags, crocodiles, monkeys, cats, and even onions, as used to be done by the Egyptians, the most ancient of nations, and yet, as you see, not the most sensible for that reason. So you will be adored.—But what am I saying! it has begun already, no doubt. You blush! deuce take it! there’s nothing out of the common course in that."

"I do not know what you mean, monsieur," rejoined Isaure with a sincerity which would have convinced any other than the man who sat opposite her.

"You do not know!" muttered the stranger, shrugging his shoulders. "That is the way they all talk! they never do know! they are always innocent and pure! And when we have proofs of their treachery, when we place those proofs under their eyes, they still answer with an air of the utmost good faith, that they do not know how it happened!"

A bitter smile played about the stranger’s lips; his eyebrows contracted, and he seemed engrossed by painful memories. Isaure, trembling violently, moved her chair away; her eyes expressed the terror which had taken possession of her. Soon the stranger glanced at her, and divined her fear; whereupon he resumed his customary careless air and said to her:

"Why do you move away from me like that?"

"Why,—monsieur,—I thought that you were angry."

"Angry? not at all! With whom do you suppose that I am angry, for heaven’s sake?—Let us come back to you, my child; come, move your chair nearer and do not tremble so."

Isaure complied, as if against her will, with her guest’s request; the familiar tone in which he addressed her would have offended her if he had not seemed so destitute; but she believed him to be unfortunate, and she attributed to compassion the submission which she displayed.

"I told you that you were pretty; it certainly was not that which made you move your chair away. Others must have told you so before; and among others, the two young men who have called upon you every morning for some time past."

Isaure blushed hotly as she stammered:

"The two young men? Ah! you know—do you know them, monsieur?"

"Yes, I know them very well now. But do you know them? do you know who they are?"

"I know that their names are Edouard and Alfred, that they are staying at the Château of La Roche-Noire, and that they are pleasant and very courteous to me."

"And is that all that you know?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You lie, girl; you know very well that both of them are in love with you."

Isaure tried to raise her eyes, but the stranger’s expression forced her to lower them again at once, and she replied in a trembling voice:

"Those gentlemen may have told me that in jest; I should have done wrong to believe them."

"Morbleu! in jest or otherwise, as if there were not a thousand ways of making themselves understood! The silliest woman sees when she makes an impression; all the more she who, like you, is neither a fool nor affected. Oh! my dear, believe that I know women better than you know your goats and your hens! I have had my day; it was short, it is true, but I made the most of it! They found me as agreeable, as fascinating, as you find Alfred and Edouard, but I rushed my intrigues more rapidly than these young men do. How many beauties seduced, and then abandoned that I might seduce others! How well I could assume all tones, affect all the varying shades of sentiment, to ensnare my victims! I would feign love, grief, despair; I would shed tears; but in reality my heart was dry, and I laughed in my sleeve at the sighs which moved those women to compassion. Ah! yes, I may say that I have had a very brilliant flight—it’s a pity that it ended so badly!"

Isaure listened to the stranger with amazement, not daring to interrupt him; he sat for some moments as if absorbed by the memories which had awakened in his mind; then he let his head droop upon his breast, and continued:

"Yes! all that has vanished! Love, friendship, wealth! I shall never know any of them more; I am alone, destitute, and I have not a single friend!"

The stranger’s tone became slow and melancholy as he uttered these words. Isaure felt deeply moved; she rose, walked toward the stranger, who no longer terrified her, and said to him with touching concern:

"Have you been very unfortunate?"

The stranger raised his head, gazed earnestly at her, and exclaimed:

"Why, this is most extraordinary! I had not noticed it before so strongly as I do now!"

"Noticed what, monsieur?" said Isaure.

"Nothing; oh! nothing. It is the effect of my recollections, no doubt. What in the deuce set me to thinking about all that? No, henceforth there is but a single sentiment that can revive my heart; but I feel that that sentiment may still afford me most delicious enjoyment."

Once more the stranger's eyes gleamed; they seemed alight with savage joy. Isaure moved away from him, and quickly resumed her former seat, while her hand rested on Vaillant's neck.

"My child," continued the vagabond, after drinking a glass of wine, "I was saying that the two young men who come to see you so often are in love with you. There is no harm in that, but you must realize that it is not to see this valley or to gaze into the lovely eyes of your goats, that these two young men from Paris rise so early in the morning! But I have reasons of my own for being curious to know which of the two you prefer—unless indeed you love them both, for such things have been seen! But no, no; I think that you are not sufficiently advanced for that. Come, speak, answer."

Isaure rose with dignity; she no longer trembled, for she felt offended; and looking fixedly at the man whom she had received as her guest, she answered:

"Your questions surprise me, monsieur! Who, pray, has employed you to ask them?"

"Who? Morbleu! I myself, who ask them; I, who question you! Is there any need of making so much fuss about saying: 'I love this one better than that one?'"

"No one ever spoke to me so, monsieur, and when my dear mother was alive——"

"I am not talking about your mother. If she were here you probably would not receive visits from young men every morning. I see that you make the most of your liberty; don't take so much pains to play the prude! Grimaces do not succeed with me. Come, sacrebleu! answer me!"

The stranger rose abruptly and walked toward Isaure. She, yielding to a thrill of fear caused by his approach, stepped back with a cry of alarm. Instantly Vaillant, thinking that his mistress was menaced, sprang to his feet, and with the rapidity of a lightning flash leaped upon the stranger and seized his leg with his teeth.

"Well, well! call off your dog! Heavens and earth! Don't you see that he is biting me?"

Isaure called Vaillant, who made up his mind only with great reluctance to release the leg that he had seized, and returned to his mistress, growling, and keeping his flashing eyes fixed on the stranger.

"I beg pardon, monsieur," said Isaure, "but this faithful animal evidently thought you were threatening me."

"Morbleu! why do you shriek because I approach you? Do you think that I am going to eat you? What fools these girls are! You have a guardian there who does not understand joking; the rascal—his teeth went into my flesh. If he should receive your young men in the same way, I fancy that they would not come so often. But you don't shriek when they come near, do you?—Adieu, my pretty discreet one! Oh! I shall soon find out what you refuse to tell me to-day! Yes, I shall find out all about you. I do not believe that you are a witch; but I do not think it natural that you should talk like the ladies from the city, that you should live alone with your flocks, and that you should be rich enough to entertain for nothing all those who stop at your house. There is something underneath it, and I shall find out what it is; for as I have told you, it is not easy to deceive me, and I believe neither in the innocence which runs about fields, nor in Platonic love, nor in innate knowledge. Adieu."

The stranger took his hat and stick and walked slowly from the house, with a contemptuous glance at the girl. Isaure felt that she breathed more freely when she saw that man take his departure, and Vaillant, who had not ceased to growl since his brief struggle with the stranger, went to the door to look after him, and did not reenter the house until he was entirely out of sight.

XVIII

NEW CHARACTERS.—A GRAND FÊTE AT LA ROCHE-NOIRE.

At last the great day had arrived on which Robineau proposed to display all the magnificence of a Caliph, although his fortune did not approach in size that of his highness's most insignificant pacha. But, after living for many years with the strictest economy, to become the owner of a château, to hear oneself called monseigneur, or Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, to have nine servants at one's orders, and to be fêted, sought after, flattered by men, and ogled and cajoled by women, is more than is necessary to make one lose one's head, especially when one has very little common sense and a great deal of vanity. So that Robineau had almost lost his head; he did not calculate, he did not reflect that the manner of life which he proposed to lead was infinitely beyond the income that he had inherited; he gave orders recklessly. But he was happy, he was fairly swimming in joy, and that is always something. How many people there are who, even with great wealth, can never succeed in being happy.

Robineau awoke very early in the morning and deliberated upon his costume; that is an important point, especially when one wishes to find a wife; for a woman who has received a fine education will never consent to take for a husband a man who does not know how to dress with taste. The first impressions are often hard to destroy: a man whose collar is too high, or whose coat sleeves are too short, will create a very bad effect in a salon, at first. At all events, that is what Robineau said to himself, and he was not absolutely wrong. But, if the ladies would pay strict attention to the subject, they would observe that it is not always the men who have the most intellect who tie their cravats best.

François brought to his master the new clothes which he had ordered from Paris. He spread them out on the bed, and Robineau hesitated between the wholly black costume and the white trousers, which were more seasonable. Monsieur Férulus entered the apartment at that moment; the librarian, man of business and butler was already in full dress, although he wore the same coat as always; but to improve it a little, he had had steel buttons of the size of a five-franc piece sewn on, which, when Monsieur Férulus stood in the sun, cast a reflection that made it impossible to see the rest of his person. Moreover, he had caused to be fixed upon his shoulders great bunches of black ribbon, the very long ends of which fell down his back, after manner of a queue.

Despite his gala costume, Monsieur Férulus's face was longer than usual, and his eyes were red and fatigued.

"Parbleu! my dear Férulus, you arrive most opportunely," said Robineau; "you must help me in the choice of my costume; ought I to adopt the full suit of black, or may I venture to wear the white trousers?"

"The full suit of black is the proper thing, monseigneur; to dress otherwise would be a crime of *lèse-ceremony*! Remember, monseigneur, that this day will mark an epoch: you represent in your person all the chatelaines who have possessed this domain! If you were in China, you would dress in yellow; in England you might dress in red; in Austria, in white; in Prussia, in blue; and in Africa, you might be practically naked, except that you could paint some very pretty things on your body and legs and arms; but as the French nation is the gayest of all, it has specially adopted black for weddings, for burials and for dancing."

"You hear, Francois; prepare the full black costume.—Bless my soul! you are brilliant, Monsieur Férulus! You have some very fine buttons there!"

"Are they not, monseigneur? They descended to me from my father's granduncle, who wore them in a minuet which he danced before Madame de Maintenon; you can understand how highly I prize them; they are the most precious heritage which my ancestors have left to me! I use them only on great occasions; for example, at my distribution of prizes, I give them and nothing else to my pupils—but on condition that they bring them back to me the next day."

"And what is this bunch of ribbons which you have on each shoulder?"

"That is a mark of dignity, monseigneur; it means that I am worthy to eat at your table with the noblest society. The pages used to wear them under King Dagobert."

"In that case you did very well to put them on.—But what is the matter with you, Monsieur Férulus? You look to me very pale this morning."

"Monseigneur, it is because—I had my bed warmed——"

"What! already?"

"The tower in which I lodge is very damp, monseigneur; however, it did not succeed so well as I hoped; I trust that breakfast will make me feel better. But they have just brought your servants' livery; it is superb—dark green, with apricot trousers and orange trimmings."

"Yes, that is my idea; can you see it at a distance?"

"At a great distance, monseigneur. I must tell you, however, that that clown of an Olitor—I mean your gardener—refuses to wear it, on the pretext that it makes him look like a parrot."

"That rascal is always rebelling about something! François, go to him and order him in my name to put on his livery under penalty of being turned out of my garden."

Alfred and Edouard were also busying themselves with their toilet; although they did not, like the master of the house, propose to make conquests, the two young Parisians desired to appear to advantage before the large company which was to assemble at the château; and then too, one is never sorry to please, even when one has no desire to love.

Everything was arranged for the festivities. Two greased poles had been set up in the courtyard, at the top of which were fastened the *Syntax* and the *Rudiments*. The colored lanterns were strung in the garden paths; the arena was arranged for the gymnastic sports; and the three musicians who were to compose the orchestra, the leader being blind, had arrived, armed with two violins and a clarinet. The servants ran hither and thither in the midst of it all, and the new livery did in fact give them some resemblance to the birds of which Vincent had spoken. However, in order to avoid dismissal, the gardener had made up his mind to put on his costume with the rest; Monsieur Férulus was careful always to stand in the sun, in order to make his buttons shine more brightly.

The clock struck twelve. Robineau was in full dress; all the preparations were made, but no one had yet arrived of the numerous company expected. However, François and the two scullions fired three musket shots; and Robineau, who was in the salon with his friends, ran out upon the balcony, saying:

"What is that?"

"It is the signal to announce that the fête is beginning, monseigneur," said François.

"Idiot! do you suppose that the fête is going to begin before anyone has arrived?"

"Why, monseigneur, Monsieur Férulus told us to fire all together at noon."

"*Non errabis!*" cried Férulus, appearing in the courtyard; "I told you to fire at noon, but it was understood that it should be *coram populo*, that is to say, before the company. Reload your weapons, therefore; you must give a second signal."

While the servants reloaded their weapons, shrieks arose from one corner of the courtyard. Everybody hurried in that direction to ascertain the cause. They found the leader of the orchestra sprawling on the steps of the staircase leading to the cellar, down which he had jumped at the report of the muskets, which he believed to be aimed at him. They picked up the poor man, who had suffered nothing worse than a few bruises, and placed him on the stand which was set up in the courtyard, ordering his two companions not to leave him, which they promised only on condition that six bottles of wine should be placed under the bench.

Half an hour passed, and no one appeared. Robineau began to be impatient, Monsieur Férulus ran about, telling each one again and again what he had to do, and as he spoke, glancing furtively at his buttons. Robineau called for an opera glass and went up with his friends to the top of the South Tower. From there they could see the road for a long distance, and Monsieur de la Roche-Noire kept passing the glass to his friends, saying, like Bluebeard's wife: "Do you see anybody coming?"

At last they espied a horseman riding toward the château; Robineau turned the glass upon him and cried:

"He is coming here; I recognize him; it is Monsieur Berlingue, a most agreeable man, with an extraordinary memory; he has already told me all the scandal of the town; he is a delightful person! He goes everywhere, even where he is not invited."

Monsieur Berlingue's horse advanced at a very slow trot, but still he did advance. Robineau went down from the tower with his friends to welcome the newcomer, and François and the scullions, seeing the horseman approach, took aim at him, thinking that the time had come to fire; but Monsieur Férulus checked them in time, and Monsieur

Berlingue dismounted and entered the château, glancing all about with malicious curiosity.

The newcomer was a short man of fifty years, who was not very stylishly dressed, but whose sneering face seemed to be constantly seeking something to make fun of. He walked toward Robineau and held out his hand, staring at the two young men who were in the salon; and even before he had asked the master of the house how he was, he had taken an inventory of everything in the room.

"Monsieur Berlingue," said Robineau, "you are very amiable, for you have come at last! But the other gentlemen and ladies—no one comes and it is nearly one o'clock! And yet I asked them to come early. I had arranged some little surprises for the ladies."

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire," replied Monsieur Berlingue in a shrill voice, shouting as if he never spoke to any except deaf people, "it is a principle of mine to be prompt, to keep my word.—Are these gentlemen your friends from Paris? Very happy to make their acquaintance.—But, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, if you want to have company at noon, you must invite them for nine o'clock, for here—You have had this part of the château repaired, I see—here, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, we go beyond the fashion: in Paris, people keep you waiting one hour; in the provinces they keep you waiting four.—Is this your livery? It is a new style.—And then the ladies, married or single! do you suppose that they can finish their toilet at noon?—You still have some furniture that's rather old-fashioned; you must change it.—In the first place, the women in the provinces are greater flirts than those in Paris!—Your coat fits you perfectly.—You expect Mesdames de Moulinet, Mesdemoiselles Bretonneau, the La Pincerie family, Gérard the manufacturer's wife, and the notary's wife—Parbleu! If those ladies are all here within two hours, you will be very lucky.—Ah! greased poles in your courtyard! That is charming! It is an entirely new idea!"

Despite Monsieur Berlingue's prediction, the guests soon arrived; little wicker carriages and covered chaises brought divers persons of great distinction, for there were no cabs or omnibuses at Saint-Amand, and everybody could not afford a handsome turnout. However, there were a few chars-à-bancs and a few pretty cabriolets to be seen in that crowd of carriages; and the persons who alighted from them cast patronizing glances upon those who arrived in chaises; vanity is present at all festivities, but in the provinces above all it makes us poor weak mortals giddy.

The La Pincerie family arrived in a carriage half-way between a city and a country vehicle: it was a huge cabriolet, not unlike that generally called a *coucou*, the lower part being of wicker, and the top of oilcloth; it might in a crowd have passed for the carriage of a merchant of Poissy; but Monsieur de la Pincerie declared that he would not exchange it for the most modern landau, because it descended to him from his ancestors; and from the leanness of the one horse which drew it, one might have been tempted to believe that the poor beast also had served the marquis's ancestors.

Monsieur de la Pincerie was a man of about sixty, almost six feet tall, and exceedingly thin; he wore a queue and his hair was powdered; his yellow, wrinkled face almost always wore an expression of arrogance and disdain; he rarely passed two minutes without coughing and expectorating, but he did it all with a gravity which caused the people about him to believe that not everybody in the world could spit as he could.

A little man with squinting eyes, red hair, a blue nose, and red ears, was the second person to alight from the carriage; he had not put his foot to the ground before he began to smile and show teeth which would have put those of a horse to shame. This gentleman, with whom they had not as yet succeeded in doing anything, and for whom they were still trying to find a place, although he was nearly fifty-five, was the marquis's brother; he was called Mignon, a pet name which had been given to him when he was a child, and which it seemed to be his destiny to bear all his life. After smiling like a wild boar, while his brother expectorated upon one of the greased poles, Mignon stepped forward and offered his hand to a young lady, who leaped from the carriage, saying to her uncle:

"It isn't worth while, I prefer to get out alone."

This young lady, who alighted so gracefully, was the marquis's younger daughter, Mademoiselle Cornélie; she was twenty-seven years old, tall and well-built; her face was regular and rather distinguished, but her manner was imperious and her eyes, which she very rarely lowered, seemed intent upon commanding homage, and their expression indicated that she received it simply as a tribute due to her.

After Mademoiselle Cornélie came her sister, who was a widow, named Madame de Hautmont, or simply Eudoxie; she was perhaps five or six years older than Mademoiselle Cornélie; she was pretty, but she lessened her attractions by grimaces and a pretentious manner; her dress was always so extravagantly elaborate as to be ridiculous; she was saturated with perfumery, and she always carried a bouquet in one hand and a phial of salts in the other; the least thing made her faint and sick. She, far from alighting from the carriage alone, required three persons to assist her; but at the moment that her foot touched the ground, she spied François and the two scullions, whose weapons were pointed in her direction.

"Oh! mon Dieu! what is that?" cried Madame de Hautmont, throwing herself into her father's arms. "Are they going to fire at us? Why, this is abominable! I can't endure the sight of firearms!"

Robineau had walked forward to meet the La Pincerie family; he bowed respectfully to the father, shook hands with the uncle, smiled at the young lady, and reassured her sister, crying:

"Monsieur Férulus, pray tell my people not to aim their guns at everybody! Do not be afraid, mesdames; it is a surprise, it's for the fête."

"What! do you mean to say that there will be guns fired at your fête, monsieur?"

"There will be all the firing that is possible, madame! But there will be no one shot; it is just for a joke, and to amuse you; that is all."

After escorting the La Pincerie family into the large salon, where Alfred and Edouard assisted him to do the honors, Robineau outdid himself in his endeavors to receive all his guests gracefully. There was the notary, who alighted with his wife from a dainty cabriolet; there was a wealthy paper manufacturer, who brought his wife, his three daughters, his two sons and his two nieces in his char-à-bancs; there were the Gérards, who alone filled both seats of their carriage, and who could not walk arm in arm, because their hips made it impossible; there was Monsieur le Chevalier de Tantignac, who could not say two words without bringing in a falsehood, and who arrived on foot, in silk short clothes, with spurs on his shoes and a hunting crop in his hand, to give the impression that he had come on horseback; lastly, there were the government officials, the leading merchants, the important personages of the district, who had one and all accepted Monsieur de la Roche-Noire's invitation, for opportunities

for enjoyment being more rare in the provinces, one eagerly seizes all that offer.

The company assembled in the immense salon on the first floor; they eyed one another, they scrutinized one another from head to foot, they passed the ladies' costumes in review, they made unkind remarks in undertones and complimentary ones aloud. Robineau went from one to another, played the gallant with the ladies, and smiled at everybody; but he addressed his homage most frequently to Mademoiselle Cornélie de la Pincerie, although ever since her entrance into the salon, Mademoiselle Cornélie had paid much more attention to Alfred than to the master of the house; while for her part Eudoxie cast languishing glances at Edouard.

On entering the salon, Monsieur le Marquis de la Pincerie had thrown himself into a big easy-chair in which he stretched himself out as if he proposed to go to sleep, extending his long legs in such a way that everybody was obliged to make a détour in order to pass him; the marquis at once began to cough and expectorate contemptuously in the midst of the salon, glancing at everybody as a sultan might glance at his slaves.

Uncle Mignon, on the contrary, had taken a seat modestly behind his niece Cornélie and was arranging the upper part of her sleeves, which had become a little rumpled in the carriage. The other guests stood about in groups or watched the preparations for the fête from the windows. Monsieur Berlingue strolled about the salon, scrutinizing everybody with a sly expression, listening to what was said, and trying to guess what was not said. The Chevalier de Tantignac, who was the last to enter the salon, contrived to catch his spurs in a lady's dress, so that he might secure for himself the pleasure of exclaiming:

"How careless I am! I forgot to take off my spurs. Oh! I beg you to excuse me, madame, but I am so accustomed to being in the saddle."

"What have you done with your steed, pray?" said Monsieur Berlingue; "I didn't see him when you came into the courtyard."

"I dismounted a few yards from the gate to avoid accidents, because my horse has a horrible trick of rearing; then I did as I always do, I struck him twice across the flank, and he at once trotted back alone to his stable. He is trained to do that, he is a pupil of Franconi.—But I must make haste to relieve myself of this equestrian apparatus!"

"Please pull my belt up a little, uncle. That's right; now put a pin in there.—These carriages disarrange one's dress terribly."

As she said this, Mademoiselle Cornélie glanced at Alfred, and seemed to demand the compliment which what she had just said invited; but it did not occur to Alfred to bestow it upon her. In his stead, Robineau picked up the gauntlet, crying:

"The carriage might do its worst, it could not prevent you from being charming!"

Mademoiselle Cornélie, after smiling at Robineau, looked after Alfred who had gone to speak to some other ladies.

"It is certain," said Madame de Hautmont, playing with her bouquet, "that someone ought to invent a different method of transportation from these carriages. A lady cannot alight from one of them without being jarred from head to foot. Uncle Mignon, give me a stool to put my feet on."

Uncle Mignon dropped his niece Cornélie's sleeves to find a stool for his niece Eudoxie, while Monsieur de la Pincerie exclaimed angrily:

"It seems to me, mesdames, that my chariot is hung perfectly, and that there is no ground for complaint."

"Oho! he calls his *coucou* a chariot!" whispered Monsieur Berlingue in the paper manufacturer's ear; while Monsieur Gérard exclaimed:

"Well, well, mesdames, I see that you will soon be carried in palanquins, as in Asia."

"But one must be very comfortable in them," said Eudoxie, glancing at Edouard.

"I favor palanquins, too," said Madame Gérard.

"If she should ever get into one," said Berlingue in an undertone, "I doubt whether she could find men strong enough to carry her."

"As a general rule," said a lady who had not yet spoken, "those men in the East are great inventors."

"Fie! madame, fie!" said another lady, "they are monsters! they have more than one wife at a time."

"What is that you are saying about the men of the East?" cried the Chevalier de Tantignac, returning to the salon; "I know something about them; I spent a long time in Turkey; my doctor ordered me there. I had such a superabundance of health that my doctor said to me: 'Go to Turkey, my friend, and buy yourself a harem at once; if you don't, you are a dead man!'"

The ladies put their fans in front of their faces in order to laugh at the chevalier, who had not at all the appearance of a Turk, when Monsieur Férulus entered the salon to ask Robineau if it were time to begin the fête. At sight of Férulus, Madame de Hautmont uttered a shriek, and clung to Edouard, saying:

"Mon Dieu! what on earth is that?"

"That is the manager of the fête, madame," said Edouard.

"But he made my eyes smart terribly! I thought that either the sun or the moon had entered the room. Pray, what has the man got on?"

"It is his buttons, which are so brilliant."

"Ah! you must agree that when a man wears such buttons, he ought at least to give people some warning."

"It certainly is difficult to look at that gentleman without squinting," said Monsieur Berlingue.

Monsieur Férulus darted out of the room again like an arrow, and soon musket shots announced the beginning of the fête. The noise of the fusillade almost made Eudoxie ill; but she took pains to fall into the arms of Edouard, who was beginning to be bored by her fainting spells, but who could not, however, avoid offering her his arm. Everybody ran out upon the balcony, and to the windows, whence they could see the sports which were to take place in the courtyard. Uncle Mignon alone remained behind, for it was necessary to find two pins for his niece Cornélie, and to fetch a glass of water to restore his other niece to consciousness. The peasants from the neighborhood, who had received permission to attend the fête, were drawn up on two sides of the courtyard. The servants were under the balcony; even Mademoiselle Cheval had left her kitchen to enjoy the sports, and especially to find out what was to be done with the greased poles, which aroused her curiosity.—Meanwhile the orchestra, which was supposed to play, did not begin, because the blind man, who was terribly afraid of the musket shots, had crawled under the bench

during the discharge, and persisted in refusing to come out, although Férulus exhausted himself in arguing to prove that he was in no danger.

The company waited for the performance to begin. Robineau leaned over the balcony and shouted to Férulus:

"Why don't you begin? We are waiting."

And Monsieur Férulus, who was on the point of coming to blows with the first violin, shouted back:

"You know very well that it begins with foot races in the garden. Go and walk there with the ladies, monseigneur."

But the ladies were tired by their ride and did not care to walk. Moreover, they were impatient to witness the sports. François ran to assist Férulus to pull the blind man out from under the bench. At last the music struck up, and six tall Auvergnats, nude from the head to the waist, appeared in the arena arranged in the middle of the courtyard. The ladies started in surprise at sight of the singular costume of the combatants; Madame de Hautmont had another slight attack of faintness; but Monsieur Férulus, who had ascended the stoop, cried:

"Gymnastic sports after the pattern of those of Greece and Rome."

"Mesdames," said Robineau, "it is after the pattern of the ancients; consequently there is nothing to offend your delicacy."

"To be sure, it is a tournament!" said Monsieur de la Pincerie.

"Precisely, a Greek and Roman tournament."

"A tournament!" said Uncle Mignon, standing on tiptoe. "Oho! the deuce! Then these half-naked fellows are knights! I understand, I understand."

"I am strongly inclined to request some guaranty for the rest of their bodies," observed Monsieur Berlingue to one of his neighbors, while Madame Gérard, gazing at the six Auvergnats with all her eyes, exclaimed:

"Those fellows are well-built! Monsieur Gérard, you ought to appear as a gladiator some time; you would be superb."

Férulus gave the signal by striking the rail with a stick and calling:

"We begin with the throwing of the discus. Strike up, orchestra, a warlike tune."

The orchestra began the air of Marlboro', which was the most warlike tune that the blind man knew, and the Auvergnats stepped forward, each holding in his hand a Brie cheese, which represented the discus which he was to throw, and which at a distance looked rather like the ancient quoit. The athletes hurled their cheeses with much skill; the target was below the stoop upon which Férulus stood with solemn face. The three cheeses approached but did not quite reach the point necessary to be declared a winner, and the company standing on the balcony and at the windows, found that that particular sport exhaled an odor which was far from balsamic. But a fourth athlete appeared; he was of a more muscular build than his antagonists; he held in his hand a so-called discus, of formidable size and thickness, and exclaimed with a contemptuous glance at those who had already thrown theirs:

"You fellows couldn't throw any farther than that! Bah! *Sac*—f——! See how prettily I'll put you out of the game!"

"The athlete's language is decidedly forcible!" said Monsieur Berlingue; and Robineau leaned over and shouted to Férulus:

"Tell them not to talk! Let them content themselves with pantomime."

"Monseigneur," said Férulus, "in all times, gladiators have provoked and stimulated one another by insults; even the knights of old did not spare epithets during the combat."

"Mesdames, that is the language of the knights of old," said Robineau; "you mustn't let it frighten you."

Meanwhile, the last athlete raised his right hand, on the palm of which rested the discus; he threw his body back, then hurled the discus with all his strength, and the cheese, passing the target, struck Monsieur Férulus full in the face.

All the ladies shrieked aloud, saying:

"Mon Dieu! He is wounded,—killed perhaps! The quoit struck him in the head!"

The librarian was suffocated for a moment by the blow, but the cheese had broken in halves, leaving upon his face some traces of its passage; and he soon recovered himself, drew out a handkerchief, wiped his face, passed his tongue over his lips, and cried:

"He is the winner; he threw beyond the mark; but he who can do more, can do less.—Sound, trumpets!"

The trumpets were represented by the violins; the Auvergnats uttered deafening shouts, the ladies produced their salts, and Monsieur de Tantignac observed:

"Ah! the discuses were of cheese! What a sell! I'll wager that I could throw one into the moon!"

"Uncle Mignon, find me some cologne, I implore you," said Eudoxie, hanging upon Edouard's arm, "for this sport smells altogether too much like a barnyard."

"You are not accustomed to it, mesdames, you will have many others!" said Robineau, who believed that everybody was infatuated by what had just been seen; and he timidly took the end of Mademoiselle Cornélie's little finger, which she abandoned to him, apparently without perceiving the rapture with which he squeezed it.

Monsieur Férulus, not observing that there were still some fragments of cheese upon his forehead and ears, had returned to his place, and once more tapped the rail with his stick, crying:

"The foot race, after the pattern of Hippomenes and Atalanta; with sticks instead of the golden apples, which will be vastly more natural."

Immediately, the Auvergnats began to race about the courtyard, and those who fell behind threw sticks between the legs of their comrades, to cause them to fall, so that they might reach the goal first. This game came to an end without accident; but the Chevalier de Tantignac cried:

"I don't see anything wonderful in running as these peasants do; I can go six leagues on one foot! That's rather a different thing!"

"Wrestling and boxing contests!" cried Monsieur Férulus; whereupon the Auvergnats set about throwing one another down; but the peasants, being accustomed to this last form of exercise, showed more pride and obstinacy, and did their utmost to overthrow their antagonists. At such a game, tempers are easily aroused; from struggles they passed to insults, from insults to blows, and already some faces were bruised and some noses bleeding.

"Enough! enough!" cried the ladies, in no wise amused by that spectacle. "Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, make those wretches stop!"

"Mesdames," cried Férulus, "when the gladiators fought at Rome, at least half of them always remained upon the field."

"But, monsieur, we are not Romans, thank heaven! And we take no pleasure in seeing men hammer one another!"

To comply with the wishes of the ladies, Robineau ordered that the combatants be separated, although Monsieur de la Pincerie declared that it reminded him of the bull fights he had seen at Madrid. Two Auvergnats, more obstinate than the others, refused to desist; but at last François and the other servants succeeded in driving them onto the lawn, where they left them to fight it out.

Monsieur Férulus next announced that the time had come to pass from the serious to the gallant; and the servants appeared with baskets filled with bouquets for the ladies.

"Ah! good!" said Madame de Hautmont; "this is more agreeable."

"And it doesn't smell of cheese," said Monsieur Berlingue.

"Why! why, there is a paper in my bouquet," said Madame Gérard.

"A paper, madame!" said Monsieur Gérard, approaching his wife as near as his paunch permitted.

"I have one too," said Eudoxie.

"And I—and I too," said each lady.

Cornélie opened the paper which was in her bouquet and read:

"'Vos attraits charment les cœurs,
Vous avez grâce et jeunesse;
La plus douce des faveurs
Est de vous aimer sans cesse.'"[9]

"That is extremely pretty!" said Monsieur de la Pincerie, expectorating upon the villagers in the courtyard.

"And it is perfectly suited to the person to whom it is addressed," said Alfred to Mademoiselle Cornélie, who looked at him in a way to force him to say something.

"It sounds to me like the mottoes in bonbons," said Monsieur Berlingue.

"I have a poem, too," said Eudoxie; "let me see—Why, it's just like my sister's; here, look, monsieur."

Edouard looked at the lines which she handed him and said:

"It must be that he thought, madame, that the same attractions would be found in all the members of the same family."

"Ah! what you say is very gallant; but it seems to me that my face is of an entirely different type from my sister's."

"Let's see my poem," said Madame Gérard; "I am very curious to know what he has to say to me:

"'Vos attraits charment les cœurs,
Vous avez grâce et jeunesse—'"

"Evidently it is a circular," said Monsieur Berlingue.

"It is extremely flattering to receive the same compliment as Madame Gérard!" said Mademoiselle Cornélie, with a shrug; while all the ladies proceeded to read their mottoes.

"It is most astonishing that they all have the same thing," said Uncle Mignon, running from one lady to another. "It is like the card trick someone played on me, when I saw nothing but aces of hearts in the pack."

"Who is the author of these pretty lines?" inquired the chevalier sneeringly.

"My librarian," replied Robineau.

"What! that man in black, with buttons like plates?"

"The same. He's a scholar of the first rank, a man who knows everything!"

"Oho! He knows everything, does he? I will wager that I can talk to him about things he never heard of."

"And those greased poles,—is no one going to climb those, monsieur?"

"In a moment, madame.—Monsieur Férulus, order the assault on the greased poles to begin."

"Parbleu!" said the chevalier, "it isn't hard to climb those; I have been to sea and I've seen some that were much harder to climb! I used to run up the mainmast like a monkey, and when I reached the top, I would stand on my head."

"Just try climbing one of these," said Monsieur Berlingue.

"I can't, because my breeches are very tight, and I am afraid of accidents; but for that, I would be at the top before you had seen that I was going up."

Monsieur Férulus requested the orchestra to play a livelier piece for the attack on the greased poles, and it was to the tune of *Ma Tendre Musette* that several Auvergnats tried to climb one of the poles; but they slid back after climbing two or three feet, and showed very little zest in the attempt to win the books which were attached to the top. In vain did Férulus urge them on, and Robineau from the balcony encourage them,—the Auvergnats refused to climb any more.

"Well!" said the librarian, "the women will set you the example, and teach you how to climb. Let the young ladies come forward!"

"Ah! the women are going to climb!" said Monsieur Berlingue; "this is getting interesting."

"The women are going to climb!" said Monsieur de la Pincerie. "Hum! that is an innovation!"

"Oh! we have provided for everything!" said Robineau; "the pole is smeared with honey."

"With honey," said Uncle Mignon; "ah! I understand, I understand; that's for decency's sake."

Two or three buxom girls came forward laughing, and walked around the pole, but did not venture, although Monsieur Férulus stood at the foot of the pole, offering his back to all those who cared to try. At last, one village girl

made the attempt, and climbed a little way, then stopped, crying that she was stuck; and Monsieur Férulus, who was below, said to her:

"Don’t give it up—don’t be discouraged; it’s the way of life,—thorns in order to obtain roses; *quid femina possit*."

The peasant descended, licking the honey from her hands; another followed her, but was no more fortunate, although Monsieur Férulus still stood at the foot of the pole, to let them stand on his back and to encourage their efforts. Monsieur Berlingue declared that the librarian had the best place and could see better than the rest of the company.

But no one else came forward. In vain did Monsieur Férulus exclaim:

"There is a chance to win the Treatise on Participles, and the *Cuisinière Bourgeoise*."

The prizes seemed fated to remain suspended in the air, when suddenly Mademoiselle Cheval, who was watching the sports from the courtyard, keeping an eye upon her cooking the while, walked proudly toward Monsieur Férulus, saying:

"You say there is a cook-book to win! that’s my business; let me climb up, Monsieur Desânus, and I will bring the things down in a jiffy! Oh! I know how to play all kinds of games, I do!"

And, pushing aside the functionary, who offered to let her stand on his back, Mademoiselle Cheval put her arms about the pole, and worked her hands and knees so vigorously that she ascended at a rapid pace.

"She will go to the top," said Monsieur Gérard; "she’s a stout young woman."

"Oh! she’s uncommonly strong," said Robineau; "she lifted me up once like a feather."

"She has a shapely calf," said Monsieur Berlingue.

In her struggles, Mademoiselle Cheval did in fact show her calves and her garters; but thus far everything had gone off successfully, and Monsieur Férulus, who, standing at the foot of the pole, kept his eyes fixed on her, constantly encouraged her by calling out "mate animo," which the cook took for an insult, and to which she replied: "Climb yourself, you animal!"

At last Mademoiselle Cheval reached the goal; she untied the two volumes and dropped them into the courtyard.

The librarian, overjoyed that the prizes had been won, ordered the orchestra to play a *fanfare*; the company applauded, and Mademoiselle Cheval, in the excitement of her triumph, attempted to slide down rapidly; but her dress stuck to the honey and refused to be detached; so that, as she dropped, her face soon disappeared beneath her skirts, while her legs were exposed to the observation of the spectators.

A murmur arose; the ladies resorted to their fans or left the balcony, the men took their glasses, and made comments on what they saw, and Robineau cried:

"Take her down!"

Monsieur Férulus, who did not know the cause of the tumult, shouted with all his strength:

"Honor to the victor!"

"Parbleu! this is quite honor enough!" said Monsieur Berlingue; while the peasants laughed and shouted, and Jeannette artlessly observed:

"I say, she’s showing her warming pan!"

However, with a final effort, Mademoiselle succeeded in freeing herself just as François arrived with a ladder; she descended, bowed to the company and returned to her kitchen, amid the acclamations of all the peasants. Thereupon the guests left the balcony and the windows. Robineau suggested taking a stroll in the gardens, and they all consented, in order to do something to kill time before dinner. The men offered the ladies their arms. Edouard did not have to take that trouble, because the languishing Eudoxie had not once left his arm, upon which she leaned as if she had done nothing else for ten years. Cornélie continued to ogle Alfred, but he had turned his attentions to two rather attractive young ladies, and Mademoiselle de la Pincerie accepted the hand which the master of the château offered her with a sigh.

They walked about at random; each couple went in whatever direction they pleased; and in large parties, not until then do people begin to talk freely, and to know and understand one another.

"What did you think of the little sports that were performed just now?" said Robineau, as he and Cornélie turned into one of the shady paths of the garden.

"Why, they were very good; I rather liked them; they were quite original.—Why are we going away from the other ladies and gentlemen?"

"Oh! we will join them again. I am so happy to be once—to be for a moment—to try to——"

"Who is that tall young man whom you call Alfred?"

"He is an intimate friend of mine, a baron, with more than a hundred thousand francs a year.—But I was saying, mademoiselle, that I am enjoying the keenest happiness, and——"

"Is this Monsieur Alfred married?"

"No, he is a bachelor, and so is Edouard Beaumont.—However, as we are alone for a moment, which rarely happens, I would like to express to you,—to make you understand——"

"Ah! I think I see your two friends; let us walk a little faster."

"Never fear; monsieur le marquis your father, and your uncle, are very busy talking politics with Monsieur Moulinet, and they will not notice that——"

"Much I care about my father and my uncle! they think well enough of me, monsieur, not to be afraid to let me walk with whomever I please!"

"I do not doubt it, mademoiselle; that was not what I meant; but when one is with you, the confusion, the agitation one feels make one, in spite of oneself——"

"He is very good-looking, is this Monsieur Alfred. His friend is not bad-looking, either. I don’t know which of them is the better looking!"

"I don’t know, mademoiselle, whether you have divined the secret sentiments of my heart. The other evening, when I danced with you at the tax-collector’s, it seemed to me that I was happy enough to——"

"Does your friend Alfred intend to pass some time in this region?"

"Oh, yes, he is in no hurry, he has nothing to do.—Well, mademoiselle, do you remember that contradance, when, as we made the *poule*, I declared that your charms, that your graces——"

"Mon Dieu! I am so accustomed to having compliments paid me, monsieur, and declarations of love, that three-fourths of the time I pay no attention to them!"

"I can understand that perfectly, and it does honor to your modesty. But still, your heart must be touched some day and if I were the fortunate mortal——"

"Ah! I beg your pardon, I see my sister; I have something to say to her!"

Mademoiselle Cornélie escaped and ran to join Eudoxie, who was walking with Edouard, Alfred and several ladies. Robineau looked after her, saying to himself:

"She is fascinating! A magnificent figure! and after our conversation, I have every reason to believe that I am not displeasing to her."

The guests walked about for some time in the gardens, where Monsieur Vincent was sitting on a bench, in evident ill humor, amusing himself by throwing dirt and water on his yellow breeches. Monsieur de la Pincerie had seized an old annuitant, to whom he was confiding his plans of economy, trudging through the strawberry plants; Monsieur Gérard plucked flowers for the ladies; Uncle Mignon looked for pins for his nieces; Alfred, as a matter of habit, paid compliments to the young ladies who were with him; Edouard talked little, but from time to time he sighed as he walked about with Madame de Hautmont; and the widow, who could not conceive that a man could sigh for another woman than herself, sighed with him, leaning more heavily on his arm. Monsieur Berlingue examined with a mocking air the colored lanterns and the dilapidated statues; the Chevalier de Tantignac told a fable to every person that he met; and Monsieur Férulus put everybody to flight, because he carried with him an odor of cheese, which recalled too vividly the throwing of the discus.

Mademoiselle de la Pincerie had received Robineau’s homage civilly enough at Saint-Amand; for Cornélie was nearing her twenty-eighth year, and although she was the daughter of a noble family, the marquis’s fortune consisted in little else than his economical projects; the tall young lady had noticed that the attentions which were paid to her always began and ended with compliments, and she was beginning to desire most earnestly to be called madame. In truth, to save her self-esteem, the family had agreed to say to all those people who expressed surprise that the fair Cornélie had never married, that for family reasons they wished to obtain a place for her Uncle Mignon first. But the uncle was becoming quite as difficult to find a place for as his niece was to find a husband for, and Cornélie no longer assumed such haughty airs with her admirers. That is why she had smiled amiably at the new owner of the château, who, although he was not of an old family, had at all events a fortune with which she could make a show, and appear to much greater advantage. They had prudently sent Uncle Mignon to the notary to make inquiries concerning Robineau’s fortune; the notary at Saint-Amand knew the new owner only from the fact that he had purchased the estate of La Roche-Noire, and that Robineau asked him every day for considerable sums, which were repaid to him by his confrère in Paris. From the mode of life that the new lord was leading, one might well accredit him with twice the amount that he really possessed; so that the notary answered Uncle Mignon that he was a man who probably had fifty thousand francs a year.

The uncle returned and imparted this news to his niece, jumping and showing his teeth, because he too thought that a very wealthy nephew would be of great assistance to him in procuring employment; and the La Pincerie family accepted Robineau’s invitation with pleasure.

But Mademoiselle Cornélie had found Alfred much more fascinating than the lord of La Roche-Noire; the unaffected bearing, the amiable manners, and the lively tone of young De Marcey had caused Robineau to appear more stupid and heavy than ever; and when she learned that the tall young man was a baron and had an income of a hundred thousand francs, she thought of nothing but making a conquest of him, because, in addition to his physical advantages, there was fifty per cent. to be won with him.

That is why she had dropped Robineau’s arm to run after Eudoxie, who had seated herself under a clump of trees with Alfred and several other ladies of the company, married and single.

Cornélie ran to them at a mincing gait, holding her hand to her heart, and said:

"I don’t know what the matter is with me, but I am tired so soon."

They hastened to offer a seat to the young lady, who eyed from the height of her grandeur the young women to whom Alfred had offered his arm.

"These gardens are immense!" said Eudoxie; "but it seems to me that they might have been arranged in a more mysterious way."

"Mesdames," said Edouard, "it is Monsieur Jules’s intention to arrange them so; but he has not yet had time to carry out all the improvements that he plans; so you must excuse him if his property is still somewhat in confusion, for his keen desire to receive you did not allow him to wait until everything was entirely finished."

"Ah! this gentleman is very agreeable," said one of the young women; "he takes so much trouble to entertain us."

"Besides, mesdames," said Alfred, "you must remember that you are at a bachelor’s house, and that quality should induce you to overlook many things."

"That quality!" said Cornélie, pressing her lips together; "do you call that a quality, monsieur?"

"It is at all events a condition which entitles one to be excused for many thoughtless acts."

"You abuse the privilege sometimes, messieurs!" said Eudoxie, making eyes at Edouard, who was gazing at the foliage.

"However," rejoined Alfred smiling, "I believe that our friend does not intend to retain long that title upon which you ladies make war."

All the young ladies were silent and looked at the ground. There was a moment’s pause, which Eudoxie broke, saying:

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire is certainly very gallant; his fête is delightful; if only he won’t have those vulgar peasants fight any more, for that is a spectacle which I cannot endure."

"Well I would have liked to climb the greased pole!" said a little girl of ten to her older sister.

"Oh! that would have been very nice, mademoiselle!" replied the sister; "to do as that vulgar creature did and

show your——"

The older sister suddenly checked herself and turned as red as a beet; all the young ladies lowered their eyes once more. Renewed silence, which amused the young men immensely.

"You gentlemen did not come with Monsieur de la Roche-Noire to the last parties which were given in our town?" said Eudoxie, addressing Alfred.

"As we knew no one at Saint-Amand, mademoiselle, we thought that it would be impertinent to try to obtain our own inclusion in invitations which were addressed solely to the new owner of this estate."

"Why so, pray, monsieur? My father will certainly be charmed to become better acquainted with Monsieur le Baron de Marcey."

"And with Monsieur Edouard de Beaumont," said Eudoxie.

"It is not *de* Beaumont." replied Edouard, with a bow, "it is Beaumont simply."

"There speaks the modesty of a man of letters, who desires to owe his reputation to his genius alone."

"Monsieur has something of my cousin the viscount's look in his features," said Cornélie, glancing at Alfred; "don't you think so, sister? In the eyes, and the shape of the mouth; but monsieur is even better looking."

"I have heard a great deal about your works, monsieur," said Eudoxie to Edouard; "and I am delighted to be in the company of the author of compositions so well turned."

"These women are terrible with their compliments!" whispered Edouard in Alfred's ear. Luckily for the young men, Robineau bustled up to them, crying:

"Dinner is ready, mesdames! Let us go to the dining-room, if you please!"

Cornélie had approached Alfred, and put out her hand as if absent-mindedly; but Alfred, paying no heed to Mademoiselle de la Pincerie's distraction, offered his arms to the two young women with whom he had already been walking, and moved away with them. Thereupon Cornélie abruptly took the hand that Robineau offered her; her anger caused her to squeeze it violently; and Robineau, beside himself with joy, kept repeating to her all the way:

"I am the most fortunate of mortals!"

They reached the banquet hall, which was decorated with festoons, garlands and mottoes.

"This is very neat," said Madame Gérard.

"It is like Berthelemot's," said Monsieur Berlingue.

"It is the salon of Apollo," said Monsieur Férulus, as he ushered each guest in with a self-satisfied air.

"The salon of Apollo? What on earth does that mean?" rejoined Monsieur Berlingue; "I did not know that Apollo presided at banquets."

"Is not monsieur aware, pray, that Lucullus had for his banquets several rooms, each of which bore the name of some divinity? and that that name also served to designate to the major-domo the amount that he was to spend for the banquet? So that Lucullus had only to say in which room he would sup, and the functionary knew the number of courses he was to serve. Nero, going a step beyond Lucullus, built the famous house of gold to give banquets in; Heliogabalus surpassed even Nero in the magnificence of his feasts, where there were as many courses as there were letters in the alphabet. Ah! you must agree, monsieur, after that, that we do not know how to eat! Think of the Emperor Claudius Albinus, who had for his breakfast five hundred figs, a hundred peaches, ten melons, a hundred ortolans, forty oysters and a lot of grapes! of the Emperor Maximin I, whose usual ration was sixty pounds of meat and twenty-four pints of wine; so that he became so fat that he wore his wife's bracelets as finger rings. Think of——"

But Monsieur Férulus discovered that he was talking to deaf ears, because they had all taken their places at the table; whereupon he ran to the seat which he had caused to be reserved for himself, between Uncle Mignon and Monsieur Moulinet; and Monsieur Férulus had ordered the servants to place the large dishes in front of him, having told Robineau that he would undertake the duty of carving.

The large armchair reserved for solemn occasions had been taken to the dining-room, and Robineau had offered it to Monsieur de la Pincerie, who had planted himself in it; and the elevation of the seat, added to his tall stature, caused him to soar above the rest of the guests.

"Mon Dieu! How handsome my father is like that!" said Eudoxie, who had found a way to sit beside Edouard; whereas Cornélie, seated between Robineau and Monsieur Berlingue, sulked throughout the dinner, because Alfred laughed and chatted with two young women between whom he was sitting.

"Madame," said the Chevalier de Tantignac, who was at Eudoxie's right, "I was once at a dinner where everyone was seated on a chair the height of which was proportioned to his merit; I actually touched the ceiling, and the servants were obliged to stand on stilts in order to serve us."

"Who wants soup? Who has not any soup?" cried Monsieur Férulus, as if speaking to his scholars.

"This is worthy of Heliogabalus," said Monsieur Berlingue.

"Oh! messieurs," said Monsieur de la Pincerie, after swallowing two plates of soup, "I hope to entertain you with better dinners than this! When I have completed my economical schemes, in which I prove that soup can be made without meat, I will show you some amazing soup!"

"I trust that I shan't dine with him that day," said Monsieur Berlingue to his neighbor.

"You seem to be eating nothing, fair Cornélie?" said Robineau, with a languishing glance at his neighbor.

"I am not hungry, monsieur."

"Ah! that is the way I was the day before yesterday!"

"Your friend Alfred seems to be in very high spirits."

"Yes, he's a facetious fellow.—Will you have a little of the *vol-au-vent*?"

"I will take just a taste of it."

"Monsieur Férulus, a taste of *vol-au-vent* for Mademoiselle de la Pincerie."

Monsieur Férulus had a way of serving by which the choicest bits were always left for himself.

"Who on earth is that gentleman who carves so well and serves us so ill?" asked a young man to whom Férulus had as yet given nothing but legs, necks and bones.

"He is a scholar, a philologist; he manages everything in the château."

"And eats everything too, I should say."

"He knows ten tongues."[10]

"Ah! in that case, I am not surprised that he eats so fast!"

"Who was it who arranged the guests in this way?" inquired Mademoiselle Cornélie; "it seems to me that it's a wretched arrangement."

"It was my librarian who undertook to do it; but I told him to place me beside you, otherwise the whole thing would have seemed dull and wretched to me.—You drink nothing! here is a certain burgundy——"

"Oh! the idea! Do you expect a woman to drink, and to be a connoisseur in wine?"

"Mademoiselle is right," said Férulus, filling his glass; "wine is not suited to the fair sex; Mecenius killed his wife because she had drunk wine; in the time of Romulus, a woman having broken the seals of a cellar, her kinsmen condemned her to die of starvation!"

"Oh! for heaven's sake, let us alone with your Romans, monsieur!" said Madame Gérard; "they were impertinent creatures if they prevented their wives from doing as they chose!—Give me some wine, Monsieur Gérard."

"That woman has a very masculine tone," said Eudoxie, turning to Edouard.—"Uncle Mignon, please fetch me my handkerchief, which I left in the salon."

Uncle Mignon regretfully left the table to fetch his niece's handkerchief, and when he returned, Cornélie sent him to find her reticule. Meanwhile, Monsieur Moulinet went into ecstasies over all that was given him to eat, exclaiming:

"You have a delicious cook, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire."

"She is a woman," said Robineau; "she is a girl of great merit; it was she who won the prize on the greased pole."

"We already know a part of her merits," said Monsieur Berlingue.

"In old days, that girl would not have remained in her kitchen," said Férulus, "Sultan Osman made a gardener who planted cabbages well a viceroy; Anthony gave a Roman citizen's house to a cook, and Henry VIII, King of England, raised to a post of honor a scullion who had cooked a wild boar to a turn."

"Evidently," said Monsieur Berlingue in an undertone, "that fellow has sworn to make us eat ancient history."

"I have a prodigious talent in the way of cooking," said Tantignac, "although you might not think it. You may judge for yourselves. One day, three of my friends came unexpectedly to dine with me, in an isolated château where I was living; all my servants had gone out, and there were no provisions in my castle. Well! what do you suppose occurred to me? I had an old pair of leather breeches which I no longer wore, and I took it into my head to regale my friends on them; I scraped and cleaned them, put them into the kettle, and made such a delicious sauce for them, that my guests and myself made an excellent dinner!"

"I see nothing so extraordinary in that," said Edouard, who was beginning to weary of Monsieur de Tantignac's lies; "once I entertained a friend at breakfast with old sheets of parchment stewed *à la poulette*."

"Oh! upon my word, monsieur," sneered the chevalier, "allow me to tell you that that is a little too much! Parchment would never digest."

"Why, monsieur," said Edouard, "I allowed you to dine on leather breeches; it seems to me that you might in return allow me to breakfast just once on parchment!"

The company laughed heartily, and the Chevalier de Tantignac did not breathe a word during the rest of the meal.

Cornélie was bored at the table, and she requested Robineau to hasten the service, on the pretext that it was not good form to be a long while at dinner; but Monsieur Férulus constantly invented some pretext or found some quotation as an excuse for keeping the dishes which the servants were about to remove. But at last they arrived at the dessert; the ladies, who were burning with the desire to dance, were already suggesting an adjournment to the ball room, when Monsieur Férulus rose and observed in a solemn tone that he had something to sing on a subject which could not fail to interest the company.

Everybody was silent and waited for him to begin; the librarian drank a glass of madeira to give himself courage, and began, to the tune of the lament of the Maréchal de Saxe, a eulogy of Robineau, in which he compared him with Saturn, Sophocles, Cicero and Bayard. The guests glanced furtively at one another, biting their lips. Uncle Mignon alone stuffed himself with biscuits and macaroons, taking advantage of a moment when his nieces left him undisturbed.

As it was plain after the third couplet that Monsieur Férulus did not propose to stop, a faint murmur arose. Robineau, taking that for a sign of approbation, lowered his eyes modestly, and said to Mademoiselle Cornélie:

"He insisted upon singing these couplets. Certainly if I had suspected that he would mention me, I would not have consented."

"Very well, monsieur, then tell him to hold his tongue, and order the coffee at once."

Instead of ordering the coffee, Robineau tried to think how he could demand an encore, as he had promised Férulus to do; but a part of the ladies had already left the table, and the others soon followed their example; the men made haste to drink their coffee, and Monsieur Férulus discovered that he was singing for Uncle Mignon alone; even he was soon called away by his nieces to tie something or other.

"Behold the results of a poor education," said Férulus to himself; "these people put on airs and have no manners! I will go and sing my couplets to Jeannette; she will listen to me or tell me the reason why."

The ball room was decorated as if for a distribution of prizes. The musicians, seated upon raised benches, played false with distressing self-assurance; but when it is a question of dancing, the ladies are always indulgent. Monsieur Robineau opened the ball with Cornélie; Alfred danced opposite them, which aroused a spirit of emulation in Mademoiselle de la Pincerie, who executed her steps with such accuracy that Robineau cried:

"She dances like a geometrician!"

Edouard did not care to dance; amid that crowd, that noise, all those remarks exchanged but unheeded, his thoughts wandered far from the château. But one must do like everybody else; the languishing Eudoxie did not dance, as she found that exercise too violent for her nerves; and to her great amazement Edouard left her to invite

another lady.

Despite the accuracy of her steps, Mademoiselle Cornélie was not invited by Alfred for the following dance. Indeed she came very near not dancing at all, because Robineau had felt called upon to invite another partner; but Uncle Mignon was always at hand to make himself useful; his niece called him, and they took their places opposite Alfred, before whom Mademoiselle Cornélie executed nothing but pirouettes.

They had reached the fourth dance when the explosion of a bomb announced the fireworks.

"What! already?" said Robineau; "it is much too soon. François, go and tell Monsieur Férulus not to set them off yet."

But Monsieur Férulus, to avenge himself for their refusal to listen to his singing, had vowed that he would not allow the ball to last any longer than the dinner. He had not awaited the message from François to set fire to the suns and the pin-wheels; and when the valet came with his master's orders, the librarian replied:

"I am very sorry, but the fire is lighted and I can't put it out."

When they found that the rockets and suns continued to go off, they decided to leave the ball room and go into the garden where the fireworks were in progress. In the confusion caused by this hurried exit, the gentlemen escorted the first ladies whom they found; Edouard had hurried out among the first, in order to avoid having Madame de Hautmont on his arm. Alfred had led away one of Monsieur Moulinet's nieces, and Mademoiselle Cornélie, compelled to accept Robineau's escort, and convinced at last that all her airs and graces produced no effect upon the young man who possessed a hundred thousand francs a year, concluded that it would be prudent not to allow Robineau also to carry his homage elsewhere; so she took his hand with a forced smile, allowed herself to be led by him into the garden, and pretended not to notice that he was taking her into a path which the rest of the company were not following; and not until they reached a decidedly dark spot did she say to him:

"Where in the world are you taking me, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire? Really, you are a cruel man."

At the words "cruel man," Robineau fell at Cornélie's feet, saying:

"I do not know what I am, but I do know that I adore you; your charms, your dancing, your wit, everything combines to take me captive; I place my fortune and my heart at your feet."

"Well, we will see; I think that—speak to my father."

"But you, ravishing Cornélie?"

"I—I—ah! Mon Dieu! there goes the bouquet, and we are not there!"

The company had in fact arrived only in time to see the bouquet fired, and to receive a few rocket sticks in their faces; but, by way of compensation, Mademoiselle Cheval, Jeannette, Cunette, Vincent, and the scullions had had the best places, and had seen the whole display.

"This will teach them to go away when I am singing!" said Monsieur Férulus to himself, rubbing his hands.

"We should have done as well not to have stopped dancing," remarked the young ladies.

"It seems that these fireworks were discharged for the servants," said Monsieur Berlingue.

Monsieur le Marquis de la Pincerie, who appeared with his brother Mignon just as everybody else was returning, refused to believe that the fireworks had been discharged in his absence; to convince him, Mignon was forced to go out and pick up the sticks, the remains of the cartridges, and bring them to him. The guests returned to the château to resume their dancing, but when they reached the ball room they looked in vain for the orchestra. At the noise of the bombs and rockets, the blind man had fled and his two colleagues had disappeared with him. It is difficult to dance without music, so that the fête came to an end much earlier than had been expected.

Each family took its place in the carriage which had brought it. As Monsieur de Tantignac's horse had not returned to fetch his master, the chevalier asked permission to make a tenth in the paper manufacturer's carriage. The chariot of Monsieur de la Pincerie received once more the noble family. Madame de Hautmont entered it in a very bad temper because Edouard had not offered her his hand, which she expected him to do, in order to obtain an opportunity to ask permission to see her again. But Robineau had almost carried Mademoiselle Cornélie to the carriage in his arms, whispering in her ear:

"Prepare your father to listen to me."

At last, all the carriages, cabriolets and chariots had left the château. Cunette closed the gates, calling after them: "God bless you!" Vincent tossed his livery upon his bed. Alfred, fatigued by dancing, and by the walks and conversations of the day, was delighted to retire. Edouard was no less delighted to be left to himself, and free to abandon himself to his thoughts; and Robineau returned to his apartment, saying to Monsieur Férulus:

"It seems to me that the fête was rather fine, I hope that it will be talked about for a long while."

"It will be cited a hundred years hence, monsieur, as a model to be followed. But we did not remain long enough at table."

"And the ball ended much too early. Fancy those rascals of musicians running away during the fireworks! Who in the deuce can have shown the blind man the way?"

Monsieur Férulus made no reply, but he turned his head to conceal a faint smile; then wished Robineau good-night; and he, thinking of the superb Cornélie, decided to go to bed; for one must always end by doing that after a day of festivity and enjoyment, as well as after a day of toil and sorrow.

XIX

LOVE AND MYSTERY

After the vagabond's visit, Isaure was sad and pensive; what the man had said to her concerning Alfred and Edouard caused the girl to reflect upon her situation. She thought that she had done wrong to talk to the two young men every morning; but could she prevent them from coming into the valley and resting in her cottage? They manifested such an affectionate friendliness for her! And they had long since ceased to talk of love to her. Once in a

while, Alfred had tried to kiss her; but is it so rare a thing to see a peasant steal a kiss from a girl in the country? It is true that Edouard looked at her very affectionately, that he sighed when he shook her hand; but did all that prove that he was in love with a simple peasant girl?

The evening passed in such reflections. At the faintest sound outside, Isaure listened intently; she dreaded a visit from the stranger; that man aroused in her a sensation which she could not define; she felt that he lacked those things which ordinarily arouse one's interest in an unfortunate person; she had a feeling now of fear in her lonely house; her glances as she looked about were wanting in the usual confidence; the darkness caused her an indefinable terror. Several times she went up to the topmost chamber in the cottage, and opening the window which looked toward the White House, gazed long and earnestly at the building, upon which the moon cast a pale light.

After passing several hours at the window, Isaure retired; then at daybreak she drove her goats to the mountain as usual, saying to herself:

"They will come to-day! Shall I say anything to them about what that stranger said to me? No, I must not; he told me that these gentlemen love me; as if young men from the city could love a girl from the mountains! Oh, no! it was only in jest that Monsieur Alfred pretended to be in love with me; and Monsieur Edouard? Ah! he has never told me that he loved me!"

But the hour at which the young men usually came to the valley had long since passed and they had not appeared. Isaure gazed very long and often at the road by which they always came, and she remained later than usual upon the mountain; at last she returned sadly to her cottage, and there continued to wait the coming of those who manifested so much friendship for her.

"They will not come," said the girl to herself, looking out of the door. "No, they will not come to-day, and perhaps not to-morrow either. I ought not to be disappointed, since it is wrong to talk with those gentlemen every day."

And yet a tear fell from the girl's eyes; it seemed to her that she was once more utterly deserted.

"Perhaps they have left this part of the country!" she said to herself. "Left without bidding me good-by; he especially, who seemed always so sorry to leave me! who smiled so sweetly at me! Why, then, did he accustom me to see him every day?"

The girl was right: why accustom people to happiness in order to inflict pain upon them afterward? That is what one should say to oneself before trying to beguile a heart. But at that time we think of almost anything else.

The day passed and the young men did not come. Isaure did all that she could to divert her thoughts; she went in and out of the house, she talked to her hens and her cow and to Vaillant; but, despite all her efforts, her heart was heavy; the time seemed to pass more slowly than usual, and she did not sleep the whole of the night.

Once more day broke. The girl was already up, and was about to leave her cottage to go to the mountain, when she heard a faint sound in the distance. It speedily drew nearer. Isaure stopped; hope and joy glistened in her eyes. Yes, it was certainly the gallop of a horse that she heard, and it came nearer and nearer. Isaure looked down the road; a young man was approaching at a fast gallop; she recognized him; it was he, he whom she was especially surprised not to see the day before. Is it possible for a woman to be mistaken when love is in question?

Edouard had not slept during the night following the fête, and he had risen before dawn and saddled a horse for himself. Alfred was asleep, and Edouard felt no desire to wake him; but it was a breach of their agreement to go without him to see Isaure; however, love makes one forget as many agreements as it forgets itself!

In a few moments Edouard had dismounted, fastened his horse near the cottage, and run to Isaure, who did not dream of concealing all the pleasure which his presence caused her.

"Here you are!" she said; "ah! I had already made up my mind that you would not come any more!"

"Not come any more! not see you any more, Isaure! Do you think that it would be possible for me to exist away from you?"

As he spoke, Edouard took the girl's hands and pressed them fondly in his; then they sat down together at the foot of a tree, and gazed at each other for some time in silence. But one can speak so eloquently with the eyes!

"You did not come yesterday?" said the girl at last.

"No, it was impossible; there was company, a party, at the château at which we are staying! But how long the day seemed to me, amid all that noise, with those people for whom I care nothing, those pleasures in which I could take no part, because I was thinking of you, of you alone, with whom I am so happy!"

"The time seemed very long to me, too; I was bored. I looked very often at the road by which you come. You have accustomed me to seeing you; you have done wrong, for after all, you will not always remain in this region, and then I shall not see you any more, and it seems to me that I shall not be so happy as I used to be."

"Dear Isaure! But would it be to me or to Alfred that you would give the keenest regrets? To-day I have come without him, I am defying his anger, for I am determined to know at last what I may hope. Yes, yes, I love you, Isaure; I feel for you the most passionate, the most sincere love; I have tried for some time to fight against it; but I feel that it is impossible for me, I feel that this love is now a part of my existence. And why should I fear to give myself up to it? I am free, I am my own master; and if you love me, who can object to our union? But it is necessary that you should love me, that you should prefer me to Alfred. Oh! speak, confess to me frankly what is taking place in your heart. Isaure, you would not, you could not, deceive me."

Isaure timidly cast down her eyes, and withdrew her hand from Edouard's, faltering:

"So it is true! You do love me? He did not deceive me?"

"Who, pray?"

"That poor man—you know, that stranger who is wandering about our mountains."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, the day before yesterday, after you had gone, he came into my house. I asked him to rest, and he remained quite a long time. He kept his eyes fixed on me all the time, and with such a strange expression! Ah! it was not like you! For, instead of giving me pleasure, it frightened me."

"Did that villain insult you?"

"No! oh, no! he simply said to me—what you yourself have just said—that it was love which brought you to me; and then he asked me which of you I preferred."

"Who has authorized him to question you concerning your most secret feelings? Ah! when I meet him again, I will chastise his insolence!"

"Oh! do not be angry with him, I beg you; the man is unfortunate; he says that all the world has deserted him! You must not make him any unhappier. No doubt he questioned me for his own amusement, but he did not insist when he saw that I did not like it. You will not say anything to him, will you?"

"How kind-hearted you are! But you are right, we must forget that man. Ah, dear Isaure, you will answer me; you will let me read your heart?"

"What do you want me to say to you?"

"Which do you prefer, Alfred or me?"

"Oh, dear! I love to see you both."

"Both equally?"

The girl blushed; she did not know how to express what she felt. Edouard approached her, gently put his arm about her waist and said to her tenderly:

"If Alfred should not come to see you again, would you be very much disappointed?"

"Why, I should think of him sometimes,—we would talk together about him; that is all."

"And suppose it were I who did not come again—would you console yourself in the same way by talking with him?"

"Oh! never, never!" cried the girl, in a tone that came from her heart.

"Dear Isaure! then it is I whom you love with love!"

Isaure softly raised her beautiful blue eyes to Edouard’s face; her expression, in which her whole soul was depicted, left no possible doubt in his mind who was master of her heart. In his intoxication, Edouard embraced her and imprinted a kiss on her lips. Instantly they heard a mocking laugh behind them.

The lovers turned their heads, but they saw no one.

"Didn’t you hear something?" asked Isaure anxiously.

"Yes, I thought—but I see no one about. Ah! what do we care for the world? What is the whole universe to me? You love me, dear Isaure! That assurance is perfect bliss to me! You love me, you are an orphan, you are dependent upon nobody; I too am my own master, and I shall be your husband! Yes, I shall be deemed worthy of so many charms, of such perfect innocence! Ah! I have known society sufficiently to be sure I could never find there anyone to be compared with you, and besides, your education and your manners are not those of a peasant; if I should desire to present you in society, you would be its brightest ornament. But no, we will live apart, for each other; to make us happy we shall have no need of those noisy dissipations of which you know nothing. My fortune is more than sufficient to satisfy all our wishes. I will buy a house in some lovely country district; I shall take delight in teaching you music and drawing myself, in reading with you those famous authors who enlighten our minds and rejoice our hearts; and if my inclination for letters, for the stage, calls me sometimes to Paris, I shall return to your arms to seek repose from the fatigues of the city. Ah! This prospect promises me the most blissful of lives; tell me that it will make you happy, too!"

For some moments past, while listening to Edouard, Isaure had become pensive, and her eyes no longer bore the expression of pleasure which had animated them; it seemed that her mind had been invaded by melancholy memories and new reflections; Edouard noticed this change, for the girl’s slightest feelings were expressed at once upon her features.

"What is the matter?" he asked anxiously. "Are you angry that I have read your heart, that I know that you love me?"

"Oh, no, it isn’t that," replied the girl, with a sigh. "Why should I hide from you what I feel? One should always say what one thinks, should not one?"

"Yes, always."

"But perhaps I have done wrong to love you! I ought first to have found out—However, I did not try to resist—what I felt when I saw you was such perfect bliss!"

"Well, Isaure, why these regrets now that I swear to love you all my life, and propose to make you my wife?"

"Your wife!" replied the girl sadly, glancing at the White House. "Ah, yes! I should be very happy then; but perhaps it is not possible!"

"Why not? Aren’t you an orphan, alone on earth, since you lost the good people who adopted you?"

Isaure did not reply for some time, but at last she said, lowering her eyes:

"Yes, I am an orphan, I have no parents."

"Well! Who could interpose any obstacle to our happiness? Who could prevent you from being mine, from never parting from me any more?"

Isaure seemed deeply agitated; after glancing about her with an expression of dread, she put out her hand, pointed to the White House, and said to Edouard in a very low tone:

"I can never go away from that house."

Edouard was thunderstruck; he gazed in amazement at the White House, to which she pointed, then turned his eyes anxiously upon the girl again; he seemed to await some further explanation. But Isaure said no more.

"What!" said Edouard at last, "you can never go away from that deserted house? Pray, what powerful reason compels you to remain near that house?"

"I cannot tell," replied Isaure, under her breath.

"What is this mystery, this obstacle which you conceal from me? You have secrets from me, when I propose to devote my life to you, to unite myself to you by indissoluble bonds! Oh! speak, I implore you, conceal nothing from me!"

"I cannot speak. Pray, forgive me for causing you pain! If it rested only with me——"

"Dear Isaure! is it some promise, some oath that you gave your adopted mother? Perhaps she ordered you never to leave these mountains. But reflect that, if your parents were alive, they could not disapprove of my love! This house at which you point so mysteriously has long been uninhabited; it does not belong to you, because if I am to believe

what I have been told, your adopted father sold it shortly after taking you into his family; and you cannot go away from it, you say! Come, confess that there is underneath all this some absurd, inconsiderate promise. Tell me the whole story, and I will soon satisfy you that you are entirely at liberty to dispose of your future."

"At liberty to dispose of my future!" replied the girl earnestly; "oh, no! I am not!"

"Why, in whose power are you then?" cried Edouard; "who can have any authority over you?"

Isaure looked down and made no reply. Edouard's brow darkened; a thousand suspicions sprang up in his mind; the love which gleamed in his eyes gave place to distrust and anger. He rose, walked away from the girl, who remained seated at the foot of the tree, then said at last in a tone which he tried to make indifferent.

"Well, mademoiselle, since you do not deem me worthy of your confidence, I will not presume to ask you any more questions. I thought that I had your love, I hoped to make you happy; I was mistaken; I will try to forget all my plans!"

The girl said nothing. Edouard walked still farther away; but surprised by her silence, he turned to look at her once more. Isaure's pretty face was bathed in the tears which flowed freely from her eyes. At that sight, Edouard was soon by her side; he threw himself at her feet, and covered her hands with kisses, crying:

"You are weeping! and it is I who am the cause of it! Oh! forgive me, dear Isaure; pardon my unjust suspicions!"

"You think that I do not love you!" said the girl, sobbing.

"I have grieved you! Ah! am I not too fortunate to have won your love? How I repent having caused your tears to flow! Hereafter I will not seek to know your secrets, I will not ask you any more questions. You love me! What more can I ask?"

"Oh, yes!" replied Isaure, while a smile appeared beneath her tears, "I shall always love you, for I do not think that it is possible to change. Forgive me for not telling you everything that concerns me. Ah! I would like to! but the secret does not belong to me. Some day perhaps I shall have no more secrets from you; and before long, no doubt, I shall know whether I can be your wife, whether I may be permitted to go with you whereever you go. As for my heart, it is yours; you know very well that I cannot take it away from you again."

The sweet child pressed Edouard's hand lovingly, and had no hesitation in showing him all the pleasure it gave her to love him; but it did not occur to Edouard to abuse her confidence, for he too loved sincerely. The time passes quickly with two lovers who still have mutual pleasures to bestow; Edouard noticed at last that it was more than time that he should return to the château. He tore himself away with difficulty from her whom he loved, saying to her tenderly:

"Until to-morrow."

"Until to-morrow," said Isaure. "Remember that you have accustomed me to see you, that the time seems very long to me when I am not with you; and now that I have admitted that I love you, I would like to tell you so every day!"

Edouard took the girl's hand, held it to his heart and said:

"May it be that before long I shall never be obliged to leave you!"

He remounted his horse, waved his hand to Isaure, who stood in her doorway, then rode back toward the château. But, in spite of himself, he could not help turning his head to look at the White House; and although he had promised the girl not to worry about what she concealed from him, and not to conceive unjust suspicions, he felt a weight at his heart as he gazed at that deserted house, and he said to himself with a sigh:

"What can be the reason that prevents her from going away from this place?"

XX

HYMENEAL PLANS

On rising, on the day following the fête, Alfred went to Edouard's apartment; not finding him there, or in the château, or in the gardens, Alfred felt assured, that disregarding their agreement, Edouard had gone without him to see Isaure. He was furious, he cursed his sleep, he was on the point of mounting and riding into the mountains after him. But he reflected that the morning was already far advanced and that Edouard, who had started some time before, was doubtless on his way back. He decided to wait in order that he might have an explanation with him the sooner.

While Alfred impatiently paced the gallery which looked over the country, Robineau, who had just risen, was devoting special care to his toilet. At last he came forth with a self-satisfied air, and said to the young baron, smiling blandly:

"Good-morning, my dear Alfred!"

"Good-morning!" replied the other shortly, continuing to stride back and forth.

"Parbleu! I am very glad to find you this morning, which rarely happens; for ordinarily you and the poet are up before Phœbus. Ha! ha! Being with that devil of a Férulus, I am getting into the habit of speaking in metaphors altogether.—But let us come to what I want to say to you. You are not listening to me, Alfred!"

"Yes, yes, I am listening to you; speak on."

"Well, my friend, I will tell you then that during the day yesterday, I—By the way, what did you think of yesterday's affair? You haven't said anything to me about my fête. It was rather neat, eh?"

"Yes, with the exception of Monsieur Férulus's poetry, the gladiators' cheese, and Mademoiselle Cheval's posteriors, it was very good."

"Oh! what can you expect? Such unforeseen little accidents always happen. Indeed, Monsieur Berlingue assured me that those things made the party more piquant.—However, my dear Alfred, during the day I definitely settled upon my choice."

"Your choice for what?"

"What! for what? Why, for my wife, nothing else. I absolutely must marry! When a man occupies a certain position,

when he has a château—and then, my heart has spoken; oh, yes! it has spoken in a most extraordinary fashion! I have never been in love like this; it is true that no such fascinating object was ever before within my reach. I will bet that you have guessed, Alfred! You must have noticed our understanding. For my part, I confess that I could not restrain myself.—I say, Alfred, what are you looking at out of the window?"

"I am listening to you, I hear what you say; go ahead."

"Well, my dear friend, it is Mademoiselle Cornélie de la Pincerie who has won my heart; it is she who will be my wife, if, as I hope, monsieur le marquis, her father, does not interpose any obstacle to our union."

Alfred left the window, and walked toward Robineau, saying to him:

"It is Mademoiselle Cornélie, that tall young woman with whom you opened the ball, whom you propose to marry?"

"Just so, my friend. She is charming, isn't she?"

"Yes, she isn't bad-looking!"

"And how she dances, eh?"

"Yes, but one doesn't marry to dance all the time. Listen, Robineau——"

"I have told you that I would not answer to that name."

"Well, Jules la Roche-Noire, or whatever you choose,—listen to me, I beg you. You are a good fellow, although wealth has rather turned your head, and although you are trying to play the grand seigneur. We were at school together, and honestly I should be sorry to see you wretchedly unhappy some day."

"What a devil of a preamble!"

"You are spending more than your income, you are running through your inheritance too fast; however, since you are enjoying yourself, I will overlook that; but my friend, take my advice, do not marry Mademoiselle Cornélie; for I am very sure that, if you do, you will not enjoy yourself long."

Robineau pressed his lips together with an air of vexation, and replied:

"My dear Alfred, so many phrases were not necessary to come to that—that I should not marry Mademoiselle de la Pincerie. I admit that I thought that you were going, on the contrary, to compliment me upon my taste. And why should I not marry her?"

"Because that woman is not at all suited to you."

"The fact that I adore her proves, on the contrary, that she is suited to me."

"Pshaw! you imagine that! You adored Fifine, too, and you left her without regret!"

"Fifine! Why in the deuce do you mention her! My friend, I entreat you, do not utter that name again. If the La Pincerie family should find out—I know of course that a young man is at liberty to amuse himself, but no matter! The family is so rigid in the matter of morals that it might prejudice me."

"You love Mademoiselle Cornélie, I doubt not; but she does not love you; she will marry you in order to have a husband, that's all."

"She does not love me!" cried Robineau. "Ah! upon my word, my dear Alfred, I thought that you had more tact and discernment than that. Mademoiselle de la Pincerie does not love me! No, she adores me, that's all; and thank heaven! yesterday I had proofs of that, the most amiable *abandon*, hand-clasps, sighs, nervous thrills! The fact is, she is mad over me."

Alfred turned away with a shrug, then rejoined:

"All right, she adores you, I don't deny it; I may have been mistaken. But that woman is as old as you are; she is fully twenty-eight."

"No, no! she is not twenty-eight, she was twenty-seven and a half last month."

"And her fortune; that is important. How much of a dowry has she?"

"Dowry—why she has a thousand things. First, magnificent hopes; then, what her father may obtain from the government for his plans for rural economy, which he is to send immediately to the minister; also, all that her Uncle Mignon will leave her, and he is certain to be appointed sub-prefect this year or next year—he cannot miss it; and lastly, a superb and very lucrative office which the marquis has the promise of for his son-in-law!"

"And for fifty years he has been trying unsuccessfully to obtain a place for his brother."

"That doesn't prove anything. Besides, my friend, I don't haggle over a dowry like a tradesman on Rue Saint Denis. Bargain for a wife! Fie, fie! And a wife like Mademoiselle de la Pincerie! It seems to me that the honor of entering such a family should count for something."

Alfred took Robineau's hand and said to him with the utmost coolness:

"My friend, I tell you again, if you make this marriage, you will make a fool of yourself."

Robineau glared at his friend with eyes like an angry turkey-cock's, and dropped his hand, saying:

"My friend, as to making a fool of myself, I don't need your advice. I don't make love to goatherds, but I will marry whomever I please."

"Marry the devil, if you choose!" said Alfred, abruptly leaving the gallery.

"I will not marry the devil, but I will marry Mademoiselle Cornélie," said Robineau, striding with a determined air toward the garden.—"Ah! so she doesn't love me! I shall make a fool of myself!" he said to himself as he hurried toward the stable. "I see how it is.—Parbleu! it is easy to guess: Monsieur Alfred would like to steal Mademoiselle de la Pincerie away from me, and that is why he tries to dissuade me from this marriage. But the trick is too clumsy; to deprive him of all hope, I will hasten to the marquis's house, and I will not leave him until he has promised me his daughter's hand."

Robineau called the coachman and the groom, and ordered the horse to be harnessed to the char-à-bancs. Monsieur Férulus came at that moment to inquire for Monsieur de la Roche-Noire's health, and to inform him that breakfast was served. Robineau reflected that he had time for breakfast before going to ask for Mademoiselle Cornélie's hand. So he accompanied his librarian to the dining-room, and while breakfasting, said to him:

"Monsieur Férulus, I am going to be married very soon."

Monsieur Férulus made a wry face, because the life he was leading at the château was very agreeable to him, and he instantly foresaw that the arrival of a mistress would lessen the importance of his duties, that he would no longer

be allowed to order the dinner and to decide how long they should remain at table. However, as Robineau had said it with a very determined air and as it was easy to see in his eyes that he expected congratulations, Monsieur Férulus tried to turn his grimace into a smile, and replied in a honeyed tone:

"Monseigneur, marriage is an institution which dates back to the earliest period of antiquity. People have always married, even before the days of notaries and municipal officers; to marry is to follow the decrees of Providence, and it was because they refused to marry that the people of Sodom were burned. Marry, therefore, monseigneur; great men have always had much inclination for marriage; Hercules, in a single night, married forty-nine daughters of Thespius, King of Bœotia; and if we are to believe Dion Cassius, Cæsar put forth a decree which declared him the husband of all the women in Rome, when he chose to avail himself of it. Ah! what fellows Cæsar and Hercules were! But now a man can marry but one wife at once; and indeed, I think that's enough.—May I know, monsieur, who the party is upon whom your eyes have fallen?"

"It is the younger daughter of Monsieur le Marquis de la Pincerie,—a tall, well-made young lady, named Cornélie, who sat beside me at table."

"Ah, yes! I know, monseigneur, I know. An antique face, a Greek profile, the figure of an Antigone, academic attitudes, and a way of expressing herself at once refined and grammatical! I congratulate you, monseigneur; she was the loveliest person at the fête!"

"Dear Monsieur Férulus!" said Robineau, pressing his librarian's hand affectionately. "Good! he knows what he is talking about, and he approves my choice because passion does not blind him, and he says what he thinks."

"Approve your choice, monseigneur! I will do more, I will sing of it in iambics, hexameters and pentameters."

"Very well, my dear Férulus; I am going at once to Monsieur le Marquis de la Pincerie; you can understand that I do not propose to neglect such a matter. Some other man might take Mademoiselle Cornélie away from me, and I should never console myself. The horse is in the carriage, and I am going to Saint-Amand; I hope to induce the family to come to the château for several days before the wedding."

"Go, monseigneur," said Monsieur Férulus, escorting Robineau to the char-à-bancs; and, as he watched him drive away, he added: "Go in search of a wife, since you are in such a hurry to be married. It seems to me, however, that the château was kept up on a very good footing, and that we had under our hands all that we needed. But no matter, I must seem to be enchanted over this union, and I must write poetry for the whole La Pincerie family."

Alfred had, on leaving Robineau, gone out upon the lawn, where he paced back and forth excitedly, waiting for Edouard. At last he appeared, and Alfred walked away from the château to meet him. Edouard had dropped the reins upon his horse's neck. Engrossed by thoughts of Isaure, of his love, and of that White House, which already offered an obstacle to his plans of happiness, he did not look about him, and did not think that he was so near the château. Suddenly a voice called to him:

"Stop; dismount; I want to speak to you."

Edouard started at the sound of that voice, which was familiar to him, but which seemed at that moment changed by anger. He raised his eyes, and saw Alfred standing before him pale and motionless, although his agitation was manifest in his features. Edouard dismounted and left his horse free, and the animal returned of its own accord to the château. The young men were at the entrance to a road lined with trees; Alfred left it, and motioned to Edouard to follow him; he halted in a more isolated spot. Edouard said nothing, but waited for his companion to begin an interview, the probable subject of which he divined.

"You have seen Isaure?" said Alfred at last.

"Yes, I have just left her."

"And is this the way you keep your promise? Have you forgotten our agreement? I, too, have longed a hundred times to go into the mountains without you,—to be alone with that girl. But I have restrained that longing, for I was afraid of breaking my promise. And you——"

"Alfred, I was wrong, I admit it. But my love for Isaure is so violent that I absolutely could not resist."

"Say rather that, being less honorable than I, you laughed at my good faith!"

"Alfred, listen to me, I beg; and do not think that it is a simple caprice which I feel for Isaure."

"But how do you know that I do not love her as much as you do? To win her love, you employ sighs and melancholy; I go about it more frankly; I declare myself, I do not conceal my love."

"But after all, Alfred, that girl cannot love us both; and suppose—suppose it were not you whom she preferred?"

"I understand you," retorted Alfred angrily; "I see that this morning, being alone with her, you made the best of your time; that you neglected nothing to carry the day over me. And do you think that, upon the strength of this statement, I propose to withdraw and to abandon your conquest to you? But you will permit me to entertain some slight doubt of your triumph and to try to be as fortunate as you. I, too, will see Isaure alone; perhaps then that haughty beauty will deign to be less stern to me."

"I do not know what your plans are, monsieur; but since you force me to tell you, why, yes, Isaure does love me, I am the one whom she prefers. She told me so only a moment ago."

"Really! You remind me at this moment of Robineau, when he came just now to tell me that he was adored by Mademoiselle de la Pincerie. All you fellows persuade yourselves that you are adored! You will allow me, although I have less self-conceit, to think that I too may possibly make an impression.—But I will see this little Isaure, who is more of a flirt than I had supposed; and I warn you that I too will do my utmost to make her adore me."

"Whatever you may say, I do not confound Isaure with all the coquettes we have known, and I have not the least fear that she will forget the vows she has exchanged with me."

"Aha! So you have already exchanged vows! Didn't I say that you had made the most of your time?—This, then, is the rare virtue that yields at a first tête-à-tête!"

"That yields!—What, Alfred, you could believe—Oh! trifle with me no longer—Alfred, I swear to you——"

"I do not place any faith in the oaths of a man who has just shown such a lack of honor."

"Alfred!"

"Yes, yes, I say it again; and if it offends you, say the word; I am at your service."

Edouard and Alfred were silent for several moments. But the former reflected that he was more fortunate than

Alfred, since Isaure loved him; he thought of the disappointment, of the regrets, which he must feel who had been unable to touch the young mountaineer's heart; thereupon his wrath faded away, he pitied his rival, he said to himself that it was the duty of the more fortunate lover to pardon the other; and approaching Alfred, he took his hand, pressed it affectionately, and said:

"Could you really fight with me?"

Alfred was moved, but he strove to control himself as he replied:

"When one has insulted a person, should one not be ready to give him satisfaction?"

"But can I take offense at a word inspired by anger, and which your heart disavows? Should one never forgive his friend for anything? What would be the use of friendship if it does not make us more indulgent to those whom we love?"

"Friendship! I no longer believe in yours!"

"Alfred, I have but one thing more to say to you; I propose that Isaure shall be my wife."

"Your wife?" cried Alfred in amazement, "your wife,—that young peasant!"

"Yes, I am fully determined upon it. Will you forgive me now for the preference which she accords to me?"

"If you really propose to make her your wife," said Alfred, after a moment's silence, "you deserve to win her; for, I admit, I never had that intention. But it is very hard for me to believe it. However, I shall find a way to ascertain the truth."

Alfred walked back to the château and Edouard did the same; but they said nothing more to each other.

XXI

SERVANTS' GOSSIP.—ALFRED AND THE VAGABOND

The next day, at daybreak, a certain excitement was apparent among the servants of the château; they were assembled in the courtyard, talking earnestly among themselves. Among those who declaimed the most loudly was the concierge, who seemed to be haranguing the others.

"I tell you that it can't be anything," cried Cunette, gesticulating in a most dramatic way. "For more than fifteen years I've been concierge in this château, and nothing strange ever happened here."

"I don't know whether it is strange or not," said the groom, "but I tell you that I saw a light. You know we came back late with monsieur; and then I had to groom the horse, put away the carriage, and then eat my supper; so that it was very late when I went to bed. As the weather was fine and I didn't feel much like sleeping, I went to the window and happened to look at the tower opposite, which you call the North Tower."

"Where no one lives," said Cunette, "because monseigneur thought that it was in too bad condition, and that it wasn't worth while to have it done over new, as there's plenty of room in the château."

"Well, whether anyone lives there or not, I tell you that last night about eleven o'clock—or rather, it was pretty near midnight—I saw a light in one of the little windows up at the top."

"Mon Dieu!" said Jeannette; "midnight! That's the time for ghosts, ain't it, Mamzelle Cheval?"

"Nonsense!" said the cook; "do you suppose I believe in ghosts? All those stories are made up to frighten folks. It's more likely to be thieves who want to steal my chickens,—that is, if it was anything at all."

"What!" said François, approaching the other servants, "are there ghosts in this château, too?"

"Oh, no! Monsieur François; there's no question of ghosts," replied the groom, "it's just a light that I saw last night in the tower where no one sleeps."

"It was a reflection of the moon, that he took for a light," said Cunette; "I am the concierge, and I'll answer for it that no suspicious person came into the château."

"Pardi!" said Jeannette, "if it was a ghost, do they come in through the doors?"

"Observe," continued the concierge, "that Benoît says that the light was up high at that window; that's in the arsenal; what would any thieves go to the arsenal for, where there's nothing but old rusty swords?"

"But suppose it wasn't a thief?"

Vincent, who had not yet spoken, drew near at that moment with a mysterious air, and said:

"My children, all this reminds me of something I'd forgotten, which might have some connection with what Benoît saw."

All the servants crowded around Vincent and looked at him with interest.

"About five or six days ago," continued the gardener, "I don't know just when it was, but it was night, and I was going to bed; I remembered that I needed my big pickaxe the next morning to work in this part of the garden. You know that I keep most of my tools in a little shed at the end of the broad path on the left."

"Yes, yes."

"Well then, I says to myself: 'I guess I'll go and get my pickaxe.' So I went out, and went into the garden; I was about in the middle of the broad path when I heard steps in front of me."

"Mon Dieu! how that frightens me!" said Jeannette, pressing against one of the scullions.

"I thought it was one of the gentlemen from the château," continued Vincent, "and I stopped politely to let him pass, and took off my hat; but no, he stopped too, and instead of coming toward me, he turned back. That appeared to me suspicious, so I called out: 'Who's that?' but he didn't answer; he walked faster than ever and I tried to follow him, but I ran into a tree, and then good-night! I didn't hear anything more."

"Ah! what a strange thing!"

"Pshaw! perhaps it was our master as was taking a ramble."

"Oh, no indeed! he never goes alone into the garden at night."

"You ought to have asked the gentlemen the next morning."

"Faith, I slept on it, and I forgot all about it."

"We must ask Monsieur Férulus what it was," said the other servants. "He's a man who knows everything, a scholar; he'll tell us whether we ought to be afraid."

As it happened, Monsieur Férulus was just crossing the courtyard, holding in his hand some verses which he had already written for Robineau's future bride, and which he intended to present to Robineau at breakfast. He approached to ascertain the cause of the gathering which he noticed in the courtyard. Thereupon he was told of what Benoît and Vincent had just related. Monsieur Férulus listened with much attention, shaking his head now and then; every time that the librarian moved his eyebrows, Jeannette and the groom exclaimed:

"See, that frightens him, too!"

After reflecting long, Monsieur Férulus asked Benoît:

"Are you perfectly sure that it was a light that you saw in the tower?"

"Oh! yes, monsieur! In the first place, it moved around; if it had been the moon, I should have saw——"

"I should have seen——"

"I should—what?"

"I should have seen; you must pay attention to the pluperfect subjunctive."

"Oh! monsieur, I didn't say that I saw a pluperfect! I said I saw a light."

"How unfortunate it is to have to deal with ignoramuses!" said Monsieur Férulus to himself.—"And you, Vincent, are you perfectly certain that there was a man in the garden?"

"Certain; that is to say, a man or a woman, I can't be sure about the sex. But it was someone, for it walked and ran in front of me."

"Perhaps it was a rabbit?"

"Nonsense! A rabbit with nails in its shoes!"

"All this seems to me decidedly peculiar," said Férulus.

"There you see that it is peculiar," cried Jeannette, "and that we ought to be afraid."

"I don't say that. Things which seem to us marvelous at a distance are often perfectly natural when examined at close quarters. Indeed, there are some which lose a good deal by being looked at too closely. But before pronouncing definitely upon this, I would like to assure myself with my own eyes of the truth, for *pluris est oculatus unus quam auriti decem*!"

"You see!" said Cunette, "that means that it's all nonsense, and that you dreamed it all."

"No, it doesn't mean that, at all!" continued Férulus. "My dear Cunette, you do not translate literally. I think, *primo*, that there is something or nothing. That is my principle, and I start from that, because one should start from a principle."

"Well! I say that there ain't anything," said Mademoiselle Cheval, "and that they was frightened by their own *shades*!"

"Why!" said Jeannette, "monsieur is a scholar, you must know—for he has shown me a whole heap of things already, me——"

"That's all right, Jeannette! that is between ourselves," said Férulus, nudging the stout girl's arm; "but don't branch off from the question."

"Well, monsieur," replied Jeannette, "tell us once for all whether there is any ghosts or isn't."

"Yes, that's it," said the other servants; "then at least we shall know what to think."

"My children," said Férulus, after blowing his nose at great length, "the question that you put to me is a thorny one. Hippocrates says yes and Galen says no!"

"But we don't ask you for Monsieur Pocrates's opinion," said Mademoiselle Cheval, "for it's yours that we want."

"My dear *coqua*, otherwise called cook, do not interrupt me, if you please. You wish to know whether there are or have been ghosts, or if we ought still to believe in them; that is the problem propounded; I start from that. I embark my reply upon the vessel of my lips, to cross the stormy sea of your attention, and to reach at last the blessed haven of your ears!"

"Look here, monsieur, if you are going to talk a foreign language, we shall never understand you!" said Jeannette.

"That is true, Jeannette; I yielded to the torrent of my eloquence, and forgot that I should come down to your level. I am there now. Ought we to believe in ghosts? Saint Augustine declares that it is rash to deny the intimate connection between devils and women; but Montaigne says that we should give magicians hellebore and not hemlock. For my part, I do not believe in supernatural things; in fact, I never have. However, I am not a Pyrrhonist; I am not one of those people who doubt everything! According to them, Xerxes did not enter Greece with five million men, and did not chastise the sea; a wolf was not the nurse of Romulus and Remus; Mutius Scævola did not proudly extend his arm over a red-hot fire; they do not believe in the phantom which twice appeared to the second Brutus, or in the labarum seen in the air by Constantine the Great. I know very well that all those things were very much out of the common course; but since they are in history, why, then, as Virgil says, *felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas*!—That, my children, is my opinion concerning ghosts; I advise you to govern yourselves by it. However, I do not see that it is worth while as yet to worry monseigneur about it."

With that, Monsieur Férulus walked away to present his poetry to Robineau; and the servants, who had not understood a word of his harangue, separated, each retaining his own opinion.

Edouard soon left his room. He would long before have left the château had he not deemed it his duty to wait for Alfred, in order to go to Isaure with him. He hoped in that way to prove to him that he did not seek to influence the girl's feelings, and that it was her heart alone which guided her. In short, although overjoyed by the preference accorded to him, Edouard, who was warmly attached to Alfred, earnestly desired that his success in love should not cause him to lose his friend.

The time passed; Edouard, who was burning with impatience to see Isaure again, was surprised at Alfred's tardiness. He appeared at last; but when he saw Edouard, his brow darkened and an expression of vexation appeared upon his face.

"I was waiting for you!" said Edouard, going to meet Alfred, whose hand he tried to take; but Alfred at once drew his hand away, replying coldly:

"Why are you waiting for me?"

"In order to go with you—to go with you to see Isaure."

"With me!" exclaimed Alfred satirically; "it seems to me that hereafter that is not worth while, and that each of us is at liberty to do what he pleases. Go, let nothing detain you. I, too, shall go alone to the valley."

"You are still angry with me, Alfred!" said Edouard in a sorrowful tone.

"Oh, no! I should be very wrong to be angry, no doubt; you are so frank in your conduct! And when do you propose to marry Isaure?"

Edouard made no reply; he seemed embarrassed.

"Well! you do not answer," continued Alfred ironically; "when a man is so much in love, and is certain that he is loved in return, I do not see why he should postpone his happiness; you are both free; there is nothing to interfere with your contracting this bond. Is it your purpose to conceal your marriage? to make a mystery of it? you who have so much contempt for the prejudices of society!"

"No, monsieur; if I marry Isaure, I shall not make it a mystery; I shall not fear to call her my wife openly."

"If you marry her! Ah! it seems that you are not so decided to-day as you were yesterday. Really, Edouard, you must think me very credulous, or a great fool, to believe that I will place any faith in this stratagem of yours, which you resorted to only to separate me entirely from the girl! Yes, yes, she is very pretty, I agree; but you know as well as I that one is not bound to marry all the pretty women; and when it is a question of a simple peasant, whose head it is so easy to turn, I shall never believe——"

"So much the worse for you, monsieur, if you think that a man cannot settle down for life with her who combines everything which is likely to make one happy. I have told you frankly what my intentions are. I cannot compel you to believe me, but ere long I trust that you will be convinced that I have not deceived you."

With that Edouard walked away from Alfred, mounted his horse and rode away from the château alone.

Alfred stood for some moments lost in thought. He did not know what course to pursue. He considered Isaure fascinating; his self-esteem was piqued; it was most unpleasant to him to abandon so readily the hope of winning the little goatherd’s heart. However, if he had been certain that Edouard really intended to make her his wife, he would have renounced at once his projects concerning the girl.

He decided to call upon Isaure also. He desired to assure himself with his own eyes of her preference for Edouard, and to know whether he had not deceived him. So he took the only remaining horse, and left the château a quarter of an hour after Edouard. This time he did not urge his steed, for he was reflecting upon the best method of ascertaining the truth. He would have liked to listen to his rival without being seen; and yet the thought of watching, of spying upon anyone, was too repugnant to his frank disposition for him to harbor it a moment.

He was only a short distance from Isaure’s cottage, when someone, jumping out suddenly from behind a rock, caught his horse by the bridle, saying:

"You will arrive too late; another is ahead of you."

Alfred recognized the vagabond, who stood leaning upon his stick, with his gleaming eyes fastened upon the young man.

"Ah! it is you, is it?" said Alfred; "what do you mean?"

"That you started too late. Your rival is an earlier bird than you, and he makes the most of his time. Yesterday you did not come. But he did, and he went away very happy!"

These words were accompanied by a mocking smile. The stranger’s features wore an even more malicious and evil expression than usual.

"How do you know all this?" demanded Alfred.

"How do I know it? Parbleu! it’s not very difficult to know. Lovers always think themselves alone, and they do not trouble themselves to conceal their feelings. I had plenty of time to count their kisses!"

"Their kisses!" replied Alfred, trembling with anger.

"Why, yes! Does that surprise you? Oh! your friend doesn’t go slow; with his little sugary way, he gets ahead! What surprises me is that you, who seem accustomed to the ways of the world, are not more advanced than he."

"But," replied Alfred, stifling a sigh, "since it is Edouard whom she prefers——"

"Whom she prefers! Nonsense! As if these little girls ever had a preference! They love everybody, everybody who makes love to them. She would have loved you, if you didn’t always come last. However, whenever you choose, it will rest entirely with you to carry the day. Don’t you know that with time and money one can accomplish everything?"

"Really," said Alfred, gazing at the vagabond in surprise, "you have principles which I should never have expected to find in an old soldier."

"Soldier! Who told you that I was ever a soldier?" retorted the stranger proudly.

"You yourself, the other morning, after speaking of my father, whose name made such an impression upon you."

The stranger frowned, and was silent for some moments; at last he continued:

"Well, that isn’t the question now; do you propose to allow this girl to be whisked away from you by your rival, when it is entirely in your power to possess her? I confess that that surprises me on the part of the young Baron de Marcey."

"Thoughtless and enterprising as I am, or as I have been, I have always respected the happiness of my friends. I may have tried to triumph over Edouard when it was a question simply of a caprice, of a mere amourette! But since this girl has turned his head to the point that he proposes to make her his wife——"

"To make her his wife!" cried the stranger, with an outburst of sarcastic laughter. "Oh! that would be too much, upon my word! If you love Monsieur Edouard, you will confer a genuine service upon him by preventing him from doing such a foolish thing."

"You speak with much assurance. What makes you think so ill of this girl, pray?"

"I have eyes and experience; and you, who know women, how can you fail to see that this one with her simple,

sweet manner is a little minx who knows a great deal? What do you think of a girl whose parents no one knows, and to whom they who adopt her leave all their property? Who entertains generously all those who seek hospitality at her hands? Who lives alone in these mountains, and talks as correctly as a woman brought up in the city? But that is not all; there are other mysterious circumstances, and I shall discover them."

Alfred reflected upon what he had heard; he could not help thinking that Isaure's conduct was in fact calculated to arouse strange suspicions.

The man who had stopped in front of Alfred watched him closely while he reflected; one could see that he was trying to read his eyes, to divine what was taking place in the depths of his heart. After a rather long silence he continued at last:

"Upon my word, you hesitate a long while; a lot of time and sighs wasted upon a girl who amounts to nothing; and who asks nothing better than to be seduced! If she were the heiress of a great name, or a noble châtelaine, you could not treat her with more respect! In heaven's name, have we gone back to the time of the Renauds and the Amadises? I am tempted to believe it. You ought to give tournaments for this young beauty; to break a lance or two to demonstrate her virtue, and to shatter a few helmets in favor of her innocence! Happy times those were when, in order to be recognized as the loveliest and the most virtuous of women, a maid had only to choose the bravest and strongest champion."

Alfred listened closely to the speaker's last words. He scrutinized him with more attention than before, and said to him:

"Who on earth are you, who presume to give me advice for which I do not ask you? I see that I am mistaken about you. No, you are not an ex-soldier. Edouard guessed the truth more nearly, I see, when he said that you must have held some position in society; in truth, your language, although you often affect a vulgar tone and manners, your language betrays education and knowledge. What misfortunes have reduced you to the melancholy situation in which I find you now?"

"What is there so surprising, young man, in my having once been rich and highly considered, and being so no longer? That is seen every day! Is not a man subject to a thousand and one reverses? And is not one especially in danger of falling when one occupies a lofty position? Whether those reverses were due to others or to my own fault, I do not need to tell you. I had ardent passions, I admit, and I loved to gratify them; that is the history of practically all men."

"You will agree," said Alfred with a smile, "that your present situation is hardly calculated to arouse a desire to imitate you."

"Oh! How many men, who have done worse than I, are still on the pinnacle? After all, what is there so unfortunate in my position? I am free, I am my own master, I can do whatever I please from morning until night. I wear a costume which is not fashionable, but it covers me, and that is enough for me; I do not envy the wealth of other men, because I have been sated with pleasure; when a man has often made himself drunk on exquisite wines, he is not sorry to drink water."

"But I have fancied that I noticed from your remarks that you had a decidedly bad opinion of women; have they treated you so very badly, that you bear them such a grudge?"

"Treated me badly! Not at all! On the contrary I was their favorite, their Benjamin; they have more reason to complain of me. There was one, however, whom I loved more sincerely than the others; she alone, I think, might have been able to subdue my character, to master my passions; with her, in short, I might perhaps have become virtuous and orderly; and I should not now be wandering about these mountains!"

"In that case, why did you not marry her?"

"Why?" replied the stranger, and his eyes gleamed with rage, as he raised them to Alfred's face; "because another, more fortunate than I, stole her from me, and that other——"

"Well, that other?"

"I was never able to find an opportunity to be revenged upon him; but I hope to find one before long, and you may well believe that I shall not let it escape me."

"I have never appreciated the pleasure of revenge!"

"Ah! you are young still! However, you know love, and you allow the woman who attracts you to be stolen from you, when it rests only with you——"

"When it rests only with me! Upon my honor, you speak very coolly. Isaure is more cruel than you think."

"She was not yesterday with your friend."

"She has with her a guardian whom it is very difficult to bribe."

"But might one not remove that faithful guardian?"

"What?"

"To be sure; could you not lure her away from her home, and then take her somewhere else, to a place where you could do whatever you chose with her, with the alternative of taking her back to her cottage if she absolutely refused to listen to your suit?"

"But who would undertake such an enterprise?"

"Who! parbleu! I would."

"You?"

"Yes, I, whenever you choose; say the word, and I promise you that your rival will not find the little one at her house to-morrow."

Alfred gazed at the vagabond for some moments, and then exclaimed:

"You are a miserable villain! Leave me, say nothing more to me! I blush to think that I have listened to such propositions!"

The stranger replied with a sneering laugh:

"What! just a little abduction of a girl who asks nothing better! A mere trick frightens you! Oh! I thought that you were farther advanced than that, monsieur le baron; but just as you please. Let your friend enjoy himself at your expense, let the girl laugh in her sleeve at your respect! After all, what difference does it make to me? But I will

wager that before long you will see that my advice was good; then, if you need me, you will find me still, for I do not bear a grudge for a word.—Au revoir!"

The stranger turned his back on Alfred and disappeared by a narrow path among the cliffs, and young De Marcey, after a moment's reflection, turned and rode back to the château, instead of pursuing his journey.

XXII

THE LA PINCERIE FAMILY AT THE CHÂTEAU

The vagabond's aspect and suggestions had produced upon Alfred's mind an effect different from that which that man apparently hoped. Disgusted by the wretch's hateful propositions, Alfred reflected upon the injustice of his conduct toward Edouard; he felt that he ought not to consider it a crime in him to have triumphed over him; and if Isaure really loved him, he vowed that he would not seek to interfere with his friend's happiness.

More content with himself after taking this resolution, Alfred, when he saw Edouard again, far from manifesting the same coolness as in the morning, spoke to him as was his habit before their rivalry. Edouard, no less surprised than delighted by this change in Alfred's humor, felt much happier since he had reason to hope that he had recovered his friend.

The next day Alfred accompanied Edouard; they rode together into the mountains. The young men did not mention Isaure; they seemed equally to dread talking about her. But they approached the valley, they were soon to see her, and Edouard felt a weight at his heart on Alfred's account. Still he was soon to see her whom he adored; but it is when we are happiest that we would like all those whom we love to share our happiness.

Since the girl had told Edouard that she loved him, she no longer feared to let him see all the pleasure which his presence caused her; she stood in her doorway, awaiting his arrival, because there she was much nearer the road, and could be the sooner in her lover's arms.

The two horsemen soon espied Isaure; they dismounted, and she walked toward them. Alfred's presence, far from annoying Isaure, seemed to please her; she received him as graciously as ever, and manifested as much friendship for him; but she had no hesitation in disclosing before him the more tender feeling which bound her to Edouard. In love for the first time, loving with all the sincerity of her years, she thought that she ought not to make a mystery of her love, especially to her lover's friend.

Alfred responded graciously enough to Isaure's friendly advances. It was easy for him to see that Edouard had told him the truth, that it was he who possessed the young girl's heart; but he tried to overcome the chagrin that he felt. The two young men stayed a shorter time than usual with Isaure, for Edouard was not so happy in the presence of Alfred, before whom he did not wish to speak of his love; and Alfred, despite all his efforts, could not succeed in recovering his usual gayety.

"My dear Edouard," said Alfred as they rode back to the château, "hereafter, I shall let you go alone to see Isaure; you are the one she loves, she does not try to conceal it; but really she is so pretty, so fascinating, even with the man whom she is not seeking to please, that despite all my friendship for you, if I should see her often, I would not promise—yes, I should do some crazy thing, and then I should be in despair over it; so it is much better that I should cease to see this girl, or at all events that I should wait until the sight of her makes less impression upon my heart. People say that I am thoughtless and fickle; I pray that I may be as much so as people say, and that I may soon forget!—Well, it is all over; she loves you, and henceforth I propose to think of her only as a sister."

Edouard shook Alfred's hand affectionately and exclaimed:

"A friend like you and a sweetheart like her! Should not one be the happiest of men with those?"

And yet Edouard sighed as he said this, for he thought of the secret which Isaure concealed from him, and of the unknown obstacle which interfered to prevent his being entirely happy. But Isaure loved him, she had told him so a hundred times; her lips could not know falsehood; the mystery which she concealed from him would undoubtedly soon be cleared up, for she herself had given him that hope; so that he ought to see nothing in the future save the most perfect happiness. Thus did Edouard console himself; to see happiness in the future is much, even though one is destined never to attain it.

On reaching the château, the young men noticed a bustle and a movement there which indicated something new. Robineau had already returned from the town, and they found him in the salon, listening to the verses which Monsieur Férulus was declaiming.

"Congratulate me, messieurs," he cried to his two friends the instant that he caught sight of them; "my wishes have been gratified! I have carried the day over my numerous rivals! In a word, Monsieur le Marquis de la Pincerie has solemnly promised me his daughter's hand, and has authorized me to look upon myself already as a member of his illustrious family."

"My dear fellow," said Alfred, "as you wish to be congratulated, we will congratulate you; and in fact, now that it is decided, it is the best thing there is to do."

"What! you are going to marry, Monsieur Jules?" said Edouard; "and who is the lady whom you are to marry, pray? There were so many people at your fête that I do not remember——"

"The sister of the pretty woman whom, by the way, you always had on your arm, my dear child of the Muses."

"Ah! I remember now: Mademoiselle Cornélie?"

"Herself. Oh! you could not have helped noticing her! She was so conspicuous! I confess that I am in a state of intoxication, of enchantment!"

"You have reason enough, certainly!" said Alfred. "But do you propose to give a second fête at the château so soon? All your people have such a busy look!"

"It is because they are preparing apartments for my future family, who have consented to pass at my château the time which must still intervene before my wedding. I would have liked to marry at once; but monsieur le marquis, who is a great stickler for form, for propriety, declares that it cannot be done so abruptly. Besides, there are papers

to be drawn, and purchases to make,—the wedding gifts which I shall send to Paris for; and in order that all this time may seem less long to us, they are coming to pass it at my château, and to enjoy the pleasures of the country. I expect the whole family this very day.—I trust, messieurs, that henceforth we shall see you here a little more, and that you will not leave the château early in the morning, to return only at dinner time."

"For my part, I promise to wait upon the ladies," said Alfred, "and to be as gallant and as agreeable as I can."

"I dare not promise as much," said Edouard; "I realize that I am a very unentertaining guest, and as you have so much company coming, allow me to leave you."

"Leave us! What! go away before my marriage,—not be present at my wedding? No, I certainly will not allow it! Besides, it would disappoint the ladies; they asked me particularly if my two friends were still at the château, and urged me not to let you go away. So it is decided, you will stay. Oh! we are going to have plenty of sport! We shall hunt. Monsieur le marquis tells me that he loves to hunt. You must teach me to hunt, messieurs; for I admit that I never tried it; but my future bride says that a man should know how to fire a gun, and consequently I propose to become a great hunter."

"Monseigneur," said Férulus, "the arrival of these gentlemen interrupted us; with your permission, I will begin again the poem I have written for your marriage. I have taken for my text this pretty line of Propertius:

"'*Nec domina ulla meo ponet vestigia lecto.*'"

"That is at once gallant and voluptuous. I start——"

"I beg pardon, Monsieur Férulus, but we are starting too; by reading us your verses in advance, you deprive us of all the pleasure of a surprise. Besides, company is coming,—ladies; we must pay a little attention to our toilet."

"That is true," said Robineau; "why, I still have on my travelling coat!—François, come and dress your master."

Alfred and Edouard went in one direction, Robineau in another; Férulus left alone, but determined to recite his poetry to someone, ran after Jeannette, whom he saw in the courtyard, and compelled the poor girl to listen to the whole hundred and forty Alexandrines; after which, chucking her under the chin, he said:

"Well! how dost thou—Mon Dieu! what a *lapsus linguæ*!—How do you like that, Jeannette?"

"Monsieur, I like the lament of Angélique and Médor better."

"You are a fool, Jeannette; and really you are good for nothing but warming beds."

"Ah! By the way, monsieur, you better buy a warming pan; for the fall's almost here, and if I've got to warm beds that way, I should get pretty tired!"

"Hush! I have given you the most agreeable place; perform your duties gracefully, and do not grumble."

The La Pincerie family had promised to reach the château in time for dinner, and about four o'clock the wicker and oilcloth vehicle drove into the courtyard. The father, the uncle, and the two ladies alighted from it; then they took out a multitude of boxes and bundles, and Monsieur de la Pincerie's rifle, which was so long that it resembled a fowling-piece. Robineau attempted to hurry forward to meet his guests; but at the sight of his future bride his emotion was so great that he dropped into a chair, saying:

"That woman deprives me of the use of my legs. What will it be when I am really her husband?"

Alfred and Edouard offered their hands to the ladies; but at sight of Alfred, Mademoiselle Cornélie, assuming her grand and haughty air, hastily took Edouard's arm. On her side, the languorous Eudoxie, who had not been satisfied with the young poet's conduct, seemed to have determined to transfer to Alfred the sentiments which she had manifested for Edouard.

Monsieur le marquis was already intent upon his rifle. Uncle Mignon was ordered to attend to the transportation of the boxes, so that his nieces' dresses might not receive too much of a shaking. Robineau, who had succeeded in recovering the use of his legs, came forward to receive the company, and escorted them to the salon on the ground floor, saying to Mademoiselle de la Pincerie:

"Pray, come and embellish this abode, of which you will soon be lady and mistress."

But the ladies did not choose to stop in the salon until they had visited the apartments assigned to them and had readjusted their clothes, which they said were disarranged by the drive. Thereupon Monsieur Férulus, who had greeted each member of the family with a honey-sweet expression, came forward and said:

"I shall have the honor of escorting the ladies."

"You, monsieur?" said Eudoxie; "it is very gallant of you, no doubt; but a servant would be much more suitable, for we may have to ask for innumerable things for our toilet, and you understand that it would be unpleasant to ask you for them."

"That is the most perfect logic," replied Férulus with a bow.—Thereupon Robineau called François and said to him:

"Have the honor to escort these ladies to their apartments."

"What! you give us a man for lady's maid!" cried Cornélie, shrugging her shoulders. "Why, that is ridiculous. Do you expect that this fellow is going to lace us and arrange our hair and dress us?"

"Oh! a thousand pardons! I am absurd!—François, go and call Mademoiselle Cheval."

"Who on earth is Mademoiselle Cheval?" said the widow, with a horrified air. "Mon Dieu! I shall never dare to entrust my head to that woman!"

"Oh! you will be pleased with her; she is my cook, but she is a girl who has all sorts of talent; she will lace you tight."

"Oh! the idea! it's an outrage! To give us a cook for lady's maid!" said Cornélie. "Our hair will smell of soup!—I tell you, monsieur, that I will not allow your cook to come near me."

"Why, monseigneur," said Férulus, "you have just the person these ladies need; Jeannette, who came to the château to do everything, and whose hair is as curly as a negro's."

"That is true! I am so confused, so happy, that I did not think of her. Send for Jeannette."

"At all events," said Madame de Hautmont, "she has a human name."

Jeannette appeared; as François had told her that they were going to give her something to do, she brought her foot-warmer under her arm.

"Jeannette," said Robineau, "you will consider yourself at the orders of these ladies."

"What has she got there?" said Eudoxie; "I believe it is a foot-warmer! Do you take us for old dowagers, my girl, that you bring us that goodwife's piece of furniture?"

"Oh! it ain't that, madame," replied Jeannette, with a reverence; "but you see that, as my duty—as I have to warm ——"

Monsieur Férulus, who was beside Jeannette, pulled her skirt and pinched her, to make her keep quiet. Luckily Cornélie interrupted her, saying:

"Well, it is all right! Go before us.—Uncle Mignon, have the boxes been carried up?"

"They have," replied Mignon, showing his enormous teeth, "and I have put the pins in the pin-cushion."

The ladies withdrew to their apartments. Monsieur le marquis, who had already expectorated in every corner of the salon, went to inspect his apartment, and Uncle Mignon, who was instructed to attend to all details, went to see if the chariot had been placed in the carriage house and the horse fed.

"How much activity and animation the presence of ladies gives to a house instantly!" said Robineau. "The arrival of the La Pincerie family is going to brighten up this abode tremendously, messieurs. Ah! by the way, monsieur le marquis is very fond of whist; he wants to play every evening; who will play with him?"

"Not I," said Edouard, "for I don't know the game."

"I know it; but as it bores me, I shall not play!" said Alfred.

"I, monseigneur, flatter myself that I play it correctly," said Férulus.

"Very good, Monsieur Férulus; you, Uncle Mignon and I, if necessary, although I don't know it very well; no matter, someone will advise me; besides, Mademoiselle Cornélie told me that she was very particular that I should play whist with her father. What a pity that we haven't so much as a harpsichord here! My fiancée plays the harpsichord, and her sister sings like Orpheus. And there is not the slightest instrument here to accompany the singers!"

"You might send for Monsieur Cheval with his drum."

"None of your poor jokes, Alfred."

"Monseigneur, I play the fife rather well," said Férulus, "and if it would give pleasure to the ladies——"

"We will see, I will suggest it. But they don't return! Is dinner ready?"

"All ready, monseigneur; my only fear is that it will get cold."

"Oh! you don't understand, my dear fellow," said Alfred; "I'll wager that the ladies won't come down for another hour. You don't know what it means to make two toilets, especially when they have but one lady's maid! But here is the uncle; I have not as yet heard him say anything except: 'Yes, nieces.'—I am curious to find out whether he knows any other sentence."

The uncle, after he had seen his brother's noble steed attack his grain, joined the company. He entered the room bowing, smiling and hopping; then he looked from one to another without saying a word. But Alfred went to him and said:

"They say that monsieur le marquis is very fond of hunting; you like it too, no doubt, monsieur?"

"Yes, oh, yes! I go hunting," replied Mignon, scratching his nose.

"Are you a good shot?"

"Shot! No! oh, no! I never shoot."

"What on earth do you go hunting for, then?"

"Why, I carry the ladies' umbrellas."

"What! Do the ladies hunt, too?"

"Oh, yes! Cornélie often brings down hares."

"And her sister?"

"Eudoxie doesn't shoot, but she follows the hunt; the movement of the horse is very good for her nerves.—Ah! I beg pardon, I think my nieces called me; I may have forgotten a box!"

Mignon hurried from the salon, and Robineau said to his friends:

"You will agree, messieurs, that it would be difficult to find an uncle more attentive! In fact, Cornélie tells me to take him for a model."

"Never fear, Robineau; I assure you that they will train you as well as they have him."

After a long hour, during which Monsieur Férulus did nothing but go from the dining-room to the kitchen, the ladies appeared at last, escorted by Mignon, and followed by the marquis. There was nothing extraordinary in the costumes of the two sisters. Edouard was surprised that they had been able to spend so long a time in making so little change in their dress; but Eudoxie began by saying:

"Don't look at us, messieurs, we must be perfectly horrid, shocking! That stupid girl has no idea about dressing the hair, and then we feared keeping you waiting. We hurried and have sacrificed all coquetry!"

"In heaven's name, how long does their toilet last when they take time about it?" whispered Alfred; while Férulus exclaimed:

"It seems to me that I see Venus and Psyche!"

They took their places at the table; this time Alfred was beside Eudoxie. But Edouard was in no wise jealous; he was beside the haughty Cornélie, who deigned sometimes to smile amiably upon him.

"My château is not yet what it will be before long," said Robineau, gazing fondly at his future bride; "but I shall try to make your stay here agreeable; my friends will second me with all their power. Thanks to your presence, mesdames, I fancy that we shall see them here more frequently; for, heaven is my witness, that since we arrived, they have been here very little; early in the morning they leave the house, and do not return until dinner time."

"Are you gentlemen fond of riding?" said Eudoxie.

"The exercise is very healthful," said the marquis; "it's a pity that one wears out one's boots and small-clothes. I have been trying for a long time to find something economical to replace them."

"To replace small-clothes, monsieur le marquis?"

"No, only the boots. I believe that I have discovered the ancient foot-gear of the Phoceans; it would be very becoming to those men who have well-shaped legs!"

"It is not simply for the pleasure of riding that these gentlemen scour the country every morning," said Robineau with a mischievous air.

"Do they hunt?" said the marquis.

"No—no—that is to say, they do hunt if you call it so, but it is a sort of game which—which——"

"Pray explain yourself, monsieur!" said Cornélie; "we do not understand you."

"It seems to me, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire," said Edouard, "that these ladies are hardly likely to care about knowing where we go."

"Ha! ha! Look, mesdames, the poet is blushing already!" replied Robineau, laughing; "it is well that you should know that we have a sorceress in the neighborhood."

"A sorceress," exclaimed Eudoxie in dismay, while Mignon ceased to play with his fork for a moment and looked at Robineau.

"A sorceress," said Cornélie, with a scornful air; "bah! I don’t believe in sorceresses myself!"

"You understand, mesdames, that it is simply a figure of speech."

"No matter," said Eudoxie; "if she tells fortunes, I shall go to consult her; where does she live?"

"About two leagues from here, in a pretty little valley surrounded by mountains, near the village of Chadrat."

"She should have an owl, a screech owl, and a black cat," said Mignon.

"I have seen none of those things," said Alfred, with a smile; "but by way of compensation, she has the loveliest eyes in the world, teeth as white as snow, and an extremely sweet voice."

"Oh! mon Dieu! what a portrait!" cried Cornélie spitefully; "it would seem that monsieur has looked at her very closely."

"Is she a young girl, then?" said Eudoxie.

"Yes, mesdames," replied Robineau, "she is rather a good-looking young girl, although I see nothing extraordinary about her; a peasant, a goatherd, in fact, who, according to what the peasants hereabout say, casts spells upon animals; and I am inclined to think that she has cast one upon these gentlemen."

"Aha! so she’s a young girl," rejoined Eudoxie, glancing at Alfred; "and it is to her side that these gentlemen bend their steps? I begin to understand."

"Well, I do not understand at all what pleasure one can take in talking to goatherds," said Cornélie disdainfully.

"If you had heard her speak, mademoiselle," said Edouard, "you would consider us very pardonable. She is not a mere peasant like the other girls one meets in these mountains; she is a young woman with refined and gracious manners, a keen and delicate wit, a sweet and touching voice, who expresses herself as well as one who has received the best education."

"Oh, monsieur! how warm you get!" said Cornélie with a satirical air. "You are this extraordinary damsel’s true knight, I see!"

"I do her justice, mademoiselle; that is all."

"I beg pardon, monsieur," said Eudoxie; "but if this goatherd is really such a person as you describe, she must indeed be a sorceress; for I should like to know who could have taught her to talk and express herself differently from the other country girls? unless she has not always lived here in the mountains, unless she is a deserted Ariadne."

"The deduction is extremely judicious!" said Férulus; "she cannot have learned without a teacher; and except my boarding-school, which she never attended, I know of no masters of arts in this neighborhood."

"I agree, mesdames," said Alfred, "that there is, in truth, something hard to explain in respect to this girl; but in my opinion that adds to the charm of her personality."

"The charm of a cowherd! She must be most seductive!" said Cornélie, with a sarcastic smile.

"Mademoiselle," said Edouard, "pray have a little compassion for a person whom you do not know!"

"Oh! I see that one would be very ill-advised to speak ill of her before you, messieurs! I leave you your shepherdess! But I confess that I should never have suspected that two young men of such excellent tone could be attracted by such a rustic character!"

"For my part, I say that we must see her in order to form a just estimate of her," said the marquis; "I shall go hunting in that direction."

"Monsieur le marquis is right," said Férulus; "we should not speak without knowledge. Everybody talks about the fair Helen, but few people know that she had five husbands: Theseus, Menelaus, Paris, Deiphobus and Achilles; that she was hanged in the Isle of Rhodes by the women servants of Polyxo; and that, during the war of which she was the cause, eight hundred and eighty-six thousand men died on the side of the Greeks and six hundred and seventy-six thousand on the side of the Trojans."

"Oh! mon Dieu! he has got onto history again!" said Eudoxie to Alfred.

"Monsieur," said Cornélie to Férulus, "Greek and Roman names make my ears ache; pray talk to us about more modern things."

Monsieur Férulus bowed and swallowed a glass of burgundy, to wash down this little snub. Meanwhile, Robineau, to demonstrate his affection to his future bride, tenderly pressed her foot with his; but Mademoiselle Cornélie gave a little shriek and exclaimed:

"Dear me! who is treading on my foot like that? Is it you, monsieur?"

Robineau turned crimson and stammered:

"Yes, I confess that I wanted to make you understand——"

"I don’t like to have people tread on my feet! You hurt me terribly! I beg that you won’t do it again."

Robineau, covered with confusion, looked at the floor, uncertain whether he should or should not throw himself at

Cornélie's feet; at last, to relieve himself from his embarrassment, he turned the conversation once more upon the subject of Isaure.

"To return to the young girl of the mountains, mesdames, the most surprising thing about her is that she lives all alone near a place which is the terror of the people of the next village. That place is a house called the White House."

"Why, what happens in the White House, pray?" asked Eudoxie.

"What happens there!" replied Robineau; "oh! nobody knows; but it seems clear that something happens there. It is uninhabited and yet lights are seen in it; sounds are heard and yet no person is seen! That is very strange, is it not?"

"It is terrifying," said Mignon.

"It is utterly absurd," said Cornélie.

"However, mesdames, the said shepherdess is the only person who is not afraid of the White House, and she lives close beside it. That is rather surprising for a young girl, eh?"

"A clever trick!" said Eudoxie; "of course her lover lives in the house, and she knows very well that he isn't the devil."

"Her lover!" exclaimed Edouard; and, struck by the widow's suggestion, he suddenly became pale, and trembled visibly.

"Oh! mon Dieu! how you frighten me, monsieur!" said Cornélie; "I thought that you had an attack of hysteria."

"I beg pardon, mademoiselle, but I don't know—I had a sudden flush."

"No one would have suspected it, for you are as pale as a ghost!"

"Come, come, my dear Edouard," said Alfred, who had observed his friend's perturbation, "let us drop the White House, which does not deserve so much of our attention, and let us drink a glass of champagne to the health of these ladies."

As he spoke, he tried with his eyes to tranquillize and reassure Edouard, who soon recovered himself, realizing that he was foolish to be disturbed by a word spoken at random by someone who had never seen Isaure. But that cruel word had wounded him to the heart.

To put an end to a conversation which was painful to him, and to revenge himself in some measure upon Robineau, Edouard said to him:

"But, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, do you, who are so well acquainted with everything curious or extraordinary in the neighborhood, do you know all that your own château contains?"

"My château? Why, now it contains a most illustrious family, and some most adorable ladies!"

"That is very well, but it is not all; you are unaware, I see, that there is a phantom, a ghost in this old château!"

"A ghost under my roof!" cried Robineau, changing color in his turn.

"A ghost!" repeated all the members of the La Pincerie family; and Uncle Mignon, in his terror, dropped upon his knees the cup of coffee he was just putting to his lips.

"Faith, I knew nothing about it," said Alfred.

"Nonsense, it is a joke, a piece of mischief on Monsieur Edouard's part," rejoined Robineau, making an effort to smile.

"No, indeed; that is, if we are to believe your servants; for I confess, for my own part, that I have seen nothing; but your groom declares that the North Tower is visited at night by a phantom; and Vincent, your gardener, claims to have met in the garden, in the evening, a mysterious personage who fled at his approach. That at least is what François, your valet, told me, and he asked me if it were I who had been in the tower and in the garden at night."

Robineau, seeing that Edouard was speaking seriously, could not conceal the emotion which this news caused him.

"What!" he cried, "my servants have seen all this and have said nothing to me about it! You know so many things, Monsieur Férulus—how does it happen that you did not know this?"

"Monseigneur," said Férulus, "I had had wind of these vague rumors; but it seemed to me that it was useless to mention them to you until I was certain that there was something extraordinary in them."

"Why useless, pray? Am I not the owner of this château? Should I not be told first of everything that happens here?"

"*Recte dicis*, monseigneur; but no thief has entered the château, since nothing has been stolen. In that case it must have been a ghost that they saw. But are there ghosts? That is the question. The Egyptians, the Gauls, the Vandals and the Ostrogoths affirm——"

"Monsieur Férulus, this is not a question of Ostrogoths! I want an explanation of what my servants saw that was extraordinary.—François, tell my groom and my gardener to come here; summon the concierge too, and the whole household, that will be the best way."

François went off to collect his fellows, while Cornélie said to Robineau:

"Really, monsieur, you display an interest, an eagerness, in this matter!—I can well believe that you do not believe in ghosts! Ah! mon Dieu! a cowardly man is a pitiful creature!"

"Certainly, mademoiselle, my courage is well known; my friends can tell you that we passed the night in the mountains, in a wretched hovel, the door of which had no lock."

"Yes, mademoiselle," observed Alfred, "and that night La Roche-Noire did some things—which I would not have done."

"To be sure," said Robineau, compressing his lips. "As for ghosts, I do not believe in them the least in the world. But I propose to find out why my servants presume to spread reports which are utterly absurd."

"Oh! yes, monsieur," said Eudoxie; "we must find out what it is, for I am afraid of everything; and it would be a shameful thing to bring us to a château inhabited by ghosts."

"Indeed, it would be dishonorable," said Uncle Mignon in an undertone, as he followed the company, who left the table to repair to the salon, where all the servants soon arrived in a body, in accordance with their master's orders.

"Which of you is it who saw something or somebody at night in the North Tower?" asked Robineau, perching himself gracefully in a large easy-chair, while the ladies and the two young men talked together on an enormous

couch at a little distance.

The servants looked at one another for some time without replying; at last Benoît stepped forward and said:

"I believe it was me, monseigneur."

"You see! he is uncertain about it already," said Férulus; "*oculos habent et non videbunt*!"

"Monsieur Férulus," said Robineau testily, "why do you speak Latin to my people? You know very well that they don't understand it! Parbleu! if I chose, I could speak Latin to them too; and even cookery Latin, which would be much more within their reach."

"Monseigneur, I was quoting a passage of Scripture."

"You are a terrible man with your passages! But, when one is with ladies, one should never use a dead language."

Férulus bowed, and seated himself in a corner of the salon, whence he ogled Jeannette. Robineau resumed his examination.

"Tell me, Benoît, what it was that frightened you?"

"Frightened! Oh! I wasn't frightened, monseigneur! I was just surprised, that's all!"

"He is lying like a tooth-puller!" cried Mademoiselle Cheval; "he was so frightened that when he told us about it the next day he was still as pale as a turnip."

"Yes," said Cunette, who was standing behind his comrades, because he had dined and did not feel very firm upon his legs, which fact he was terribly afraid that his master would discover; but which did not prevent his persisting in talking all the time. "Yes, he was frightened! He pretends to be brave, and he hasn't any marrow in his bones!"

"Hold your tongue, you others, and let Benoît speak.—What was it you saw at night?"

"Monseigneur," said Benoît, "I was at my window because I couldn't sleep."

"Well, you ought to sleep," said Cunette. Robineau made a threatening gesture and the concierge said no more.

"I happened to look at the old tower, where no one lives, and I saw a light in the windows on top."

"In the first place, there ain't any windows on top, because the platform's there," said Cunette under his breath.

"What did that light do?" inquired Robineau with keen interest.

"What did it do! It went back and forth; and then I didn't see it any more, monseigneur."

"Which one of you has been in the old tower at night with a candle, my men?"

"Not me," said all the servants in chorus.

"In that case, this is very peculiar," said Robineau.—"And you, Vincent, whom did you meet in the garden?"

The gardener came forward with his customary air of ill humor, wearing his livery which was hardly recognizable, it was so stained and covered with dirt, and exclaimed:

"Who did I meet? Pardi! If I knew who it was, it would be all right; but you see I don't know."

"You ought to have called for help, and to have arrested the person who dared to walk in my garden at night without my permission."

"Oho! I ought to have done that! I can't do everything all alone! Besides, I couldn't run, my clothes are too tight for that!"

"How is this? Is this your livery, ruined like this already, Monsieur Vincent?"

"You shouldn't give me a color so easy to dirt, master, if you want me to plant and dig and water flowers; that's the trouble!"

"My friends," continued Robineau, addressing his servants, "as you don't know just what it was that frightened you, I will let it go at that for to-day; but the next time that you hear anything, or see anything suspicious in the château, I order you to find out instantly what it is, under pain of being discharged; because I do not choose that anyone in my service shall be afraid.—Go."

All the servants took their leave, and Robineau walked toward the ladies, saying:

"It seems to me that I talked to them rather decidedly."

"It seems to me, monsieur, that you have made a great deal of noise over nothing," said Cornélie.

"I am not so brave as my sister," said Madame de Hautmont, "and I am sure that I shall dream to-night of imps and will-o'-the-wisps, in spite of myself. And then, too, this château has such a Gothic appearance! In pity's name, Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, do not give us rooms very far from these gentlemen, for if I should hear anything in the night, if I should be afraid, who would come to my assistance?"

"Have no fear, madame," said Alfred, "my room also opens on the large gallery; my door is almost opposite yours; at the slightest sound I shall hasten to offer you my services."

"Ah! that is very nice, monsieur; I place myself under your safeguard, under your protection!"

Cornélie glanced furtively at her sister and Alfred, saying in an undertone:

"How convenient it is to be afraid!"

To afford an agreeable diversion to the guests, Monsieur Férulus came forward with his poem, and proposed to read it. But the dinner had lasted until late in the evening. The La Pincerie family was fatigued. Monsieur le marquis was already beginning to snore in his armchair, and they concluded that it was preferable to send him to snore in his bed. Everybody retired, each one armed with a candle, the light of which gleamed like a minute point in the vast corridors of the château. One after another, each light disappeared; and just as happens when paper is consumed by fire, all those luminous streaks vanished and left absolute darkness behind.

XXIII

ANXIETY.—JEALOUSY

For a fortnight the La Pincerie family had been settled at the Château of La Roche-Noire, where Robineau did his

utmost to provide varied entertainment for his guests; nevertheless, the time passed rather monotonously. The ladies, who rose as late in the country as in the town, did not descend until the breakfast hour; then they went up to their rooms again, to devote themselves to their toilet, and that lasted until noon. Then they met in the salon, and chatted there, or strolled about the gardens. Several times Robineau suggested an excursion among the mountains; but if the weather was fine, Eudoxie was afraid of the heat; if it was overcast, she was afraid of dampness or rain. But if by chance she resolved to defy the elements, then it was Cornélie who refused to go out, because she suspected that Alfred would be her sister's escort; and she was not at all desirous to be always on the arm of her fiancé, with whom she seemed to feel that she would have plenty of time to be alone in the future.

As for Edouard, the presence of the La Pincerie family did not prevent his going every morning to see Isaure; he simply returned to the château a little earlier; but they never saw him at breakfast, which fact was a subject of constant jesting for Robineau; whereas the ladies, terribly scandalized at the idea that anyone could prefer riding or a goatherd to their society, treated Edouard with much coolness, and constantly hurled epigrams at him, to which the young man listened with a courteous indifference which served only to increase the irritation of the marquis's daughters.

Monsieur de la Pincerie, who had declared himself so devoted to hunting, and who passed an hour every morning examining his gun, had not yet found himself in a sufficiently hardy and active condition to take the field; and although Robineau had purchased a very fine new rifle, he seemed in no hurry to use it. As for Uncle Mignon, he was always ready to do whatever anyone wanted; he had become so accustomed to that, that the excellent man would have thought that he was ill if he had felt any will of his own.

The ladies ordinarily went up to their apartments an hour before dinner, to change their dresses. Monsieur Férulus did all that lay in his power to remain at table a long while, wherein Uncle Mignon seconded him warmly. When they returned to the salon, the whist table was prepared, and monsieur le marquis did not allow five minutes' interval between dinner and the game. Mignon, Monsieur Férulus and Robineau made up Monsieur de la Pincerie's table. As La Roche-Noire played very badly, he was usually scolded throughout the game; and if he chanced to turn his head or to say a word to the ladies, who were talking with the young men at a short distance, the marquis would say to him with much temper:

"Pray attend to what you are doing, monsieur! You are not playing with the ladies, but with us!"

Thereupon Robineau would bow submissively and falter:

"I beg pardon, that is true! I was absent-minded!"

But as it began to bore him terribly to play whist every evening, and to be scolded from seven o'clock until ten, Robineau hastened forward the moment of his marriage, because he hoped to enjoy life a little more then.

Nothing more had been heard of ghosts or of nocturnal noises; Robineau laughed and joked with the widow when she said that she was still afraid. For several days, however, Eudoxie seemed less nervous, and evidently relied greatly upon the support of her neighbor. It is true that Alfred, who, in accordance with his promise, had ceased to go to Isaure's house, did what he could to foster a slight inclination for the languorous Eudoxie, whose only ambition was to find someone with whom she could exchange sighs.

It was the middle of September, and the days were growing short and the mornings cool. Edouard often reached Isaure's cottage before the people at the château were thinking of rising. Happy only when he was at the young girl's side, he always saw her with renewed delight, and found it harder to leave her. Each day Edouard discovered some new attraction in the woman who had won his affection. Isaure's pure and ingenuous heart poured itself out freely into her lover's; she, too, was evidently happy to love him, and their mutual love seemed to wax greater with every instant. But, when Edouard said to her:

"As we love each other so dearly, why should we not belong entirely to each other, why should we have to separate every day?" Isaure sighed and made no reply; but her eyes, turning toward the White House, seemed to indicate that thence came the obstacle which lay in the path of their happiness.

That mystery tormented Edouard; it was painful to him to think that Isaure had secrets from him; he could not doubt that she loved him, and yet jealousy crept into his heart. Of whom could he be jealous? Isaure was incapable of deceiving him; he was sure of that when he was with her; but when they were apart, new ideas assailed him, and in spite of himself, what Eudoxie had said came often to his mind.

Several times, after bidding Isaure adieu, Edouard softly retraced his steps. Hiding behind trees, the young lover would keep his eyes fixed steadfastly on the maiden's house. When she came out, Edouard would follow her at a distance, and watch her for hours at a time. But he saw that she was always alone, running along behind her flocks, or seated quietly upon a mound, smiling artlessly at the gambols of her goats, and glancing along the road by which her lover had gone away. If her eyes turned toward the mysterious house, then an expression of melancholy, of anxiety, would steal over her features; but she did not on that account leave the place where she usually sat, and no one came out of the White House to speak to her.

Ashamed of yielding to such jealous impulses, Edouard was always tempted to throw himself at Isaure's feet; but he restrained himself, watched her return to her cottage, and then walked cautiously toward the White House, and when he reached the door, listened attentively to see if he could hear any sound inside.

Although thus far nothing had happened to justify his secret uneasiness, Edouard was unable to overcome it; he felt that he should not be tranquil in his mind until he knew what the obstacle was which prevented him from being Isaure's husband. Day after day he implored her to confide to him what it was that detained her near the White House, that prevented her from consenting to be his wife at once; but Isaure always kept silent, or else said to her lover:

"Forgive me, but I cannot speak; the secret is not mine. Wait a little longer. After all, are we not happy now, since we can tell each other every day that we love each other?"

A girl may be content with such happiness; it satisfies her mind and it satisfies her heart; she cannot desire any other; but it is not the same with a young lover; the assurance that he is loved, the joy of pressing his sweetheart in his arms is not enough for him; he is not content with glances and oaths. Edouard realized that he could not long contain himself; he realized the perils of their situation, and yet he did not wish to sully that pure young blossom before it was lawful for him to pluck it.

One morning, after urging the girl once more, to no purpose, to tell him what it could be that prevented her from

disposing of her hand, Edouard had walked sadly away from the cottage, and his eyes had rested with gloomy anxiety upon the White House. The weather was bad and the valley was shrouded in a dense mist. Isaure was not likely to leave her cottage. After pretending to take the road leading to the château, Edouard retraced his steps, took a detour, and came back to the walls of the deserted house.

Jealousy had crept into Edouard's heart; he did not know what course to pursue in order to discover if someone were secretly living in the White House. He looked at the windows; those on the ground floor were provided with wooden shutters, those on the first floor with persiennes. Edouard made the circuit of the house and the garden walls. Suddenly it occurred to him that if he entered the garden, he might perhaps solve the mystery which was being hidden from him. At first he cast the idea aside as unworthy of him. To force his way into a house by scaling the walls was repugnant to his sense of delicacy. But the house was deserted, and no one would know that he had given way to that impulse of curiosity. He glanced involuntarily about; the dense mist made it impossible for him to see Isaure's cottage; consequently it was impossible that she could see him from her windows. He walked close to the garden wall. It was fully six feet high; but in several places it was broken; some stones had become detached, and others protruding made it very easy to climb. Edouard kept his eyes fixed upon the wall; the suspicions which he could not banish, the secret which was being kept from him and which seemed to be contained in that house, everything impelled him to attempt the undertaking. Once more he looked about him; he was entirely alone, not a sound could be heard. In a few seconds he had climbed the wall, leaped down upon the other side, and stood in the garden of the house.

Edouard could not control his emotion; we are moved in spite of ourselves when we feel that we are doing something wrong. He paused a moment and looked about. The garden was large, but it was uncultivated; nettles and weeds were growing in the paths, where evidently no foot had trodden them for a long while. Trees, entirely neglected, had spread out their new branches, untrimmed by the gardener's pruning hook, over other trees near them; the flowers had fallen at the foot of the shrubs that bore them; and the fruit had in large part dried upon the branches.

Edouard walked forward cautiously along the first path that he came to. At every step his feet became entangled in weeds and branches. Everything indicated that for a long time no attention had been paid to the garden. In a clump of trees which was a little less overgrown, he spied a bench with a back; that bench was not covered with leaves and dust, and the path leading to the clump seemed to have been used more than the rest of the garden.

Edouard walked toward the house, and came to a small courtyard. The gate in the fence separating the courtyard from the garden was not closed, so he was soon in front of the house. On that side the windows were not closed by shutters; the door leading from the ground floor into the garden was of glass, and seemed to be secured inside by a latch only.

Edouard listened for some time, but not the slightest sound could be heard in the house. In a corner of the courtyard was a small stable, where there was some straw and grain; everything indicated that horses had been kept there; but it was the interior of the house that the young lover was especially eager to examine. One of the panes in a window on the ground floor was broken, so that he could easily pass his hand through, and in that way unlock the window and gain entrance to the house. After some further hesitation, Edouard yielded to his longing to discover what Isaure was concealing from him. The window was opened and in a moment he was inside the house.

When he was inside, Edouard could hardly see anything, for it was a dark day, the windows looking on the open country were tightly closed by shutters, and very little light came in from the garden. But he gradually became used to that half light and could examine everything about him.

The furniture was old, but seemed to have been used very little; it was covered with dust, but on the dining-table there still stood the remains of a meal, plates, a glass, and a bottle, in which there was some wine.

"If this house is not always occupied," said Edouard to himself; "it is certain at all events that people come here sometimes; but is it a man or a woman who comes to this place in secret?"

He passed into a vestibule which separated the two rooms on the ground floor. That vestibule had one door leading to the road and another to the garden; he crossed it and found himself in the other room; it was only partially furnished, but there was a small bookcase, the shelves of which were filled with books. Edouard took one up at random; on examining the binding, it seemed to him to be exactly like that of the volumes which he had seen in Isaure's hands.

"Yes, this is where the books come from that she has in her house!" he said to himself, his curiosity becoming greater with every moment. "This library is for her. Ah! here are grammars, abridgments of history, geography, treatises upon botany and the cultivation of flowers; certainly no one would have all these books in his library unless they were used for someone's instruction. Yes, it must be the person who comes here who has educated Isaure; evidently she has learned here all that she knows more than the other peasants!"

And the young lover heaved a sigh, for he feared that the woman he loved had been taught too much.

He left this room and ascended a staircase leading from the vestibule to the rooms on the first floor. The keys were in all the doors. He entered a bedroom; the tumbled bed indicated that someone had passed the night there. Edouard, more perturbed than ever, looked carefully about; the desk was locked and so was the bureau; but he spied upon a table a pair of small pocket pistols; on examining them he found that they were loaded.

"Pistols!" exclaimed Edouard; "it can't be a woman who carries such weapons! and yet sometimes, on a journey—but, no! no! it is a man who comes secretly to this house. A man! and Isaure refuses to go away from here! She cannot give me her hand as yet, she says. Can this man be her father? But she told me only this morning that she never knew her parents. No, it is not her father! Who then can this mysterious being be, who exercises such absolute control over her?"

Edouard threw himself upon a chair; his emotion was so intense, his heart beat so violently, that he needed a moment to recover himself. He glanced about the room and sighed as he said to himself:

"Ah! if only I could know all that has happened in this house!"

He replaced the pistols where they were, entered two other rooms, and finding nothing to throw light upon his suspicions, concluded that it was time to leave the deserted house. He closed the doors, descended the stairs, went out through the window on the ground floor, and stood once more in the courtyard adjoining the garden. After one last glance at the house, Edouard returned to the garden and left it by the same method by which he had entered.

Looking about him once more, and convinced that no one had seen him, he walked rapidly away from the White House, even more anxious and tormented than he had been before visiting it.

XXIV

THE GHOST.—THE NORTH TOWER

Two days had passed since the visit Edouard had paid to the White House, and despite the suspicions which had arisen in his mind, when he saw Isaure his anxiety always vanished; she displayed so sincere an attachment for him, told him so earnestly how pleased she was that she had won his love, that he often blushed at the thought that he could give way to any feeling of jealousy.

Alfred, however, noticed that Edouard did not seem to be so happy as he should have been; more than once he had asked of his friend the reason of the melancholy and anxiety which he read in his eyes; and he always replied:

"Nothing is the matter, my dear Alfred; but you know very well that lovers are never entirely satisfied. If I had any real cause for unhappiness, to whom could I more fittingly confide it than to him who sacrificed his love to mine?"

But one day more, and Mademoiselle de la Pincerie would become Robineau’s wife. All the documents were ready, the gifts were purchased, the dresses prepared. The wedding was to take place at the town; and the husband and wife were to return thence to the château, where the wedding feast would be spread. It would have been more in accordance with custom that the bride’s family should return to their own house in the town, and that the groom should go thither to fetch his wife. But among his economical plans, the marquis numbered a determination never to keep house again, but to live always at his son-in-law’s château. That is why all the family had remained there. As the marquis declared that only the lower orders danced on their wedding-day, it was agreed that there should be no ball, and no dancing at the château; but Robineau had obtained from his future father-in-law a promise not to play whist that evening.

Nearly an hour had elapsed since all the guests in the château had separated in search of repose. Robineau, who had persuaded himself that he was very much in love, and who deemed himself highly honored to enter the family of a marquis, reflected that on the following day he was to lead the superb Cornélie to the altar, that the whole town would probably go to church to witness the ceremony, and that the wedding would be talked about for a long time. Cornélie thought of nothing but the two dresses that she was to wear that day, and the anger which all the young ladies would feel who had flattered themselves that they would be Robineau’s choice.

She remembered too that she was about to be the lady and mistress at the château, and she proposed to make the most of the privileges which those titles conferred upon her.

Edouard gave but little thought to the marriage which was in preparation. All his ideas, all his affections were centered in the little valley which contained Isaure and the White House, and he had too much to think about to make sleep easy for him. The marquis and his brother Mignon were already sound asleep; the former dreaming that he had invented a way of bringing up children on vapor; the other that he was looking for pins in a haystack. As for Alfred and Eudoxie, I cannot tell you positively what they were doing.

But suddenly shrieks were heard in the part of the building occupied by the servants. It was Benoît’s voice, waking the scullions, the cook and the concierge. He called them in great haste, shouting as loud as his fright allowed him to do:

"Get up! Look at the tower! Look over there! It’s the ghost! This time they’re not likely to say that I see double!"

Mademoiselle Cheval had gone to her window; she saw a light in one of the windows of the abandoned tower, whereupon she added her shrieks to Benoît’s.

"It is true!" she cried; "there is something there; perhaps it’s a thief; that light ought to be arrested!"

All the servants were soon on their feet; and as Monsieur de la Roche-Noire had told them that he would discharge them all if they did not discover what it was that had frightened them, they thought that they had better wake their master and let him see what was taking place. So they ran to the large gallery on the first floor, on which the chief apartments opened. The shouts of the servants woke Robineau with a start. He thought that the château was on fire; so he rang for François, and his first words when he appeared were:

"Firemen! firemen!"

"Firemen for the ghost, monsieur?" asked François in surprise.

"The ghost!" cried Robineau, putting his legs back into bed. "What! has anyone seen anything horrible?"

"We’ve seen a light in the North Tower, monsieur!"

"A light! the deuce! Go at once, François, and wake the gentlemen. Wake everybody! I will get up at once."

François went to Alfred’s door and knocked, but no one answered. Soon, however, all the other doors opened except Eudoxie’s. Edouard had drawn on his trousers, and came out to inquire the cause of the uproar. Cornélie, in a dressing jacket, over which she had hastily thrown a large silk shawl, appeared, with a candle in her hand. Monsieur Férulus also arrived, followed by Jeannette, whom no one had seen heretofore, and who had put on over her night-dress an old black waistcoat, which in no wise resembled a dressing jacket; while Monsieur Férulus, in his haste, had put on a housemaid’s cap; but everybody was too much engrossed to notice that. Everybody questioned everybody else.

"It’s the ghost in the tower!" said all the servants, while Mademoiselle Cornélie did not cease to call her sister, saying:

"And Monsieur Alfred, too—why doesn’t he get up?"

Robineau appeared in a pair of drawers in the waistband of which he had thrust a pair of pistols, while he had his gun under his left arm and a razor in his right hand.

At last Eudoxie partly opened her door, saying in a low voice:

"Why do you knock so at my door? It is a shame to wake me so suddenly! This will make me ill for a fortnight! I certainly shan’t go roaming about after the ghost! Let me sleep, I beg you; I have a sick headache."

"You shall have your sick headache some other night, sister," said Cornélie; "but as everybody else is up, you might as well do like the rest."

Eudoxie showed much temper, but finally came out of her room, half covered by a pelisse which she had thrown over her shoulders, and taking pains to stand in front of her door.

At that moment all the servants began to shriek at the top of their voices:

"There it is! It's coming here!" they cried. And they ran to the other end of the gallery, pushing and jostling one another, while from the opposite direction advanced majestically a tall white figure, which was no other than Monsieur le Marquis de la Pincerie, who, with his tall, thin form, his fluttering night-shirt and his nightcap, might very well pass for a spectre.

Robineau had already taken aim at his future father-in-law, when he was recognized by his familiar cough.

"It is monsieur le marquis!" cried Robineau; "I believe that these fellows have become idiots."

"Certainly, it is I," said Monsieur de la Pincerie, stalking as proudly in his night-shirt as if he were in full uniform. "What has happened, in heaven's name? Has anybody made an attack on the château?"

"Yes, what is it all about?" asked Alfred, who, in the midst of the uproar caused by the arrival of the marquis, had suddenly appeared among the company, no one knew whence.

"Ah, there you are, monsieur!" said Cornélie, with a sarcastic air. "For a gallant man, you are very slow in coming to the assistance of ladies."

"Because, mademoiselle, I thought that before all else, I ought at least to put on the necessary clothing."

"Yes," said Monsieur Férulus, stepping forward, "decency and good morals before everything,——"

Férulus did not finish his sentence, for he suddenly noticed that Jeannette was wearing an easily recognizable waistcoat. He led her into a dark corner of the gallery, and there while Jeannette removed his cap, he hastily took off the waistcoat, saying:

"*Errare humanum est*, Jeannette."

"But after all, what is the cause of all this shouting and uproar?" said Edouard.

"It's the ghost, the spirit, walking in the tower at this time of night!" said Benoît.

"We all of us saw a light," said the servants.

"Well," said Alfred, "we must go and examine the tower, that's all."

"That is so," said Robineau, "we must send all these cowards to examine the tower."

"Where is my Uncle Mignon?" asked Cornélie; "he is the only one who isn't up."

"He absolutely refused to get out from under his bedclothes," said the marquis; "I told him to get up, but it was in vain. He never showed so much resolution before."

"Let us leave Monsieur Mignon under his bedclothes," said Edouard, "and let us go to the tower. Come, concierge, you know the way,—guide us."

Monsieur Cunette was no longer so incredulous since he had seen the light; he displayed much disinclination to guide the young men; and the other servants were no more anxious than he to accompany them to the tower.

"But, messieurs, who is going to take care of us?" said Eudoxie; "for we certainly are not going to examine that horrible tower with you."

"For my part, I am going back to bed," said the marquis; "for I feel a cold wind which makes me shiver, and if I had known that all this fuss was about a ghost, I would have done just as Mignon has—I would have remained in my bed."

"Mesdames, I will stay and take care of you," said Robineau; "I will not stir from your side; I refuse to leave you for an instant."

The ladies did not seem very much reassured by Robineau's presence, and they absolutely insisted that Alfred or Edouard should remain with them also. But the former had already started, compelling the concierge to walk in front of him; so that Edouard was obliged to remain with the ladies, while Robineau said to the other servants:

"Follow Alfred, and at the slightest danger call me. It is very disagreeable not to be able to sleep in peace on the eve of one's wedding!"

The servants bowed obediently, but when they reached the end of the gallery, they turned toward the kitchen instead of toward the tower.

Meanwhile, Alfred, carrying a torch in one hand and in the other a pistol which he had taken from Robineau, went with Cunette down the stairs which led to the door of the tower.

"Come, open this door," he said to the concierge.

"Open this door? Does monsieur really mean to go in there?"

"To be sure I do."

"You see there's only two of us, monsieur; those other cowards didn't come with us."

"We two are enough to arrest a thief, if there really is one in this building."

"But suppose there's more than one, monsieur?"

"Then we could call for help."

"Yes, but before anyone could come to our help——"

"Open the door, Monsieur Cunette, I say!"

"I can't find the key, monsieur; I must have left it in my room."

Alfred, losing his patience, dealt the old door a violent kick; it gave way and flew open, to the great surprise of the concierge. While the latter made his reflections thereupon, Alfred ascended the winding staircase; and when Cunette saw that the young man had gone up without him, he, instead of following him, went back to his comrades.

Alfred entered the old apartments on the first floor; he found no one there, and everything was in the same order as when he had visited the tower with Robineau. On leaving the first floor, he found that the concierge had left him; he pursued his investigations none the less, and went up to the floor above; finding no one there either, he went still higher up, and was about to enter the room called the arsenal, when he distinctly heard someone therein. He stopped, cocked his pistol, and listened; the noise had ceased. He abruptly opened the door of that room, which was

as dark as night; but he fancied that he could see some one, absolutely still, in one corner. He walked toward that object, holding his light before him, and soon recognized the vagabond, seated tranquilly in an old armchair.

Alfred started back in surprise, and the stranger smiled, saying:

"You hardly expected to find me here, did you?"

"That is true," said Alfred, setting his candle down near him. "But what are you doing in this tower? How did you get into this château at night? Why have you come here? Answer me, and do not try to deceive me."

"What am I doing in this tower? Why, you see: I am resting. How did I get in? Oh! quite simply, through the door; for I have not the faculty of passing through keyholes, as the imbeciles in this château think. What I have come here for to-day is to see you, to whom I wished to speak secretly; and as I never meet you now in the mountains, because you never leave the château, I had no choice but to come here to see you; and it was my intention to tap lightly at the door of your room to-night."

The placidity, the perfect coolness with which the stranger answered Alfred, added to the latter's surprise; he could not imagine that a malefactor, a man who had come there with the purpose of committing theft, would speak to him so calmly; moreover, there was nothing in the tower to tempt the cupidity of a thief; and he remembered that the man before him had not long before refused a purse which he had offered him.

The stranger, apparently divining the young man's thoughts, said:

"You cannot imagine that I have come into this château for the purpose of committing theft. Since you have been living here with the new owner there have been very few nights that I have not come into this tower to rest; but I have never wished or attempted to go into any other part of the château, which, however, it would have been very easy for me to do. No, this place alone attracts me; it recalls memories of my childhood. I used to live in this château, in the time of the old dowager of whom you have heard. I noticed that no one lived in this tower, that it was altogether deserted, and I saw no great harm in coming sometimes at night to seek shelter within these walls, where I used to sleep so soundly long ago."

The stranger's speech had become slow and melancholy as he said these last words; and, apparently engrossed by the memories which that old room in which he sat aroused in his mind, he glanced about at the walls, blackened by time, at the armor eaten by rust, which could still be seen in some of the corners. A sigh escaped from his breast, his eyes were moist; all his features expressed misery in the present and regret for the past.

Alfred could not avoid a secret thrill of emotion at the demeanor of that strange man.

"But," he said after a moment, "how do you get into the château?"

"Oh! that is very simple; near the little summerhouse in the garden, behind the statue of Mars, there is a little gate which has all the appearance of being condemned, because no one uses it; it happens that I still have the key to this gate, which opens into the fields. That is the way that I get into the garden; and from the garden it is not difficult to come here by following the main path, then the terrace; and without entering by the door you opened, one can go through the cellars and up to the ground floor."

"I see that you know the château perfectly, better, I am inclined to think, than the man who has bought it."

"In my childhood I have so often run through these corridors, these secret passages! In those days I was romantic, too. This Gothic château seemed to me well suited to the marvelous adventures of the days of chivalry; and I should have been overjoyed to meet a phantom in the vaults of this tower; but I never had that pleasure."

"But you must have expected to be seen, walking about with a light through these rooms?"

"There have been only two nights that I have lighted this little lantern with my flint and steel; I supposed that everybody in the château was asleep, and that they would not see the light in this tower. I could not resist the desire to see, to examine once more various things which I formerly—which were used long ago by the persons who lived in this château; and as there is not always a moon, you will agree that it would have been rather difficult to have gratified my curiosity without a light."

"Do you know that if anyone but myself had fallen in with you by night, you would have been arrested, imprisoned perhaps?"

"When one has reached the point where I am, what more has one to fear? Besides, I knew very well that no one in this château, except you and your friend, would be tempted to come to this tower at night; and indeed, if I had chosen to drive them all from the château, I should only have had to walk in the direction of the inhabited apartments at night with a sheet over my head; I will answer for it that the present owner would have been the first to take flight; but, I say again, I have never intended to frighten anybody, or to take anything from anybody; if I did frighten the old gardener once, I did it unintentionally; I did not expect to meet him in the garden so late."

"I believe you," said Alfred. "But let us come to what concerns me; you say that it is I whom you came here to see to-night. What have you to say to me? Speak."

The stranger's features lost the expression which his memories of the past had seemed to inspire, and resumed that which they ordinarily wore.

"Yes," he replied, smiling sarcastically, "let us come to that subject; the present should be more important than all that has gone by, and can never return. It seems that, when you gave up to your friend the woman who had fascinated you, you altogether renounced the conquest of the little goatherd, as you no longer go to see her."

"What does it matter to you? Do I owe you an account of my sentiments? If you desire to speak to me with the purpose of renewing your hateful proposals, you are wasting your time; and I forbid you——"

"La! la! calm yourself, monsieur le baron! Oh! I have no desire to argue with you; but I should be very glad to convince you that I was not mistaken in the judgment I expressed concerning the girl whose innocence you feared to sully. A poor Agnes! who desires to induce your friend to marry her! I knew that there was something underneath it all."

"What more do you know about Isaure? Explain yourself."

"Her friend has arrived."

"Her friend?"

"Yes; or, at all events, the man who takes care of her, call him what you please. I was very certain, for my own part, that these dull-witted peasants could not have taught the girl the pretty manners which fascinated you. And

then, the education which she has received, her marked ease of manner,—all that could come only from a man who loves her, and who, doubtless from jealousy, keeps her concealed among these mountains, where he hopes his treasure will not be discovered. Well, I tell you again, that man arrived this evening."

"Did you see him at Isaure's house?"

"At her house? Oh, no! He is prudent; he does not go to the girl's house; he is doubtless afraid of compromising her or of meeting people there; and from the precautions which this mysterious personage takes, it is easy to judge that he is terribly afraid of being seen."

"Go on."

"Well, the White House is the place where they meet."

"The White House?"

"Yes; I do not know whether this stranger is the owner; but what is certain is that he has the keys. He evidently arrived there this evening, and soon a little light shone at one of the windows of the house. Instantly the girl, who had been on the watch for some time, hurriedly left her cottage, and ran at full speed to the White House; a man, whom I saw very plainly, for I was hidden near by, opened the door, and the girl went in. What they did then, I cannot tell you precisely; but, not for a full hour did the door open again, and the young girl came out and returned to her own house, after an affectionate parting from the man she left behind. So all the mystery is cleared up! Now we know the perfectly natural cause of that which frightens the mountaineers in the neighborhood! We know, in short, why the girl was the only one who had no fear of the White House! It is almost always so; a lot of noise for nothing; marvelous happenings, which are nothing out of the common when examined at close quarters."

Alfred had listened attentively to the vagabond. He had much difficulty in believing that Isaure, who had seemed so artless and frank, could have deceived them to that extent.

"Are you perfectly certain of all you have told me?" he said at last, gazing fixedly at the man before him.

"If you don't believe me, assure yourself of it. It is not probable that the man I saw has come into this part of the country for a single day. Your eyes will satisfy you that I have told you the truth; and you will regret perhaps that you did not follow my advice; you will be sorry that you stood on so much ceremony with a little sly-boots who laughed at you and your friend; but, I say again that, whenever you please, it will be easy enough to make up for lost time."

As he spoke, the stranger took his little lantern; and, leaving the room by a secret door, he disappeared before Alfred, who was lost in thought, had noticed his absence. Not till some minutes later did young De Marcey, happening to look up, discover that he was alone in the tower. Then he reflected that the people in the château must be surprised, and perhaps anxious, at his non-return. He would have been glad to talk further with the stranger, and especially to forbid him to come again at night to the château; but the man was no longer there, and Alfred decided to leave the tower.

The whole party was assembled in Cornélie's apartment; the ladies were anxious; Edouard desired to go in search of Alfred, Monsieur Férulus quoted divers authors who denied the existence of ghosts, and Robineau still held his razor in his hand, repeating:

"A wedding-eve! It is very cruel to fatigue oneself so at such a time, is it not, my dear bride?"

The bride did not reply, but made a slight grimace, and Robineau said to himself:

"She does not like equivocal remarks; she is chastity personified."

At last Alfred returned, and they overwhelmed him with questions.

"Was there anybody there?"

"Was it a ghost?"

"Was it a thief?"

"Was it very terrible?"

"It was nothing at all," Alfred replied; "I found the tower empty, and everything in its place. The result is, we must conclude that the light that was seen was but the reflection of the moon on the window panes."

"But there is no moon to-night, my dear fellow," said Robineau.

"No? In that case, it was anything you please; but, I assure you, mesdames, that you may sleep in peace, and that no evil spirit will come to disturb you."

They were fain to be content with what Alfred said; they noticed, however, that he was much less cheerful than before he went to the tower; but he persisted in saying that he had seen nothing, and they decided at last to return to bed,—Eudoxie complaining because she had been awakened for nothing, Cornélie looking after Alfred to make sure that he returned to his room, Alfred glancing sadly at Edouard, uncertain whether or not to tell him what he had heard from the vagabond, and Robineau brandishing his razor, as if he had sworn to shave all the ghosts in the château.

XXV

ROBINEAU'S MARRIAGE

Alfred reflected all the rest of the night upon what the vagabond had told him; he did not know whether he ought to disturb Edouard's happiness by telling him what he had learned concerning Isaure's conduct. Before dealing him so terrible a blow, before letting loose in his heart all the demons of jealousy, was it not his duty to assure himself of the truth? Alfred determined not to allow Edouard to form any indissoluble bond until he had solved the mystery; but he did not feel as yet the courage to afflict his friend. Moreover, that day they would be too busy with Robineau's wedding to have opportunity to talk together alone.

Edouard himself had had to make a great sacrifice that day: he was not to visit Isaure, for Robineau had entreated him not to leave the château; he had selected him to escort his sister-in-law, for the order of the ceremony had been arranged long before. Robineau desired that everybody should be present; and even then he thought that there

would not be enough witnesses of his good fortune. Edouard felt that it would be discourteous to his host to refuse to comply with his wishes; so that he would be all day without seeing Isaure. That day would seem very, very long to him! But, when one goes into society, one must often sacrifice to it one's dearest pleasures.

At ten o'clock, the whole company was to assemble for breakfast, to which were invited as witnesses the Chevalier de Tantignac, Monsieur Berlingue, and an old annuitant, a friend of the marquis. The three carriages at the château, that is to say, the post-chaise, Robineau's char-à-bancs, and the marquis's chariot, were to take the company to the town, where the ceremony would take place; then they were to return to the château, where only a few persons were invited to dinner; and there would be no dancing in the evening, it being too vulgar.

The servants had donned their fine livery; Monsieur Férulus had had the metal buttons sewn on his coat, and he had a piece of poetry in each pocket. Robineau was in black from head to foot; he held himself very stiffly and did not laugh; because his father-in-law, the marquis, had told him that one could not have too solemn an expression on his wedding-day; lastly, Uncle Mignon had laid in a stock of pins, which he had concealed under the cuffs of his coat, because he thought that on a wedding-day there would inevitably be something that would need to be pinned.

The three guests had arrived. Alfred and Edouard, who had sacrificed their day, would have been glad to infuse a little merriment into the occasion; but Monsieur de la Pincerie, who had joined them in the salon, seemed to wear an even more disagreeable expression than usual; and Robineau, to imitate his father-in-law, assumed a melancholy or sentimental air. They exchanged a few complimentary remarks in such a serious tone that they seemed to have come together to follow a hearse. However, Monsieur Berlingue had already uttered some spiteful remarks in a low tone, and the chevalier had relieved himself of a few falsehoods, when the ladies appeared at last.

Cornélie wore a very elaborate dress; and although she did not seem by her expression to be seeking to attract homage, she deserved a great deal. At sight of her, Robineau stepped back and grasped Alfred by the arm, exclaiming:

"Mon Dieu! how dazzling she is!"

The witnesses echoed his words. Monsieur de la Pincerie stepped forward to take his daughter's arm; then, leading her toward Robineau, he said to him in a majestic and almost threatening tone:

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, I bestow upon you a most magnificent young lady, perfectly well-bred, and the descendant of an illustrious family. I flatter myself that you will render yourself worthy of the honor of this alliance. But if I should learn that my daughter was not happy, that she had reason to complain of her husband! Corbleu! Monsieur de la Roche-Noire, then I should have something to say to you!"

"She shall be happy, my dear father-in-law, she shall be happy, and so shall I too, I flatter myself!" cried Robineau, who seemed to be afraid of being whipped if he were not good. "But breakfast is awaiting us, and all our moments are occupied."

They adjourned to the breakfast table. Eudoxie, who was determined that some attention should be paid to her as well, had a slight attack of hysteria while they were eating the cutlets; but it amounted to nothing, and she warned the guests that she might have several during the day, because a marriage ceremony caused her the greatest emotion. The gentlemen, whose appetites were not taken away by this accident, encouraged her by telling her that they were well provided with flasks. Monsieur Berlingue, who had nothing in his, filled it with water; but he declared that that would produce the same effect as ether; and the Chevalier de Tantignac exhibited a small phial carefully bestowed in a leather case, with the contents of which he claimed to have restored more than twenty people to life.

Toward the end of the breakfast, Monsieur Férulus pulled a huge roll of paper from his pocket and was preparing to read, when monsieur le marquis said in a solemn tone:

"It is time to start for the town."

Monsieur Férulus pocketed his poetry again. Everybody rose; Robineau, who dared not offer his hand to his future bride, before whom he constantly kept his eyes on the floor, for fear of being dazzled too much, allowed Edouard to escort Cornélie to the chariot, in which he took his place with her, her father and her sister. Alfred and the three witnesses took the char-à-bancs; and Robineau entered the post-chaise with Uncle Mignon and Monsieur Férulus, who, as soon as he was seated in the carriage, began to rehearse his poetry, to which only Mignon listened, scratching his nose and showing his teeth the while.

But the post-chaise was drawn by the lame horse, and could not keep up with the other two carriages, which went quite fast. When Robineau could no longer see the marquis's chariot in front of him, he cried:

"Ah! Mon Dieu! I shall be late; my bride will have to wait for me, and that will be very disagreeable!"

"Monseigneur," said Férulus, "you may be sure that the ceremony will not begin without you."

"Of course not; but monsieur le marquis will scold me."

"It is not our fault if our horse will not go any faster."

"That is true; Uncle Mignon, you are a witness that it is the horse's fault."

"Yes, yes, yes!" replied Mignon; "oh, yes! it is the horse."

"This wretched beast isn't going to be married," said Robineau, lashing the poor creature with all his might.

"Perhaps if he were, he would go still lamer," said Férulus in an undertone.

"Ah! one's wedding-day is a great day, messieurs!" said Robineau with a sigh.

"It is a day which serves as a memento, monseigneur.—*Est pater ille quem nuptiæ demonstrant*."

"Yes, yes, yes!" assented Mignon with a smile.

"I confess," continued Robineau, "that I thought myself stronger, more stoical; but it is true that my bride is so ravishing—it upsets me so—I am all of a tremble.—I beg pardon, messieurs, but let us stop a moment, if you please."

He stopped the horse, which asked nothing better. Then he alighted and stepped a hedge, while Monsieur Férulus observed:

"'*Homo sum et humani a me nihil alienum puto!*'"

Robineau returned; they started off again, and he lashed the horse as before. Férulus tried to continue his declamation, but Robineau stopped him, saying:

"Later, my dear librarian; at dinner; I am in no condition to listen to you now. Love and happiness produce a peculiar effect upon my senses! You don't know what that is; you have never married, perhaps?"

"I beg your pardon, monseigneur; I was married once, and I have had enough of it."

"And you, Uncle Mignon, were you ever married?"

"I! no, I don't think so. Oh, no! no! that has never happened to me."

"Ah! when one has a heart so easily touched as mine, it produces a complete revolution. My bride is a perfect Venus, she is built like Minerva; and when I think that to-night—I beg pardon—let us stop again, if you please."

They stopped; Robineau alighted once more and glided behind a clump of trees. Monsieur Férulus took a pinch of snuff, and cried:

"'*Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret!*'"

Robineau soon reappeared; they drove on, and tried to make up for lost time by whipping the horse; but he went none the faster for it, and the bridegroom was in despair.

"Monsieur le marquis will be terribly angry," he said; "I am sure that they are at the mayor's office already, and are waiting for us. Messieurs, you are my witnesses that it is the horse's fault."

"There is another cause, too," said Férulus to Mignon, "but we will not mention that."

They were within a fourth of a league of Saint-Amand, when Robineau called another halt and alighted again, crying out:

"This is really cruel! I don't know what it means!"

"Courage, monsieur!" said Férulus: "'*Labor improbus omnia vincit!*'"

"What on earth is the matter with him that he has to get out so often?" Mignon asked Férulus when Robineau was out of hearing.

"The matter with him! Why, haven't you guessed yet? Parbleu! he has a *bilis suffusio!* he says it's the effect of love. At all events, if it lasts twenty-four hours, it will put him in a very false position!"

Robineau returned, reëntered the carriage and they reached the town at last. The bridegroom inquired for his father-in-law's chariot, and was told that for more than half an hour, the bride, her relatives, and the whole company had been waiting for him at the mayor's office, and that they had already sent back two messengers to find out what could have become of him.

Robineau drove toward the mayor's office, lashing his horse and crying:

"What will they say to me? perhaps monsieur le marquis feels insulted! And my bride! suppose that she should be angry with me! fortunately my friends are with her."

They arrived at the mayor's office. The marquis was pacing the main hall with an angry expression; the young men were chatting with the ladies; Monsieur Berlingue had already made several epigrams upon the bridegroom's delay; the old annuitant did not utter a word, he saw in the future only the repast that he was to enjoy; and the Chevalier de Tantignac observed, to pacify Monsieur de la Pincerie:

"At the wedding of a cousin of mine, the bridegroom kept us waiting five minutes only; but when he arrived his betrothed had married another man, to teach him to be more prompt in the future."

But Robineau appeared, followed by his two companions.

"Monsieur de la Roche-Noire," cried the marquis, tapping the floor with his cane, "do you know that it isn't decent to keep people like us waiting?"

"My dear father-in-law, it isn't——"

"Whom do you think you are marrying? Do you imagine that you are marrying a mere plebeian?"

"No, certainly not, monsieur le marquis; but I——"

"But you deserve that I should not bestow my daughter's hand upon you, to teach you to keep us baying at the moon for an hour."

"My most honored father-in-law, here are my witnesses. Ask your brother and Monsieur Férulus, and they will tell you that if I did not arrive earlier it was not for lack of desire to do so."

"That is very true," said Férulus; "it was not the desire that was lacking."

"It was our horse's fault entirely," continued Robineau; "it was he who defeated our impatience."

"Yes, yes," said Mignon, "it was the horse and—a *bilis suffu*——"

Robineau trod upon Mignon's foot, and bruised two corns, to keep him quiet; on the contrary, it made him shriek like one possessed; but nobody listened to him, and they proceeded to the civil ceremonies, during which the bridegroom seemed decidedly ill at ease, which condition was attributed to excitement and joy. Then they left the mayor's office and reëntered the carriages to go to the church, although it was only two steps away; but it would not have been seemly to have arrived there on foot. But the bridegroom did not enter his carriage; he disappeared on leaving the mayor's office, and they arrived at the church without him. There monsieur le marquis noticed that his son-in-law was absent again, and as the church was filled with people, and as in a small town a wedding is a great event, Monsieur de la Pincerie was furious with Robineau, who had spoiled the triumphal entry, and compelled the ceremony to be suspended.

"Where is he, where is he now?" cried the marquis, while Cornélie glanced over the crowd, saying:

"Why, this is inconceivable! it is absolutely indecent! to keep us waiting twice in succession! If the affair had not gone so far, I would break it all off!"

"Why did you leave him?" Monsieur de la Pincerie asked his brother Mignon and Férulus.

"We did not leave him, it was he who left us, saying: 'Go on, I will overtake you.'"

"But what the deuce can he have to do at the very moment of his wedding?"

Mignon scratched his nose and Férulus compressed his lips.

"Love has turned his brain," said Alfred.

"Monsieur, the proprieties and etiquette should go before love. Corbleu! If I had not formed the plan of marrying my daughter—But he doesn't come! he cannot say this time that it was the horse that detained him."

At last Robineau appeared, flushed and perspiring and gasping for breath; he glided to the side of his bride and his

father-in-law; the latter seized his hand and squeezed it fiercely, saying in his ear:

"Monsieur, you will give me satisfaction after the ceremony."

Robineau no longer knew where he was; luckily for him, the contracting parties were summoned to the altar. He walked thither with Cornélie; the ceremony began, and while it was in progress, Monsieur de la Pincerie, who had become calmer, reflected that it would not be proper to challenge his son-in-law on the very day of his wedding.

The ceremony was at an end. Cornélie had become Madame de la Roche-Noire, and Robineau had ceased to be a bachelor. They received the compliments, the congratulations, sincere or insincere, of the persons who had come to witness the nuptial benediction; then they left the town and returned to the château, still in the same order as in the former journey; but Robineau did not stop the carriage once.

It was four o'clock when they reached the château. The ladies went at once to their apartments to change their dresses; for women who go much into society, who attend many fêtes and balls and ceremonies, spend a large part of their life in dressing and undressing.

About a dozen persons who were invited to the dinner soon joined the company already assembled at the château. At each new arrival, monsieur le marquis took Robineau by the hand and went forward to meet those who entered the salon, saying solemnly:

"I present my son-in-law to you."

Thereupon the newcomers would congratulate the marquis, then Robineau, and after looking about to see if there were anyone else to congratulate, would take seats in the salon. But it seemed as if all those people had agreed beforehand not to smile, and as if it were the general opinion in the provinces that it was bad form to be cheerful on a wedding-day. So that it was necessary to try to kill time by talking upon insignificant subjects with people who were able to discuss nothing else. Alfred did what he could to enliven the conversation; but he himself was disturbed, and the remembrance of his experience in the tower occupied his mind more than Robineau's marriage. Edouard, too, tried to make himself agreeable, but he cursed under his breath the length of the day.

Two hours had elapsed since the ladies had gone upstairs, when they finally appeared in the salon. Cornélie's costume was more coquettish than that of the morning, and this time Robineau was so dazzled that he was obliged to sit down for fear that he would be dizzy. The compliments began to circulate anew. During the curtsies and the salutations, Robineau went to a corner of the salon to rub his temples with cologne; then he returned with a somewhat less timid air to his wife, who was attentive to everybody but her husband.

Monsieur Férulus, who had not yet delivered his congratulations to the newly-married pair, because he was waiting until all the company should be assembled, took his place in front of Cornélie, before whom he bowed to the floor, and presented her with a roll of paper tied with pink ribbons, saying:

"Permit me, madame, while adding the incense of my good wishes to the perfume of the congratulations which have already shed fragrance upon your passage, to dedicate to you this trifle, born of your marriage. May Laughter and Sport gambol ever about your couch! and may heaven bestow upon you children, masculine, feminine and neuter, whose tutor I shall be!"

The librarian's offering created a great sensation; the men smiled, the ladies asked one another in undertones what neuter children were; and Robineau, who had gone once more to rub his temples with cologne, seemed to have resolved that he would procreate no others.

Cornélie took the paper with a patronizing air, and then returned it to Férulus, saying:

"You must read it to us at dessert."

The servants having announced that dinner was served, the company passed into the dining-room, marching in time, like Prussian soldiers.

Monsieur de la Pincerie appropriated the great armchair. Cornélie was seated opposite her husband, and Férulus was relegated to the further end of the table, where he was not allowed either to serve or to carve; such was the order of things established by Madame de la Roche-Noire, who did not seem particularly touched by the verses which the scholar had written for her. Monsieur Férulus said nothing; he devoured that affront in secret, and determined to eat, if possible, four times as much as usual. People who endure humiliation in order to enjoy a good dinner always have little courage and much appetite.

The dinner passed off as seriously as all that had gone before. The first course was interrupted only by a slight accident: Monsieur Mignon came near swallowing a pin which had fallen from his sleeve into his plate; but they succeeded in removing it from his throat with small pincers, and tranquillity was soon restored.

Mademoiselle Cheval had surpassed herself; the repast was magnificent. But Robineau ate little; he seemed absent-minded and restless; and when he looked at his wife, he heaved sighs capable of extinguishing the candles. Cornélie had already assumed the manners of the mistress of the house: she issued orders in a tone which announced to the servants that they must walk straight. As they did not intend to dance after dinner, and as it was probable that the evening would be rather tedious, they remained a long time at table. Toward the close of the banquet, the fumes of the wines, which were frequently changed, enlivened the guests a bit. The old annuitant recounted an ancient jest or two in an undertone; the Chevalier de Tantignac declared that he would give half his fortune to be in Robineau's place; and Monsieur Berlingue declared that his fortune was as fabulous as his horse. Robineau drank a great deal, to banish his timidity, and to muster courage to look at his wife; and even Uncle Mignon, who had forgotten his accident, became animated and talked a little; lastly, monsieur le marquis laughed more than once at the jokes which he made, and which he alone understood.

Monsieur Férulus thought that the time had come for him to read his poetry; he looked at Robineau to know whether he should begin; but it was no longer Robineau who gave orders, it was Madame de la Roche-Noire. However, Cornélie herself said:

"Monsieur has, I believe, something to read to us; I trust that it will not be so long as his last ballad."

"I flatter myself, madame, that you will find, on the contrary, that it is too short," replied Férulus, who was not overjoyed at this reference to his last ballad. Then, taking the roll from his pocket, and untying the ribbon, he rose and began:

"Compliment in verse in honor of the union of the newly-married pair."

"It seems to me, monsieur," said the marquis, "that you would have done well to say: the union of Mademoiselle

Cornélie, daughter of the Marquis de la Pincerie, with Monsieur de la Roche-Noire; that would have been more becoming than to say ‘the newly-married pair,’ exactly as if you were talking about Jacquot and Pierrette!"

"My noble father-in-law is right," said Robineau, "I don’t like ‘the newly-married pair.’"

"Monsieur," replied Férulus, dissembling his mortification, "that phrase is strictly grammatical; you will find it in Lhomond, in Wailly, in Boiste, and in all the dictionaries."

"Oh! for heaven’s sake, monsieur, don’t talk about dictionaries!" cried Eudoxie; "it seems to me that to-day you should talk to us of something pleasant and attractive."

"Therefore, madame," continued Férulus, "I have taken for the text of my trifle, this line from Propertius:

"‘Nec domina ulla meo ponet vestigia lecto.’"

"And what may that mean?" said Cornélie; "for it seems to me that you would do better to give us a translation of it."

"Yes," said Robineau, "he is a terrible fellow for that! I have told him a hundred times that I cared for nothing but translations."

"Madame," rejoined Férulus, with an amiable smile, "that means: ‘No other mistress shall disturb my bed.’"

"Mon Dieu! how shocking! how indecent!" cried Eudoxie, hiding her face behind Alfred’s shoulder.

"What, monsieur!" said Cornélie; "you presume to compose such loose verses!"

"Madame, I have the honor to inform you that the author is Propertius, and that——"

"No mistress in his bed!" cried the Marquis de la Pincerie. "Corbleu! I would like to see—Son-in-law, what is the meaning of this allusion?"

"I swear to you, father-in-law, that I have no idea," said Robineau; "I do not understand Monsieur Férulus’s motive in perpetrating such a wretched jest!"

"Monsieur," said Férulus, "I say again that that is the translation of the line, and that——"

"Very well, monsieur, that will do," said Cornélie; "after such a beginning, I do not care to hear any more! If the remainder corresponds with the text, it cannot be repeated to ladies."

"But, madame, allow me to call your attention——"

"No remarks, monsieur," said Monsieur de la Pincerie, rising from his chair as if he proposed to chastise the scholar; "you have been told that your poem is good for nothing. I am inclined to think that you are not here to lay down the law, monsieur!"

Férulus dropped back on his chair, crumpled the paper in his hands and threw it under the table; and, stuffing three macaroons into his mouth at once in his wrath, he narrowly escaped swallowing his tongue. Uncle Mignon, who had drunk more than usual, and had been moving about uneasily on his chair for half an hour, began to laugh.

"I, too, have made up a little ballad for my niece," he said. "It came into my head at the dinner-table. It’s an impromptu."

"Let us hear Mignon’s ballad," said Monsieur de la Pincerie. "The devil! I didn’t know that he wrote poetry.—Sing, Mignon."

Everybody was silent, and Mignon sang, playing with his napkin the while:

"Sois heureuse, ma nièce,
C’est du meilleur de mon âme;
Lorsque j’admire tes yeux,
Turc lure!
Il me semble être à la noce!
Robin turelure lure!"

"Bravo! very good!" cried the marquis; and everybody applauded, laughed and called for an encore. Mignon repeated his verses, and Monsieur de la Pincerie observed:

"There you have the genuine French ballad—after the style of our fathers. They are blank verses, to be sure, but they are none the less agreeable."

Férulus, his discomfiture completed by the success of Monsieur Mignon’s ballad, muttered between his teeth:

"If one of my scholars had written that thing, he would have been whipped every day for a fortnight!"

The company left the table to go to the salon. Férulus alone did not go thither; he went off to bed, saying to himself:

"They needn’t expect me to play whist. I won’t open my door."

But a whist table was made up without the librarian; there was also a game of piquet and one of chess; in fact, the evening passed very quietly, and one might have thought that the host and hostess had been married twenty years.

But Robineau, who had obtained leave not to play, left the salon several times; he still seemed restless and distraught, although, as he looked at his wife, he kept repeating:

"She has never seemed to me so fascinating as she does to-night! My love is becoming more and more passionate."

In one of his excursions from the salon, Robineau went to his apartment, which his wife was to occupy with him thenceforth. It was quite cold, but no fire had been built in the nuptial chamber, and the groom said to himself:

"I am terribly afraid of being cold to-night with my wife; not that—but still, this room should have been warmed."

He left the room and happened to meet Jeannette; thereupon he recalled the stout maiden’s functions; an idea occurred to him, he struck his forehead joyfully and called the servant.

"Jeannette, you will warm the marriage-bed to-night, do you hear?"

"Oh! monsieur wants his bed warmed?"

"Yes, Jeannette, it cannot fail to be very agreeable to both my wife and myself."

"All right, monsieur."

"By the way, Jeannette, just warm it with sugar; that is more refined and it smells very nice."

"With sugar? But, monsieur, you see——"

"Do as I tell you, Jeannette."

Robineau walked away and returned to the salon. Jeannette, when she was alone, scratched her ear, saying to herself:

"Warm his bed with sugar! How can I do that? I don't understand that at all, myself!"

To obtain an explanation, Jeannette, who had seen Férulus go to his room, knocked at his door.

"It's me, monsieur," she said.

"I'm asleep," Férulus replied from his bed.

"But I want you to explain something, monsieur."

"I'm asleep, I tell you! *Retro, Satanas!*"

"But the master wants me to warm his bed with sugar——"

"Warm it with the four spices and leave me in peace."

Unable to obtain any different reply, Jeannette went down to the kitchen, to Mademoiselle Cheval, and said to her:

"Do you know what to do to warm a bed with sugar?"

"Pardine! what a question!" replied the cook; "why, you put sugar in the warming pan. That's all, my girl."

"And monsieur said it smelt good."

"Why, yes; it makes a kind of caramel!"

"Oho! it makes ca-a-ramel! that's funny! I wouldn't have thought that!"

Jeannette procured several lumps of sugar and went up to the nuptial chamber, saying to herself:

"What queer notions these rich people have! never mind, as it's my work, I must obey."

And Jeannette crawled into the nuptial bed, which was surrounded by immense silk curtains; then she proceeded to sweeten her warming pan, saying to herself:

"I must make some caramel for 'em, if they like it!"

The bed prepared for the husband and wife was soft and luxurious, and Jeannette stretched herself out therein with keen enjoyment, thinking that she must warm it thoroughly for her master. But Jeannette had become very tired during the day, having had to dress the ladies and wait at dinner; and as she recalled what she had had to do, while dressing the bride, and the different dishes served at dinner, the buxom damsel yawned, closed her eyes and finally fell asleep in the nuptial bed.

Whist, chess and piquet came to an end; all the strangers took a solemn leave of the bride and groom and left the château. Edouard and Alfred went to their rooms, after wishing a good-night to Robineau, who squeezed their hands as if he were in convulsions. Eudoxie, whose vapors was brought on by the approach of that moment, had long since retired. Monsieur le marquis rose, walked up to Robineau and said in his ear:

"My son-in-law, see that everything goes off all right, I beg."

"Father-in-law, you may rest assured that it shall," replied Robineau, bowing low to Monsieur de la Pincerie.

At last the bridegroom took his bride's hand and retired with her to the nuptial chamber.

They found the room lighted, but they looked upon that circumstance simply as an attention on the part of the servants. It was an enormous room, and the bed, which stood in an alcove, was concealed by the curtains. Before going thither, it was necessary to divest themselves of their garments, which Cornélie proceeded to do with the utmost tranquillity, while Robineau tossed his clothes on the floor in a twinkling and danced about the room, exclaiming:

"I am too happy! I believe I am going to be dizzy!"

"I trust that you are not going to be ill, monsieur!" said Cornélie, "for that would not afford me any amusement whatever."

Robineau made no reply, but rubbed his temples and forehead with eau de Mélisse.

At last Cornélie completed her toilet for the night and walked toward the alcove; but as she was about to draw the curtains aside, she stopped, fell back a step or two, turned pale and said:

"This is very strange!"

"Would you like some eau de Mélisse, too, my dear love?" inquired Robineau, who was at the other end of the room.

"No, monsieur, no—but come here,—walk softly, and listen; it seems to me that I hear someone breathing."

Robineau shuddered; he no longer desired to approach the bed, and his bride was compelled to go to fetch him. When he reached the alcove, he distinctly heard someone there. Thereupon his legs gave way under him and he was obliged to cling to a chair.

"Do you hear?" whispered Cornélie.

"Yes, yes, madame!"

"There is someone hidden here, who seems to be asleep."

"It's the—the ghost from the Tower—come to disturb my bliss."

"Oh! no, monsieur! it's no ghost; but it may very well be a thief!—Go, monsieur, ring, call for help."

"I haven't the strength to move, madame!"

"Bah! what a man you are!"

Cornélie ran to the door, opened it, and rushed from the room, calling for help. When Robineau found that he was alone by the bed, he recovered his strength and ran after his wife, adding his cries to hers.

At the sound of their outcries, those inmates of the château who were not asleep ran to the spot with lights; they were curious to know what caused the bride and groom to shriek so loud. Most of them were half dressed. They found Robineau as pale as death, and Cornélie in an undress in which there was nothing to inspire alarm.

"What's the matter? what is it?" asked Alfred and Edouard; while Monsieur de la Pincerie, who was the last to

appear, strode angrily to Robineau, saying:

"I would like to know why you cause my daughter to shriek like this on the first night after her wedding? I have been married myself; but my wife didn't utter the faintest shriek!"

"Why, it isn't I who made my wife shriek, father-in-law; on the contrary, I am shrieking with her!—But, bring weapons! arm yourselves, quick! there's someone in our bed! I thought of the ghost, but my wife says that it may be a robber."

"Let us see about it," said Alfred; "there are enough of us, we don't need weapons. There can't be a band of brigands in your alcove!"

And Alfred and Edouard went into the room, followed by the husband and wife, the marquis and the servants. When they reached the bed, the young men jerked the curtains aside and disclosed to view Jeannette snoring peacefully, with outstretched legs.

"It's Jeannette!" exclaimed Alfred and Edouard, laughing heartily.

"It's Jeannette!" echoed the others.

"What on earth is this girl doing in your bed, monsieur?" said Cornélie, gazing at Robineau in amazement.

"What, indeed!" said Monsieur de la Pincerie; "this maid-servant asleep in your bed—what does it mean, son-in-law? Corbleu! this has a very evil look——"

"Father-in-law, I swear that I have no idea what it means; I am innocence itself. Wake Jeannette; she must explain to us why she is here."

They shook the stout damsel, who yawned, stretched her arms, rubbed her eyes, and gazed about with a surprised expression, crying:

"Mon Dieu! have I been having a nap?"

"How do you happen to be in this bed?" demanded Cornélie, with a glance at Jeannette that was by no means amiable.

"How! Mon Dieu, madame, I ask your pardon; but it's natural that when I warm your bed——"

"Warm my bed?"

"Didn't you, monsieur, order me to warm your bed?"

"Yes, I admit it," said Robineau, "I thought that my wife would like it; but I didn't tell you to go to bed in order to do it."

"Oh! monsieur, I'll tell you how it is—there ain't any warming pan in the château, and nobody's thought to buy one; in fact, Monsieur Férulus said there wasn't any use of it; he taught me to warm beds like the ancients; in fact, I've been warming his bed with my gravity, as he calls it, every day."

"How shocking!" cried Cornélie; "your great scholar is a scoundrel, monsieur; and I trust that he will leave my house to-morrow."

"I agree with you entirely, madame," said Robineau; "besides, he writes nothing but wretched stuff now."

"He is a villain!" said Monsieur de la Pincerie; "and if I were not almost in my shirt, I would go to him at once and pull his ears!"

"Meanwhile, I certainly shall not sleep in this bed," said Cornélie; "and as the one I have been sleeping in has been taken down, I shall pass the night with my sister."

"But, my dear wife, consider—" began Robineau.

"No, monsieur, my mind is made up; this will teach you not to entertain in your château people who behave in this way."

Cornélie took a candle, and, turning a deaf ear to her husband's remonstrances, went to her sister's room. The marquis approved his daughter's conduct. Jeannette, who had risen from her couch, went away with the other servants.

"*You would have it so!*" said Alfred to Robineau, who, being left alone in the bridal chamber, went to bed, saying to himself:

"After all, perhaps it's better that it should be so for to-night."

XXVI

A NOCTURNAL VISIT TO THE WHITE HOUSE

To recompense himself for a whole day passed without seeing Isaure, Edouard rose with the dawn; and while everybody was asleep in the château, he was already on his way into the mountains. He had told his friend that he would not come to see her for a day, and the girl had answered affectionately: "I shall think all day long of nothing but the next day."

So he urged his horse, in order to be with her the sooner, for he had no doubt that she shared his impatience.

He reached the little valley at last; he fastened his horse and walked toward the cottage. He was surprised to find that Isaure was not at her window to watch for him; it was her habit to sit there every morning; and after a day of separation, should she not desire to see him even sooner?

He knocked at the cottage door; Vaillant barked and soon the door was opened. Isaure appeared before her lover, but she did not rush into his arms; pleasure and love no longer seemed to animate her, and instead of receiving him with the sweet smile to which he was accustomed, she lowered her eyes, as she said sadly:

"Is it you?"

"Yes, it is I," he replied, struck by the change in Isaure's manner. "Didn't you expect me?"

"Oh, yes, I felt sure that you would come."

"What is the matter, Isaure? What has happened to you? What has taken place here in the short time since I left

you? For heaven's sake, answer me."

Isaure seated herself in the living-room, and answered with a sigh:

"Nothing has taken place, nothing has happened to me."

"You are deceiving me, Isaure, you are not the same as usual. This depression, the tears which I still see in your eyes—Do you think that I can misunderstand them? Do you seek to deceive your lover? the man who adores you? Speak, I demand it! I implore you! What is this new mystery? Does it mean that you no longer love me?"

"Oh! I shall always love you," said Isaure, looking up at Edouard, with eyes filled with tears; "yes, always; although I have been told that I was doing wrong, that I was making a great mistake, to love you and to listen to you."

"Who has told you that?" cried Edouard.

"Oh! do not be angry, I implore you. Alas! it would do no good. My friend, forgive me for having inspired love in your heart; it was not my fault; but since I cannot be your wife, since we must renounce all the happiness which we had promised ourselves, forget me. I shall always love you; that will be henceforth my only sentiment, my only thought, my only comfort!"

The tears which flowed from the girl's eyes seemed to bear witness to the sincerity of her grief. But Edouard, intensely excited, sprang to his feet and walked away from her, exclaiming:

"You say that you still love me, and yet you will not be mine! When, forgetting what so many people in society take for their rule of conduct, I determined to give you my name, to call you my wife, to live for you alone, someone forbids you to love me, to listen to me; and instantly you change your manner toward me, instantly you determine to cease to see me, and I must needs renounce my dearest hopes! No, you do not love me; if you shared my love, you would care more for me than for anybody else. But, mademoiselle, what power over you has this person to whom you sacrifice me? It is not your father; you have told me several times that you had no parents. By what right does this person, who keeps out of sight so mysteriously, pretend to separate you from me? Where is this person—whom I would see, know, and speak to?"

"No, no! do not think of it," cried Isaure. "Oh! I beg you, if you still love me, do not try to make that person's acquaintance—he does not wish, has never wished to be known, to be seen."

"*He* does not wish," said Edouard angrily. "Very good! it is a man; you have betrayed yourself!"

"Betrayed myself!" replied Isaure, raising her lovely eyes, streaming with tears, to heaven; "what harm is there in its being a man?"

"Who is this man? What power has he over you?"

"Who he is, I do not myself know; but he has the strongest, the most sacred rights over me—those of gratitude. It is to him that I owe everything."

"That you owe everything! what? were you not adopted and brought up by the honest peasants who lived in this house? Was it not to them alone that you owe gratitude?"

"Oh, no! it was not to them alone. Those good people who lived here loved me dearly, I know; but when they took me into their family, and treated me as their own daughter, they simply obeyed the orders of the man whom I must obey to-day! I am doing wrong even now in telling you all this; he forbade me to do it."

"When a man has only honorable intentions, he does not conceal himself thus, he does not envelop himself with so much mystery; and if this person desires only your happiness, why does he forbid you to love me, to become my wife?"

"Your wife! No, he told me that I could never be any man's wife, that I must not see you any more, must not receive you here; he said also that that would make people think ill of me. Alas! I did not know that it was wrong to love to be with you."

"And you will obey this order, which parts us?"

"I must; do not be angry with me, Edouard. The man who separates us is terribly distressed to make me unhappy, for he is very kind, and he loves me dearly."

"This is too much!" said Edouard, striding angrily from the cottage; "you pity, you love another; and as the reward of my love, to pay me for not acting as so many men would have done in my place, you request me never to come again; ah! I must be a great fool to continue to love you. Adieu! you shall be gratified, you shall see me no more!"

"Edouard! Edouard! do you leave me like this?" cried Isaure, who had followed the young man out of the cottage. But Edouard was no longer listening to her. Beside himself with rage and jealousy, he had remounted his horse, and was galloping back to the château.

The whole party was at that moment assembled in the salon, except Monsieur Férulus, who had received orders to leave the château, with only twenty-four hours in which to make his preparations, and who was then in the library, where he was packing up the volumes which he had brought to the château, and consigning to the devil Monsieur de la Roche-Noire's new wife.

Alfred was with the family in the salon, with his eyes fixed smilingly on Robineau, who seemed more timid than ever with his wife, and more humble with his father-in-law.

Edouard was too excited to go to the salon; he went to his own room and sent word secretly to Alfred to join him there.

Alfred immediately complied with his friend's wish. Edouard's pallor and agitation attracted his attention the moment he caught sight of him; he ran to his side, seized his hand, and pressing it affectionately, said to him:

"What has happened? tell me!"

Edouard could not reply at once, his grief choked his utterance; he tried to speak, but his heart was too full; at last he threw himself into his friend's arms, stammering:

"My dear Alfred, you sacrificed your love for Isaure to me; you desired that I should be happy; you saw my extreme passion for that girl. Well! to reward my love, she refuses to see me again. I must abandon all hope of marrying her. When I forget that she is only a peasant, nameless, penniless, it is she who refuses to be mine!"

"Who told you that?"

"She herself; I left her only a moment ago."

"What reasons does she give you?"

"The obedience which she owes to a man who forbids her to see me again."

"Then I was not misinformed," cried Alfred, after a moment.

"What? what do you mean?"

"Listen! two nights ago, when I went to examine the old tower, I did find someone there—that vagabond whom we have met so often in the mountains; he declared that he had made his way into the château at night for the purpose of speaking to me secretly, and he told me that Isaure was unworthy of your love, that he had been suspicious of her conduct for a long time, and that he had at last acquired the certainty that she went to the White House at night, to see a man who had just arrived there."

"The traitor! She goes to see him at night; and to think that I respected her sincerity, her innocence, and was afraid of offending her delicacy! Ah! my friend, these women! Oh! I am suffocating, I cannot stand it; I have a weight at my heart which oppresses me, which is killing me!"

"Come, come, Edouard, be a man; be yourself; does a woman who betrays us deserve that we should regret her?"

"Ah! my friend, I have not your temperament; but why have you concealed from me what you had learned?"

"I wished to be certain, before causing you pain; I had my reasons for doubting the veracity of the wretch's story, he seemed to take so much delight in slandering that girl; and I fear even now——"

"What! when she herself told me that she would not see me any more, because some insolent villain has forbidden her to? And you think that I will suffer such an outrage? No, I will make this man's acquaintance. I will see my rival, and he shall have my life, or I will have his."

"Calm yourself, Edouard, reflect before——"

"Reflection is useless; I am determined to fight with the man who has stolen Isaure's heart from me."

"Who has stolen it from you! That is not quite fair; consider that it is you rather, who have stolen it from him. This man knew Isaure before you did; if anyone has a right to complain, is it not he?"

"Yes, that man knew Isaure; but before he returned to this place, she loved me—at least she swore that she did; every day she seemed to see me with greater pleasure, to part from me with greater regret. It is only since the return of this unknown protector that she spurns me, that she wishes to see me no more. So you see that it is he who has stolen the woman I love from me, it is he who wrecks my life."

"I see that it is utterly impossible to make a man who is in love listen to reason!"

"My friend, my mind is made up; to-night I shall seek out my rival, and he must give Isaure up to me, or take my life."

"Give Isaure up to you! What! are you still willing to give her your name?"

"I do not know what I am willing to do; my blood is boiling, my head is on fire. Ah! Alfred, may you never know the torments of jealousy! Argue with me no more; I will listen to nothing until I have satisfied my rage. To-night we will go together to the White House. That is where I shall find this man, who surrounds himself with so much mystery. I have relied upon you to go with me, to be my second. However, if you disapprove of my resolution, I will go alone."

"What! I desert you at such a moment! No, my dear Edouard, I will go with you. I shall take my pistols; do you take your weapons too. We will leave the château on foot, at eight o'clock; we shall be there at ten, which is early enough. Now let me return to the salon."

"Make my apologies for not appearing; say that I am indisposed; it would be impossible for me to be with people now in whose presence I must constrain myself."

Alfred pressed his friend's hand and did not insist upon remaining with him; for he knew that in great grief there are times when even words of comfort are unwelcome. He returned to the company and announced that Edouard was not feeling well. The absence of one of the young men, and the depression and absent-mindedness of Alfred did not tend to enliven the dinner on the day following the wedding, during which Robineau, having had the misfortune to say, rubbing his hands: "I flatter myself that I shall not sleep alone to-night!" received a sharp reprimand from Monsieur de la Pincerie concerning the freedom of his manners; and Madame de la Roche-Noire manifested a sulky manner during the rest of the meal.

In the evening, the whist table was prepared; as they no longer had Monsieur Férulus to make a fourth, because he would have been very sorry to do anything agreeable to the marquis during his last evening at the château, they suggested to Alfred that he should take his place; but he announced that he felt tired and would withdraw early. Thereupon Monsieur de la Pincerie took his two daughters into the game, and they played a family bouillotte, at which Mignon considered himself very skilful, because he said "I pass" before looking at his cards. At eight o'clock, leaving Robineau in an altercation with his father-in-law and his wife over a bad play that he had made, Alfred left the salon, went to his room, took his weapons and his cloak, because it was a damp and cold evening, and then joined Edouard, who was impatiently pacing his room, awaiting his friend.

"Here I am," said Alfred.

"Let us go then," replied Edouard shortly, "it is quite time."

"Why are we going on foot?"

"It seems to me that we are less likely to be seen, that they will not hear us coming. Who knows that the man whom I wish to discover may not have spies posted on the road, to give him warning of a surprise?"

"All right, let us go on foot; perhaps the walk and the cool night air will calm you a little."

Edouard did not reply, but took his pistols, put on his cloak, and went downstairs. The two young men bade the concierge open the gate for them, and Alfred put a gold piece in his hand, to bribe him to sit up for their return, which could hardly take place until late at night. They left the château, and by the pale light of the moon, which showed itself at intervals from behind the clouds, they took the road leading into the mountains.

Edouard walked in silence, and at a rapid pace. Alfred dared not interrupt his reflections, but contented himself with glancing from time to time at the cliffs and mountains which surrounded them. That night excursion reminded him of their journey to La Roche-Noire; he thought of their hilarity at that time, and sighed as he reflected how soon the happiness which the future promised had disappeared.

After walking more than a league and a half without stopping, and when they were only a short distance from the

little valley, Alfred said to his friend:

"Let us rest a moment and take breath; perhaps the man whom you seek will not be at the White House so early."

"Very well," said Edouard, "let us rest here."

And he sat down beside Alfred on a boulder. As he continued to sit in silence, Alfred took his hand, and said to him:

"My dear Edouard, you must admit that we are great fools, to take so much trouble for a girl,—a very pretty girl, I admit; but there are so many others whom we do not even know!"

"Alfred, it is possible that this is folly, rank madness; I realize fully that I should do better to forget Isaure, to despise her; but, my dear friend, every day we persevere in things, although we know that we are doing wrong. As I have told you, you do not feel love as I do, and it is very lucky for you! You loved Isaure passionately; but as soon as you made up your mind to sacrifice that love to me, you were able to put her adored image from your thoughts, and you will agree that in a few days it presented itself much less often. I loved Isaure without manifesting it so plainly; but it is a sentiment which will end only with my life. May I not have long to suffer thus!—Come, the time is passing, and I am in haste to arrive."

Edouard rose, they walked on, and in ten minutes went down into the valley. There Edouard was obliged to stop; he was trembling from head to foot, he could hardly breathe, and he was almost forced to lean upon Alfred’s arm to keep himself from falling.

"Wait, wait," he said; "the sight of this place makes me ill. Forgive me, dear Alfred, for all the trouble that I am giving you."

Alfred made no other response than pressing his friend’s hand, and they soon resumed their walk; but they did not notice that the man with the knotted stick, who had stopped a short distance away, was now dogging their footsteps, taking pains to keep constantly in the shadow.

"Let us go first to her house; we will find out if she is still at home," said Edouard.

They walked silently, trying to make as little noise as possible, and soon reached the cottage; they saw a light in the room on the first floor, the window was open, and from a distance they saw Isaure in that room.

"She is there!" said Edouard in a low voice.

"Yes," replied Alfred, "and she is alone."

"She is doing nothing, she seems lost in thought; see how lovely she is still, Alfred!"

"Why, my dear friend, women are not less pretty for being unfaithful. Sometimes they seem even prettier."

"She rises, she walks to Vaillant and pats him; look,—one would say that she was weeping. Ah! my friend, if I did not hold myself back, I should rush in and throw myself at her feet."

"Wait, she is coming to the window; let us hide behind these trees."

Isaure came to the window, and looked at the White House.

"It is there, it is always there that her eyes turn," said Edouard sorrowfully. "Madman that I am! I believed that she was thinking of me."

Ten minutes passed, during which Isaure stood at the window, and the young men, stationed behind some trees, did not lose sight of her or of the White House. At the end of that time, a light appeared in a window of that mysterious house.

"That is the signal that she was waiting for, no doubt," said Edouard.

And, in fact, the girl instantly left the window, disappeared from her room and soon stole softly out of the cottage. Edouard gripped his friend’s arm fiercely; he could not speak, but he followed every movement that Isaure made. She, after locking her door, darted swiftly into the field, and crossing it at a rapid pace, soon reached the entrance to the White House, and glided furtively through the door, which closed behind her.

The young men followed her, watched her enter the house, and stopped a few steps away.

"There is no more doubt," said Edouard in a gloomy voice; "she is there with my rival! Ah! I am going——"

"What are you going to do?" said Alfred, holding Edouard back; "knock at that door? make an uproar? They will not admit you, and besides you will not find out anything more. Would it not be better to wait until she comes out? Perhaps the man who is in there will accompany her; suppose we could see them, hear them, unobserved! There will still be time enough to challenge your rival; as he is here, he cannot escape you."

"Yes, yes, you are right," said Edouard; "let us wait, I will try to be strong enough."

"See, let us take our places under this clump of trees. We shall be just opposite the door, and no one can see us. Come."

Alfred led Edouard under the trees, which were some forty yards from the White House. There they crouched in the darkest spot, and waited in silence until the door opposite them was opened. A quarter of an hour passed in this painful suspense; Edouard was frantic with impatience and jealousy; but the desire to acquire proofs of Isaure’s treachery gave him strength to resist the violent impulses of his heart. Suddenly they heard a slight noise; it did not come from the White House, however, but from behind the young men.

"I heard something," said Edouard.

"Yes, I thought that I did, too."

"Can it be that we are not alone here?"

They looked carefully all about them, but could see no one. At that moment, the moon, coming out from behind the clouds, enabled them to distinguish objects very plainly, and Edouard shuddered as he heard the door open.

"Here they are!" he said.

Isaure came out first; she was followed by a man of tall stature, wrapped in an ample coat, and with a round hat pulled low over his eyes. They stood in the shadow cast by the house, and in a moment the girl said in a sad tone:

"Adieu, my friend; adieu, I will go home. You will not scold me any more, will you? He will not come again; I have told him that I could not receive him any more."

The man who was with Isaure answered too low for them to hear, as he escorted her toward her house. Edouard followed them, keeping out of sight in the shadow, while Alfred remained under the trees, in front of the house, to

cut off the stranger’s retreat.

Soon Isaure and her companion stopped; he took the young girl in his arms and kissed her affectionately. At that sight, Edouard, in a frenzy, started to rush toward them; but Isaure was already tripping lightly toward the cottage, while the other person strode rapidly toward the White House, along the edge of the clump of trees which concealed Alfred from his sight. At that moment, the moon, shining full in the face of the person walking toward him, enabled Alfred to examine him at his ease; and instead of stopping him and preventing him from returning to the White House, Alfred remained absolutely motionless on the spot where he stood. Meanwhile, Edouard hastened after the man with whom he was burning to fight; but he only saw him reënter the house, the door of which closed upon him.

"What!" he said to Alfred, "he passed in front of you and you did not stop him? You did not prevent him from escaping from my wrath? I can no longer doubt Isaure’s perfidy, that man took her in his arms! Ah! he must pay for his good fortune with his life! Yes, if he refuse to open the door, though I have to scale the walls or break the windows, he shall not escape me!"

And Edouard was already rushing toward the house, pistol in hand, when Alfred, rousing himself from the stupor which had taken possession of him, hurried after him, grasped his arm and held him back, crying:

"Edouard, do not think of fighting that man, I implore you! it cannot be!"

"What! not think of revenging myself? Did you come with me for the purpose of talking to me like this? Let me go!"

"No, I entreat you! in the name of our friendship, put down those weapons, which horrify me!"

"What is the meaning of the interest which that man arouses in you? Ah! for my part, I feel that I detest him, that I abhor him! and in his blood——"

"Wretched man, what are you saying?—It is my father!"

"Your father!" cried Edouard, upon whom those words produced the effect of a thunderbolt; while the vagabond, a short distance away, repeated in a hollow voice, "his father"; then strode rapidly away, and disappeared under the trees.

After a silence of several moments, Edouard, who seemed not to recover his wits until then, handed the pistols to Alfred, saying:

"Here, take them, take these weapons away from me! You are right, I cannot fight with him!"

Leaving Edouard no time to change his mind, Alfred took his arm and led him hurriedly away from the White House.

XXVII

THE FAREWELLS AT THE CHÂTEAU

Alfred led his friend into the first road that they came to; his only thought was to take him away from the White House, and from Isaure’s dwelling. The two young men walked a long while at random and without speaking; their hearts were too heavily burdened for them to be able to exchange their thoughts. But, after walking for a considerable distance, with no other object than to escape from the little valley, they stopped, worn out with fatigue and excitement, in a large field. Edouard dropped upon the turf, saying:

"Let us rest here; I feel that I must breathe for a moment."

Alfred seated himself beside his friend. They were both silent again for some time, until at last Edouard said in a trembling voice:

"Are you perfectly sure that that man was your father?"

"My friend, can a son’s eyes be mistaken? Yes, it was certainly he; he was coming toward me, and the moon shone brightly upon his face. I had plenty of time to look at him, to recognize him. Thunderstruck, I stood perfectly motionless, I did not leave the trees which hid me from him; and I thank heaven for it! A son should never compel the author of his days to blush before him. I must no longer seek to discover the motives of my father’s conduct, or the sentiment which he feels for Isaure. Is he not master of his actions? And if he has some weak points, does he not redeem them by a thousand noble qualities? Ah! my dear Edouard, when I think of the ghastly things that might have happened had I not recognized my father,—if the darkness had concealed his features from us both,—I still shudder, my heart stands still! My father, who is so kind, so indulgent to me, whose sole aim is to make me happy, who is a most affectionate friend to me, would be dead by your hands, perhaps, and in his son’s presence!—Ah! believe me, my dear friend, all the griefs of love, all the torments that a woman causes us, will never approach the agony that tears the heart of a son at the thought that he might unconsciously have acted as a second to his father’s murderer!"

"I trust, Alfred, that your mind is at ease now?"

"Yes, I am convinced that you will respect my father; and besides, my dear friend, let us be fair—it is not he who has betrayed you; Isaure alone is guilty; she should not have responded to your love, she should not have given you any hope; but women always yield to their desire to please, without thinking of all that may result from it. In your jealous rage, you wish to fight him who forbids Isaure to see you, to listen to you again! And yet, had he not the right to do it? He has undoubtedly known this girl for a long while.—So this was the motive of those frequent journeys, in which he never proposed that I should accompany him! Yes! oh, yes! he must have been coming to the White House for a long while, a very long while. But a love-affair! I confess that that astonishes me, and I still have difficulty in believing it. Since the death of his second wife, of that Adèle whom he loved so dearly, I have heard him say a hundred times that no woman could touch his heart again. I know very well that men say that, and that that does not prevent it; but I say again that it surprises me. His only mistake was not taking me into his confidence, not saying a word to me of this affair. Am I not his friend, as well as his son? Then we should not have walked in the direction of the White House and made love to the girl, and I should not have been exposed to the risk of becoming my father’s rival! But, since he wishes to conceal this intrigue, let us respect his secret. He has no idea that we are in this neighborhood; I have never had time to write to him, and certainly, if the girl has mentioned an Edouard to him, he will never have suspected that she referred to his son’s friend."

Edouard listened calmly to what Alfred said; he seemed to approve of it all; he was much calmer, for his common sense had made itself heard. The pure, cool night air, the rest which they had taken, had also produced their due effect; their blood circulated more freely, their hearts were less oppressed. The man who abandons himself to all the transports of a jealous frenzy, and dreams of nothing but vengeance, would be much less frantic if he would only walk in the open air for a quarter of an hour. The physical and the mental condition are always dependent upon each other.

After a further silence of a few moments, Edouard said to his friend:

"I do not propose to remain in this country any longer. On the contrary, I am anxious to go away. I shall bid the people at the château adieu to-morrow, and leave Auvergne, where, for the sake of my peace of mind, I ought never to have come!"

"I will go away with you. Indeed, I am beginning to tire of the Château of La Roche-Noire, and of all the original characters it contains. Yes, to-morrow we will make our adieu. We will return to Paris in search of distraction; or, if you prefer, we will take a trip to Switzerland or Italy. I will go with you anywhere. Time and my affection will succeed in banishing painful memories from your mind. Come, give me your hand, Edouard. Believe me, one is never entirely wretched when one has a veritable friend."

The two young men held each other’s hands for a long while, and Edouard promised Alfred to do everything that was in his power to forget Isaure.

"Where are we?" said he, after a moment.

"Faith, I have no idea; we have walked a long while, and I have not paid any attention to the road. I do not recognize the surroundings, and the moon is hidden. As we might very well go astray in these mountains, I think that we shall do better to remain here until daylight; as soon as it is light, we will go back to the château."

Edouard agreed with Alfred; they stretched themselves out on the grass, to seek repose; but sleep did not approach the eyelids of Isaure’s lover, who had always in his thoughts the lovely features of her whom it had become a pleasant habit to love and to see every day.

As soon as the day began to break, the young men rose, and some peasants on their way to work pointed out the way to the château. They arrived there about eight in the morning and met in the courtyard Monsieur Férulus, who had his big steel buttons on his coat, and who carried under his arm a large bundle of books, as on the day that he had come to establish himself at La Roche-Noire.

The scholar had halted in the middle of the courtyard, and was casting a last glance at the window of the room which he had occupied, exclaiming:

"Adieu, Rome! I go!"

On turning about, he saw the two young men, and went toward them with a melancholy expression, then made them a low reverence.

"Where are you going so early in the morning, Monsieur Férulus?" said Alfred.

"I am going away, messieurs; I am leaving this spot forever; I am discharged, deprived of my office! And why? because I taught a young woman to use the warming pan that nature has given her. It was not my fault that there was not any other kind in the château."

"What! has that trouble not been arranged?—But Robineau is a good fellow."

"Since he has married, he has become an absolute nullity. Poor, dear man! He will see some cruel moments! I have not the good fortune to please his excellent wife. She did not consider my verses pretty, or rather, she refused to listen to them.—Messieurs, it is useless to hope for anything from one who does not respect learning! After boring myself to death, playing whist every evening with that insolent La Pincerie and his idiotic brother, this is the way that I am rewarded! *Saturus sum opprobriis!*—and thrown out of doors without even a month’s salary as librarian. But let them find another like me! Madame says that her Uncle Mignon can do perfectly well all that I do here. What blasphemy! But it seems that all the places which the dear uncle was to hold will be reduced to that of servant to his niece.—However, I am carrying the library away under my arm; it belongs to me, it is all my property. I am going to try to start another little school, or to find another Mæcenas, who desires a Virgil to procure him immortality for three hundred francs a year. It seems to me that that is not worth haggling about.—As for this château, you will see, messieurs, that it will soon be pillaged, sold, abandoned; it will crumble to dust, and no one will remember the name of its last owner, and people will seek for La Roche-Noire as they now seek for Babylon, Thebes and Nineveh!"

"We shall not see that, my dear Monsieur Férulus, for we too are about to leave the château."

"You are going to leave, messieurs," said Férulus with a joyous air; "I am delighted to hear it! These people are not worthy of having you for guests! When you and I are gone, I ask you what clever people will remain at the château?—Are you going back to Paris?"

"Perhaps so; we intend to travel a little."

"You do not need an interpreter, do you, in the countries which you propose to visit?"

"No, we know enough to make ourselves known where we shall go."

"You don’t happen to have any children whose education needs to be attended to?"

"No, Monsieur Férulus, not at the moment."

"In that case, messieurs, I will bid you farewell; *vale et me ama.*"

The scholar walked sadly away; the young men would have been glad to induce him to accept their purses, in order to keep from dying of starvation a man who sought only to exalt his fellowmen to immortality; but they did not know how to go about it, for fear of wounding his self-esteem. Meanwhile Férulus, as he moved slowly and regretfully away, dropped a volume from the bundle which he held, and kept on, without noticing the loss he had sustained. Alfred picked up the volume, concealed his purse underneath it, called to the scholar, who instantly stopped, and running after him, placed the book and the purse in his hand, saying:

"Monsieur Férulus, you dropped this book."

"Jehovah! it is Seneca’s treatise on Contempt of Wealth."

"Perhaps you might have missed it."

The ex-librarian instantly closed the hand into which the two articles had been slipped, smiled agreeably at Alfred,

then hurried away as if he were afraid that he might wish to take back what he had just given him.

Alfred and Edouard returned to their apartments and remained there until the hour for breakfast. Then they went to the salon, where the family had assembled. Although he had passed the night with his wife, Robineau seemed no less timid than before with her; but Cornélie hardly took pains to reply to her husband; she scolded each servant in turn, and had already informed her husband that Jeannette, the groom and Monsieur Cunette would speedily follow Monsieur Férulus. Robineau had no time to approve his wife's resolution, because, whenever he attempted to speak, his father-in-law cut him short by saying:

"Son-in-law, allow your wife to do as she pleases, and never thwart her, or by heaven! you will have to deal with me."

The young men informed the company that they were going to leave the château, and Eudoxie said in an undertone:

"It will be very amusing here now! I certainly shall not stay long!"

Madame de la Roche-Noire received this news very coolly; the young men had not seemed sufficiently dazzled by her charms for her to regret them. But Robineau, who was beginning to discover that since he had been married he did not enjoy himself as much as he hoped, exclaimed:

"What! you mean to leave us already? to go away? When, for heaven's sake?"

"This very day," said Alfred.

"To-day! Oh! On my word, I won't—we won't allow it, it will cause my wife much distress. Just a few days more,—it isn't right to go away so abruptly."

"Very well, we won't go until to-morrow," replied Edouard, who had seemed lost in profound thought for some minutes.

"To-morrow it is then," said Alfred, who was surprised, however, that Edouard consented to defer their departure.

The guests soon separated, each to do what pleased him best. Eudoxie doubtless wished that Alfred should pay his last farewells to her, for she asked him for his arm for a walk in the garden; and Cornélie, left alone with Robineau, said to him:

"Why do you presume to keep these gentlemen at the château without finding out whether I would like it?"

"My love, I thought that——"

"Your friends are very agreeable, are they not, to pass all their time travelling about no one knows where, and coming here only to eat? Hereafter, monsieur, I will invite the persons whom I wish to receive."

"Very well, my dear love, if you wish, I will go and tell Alfred and Edouard that they can go at once, that we don't care."

"Another absurd remark! No, monsieur, say nothing, do nothing, meddle in nothing,—that is all I ask of you."

And with that, Cornélie left Robineau, who, when he was alone, stamped the floor viciously, saying:

"I will not thwart her, because this is our honeymoon; but I know that I am master, and that is enough for me."

After walking for a sufficiently long time with Eudoxie, Alfred returned to the château; he arranged everything for his approaching departure and then joined Edouard.

"What was your reason for consenting to defer our departure?" said Alfred; "I supposed that you were in a hurry to leave this region and these mountains."

"Yes, yes, of course," replied Edouard, with some embarrassment; "but before leaving Auvergne, to which I shall never come again, I would like,—you will scold me, Alfred!"

"No; tell me frankly what hope you have."

"I have no hope at all, but I cannot resist the longing to see Isaure once more, to bid her a last farewell!"

"I suspected as much."

"I left her so abruptly, and yet I did not then know all her treachery; but never fear, it is not for the purpose of reproaching her uselessly, that I wish to see her—far from it. I will tell her that I forgive her all the pain that she has caused me, that I hope that she may be happy, that her image will never—Oh, no! I will not tell her that, and yet—Ah! blame me for my weakness, my friend, but I believe that I love her more dearly than ever."

"You mean to go to see Isaure again? Why, how can you think of such a thing? Suppose you should find—suppose you should meet the baron there?"

"I will watch for a moment when she is alone, you know very well that she passes only a little time at the White House; I must see her again, even though I may be able to speak to her but a moment. Remember, Alfred, that it will be the last time."

"Very well, I will go with you. Yes, I will go with you; at all events, I shall be more certain that you will commit no imprudence, and I shall be able to see to it that no one surprises you with her."

"Dear Alfred! how kind you are!"

"I must needs become wise when you make a fool of yourself; each in his turn. I will go and tell the groom to have the horses ready for us to-night, for I do not see the necessity of going on foot again. We will start at the hour when the others go to bed, having alleged our departure to-morrow as an excuse for retiring early.—Edouard, you will take no weapons, I trust?"

"What an idea! Oh, no! I only want to see her, I only want to bid her farewell before leaving this place forever!"

Everything having been agreed upon, the young men returned to the guests. As Férulus had predicted, the dinner was much less merry than usual. Alfred and Edouard had too much to think about to try to keep up the conversation. Eudoxie seemed bored; Monsieur de la Pincerie was in bad humor, because he foresaw that there would no longer be anybody to play whist with him in the evening; Cornélie maintained her haughty air, and hardly spoke; even Mignon himself did not seem very well pleased, because his niece had given him a thousand things to do in the château; lastly, Robineau treated his two friends with extreme coolness, hoping thereby to please his wife.

In the evening, the young men made their farewells.

"It is possible," said Alfred, "that we shall start to-morrow before you ladies have risen."

"As you please, messieurs," said Robineau; "indeed, if it will give you pleasure to go this evening, you may——"

Monsieur de la Roche-Noire did not finish his sentence, because his wife pulled his coat-tail so that she almost tore it. Alfred and Edouard glanced at each other with a smile; and after several hours' conversation, interrupted by frequent yawns on the part of the marquis and by the stifled sighs of Madame de Hautmont, they bade one another farewell and separated.

The young men gave their hosts time to shut themselves up in their rooms; then they went down into the courtyard, found the horses saddled, and bade the concierge open the gate for them, saying to him:

"We shall return in two hours."

"You can return when you please, you will find the gate open," replied Cunette, who was drunk as usual. "The mistress has told me that I could look for another place. So you see I don't propose to bother my head about her gate. I am going to bed, and I will leave everything open; what is planted may come up; I don't care a fig; I don't propose to put myself out."

XXVIII

A CRIME

"We shall have ridden over this country at night quite often," said Alfred, as he trotted beside Edouard. The roads were very bad; the rain which had fallen during the evening had made them soft and slippery; and only by taking great precautions could the two horsemen proceed without accident.

Edouard answered his friend only by heaving a profound sigh. Alfred understood that as Edouard was about to see Isaure for the last time, he was naturally engrossed by his memories and his regrets; and so, respecting his friend's silence and his distress of mind, he rode close beside him, but did not speak to him again.

They had travelled only a third of the distance; a cold rain was falling; Edouard tried to urge his horse, but twice already the animal had nearly fallen. The road had become steep, and they had to resign themselves to go at a walk.

"I believe that we could travel faster on foot," said Edouard impatiently.

"Haven't we time enough?" replied Alfred; "There is no hurry about our returning to the château; and you don't need the whole night to bid Isaure farewell."

"I don't know what the matter is with me, but it seems to me as if I cannot reach her side soon enough. Gloomy thoughts oppress me.—Alfred, do you believe in presentiments?"

"Nonsense! what childish folly! when one has had some trouble, when one has been deceived, betrayed in one's affections, one dreads some new misfortune every instant; we call that having a presentiment, whereas it is simply the result of our frame of mind. Lucky people, those with whom everything succeeds, never have presentiments; and yet unpleasant things sometimes happen to them; but they have never foreseen them, because they don't look at the dark side of things.—This infernal horse! he absolutely insists upon kneeling. François told me that at Clermont, where he went the other day, there were two very good horses for sale; if you would like to travel that way, I will buy them."

Edouard did not reply; he had relapsed into his reflections, and emerged from them only to say in a low voice:

"How dismal and gloomy this night is! what a difference from last night!"

"Yes," said Alfred; "I begin to think that in winter, life in Auvergne is not very hilarious."

"Ah! If she had loved me, as she said; if I might have lived with her, these snow-covered mountains, these glaciers, this wild landscape, would always have been cheerful in my eyes!"

"Come, come, Edouard, be sensible; time will console you. I, too, loved Isaure dearly; oh, yes! I was mad over her; but I succeeded in triumphing over that love."

Edouard made no reply, but he sighed and said to himself: "He was very far from loving her as I do!"

At last they reached the path leading down into the valley; they halted and left their horses at the usual place, then walked toward the cottage. Alfred took Edouard's arm; the latter's excitement doubled as they approached Isaure's abode.

"She is at home!" cried Edouard, as they perceived a light in the window of the first floor. "Ah! my friend, let us stop a moment; my heart is beating so violently. She is in her room! I was so afraid that I should not see her again; I was in despair lest we should not arrive soon enough. Ah! you were right, Alfred; when one is in trouble, one adds to it by one's imagination! But her window is closed; I cannot see her as I could last night. I would like to see her without her knowing that I am here!"

"As you mean to speak to her for the last time, of course she must know that you are here. Shall we not knock? Or do you prefer to call her?"

"I don't know—wait a moment; suppose there was someone with her! Do you see any light in the White House?"

"No."

"How can we make sure that she is alone? Suppose that your father were there? Let us wait; perhaps she will open her window, or will come out to go to the White House."

The young men waited several minutes; Edouard kept his eyes fixed on the window in which the light shone.

"It is very strange," he said at last; "I can see no shadow through the curtains, the light does not move at all, and there is not the slightest sound to indicate that she is there. And yet, in this lonely valley, the least movement can easily be heard. Alfred, there is something absolutely terrifying in this stillness."

"More of your black ideas! For heaven's sake, what do you suppose has happened to her? Are thieves or brigands ever seen in this region?"

"Come, let us go near the house, perhaps we shall hear something."

Alfred followed Edouard; they went close to the door; but the most profound silence continued to reign in Isaure's home.

Suddenly Edouard, struck by a sudden thought, exclaimed:

"Great heavens! here we are standing close against the door, and Vaillant does not bark, although he always divines the presence of a stranger a long distance away!"

"That is strange, in very truth," said Alfred.

"I cannot resist any longer, let us knock."

Edouard knocked on the door, gently at first, then a little louder; but no sound indicated that anyone proposed to admit them.

"Isaure! Isaure! it is I," said Edouard, standing under the window; "I have come to bid you farewell before going away from here. Are you not willing to see me?"

There was no reply. Edouard's distress and excitement were extreme.

"Can it be that she has sworn never to speak to me again, not to listen to me?" he cried; and in his anger he knocked loudly on the door. Thereupon a low groan, a plaintive sound, which seemed to come from behind the house, answered the clamor that Edouard was making.

"Did you hear?" he asked Alfred.

"Yes, I thought——"

"There, listen again; that mournful sound echoed in my heart. Some calamity has happened to Isaure. We must go into this house."

Alfred, who now fully shared Edouard's fears, seconded his efforts to force the door of the cottage. The lock alone held it; that broken, the two young men entered the lower room, where it was pitch dark.

"Let us go upstairs, let us go to her room at once," said Edouard, feeling for the staircase; he found it and ran rapidly up; he soon reached the room where the light was; the door was not locked. Edouard, followed by Alfred, entered the girl's room, but they found it empty, and observed there a disorder which was not natural. The bureau-drawers were open, and several female garments were scattered about the floor; it seemed as if some few things had been taken in haste, and several pieces of money which lay on the floor indicated that someone had also taken possession of the cash contained in that piece of furniture.

"She is not here!" cried Edouard, gazing about him in dismay. "But what is the meaning of this disorder? Has someone taken her away by force? Has she been torn from this house against her will?"

"Come," said Alfred, taking the lamp; "let us search the house, we may perhaps discover some clew. Let us find out first where that noise we heard came from."

They went downstairs, entered every room, called Isaure, and received no answer; but, as they passed near the yard which separated the house from the garden, they heard once more the plaintive moan which had impressed them before. They went into the yard, and traces of blood caught their eyes. Edouard's heart stood still; but in a moment he shuddered with horror as he saw Vaillant lying by the garden gate, wounded in several places, bathed in blood, but trying to drag himself to those whom he recognized as his mistress's friends.

"It is Vaillant! He has been murdered!" cried Edouard. "Ah! some horrible thing has happened, my friend! Brigands, murderers have forced their way into this house! But what have they done with Isaure? They have killed him who tried to defend her, and I was not here! Poor Vaillant! He seems to be asking me where his mistress is. They must have taken her away through the garden. Come! come! Let us continue our search!"

"But Vaillant is not dead," said Alfred; "perhaps these wounds, which seem to have been made by a sword, are not fatal. Shall we leave without assistance the only one who dared to defend his mistress? Poor dog! How he gazes at us! Wait until I bind his wounds. Perhaps your handkerchief and mine will suffice to stop the flow of blood."

Despite his impatience to fly in search of Isaure, Edouard seconded his friend in attending to the needs of the girl's faithful defender. Vaillant was transported gently to his mistress's bed, where he was wrapped in linen. Then the young men went to the garden; they found a small gate opening into the country still open. Blood stains indicated that the dog had followed his mistress thus far, and that Isaure had been taken away in that direction.

Edouard wished to scour the country, to follow the tracks of Isaure's abductors; he flattered himself that he could overtake them, and he asked Alfred for his weapons.

"What do you mean to do now, pray?" asked Alfred. "You have no idea in what direction they have gone! Which way do you propose to go this dark night? Is it not better to wait till daylight?"

"Wait! Why, perhaps even now she may be calling to me for help! Everything seems to indicate that it is not long since this horrible crime was committed. I implore you, Alfred, give me your pistols! What have you to fear? I only wish to restore Isaure to your father. If he had been here, doubtless he would have defended her. Come! come! Let us search these mountains; perhaps there is still time to save her."

Alfred yielded to his friend's entreaties; he gave him one of his pistols, kept the other, and tried to keep up with Edouard, who started across the country at a rapid pace.

The weather was still unpleasant, and it was difficult to distinguish objects at a short distance. Edouard frequently stopped and listened to see whether he could not hear shrieks or footsteps. They had passed the White House, and were going toward Chadrat, Alfred being some yards behind Edouard, when they heard footsteps in front of them. Edouard instantly rushed forward, and before Alfred had time to urge him to be prudent, he found himself face to face with a person whom he abruptly stopped:

"Where are you going? Where have you come from?"

The man whom Edouard had arrested took a step backward, and drawing his arm from beneath his cloak, held a pistol in the young man's face as he retorted in a firm voice:

"By what right do you question me?"

At the sound of that voice so familiar to his heart, Alfred darted in front of Edouard, exclaiming:

"Wretched man! What are you doing? It is my father!"

The Baron de Marcey, for it was he in very truth, uttered a cry of surprise as he recognized his son; while Edouard stood as if rooted to the ground.

"What! you, Alfred? you, in these mountains, at night, and with——"

"Oh! don't be alarmed, father," replied Alfred; "it is Edouard who is with me; and although he did bring you to a halt rather abruptly, you may be sure that we have not become highwaymen! On the contrary, we are on the track of

the abductors of a young girl; and when he saw you, Edouard took you for one of the men we are looking for."

"You, in this country; you, here!" said the baron, unable to recover from his surprise; "and—this girl?"

"Is Isaure!" cried Edouard.

"Isaure! you know Isaure?" rejoined the baron, whose surprise and excitement increased momentarily. "What! then it was you, Edouard, whom she had so much to say to me about?"

"Yes, monsieur, it was I who loved her, who love her still, who wished to give her my hand, and never to part from her again, not knowing that another had a prior right over her, and that that other was Alfred's father! But at this moment, monsieur le baron, let us think only of finding her, of helping her. Her house is empty; Vaillant is pierced with wounds, and everything indicates that Isaure has been abducted from her home."

"Great heaven! the poor child! But she may be in the White House; she may have succeeded in escaping thither. Come, come! we still have that last hope; may it not soon be taken away from us!"

The baron strode rapidly forward; the two young men walked beside him; all three were silent; a single thought, a single desire inspired them at that moment. They soon reached the White House. The baron opened the door and went in first. With the aid of a match he soon struck a light, and all three examined the house and garden; but Isaure was not there.

"How could she have come here in your absence?" said Edouard, looking at the baron with an expression of curiosity.

"She had a key to the garden of this house," replied Monsieur de Marcey; "but let us go to her cottage and see if we cannot find some proof which may help us to discover the authors of this crime!"

They returned to the cottage, they visited and examined every corner; but except in Isaure's bedroom, they found nothing disturbed in the house.

"She has carried away a part of her clothes!" said the baron, who seemed overwhelmed by Isaure's disappearance.

"Can she have gone voluntarily?" cried Edouard.

"Voluntarily!" said Alfred; "does not this wounded dog prove, on the contrary, that someone forced his way into the house to carry Isaure away? The entrance was effected through the garden. Had Isaure any money with her?"

"She may have had some fifty louis," said the baron.

"That money is no longer here," cried Edouard; "so it must have been a robber who came here. But would a robber have taken Isaure away with him?"

They left the house, and were crossing the yard when Alfred spied something that glistened against the wall; he held his light to it and saw at his feet a sword still dripping with blood; it seemed evident that that was the weapon with which Vaillant had been wounded. They at once examined the sword with care. It was a weapon which seemed to be very old, the hilt was broken in several places, and it was impossible to distinguish the characters which had once been carved on the blade, which seemed to be of finely tempered steel.

"Such a weapon cannot have belonged to a thief," said the baron.

The young men agreed with him, and they lost themselves in innumerable conjectures. Suddenly, Alfred exclaimed:

"Stay! something, I don't know what, tells me that that wretch, that vagabond, who is always prowling about these mountains, is not unconnected with this event!"

"What man are you talking about?" asked the baron.

"A villain, whose conduct and speech seem to indicate that he formerly lived in good society. We have not been able to take a step without meeting him; he knew you, father—at least he said he did; and when your name was mentioned before him, it seemed to produce a strange effect on him. However, I offered him money, and he refused it; but some unknown motive led him to think ill of Isaure. The villain! if I had followed his advice, I should have abducted this girl long ago; he considers such an exploit as a trivial escapade, and constantly told me that a girl that lived alone did not deserve to be treated differently."

"The scoundrel!" said the baron. "Ah! he did not know my Isaure! Dear Alfred, how bitterly you would have regretted it, if you had yielded to a passing passion! You do not know yet who this sweet, interesting girl is; you have no idea what bond there is between her and myself. I did not intend to reveal this mystery to you, I wished that it might be kept concealed forever; but since circumstances have led to your meeting your father in this place, you shall know everything, you shall learn the secret which is the cross of my life. You will pity your father, but I think that you cannot blame him. And you, Edouard, who think perhaps that you see in me a rival, you shall know how pure and unselfish is my attachment for Isaure; you shall learn that in seeking to keep her apart from the world, I had no such purpose as you may have supposed me to have."

"What! Can it be, monsieur?" cried Edouard, whose jealousy was instantly banished by these words. "You do not love Isaure? Then she did not deceive me when she told me that she still loved me, that she constantly thought of me? Her tears were not feigned! Oh! Mon Dieu! and to think that I added to her grief by my suspicions, by my jealousy!"

"This is no time to give way to fruitless regret," said Alfred; "we must find her, first of all. If the man I suspect is the author of this abduction, he may still be in this neighborhood. Why, I believe that that fellow, whose audacity is unmeasured, is capable of having taken Isaure to the château, to the tower, into the cellars, perhaps. We must neglect nothing. I'll ride back to the château and search every nook and corner of the deserted portion."

"Go, dear Alfred; meanwhile, monsieur le baron and I will continue our search in the mountains. I shall not take an instant's rest until I have found Isaure."

"To-morrow, at daybreak," said the baron, "we will meet at the White House; and there, my son, I propose to tell you the cause of my mysterious conduct. Edouard, too, shall know my misfortunes. He loves Isaure and she loves him; he must know the whole story of her birth, and then he can consider whether he still wishes her to be his wife."

"Ah! always, always, monsieur!"

Alfred did not allow Edouard to discourse any farther upon his love; he urged him to remember that at that moment it was more important to act, and to try to overtake the girl's abductors. Edouard mounted his horse; Alfred did the same. The baron had his at the White House, and each of them took a different road, agreeing to meet on the

morrow at daybreak. Alfred dug his spurs into his horse, at the risk of breaking his neck on the mountain paths; he reached the château at three o'clock in the morning. As the concierge had informed him, the gate was not closed, and the Château of La Roche-Noire was open to all comers. But Alfred needed a light, and he desired the concierge to open the underground vaults and the deserted apartments, to which he had the keys. So he knocked loudly at the door of Monsieur Cunette, who was sleeping like a deaf man and did not reply. Caring little whether he disturbed the rest of the occupants of the château, Alfred continued to hammer and call, and soon nearly every window opened except the concierge's.

Robineau appeared at the window of his apartment in his silk nightcap, the marquis in one of cotton, Eudoxie half-wrapped in a pelisse, Cornélie in a lace-trimmed dressing jacket, Mademoiselle Cheval in déshabillé, Jeannette in a mob cap; the scullions also showed themselves in the windows in the roof.

"What's the matter? what's up now?" asked Robineau.

"Why this uproar?" said Cornélie.

"Is this château bewitched?" said Eudoxie.

"A body can't dream comfortably here," said the cook.

"Son-in-law," said Monsieur de la Pincerie, "I order you to go down and thrash the miscreants who are disturbing my sleep."

"Monsieur le marquis, I am distressed to have awakened you," said Alfred, "but I do not believe that anyone will thrash me for that."

"What! is it Alfred who is making this disturbance?"

"My dear fellow, go back to bed with your wife; there are no thieves or ghosts in the château. It is possible, however, that there may be someone hidden in the old tower; and it is that someone that I propose to arrest."

"Someone hidden in my house!"

"It wouldn't be the first time that that person had passed the night in this house."

"Great heavens! People hide themselves in my château, without my knowledge?"

"You see, monsieur, that we are well guarded," said Cornélie; "to-morrow I shall throw the whole household out of doors!"

However, upon the assurance that there was nothing new in the château, the windows closed one by one. The cook provided Alfred with a light, and he decided to examine the tower and the vaults, without the assistance of the concierge. Mademoiselle Cheval boldly offered to accompany the young man; but he thanked her and bent his steps alone toward the part of the château which was not occupied.

Alfred found the door of the tower still open; he went up to every floor, examined all the chambers, and carefully secured the doors; then he went down into the cellars, to which the more dignified name of subterranean vaults had been given; but he saw no one there and nothing to indicate that the vagabond had visited the place very recently.

Alfred spent nearly two hours in his investigation. The dawn was beginning to appear when he went to his apartment, to prepare his things for his departure. He ordered François to send his luggage and Edouard's to the White House, and was on the point of leaving the château, when he saw Robineau, who had risen very early in order to see his friends before their departure.

"So you are going away?" said Robineau to Alfred.

"Yes, my friend; nothing can stop me now."

"And Monsieur Edouard?"

"He is waiting for me at the White House."

"At the White House?"

"Yes, we know the owner now."

"The deuce you do? and the girl?"

"She has been kidnapped and we are looking for her."

"Kidnapped! the little witch!"

"Adieu; when I see you again, I will tell you more."

"But—who is this person who dares to come to my château at night?"

"The man of Clermont-Ferrand."

"Mon Dieu! and you never told me! I am going to have the North Tower torn down."

"Simply have it carefully secured and have all the doors walled up, as well as the gate in the garden behind the statue of Mars, and no one will make his way into your premises without your permission, unless your concierge continues to leave the main gate open all night."

With that, Alfred shook hands with Robineau, and, leaving him bewildered by what he had learned, left the château to return to the White House, feeling sure that his father or Edouard would have been more fortunate in their search than he had been.

Alfred found only the baron at the place of meeting. Edouard had not yet returned, and they hoped that he had discovered the track of Isaure's abductors.

"Poor child!" said the baron; "if we cannot find her, I shall reproach myself with this disaster forever; and yet you shall judge, Alfred, if I have acted ill, if love and jealousy made me unjust."

"Father," said Alfred, "if it is painful for you to reveal this mystery to me, if you would have occasion to blush before your son, I do not wish to know it, I do not care to hear your secret."

"My dear boy, I might have had to blush in society, although I am in no wise culpable, but I can only be pitied by my son. You shall know all."

After they had waited two hours, Edouard arrived; but he was alone and in despair, for he had learned nothing of Isaure.

"Before undertaking our search anew," said the baron, "listen to me, my friends; learn at last the motive of my conduct and of the mystery of my relations with Isaure."

XXIX

THE BARON DE MARCEY'S SECOND MARRIAGE

Alfred and Edouard seated themselves beside the baron in the living room of the White House, the doors of which were carefully secured; and Monsieur de Marcey, after pressing his son's hand affectionately once more, and heaving a profound sigh, at last gratified the impatient curiosity of the two young men.

"I entered the service very young; the military profession had a great charm for me, I was burning to achieve renown, eager, ardent, impulsive; but my heart was never insensible to the sufferings of my fellowmen, and I recall that even on the battle field, I always remembered that I was fighting against men whom politics alone had made my enemies.

"I was passionately fond of women, too. Like yourself, my dear Alfred, I was for some time a fickle creature; I ran from one conquest to another, forgetting on the morrow the fair one who had charmed me the day before; that time was the happiest in my life, but it was brief; my heart, in reality easily moved, longed to be attached by other than trivial bonds. But I was born jealous; that cruel sentiment had already made me unhappy with women whom I hardly loved; it was to be feared therefore that it would assume still greater proportions with one whom I adored. That is why my parents induced me to contract, at twenty-three years, what is called a marriage of reason. Although I was not madly in love with her, I married Céline de Colleville, your mother, my dear Alfred. A year after our wedding, she brought you into the world. Your birth and your mother's virtues had made my happiness secure; every day I felt that my attachment to Céline increased, and I thanked my parents for the choice that they had made for me; but a year after your birth, I lost my wife. You were too young for me to seek comfort from you; but the war, which had broken out again, recalled me to the field, and there I found distraction from my grief.

"More than five years had passed since the death of your mother, my memory of whom was still as sweet as that which recalls to our hearts a friend from whom fate has parted us. A severe wound, which was certain to be a long time in healing, caused me to quit the service, I had paid my debt to my country, and I was determined to devote myself to my son. Meanwhile, to reëstablish my health, which had become precarious since my wound, the doctors ordered me to travel in the South. You were too young for me to take you with me, so I left you in reliable hands and went to Toulouse, to Marseilles, and lastly to Bordeaux.

"I had been in the latter city for some time; my health was entirely restored, and I was even on the point of returning to Paris, when one day I was presented to Monsieur de Montfort, an ex-naval officer, very wealthy, who was a widower, and had an only child, a daughter, then seventeen years old. Adèle was her name. It would be hard for me to describe all her charms, all her attractions. Adèle was pretty, rather than beautiful; but it was impossible to resist the charms of her face, the sweetness of her expression, the enchanting tone of her voice. I fell madly in love with her, and from the moment that I saw her, I felt that the happiness of my life henceforth depended upon her.

"Monsieur de Montfort was far from having in his manner that charm, that gentleness which attracted everybody to his daughter. He was a man with a stern glance and a harsh manner; his eyes shot fire when they were inflamed by anger; he had retained the brusque, peremptory tone common to the naval officer, which he seemed to think that no one should resist. However, Monsieur de Montfort received me very well; he was almost cordial with me; and whether it was my fortune, my rank, or the wounds which I had received for my country, that led him to regard me with interest, he manifested considerable friendliness for me and urged me to come often to his house.

"This permission was most precious to me; to be with Adèle was already my only wish; determined to marry her if her father would bestow her hand upon me, I was most desirous to please her; she seemed to take pleasure in seeing me, and to have some friendly feeling for me; I flattered myself that that feeling of amity would become love; but I was distressed to observe in her a melancholy which nothing could overcome; only in her father's presence, before whom it was easy to see that she always trembled, would Adèle try to be cheerful and to take some part in the amusements of the company.

"I was never able to be alone with Adèle; only before other people was I allowed to see her, to speak with her, to try to make her understand all the love that she had inspired in me; she seemed to be afraid to answer me, and I saw that she shuddered at the slightest glance which Monsieur de Montfort cast upon us.

"Burning with the desire to make my happiness secure, I had been on visiting terms at Monsieur de Montfort's hardly a fortnight, when I declared to him my love for his daughter.

"'I had guessed it'; he replied, with his usual abruptness; 'and if this love of yours had not seemed to me a suitable thing, you may be sure that I should not have allowed you to come to my house so often. I know your family; you are wealthy and well-behaved; you have a son by your first wife, but your fortune is more than sufficient to bring up other children too, and I am sure that Adèle will love your son. You are satisfactory to me as a son-in-law, and I give you my daughter's hand.'

"I was happy beyond words. Monsieur de Montfort added: 'I confess that I am not sorry to marry my daughter early. I am not of the proper temperament to be always watching a girl. My Adèle is virtuous, but she is pretty. Several young men have seemed to be very much in love with her already, but they did not suit me; I propose that my son-in-law shall be agreeable to me, first of all.'

"'But suppose that one of them had pleased Adèle?' I said.

"'Do you suppose that my daughter would love anybody before I had given her permission?' he demanded angrily. 'No, monsieur, no; that cannot be. A certain Chevalier de Savigny, of a very old family, I believe, seemed to be particularly fond of Adèle; but as soon as I became aware of his love I forbade him to come to my house again, for this Savigny is a downright scamp, a rake, a gambler, a libertine. A scandalous business, a duel about a woman, forced him to leave Bordeaux, where he had been for some time. And should such a man be my daughter's husband? No, though she had died of love for him, I would never have consented to that marriage.'

"'But I trust that she did not love this Savigny?' I said, with an anxiety which I could not surmount.

"'I am inclined to believe that she did not dislike him,' replied Monsieur de Montfort; 'that is to say, like all women, Adèle was dazzled, surprised, by the rascal's gallant manners and honeyed tone; for, in order to obtain admission to my house, he had succeeded in disguising his vicious tastes at first. But love him! ten thousand frigates! she would never have dared!—However, monsieur, if you do not think my daughter worthy of you, nothing is settled as yet; but

in that case I will request you to cease visits which might have some ill effect upon her reputation, and to say nothing more to me about your love.'

"Monsieur de Montfort was a man with whom it was necessary to decide promptly; excessively sensitive upon everything connected with honor as he was, I saw that, if I hesitated a moment, Adèle was lost to me. And I was too much in love to abandon the hope of being her husband; even supposing that she had received with pleasure the attentions of Savigny, should I for that reason abandon my suit? Savigny was no longer received at Monsieur de Montfort's house, where I had never seen him. He had left Bordeaux and no one knew what had become of him. Adèle was only seventeen; was I not justified in hoping that my attentions, my affection would soon efface from her heart the memories which another might have left there? In short, I made haste to inform Monsieur de Montfort that my only desire was to become his daughter's husband speedily.

"Satisfied with my sentiments, he assured me that Adèle should be my wife within a week; and summoning his daughter, who came to us at once, he quickly informed her of his intentions by ordering her to prepare to give me her hand.

"At that news, Adèle turned pale, a sudden trembling shook her from head to foot; I saw her stagger; she stammered some words which I could not understand; I flew to her side, I put my arm about her, and implored her to tell me if the thought of becoming my wife distressed her. But her father was there with his threatening eyes fixed upon her, and she answered under her breath:

"'I will obey my father'; then she withdrew to her apartments.

"Adèle's evident confusion had distressed me deeply; but Monsieur de Montfort was the first to speak jestingly of it. He knew but one thing,—obedience to his will.

"'My dear fellow,' he said, 'when a girl is told that she is to be married, isn't it to be expected that she will blush and turn pale and sigh and seem to be deeply moved? That is all customary. But a week after marriage, when a husband has any strength of character, a woman has no more vapors or giddy turns or faintings.'

"I did not propose to take Monsieur de Montfort for my model; I hoped to obtain Adèle's affections by gentleness and love. Monsieur de Montfort wished that our marriage should take place at a country house of his in the suburbs of Bordeaux. He went there at once with his daughter; I remained a few days in the city to settle my affairs and make the customary purchases; then I joined my new family.

"I found Adèle as sad as ever, and as terrified before her father. During the four days which preceded our union, I flattered myself that I should have more than one opportunity to be alone with my future bride; but Monsieur de Montfort was almost always present, he left us very little; and when, being alone with Adèle, I spoke to her of my love, she sighed, lowered her eyes and did not answer me.

"Our wedding-day arrived; Adèle, whose pallor and distress made her even lovelier in my eyes, walked with me to the altar. As we were about to take the oath which bound us to each other, I saw her tremble and look at her father. At last we were united, and I received her hand, which trembled in mine. I should have been at the very summit of felicity, if my wife's melancholy had not secretly worried me; but I say again, I loved her with an idolatrous love, and I still flattered myself that I could make her love me in return.

"Our wedding-day passed quietly, without festivities; only a few friends and neighbors spent it with us. It seemed to me that I could see Adèle's sadness and depression increase momentarily; but when I asked her if she were suffering, she answered gently that there was nothing the matter. The hour to retire arrived. Adèle went to our apartment, but I was obliged to remain a few moments longer with the guests. At last, everyone went away, and I hastened to join my wife.

"They had given us for our quarters a very pleasant wing looking on the garden, and separated from the other parts of the building. I dismissed the servants and was soon in my room, where I expected to find my wife; but it was empty. Surprised not to find Adèle there, I went through the adjoining rooms, looking for her and calling her; but I soon acquired the certainty that she was not in the building. Her absence disturbed me; I noticed that the small door opening into the garden was ajar, and I concluded that Adèle, feeling indisposed, had gone out into the garden for a breath of fresh air. I instantly went there in search of her.

"The garden was immense; I walked hastily along, seeking to pierce the darkness in the paths which surrounded me. There was a heavy weight at my heart, and my anxiety became greater every moment. I was approaching a beautiful pond at the foot of an extensive lawn, when I fancied that I distinguished the figure of a woman kneeling on the edge of the water. I quickened my pace, but before I reached the bank, she whom I had seen had hurled herself into the water. I saw my Adèle's white garments floating on the surface. I was soon beside her, I succeeded in grasping her, and in swimming back to the shore with her; taking her in my arms, I carried her to our apartment, where, without calling anyone, I instantly bestowed on her every attention demanded by her condition.

"Adèle had been taken from the water so quickly that I had no fear for her life; my efforts were soon rewarded; she opened her eyes and saw me beside her, moistening with my tears the hands which I had warmed in mine.

"'You saved me!' she exclaimed, with an expression of the most profound regret.

"'Yes,' I said to her, 'yes, heaven permitted me to arrive in time to bring you back to life. But who will save me now from my despair? Who will allay the remorse which I feel for having induced you to contract a union which causes you such horror? Do you detest me so, Adèle? Do I inspire you with such insurmountable aversion that you'd rather kill yourself than be mine?'

"Adèle seemed touched by my excessive despair; her eyes filled with tears, and she answered, while sobbing:

"'No, I do not hate you; indeed I have the most affectionate friendship for you; but alas! I could not be your wife, and yet I had to obey my father, of whom I am so afraid, whose anger is so terrible! Ah! he would have killed me if I had resisted his will; I preferred to kill myself after obeying him. In pity's name, forgive me and let me die!'

"The unhappy creature threw herself at my feet and held out her hands in entreaty; I raised her and implored her to be calm, to look upon me only as a brother, as a friend, and to conceal from me no longer the cause of her grief.

"'You wish it,' she said; 'well, I will obey you. This confession is very painful; it would have been easier for me to die, but I must undergo this punishment, too. As I have told you, I am unworthy to bear the name of your wife. Another man has my love. He told me that he would die rather than abandon me; and yet, alas! he has gone; and I, I had the weakness to believe in his words! I hoped that my father would consent to our union; but, far from that, he

harshly refused my hand to the man who already called me his wife; and I, when I allowed my father to see that I shared the love of him whom he turned away from his house—Ah! if you knew how terrible his anger was! I realized that he would kill me if he suspected my fault and I did not wish to die by my father's hand.—Yes, I am guilty, I am ruined, and I bear in my womb the fruit of my dishonor!'

"You can judge of the effect produced upon me by such a confidence; jealous rage created a revolution in my mind. I longed to kill Savigny, or to die at his hands; for although she had not named her seducer, I could not doubt that it was that man, of whom Monsieur de Montfort had spoken to me, who had abused Adèle's innocence.—While, giving way to the first outburst of my rage, I strode rapidly back and forth, swearing to be revenged, the unfortunate creature who had made so painful a confession had lost consciousness again. She lay on the floor, pale and lifeless. That sight recalled me to myself, and I blamed myself for my barbarity; for doubtless, after the confession of her wrongdoing, Adèle had heard the threats inspired by my despair, and I had added to her sufferings. I took her in my arms; as I gazed upon her sweet and lovely features, I promised to do my utmost to restore tranquillity, at least, if not happiness, to her heart. By my persistent efforts I restored her to consciousness once more; but she dared not look me in the face, she feared to read there an expression of contempt; she thought that I would not forgive her for giving me her hand when her honor was sullied, and she said again, in a heartrending tone, that there was nothing for her to do but to die.

"I sat down beside her, I took one of her hands, and begged her to listen quietly to me.

"'Adèle,' I said to her, 'a villain has abused your innocence, your candor; it is he especially who is guilty; but have no fear, this misstep is hidden forever; no one will ever be able to divine it, your father shall never know it. I shall have only the name of your husband; I will be to you a brother, a friend, if you some day deem me worthy of that title. In marrying you, when your melancholy, your secret melancholy, should have convinced me that I had not your love, I made a mistake. Presuming too far, no doubt, I listened only to the passion which I felt, and flattered myself that I could make you share it. I must renounce all hope of that happy future; and yet I feel that it will still be sweet to me to pass my life with you, to try to allay your suffering, and to restore peace to your soul. Yes, such henceforth will be my only object; as the reward of my efforts, I hope only to see a smile upon your lips some day, and in your eyes a little affection for me.'

"Adèle pressed my hand, and said in a voice trembling with emotion:

"'How kind you are, monsieur! and how much your conduct adds to the remorse I feel! But, since you will have it so, I will live; henceforth, dispose of my fate; I will have no other will than yours, even in the most trivial actions of my life; I trust that I may, by my entire submission, prove to you my respect and gratitude at least!'

"After such intense emotion, Adèle sorely needed rest. I left her in her room, and withdrew to mine. That is how the first night after our wedding passed! And when so many people were envying my happiness, I was consecrating that unfortunate bond by bitter tears.

"The next day I secretly made inquiries concerning the Chevalier de Savigny, but he had quitted Bordeaux, leaving an enormous amount of debts behind him, and no one knew in what direction he had gone. Everything that I learned about that young man convinced me that Monsieur de Montfort had not slandered him and that he was, in fact, a thorough rascal. And yet such a man had been able to make himself master of Adèle's heart; but it is only too common a thing to see women misplace their love. However, I never mentioned his name before my wife; that would have compelled her to blush, and she had only too much remorse for her fault. It was enough for me to know her seducer's name to be certain that he would never appear in my presence with impunity.

"I had determined upon my plan of conduct. We passed another fortnight with Monsieur de Montfort, and at the end of that time I announced that we were going to take a trip to Italy. My father-in-law, realizing that we were entitled to do only what we pleased, contented himself with wishing us a pleasant journey, caring very little in which direction we bent our steps. My wife and I started without a single servant, and began a journey which was not to come to an end until Adèle had brought into the world the child that she was bearing.

"We travelled through Italy, the Alps and Switzerland; more than six months had passed since our marriage, and we were in Auvergne, when Adèle felt that her time was at hand.

"Adèle's health compelled us to stop in a small village, named, I think, Saint-Sandoux, about two leagues from here; I had taken the name of Gervais. There it was that she brought into the world a daughter, whom I caused to be baptised under the name of Isaure Gervais."

"Isaure!" cried Edouard, interrupting the baron; "what! can it be, monsieur, that Isaure is——"

"Adèle's daughter, yes, Edouard; but, for heaven's sake, let me finish this painful story.—I had made my plans long before; that child could not remain with her mother. I rode about the neighboring country, alone, carrying concealed beneath my cloak the innocent creature whom I desired to hate, and in whom, nevertheless, in spite of myself, I already felt an affectionate interest. I arrived in this valley, I entered the cottage then occupied by André Sarpiotte and his wife; she was nursing a young baby, and I proposed to her to be the nurse of the little girl whom I carried in my arms, inventing a story concerning Isaure's birth and parents.

"The worthy Auvergnats accepted my proposition, which I supported with a purse filled with gold. They swore to me to take the greatest care of the child whom I entrusted to them; and being then more at ease in my mind, I returned to Adèle, to whom I announced that she could henceforth be at ease concerning the fate of her daughter; but I did not tell her where the child was.

"As soon as Adèle was restored to health we left Auvergne; but before returning to Paris and laying aside the assumed name I had taken upon my journey, I took pains to make several detours in order to avoid the possibility of anyone discovering what my honor was so much interested in concealing. At last we reached Paris, my dear Alfred! I had longed so to be there, in order to see you and to embrace you once more. There I introduced my new wife in society; and she, by her lovable qualities, readily won general esteem. A single thought still disturbed my tranquillity: I might meet in society my wife's lover; but in that case his blood would have washed out the outrage that he had perpetrated on Adèle. However, my thirst for vengeance was constantly disappointed; I never saw or heard of the Chevalier de Savigny.

"Adèle never dared to mention her daughter; but she poured out upon you, my dear Alfred, the affection of a mother; caring nothing for society, desiring nothing but you, and liberty to kiss you, to lavish caresses upon you, how many times have I seen her, while covering you with kisses, furtively wipe away the tears that she shed for the child

who was banished from her arms! And yet, never a complaint, never a word escaped her upon that subject; attentive and submissive to me, it seemed that in every action of her life she sought to show her gratitude to me. What a woman! And how fervently I would have adored her forever! Ah! even if she were guilty for one moment, how many others are there in society who are guiltier than she and have nothing to offer us to redeem their shortcomings!

"Five months after our arrival in Paris, I set out secretly for Auvergne, and went to see little Isaure, under the name of Gervais as before. The good people to whom I had entrusted her loved her as dearly as their own child. André at that time wanted to sell this house, which he had just built; it occurred to me that, if I should buy it, it would be convenient for me in the trips which I expected to make into this country. So I became, still under the name of Gervais, the owner of the White House. I furnished it so that I might have everything that I required when I came here; then, after making the peasants swear that they would not say that the owner of the White House was the same man who had placed Isaure in their charge, I returned to Paris, where I afforded Adèle the most delicious pleasure by giving her most satisfactory news of her daughter.

"Two years passed; every six months I came secretly to the White House. As soon as they saw a light here, André or his wife never failed to come and bring little Isaure to me. The child of those worthy peasants died and they promised to adopt Isaure to replace him whom they had lost; for I, on my part, had promised to leave the girl with them forever.

"Meanwhile, Adèle's health was still poor; I believed her to be better than she really was, and she concealed her sufferings from me and always greeted me with a smile. Soon, however, it was impossible for me to delude myself as to her condition. Presuming that her grief at being separated from her daughter was the cause of the sorrow which was secretly undermining her health, I swore to her that before long I would devise some way to have the child brought to us, without running the risk of disclosing the secret of her birth. Adèle thanked me affectionately; but alas! it was too late; in a short time her disease made alarming progress, and soon I was forced to see the woman whom I adored fade away in my arms. She died, urging me never to abandon her daughter, to forgive her for her mother's sin, and imploring me to love her Isaure a little.

"I will not attempt to describe my grief; I had never loved a woman so passionately as I had loved Adèle. But I still had you, my son; I tried to transfer all my affection to you. Meanwhile, faithful to the oath I had sworn to Adèle, I went to see Isaure again. André also had died, and his wife now had only her adopted daughter to console her; she trembled lest I had come to take her away; but I reassured her. Why should I have taken that girl away from these mountains? Could she not live here more happily than in society, where her birth would have interposed an obstacle to her marriage?

"After my Adèle's death, life in Paris was painful to me; but for you, my dear Alfred, I should have left the capital and settled down in this solitary house. Amid these mountains, near little Isaure, who, by her features and her childish charms, reminded me so forcibly of her mother, I loved to come and dream of that unfortunate woman, who had known only the sorrows of love, and in such a brief life had never felt those pleasures, those delightful emotions, which seem the attributes of youth and beauty.

"But you were growing, my dear Alfred; already the world attracted you with its pleasant chimeras; it presented to your eyes only enjoyment, pleasures, happiness; you were at that age when man enjoys life; I was just leaving the circle which you were entering. So that it was easy for me to come more frequently to Auvergne without your noticing my frequent absences. I came here, and sometimes passed a whole fortnight here. But, as I was still afraid that someone would recognize me and mention my sojourn at the White House, I always arranged to arrive here at night, and I never left the White House except after dark. Hence the reports which the superstitious mountaineers spread about this house; but I urged André's widow not to try to correct the error of the peasants; the fear which this place inspired in them seconded my wishes, by keeping everybody away from this building.

"The more I saw Isaure, the more my affection for her increased; kindly, sensitive, affectionate, she had her mother's heart and mind. The solitary life to which her birth condemned her was likely to keep her in these mountains permanently. Doubtless, in order to avoid arousing suspicion, and causing the little goatherd to be noticed, I should have done well to allow her to remain as ignorant as the other peasants in this vicinity. But I delighted, in spite of myself, when talking with Isaure to enlighten her mind and to train her judgment; I thought that, destined as she was to live away from the world, reading would be to her a source of pleasure and of agreeable distraction. So I taught her to read. Isaure listened to me with so much attention and docility that she made rapid progress during the short time that I passed at the White House. Thus did she little by little acquire knowledge and manners which were not those of a peasant girl; but the pleasure that her progress caused me made me forget the dictates of prudence; I did not reflect that such a wealth of attractions, of charms, and of intelligence would some day impress the stranger who should come to this valley.

"Isaure loved me as her protector and knew me only by the name of Gervais. I had told her that her parents entrusted her to my care when they died; that she had no one else in the world who took any interest in her. It was useless to distress her heart by the story of her mother's misery. I gave her Adèle's portrait, which that unhappy creature had given to me for her daughter; but I made Isaure swear that she would never show that portrait to anyone, and that she would never mention me or my visits to the White House; and she has always kept her word.

"It is nearly three years since André's widow died, leaving her cottage to Isaure, who enjoyed there all the comforts which I could provide without arousing too much suspicion. At the death of the excellent peasant woman, I gave the girl a faithful and vigilant guardian, and I myself tried to come more often to see my Adèle's daughter. Only when the peaceful inhabitants of the mountains were sound asleep, would I announce to Isaure, by a light placed in a window in this house, that I had arrived. During the day, I amused myself by visiting on foot the most beautiful parts of Limagne; and not until night did I return here. Although alone amid the mountains, Isaure was happy none the less; she laughed in secret at the terror of the peasants, who believed her to be something of a sorceress because she had some knowledge in botany and owned a book in which the manner of raising and taking care of animals is treated; in fact, she often told me that she had no wish, no desire; that her whole happiness consisted in living in her pretty cottage, and in taking her flock to the mountains; but the sweet child did not know love. You came to this valley, you caused Isaure to experience a new sensation, more keen, more imperious, than all the others; henceforth this cottage, these flocks, this landscape were no longer sufficient for her happiness.

"Two days ago I came again to this spot; I saw Isaure; but she was no longer the same. I had no need to question her concerning the state of her heart; the sweet child candidly admitted that a young man named Edouard had come

to her cottage with a friend of his; that this Edouard had come again day after day; that he had told her that he loved her, and desired to make her his wife. My son had not told me in which direction he was going with his two friends, and I was very far from suspecting that you were the Edouard of whom Isaure talked to me. But at the portrait which she drew of your refinement, of your manners, I concluded that, being a fashionable young man, you could not intend to marry a peasant girl; I saw in this lover whom she described as so attentive and so tender, only another villain who was scheming to deceive a defenceless girl. Such, Edouard, were the motives which led me to forbid Isaure to listen to you any more. You can appreciate also all the motives which led me not to allow the mystery which surrounded her birth to be suspected. I have revealed this painful secret to you; I have made to you this confession, which is so humiliating to my self-esteem. Now, if heaven grants that we find Isaure, and you still deem her worthy to be your wife, I shall no longer oppose that union, since you now know the whole truth."

Edouard pressed the hand which the baron held out to him, and said:

"I shall love Isaure no less now, monsieur. I shall see in her only the daughter of your Adèle. Her charms and her virtues atone sufficiently for the blot upon her birth. May she soon be restored to us! And it will be my greatest joy to call her my wife."

Alfred, after affectionately embracing his father, as if to make him forget all the griefs which his narrative had revived, offered his hand to Edouard, saying:

"Yes, Isaure must be restored to us. I love her as a brother now; but I will assist you; I shall not enjoy a moment's repose until I have restored her to your arms."

"Poor Isaure!" said the baron. "Since she has been stolen from me, I realize all the strength of my attachment to her. Who can the men be who have taken her from her house? What motive can have inspired them? Robbers would have pillaged the house but would not have taken Isaure. Only a lover—but Isaure said that only you two came to this valley to see her. As for this wretch, this vagabond, of whom Alfred has spoken, what reason could he have had for stealing Isaure from us? And, indeed, how could he have compelled her to go with him?"

The baron and the young men lost themselves in conjectures; but they prepared to take the field once more. They went to Clermont-Ferrand to buy horses; they caused poor Vaillant to be taken to the house of honest peasants who promised to take the greatest care of him; they gave them the goats and all that composed the girl's fortunes. Alfred took with him the sword which they had found in Isaure's cottage; then all three plunged at random into the mountains, determined to visit every corner, even the hovel of the most destitute mountaineer, to search the least travelled paths, to undertake everything, in short, to find the maiden.

XXX

THE ABDUCTION OF ISAURE

During the night when Alfred and Edouard went into the valley to spy upon Isaure's actions, a man had constantly followed the two young men, keeping always in the shadow; that man, whom the reader will recognize as he who seemed to have no other home than the mountains, did not lose sight of the two friends; he seemed to take a great interest in having them learn the secret actions of the young girl, and to await impatiently the result of that discovery.

At the moment when Alfred recognized his father in the man who had left Isaure, and named him to Edouard, the vagabond, who was hiding close at hand, had made a sudden movement as if he would have rushed on the baron. But instantly he had checked himself, muttering:

"I have no weapons!" then he had walked rapidly away in the direction of the girl's cottage.

Arrived in front of the cottage, he stopped, scrutinized it for a long while, and seemed to be meditating some scheme of vengeance. Suddenly his eyes lighted up, and a bitter smile played over his face as he muttered:

"That will be better, much better! If I had killed the baron, that would have been the end. Death is soon over; he would have suffered only a moment; but I have been suffering eighteen years; I will try to repay him what he has done to me. He must be very strongly attached to this girl, to conceal her in this place and to employ so much mystery about coming to see her. I must obtain possession of Isaure; to-morrow she shall be in my power. But in order to carry out this plan, I, too, must have weapons, and I have no money, absolutely none. The other night, but for the arrival of that Alfred, I should have found what I was looking for in the tower; but I still have time to go there again; yes, I have no other means of procuring what I want."

Thereupon, striding hurriedly along the country, and as quickly, despite the darkness, as if it were bright daylight, the vagabond took a cross road which shortened the distance to the Château of La Roche-Noire, where he arrived in a very short time. He soon stood before the small gate of the garden, to which he had a key; he opened it, entered the garden and walked toward the abandoned tower, where he arrived without meeting anyone. He rapidly mounted the winding staircase and did not stop until he reached the room where Alfred had found him two nights before. The most profound darkness reigned about him; he hesitated a moment, then drawing a flint and steel from his pocket, he decided to strike a light, at the risk of alarming the château again.

He always carried about him a small dark lantern, which had often been of great service to him at night in the mountains. It was soon lighted; then he searched in every corner of the room, which was formerly the arsenal of the château, for a weapon which was still in condition to be used. After hunting on all sides, and angrily throwing aside broken lances and rust-eaten sabres, he seized a sword which was still in reasonably good condition, and was about to depart, when he spied another, hanging on the wall in a recess. He walked to the spot, took it down, examined it and cried:

"Here it is! This is the one I was looking for! It was this sword with which I learned, in this room, to fight like a gentleman, to rid myself loyally of an enemy. Poor Richard, you were so fond of giving me lessons, and so proud of your young pupil's talent! when you gave me this sword, you repeated to me again and again the Spanish motto: 'Never draw it without reason; never sheathe it without honor!'"

The vagabond held the sword against his breast, and was about to throw aside the one he had taken first, but he

checked himself, saying:

"No, this one will serve me to get rid of Vaillant, so that I may carry off the girl; at all events, the weapon of my youth will not be sullied by that act."

Thereupon, extinguishing his lantern and bestowing the two swords carefully under his enormous coat, the vagabond descended the winding staircase and left the tower and the château by the same road by which he had entered. Then, looking up at the sky, and reckoning how much of the night remained and how long it would take him to return to the cottage, he said in a low tone:

"It is too late to-night; I will do it to-morrow."

The next day, when night had spread its shadow over the country, the vagabond was in the valley; he scrutinized everything, nothing escaped his eye, nothing could mislead his prudence. He was certain that as yet there was no one in the White House, and that Isaure was alone in her cottage. He had anticipated everything, calculated all his chances; he soon stood beside the wall which enclosed the garden of the cottage, and placed on the ground, a few steps from the gate, one of his swords, saying:

"I will take you again when I come out."

Then, with the other in his hand, he easily scaled the low garden wall. He had not taken four steps when he heard Vaillant bark, and the dog rushed fiercely at him; but the vagabond, expecting that attack, had prepared to defend himself; advancing to meet the threatening beast, he buried the sword in his body; despite that wound, the dog leaped upon his foe and bit him savagely in the face and neck; but the loss of blood weakened him, and three more sword thrusts completed his discomfiture; poor Vaillant fell helpless at the vagabond’s feet, whereupon he threw aside the weapon he had used, and hastened upstairs to Isaure’s bedroom.

The girl was seated sadly by her window; the memory of Edouard was her sole comfort; she was not to see him again but she could continue to love him, and she abandoned herself entirely to that sentiment. When our wills and our desires are thwarted, we feel a secret satisfaction in saying to ourselves that we can at all events dispose of our hearts as we please; and women especially take refuge in that source of consolation, because they are much less at liberty to follow their wishes in their acts.

At the first yelp of her faithful guardian, Isaure started; she thought that someone was prowling about the house; she listened, and then called her dog:

"What is it, Vaillant? What has frightened you?"

"It is I," replied the vagabond, abruptly entering the girl’s room. Isaure uttered a cry of alarm at sight of that man, whose face and neck were covered with blood, and who glared at her with threatening eyes.

"Come! You must go with me, you must leave this house at once," said the stranger, approaching the pale and trembling Isaure with a savage expression. "Take some of your clothes, make a bundle of them, they will be useful to me, and give me all the money you have here; you must have plenty and we shall need it. Come! Do you hear me?"

Isaure had heard, but she could not believe her ears; she fell on her knees and raised her hands imploringly to the man who stood before her, crying:

"Monsieur, what are you going to do with me?"

"As I have told you, I am going to take you away, that is all."

"Take me away! Where are you going to take me?"

"Where I please! Ten thousand thunders! that doesn’t concern you."

"Oh! monsieur, see, my money is there in that drawer; it is all I have. Take the money, take my clothes; take what you will—but I implore you, do not take me away!"

The vagabond opened the drawer that the girl pointed out to him and filled his pockets with the money he found there, muttering:

"Good! Here’s enough to live on for a century in these mountains."

Then he turned, and finding Isaure still on her knees, in the same spot, he cried angrily:

"Well! didn’t you hear me? I told you to make a bundle of your clothes! Make haste!"

"Oh! mon Dieu! Do you still mean to take me away?" said Isaure, in an imploring voice.

"Do I mean to? Yes, that is why I forced my way into your house and braved death. This blood flowing from my face should prove to you that my resolution is not to be shaken, that I will allow neither your prayers nor your tears to change my mind. As for your shrieks, they would be thrown away, for no one can hear you; your protectors, your friends, are not near you now; your faithful guardian is dead."

"Vaillant dead!" exclaimed Isaure, with a cry of horror which was soon followed by a flood of tears.

"Yes, Vaillant is dead, or nearly so. Come! No words, no useless prayers! I say again—you must follow me willingly, or——"

The stranger took the girl’s arm and pressed it so violently that the pain nearly deprived her of strength; she could only falter:

"I will obey you, monsieur," whereupon the vagabond released her arm and pushed her roughly toward the bureau.

Having no idea what she was doing, or what was going to become of her, Isaure collected a few clothes at random, tied them in a handkerchief, took the bundle in her hand, and leaned against the wall in order not to fall.

"That is well," said the vagabond; "now give me your hand and come."

He took the hand which the girl tremblingly held out to him; he led her to the staircase, and seeing that she was staggering, compelled her to lean on his arm. When they arrived in the courtyard, Isaure saw Vaillant bathed in his blood; the faithful beast uttered a plaintive groan, and tried to rise to defend his mistress. At that sight, Isaure lost consciousness; she was falling to the ground when her guide caught her in his arms; and, throwing her over his left shoulder, walked toward the garden, preferring to go out that way rather than through the main gateway. He opened the small gate leading into the fields and picked up his sword which he had left there; then, notwithstanding the burden which he carried, he walked with a firm and swift step toward the mountains. It was a cold, rainy night, but the vagabond made rapid progress, although he took the steepest paths and the rough, winding roads by preference. From time to time he turned his head to glance at her whom he was carrying. Isaure was still unconscious, her lovely

face had the pallor of death, and was wet with the rain which fell upon her whole body. But, little touched by the girl's state, her abductor, after glancing at her, simply muttered:

"She will come out all right! This is not very serious!"

After walking a long while in this way, the stranger stopped on the top of a hill; he gazed about for some time, as if trying to make out where he was; then he placed the rain-soaked, unconscious girl on the ground, saying:

"I must take breath; she is not heavy, but after awhile the weight makes itself felt."

He gazed for some time at the body lying at his feet, which seemed already to belong to death; a bitter smile played about his lips while he gazed at Isaure, and he exclaimed:

"So here she is in my power, this girl whom the baron secretly comes to these mountains to see, this peasant whose education he has provided for, and whom he adores, no doubt! At last I am about to taste the pleasures of revenge! I wanted Alfred to abduct this girl, I tried to induce him to do all sorts of foolish things, and to fight with his friend; but all that would not have distressed the baron so much as the loss of this girl. Yes, I know what a man feels when another steals from him the woman whom he adores; I too loved Adèle; Adèle was mine; I had the right to look upon her as my wife; and yet he took her away from me!"

Several moments passed, the vagabond seemed entirely absorbed by his memories; but at last he looked at Isaure again and stooped over her, saying:

"She doesn't come to herself! She doesn't move! Suppose she should die! Oh! I do not want her to die! No, so long as she is with me, she may live,—but with De Marcey, never!"

He took the child's head, raised it, rested it on his knee, and tried to warm Isaure's icy hands in his. He felt in the bundle of clothes which he had carried away, and with the first thing he found wiped the poor child's dripping face. At last, life seemed to return to her features, which had been so long inanimate; the beating of her heart became more rapid. Isaure opened her eyes, looked about her, and shuddered with dismay, when she found herself lying on the summit of a cliff, in the middle of the night, with her head resting against the breast of the man who had kidnapped her from her home.

"Calm yourself, be yourself again, and fear nothing," said the stranger.

"Oh! mon Dieu! Then it is not a dream!" cried Isaure, rising to her feet; "I am no longer in the home where I passed my childhood, in André's cottage; and it is you who have taken me away! it is you who killed——"

"Yes," replied the vagabond coolly, "it was I who killed Vaillant, in order not to be torn to pieces by him; I had to do it. I would have sacrificed you too, if you had not consented to come with me."

"Unhappy creature that I am!"

"Come, come, don't be afraid; you came with me, you are with me now, you have nothing to fear any more, that is to say, unless you make more fuss, unless you try to escape; but I fancy you will be reasonable, and will submit to your fate. I can very well understand that you would have preferred to live luxuriously in your cottage, where you had everything in abundance, where your mysterious protector allowed you to lack nothing; and, in short, where you were able to play the coquette with the young men who came to see you. That life was more agreeable for a young girl than the life you will lead with me—I agree to that. But you must make the best of it, for my will is irrevocable; your tears, your lamentations, your sighs, all will be thrown away on me. I have decided that you are not to leave me any more; but do not think that it is love which has led me to form this resolution. No! I am not in love with you, I have no sort of idea of seducing you. In that respect you may be perfectly tranquil. And yet you are pretty, very pretty indeed; but I give you my word that that is a matter of indifference to me."

These last words allayed in some measure Isaure's grief and alarm; and fearing to irritate anew this man whose wrath seemed to her a terrible thing, she replied, forcing back her sobs:

"Well, monsieur, I will obey you; I will do whatever you command."

"That is well, that is very well; you are a good girl," said the vagabond, shaking Isaure's hand; "in this way, we shall be good friends. But it must be nearly midnight, and we must resume our journey. Do you feel strong enough to walk? If you cannot, I will carry you; do not hesitate to say so."

"Oh! I can walk, monsieur."

"In that case, take my arm, lean on me, and let us go."

Isaure obeyed without comment; she took the arm of her guide, who had hung the bundle on the end of his sword, and carried it thus over his shoulder. They went on again through the rocky paths; they went away from Ayda, and reached the chain of hills which connects those of Cantal and of Puy-de-Dôme; Isaure was forced to cling to her companion's arm in order to keep on her feet in the steep and slippery paths. They walked in silence, but sometimes the vagabond asked Isaure:

"Are you tired? Would you like to rest awhile?"

"No, monsieur, I can go on," the girl would reply; and they would continue their journey.

At last the dawn succeeded the dark and rainy night; Isaure's guide, who had always taken pains to avoid passing through villages or near inhabited houses, stopped with the girl on the slope of a mountain, looked about him and said:

"Let us rest here until we can see a little better; I do not think that I can be mistaken; we must be near the end of our journey. An hour more at most. But here is the daylight, and we must not go astray."

He sat down on the ground, and Isaure did the same, seating herself a few steps away. Depressed and dejected, she dropped her head upon her breast and did not utter a word. The vagabond looked at her a moment and then turned his face in another direction, saying:

"She is not in the mood for talking; I can understand that."

After a quarter of an hour, they could see to recognize the different roads. Isaure's companion smiled and said:

"I was not mistaken. I know this country so well. I have travelled all over it so many times in my youth and also within the last few months—Come, my girl, forward; one league more, and you will be able to rest as long as you please."

Isaure rose and took her guide's arm once more. They descended the mountain, then turned to the left, along the narrow, winding path cut in the side of the cliff. Every moment their road became more difficult; they were in an

arid, uncultivated region, where man seemed never to have trodden; only at rare intervals did they perceive a shepherd's hut, and the wild goats that sometimes passed near them fled at their approach, as if unaccustomed to the presence of man. After walking a long while through this deserted tract, they found themselves at the entrance of a path running between two very high cliffs, which were so near together at the top that the daylight hardly reached the narrow path, which was more than eighty feet below their summits.

Along this dark and gloomy way, the vagabond guided Isaure's steps; the girl shuddered as she entered that defile which the cliffs seemed to threaten to fill up.

"Oh! mon Dieu!—is this the way?" she said, trembling as she spoke.

"Yes, this is the way, and we have arrived," replied her companion, stopping in front of a small wooden house on the left of the path, close against the cliff, which overhung it; externally it resembled the habitation of a quarryman.

Isaure gazed at the wretched structure, which she presumed was to be her abode, but she said nothing; she allowed her tears to fall in silence and made no further attempts to move by her prayers the man who had brought her to that wild spot.

Judging from its outside, the house seemed to be of little extent; it had one floor above the ground, with a window under the roof. Below, there was a single window by the side of the door; and everything was in such a dilapidated state that it seemed that one might overturn the wretched hovel with a kick.

Isaure's companion placed the sword and bundle on a wooden bench beside the door; then he knocked and shouted in a voice which echoed loudly along the path:

"Holà! Charlot! Are you still asleep, you sluggard? Get up; it is your friend; it is the vagabond!"

For some time, not a sound was heard; at last they could distinguish slow and heavy steps, which seemed to come from the back of the house. They approached, however; the door opened and a little man of some sixty years, lean and lank, of a livid pallor, and with red-rimmed eyes, whose expression was lifeless and stupid, appeared on the threshold of the wooden house, with his feet and part of his legs bare, but with the rest of his body covered with goat-skins held in place by leather thongs, while upon his head he wore the brimless crown of an old straw hat.

This man, whom Isaure's companion had called Charlot, showed neither surprise nor curiosity as he stared at the persons in front of his abode, but he held out his hand to the vagabond, saying in a slow, guttural voice:

"Ah! it is you? It is a long time since you came to see me."

"Yes, true, but this time I think I have come to see you for a long time," replied Isaure's guide; "I have brought you some company, as you see."

As he spoke, he pointed to the girl, at whom Charlot glanced indifferently, saying:

"Oh, yes! it's a woman!"

"But let us go in, first of all; we shall have time enough to talk then," said the vagabond, motioning to Isaure to enter the house. The poor girl had difficulty in determining to comply; she cast a glance backward; she was afraid that she was looking at the sky for the last time; but her companion pushed her roughly, and she was soon in Charlot's disgusting abode, the door of which was instantly closed behind her.

The interior of the house consisted of a room of considerable size, on the lower floor, with several beams in the centre, supporting the upper floor; on the left was a huge fireplace, in which a man could have stood without stooping; on the right there was a staircase leading to the room above. A few stools, several earthen vessels and some straw composed the furniture.

Isaure could hardly see, her eyes were so full of tears; she seated herself in the corner of the room, where the daylight hardly penetrated, because the cliff hung far over the house. She supposed that she was to be taken to the upper room, and waited silently till she should learn her fate; but the vagabond made a sign to Charlot, who thereupon went to the other end of the room, and, pushing aside one of the boards of the partition, disclosed to view a passage much better lighted than the interior of the house.

"Come this way," said Isaure's guide, motioning to her to rise; she obeyed; he led her through that narrow opening and she found herself at one end of an excavation, where she was overjoyed to see the sky once more. This excavation, which was thirty feet in circumference, was surrounded on all sides by the earth; it resembled the bottom of a well, except that it was much larger; but the light which came from above was much stronger than it was inside of the house, because there was nothing above to shut it out from that species of quarry. At one end of this place, a second house had been built, also of wood, but it consisted only of a ground floor. It was this retreat, undiscoverable to the eye of travellers, that the young girl, who had always lived in a fertile and lovely valley, was forced to enter.

"This is your lodging from this time," said the vagabond, as he led Isaure into the house at the end of the excavation. "You see that it was not without reason that I chose to bring you here; this retreat can be found only by those who are familiar with it. People might search the house in front, on the path, and never suspect that there was another house behind. This place can be seen only by those who are up yonder on the cliff, eighty feet above us. But as that cliff is frightfully steep and is on the path to nowhere, no one ever thinks of climbing it, only from time to time a wild goat. So I am perfectly easy in my mind, no one will find you here. This is not so charming and cheerful a home as that which you have occupied, I agree; but what would you have? I had no choice. So make the best of it, and try to accustom yourself to your new quarters. You will be entirely free to follow your own devices from morning to night—except as to going out. Here is a room of good size, where you can make yourself at home; there is a bed, a table, a bench—it is the best furnished room in the house. If I can find a small piece of looking-glass, I will bring it to you; I know that women think a great deal of that. Try to calm yourself and to dry your tears; I tell you again, your virtue is safer here than it is in the neighborhood of the White House. This place seems horrible, ghastly to you now! But you will become accustomed to it, because one gets used to everything!"

Having delivered this speech, the vagabond left Isaure alone in her dismal abode, and returned with Charlot to the house on the path. There, seating himself in front of his taciturn friend, he said to him:

"Charlot, I saved your life once, two months ago, when, as you were chasing a goat, you were on the point of rolling over a precipice, and I, running after you, succeeded in reaching you my stick and pulling you away from the hole into which you were about to fall."

"I haven't forgotten it," replied the old shepherd in a low voice.

"True," rejoined the vagabond, "since that time you have shown the most absolute devotion to me; when I had no bread, I came here, and I was sure that you would share with me all that you possessed. That is well, Charlot; you are grateful, you have treated me better than many wealthy gentlemen have done, and many women of the world; but that is not enough; to-day you must allow me to make use of your house as I choose.—Here is money for it—take all that you wish."

The vagabond spread out before the old shepherd's eye the money that he had taken from Isaure's house; Charlot looked at it indifferently and replied simply:

"If I haven't any house, where shall I live?"

"You will live here as always,—indeed, that is necessary; the girl will occupy the second house, and I shall sleep here, upstairs. But you must swear to me on your life, that you will tell no one that you have anybody living with you."

"Who should I tell? I never see anybody."

"But if by chance any travellers should come here, I shall retire at once to the house behind, and you will never disclose the existence of that secret dwelling."

"No, no!"

"Do you swear it?"

"Swear? I tell you no, that is enough."

"In truth, I place more faith in your promise than in other people's oaths; but you do not take this money?"

"What for? I don't want it."

"Well, I will give you some when you go to buy provisions. You will have to go a long distance, and buy at different places, in order not to arouse the slightest suspicion. With this sum and your skill in killing wild goats and in snaring birds, we have enough to live on for years. Well, is it agreed? Do we live together?"

"Yes."

"And you will not mention us to anyone?"

"No."

"And you will never open your door to a traveller until I have gone to the house behind?"

"Never."

These arrangements completed, the vagabond ascended to the upper room, threw himself upon a heap of straw and went to sleep; the old shepherd, who passed a large part of his time in slumber, did the same in the room below. Isaure alone remained awake, on her knees in the vile hovel to which she had been consigned; she held up her hands imploringly to heaven, she raised her eyes, whence the tears flowed in streams, and in her despair had not the strength to utter a single word.

XXXI

LIFE IN THE HOVEL.—A LAST HOPE DISPELLED

There is in extreme wretchedness a last burst of strength, of courage; when one has reached the climax of misfortune and is compelled to abandon all hope of a happier lot, then it seems that one feels a secret consolation in being able to defy destiny to deal us any additional blow.

Such was now Isaure's plight—that gentle, timid maiden, forcibly removed from the home she loved and had lived in since her infancy, from her protector and from her lover, to dwell in a miserable hovel hidden in the centre of the earth, with no other company than two men, one of whom was the author of her trials and the other seemed entirely insensible to them; and yet she had succeeded in surmounting her despair. Her eyes no longer shed tears, at least in the presence of her two companions; no complaint escaped from her lips; and when she spoke to the man who had torn her from her home, it was with gentleness and docility, instead of with eyes gleaming with wrath, and with tones that expressed the horror with which he must have inspired her.

Several days had passed since the vagabond had concealed Isaure in the old shepherd's house, and the girl's conduct seemed to surprise him. He often sat and gazed at her in silence, for whole hours at a time. The more he looked at her, the more his surprise seemed to increase. One morning, when the old shepherd had gone out on the mountain, and the vagabond, alone with Isaure in the excavation, in front of the door of the rear house, had been gazing a long while at the girl as she worked patiently, sewing goat-skins together, he was so amazed at her mild and placid demeanor that he could not help exclaiming:

"You amaze me, girl; really I am beginning to think that I judged you wrongly, and that you really deserve the good opinion that the two friends had conceived of you. Your docility, your innocence—No, that young Edouard was not wrong to love you, to desire to marry you.—But that man whom you went secretly to see in the White House—what bond was there between you and him? How long have you known him? Come, speak,—answer me frankly."

A feeling which Isaure could not define, but which was not fear, led her to always obey the stranger promptly; so she answered with a sigh:

"I have known Monsieur Gervais since my childhood."

"Monsieur Gervais! Ah! so he never told you that he was the Baron de Marcey?"

"No, monsieur, I never have called him anything but Gervais, and it was by that name that my adopted parents, André and his wife, knew him."

"Yes, I understand; he preferred to remain unknown. Either you are a natural child of his, or, suspecting that you would become pretty some day, he intended to make you his wife."

"His wife! ah! monsieur, my protector loves me as his daughter; but he has often told me that my parents were dead."

"Was it he who placed you with the peasants?"

"Yes, monsieur. At first he came to see me very seldom, then he came oftener. When I was very small he used to take me in his arms, and kiss me and play with me. Then, when I grew up, he used to make me talk; then he taught me to read and to write, and to speak differently. He said that I learned quickly, and that it was a pity that I should be ignorant, like the people of the mountains."

"And then?"

"That is all, monsieur."

"He did not tell you that some day he would take you into the world, that he would provide you with pleasures innumerable?"

"No, he never told me that."

"And when you knew Edouard, and loved him, did you confess that to him?"

"Yes, monsieur; oh! I concealed nothing from him."

"What did he say to you then?"

"He scolded me, but very gently. He told me that I did wrong to love Edouard; that I must forget him, give up all hope of him; that he would never be my husband."

"I was sure of it! It was not for others that he brought you up in secret, that he attended to your education. No! he was acting for himself! Ah! he must love you dearly, to do as he has done. And I have deprived him of your presence, your caresses; I have wrecked all his plans of happiness for the future. So I am revenged at last!"

A ferocious smile lighted up the vagabond's features. Isaure looked away in terror. After a few moments he said to her:

"Do not think that it was for the sole purpose of doing evil that I took you away from your home; I have had many failings, vices even, but to do evil for the sole purpose of doing it never occurred to me; and although I have many reasons for detesting men, I do them justice enough to believe that they would rarely be wicked if they did not find some advantage in it. Listen to me, my girl; I am going to tell you why I stole you from your protector. I am aware that I owe you no account of my acts, and that I am at perfect liberty to withhold this confidence from you; but your mildness, your submission, arouse my interest. Yes, the more I see you, the better I know you, the more you astonish me; I am making you unhappy, I know; and yet I would like to see you happy. What a strange effect is produced by beauty combined with kindness of heart and virtue! I believed that those things could never touch my heart again, but you prove to me that I was mistaken."

Isaure raised her eyes to the vagabond's face; they wore an indescribable expression as she said to him:

"Ah! monsieur, I, too, feel that I would be glad to like you, even though you make me so unhappy; I cannot hate you as I should!"

"Nonsense! hush, my girl, and do not look at me like that," replied the vagabond, turning his face away to conceal his emotions. "Yes, I am pleased with your submission, but your fate will be the same, nevertheless, because it cannot be otherwise; and notwithstanding the interest you arouse in me, I would strike you dead if I saw the Baron de Marcey on the point of rescuing you from my hands. Do not be so alarmed; that can never be; you see that I have taken my precautions too well for that. Let us return to what I was about to tell you,—my reasons for my conduct; and since destiny has united us forever, learn to know the man with whom you are to pass the rest of your life.

"I was not born in poverty, as you must have surmised. My youth was passed in a château; my early days were lived in the lap of luxury, surrounded by numerous servants whose only desire was to anticipate all my wishes. What a change! and ought I to have expected to end in this wretched plight? However, man ought to expect everything, when he is unable to overcome his vices and to resist his passions. But I verily believe that misfortune has taught me to indulge in moral reflections. Of all the changes it has wrought in me, that is not the least surprising!"

The vagabond was silent for some moments; he had taken out his pipe, which he filled and lighted, then he resumed his discourse, interrupting it only to take his pipe out of his mouth from time to time.

"The two young men who came to see you so often were staying at the Château de la Roche-Noire, two leagues from your house; they probably told you so?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Well, it was in that same château that I passed my youth; it then belonged to one of my aunts, a most respectable old dowager, who allowed me to do exactly as I chose from morning to night. I had lost my other relations; I possessed a considerable fortune, to say nothing of that which my aunt would probably leave me; now, she considered that a noble and wealthy young man could never be his own master and misbehave himself in the world too soon. The poor dear woman! she was terribly mistaken! So I began very early to do foolish things! Women, cards, the table, wine, offered attractions which I did not even try to resist; I found it so natural to gratify my passions, my most trivial desires. I had been so accustomed to follow only my own will, that I scattered gold lavishly in order to remove all obstacles from my path. This mode of life soon acquired for me a reputation in society at which I snapped my fingers. I was the terror of fathers and brothers and husbands; for my greatest happiness consisted in seducing some young beauty, in winning her love, and then abandoning her to her regrets."

"Oh! mon Dieu!" said Isaure; "how can one take pleasure in deceiving those who love one?"

"You can't imagine that, my girl, for you have never lived in the world, you have no idea of all that goes on there; you do not know that love is treacherous, friendship is selfish, virtues rare, and gratitude almost non-existent. If you knew that frivolous world as I do, perhaps you would consider yourself less unfortunate to live in a hole. But to return: I soon squandered the fortune which my parents had left me; my old aunt died and her inheritance put me on my feet again; I travelled a great deal in search of new enjoyments, of new faces, and sometimes to escape the vengeance of a father or of a husband; I was, I admit, a very sad scamp.

"Chance took me to Bordeaux. I met there a charming young lady, whom her father, a crabbed old naval officer, kept in the strictest retirement. But bolts, locks and duennas were no obstacles to me; I succeeded in making my way to Adèle's presence; I was even received at her father's house. But I took great pains to conceal my past misconduct. I was then young and well-built; my features were not worn by privation, my eyes sunken by fatigue; I was well adapted to please. I had, above all, the art of appearing to be in love; but upon this occasion my passion was not feigned; Adèle aroused in me a sentiment which I had never felt for any other woman; credulous and affectionate as she was, it was not difficult for me to win her love, to seduce her, to triumph over her innocence. But I swear to you

that, weary of the life I was leading, my purpose, my sole desire was to marry Adèle. Unluckily, her father, having made some inquiries concerning me, refused to receive me any more. Soon I was compelled by a duel to leave the city, but I left it persuaded that Adèle would be faithful to me. Many circumstances combined to assure me that she would never marry another, and I still retained the hope of calling her my wife; imagine my rage, therefore, when, on returning to Bordeaux, six months later, I learned that Adèle had been married a long while, that she was travelling with her husband, and that no one knew where she then was! Thus this Adèle, so gentle and so loving, who had given me so many rights over her,—she, too, had deceived me!"

"Oh! she was doubtless forced to obey her father; and as she loved you, she must have been terribly unhappy!"

"Yes, yes; I was told that her father had forced her into this marriage; but the man who married her was none the less a dastard; he must have known; Adèle must have told him,—no, she could not be his! Well! that man who stole from me the woman whom I loved, who deprived me of the only real happiness that it was in my power to enjoy, was your mysterious protector, the Baron de Marcey! Consider now whether it is sweet for me to revenge myself, and whether I was justified in tearing you away from his love!"

"Oh! monsieur, my protector probably had no idea when he married the unfortunate Adèle that he was wrecking her happiness and yours!"

"Yes, he must have known it! On learning of this marriage, I determined at once to seek out the baron and kill him, or to meet death at his hands; but his whereabouts at that time were not known, and I soon had to fly myself, in order to escape certain creditors who were pursuing me; I sold my estate of La Roche-Noire, and went over to England; I tried to deaden my suffering by new dissipation; but it seemed that from that moment misfortune followed at my heels. The gaming table carried away a large part of my fortune; women and false friends took the rest. I returned to France. In the days of my prosperity, I had lent money, I had been very generous in accommodating my friends; I applied to them in my turn, but I could obtain nothing,—the wretches!

"I learned that Adèle had died three years after her marriage with the baron, and had left no children; it was important for me to know that circumstance. The baron's grief avenged me in part, but it was not enough; and I should have tried doubtless to inflict other troubles upon him, if the deplorable condition of my affairs had not forced me to leave the country again in order to avoid arrest.

"I went to Italy and Spain; I was no longer the same man, I was no longer the brilliant rake, admired by women, and dreaded by my rivals. Compelled to seek constantly new means of gaining a livelihood, I did not blush to ally myself with base schemers, contemptible creatures whom a few years earlier I would have driven from my house! But what was I to do? Work? I did not know how, and the idea of work was intolerable to me. I speedily adopted the habits, the low manners of the dregs of mankind who live without visible means of existence; I fell into the lowest degradation, in short; for that is where vice leads us. Sometimes indeed I cast a glance backward; I bestowed a memory and a tear on the past; I blushed for myself; and more than once I have tossed away in disgust this pipe, which idleness and degradation had placed in my mouth, and which has since become my only pleasure, my only diversion.

"However, amid my disorderly life, amid my debauchery, I still retained a feeling of honor; I never shared in the villanous trickeries which the men with whom I lived committed; they laughed at what they called my principles. Disgusted by the language of those wretches, I left them at last, and determined to return to my country; above all, to visit once more this Auvergne, where I had passed the happiest days of my life. So I returned on foot, almost penniless. But many years had passed since my departure, and so I was not afraid of being recognized. I reached this province several months ago. I had left here some friends and acquaintances, but some of them were dead, others were in foreign countries. I tried to make myself useful to travellers, to obtain work; but it seemed that something about me repelled all those to whom I offered my services. I made the best of it; I entered the mountaineer's cabin, and never yet has an Auvergnat denied me bread and entertainment. Thus it was that I saw once more my old aunt's château, the domain of La Roche-Noire, where I had been brought up. I found a way to enter the château secretly; and at night, while the new owner was asleep, I loved to wander about the old tower, to gaze once more on the walls which had witnessed my childish sports, the porches and galleries which had echoed the accents of my joys. There, engrossed by my recollections, I have more than once forgotten thirty years of my life and been happy once more."

The vagabond dropped his head upon his breast, heaved a sigh and stopped. Isaure, who had been deeply moved by the close of his narrative, had approached him involuntarily, and said to him in a voice that trembled with emotion:

"Ah! you have been very unhappy!"

The vagabond raised his eyes, and looked at her, and seemed more deeply impressed by her features and the tone of her voice.

"It is most surprising!" he cried. "I fancied that I heard her voice! It seems to me that I see her once more!"

"Whom?" asked the girl gently.

"The woman whom I loved best, and who was stolen from me! Yes, you have her features, the same sweet expression—or perhaps it is only a delusion.—However, the sight of this country had almost made me forget the Baron de Marcey; I still hated him, but I would not have left these mountains to find him. Fate, however, has enabled me to take my revenge. First of all, I learned that Edouard's friend, that Alfred was the baron's son by his first marriage."

"Alfred, my protector's son?" cried Isaure.

"Yes, he is his son, and that is why I urged him more than once to abduct you. I tried to persuade him to do all sorts of wild things, even to fight with Edouard! By ruining the son, I hoped to avenge myself on the father. But Alfred was weak enough to renounce his love. I do not know what I should have determined upon. Perhaps I should have sought my vengeance in his blood! But fate has served me better. I learned from Alfred himself that the man of the White House was his father; thereupon, changing my plans, I determined to repay the baron a part of the anguish he has caused me, by obtaining possession of you. I have succeeded; you are parted from him forever.—Now, my girl, you know all, you know the motive which has led me to take you to this undiscoverable retreat."

"Oh! mon Dieu!" said Isaure, falling on her knees, and raising her hands to heaven; "I am most unhappy, assuredly; but if, by remaining in this place, I save my protector's life, and his son's, I shall not complain, and I submit to my fate without a murmur."

Touched by the girl’s demeanor, the vagabond allowed her sometimes to breathe the fresh air in front of the hovel; at such times Charlot kept watch at some little distance; and at the slightest sound, at the approach of any person, Isaure and her companion would return to the inner house. But it rarely happened that a traveller passed along that rocky path, which was at a distance from all the travelled roads. In the fortnight that she had been in the house, Isaure had seen only a few goats, which had shown their heads over the edge of the hole, in which her abode was situated; but no murmur escaped the lips of her who was now leading such a melancholy existence. She seemed to be submissive to her fate; and if she sometimes uttered Edouard’s name, it was because she believed herself to be alone, because she thought that she was musing when she pronounced her lover’s name.

At such times, to comfort the poor child, the author of her misfortunes said to her coldly:

"Your Edouard would have been no better than the rest; his love would have passed away, because everything passes away in this life; and then he would have deceived and abandoned you, or else he would have repented marrying you and would have reproached you harshly."

Isaure made no reply; but she did not believe that Edouard would have behaved thus; her heart told her that he would always have loved her dearly; that, although he no longer saw her, he constantly thought of her; that idea was the last consolation, the last ray of happiness that the poor child had; why should she not try to retain it?

In the long hours which she passed in solitude, she was always thinking of Edouard; sometimes she involuntarily called him; perhaps all hope was not banished from her heart; but when her courage failed her, when she felt more keenly the horror of her new existence, she took from her breast the locket which she kept carefully hidden there; and, after assuring herself that she was quite alone, that no one could see her, she covered with kisses the portrait which she had been told was her mother’s, and which she had sworn never to show to anyone. Indeed, she had no idea that the sight of that beloved image could possess any interest to those with whom she was condemned to pass her life.

Three weeks had passed since Isaure had been taken to Charlot’s house; during that time, only two shepherds had appeared in the neighborhood, and they had not entered the narrow path, but had followed the road which passed at the end of it. So the vagabond believed that although he was only twelve leagues at most from the White House, his captive was more difficult to find than if he had taken her into another province.

Isaure was seated on the bench in front of the outer house; it was mid-day, but the weather was bad and no one was likely to be tempted to travel through the mountains. However, the old shepherd was keeping watch on a cliff near by, and the vagabond himself, who was a few yards away from Isaure, also watched keenly.

Suddenly, old Charlot gave the signal agreed upon to warn him of someone’s approach. The vagabond hastily entered the hovel with the girl, and soon the old shepherd joined them there.

"What is it?" the vagabond asked Charlot.

"I saw three men in the distance on the mountain."

"Three men! Are they coming in this direction?"

"They act as if they didn’t know where they wanted to go."

"Remain in this cabin; if these men knock at the door, open at once, don’t keep them waiting, and let them come in and rest; if they want refreshment, give them only bread and water; if they ask you questions, you know what you are to answer."

Charlot nodded and returned to his house. The passage leading to the inner house was carefully secured. The vagabond made Isaure go in; she had started when she heard mention of three travellers; a secret presentiment seemed to tell her that they were her protector, with his son and Edouard, searching for her. But the vagabond’s eye had become threatening. He had seized his sword, which had been hidden in a corner of the excavation, and seizing Isaure’s arm, he said to her in a menacing voice:

"If a single cry escapes you while those strangers are with Charlot, if you try to reveal your presence, I swear that I will kill you! Do you swear, therefore, that you will keep the most absolute silence?"

"I swear," replied Isaure, trembling from head to foot; thereupon the vagabond left her in her room and returning to the hole, walked to the boards which formed the rear of Charlot’s house, and placing his eye at a wide crack, saw everything that took place in the room that looked on the path; more than ten minutes passed, and no one arrived; the old shepherd was beginning to think that the travellers whom he had seen had taken another road, when footsteps were heard; they stopped in front of the house and a voice exclaimed:

"Here is a house, at all events."

The vagabond started at that voice, for he recognized it as Edouard’s. There was a knock at the door, Charlot opened, and the vagabond shuddered as he saw the Baron de Marcey, Edouard and Alfred enter.

"Excuse us, my friend, if we disturb you," said the baron, while the young men glanced curiously about them. "We are tired; the roads are so bad in these mountains that we were obliged to leave our horses in the village below; may we rest a moment here?"

"Yes, messieurs, sit down," replied Charlot calmly. Thereupon the three travellers seated themselves upon some straw, and Alfred, taking a sword from beneath his cloak, placed it beside him. The vagabond could not avoid a thrill of horror as he recognized the weapon he had used against Vaillant. But he was conscious of a savage joy when he saw the grieved and melancholy expression in the eyes of the two young men and the baron.

"Do you live alone here?" the baron asked the old shepherd.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Do you ever entertain travellers here?"

"Oh! hardly anybody ever comes here."

"And you do not remember having seen a man with a young girl?"

"No."

"Listen!" said Alfred to Charlot; "we are looking for a lovely young woman, whom one or more wretches have stolen from her house; if her abductors did not come here, it is possible that they passed through this neighborhood, that you have heard someone speak of them. If you can give us any information concerning her for whom we are looking, you will be handsomely rewarded."

"I don’t know anything and I haven’t seen anyone," replied Charlot, with cold indifference.

"So all our search is vain!" cried Edouard, in a despairing tone. "Dear Isaure! We shall never be able to find you, to see you again; we do not know even in what direction to look for you!"

The baron took Edouard’s hand and tried to allay his grief, although it was easy to see that he was no less affected himself. Alfred rose; he examined the place where they were, and, noticing the staircase, said to Charlot:

"You have another room upstairs?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"I suppose it looks on the narrow path by which we came; could we rest more comfortably there than here?"

Without awaiting the old shepherd’s reply, Alfred went to the upper room, but he found it empty, and came sadly down again, seated himself by his companions and said:

"We shall be quite as comfortable here."

"This part of the mountains is quite unfrequented," said the baron. "How do you manage to live here?"

"I go to the village and buy bread enough to last ten days."

"What a dismal place to live in!" said Alfred. "How in the deuce can a man make up his mind to pass his life here?"

"Poor Isaure!" said Edouard, "who knows that you are not living in some hovel as wretched as this? Three weeks have passed already since you were torn away from our love, and no indication,—nothing to lead us to hope that we are on the track of your abductors!"

The three travellers were silent for a long time. The vagabond, hidden behind the partition at the rear, did not take his eyes from them, and did not leave his place; after half an hour, the baron rose, saying:

"Let us go on; it is useless to remain here any longer."

"Yes, let us go," said Alfred, "and let us try to remember the road, so that we need not go over the same ground twice, which would cause us to waste time. However, this place is easily recognized; I have seen few spots so wild, so melancholy as this, where somebody has thought fit to build this house.—Well, Edouard, are you coming?"

Edouard rose, casting a last glance at the walls of the hut, and walked slowly off with his companions. Soon their steps died away along the path, then the travellers disappeared altogether from the sight of Charlot, who was looking after them from the doorway.

Thereupon the vagabond returned triumphantly to Isaure, crying:

"It was they! but they haven’t the slightest suspicion, and they have gone away from this place, and will never return to it!"

"It was they!" murmured the girl; it seemed to her then that she had been torn once more from those whom she loved; she had not yet experienced such a feeling of anguish; her last hope was gone; and she fell, sobbing, at the vagabond’s feet.

XXXII

THE NEWFOUNDLAND DOG

The Baron de Marcey and the two friends searched with the utmost care every village and hamlet in Auvergne. The shepherd’s hut, the ploughman’s cottage, the most wretched hovel did not escape their notice. Wherever they went, they asked questions, made inquiries, described Isaure, and promised money to anyone who should furnish information concerning the girl. Everywhere their search was fruitless, their investigations without result, and each day that passed took away a part of the hope that sustained them.

Edouard had sunk into the lowest depths of despair. Since he had known that Isaure really loved him, that no other than he had made her heart beat faster, his love had become more intense. He reproached himself bitterly for the suspicions he had conceived, for the tears he had caused the poor child to shed. The thought of not seeing her again, of having no opportunity, by the power of his love, to make her forget the grief that he had caused her, crushed him and made him insensible to every other sentiment. If the baron’s grief was less keen, one could see by his melancholy expression and by his careworn brow how profoundly he regretted the lovable child upon whom he had bestowed so much care. Indeed, he often accused himself of the disaster that had befallen Isaure.

"If I had kept her with me," he said, "if I had not banished my Adèle’s daughter from my arms, I should not now be deprived of her caresses."

Alfred, whose temperament made it easier for him to overcome grief, did his utmost to distract his father and Edouard in some measure; when they lost all hope, he strove earnestly to renew it, saying:

"Why should we despair? We may find Isaure just when we least expect it; she may escape from the place where she is undoubtedly detained against her will; then she will hasten back to her cottage near the White House. Who knows that she has not returned there now?"

That hope led them back to the little valley. After more than six weeks employed in scouring the mountains, they returned to Isaure’s home; but they found the same solitude as before. She whom they sought had not reappeared in the neighborhood of Chadrat, and even Alfred himself seemed to lose all hope.

Before going to the White House to repair the fatigue of their toilsome journey, the baron and the young men went to the cottage of the peasant with whom they had left Vaillant. They were afraid that they might not find Isaure’s faithful defender alive; but their fears speedily disappeared: they were a hundred yards from the Auvergnat’s house when a noble dog came out and ran toward them with every manifestation of the liveliest joy. It was Vaillant, his wounds entirely healed; he fawned upon the baron, then ran to Alfred and Edouard and licked their hands as if to thank them for assisting him and dressing his wounds when he lay dying in the yard of the cottage. The three travellers, overjoyed to find the gallant creature, who had nearly died for his mistress, well and strong again, returned his caresses. But suddenly, ceasing his demonstrations of joy, Vaillant began to walk about them, as if in search of something; he looked at the house, then took his stand in front of the travellers again.

"Alas! my poor old Vaillant!" said Edouard, "are you looking for someone else? Are you asking us if we have brought back your mistress? No! she is lost to us—perhaps forever!"

The dog looked closely at Edouard; he seemed to understand his grief; he made no sound, but contented himself with walking silently beside him to the house of the peasants, whom they rewarded handsomely for the care they had taken of Vaillant. Then they returned to the White House, where they proposed to remain until they had decided what further steps to take.

The winter had come; it had scattered afar the dead leaves from the trees, it had stripped the shrubs and withered the grass. The winter is sharper and more severe in mountainous regions; nature there assumes a more melancholy and imposing aspect. Snow had fallen in abundance in the little valley; the roof of the White House was covered with it, and the garden displayed the combination of dried and blackened branches and the brilliant glare of the snow. However, despite the inclemency of the season, despite the depressing aspect of the country, the Baron de Marcey, his son and Edouard remained in Auvergne, living in the White House, going forth each day to visit some point in the neighborhood. A secret hope detained them in the place where Isaure had lived; they could not make up their minds to leave it.

Vaillant always accompanied the gentlemen who were seeking his mistress; it seemed that the dog was desirous to dig through the snow to the ground, hoping to find there Isaure’s footprints. They saw him stop more than once and scratch violently; then look uneasily to the right and the left; but the blanket of snow that covered the ground seemed to perplex him and to arrest his advance.

As the baron and the young men often went in different directions, Vaillant was sometimes with one and sometimes with another. Every day they acquired fresh proofs of his intelligence; every day he was pleased and joyous when they left the White House to pursue their search, but he always returned silent and sad.

Alfred argued that they would not succeed in finding Isaure by staying always in the same place; he did not believe that her abductors had remained in Auvergne, and he urged his father and his friend to bid that province farewell for some time. Certain business matters required the baron’s presence in Paris; they agreed to go thither for a short time, and then to resume their search.

But Edouard suggested making one more circuit of the mountains before leaving Auvergne, upon which he regretted to turn his back. Although they looked for no success from that course, Alfred and the baron acceded to his wish. One fine winter’s day the three started on foot, accompanied by the faithful Vaillant. They wrapped and wound themselves in enormous cloaks, and Alfred still carried under his the sword they had found in Isaure’s house.

The travellers walked a large part of the day over roads which the snow had made very hard to travel. They passed the night in a village, and, as their search had been no more successful than usual, they prepared to return to the White House on the morrow. They started early in the morning and took roads which had been pointed out to them as the shortest to Saint-Amand. But, after walking several hours, they found themselves in the heart of the mountains, in an absolutely deserted spot; and they had no doubt that the snow had caused them to wander from their road.

"Where in the devil are we?" said Alfred, stopping to look about; "instead of approaching our destination, we are going away from it."

"It seems to me that I recognize this place," said the baron, "and that we have been here before."

"Let us follow Vaillant," said Edouard; "see, he keeps on, he seems to propose to be our guide."

The dog was in fact going on ahead, manifesting extraordinary eagerness and excitement. The travellers covered themselves with their cloaks as well as they could, to protect themselves from the cold, and decided to follow Vaillant. They soon came to the steep slope of a mountain, and saw before them a dark, narrow path, running between two very high cliffs.

"I recognize this spot now," said the baron; "we took this path nearly two months ago, and visited an old hut occupied by an aged shepherd."

"Come," said Alfred, "it is useless to follow a course that will take us still farther from our destination."

The travellers were about to retrace their steps when, on looking about for Vaillant, they saw him running toward the path at incredible speed. They called him, but he did not heed the voice of his masters, and entered alone the narrow road between the cliffs. The ardor with which the dog ran in that direction impressed the travellers; they went on as far as the entrance to the path, but the prolonged barking of Vaillant, a loud, savage barking, announced that he had made some important discovery.

The baron and the young men walked rapidly along the narrow way and saw the dog in front of the hovel. Vaillant’s eyes were gleaming; he threw himself against the door, scratched at it with his claws, and his barking redoubled in force and fury.

"What does this mean?" cried Edouard; "does not Vaillant’s frenzy indicate that that house contains his assassin? Look! look! he will not leave that door; he looks at us to urge us to second his efforts."

"But we examined this house once," said the baron.

"No matter; it cannot be without some reason that that faithful servant insists on entering that wretched place. O my God! suppose we should find Isaure in this hole!"

"Open! open!" cried Alfred, pounding on the door. But nobody replied; there was no sound to be heard within. Notwithstanding, Vaillant’s anger seemed to wax greater with every moment; his prolonged barking echoed loudly among the cliffs, and the three travellers determined to enter the old hut, peaceably or by force.

After the dog began to bark, a ghastly scene took place inside the second hovel. The vagabond was alone with the girl; the old shepherd had gone to the nearest village to obtain provisions. At the dog’s first howl, Isaure’s companion ran to the door and looked out; he recognized Vaillant; instantly a cold perspiration came out on his forehead; he felt that he was lost, that Isaure’s retreat would be discovered, because no human power could force the dog to leave that house until he had found his assailant. Soon the baron’s voice and the shouts of the young men fully convinced him that he could no longer keep the girl concealed from them, for Vaillant would surely show them the secret entrance to Isaure’s hiding-place. It was impossible for him to fly with his prisoner; he could not leave the excavation and reach the top of the cliff. In an instant the vagabond realized his position, and thereupon he formed a ghastly resolution. He returned to the inner house, carefully secured the passage of communication and joined the

girl, who was listening in the most intense excitement to the barking of the dog, saying in an undertone:

"O mon Dieu! I should think that it was Vaillant! Can it be that heaven has sent me a preserver? Is my faithful companion not dead?"

"Yes! it is he, in truth," said the vagabond in threatening tones, glaring at the girl with a terrifying expression; "but instead of saving you, that dog will be the cause of your destruction!"

"Great heaven! what do you mean? why do you look at me like that?" said Isaure with a shudder.

The vagabond took his sword and walked toward the girl, seized one of her hands, which she raised tremblingly in appeal to him, and said to her:

"You must die!"

"Die!" cried the girl, turning with an imploring glance to him who was threatening her life. "O mon Dieu! you intend to kill me! What have I done? how have I deserved death? have I not obeyed you without a murmur ever since I have been with you?"

"Yes, yes! you do not deserve such a horrible fate, I know; far from hating you, I had for you a feeling—I do not know how to describe it—but my hatred for the baron is stronger than every other sentiment! I have sworn that you should not fall into his hands again alive. I will keep my oath.—Do you hear them? They are besieging this place; soon they will break down the door, which is not strong; that miserable dog will show them the way to this last hiding-place. They mean to save you, to take you away from here! They shall not find you alive! Isaure, you must die before they find their way here!"

Beside herself, desperate, Isaure tried once more to move her assassin; she threw herself at his feet; but in his frenzy, he was no longer himself; in his right hand he held the sword; with the other he bared the girl's breast, the more surely to pierce her heart. Isaure struggled; she tried to escape; and he, detaining her by main strength, tore aside the garment that covered her breast. The locket which the girl wore hidden there arrested the sword that was about to take her life; the portrait caught the eye of the assassin; he uttered a cry of surprise, of horror.

"Can I believe my eyes?" he exclaimed; "that portrait! that woman! Where did you get it? Speak! speak!"

"It is my mother's portrait!" cried Isaure, holding her clasped hands toward him; "she was most unhappy too, they say; oh! in heaven's name, have mercy on her daughter!"

"Your mother! Adèle! Adèle was your mother? What thought is this? Can it be that you are——"

He did not finish the sentence; his sword fell from his hands; he was like a man struck by lightning. But soon they heard a loud crash; the door of the hut had been broken in. While the baron and Edouard entered the room below, Alfred, assisted by Vaillant, and striking the wall on all sides with the sword he had brought under his cloak, succeeded in discovering the entrance to the excavation. He rushed through the passage and entered the second hut, sword in hand, at the moment that Isaure, overcome by terror, fell unconscious at the vagabond's feet.

"Villain!" cried Alfred, "so I was not mistaken: it was you who abducted her! You shall pay for your infamous conduct with your life!"

"Isaure belongs to me!" replied the vagabond, seizing his sword once more; "no one has a stronger claim to her than I have!"

But Alfred had already rushed upon him, sword in hand; a terrible combat took place within a few feet of the unconscious girl. It lasted only a few seconds; Alfred dealt his blows with startling rapidity; he seemed endowed with unusual strength and dexterity. His adversary fell at his feet, mortally wounded, at the moment that the baron and Edouard entered Isaure's retreat.

They were about to take the girl away from that horrible place and carry her out to the path, where the sharp air would probably restore her to consciousness. But the man whom Alfred had overcome still breathed and motioned that he wished to speak. They gathered about him; compassion had succeeded the desire for revenge, and they tried to assist him.

"Spare yourself useless trouble," said the wounded man in a dying voice; "I feel that I am dying,—let me look once more upon Isaure's beloved features. Oh! do not recall her to life until I have ceased to live.—Alfred, you have avenged your father! I am Savigny—the unhappy Adèle's seducer!"

"Savigny!" cried the baron, with a gesture expressive of horror.

"Yes; I see it all now. Isaure is my daughter, my Adèle's child! And I barely missed being her murderer! But heaven decreed that that ghastly crime should not be committed, and I thank heaven for it! The poor child will execrate my memory!—Promise me that you will never tell her that I was her father!"

The three men who stood about Savigny had hardly made the promise he requested, when, after making a last effort to kiss his unconscious daughter's hand, the wretched man fell back and closed his eyes forever.

They carried Isaure out to the path and did all that could be done for her. At last she opened her eyes, glanced about and uttered a cry of joy when she found that she was in the arms of her friends.

"O my God! thou hast saved me!" she said; but a moment later she cried, glancing in terror toward the hut: "But he is there! suppose he should come and still want to kill me!"

"The man who snatched you from our arms no longer lives," said the baron. "You will see him no more, my dear Isaure; he died fighting with my son."

"He is dead!" exclaimed Isaure, evidently with a thrill of compassion; and instantly, falling on her knees, she raised her hands toward heaven, saying: "O my God! forgive him, as I do, all the injury he has done me!"

Isaure's friends listened respectfully to her prayer; but the glances which they exchanged betrayed their emotion at the sight of that girl unconsciously invoking God's forgiveness for her father.

Their first thought was to remove Isaure from that horrible spot, where she had passed nearly three months. The old shepherd returned home just then; they gave him money and ordered him to bury Savigny at the entrance to the path, and to see that the unhappy man's grave was respected so long as he lived.

Then they set out for the little valley. Vaillant ran and leaped and gambolled about in front of his mistress, and you may guess how they caressed and fondled him, seeking to reward him to whom the finding of Isaure was due. The young girl could not credit her good fortune; she pressed the baron's hand and Alfred's; she looked at Edouard, and in that look all her love was expressed.

At last they saw the cottage and the White House once more; they took up their abode in the latter and abandoned themselves to the joy of being united. There Isaure learned that her protector was no longer opposed to her union with Edouard, and that she could without fear give herself up to the pleasure of loving.

After three months of separation and suffering, it is natural to be in a hurry to be happy; Edouard did not wish to leave the White House except with the title of Isaure's husband. So that the marriage was celebrated in Auvergne, quietly, without festivities, without other guests than love and friendship.

The young girl was married under the name of Isaure Gervais; she thought that the last name was her father's, and all her friends were careful not to undeceive her. But Edouard found in his bride no less virtues and lovable qualities than charms and sweetness of character; he considered that all these were worth fully as much as a long genealogy, and he said, parodying the line in *Mérope*:

"She who knows how to win love needs no ancestors."

XXXIII

THREE YEARS LATER

About three years had passed since the events we have described; a short, stout individual, enveloped in an ample redingote *à la propriétaire*, in the pockets of which his hands were buried, was crossing Rue Vivienne about three in the afternoon. After glancing at the new books displayed in the shop of Ambroise Dupont et C^{ie}, and admiring the fine edition of the poem, *Napoléon en Egypte*, by Messieurs Barthélemy and Méry, he went skipping along and was about to enter Passage Colbert, when he came into collision with a lady who was just coming therefrom.

This lady, whose manners were very free and easy, wore a pretty pink bonnet; she feared that, by running against her, the gentleman had disarranged it; she uttered an impatient exclamation and was about to rebuke him for his carelessness, when, happening to glance at him, she shouted with laughter, to which he replied by a cry of surprise:

"Why! I cannot be mistaken! it is the fascinating Fifine!"

"Well, well! it is Robineau! Ah! my dear friend, what a swell you have become in the three years since I saw you!"

"Still the same as ever! still amiable and piquant! What happy chance brings us together?"

"How does it happen that you dare to speak to me? For heaven's sake, take care; you will attract attention! Suppose some of your swell friends, your princesses, should see you talking with me! Great heaven! what would they say? Skip away quick, for fear you may compromise yourself!"

"O Fifine! sarcasms! epigrams! to your old and always affectionate friend!"

"You see, I haven't forgotten the way my old and affectionate friend dropped me when he inherited a fortune!"

"Ah! you judged me very ill, Fifine; on the contrary, it was you who lost your temper right away and refused to listen to me. You are so hotheaded! Why, I remember that you left me in the dark! That distressed me terribly; and if I had not been afraid of being received harshly, I would have laid my fortune at your feet the next day, for what I said to you was only said to test your disposition."

"It's amazing how entirely I believe that!—But let us say no more about the past! You are well aware that all I ever cared for was to enjoy the present, without worrying about anything else; the result being, my dear fellow, that two days after your performance I gave you a successor; for you're not the kind of a blade to inspire an incurable passion!"

"Don't say such things, Fifine. Of course I might have guessed that another man would have touched your heart in three years."

"Another man! Well! you are generous!—Seven others, my dear friend—each more agreeable than the last, and blessed with *very comfortable* physiques.—I speak English now."

"Fifine, if you knew how you hurt me, you would not make such confessions—to me, who have always kept you in my heart!"

"Bah! don't talk such nonsense! But I am very curious to know all you have been doing these three years. Give me your arm; can you do it without fear of consequences?"

"Yes, of course I can."

"Well! let us walk up and down the passage a while—I have until four o'clock—and tell me about it."

Robineau offered Fifine his arm with a sigh which made the milliner laugh; then he began his narrative.

"After we had our falling-out, I left Paris for the château I had bought——"

"You bought a château! Where, then?"

"In Auvergne."

"I should have preferred one at Belleville; it's livelier there, specially now that they've got a pretty theatre like the one at the Rochechouart Barrier."

"Yes, I discovered myself that I should have done better to buy nothing more than a pretty country house.—However, I started for Auvergne; I took Alfred de Marcey and Edouard with me."

"Alfred! he's the man at whose house monsieur got so drunk one night that I had to make tea and other preparations for him. God! how kind I was to that creature!"

"I have never forgotten it, Fifine!"

"No more has the cat!—But go on."

"I had a very fine château. Ah! it was magnificent! towers, galleries, apartments with Cupids on the ceiling!"

"Great heaven! and did you walk about dressed as Cupid?"

"Let me finish.—Unluckily, my château was not new. I made repairs. Then I married—in order to banish your memory. I married a marquis's daughter, who was mad over me. I thought that I had made a superb marriage. But I had to marry the whole family: father, uncle and sister; I had them all in my house. My father-in-law, who was to

obtain a lucrative position for me, obtained nothing at all. My wife turned all my servants away, and hired others who robbed us. My devilish château required constant repairs; when I had finished in one part, I had to begin on another! And Uncle Mignon, who had been appointed inspector-general of my establishment, amused himself picking up pins instead of overlooking the workmen. On the other hand, my father-in-law ruined me with his economical schemes; he induced me to buy flocks of sheep which he insisted on training to draw the plough, saying that they would do the ploughing much faster; but the poor beasts died just as they were beginning to get used to the fatigue. He filled the lofts of my château with plums, declaring that they would make better sugar than beets; but when he set about making the experiment the plums were rotten. He had a canal dug in my park, because he swore that we could catch gudgeons in it and salt them and sell them for sardines; but the canal was always dry, and we caught nothing but rats.—While monsieur le marquis tried these fine experiments, my wife gave dinner-parties and elaborate fêtes. But I could not enjoy them, because I always had to play whist with my father-in-law. Finally, my sister-in-law married a widower with three children, and I had to put them all up at my château. I attempted to remonstrate, but my wife told me that when a man was as rich as I was he ought not to be mean. I determined to find out whether I still was very rich, so I wrote to my notary one fine day, when I had been married two years. He replied that of all the property of mine that he had had, only about fifty thousand francs was left. We had spent about three hundred and fifty thousand in repairs, entertainments and economical undertakings. I lost no time in informing my father-in-law that all I had left was twenty-five hundred francs a year and the château. Thereupon my wife fainted, my father-in-law seized a cane and threatened to give me a drubbing, claiming that I had deceived him; that, in order to have the honor of marrying his daughter, I had represented myself as being much richer than I really was.

"Faith! as I was tired of being scolded and threatened, and of playing whist, I started for Paris one fine morning, leaving them the château, which they were obliged to sell as it brought in nothing; but I turned over the proceeds to them. I am content with my twenty-five hundred francs a year, and if only my wife and my father-in-law do not come to Paris some day to hunt me up—that is all I ask.—That is what has happened to me, my dear Fifine;—My two travelling companions have been more fortunate: Edouard married a girl who lived in the mountains, near my château. She does not bear an illustrious name, she does not dance like Cornélie, but it seems that she makes her husband very happy; they have a lovely little girl, and they pass six months of the year at the White House, a pretty place of theirs in Auvergne, where they have urged me to visit them, which I would gladly do if I was not afraid of meeting my wife or my father-in-law in the neighborhood. As for Alfred, he too has married lately—a certain Jenny de Gerville, with whom he had been in love a long while; his wife is very pleasant; I dine with them sometimes.—There, dear Fifine, that is what I have been doing these last three years. And you?"

"I have flitted about."

"Are you still in the same shop?"

"I should think not! I have been in thirty since. But I think that I am going to settle down at last; the person with whom I am intimate now is looking for a *fashionable* little shop for me."

"Fifine!"

"Well?"

"Doesn’t your heart say anything to you? does not this meeting cause you a delicious emotion, as it does me?"

"Mon Dieu! no! I am not moved at all!"

"Fifine, I still have a neat little income, and I hope to get back into my old department. As we have met again, what prevents us from renewing a connection that was once so affectionate, from adoring each other as we used?"

"No, thanks! I won’t renew anything! You would only have to inherit some more money, and then you’d drop me again!"

"Ah! Fifine! what a rebuke! You cut me to the heart!"

"I am very sorry, but you don’t cut me at all!"

"Let us at least make the most of the chance that brings us together; come and dine with me, Fifine."

"No."

"I know a little restaurant where they make excellent rum punches;—you used to be very fond of rum punch, Fifine."

"I still am, but I won’t dine with you. Oh! it’s of no use for you to assume your affecting expression! it doesn’t touch me in the least now.—It’s four o’clock and I must leave you; I am going to join my little milord, who is waiting for me on Place de la Bourse."

As she spoke, Fifine dropped Robineau’s arm. He heaved a deep sigh and drew his handkerchief, raising his eyes heavenward in his distress; but that only made Fifine laugh.

"My dear man," she said as she left him, "a woman forgives infidelity, but never ingratitude!"

Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:
worthy villager, who know La Roche-Noire=> worthy villager, who knows La Roche-Noire [pg 124]
alive when they took his out=> alive when they took him out [pg 145]

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *Bas.*—Which means stockings, as well.

[2] A *rosière* is the name given in many villages to the girl who wins the prize for virtue.

[3]

How I love this spot! beside these pure waters,
How sweet, in the gloaming, nature to admire!
Born ’neath yon humble roof, he who dwells here
Views with indifferent eye these frowning mountains.

But to a heart susceptible to melancholy,
This romantic spot is full of poesy!
These steep cliffs, these limpid streams,
These winding paths, these swaying reeds,
All these excite me, touch me, and this savage scene
Speaks to my amazed senses an unfamiliar language.

[4]

All rests in the darkness and Idamore alone
From the walls of Benares escapes before dawn.
What is this ancient forest, whither your steps have led me?
But I see a temple, and the luminary of night!

[5]

Where am I? What darkness
Shrouds with a ghastly veil the light that shone for us?
These walls are dyed with blood! I see the Furies
Shake their torches, avengers of parricides!
The vivid lightning seems to strike me down,
Hell yawns!

[6]

I have the blest promise,
That as midnight draws near,
Love will noiselessly open to me
My mistress’s alcove!

[7] *Va te promener!* Literally, as translated, but as an idiomatic expression it signifies: Go about your business!

[8] The point made in French is lost in English. The verb used—sentir—means either to feel or to smell.

[9]

Thy charms all hearts ensnare,
Grace, youth in thee I see;
No joy so sweet, so rare,
As always loving thee.

[10] In French, *il possède dix langues*!—"he possesses ten tongues,"—which makes the pun more intelligible.

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