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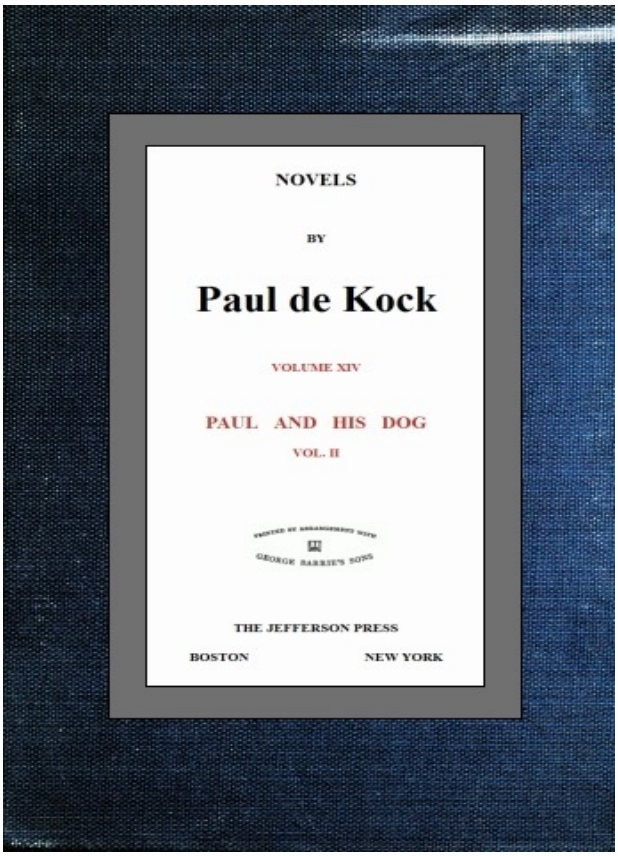

PAUL AND THE CROSS IN THE RAVINE
They then saw the owner of the Tower on his knees beside a grassy mound at one side of the road, in the centre of which stood a wooden cross.

NOVELS

BY

Paul de Kock

VOLUME XIV

PAUL AND HIS DOG

VOL. II

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PAUL AND HIS DOG

PART II

THE CHAMOUREAUS

CONTENTS

I

THE INSTINCT OF DOGS

“You have not told us yet, monsieur le docteur,” said Agathe, “how the little fellow fell into the water. I fancy that he was not trying to play a trick on himself?”

“Oh, no! mademoiselle; but still that accident happened to him as a result of his evil disposition. In the first place, he did not fall into the water—he went in himself. My young gentleman was pleased to bathe, although it isn’t warm enough yet for bathing in the river; but he had been forbidden to do it, and that was a sufficient reason for him to do it. He had also been told, when he did bathe, not to go to that particular part of the Marne, because, on account of the eddies and currents, it was very dangerous and even the best swimmer might be drowned.

“My little scamp, who is afraid of nothing, did not fail to go to that spot to bathe, about three days ago. But when he tried to swim, he found that he was being drawn under; his strength failed him and he shouted for help. Ami happened to be passing—his master was not far away, probably—and in two bounds the dog was in the water. He swam toward the child, who was sinking, caught him by the hair and carried him to the bank. The little fellow had nothing worse than a fright.”

“Of course he patted and fondled the dog, to thank him for the service he had rendered him?”

“He? He called him a nasty beast and said: ‘You fool, to grab me by the hair and make my head ache! you deserve to be licked!’ That was the young gentleman’s gratitude!”

“Oh, dear! he certainly is a wicked little boy.”

“If my son had lived,” sighed Honorine, “I am sure he wouldn’t have been naughty like that!”

“Probably not, madame; for children generally take after their father and mother more or less, although there have been great criminals who were born of most estimable parents. But you would have taken care of your child, madame; you would have repressed his evil tendencies, corrected his faults, early in life; and that is just what poor Jacqueline could not do. The good woman, being obliged to work for her living, could not keep her eye on the boy, who, no doubt, passed his days in the village street with the other children, from the moment he was able to walk. And here it is the same: Jacqueline works for her sister, and little Emile does what he pleases, for there is no way of keeping him in the house. Mère Tourniquoi undertook to make him go to school,—but no; the rascal beat his schoolmates, laughed at his teachers, played tricks on them, concealed or destroyed the school-books—so that they turned him out of the school.”

“He’s a promising child!” cried Agathe; “still, I am curious to see him.”

“And so am I,” said Honorine; “if only we might by gentle treatment and reasoning bring him around to better sentiments!—for he will be a man some day! There are too many people who enjoy doing evil; and it is blameworthy to allow the number to increase!”

“What you say is very true, madame, but in truth I believe that you would waste your time with the lost child; not that he is without intelligence and doesn’t understand what is said to him;—oh! no, indeed! On the contrary, the little rascal has plenty of wit, and he often proves it by what he says; but it’s an evil kind of wit, mischievous and wicked!”

“Oh! doctor, consider that he is not eight years old, so you told us! One would think, to hear you talk, that you do not love children.”

“I do love them dearly until they are two years old; but very little when they are growing up.”

“If this one has intelligence, there is still hope; only the unintelligent are hopeless.”

“Ah! but what I love,” cried Agathe, “is that splendid dog, who throws himself into the water as soon as he sees anyone in danger; that is magnificent!”

“That is not at all extraordinary, mademoiselle, in a dog of that breed. I do not mean to decry Ami’s merit, I acknowledge that it is very great—although our acquaintance began in such strange fashion, as you remember. I

simply mean to say that history, both ancient and modern, relates such astounding facts with respect to dogs that one would be tempted to doubt them, if they did not come from authors deserving of credit. Moreover, we ourselves constantly witness actions which do honor to the canine race. I have read not a little—for one must do something with one's time, and in this small place my profession leaves me a great deal of leisure. If I were not afraid of making myself a bore, I would tell you some of these remarkable stories."

"Far from boring us, it will interest us deeply; but you will allow us to work while we listen."

The doctor, having taken a pinch of snuff, bowed to the ladies, because he thought that he was going to sneeze, and continued, with that supremely happy expression which appears upon the faces of people who are given to gossiping when they see that their listeners are profoundly attentive:

"What I am about to tell you, mesdames, you know already, perhaps; for, I say again, they are facts reported by historians or travellers; you will please stop me if I tell what is familiar to you.

"In a history of the Indies, by Oviedo, I have read that a man who was guilty of a heinous crime was abandoned to a dog who was accustomed to eat the poor devils who were placed at his mercy. Well, the criminal having thrown himself at the dog's feet, praying for mercy, the beast took pity on him and did him no injury. The authorities, believing that they saw the hand of God in the incident, pardoned the culprit. To my mind this is far more wonderful than the story of Androcles; for Androcles had previously rendered the lion a service by removing a thorn from his foot, and the king of beasts recognized his benefactor; whereas the dog had never before seen the man who knelt at his feet. The learned men of those days—who were men of merit too—declared that this miracle was to be attributed to the power of the man's eyes over those of the dog; and this is the opinion of modern scholars as well; they attribute to the human glance a mighty power of intimidation, let us rather say of fascination, over all animals; and it is this power of the glance which enables men to subdue the wildest horses; but I return to the dog.

"A tyrant of a small principality in Italy had a pack of hounds trained to hunt men and regularly fed on human flesh. A child was tossed to this pack and the dogs did not touch it. In this case it may have been that the victim's tender age awoke a secret compassion in their hearts. We often have proofs that dogs are very fond of children; they display with respect to them a gentleness and patience really extraordinary. Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw a child bite a poodle until it yelped with pain, and yet it did not manifest the slightest temper. The Genevan philosopher, who claimed to be a friend of mankind, did not fail to draw this conclusion: that dogs are superior to men.

"The dog displays unwavering attachment to his master; he understands his wishes, knows his habits, always submits to his will: to serve him is a necessity of his existence. In Siberia, during the summer, the dogs are allowed to run wild, so that they may provide themselves with food. No matter how much they may be overworked, brutally treated, beaten even, they return to their masters none the less, at the approach of winter, to be harnessed anew to the sledge and resume their laborious service.

"In India there are the *pariah* dogs, which have neither master, nor friend, nor home. They try to attach themselves to strangers, they exhaust every means of persuasion to induce them to adopt them. It often happens that one of them will follow for a long distance the palanquin of the traveller whose service he begs to enter, and he does not leave it until he falls in his tracks, utterly exhausted.

"According to Cuvier, mankind made the most useful and complete of all conquests when it domesticated the dog. 'Without the dog,' he says, 'men would have fallen victims to the wild beasts they have subdued.' Other animals surpass the dog in strength and beauty, but throughout the world the dog alone is the ally of man, because his nature makes him susceptible to man's advances and obedient to his will. He is a turncoat, who has deserted the ranks of our enemies and passed into our camp, in order to aid us to become masters of the other animals.

"To obtain a just idea of the dog's real worth, we must take note of the value which savage races attach to him. In Australia, women have been known to give the breast to puppies. I hasten to add that this has never been seen in France, because the women here are not savages.

"Men in general are very fond of hunting; there are some men indeed who cannot exist without it; hunting is the first instinct of the dog. In unsettled countries they join in troops to hunt the buffalo, the wild boar, and sometimes even the lion and the tiger.

"Pliny relates the anecdote of Alexander's Albanian dog, who conquered a lion and an elephant in succession, and whose tail, paws and ears were cut off, one after another, without making him give the slightest indication of pain.

"The terrier holds his own against beasts fifteen times as large as himself; no matter how cruelly his adversary may tear him, he dies without a groan. Few of the domesticated breeds possess courage and contempt of pain in so high a degree.

"Nature develops in dogs faculties suited to the countries in which they live. The dogs of the banks of the Nile drink while running, in order not to fall into the jaws of the crocodile. The dogs of New Orleans, when they wish to cross the Mississippi, stand barking on the bank to attract the alligators; and when they feel sure that the reptiles have all assembled at that point, they scamper away at the top of their speed and jump into the stream half a mile farther up.

"Dogs have been known to resort to ingenious wiles to increase their allowance of food; they scatter it all about, then pretend to sleep, in order to attract birds and rats, which by this means they add to their repast. As a proof of their intelligence, we are told of the setter who went into partnership with a greyhound for the purpose of hunting; the one having a keener scent, undertook to discover the game; the other, fleeter of foot, to run it down. The owner of the setter conceived some suspicion, and fastened a chain to his leg in order to make locomotion difficult. As he continued his wandering life none the less, they watched him, and soon discovered that his partner, the greyhound, in order to make it easier for him to perform his part of the task, carried the end of the chain in his mouth until it was time for himself to start in chase of the game.

"One of the most difficult services which the dog is called upon to perform is that of smuggler, in the contraband trade. In that dangerous service, which is often fatal to him, he displays the most surprising sagacity. He ordinarily sets out at night, laden with merchandise; he scents the customs officer in the distance, and attacks him if he feels that he can gain the victory; otherwise he hides behind a tree, a hedge, a clump of bushes. And when he has reached his destination, he does not show himself until he has made sure that he is in no danger of being seen.

"Everybody is familiar with the intelligence and fidelity of the shepherd dog; we see examples of it every day as

we walk about the country; but I cannot resist the temptation to mention one incident related by James Hogg.

“Seven hundred lambs, in charge of a single shepherd, escaped one fine summer night, divided into several bands, and scattered among the valleys and fields and mountains. ‘Sirrah, my boy, my lambs have gone!’ said Hogg disconsolately to his dog, simply putting his thought into words, with no idea of giving him an order. Then the shepherd went hither and thither in search of his flock; while the dog disappeared, without a sound, and without the knowledge of his master, who could see nothing in the darkness. When the day broke, the poor shepherd, exhausted by fatigue and distress, was preparing to return to the farm, when he spied his faithful dog Sirrah, in a neighboring valley, guarding not simply a few lambs that he had found, as one might have supposed at first; but the whole flock, with not one missing. ‘That,’ says James Hogg, ‘is the most amazing fact in my whole experience.’—And, in truth, how can we comprehend the patience, the sagacity and the labor which enabled that dog, in the brief space of a summer night, to collect that whole band of fugitives! It was more than several shepherds together could have done.

“Hogg also relates how a sheep-stealer carried on his unlawful trade with the help of his dog. The thief would pretend to want to buy some sheep, and while he examined the flock, he would indicate to his dog, by a sign which he never mistook, which ones he desired to appropriate. During the night the dog would return alone, often from a considerable distance, and would never fail to detach from the flock and drive to his master the sheep he had designated, which were always the best and fattest of the flock.

“If a sheepfold takes fire, the sheep refuse to go out, but the shepherd dog saves a great part of them by rushing into the fold and barking and snapping at them until he induces them to go out.

“In Turkey, where the dogs are very numerous, every person who meets one at night is attacked unless he is provided with a lantern; for they look upon him as a stranger with evil intentions.

“Petrarch had a dog that snatched a naked sword from the hand of a cutthroat who attacked his master. We have many servants who would not do as much!

“Plutarch relates an anecdote which proves that the dog never forgets his master’s murderers and never forgives them: King Pyrrhus caused his whole army to march past a dog who had watched for three months the body of his murdered master, refusing to eat or drink; he seized the murderer as he passed, and would not relax his hold until the man had confessed his crime.

“You must surely have heard of the dog of Montargis, who pointed out the place where his master had been buried, and jumped at the assassin whenever he saw him; the result being that the king ordered a duel between the man and the dog, in which the latter was the victor and slew the murderer.

“In the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini, we find this anecdote: A malefactor had forced his way into the artist’s shop at night; the dog that was on guard there tried at first to contend against him, although he was armed with a dagger. Being wounded, and feeling that his strength was failing him, he hastened to the apprentices’ room, found them sleeping soundly, and, to rouse them, pulled off the bedclothes. As they could not understand the dog’s persistence in uncovering them, they drove him from the room and locked the door. Thereupon the poor dog, wounded as he was, returned to the robber; but he, being young and active, succeeded in making his escape. Some time after, Cellini happened to be walking one day in Rome, when his faithful dog suddenly darted at a fine gentleman who was passing, and clung savagely to him despite the swords and staves of the bystanders. At last they succeeded in forcing him to let go, but the fine gentleman, hurrying away, dropped from beneath his cloak several valuable jewels, among which Benvenuto recognized a ring belonging to him. He instantly cried out: ‘That is the villain who broke into my house at night and robbed me; my dog recognized him.’—And he was about to set the animal on the robber again, when he confessed his crime and begged for mercy.

“One of the most astounding and most mysterious faculties of the dog—but not all dogs possess it—is that of divination. When the regicide Jacques Clément appeared before Henri III, intending to assassinate him, a favorite dog of the king flew into a perfect paroxysm of rage, and only with the greatest difficulty could they succeed in keeping him in an adjoining room; had they not done so, he would have hurled himself upon the monk and the crime which the latter meditated would not have been consummated.

“On September 10, 1419, the Duc de Bourgogne, Jean-sans-Peur, mounted his horse in the courtyard of the house he occupied at Bray-sur-Seine, to ride to the interview he was to have with the Dauphin of France at the bridge of Montereau. His dog had howled piteously all night, and when he saw that his master was about to start, he darted from the kennel where he was fastened, with gleaming eyes and hair erect; finally, when the duke, after a parting salutation to Madame de Gyac who was looking on from her window, rode forth from the courtyard, the dog made such a mighty effort that he broke his double iron chain, and as the horse passed under the gateway, he threw himself at his chest and bit him so cruelly that the beast reared and nearly unhorsed his rider. The grooms tried to drive him away with whips, but the dog paid no heed to the blows he received and threw himself again at the neck of the duke’s horse. The duke, thinking that he was mad, seized a small battle axe which he carried at his saddle-bow, and laid open his head; the dog gave a yell and fell dying in the gateway, as if still forbidding his master to go forth. The duke, with a sigh of regret, jumped his horse over the faithful creature’s body and rode to the bridge of Montereau—where he was assassinated.

“Lastly, they tell of an equally admirable and equally incomprehensible act of an English bull dog, who followed his master to his bedroom one night. The latter, who had never paid much attention to the dog, refused to let him enter the bedroom; but the animal was so persistent in begging to remain with him that he finally consented to allow him to take up his quarters there. That same night, a servant stole into this same bedroom, with the intention of killing his master and then robbing him; but he was prevented by the faithful dog, who had insisted upon doing sentry duty, and who saved his master’s life by seizing the robber.

“These, mesdames, are a few of the anecdotes which I have collected concerning the canine race and which show the exceptional claims of this faithful animal. I will add that the fine dog belonging to the owner of the Tower, for which mademoiselle feels such a strong liking, is, according to his master,—he didn’t tell me so, but his old servant has often heard him say it,—it seems, endowed with this faculty of divining affection or hatred, of which I have just cited to you some extraordinary proofs. Thus Ami, when in the presence of strangers, divines their feeling for his master; he fawns on those who are inclined to like him; he growls and grumbles at those who would rather do him an injury than a good turn.

“You must agree, madame, that such a dog is exceedingly valuable; with him it is impossible to be led astray by

the manifestations of affection we receive from a person; he unmasks false friends and unfaithful or deceitful women. Many people would pay an exorbitant price for such an animal, and in my opinion they would make a mistake, for it would be very melancholy to know the truth always."

Honorine and Agathe listened to the doctor with interest, so that he went away well pleased with their society.

"Good!" exclaimed the girl when he had gone, "it isn't a bore to listen to him. Now I would like right well to meet the dog from the Tower and see whether he will fawn on me as he did the other time."

"For my part," said Honorine, "I am curious to see this little boy, whom they call the lost child."

"And who is said to be so naughty."

"Ah! my dear girl, we must forgive him much; his parents deserted him."

II

A COW

Not long after this day of visits, on one of those lovely mornings which invite one to wander about the country, the heat not being sufficient as yet to make walking tiresome, the two friends, who had finished breakfast at nine o'clock because they rose at six, took their straw bonnets, threw light silk mantles over their shoulders, and having instructed Poucette not to leave the house, started off in high spirits, saying:

"We will walk in the direction of the Tower."

Agathe remembered the road, which they had already taken once. On leaving Chelles they crossed the railroad and followed the Gournay road bordered by ditches full of water. That road was short; on turning to the left they soon reached the bank of the Marne at the bridge where there was a toll of one sou for each person. This charge, apparently very trifling, made that part of the country very unfrequented; for the peasant looks a long while before spending a sou—two, in fact, when one is obliged to return; they preferred to take a route which was often much longer, but which did not force them to put their hands into their pockets.

The two friends crossed the bridge; since leaving Chelles they had not met a living soul—not a peasant, not a carter, not an ass. The bridge, which was long and solidly built, was also deserted. Nor was there a sign of life on the Marne—not a boat, not a fisherman was to be seen.

But they had already observed that solitude the first time that they had come in that direction; and now that the aspect of the country was changed, the trees having renewed their foliage, the meadows their verdure, the fields their grasses and flowers, the more solitary the spot, the more inclined they were to admire all the majesty of nature, all the beauties of creation.

"Why, we were misinformed as to having to pay to cross this bridge!" said Agathe; "here we are at the end of it, and I see no one at all. Do you suppose we are to toss the sou into the water; that would be decidedly amusing."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when a man suddenly appeared in front of her. He came from a house at the left which belonged to a beautiful estate called the Maison Blanche, of which this same man was the concierge; to this function he added that of collector of tolls at the bridge.

"Monsieur," said Honorine, after paying her two sous, "which road must we take to go to the estate called the Tower?"

"Pass through the village of Gournay, straight ahead, then turn to the left."

"Is it very far?"

"It's close by. The village of Gournay's so small that it don't take long to walk through it; then you take the road to Noisy-le-Grand."

The two young women walked on, and soon found themselves in the village square, where there was a pretty bourgeois house embellished with the name of the Château Vert, probably because of the color of its blinds.

Next to it was a dealer in wines, the only one in the district; which fact spoke well for the sobriety of the people.

Opposite was a little church and beside that a small cemetery. The toll-gatherer was right: everything was diminutive in that place, which had less than a hundred and thirty inhabitants.

The little square was shaded by noble trees which gave it a charm of its own. Trees are not proud; they grow as well in a small village as on the fashionable promenade of a city; ordinarily indeed they are finer in the village; everything has its compensations.

Our travellers found some children on the square, who pointed out the road to Noisy-le-Grand. As they walked in that direction the country became more picturesque, less monotonous, and the ladies soon spied, on a slight eminence, a very pretty house, flanked by a graceful turret which overlooked the whole country.

"That is where Paul and his dog live!" cried Agathe.

"Hush, child!" said Honorine; "if that gentleman should happen to be passing, and should hear you speak of him in that way, what would he think of us?"

"Why, my dear love, I am simply repeating what they say at Chelles; how do you want me to speak of him, since nobody knows him by any other name? No matter, this estate of his makes a very fine appearance; it's like a château. Let us walk along this road—it will bring us nearer."

As she spoke Agathe ran ahead. Honorine followed her, but more slowly. They were then on rather a narrow road, shaded on one side by walnut trees, and intersected by numerous paths.

Suddenly Agathe heard a shriek; recognizing her friend's voice, she turned and saw, about a hundred yards behind her, a cow coming from one of the paths, at full speed, and rushing straight at Honorine, who had an excessive fear of cows and dared not advance or retreat; she simply stood where she was and shrieked.

Agathe instantly ran back, to try to protect her friend; but she was too far away to reach her in advance of the cow, and the animal was within a few feet of Honorine, when suddenly an enormous dog, rushing down from a hill near by, arrived on the scene and jumped in front of the cow, barking furiously as if to forbid her to take another

step. Ami's frantic barking—for it was Ami who had come to their assistance—did in fact terrify the cow; she stopped, turned tail and retreated by the path by which she had come.

"Oh! thanks! thanks! good dog!" cried Agathe, who had been terribly frightened for her friend, and who came up at that moment. But Honorine's fright had been so great that it had deprived her of consciousness; she had fallen to the ground in a swoon.

"Oh! mon Dieu! she is unconscious! Honorine! dear love! come to yourself! the danger is all over. She doesn't hear me—she doesn't open her eyes! And no one near! How can I obtain help here?"

Ami walked about the unconscious woman, then gazed at Agathe, who was in dire distress; he seemed to be trying to read in her eyes what she wanted of him. Suddenly he bounded away and disappeared.

The girl knelt beside her companion, raised her head and rested it against her breast, took her hands and called her name. But Honorine did not recover consciousness, and Agathe, in despair, cast her eyes over the deserted fields, crying:

"Mon Dieu! no one will come to our help!"

At that moment a small boy, poorly clad, with bare feet and hair waving in the wind, appeared on a piece of rising ground from which he could see the path.

Agathe saw him and called to him:

"Go and bring us some water, I beg you, my friend; call someone to come and help me take care of my friend."

The boy's only reply was a sneering laugh; then he went away, leaping in the air and crying:

"They're afraid of the cow! that's good! I'll throw stones at the cow again and make her run at folks."

The small boy disappeared, but the girl's wishes had been understood by Ami; he ran where he knew that he would find his master, and by pulling persistently at his jacket made him understand that it was urgently necessary that he should go with him.

When Agathe was beginning to lose hope she saw the noble beast returning toward her, while his eyes seemed to say:

"Help is coming!"

And his master was soon by his side.

"Oh! monsieur—I beg you—my dear friend has fainted!" cried Agathe.

Paul had already taken a phial from his pocket, and he held it to Honorine's nose, saying to the girl:

"It's nothing; don't be alarmed; your friend will come to herself in a moment. What was the cause of this accident?"

"Fright; a cow came running straight toward my friend, who is terribly afraid of them; and but for your good dog, who ran up and drove the cow away, she would certainly have been wounded."

"See, she is coming to herself."

Honorine opened her eyes at that moment. The first person she saw was Agathe, who was leaning over her and gazing anxiously into her face. The young woman smiled as she muttered:

"I am an awful coward, am I not? But it isn't my fault; I was so frightened that——"

Honorine interrupted herself, for she had caught sight of Ami's master, who was standing a few steps away, regarding her attentively; he still held in his hand the little phial he had used to restore her to consciousness.

It was an easy matter for the two ladies to examine at their ease the individual of whom they had heard so much; and the result of their examination was not unfavorable to him; for although, when seen at a distance, his bushy beard gave him a somewhat forbidding aspect, on looking at him nearer at hand and at leisure, one saw that his features were handsome and distinguished, that his eyes were not always fierce, that his expression was neither threatening nor calculated to inspire alarm.

Agathe, divining her friend's amazement, made haste to say:

"This gentleman came to my assistance, for you didn't come to yourself—I did not know what to do—oh! I was very unhappy!"

"But that cow that was running at me—how did I escape being hurt?"

"Because this good old dog here ran up to defend you, threw himself in front of her and barked and jumped at her nose! Oh! it was magnificent! And then, after putting the cow to flight, he ran to fetch his master to help me bring you to yourself.—Oh! how fine that was, Ami! Come, come here and let me embrace you!"

The girl put her arms about the dog's neck and patted and caressed him; he submitted with a very good grace, wagging his tail, and looking at his master from time to time, as if to inform him that he already knew the two ladies.

Honorine rose and bowed gracefully to the owner of the Tower, saying:

"Pray accept all my thanks, monsieur, and excuse me for having disturbed you in your walk."

"You owe me no thanks, madame; it is a duty to make oneself of use when one has the opportunity. You do not need this phial any more?"

"No, monsieur, I feel much better; but—this is very strange—I don't know whether it is the result of my fright, but I seem to have no legs, they give way under me; I feel as if I were going to fall."

"Well! that would be nice!" cried Agathe, doing her utmost to support her companion. "What are we to do if you can't walk? There are no cabs or omnibuses here, and we are quite a long way from home."

Ami's master, who, after offering his flask, had started to walk away, stopped when he discovered the embarrassment of the two friends. He realized that they still needed him, but it was evident that he hesitated, that it was hard for him not to be guided by his ordinary instinct of aloofness. But Agathe, without speaking, looked at him with an almost imploring expression, and her eyes expressed her thought so fully that Paul walked back toward them, murmuring:

"If I can be of any further use to you—take my arm, madame; lean on it without fear, and I will help you to walk."

"Oh! you are too kind, monsieur! I am afraid of abusing——"

“No, no, take monsieur’s arm, since he is kind enough to offer it,” cried Agathe; “for if you had only mine to support you, we might both fall by the way; it is a long way from here to Chelles.”

Honorine decided to put her arm through the arm which their new acquaintance offered her. Agathe supported her friend on the other side, and they started.

“Where were you ladies going when the cow frightened you?”

“We will return to Chelles, monsieur, if you please. When we came out this morning, we had no definite destination; we just set out for a walk.—That is to say,” continued Agathe, “we came this way in order to see the estate of the Tower, of which we have heard a great deal since we came to Chelles.”

Honorine nudged her friend, to bid her keep silent, but Agathe paid no heed.

“We had just caught sight of it as we turned into that road; and as it seemed to us very pretty at a distance, we were going nearer in order to see it at closer quarters. We did not expect to make the acquaintance of its owner,—for monsieur is the owner of the Tower, I believe?”

“Yes, mademoiselle,” replied Ami’s master curtly, while Honorine nudged her friend again to make her keep silent; but she continued to pay no heed to the admonition.

“Oh! I recognized monsieur at once; we met him one day when we were looking for a certain field. It was then that your dog came to me and made advances. He doesn’t do that to everybody, does he, monsieur?”

“Assuredly not, mademoiselle. He is not lavish of his friendship! And he has one great advantage over men, in that he never gives it except to those who deserve it.”

“Then I ought to be proud of his friendship for me. Oh! you splendid dog! you good old dog! Look, Honorine; see how he walks around us, and how pleased he looks!”

It was a fact that Ami kept circling about the three persons who were walking along arm-in-arm. Sometimes he darted ahead, but he very soon returned, looked up in his master’s face with a joyous yelp or two, then made the circuit of the little group anew, as if to make sure that they had not separated.

This pantomime on Ami’s part did not escape his master, whose face, which wore an expression of annoyance when he first offered his arm to Honorine, began to be less severe.

Honorine, who still felt very weak, was forced to lean heavily on the arm of her escort, and she apologized therefor:

“I beg pardon, monsieur,” she murmured; “I am tiring you, I am obliged to lean so heavily on you. But I am not very strong, and the slightest shock is enough to make me ill.”

“Lean on me, madame; it does not tire me in the least.”

“We have had bad luck for our first walk; do you often meet cows alone in the fields?”

“Very rarely, madame; and I am much surprised that that cow, which probably belongs to a good woman who lives near me, should have escaped and attacked you, for I know that she is not vicious; she must herself have been attacked or irritated by some one, to behave so.”

“Oh! wait, monsieur,” cried Agathe; “I remember now; while my dear friend was unconscious, and I was looking all about and calling for help, a little boy seven or eight years old appeared on a mound near by; he stared at me and laughed, and when I asked him to go for help, he laughed louder and sneered at me and made faces; then he ran away, jumping about and crying:

“‘That’s good! I like that!’ ”

“All is explained then, madame; that little boy probably played some cruel trick on the cow, which thereupon fled from the pasture where she was peacefully grazing.”

“Oh! that was very naughty of the little fellow!”

“Mon Dieu!” said Honorine, “I wonder if it was the child whom they call at Chelles the lost child?”

“Yes, madame, it was he undoubtedly. I saw him prowling about in the direction of Noisy-le-Grand. I am not surprised to find that he has been up to some mischief.”

“Why, in that case, the boy must be naturally perverse,” said Agathe; “is there no way of reforming him?”

“I have tried, without success; he defies punishment, he is insensible to entreaties; he has a most intractable disposition. If age and common sense do not change him, he will be a detestable man.”

While conversing thus they had reached Chelles, and as they entered the village they met Monsieur and Madame Droguet, accompanied by Monsieur Luminot and Doctor Antoine, who were going for a walk in the country. When she espied the new sojourners at Chelles arm-in-arm with the owner of the Tower, Madame Droguet nearly fell backward; she stepped on the feet of Monsieur Luminot, her escort, saying:

“Great heaven! just look! what does this mean?”

On his side the former dealer in wines dug his elbow into Monsieur Droguet’s ribs.

“On my word!” he exclaimed; “will you look! this is surprising!”

Thereupon Monsieur Droguet, always ready to dance, made a pirouette which brought him nose to nose with the doctor, crying:

“What is it that’s so surprising? what’s the matter? why did Luminot say that?”

As for the doctor, having no one to attack, he contented himself with bowing to Honorine and Agathe, although his face betrayed the surprise he felt at meeting them in the company of Paul and his dog.

Monsieur Luminot also bowed. Père Droguet was on the point of following their example, but his wife suddenly caught his arm.

“Well, monsieur, what are you going to do?” she demanded; “can you think of such a thing as bowing to people who have never been to call on me since they have lived in the neighborhood? It’s very uncivil of them! I have a very poor opinion of those women; and they’re hardly settled here before they go about with that ill-licked cub, that Monsieur Paul who also has treated us all very rudely! That was all that was necessary to confirm my opinion concerning those women. Let us go on, messieurs; forward, march! You see, that wretched fellow didn’t even bow to us.”

“The ladies bowed,” said Monsieur Luminot.

“Because you bowed first; it would have been very pretty if they hadn’t returned your bow! Come, Monsieur Luminot, let us go on, I beg; do you propose to remain in admiring contemplation before the skirts of those ladies?”

And Madame Droguet, having given her husband a push to make him go forward, dragged Monsieur Luminot and the doctor away, and almost made them run.

“Oh! what a strange woman!” cried Agathe with a laugh; “what eyes she made at us! Did you see, Honorine? One would say she wanted to turn us to stone.”

“Doubtless that is Madame Droguet, whom Doctor Antoine has often mentioned to us.”

“And that little slim man who stands on one leg when he looks at you is probably her husband.”

When the ladies reached their house, Honorine took her arm from her escort’s, saying:

“This is our modest abode; would you not like to come in a moment and rest, monsieur? I must have fatigued you terribly.”

“I thank you, madame,” Paul replied, bowing, “but I will continue my walk.”

“Oh! do come in a moment, monsieur,” said Agathe; “see, your good dog seems to invite you; he has already gone in.”

Paul’s only reply was to call his dog which quickly returned to his side; then he hurried away, after saluting the ladies.

“What a strange man!” murmured Honorine.

“All the same, my dear love, we were very lucky to meet him; and he doesn’t frighten me at all now. Do you still think that he has a terrifying look?”

“No, oh, no! but he went away very abruptly.”

III

THE EFFECTS OF MUSIC AND OF A MATELOTE

It was a magnificent morning and the clock had just struck nine, when Edmond Didier appeared, very carefully dressed, at his friend Freluchon’s, who had just left his bed.

“What, you lazy fellow! not dressed yet! And it’s nine o’clock, and the weather is superb, and the first days of June are the finest of the whole year!”

“Bah! what do I care for all that? It matters little to me what time it is. I rise late because I sat up very late. A little egg-supper, with some very interesting ladies from the Folies-Dramatiques. Artistes, you see—they are the only really agreeable women!”

“You exaggerate, Freluchon, my dear fellow! We have artistes also who put on airs and are forever posing in company.”

“To them we say *zut!*—dramatic style.—But how fine you are this morning! Have you something on hand for to-day?”

“Certainly; this is the day that we are going to Chelles, to see those ladies I spoke to you about.”

“*We are going* is very pretty! you are going, perhaps—that’s all right. But why should I, who don’t know the ladies in question—why should I go with you?”

“Because it’s somewhere to go; it will give you a chance to see that part of the suburbs of Paris, which is very beautiful. We will dine there; we will have a *matelote;* Gournay is famous for them and it’s close by.”

“That’s an inducement; I am passionately fond of *matelote.* In Parisian restaurants it’s execrable, as a general rule; you can’t get a good one unless you are right on the water.”

“While I go to call on the ladies, you can find out the best restaurant and order the dinner.”

“The best place to get a *matelote* is ordinarily the house of some fisherman who sells wine.”

“Oh! Freluchon, if you knew with what pleasure I shall see the lovely Agathe again! Her name is Agathe——”

“So you told me.”

“She has dark-blue eyes with such a sweet, amiable expression; a slender, graceful figure; perfect grace in every movement——”

“Like a cat.”

“Come, dress quickly, and we will go to the Strasbourg station.”

“Are we going to Strasbourg first? That will be the longest way.”

“Pshaw! if you began to talk nonsense!——”

“I hope to continue.—Well, if it must be, I proceed to sacrifice myself. After all, a day in the country will do me good, and I shall not be sorry to form a little acquaintance with some rustic beauty. A woman of nature—that will be a novelty; for the stage is very far from nature.—Speaking of nature, do you know what has happened to Chamoureau?”

“I have heard that he has made a fortune—or inherited one; twenty thousand francs a year; is it true?”

“Quite true; and, what is even truer, since he became rich, he doesn’t speak to his old friends. He hardly looks at me—at me, whom he never used to quit! He puts on the airs of a great noble! As you can imagine, it amuses me beyond words; and so, not long ago, I said to him in the foyer at the Opéra, where he seemed to be in deadly terror that I would take his arm:

“‘My poor Chamoureau, how is it that, in becoming rich, you have become a bigger fool than you were? I assure you that wealth doesn’t require a man to be insolent; I know that it often makes them so, but there’s no obligation about it.’

“Chamoureau stood there like an utter idiot; he mumbled a lot of words that had no sort of connection with one another, and ended by saying that it was proper for him to adopt a different demeanor, as he was going to be

married."

"Aha! he is going to be married! and to whom?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Some wealthy retired groceress?"

"No, no! he would do much better to marry a groceress. The drivelling idiot! he is going to marry the lovely brunette, Madame Sainte-Suzanne."

"Thélénie! is it possible?"

"It's a fact; he told me under the seal of secrecy; he tells everybody—under the same seal."

"But it was your duty to impress it upon him that he is doing an insane thing, that this marriage will make him very unhappy, that all the men with any good looks in Paris have known Madame Sainte-Suzanne intimately."

"I was careful to do nothing of the kind; he would have believed that I said it from envy, from spite; and then, d'ye see, I am not sorry to see him do this crazy thing. If Chamoureau were a good fellow, if he had shown himself in prosperity a man of heart, devoted to his friends, then I would have done my utmost to prevent him from tying himself to that lady. But as he did nothing of the kind, as he is nothing better than an ass, a selfish fool overflowing with vanity, who pretended to mourn for his wife in order to make himself interesting, why, let him roll in the muck, let him swallow with his eyes closed all the lies his lovely Thélénie tells him; let him roll there till he falls into a ditch, into which that lady will not fail to push him! it will be a good thing! There's no harm done if fools are punished from time to time. I never pity the discomfiture of those people who are insolent in prosperity.—Now I am ready; let us go; that is to say, let us go to the Café Anglais to breakfast—just a cutlet; I shall save myself for the *matelote*—and then to the station."

The two friends breakfasted together. But Edmond gave Freluchon hardly time to eat; he said to him every minute:

"Let us go; you have eaten enough; if you eat any more, you won't do honor to the *matelote*."

"I assure you that I shall; the journey, you know, and the country air; and then we shall not dine as soon as we arrive.—Garçon! a cup of chocolate."

"Great heaven! he is going to drink chocolate too! Why, it will make you ill!"

"On the contrary, it will do me good; it's a habit which I learned from a little Spanish dancer, who danced the *yota*, *bolera*, et cetera, at the Folies-Nouvelles, and who quivered so when she looked at her feet. Ah! my dear fellow, such a quivering!"

"That is no reason for drinking chocolate! I have known English women, but I don't eat plum-pudding!"

"Well! you make a mistake; you should always adopt the tastes of your lady friends; then you end by eating everything."

At last Edmond succeeded in dragging Freluchon from the café; but the little man, as a precautionary measure, put in his pocket the rolls that he had not had time to eat. They arrived at the station, only to find that they had three-quarters of an hour to wait for the train.

"You see, I should have had plenty of time to soak my rolls in my chocolate!" cried Freluchon as they paced the floor of the waiting room. "Oh! these lovers! how unpleasant they are at table!—I say! they sell cake here; I am going to fill my pockets in case of accidents.—If this fellow Edmond were only amiable! I do whatever he wants, I follow him to a place where I don't know a cat, and he doesn't say a word, he looks as dismal as a night cap! Are you going to be like this all the way to Chelles?"

"Oh! Freluchon, if you knew what I feel when I think that I am going to see that fascinating girl again! It seems to me that when I am with her, I shall not dare to say a word."

"Well! that will be lovely! You will give them a very pretty idea of your intelligence!"

"A man ceases to have any when he is in love!"

"In that case, I have an excellent reason for never falling in love. *Fichtre!* I don't propose to lose my intelligence; it's a thing that can't be replaced."

"Do you think she'll be glad to see me?"

"What a question! It's as if you should ask me if I know how many times I blew my nose yesterday."

"If they should receive me coldly—with that frigid courtesy that means: 'Monsieur, you are welcome this once—it's all right—but you will gratify us by not coming again'——"

"Why, you would say to them: 'Mesdames, you will be the losers; I improve rapidly on acquaintance'——"

"Ah! there's the bell, the signal for the train; let's hurry."

"Hurry! what an extraordinary man! What's the use of hurrying? there's always room in the cars; as the saying goes: 'When there's no more room, there is still some.' "

The two friends took their seats, and the train started. Freluchon scrutinized their travelling companions. Two elderly women, a child, and three men, two of whom instantly began to smoke, in the teeth of the regulations, deeming it perfectly natural to gratify a brutish taste at the risk of setting the carriage on fire and roasting a considerable number of travellers. What vile cads such people are!

Freluchon admired the landscape, as much as one can admire it from a railway train. The country was very pretty through Raincy; but Edmond looked at nothing, saw nothing. Whenever the train stopped, he wanted to alight, thinking that they had arrived; Freluchon was obliged to hold him back by the coat, saying:

"We are not at Chelles; do you mean to go the rest of the way on foot?"

At last they reached the Chelles station. The two friends alighted and Edmond asked a peasant woman:

"Which way to Chelles, if you please?"

"To your left, up the hill."

"And the *matelote* country, madame?" asked Freluchon.

"To your right, monsieur; follow the main road, take the first road to the left, cross the bridge, and you're in Gournay."

"Infinitely obliged. I will go in that direction, Edmond, while you go to Chelles; you will find me at the best

restaurant, cabaret or grill-room in Gournay. It is now one o'clock; I trust that I shall see you again by four; three hours to pay your respects is a very generous allowance. I am going to try to find a shepherdess of the Florian type; if it come to the worst I will be content with a bather of the Courbet type.—Bah! he isn't listening; he's already on his way; he continues to be amiable!"

Agathe was at the piano, singing and accompanying herself. Honorine, seated by the window, was working at embroidery, glancing frequently in the direction of the Tower.

Several days had passed since the adventure of the cow; they had seen neither Paul nor his dog, and Madame Dalmont had just observed:

"I am sure that that gentleman was sorely annoyed to be obliged to walk home with us; that was why he ran away without listening, I think, to my invitation to him to rest a moment."

"Why, yes, he did listen, because he answered: 'I must continue my walk.'—Ah! the dog is more agreeable than his master!"

And the two friends had relapsed into silence.

Poucette entered the salon.

"Mesdames, here's a fine young man who wants to know if he can have the honor of seeing you."

"A young man—did he give his name?"

"Monsieur Edmond Didier."

"Edmond Didier! Oh! my dear friend, that's the young man, who—the young man, who—you know—who took so much trouble to help you to buy this house."

"Yes, yes; I remember very well; but that's no reason why you should blush so. Why, you are all confused. Come, come, Agathe, control yourself.—Show the gentleman in, Poucette."

"Oh! my dear love, does my hair look nice? I didn't have time to braid it this morning."

"You look very sweet. But do sit still, don't jump about on your chair like that; this young man will think that you have nervous spasms."

"O Honorine! how unkind you are!"

Edmond's appearance put an end to this conversation. He entered the room very modestly, apologizing for his presumption. One is generally well received when one displays some fear of coming inopportunely. The young man's courteous, gentlemanly demeanor and his reserved manners prepossessed Honorine in his favor. As for Agathe, the flush that overspread her cheeks, her confusion, her eyes, which she was afraid to turn upon the new arrival, demonstrated clearly enough that his presence caused her the most intense emotion; and her voice was almost inaudible when she replied to Edmond's greeting and inquiry for her health.

But when the first awkward moment had passed, the young man, reassured by the cordial welcome he had received, became amiable and sprightly, recovered his spirits, and his conversation soon afforded much amusement to the ladies, to whom he gave all the news of Paris. Then he spoke enthusiastically of the house, the situation, the outlook.

"We also have a very pretty garden," murmured Agathe.

"If I were not afraid of being presumptuous, I would ask to see it."

"With pleasure, monsieur; landed proprietors, you know, are always flattered to exhibit their property; and it should be more excusable in us than in others, we have been landed proprietors such a short time!"

They walked in the garden, which the young man found charming, as he did the whole house. Agathe began to be less embarrassed, she recovered her gayety, laughed at the slightest provocation, and, when she did so, disclosed such fresh red lips and such pretty teeth that it would have been a pity for her not to laugh, in very truth.

"It is very good of you, monsieur," said Honorine, "to remember your promise and to think of coming to see us. But perhaps you know someone at Chelles?"

"No, madame, absolutely no one. The desire to present my respects to you was quite sufficient to bring me here; furthermore, I was anxious to know if you were satisfied with your purchase."

"Yes, monsieur, very well satisfied. Agathe and I like this neighborhood very much."

"Have you plenty of society?"

"We might have, if we wanted it; but we do not seek it; society is often a nuisance in the country. We have a call now and then from the local doctor, an old man and rather pleasant. I think that we shall go no farther; what we have seen has given us no desire to join in the festivities of our neighbors, has it, Agathe?"

"Oh! no, indeed! tiresome eccentricities—perfectly intolerable with their chatter, in which there is never an interesting word. It's so amusing to listen to that! What a difference when one is with people who—whom we like! then the time passes so quickly!"

"Yes, indeed; too quickly, in fact; for I fear that I presume too far, that I incommode you by prolonging my call."

"Oh! no, monsieur, our time is entirely at our disposal; and if there is no necessity for your hurrying back to Paris——"

"Not in the least, madame; I too am master of my time—too much so, indeed."

"Have you no business?"

"Pardon me, I trade on the Bourse. I am thinking seriously about earning money."

During this dialogue between Edmond and Honorine, Agathe frequently glanced at her friend, and her eyes seemed to say:

"Well! do you propose to let this young man go away like this? Aren't you going to invite him to dine with us? He was so courteous to us in Paris; he certainly deserves to have us pay him that compliment."

Honorine understood Agathe's pantomime perfectly, but she was amused by her impatience. However, when Edmond again spoke of going, she said:

"If you are in no hurry to return to Paris, monsieur, stay and dine with us; you will have a very simple dinner, but we shall enjoy your company longer."

"Really, madame," stammered Edmond, bowing in acknowledgment of the invitation, "your invitation causes me

so much pleasure—it is very bold of me to accept—and yet I haven't courage enough to refuse."

"Oh! then you will stay!" cried Agathe, jumping for joy; then, ashamed of having allowed the pleasure she felt to appear, she ran away, saying:

"I am going to see if the hens have laid any eggs."

Edmond was on the point of calling after her: "Oh! mademoiselle, don't make them lay for me!" for no one is so likely as a bright man to say foolish things, when he is in love. However, he caught himself in time, and Honorine said to him:

"You will permit us to forego ceremony, won't you?"

"It is a sign of friendship, madame."

"Very well; I will leave you and finish my toilet. Meanwhile, will you walk, or will you go back to the salon? You are musical, I believe; you can play on the piano; in short, make yourself quite at home."

"Thanks, madame, thanks a thousand times."

Honorine retired to the house; Edmond, left alone in the garden, strolled about there for some time, then entered the summer-house and sat down.

"She comes here to work," he thought; "it is here she sits—she said so just now. Sweet girl! she blushes when I glance at her; and then she lowers her eyes; she seems moved, perturbed. Oh! if she might love me!"

And the young lover, absorbed by his thoughts, leaned against the window and looked out into the country. But he looked without seeing, his mind was busy with Agathe alone.

Suddenly he remembered Freluchon, whom he had almost forced to take the trip with him; who must be waiting for him now, to eat *matelote*, and who would be furious if he did not join him.

"Faith! I can't help it," thought Edmond; "he can be angry, if he chooses, but I can't decline the invitation of these ladies, and deprive myself of the happiness of passing the day with the girl I adore. No, indeed! and Freluchon, in my place, would do the same. Besides, between friends there ought to be no formality."

Agathe did not appear. Hoping to find her in the salon, Edmond went there; but the ladies had not finished dressing. The young man took his seat at the piano, turned over the leaves of several songs, then yielded to the temptation to sing. Edmond sang very well; his voice was sweet and well modulated, and he had in addition taste and expression, which constitute the greatest charm of every person who sings; moreover, he accentuated the words perfectly; when he sang you did not lose a syllable; and it is so uninteresting to listen and not understand!

The lovely song called the *Val d'Andore* was on the piano. Whether it was that the thought that he was at Agathe's piano, or his pleasure in knowing that he was near her, had augmented his powers, certain it is that the young man had never sung so well, that his voice had never been so sweet and pure. And the two friends, who, after completing their toilet, had returned to the salon, stood at the door to listen, and did not move a muscle for fear of losing a word.

But Agathe flushed and turned pale alternately as she listened to that melodious voice, which went to her very heart.

"Oh! how beautifully he sings!" she whispered; "oh! my dear! what a voice!"

"Hush!"

Agathe was silent; but a moment later two great tears rolled down her cheeks. Honorine saw them and touched the girl's arm.

"Upon my word!" she whispered, "you are crying now. What does this mean?"

"I don't know, my dear friend! I don't know what the matter is; but I am very happy!"

"Will you be kind enough to wipe your eyes and not show how susceptible you are to music. Really, I am almost sorry that we invited this young man to dinner."

"Oh! it's all over, my dear; it's all over; it won't happen again."

Edmond having ceased to sing, the two young women entered the salon.

"You sing very well, monsieur," said Honorine; while Agathe, still all a-quiver from the effect that Edmond's voice had produced upon her, stood apart and dared not trust herself to speak.

"What, mesdames, were you listening to me? If I had known that, I should not have dared to sing."

"You would have been very foolish, and we hope, on the contrary, that you will continue, although you know that we are here."

"If it will give you any pleasure, madame, I will do whatever you command. But may I not hear you and mademoiselle, also?"

"Oh, yes! monsieur, we will both sing; and as I have not enough talent to require urging, I will begin."

Honorine seated herself at the piano. She had not much voice, but she put so much expression into the words she sang that one never tired of hearing her.

Next it was Agathe's turn; she faltered, forgot words and air, confused one song with another, and sang very badly because she longed to sing better than usual.

"Do not judge her by this hearing," said Honorine; "really, she is not in voice to-day."

"I am hoarse!" murmured Agathe with a pout, as she left the piano.

Edmond sang again, and his sympathetic voice delighted the two friends so much that they listened too intently to hear Poucette, who stood in the doorway shouting that dinner was served. However, the young peasant's loud voice succeeded at last in making itself heard. They left the piano and went down into the garden, where the table was laid under an arbor. To dine in the open air is one of the great joys of life in the country; and to those sybarites who fear that they may not have everything necessary to their comfort, who make a wry face if a leaf falls on their plate, if a maybug buzzes about their ears, I would say:

You do not know that the sense of well-being which one feels on breathing the pure country air always sharpens the appetite.

The dinner passed off very merrily.

Edmond was agreeable, Honorine witty, and Agathe happy. Everybody was content.

From time to time Edmond exclaimed:

"How lovely it is to live in the country! I think I must hire a little room in the neighborhood, for the summer; it would do me a great deal of good."

"Is your health poor, monsieur?" asked Honorine in a slightly sarcastic tone, for the young man had done ample justice to the dinner.

"I am not ill as yet, madame; but my lungs are weak, very weak."

"Why, that is strange; one would not think it, to hear you sing."

"I assure you that a doctor, a friend of mine, tells me that the country air would do me no end of good."

"Indeed, I believe that it can never injure anyone."

"If I could find a small furnished apartment in this vicinity—a bachelor requires so little!"

"Oh! you can find that!" exclaimed Agathe; "it seems to me I have seen signs on the main street. It would be very nice to have you for a neighbor!"

"It is I, mademoiselle, whom it would make very happy."

Honorine nudged her young friend with her knee, to urge her to be less expansive; whereupon Agathe made a funny little face and held her peace until some new outburst escaped her.

The girl was not as yet accustomed to society, and she said frankly just what she thought; which people are very careful not to do in society—and with good reason.

The music had delayed the dinner, and they were still talking around the table in the garden long after it had grown dark. Suddenly Poucette ran toward them with a terrified air, and said to the young man:

"Monsieur, your name's Edmond Didier, isn't it?"

"Yes—why?"

"Because there's a young gentleman running all about the neighborhood, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"'Edmond Didier, where are you? if you are not killed or eaten, answer me! I am waiting for you! I am waiting for you! I am waiting for you!' "

"What does this mean?" demanded Honorine, while Edmond hung his head and stammered in dire confusion:

"Mon Dieu, mesdames, I beg your pardon most humbly; I remember now that I came here with a friend of mine."

"And you have not thought of him since morning! Oh! the poor fellow!"

"Do not pity him, madame; I arranged to meet him at Gournay, to eat a *matelote*; but it gave me so much pleasure to remain with you——"

"That you left your friend to his own devices."

"He will have eaten his *matelote* without me—that's all."

"But you see that he is anxious about you, since he is rushing about the country calling you.—Try to overtake this gentleman, Poucette, and bring him back with you; tell him that the person he is looking for is here."

"Very well, madame. I'll find him; he's yelling loud enough, so that you can hear him a long way."

"Really, madame, I abuse your good nature. To compel you to receive my friend——"

"Is he not presentable?"

"I beg pardon; he's a very good fellow,—a little free-and-easy,—I mean, a little eccentric; he is very well circumstanced, he has a handsome fortune——"

"That is a matter of indifference to us; but it seems that he must be very fond of you, to look for you so energetically."

"Oh! that's because he doesn't want to go back alone."

At that moment Poucette returned with Freluchon, who, as soon as he caught sight of Edmond, exclaimed:

"Ah! so this is the way you treat your friends; and it was to make me pass a day like Robinson Crusoe, in a horrible place where one doesn't see a living being, that you brought me into the country with you!"

"Freluchon!—don't you see these ladies?"

"Oh! I beg pardon, mesdames; but really that is no way to act; I leave it to these ladies—let them say whether I did wrong to cry aloud.—Imagine, mesdames, that this gentleman, who dares to call me his friend, brought me here almost by force this morning, saying: 'We will have a delightful day; I am going to call on some very charming ladies who live at Chelles, but I shall not stay long; go to Gournay and wait for me; order a *matelote* and I'll be with you at four o'clock.—Very good; I turn to the right when he turns to the left. I find myself in a country which is not unpleasant to look at, perhaps, but where you don't meet a living soul—not a peasant—not an ass—and ordinarily there are asses everywhere!—Oh! by the way, I did meet some sheep, but no shepherd—I saw only the dog—probably he acts as shepherd too. After walking about for three mortal hours in this desert, somewhat anxious concerning my plight and saying to myself from time to time: 'Can it be that a second Deluge has swept this region?' I returned to the modest cabaret where I had ordered a *matelote*, some fried fish, and even a rabbit *sauté*, for I should not believe that I was dining in the country unless I ate rabbit.

"The dinner was ready, but monsieur had not arrived. I waited one, two, three-quarters of an hour, until the *cabaretier* informed me that the dinner was suffering from the delay. At that, I took my place at the table, thinking that he would come in a moment. I swallowed several pieces of eel—the *matelote* was good, I must admit that—but he didn't come. I said to myself: 'What's the use of leaving the eel?'—I ate eleven slices of it, mesdames, with fried fish and rabbit in proportion; if I have indigestion, it will be his fault! Eleven slices! and the eel was superb.

"After dinner I left Gournay and set out in quest of my gentleman; for I was really uneasy. I thought that something must have happened to him, that he had fallen into a hole—there are holes everywhere. I reached this hamlet, and, not knowing where you lived, mesdames, I called my friend—in a heartrending voice; no one answered. Faith! then I rang the bell at rather a fine house, with pilasters topped by great balls tapering to a point. I don't know what style of architecture that is, but I suspect that it's the *Boulette* style. I rang rather violently, no doubt; and as I continued to call this blackguard—I beg pardon, mesdames, I mean this—scamp—it seems that I alarmed the occupants of the house, and four of them came in a body to open the door; there was one gentleman who was armed,

and I saw another dancing in the courtyard. A tall woman, with the voice of a sapper and miner, said to me:

"'What do you want, monsieur, and why are you making all this uproar at my door?'

"Thereupon I assumed an affable manner and replied in honeyed tones:

"'Do you happen to have here my friend Edmond Didier, with whom I would like to return to Paris?'

"At that, the big man who was armed observed that I was a joker, that it was probably a prearranged scene, and the tall woman said:

"'I don't like jokes of this kind; I call it downright impertinent.'

"And they immediately shut the door in my face, just as the little man who was dancing posed as *Zéphir*."

"Monsieur must have called at Madame Droguet's!" said Agathe, laughingly.

"Ah! that lady's name is Droguet, is it? it is well suited to her.—Appalled by my inhospitable reception, I walked on through the streets, shouting exactly like a crier announcing the loss of some object or the approach of the day when taxes must be paid; in villages they never fail to make that announcement, in order to stimulate the zeal of the taxpayers. But your servant came to my rescue, madame, and guided me here."

"And now, Freluchon, I will reply to your reproaches in very few words. I certainly intended to join you, but these ladies had the extreme kindness to invite me to dine with them. Tell me now, if you had been in my place, would you not have done exactly as I did, and accepted?"

"It's very likely; but I would have sent a messenger to Gournay to set my friend's mind at rest."

"You? you never would have thought of such a thing! And besides, there are no messengers in a village."

"You won't have so much difficulty in finding your friend when he has lodgings here," said Agathe.

"Ah! do you propose to hire a house here?"

"No, not a house, but a small apartment."

"Monsieur's lungs are delicate," said Honorine, "and he thinks that the country air will do him good."

"Your lungs delicate! Well! that is a good one!"

And Freluchon threw himself back in his chair, laughing uproariously, oblivious to the glances Edmond bestowed upon him.

Honorine put an end to the scene by saying to the newcomer:

"Will monsieur have something to eat?"

"Infinitely obliged, madame; but when one has eaten eleven slices of eel, one needs nothing but exercise.—But the trains—what time does the last train leave for Paris?"

"At ten o'clock."

"In that case, it will be well for us to start."

Edmond realized that his friend was right; he took leave of the ladies, thanking them for their hospitable welcome; while Freluchon eyed Poucette, whose robust figure aroused his admiration.

Then the two young men went to the station.

IV

CHAMOUREAU MARRIED

Chamoureau, who was in such utter despair when he lost his Eléonore—or who pretended to be, for genuine sorrow does not act a part and make a public display of its tears; it seeks solitude and finds solace in its memories—Chamoureau had contracted a second marriage; he had become the husband of the woman whose charms had turned his head. At last he possessed the fair Thélénie, if it is proper to say that one possesses a woman when she gives herself to one without love. In my opinion one has only the usufruct in such cases.

The newly-married pair had taken a handsome apartment on Rue Saint-Lazare. Thélénie had informed her husband that she proposed to have a carriage, and he had bowed to his wife's wishes, saying:

"My dear love, we will have whatever you wish; I shall always consider it a pleasure and a duty to gratify all your desires."

"In that case, monsieur, you may begin by ceasing to call me *thou*; there is nothing in worse form than to thee-and-thou one's wife; and I am a stickler for good form."

"What, my dear love, after three days of married life, thou—you want——"

"You have thee-and-thoued me three days already, and that's too much; I tell you again, monsieur, that in good society a man and wife don't do it. You seem desirous to appear like a petty government clerk."

"I don't agree to that—but I thought——"

"Enough—it's decided: you are not to call me *thou* any more."

"What! not even in the blissful moments when my affection——"

"Hush! that's enough."

"The devil! that will embarrass me terribly."

From that moment Chamoureau no longer ventured to use the familiar form of address to his wife; in her presence he was like a scholar before his teacher, or rather, like a soldier before his commanding officer. He dared not speak unless he was questioned; he had no opinions, tastes, desires; Madame Chamoureau took all that responsibility on her shoulders.

As is frequently the case with women who have led very dissipated lives, Thélénie, after her marriage, assumed a very severe demeanor and bearing; she became a veritable prude, frowned if anyone made a ribald remark before her, and scolded her husband if he presumed to laugh at it. She refused to go to the Théâtre de Palais-Royal, and she could not understand how women could have the effrontery to waltz.

Such was Madame de Belleville; for the newly-married pair answered to no other name, and Thélénie had said to her husband more than once:

“Remember, monsieur, that your name is no longer Chamoureau; when anyone calls you by that name, don’t answer, but turn a deaf ear and go your way.”

“But, my dear love, there are people who have known me a long while, and who know perfectly well that my name is Chamoureau.”

“Tell those people once for all that you answer to no name but Belleville.”

“There are some who think that I live at Belleville, and that that’s what I mean.”

“Bah! monsieur, what difference does all that make? Suppose you should cease to be the friend of the pack of fools with whom you used to associate, where would be the harm?”

“That’s true; in that case, I cease to know my former acquaintances; I have a handsome fortune, and I ought not to frequent the same kind of society.”

“Oh! by the way, monsieur, there are two persons to whom I give you leave to speak, and even, if—if it will be agreeable to you to see them—you may ask them to call on us; I shall not be sorry to let them see the comfort and elegance of our home.”

“Very well, dear love; and who are these two persons whom you are kind enough to be willing to receive?”

“Monsieur Edmond Didier and his friend Freluchon.”

“Oho! why, if I’m not mistaken, you demanded, before marrying me, that I should break off all relations with those two gentlemen.”

“It is quite possible, monsieur; I may have desired it then; now I feel differently. Am I not at liberty to change my mind?”

“Oh! yes, indeed! absolutely at liberty.”

“This Freluchon was your intimate friend, I know, and I do not wish to deprive you of his company.”

“Oh! thanks a thousand times, my adored wife! I am deeply sensible of——”

“Don’t talk to me like that any more! *Adored wife!* Anyone would think we were acting a melodrama! Call me madame, and stick to that.”

“Very well, I understand, madame—madame—and I will stick to that.”

Some days after this conversation, which will give an idea of the kind of happiness which Chamoureau enjoyed since he had ceased to be a widower, he came face to face with Freluchon one morning on the boulevard.

The latter began by laughing in his former friend’s face.

“Good-day, Freluchon; what are you laughing at?”

“Parbleu! at your expression—your new rig—your new face—for you have manufactured a new face for yourself with all the rest.”

“Freluchon, you see a very happy man.”

“No one would think it to see you walk.”

“Freluchon, I am married again; the lovely Thélénie has become my wife.”

“Aha! so that’s what gives you such an idiotic look, is it? I supposed at first that it was the result of your new wealth; but you’re married, so there’s a double explanation.”

“Yes, Freluchon, I am.”

“You have been married once already; but you were bent on doing it again, and it was your right.”

“Ah! my friend, I am the most fortunate of men!”

“You say that as if you were reciting a fable: ‘A crow perched on a tree——’”

“Tell me, Freluchon, why won’t you believe that I am happy?”

“Bless my soul! I ask nothing better than to believe it. If it is so, so much the better; but as I know these women, as I know that when they have once found a dupe to cover up their past misconduct, they acquire such authority over him that he becomes a mere nobody—an utterly ridiculous person—well, I didn’t know that that rôle would suit you. But it does suit you, so it’s all right, it’s your business. March gayly on, my poor Chamoureau, and may——”

“Oh! I beg your pardon—allow me to stop you right there. I must tell you that my name is no longer Chamoureau, or, at least, I no longer answer to that name.”

“The deuce! have you taken your wife’s name, pray? are you Monsieur Thélénie?”

“No, my name is De Belleville now.”

“What does this new farce mean?”

“It means that my wife, my superb wife, cannot endure the name of Chamoureau; it’s a weakness of hers, but to be agreeable to her, I have taken the name of the place where I was born—Belleville—and we are known by no other name now—Monsieur and Madame de Belleville.”

“Gad! that’s another good one! But after all, you may call yourself Romulus if you choose; it’s all one to me, absolutely.”

“By the way, Freluchon, that isn’t all; my wife, who is very affable with me, although——”

“Although it doesn’t appear?”

“No, I mean, although—although she doesn’t mean to be—has authorized me to invite you and your friend Edmond Didier to come to see us.”

“Ha! ha! ha! worse and worse!”

“What’s the matter?”

“And it is you whom she selects for such errands?”

“Why not?”

“Poor Chamoureau!”

“De Belleville, I beg you, Freluchon; De Belleville! Don’t call me anything else.”

“Very well, my dear Seigneur de Belleville—for if you are not yet a seigneur, I am sure that you soon will be——”

“Do you think so?”

“You are well fitted to reach any height—with the help of your wife’s *cotillon*.”

“What do you mean by her *cotillon*?”

“In other words, her influence. You will thank Madame de Belleville, in my behalf; I do not expect to avail myself of her invitation.”

“Why not?”

“As I am very absent-minded, I fear that I might make a mistake, and call her Madame Chamoureau; and I am sure that she would turn me out of doors on the instant.”

“What a paltry reason!”

“As for Edmond Didier—oh! that’s a different matter. I hardly ever see him now.”

“Indeed? have you had a falling out?”

“Not at all; but he is in love, yes, very seriously in love this time; and as his passion lies in Chelles, he has hired a place in that region and he never stirs from there.”

“Chelles? I wonder if this passion of his can be a lady for whom I bought a little place at Chelles in the spring—Madame Dalmont?”

“Precisely; that is to say, it is not Madame Dalmont whom he’s in love with, but her young friend, a very pretty girl who lives with her—Mademoiselle Agathe.”

“Oh, yes! I remember—a very pretty blonde, that is true. I understand now why he took so much trouble to have that purchase concluded so quickly: Mademoiselle Agathe had already caught his eye.”

“Parbleu! when a young man becomes so obliging, so zealous, so eager to make himself useful, you may be sure that love has something to do with it.”

“So you don’t see Edmond now?”

“I see him when I go to Chelles, to his lodgings; but as I am not in love, I don’t go very often. Still, there’s a very pretty peasant girl there, Mademoiselle Poucette. But when you attempt to joke with her, why! she cuffs you as if she’d pound you to a jelly.—So, my dear fellow, you need not expect a call from Edmond. As I tell you, he is hooked this time; he’s head over ears in love; but this young woman cannot be his mistress—and then——”

“Then he will marry her.”

“That would do very well if he still had the sixty thousand francs that he did have; one can live upon that amount. But he has very little of it left; and as for the young lady, I fancy that she has nothing but her lovely eyes, and they won’t do to make soup.”

“Oh, no! money before everything! That is my wife’s principle, too.”

“I don’t doubt it; she has famous principles, has your wife!—Adieu, Chamoureau de Belleville, lord of the outskirts and of other places which I will not mention. When you have a coat of arms, I advise you to put in some stag’s horns; they look well against the background of the shield.”

Freluchon walked away, still laughing.

“That devilish Freluchon!” said Chamoureau to himself as he looked after him; “he’s always in high spirits; but I don’t believe he has thirty-two thousand two hundred francs a year! After all, I am quite as well pleased that he is not coming to our house; I am quite certain he would call me Chamoureau; he would do it on purpose!”

When he reached home, the happy bridegroom lost no time in seeking Thélénie, and telling her that he had met Freluchon. The name of Edmond’s friend instantly fixed Thélénie’s attention.

“Well, did you invite him to come to see us, and to bring his friend Monsieur Edmond?” she asked.

“Yes, to be sure, I did what you told me; but they won’t either of them come.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Freluchon has contracted the habit of laughing in everybody’s face; he joked me about my change of name, and declared that if he came to see us he couldn’t help calling me Chamoureau. As you may imagine, I didn’t insist.”

“But his friend, Monsieur Edmond Didier?”

“Oh! that’s a different matter! He has a love-affair on the brain; a passion—oh! a grand passion—Look out, my dear, you’ll drop that book you have in your hand.”

“Never mind, monsieur; what does the book matter? Go on; you say that Monsieur Edmond is very much in love—as usual—some caprice for a grisette, for that gentleman takes to that type of woman.”

“No, madame, this time it’s a respectable young woman with whom he is in love.”

“How do you know that she is respectable?”

“Because I know her; she’s a fascinating blonde.”

“You know her, you say, monsieur; and you have never mentioned it to me!”

“Never mentioned what to you?”

“Why, Monsieur Edmond’s love for this girl, whom you know, and whom you consider so pretty.”

“Why, madame, I couldn’t mention it to you, because I knew nothing about it myself; it was Freluchon who told me.”

“But you said that you knew this woman! You don’t seem to know what you are saying, monsieur! Oh! how you irritate me!”

“My dear love, do be careful; you’re tearing the lace in your sleeves—you will have it in rags.”

“Oh! don’t bother about my lace, monsieur; it suits me to tear it, apparently. But for God’s sake, tell me exactly what Monsieur Freluchon said to you about his friend Edmond. Speak, monsieur! why don’t you speak? you see that I am waiting!”

At that moment Thélénie’s eyes emitted flames, and their expression was so far from loving that Chamoureau found them less beautiful than usual. He had never seen his superb wife’s face wear such a savage, threatening expression; he felt ill at ease, he was frightened, and he stammered:

“Madame, you—you—dis—dis—distress me; what—what—what’s the m—m—matter?”

Thélénie strove to calm herself as she replied:

“Why, nothing’s the matter, monsieur; only my nerves are on edge this morning, and the slightest thing upsets me, irritates me. Go on, I am listening.”

Chamoureau repeated to his wife all that Freluchon had told him concerning Edmond’s new love-affair. Thélénie listened attentively; she tried to remain calm; to avoid tearing her lace; and she rejoined with apparent tranquillity:

“So these women who live at Chelles are known to you?”

“Yes, my dear love; it was through me that they bought Monsieur Courtivaux’s house—for twenty thousand francs, as I remember.”

“What sort of women are they?”

“Madame Dalmont, the one who bought the house, is a widow, some twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, with an interesting, but sad face; of moderate means, she told me herself. Her young friend, the one Monsieur Edmond is so much in love with, must be about sixteen or seventeen—she’s an orphan, I believe—but such a pretty face! lovely fair hair, blue eyes——”

“Enough, monsieur! you have extolled this surprising beauty too much already! I shall end by thinking that you are in love with her too!”

“Ah! madame, you know very well that you alone, whose unapproachable charms——”

“And Monsieur Edmond has hired a house at Chelles? he lives there now?”

“Yes, in order to be near those ladies.”

“At whose house he visits?”

“Naturally.”

After a few minutes of silence, Thélénie said:

“Monsieur, all *comme il faut* people have a house in the country, a villa to which they go for the summer. Of course you do not expect me to stay cooped up in Paris all summer, like a shopkeeper on Rue Saint-Denis.”

“Madame—I think—faith! I don’t know; I will do whatever you want.”

“I want a country house, monsieur; we will hire one.”

“Very well, my dear love; I will look about for one, I will read the *Petites-Affiches*.”

“Don’t take all that trouble; just tell them to put the horses in the carriage, and we will look for a house in the neighborhood that I like best.”

Chamoureau executed his wife’s orders with alacrity, while she, left to her reflections, said to herself:

“Ah! I will know this woman whom you love, ungrateful Edmond! and I will find a way to put a spoke in your love-affairs!”

Mademoiselle Héloïse, who had retained her former footing of intimacy with her old friend, because she was careful to call her nothing but Madame de Belleville, suddenly appeared, in evident uneasiness, and whispered to Thélénie:

“I say, my dear, I just saw—down in the street, standing in front of the house, that horrid man who came to your old rooms one day, so wretchedly dressed, all in rags, and who had such a strange name—Croque, I think.”

“Ah! you recognized him?”

“Yes, although he is dressed a little better than he was the other time. He has one of those faces that one doesn’t forget! he looks like a night-owl!”

“So Croque has found my trail,” thought Thélénie, “and some day he will present himself again. Oh, well! it matters little, after all; I have an idea now that I may have occasion to make use of him.”

V

THE CHERRIES.—THE RAVINE

Edmond very soon put in execution the plan he had formed. On the day after that on which he had dined at Madame Dalmont’s, he returned to Chelles alone. He did not call upon the ladies, because a second visit after so brief an interval would have been indiscreet; but he went all about the neighborhood and succeeded in finding an attractive house to let all furnished, a very short distance from Madame Dalmont’s. The house was large enough for a good-sized family; it was much too large for a single man; but the tenant could have possession at once, and it was only five minutes’ walk from Madame Dalmont’s; so Edmond did not hesitate; he hired it for the balance of the year for one thousand francs, one-half of which he paid in cash to Monsieur Durand, the owner of the property.

Two days later, the young man called at Madame Dalmont’s.

“It is a neighbor of yours,” he said, “who ventures to pay you a visit, and who, if it is not too presumptuous, will ask your permission to come now and then in the evening, to play and sing with you.”

“What! have you hired a house here?” cried Agathe, unable to restrain a joyous movement.

“Yes, mademoiselle, a summer house, belonging to a Monsieur Durand, very near that lady’s house where Freluchon was so coldly received when he went there to ask for me a few days ago.”

“Oh! I know the place,” said Honorine, “but it seems to me to be very large for a single man.”

“Oh! what difference does it make? Besides, Freluchon will come to see me often, and pass the night.”

“I thought that he didn’t like this part of the country.”

“He will get used to it; for my part, the longer I am here, the better I like it.”

As he said this, Edmond’s eyes were fixed on Agathe, and she understood perfectly why the young man liked Chelles so much.

But it was not without considerable disquietude that Honorine saw Edmond Didier take up his abode so near to them; and Agathe, who could read her protectress's face very easily, said to her after Edmond's departure:

"How serious you look! Are you sorry that Monsieur Edmond has hired a country house in this vicinity? You frown at me; is it my fault?"

"Your fault? yes, of course it's your fault; and yet I can't scold you! Why, you know perfectly well that this young man is in love with you; and that that was the only motive that led him to hire that house, which is large enough for ten persons."

"My dear friend, I swear to you that Monsieur Edmond has never said a word to me which would lead me to suppose that—that he was thinking of me."

"I believe you; indeed, he has not been coming here long."

"Do you mean that you think that that young man is capable of saying unseemly things to me? Do you suppose that I would listen to them?"

"No. Monsieur Edmond seems an honorable man; he has no evil intentions, I believe; but love is a sentiment that one cannot control. If you should love this young man——"

"Well, where would be the harm, since you think that he loves me? He would be my husband."

"Your husband! My poor girl, before marrying, you must have at least enough to live on. You have nothing, and I fancy that Monsieur Edmond hasn't very much, either!"

"But he is always very well and fashionably dressed; he hired Monsieur Durand's house for a thousand francs."

"That proves that he knows how to spend money, but not that he knows how to earn it.—Come, come, don't you take your turn at making wry faces at me. I am your second mother; I am thinking of your future, of your welfare; you ought not to be angry with me for that."

Agathe replied by throwing herself into Honorine's arms, saying:

"Never fear! I shall not have any secrets from you."

The two friends had hardly finished their conversation when Poucette's voice attracted their attention. The girl was talking to someone, in what seemed to be a threatening tone. Her voice came from the garden; the two ladies were there in a moment, and found Poucette clinging to the leg of a small boy who had climbed into a cherry tree, and continued to eat the cherries although she jerked at his leg, trying to pull him down. But when Honorine and Agathe appeared, little Emile concluded to come down from the tree.

"D'ye see, madame," cried Poucette, "here's the one that steals our cherries; for some time past I've been noticing that the cherries kept disappearing although you ladies don't pick any; so I began to suspect something; I hid and watched, and I saw this good-for-nothing scamp, the lost child, climbing over the wall right here by the cherry tree, and in a minute he was in the tree."

"Oh! I recognize him," said Agathe; "it's the boy who chased the cow that frightened you so."

"Pardi! he don't know to do anything but mischief, the wicked little scamp.—But I'll teach you!"

And the peasant made ready to strike the boy, who neither stirred nor spoke, and seemed to care little whether he was beaten or not.

But Honorine stopped Poucette with a gesture; then she sat down on a bench and beckoned the boy to her.

He hesitated, but at last decided to go to her, after casting a savage glance at Poucette.

"Why do you come here to take my cherries?" inquired Honorine in a gentle voice, and looking at the little thief with no trace of anger.

He seemed astonished to be spoken to otherwise than harshly; he lowered his eyes and answered at last:

"Well! I like cherries, I do."

"Even so, that is no reason for taking what doesn't belong to you,—for climbing a wall. Do you know what a risk you run? If the constable had seen you he would have arrested you; he might have taken you to prison, and they would have kept you a long time perhaps, as a vagrant, a bad boy."

"Oh! I'm too small; they don't put little boys in prison!"

"You are mistaken! little boys are just the ones they do keep in the houses of correction until they grow up, so that they can't loiter along the roads doing nothing."

"Well, then, in prison I'd play with the other little boys, as you say there's little boys there."

"No, you wouldn't play, because they don't keep little ne'er-do-wells in prison to play and enjoy themselves; they make them work; and those who refuse are punished, kept on bread and water, and not allowed to speak to anyone. —Come now, think and tell me whether the few cherries you have eaten are worth all the punishments that they might bring upon you."

Little Emile made no reply; he gazed at Honorine, furtively at first, but at last made bold to look her in the face, as if to assure himself that she was not laughing at him, and that she really meant what she had said. Doubtless the young woman's face inspired confidence, for he seemed to reflect; and after a few moments he muttered:

"What am I to do to get cherries then? there ain't any cherry tree at our house; and they won't give me any money to buy any."

"Why, instead of stealing—which is very, very wrong, even if it's only cherries—you should just come and ask for some; and I would never refuse to give them to you! Especially if I haven't heard of your doing any more naughty things, like throwing stones at a cow to make her run through the fields at the risk of hurting people, especially poor little children who might not have time to get out of the way. Oh! it is so wicked to hurt those who are weak and can't defend themselves; only cowardly hearts do that."

"Oh! I fight with big boys, I do!"

"Don't fight at all; that will be much better."

Then she made a sign to Agathe, who understood her and brought a little basket filled with cherries. Honorine took out two handfuls and handed them to the little boy.

"Here," she said, "since you are so fond of cherries, take these."

The child stared at her in surprise, and said in a faltering voice:

“What! are you going to give me some?”

“Yes, I will give you these, on condition that you won’t steal any more; do you promise?”

“Well! as long as you give ‘em to me, I don’t need to climb over the wall any more.”

And the boy, putting his hands together, received the cherries which she gave him and hugged them to his breast. Then he looked all about and asked:

“Can I go now?”

“To be sure—you are free. Go; but don’t be so naughty any more, and instead of making everybody hate you, make them love you, and you will see how much happier that will make you.”

“And will everybody give me cherries?”

“I don’t promise you that; but people will be kind to you when you are kind to them.”

Little Emile said nothing more; but he made a pirouette and scampered away, shouting at Poucette as he passed her:

“The lady’s better ‘n you!”

“Thanks!” said the young peasant; “if madame gives fruit to everybody who comes to steal it, they won’t take the trouble to climb the wall!”

“Well! what would you have had me give the child?”

“It seems to me that he deserved a good licking instead of cherries!”

“He is said to be very naughty; but on the other hand everybody scolds him and treats him harshly.”

“Sometimes they beat him, and hard too!”

“Well, I propose to try another method of reforming him.”

“You are right,” said Agathe; “*gentleness is better than violence*; I have read that somewhere in La Fontaine’s fables.”

A few days later, Edmond having gone to Paris, the two friends knew that he would not come to see them; and so, immediately after dinner, Agathe proposed to Honorine that they should go for a long walk.

“I don’t want to go in the direction of the Tower,” said Honorine; “it would seem as if we were trying to meet the owner again; and as that gentleman has not thought fit to call to inquire whether my fright had any serious consequences, I should be sorry to have him think that we cared to see him again.”

There was a faint suggestion of irritation in Honorine’s manner as she said this; but Agathe did not notice it.

“Mon Dieu! my dear,” she rejoined, “as the man doesn’t care for society, but avoids it, why should you expect him to come to see us? It doesn’t seem to me that that is any reason why we should deprive ourselves of the pleasure of walking in the direction that is most agreeable to us. For my part, I would like to go toward the Tower, and Noisy-le-Grand; for that is where that ravine is, with the cross erected on the spot where they found a young man dead. To tell the truth, I am very curious to see the place; it will make my flesh creep, but no matter; I am very desirous to see it; I have never forgotten that story that the doctor told us.”

Honorine, whose resolution did not seem very firm, replied:

“Oh, well! if you want to see the ravine and the cross—after all, it isn’t our fault that the gentleman’s estate lies in that direction; and then it would be very strange if we should happen to meet him again.”

“It isn’t likely.”

“At all events, if we do meet him, we will not speak to him—do you understand? we will simply bow to him, but we will not stop.”

“But suppose he speaks to us?”

“Oh! in that case—but he won’t speak to us, as he cares so little for society.”

“Let us start; this time I trust that we shall not meet any cows to frighten us.”

The two friends left the house. It was seven o’clock in the evening; the weather was fine, but the atmosphere was somewhat heavy and seemed to presage a storm. The young women did not allow themselves to be frightened by some dark clouds which appeared above the horizon. They strolled idly along the road to Gournay, stopping now and then to pluck flowers; and after passing through the little village, Honorine said:

“We must not take the road we took the other time, which leads toward that gentleman’s property. Let us take another road—this one, for instance.”

“But suppose we lose our way?”

“We can always find it again by inquiring. Besides, Noisy-le-Grand is in this direction.”

“But Noisy isn’t where we want to go; we want to find the ravine where the cross is that was set up in memory of the young man who was murdered there.”

“Well! that ravine, they say, is close by the road leading to Noisy.”

“No, it’s near the park belonging to the Tower, and this road takes us away from it.”

“You don’t know any more about it than I. However, we will ask.”

The two friends walked along the road, which was unfamiliar to them; it was shaded in spots by fine walnut trees and venerable acacias.

After having walked for some time, Honorine stopped.

“How dark it is!” she said; “has the night come already?”

“No, it’s the storm coming up! Oh! how black it is! What should we do if the storm should surprise us here? I don’t see any house where we could go for shelter.”

“We will stand under one of these magnificent walnuts.”

“Oh, no! when it lightens, we mustn’t stand under a walnut tree, it’s one of the trees that attract lightning.”

“What! are you afraid, Agathe, you who are always so brave?”

“A storm isn’t very pleasant when you’re in the midst of the fields! Oh! mon Dieu!”

“What is it?”

“I felt a drop of rain, a big drop.”

“Let’s walk faster.”

But they quickened their pace to no purpose: in a moment the storm burst; the rain fell in torrents and forced them to seek shelter under a huge tree whose dense foliage protected them almost entirely from the downpour.

“We are not lucky in our walks!” said Honorine; “I shall not leave our garden any more!”

“Nonsense! when it’s over we forget all about it.”

“Yes, but this one keeps on, and we are a long way from home! What an idea of yours to want to go to a place that is said to be dangerous!”

“Oho! it’s your turn to be afraid now.”

“Not of the thunder, at all events!”

“But the thunder is more dangerous than a cross set up in a ravine.”

“Ah! what a flash! it was superb!”

“It was frightful!”

“I think the rain is subsiding a little.”

“Let us go on.”

“Mon Dieu! here comes the darkness now; suppose it should overtake us before we have found our way!”

“Let us walk, let us walk; we shall certainly meet someone who will tell us which way to go.”

“Oh! how slippery the rain has made the road! We shall fall in a moment; that will be the last straw!”

“Let’s take each other’s arm, and hold on firmly.”

The two friends walked on, laughing when they almost fell, shrieking with terror when the lightning flashes lighted up the surrounding country. The rain had almost ceased, but the night was coming on, and the farther they walked, the less familiar the road seemed to them.

At last they met a peasant woman driving an ass before her; at sight of her they uttered a cry of delight.

“Madame! madame! which way to Chelles, if you please?”

“Why, bless me! you’re turning your backs to it!”

“Which way must we go, then?”

“See, take this path to the left; then turn to the left again and you’ll come to Gournay; then——”

“Oh! we know the way after that, thanks!”

“And the cross in the ravine—are we far from that?”

“The cross in the ravine! Jesus, my Lord! you want to go to the cross in the ravine! at night! What in the world do you want to go there for?”

“From curiosity.”

“The deuce! you must be mighty curious, then!”

“Is it dangerous to go by there?”

“Bless me! this much is sure, that nobody round here would want to go through the ravine at night. As soon as you get near it, you hear groans and complaints.—It’s the dead man come back, for sure.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts myself.”

“It’s plain you don’t belong round here. Well, if you take the road I told you, you’re bound to pass, not through the ravine, but by one end of it. Good-night, mesdames.”

“Will you let us take your ass to return to Chelles? we will pay whatever you choose.”

“No, no; I don’t let my ass to folks who want to go to the dead man’s cross! No, thank you! Besides, Julie wouldn’t go, either; she’d balk. Come, away with you, my poor Julie!”

And the peasant who gave her jenny the name of Julie went her way, driving the beast before her.

“We know our way now,” said Honorine; “let’s make haste, for it will soon be entirely dark.”

“The thunder is still rumbling.”

“That isn’t what I am afraid of.”

“Do you mean to say that you believe in that peasant woman’s nonsense, and the groans that are heard in the ravine?”

“I’ll tell you this, that when we pass the place, I shall run. Mon Dieu! how dark it is!”

“Here we are on the main road, at all events. We must turn to the left again.”

“I can hardly see, and I am beginning to be very tired.”

“Oh! look, my dear, this narrow path between those two little hills must be the ravine.”

“Well! perhaps you would like to go in there, to delay us still more?”

“Oh! I entreat you, just a minute, to see the cross. I don’t know what is taking place in me, but it seems to me that I must go there, and—and pray for the unhappy man who met his death there.”

“Why, Agathe, you are positively foolish! I am not willing to stop.”

“Ah! listen! did you hear?”

“No, I heard nothing.”

“Nothing? listen again.”

This time a prolonged groan was heard by them very distinctly. Honorine began to tremble. She tried to hasten on, but her legs gave way; she could only cling to Agathe’s arm, saying:

“You see—the peasant did not deceive us. This is a ghastly place! Mon Dieu! I should say that someone was running toward us now.”

“That is true; but it’s no man running so fast as that.”

Agathe had hardly finished speaking when Ami, the noble Newfoundland, was beside her. After running around the two friends several times, as if to see if they were alone, he went to the girl, rubbed his head against her, wagged

his tail, and stood on his hind legs, fixing his intelligent eyes upon her as if to express the joy he felt at seeing her.

"It's Ami! it's Ami!" cried Agathe, patting the dog. "Oh! now I am not afraid any more; for, if we should be in any danger, he would defend us."

"It certainly is Monsieur Paul's dog; if he is here, his master cannot be far away."

"At this moment, I should not be at all sorry to meet him. See, Honorine, Ami is going into the ravine; now he stops and comes back to us, and now he turns back again. He certainly is urging us to follow him; come."

"But we can't see where we are going; and those groans that we heard——"

"The dog is with us, and I am not afraid any more."

Honorine allowed herself to be led into the ravine by Agathe, who had taken her hand.

The dog trotted before them. It was very dark in that sunken road, but they had taken scarcely twenty steps when a brilliant flash of lightning furrowed the clouds and enabled them to see distinctly everything within thirty yards. They then saw the owner of the Tower on his knees beside a grassy mound at one side of the road, in the centre of which stood a wooden cross.

At that strange apparition the two women halted, grasping each other by the hand; then Agathe murmured very low:

"Do you see that?"

"Yes, it's Monsieur Paul; and he is kneeling by the cross on that grave."

"Isn't it very strange? What can he be doing by that cross?"

"One would think that he was weeping; listen, listen! I believe he is speaking."

It was true that Ami's master, believing himself to be alone on that spot which the people round about were careful to avoid, especially at night, uttered these words:

"Forgive me, unfortunate victim of the most dastardly treachery. Ah, me! if only I could have fulfilled your last wishes, it seems to me that you might forgive me for your death. But it was impossible; all my efforts were fruitless!"

"Did you hear?" murmured Honorine to her companion; "he said: 'You might forgive me for your death.'—So it must have been he who killed the person who is under that cross! Why, this is frightful!"

"It isn't possible," said Agathe; "we couldn't have heard right."

At that moment, Ami, who had reached his master's side, looked up in his face and began to yelp, but softly, not angrily. It was his way of informing his master that he was no longer alone.

"What! is there someone here?" cried Paul, springing hastily to his feet; "where, Ami? where, I say?"

The dog ran back to the two friends who stood a short distance away, trembling, afraid to go forward or to retreat, especially since they had heard the words uttered by that mysterious man.

"What! ladies?" cried Paul, stopping in front of them. "Why, this is strange; so far as the darkness permits me to distinguish your features, I seem to recognize the ladies whom I escorted back to Chelles a few weeks ago."

"Yes, monsieur, it is we," replied Agathe, who was the first to recover her courage. "It is we again, and sorely embarrassed; for we were surprised by the storm, then by the darkness; we lost our way, and I do not know what would have become of us, but for your dog. He met us and recognized us; and we followed him, having no idea where he was leading us."

"But you are a long way from Chelles; did you find no protection from the storm?"

"Only some big trees. It is so deserted about here."

"Is madame indisposed?"

This question was addressed to Honorine, who, pale as a statue, had not yet uttered a word, because she recalled too distinctly those uttered by their companion when he believed himself to be alone before the cross on the grave.

But, feeling that her companion was nudging her, Madame Dalmont said in a faltering tone:

"No, monsieur, no; I am not ill; but I had a fright, and——"

"She was afraid of the storm," interposed Agathe hastily; "and just now she admitted to me that she could not walk."

"Oh! that's all over, and I can walk very well now."

"Since chance has placed me in your path again, mesdames, you will allow me to act as your guide once more, and to take you home."

"Oh! I thank you, monsieur, but if you will be kind enough to take us as far as the bridge at Gournay, that will be sufficient. Really, you might well conceive a strange idea of us, when you constantly find us wandering about the country at night, and always obliged to call upon you for assistance!"

"When I am able to render a trifling service, madame, my thoughts do not go beyond it, and I do not try to guess by what circumstances the occasion was brought about. I am simply doing my duty, and you owe me no gratitude."

"Oh, dear! I believe it is beginning to rain again!" cried Agathe; "for my part, monsieur may think what he pleases, but I am very glad that we met him, and I accept his arm with pleasure."

And the girl took Monsieur Paul's arm without more ado. He looked at Honorine, who, after a moment's indecision, decided at last to take his other arm, and they started off at a rapid pace, escorted by the faithful Ami.

But Honorine's arm trembled so in her cavalier's that he finally said:

"How you tremble, madame! is it with cold, or with fear of the storm? It is passing over, and you will reach home safely."

"Yes, monsieur, it's the thunder; it has upset me completely."

"Pray lean on me, madame; one would think that you were afraid of tiring me, and I can hardly feel you."

"Thanks, monsieur, thanks; I am leaning on you as much as I need."

"We were altogether lost when we saw you, thanks to your dog," said Agathe; "that is a very lonely spot where you were, monsieur!"

"Yes, mademoiselle; yet it is quite near my house."

“That road, monsieur, is the ravine where there is a cross, is it not?”

If Honorine had been next to Agathe, she would have pinched her viciously, to make her regret her question, but their escort separated them; so that she could only make a convulsive movement, which she instantly checked, pretending that she had made a misstep.

“Yes, mademoiselle,” replied Paul curtly, “that is the ravine of the cross.”

“We have been told a very sad story about that cross—that a young man was found dead on that spot, nine or ten years ago, I believe. Is it true, monsieur?”

Honorine would have beaten Agathe with the greatest satisfaction; she began to cough as if she would tear her throat to tatters.

“I too have heard of that occurrence, mademoiselle,” replied their companion in a gloomy tone.

“And the unfortunate man’s assassins have never been discovered?”

“Assassins!” exclaimed Paul in a loud voice, raising his head proudly. “Who told you, mademoiselle, that the person found dead on that spot had been assassinated?”

“Oh! mon Dieu! no one, monsieur, no one. I said that, because the people who tell the story——”

“The world almost always judges falsely; it never knows the true inwardness of things; and as it is more disposed to believe evil than good, as soon as a stranger is found dead by the roadside, it says: ‘He was murdered!’—You are still very young, mademoiselle! Distrust the judgments of the world; you will often have occasion to realize their injustice.”

“Here is Gournay bridge,” said Honorine; “will monsieur leave us now?”

“No, madame; unless you bid me to do so, I shall not leave you, trembling as you are, out in the country, at night. I shall escort you to your home.”

Honorine bowed and they walked on. But they were silent, for Agathe dared not speak since their guide had almost lost his temper in answering her last question.

They reached Honorine’s house, and Paul bowed to the ladies, saying:

“You are at home now, I believe?”

“Yes, monsieur. I do not know how to thank you——”

“For what, madame, pray? I have simply done my duty.”

“Adieu, Ami; adieu, my good dog!”

The dog and his master took their leave.

“Oh! I could have beaten you!” said Honorine, “when you questioned that man about the story of the cross!”

“Why so? You heard him answer that the young man who was found there was not murdered.”

“But since he was the one who killed him, could you expect him to admit it?”

“That man an assassin! Nonsense! it’s impossible. Do you believe it, my dear love?”

“I believe—Mon Dieu! I don’t know what to believe; but this much is certain, that I will not walk in that direction again. Let’s go to bed; what with the fright, excitement, fatigue and the storm, I am completely exhausted; and you?”

“I? Oh! I regret that we didn’t go as far as the cross in the ravine. I would have liked to pray for him who lies there!”

VI

CALUMNY

Several days had passed since the memorable evening of the storm. Honorine and Agathe had promised each other never to breathe a word of what they had seen and heard that evening by the cross in the ravine. There are some subjects with respect to which the slightest indiscretion is a crime, in that it may have the most serious consequences; and the words which the owner of the Tower had uttered when he was on his knees beside the cross, were of those which one regrets having heard, and which one tries to forget.

However, there was no reason why the two friends should not discuss the subject between themselves, and in fact they often did.

Agathe, who always defended Paul, would exclaim:

“No, that man is not an assassin! I am absolutely convinced of it. Indeed, the very emotion that he showed when I said that a stranger had been murdered in the ravine, and the warmth with which he repelled that suggestion prove that it is false.”

“It is a fact that he did seem keenly wounded by your words. But why, then, did he ask the forgiveness of the man who is buried there?—When one has fought a duel, loyally and honorably, it is no crime; the victor may regret his victory, but he does not accuse himself of it as of a criminal act.”

“But how can we tell how it happened—what brought it about?”

“Well, let us say no more about it; that will be the better way.”

“You are right; let us never mention it again.”

But it rarely happened that the following day passed without Honorine herself leading the conversation to the subject of the owner of the Tower. And after talking about him, the young woman would be thoughtful and melancholy for a long while.

Agathe noticed this fact, but she was very careful not to mention it to her friend; women very quickly understand the secrets of the heart, and know when it is advisable not to seem to have divined them.

Edmond had returned to Chelles; he had passed several days in Paris, because he had been led to hope for a very well-paid position in a banking house; but it had been given to another and the young man was not cast down. He still had about twenty thousand francs; with that amount, with love in one’s heart, and with a great hope of its

being reciprocated, one has before one a whole future of happiness.

One morning the two ladies were working in the garden and Père Ledrux was raking a path a short distance away, when Honorine suddenly said:

"It's a long while since we have had a call from Doctor Antoine Beaubichon; I wonder if he can be sick?—Père Ledrux, do you know whether Doctor Antoine is well?"

"Oh, yes!" replied the gardener; "I saw him this very morning going to Madame Droguet's.—Tutu-turlututu."

"It's strange that he hasn't been to see us for a fortnight."

"Well! perhaps it's because he agrees with the rest—that you have enough company without him!"

"What's that? enough company? I don't understand. What do you mean by that, Père Ledrux?"

"I—nothing at all; in the first place, you understand it don't make any difference to me, it ain't any of my business; you can have whole regiments come to see you for all me; you're your own mistresses, and I ain't the one to find fault!—But you know, there's some folks who do nothing but meddle with what don't concern 'em, and talk—why, just for the sake of talking!"

"Do you understand one word of all that he says, Agathe?"

"Not very well; but it seems that people think that we receive a great deal of company. Isn't that what they say, Père Ledrux?"

"Yes, they say that you receive a good many men; that you've had some come from Paris, without counting those from this part of the country, who go to walk with you in the evening.—Tutu—turlututu."

"You hear, Agathe; what do you think of that?"

"Why, I think that it's an outrage, and that people in the country are even more unkind than they are in large cities.—Poucette, is it true that many men come here?"

"Oh! my word, mamzelle, I haven't ever seen anybody come but our neighbor Monsieur Edmond, and then two or three times his friend, Monsieur Freluchon, who's so full of mischief.—Oh! what a scamp that little man is!"

"Where did you hear all this about us, Père Ledrux?"

"Bless me! a word here and a word there; you hear people jabbering; you may not listen, but you hear all the same. In the first place, when I'm working in Madame Droguet's garden, she's always talking about her neighbors, and I heard her say to Madame Jarnouillard the other day—or Madame Remplumé, I don't just know which; in fact, I think they was all three there—and Madame Droguet, she says:

"'You know Monsieur Durand has let that nice house of his close by, almost opposite me; but what you don't know perhaps is that he's let it to a young dandy from Paris, who's come there to live all alone, without any servants; Mère Lupot opposite does his housework.'

"'And what can one man all alone do with that big house, where there's room enough for two families?' says Madame Jarnouillard.

"'Oh! you understand, mesdames, the young dandy has his reasons for going to such an altogether useless expense. He's settled here because he's on intimate terms with the two newcomers in the Courtivaux house.'

"When they talk about you, they always say: 'the ladies in the Courtivaux house,' as a matter of habit, because, you see, Monsieur Courtivaux lived here a long time."

"Very well, Père Ledrux; go on."

"'Yes,' says Mame Droguet, 'he goes there night and morning; he's always prowling round there. Which of 'em is he in love with? no one knows; perhaps it's both.'"

"Oh! my dear love!"

"Hush! let him go on."

"'And then,' says Mame Droguet, 'he's got a friend who looks like a regular good-for-nothing; it's the same fellow who had the face to knock at my door very late one night, to ask if we had seen his friend Edmond Didier; and with such a sly, impertinent air! humming his tra la la!'

"'Oh! what do such people amount to anyway!' says La Remplumé; 'this gives me a very poor opinion of the women in the Courtivaux house.'

"'But that ain't all,' says La Droguet; 'guess who we saw walking home with 'em the other night—at quite a late hour?'

"'The two young men from Paris?'

"'No. Oh! they've made other acquaintances here. They came home arm-in-arm with Monsieur Paul and his dog!'

"'Is it possible?'

"'Did they have the dog's arm too?'

"'I didn't say they had the dog's arm! I said the dog was in the party. And it was very lately, the night of the storm—don't you remember?'

"'Perfectly! I'm afraid of the thunder, and I stuffed my head in a butter crock so as not to see the flashes! I put it in so far that I couldn't get it out again, and I says to my husband: "Break the crock, Jarnouillard, I can't move my head;" and he replied, as calmly as you please: "That would be a pity; it's almost new!" So I was obliged to break it myself by banging my head against a wall.'

"'Never mind about your crock!' says Mame Droguet impatiently; 'we're talking about these newcomers. How does it happen that after living in this part of the country such a short time, they're already on intimate terms with the owner of the Tower—that disgusting man, that ogre, who won't speak to anybody? It seems to me more than extraordinary.'

"'It is very mysterious, that's so.'

"'I should say that it was suspicious even.'

"'Well! birds of a feather flock together, as the proverb says. The bear of the Tower must have found these ladies to his taste!'

"'As for me,' says Mame Droguet, 'I have a very bad opinion of the persons in the Courtivaux house.'

"'It isn't Monsieur Courtivaux's, since he has sold it.'

"'That don't make any difference. Besides, we don't know whether these fine ladies have paid for the house; there's so many people who buy and then don't pay.'

"At that, you see, I couldn't help putting in my word.

"'So far as that goes,' says I, 'I'm very sure that Madame Dalmont has paid for the house. I had a letter from the notary telling me to give 'em the keys and everything.'"

"Thanks, Père Ledrux, thanks for defending us on that point; but pray understand that the remarks, the insults of those ladies affect us very little! When one knows that one has no reason for self-reproach, one should hold oneself above the sneers of calumny! But we congratulate ourselves now that we have not called on that woman, that we have not made a friend of her."

"It's just that thing that's vexed her most, I tell you! And she only says all these nasty things about you from spite because you haven't been to see her. But what I can't understand is how there's anybody who'll allow himself to be taken in by all that tittle-tattle. It's just because Mame Droguet invites 'em to dinner. She says to Monsieur Luminot: 'You must choose between the society at the Courtivaux house and mine, monsieur. My husband and I are determined not to receive people who go to see those ladies.'—She puts her husband forward, the poor dear man! but he doesn't meddle in such things; so long as he can dance in the evening in front of a mirror, with himself for his vis-à-vis, he's satisfied! But Monsieur Luminot—you see, he thinks a lot of Mame Droguet's dinners."

"And as we do not give dinners, the gentleman is very wise to choose her society. But Madame Droguet has no suspicion that she gratifies us exceedingly by ridding us of Monsieur Luminot's visits—eh, Agathe?"

"Oh! yes, my dear; and we must hope that Monsieur Jarnouillard will follow Monsieur Luminot's example."

"Oh! that won't stop him! he ain't pleasant very often, Monsieur Jarnouillard; and then, I don't like money-lenders, I don't.—I'll go and take a look at the hens; I'm sure the black one beats the others; if she does, we ought not to leave her in the coop."

The gardener went away and Agathe looked at Honorine, with a sigh.

"Oh! my love! how cruel the world is!"

"Yes, even more so in small villages than in the large cities. That is easy to understand: these people here have nothing to do most of the time, and their principal occupation is to attend to their neighbors' affairs. In a small place everybody is everybody else's neighbor."

"The idea of saying that we receive men!"

"Oh! I suspected that Monsieur Edmond's appearance in this village, a short time after we settled here, and his frequent visits to us, would give occasion for gossip."

"And I am the cause of it, my love! You are going to be angry with me."

"No, indeed! That young man is honorable, his company is agreeable; and we will not deprive ourselves of the only society we have here, just because Madame Droguet is displeased."

"Oh! how right you are! how good you are!"

"As for this gentleman—from the Tower, he is not an acquaintance. We have met him twice, and both times his assistance was quite necessary to us; he escorted us as far as our gate, but he has never entered the house, and probably never will."

"Ah! my dear friend, suppose Madame Droguet had heard that strange man's words in the ravine, beside the cross! what fine tales she would have to tell!"

"Hush, Agathe, hush, for heaven's sake! I shudder in spite of myself when I think of that. I feel that it would distress me to be compelled to have a bad opinion of that man."

"Especially as he has very refined manners, and a very *comme il faut* air, has this Monsieur Paul. I am sure that he would be very fine-looking, if he hadn't so much hair on his face."

"Oh! I didn't notice that; I hardly looked at him. He has black eyes, hasn't he?"

"Not exactly—brown; but very soft."

"Do you think so? And a scornful mouth?"

"Oh, no! his smile is very agreeable."

"What! did he smile while he was talking to us?"

"When I slipped and almost fell, I clung to him, and that made him smile."

"It's strange; I remember nothing of all that."

"Oh! the storm was so violent!—Well, I am sure, for my part, that it makes Madame Droguet furious to see we already know that gentleman, who has refused to have anything to do with anyone in the neighborhood! Just for that reason, I am delighted that she saw him bringing us home."

The conversation of the two friends was interrupted by sobs from Poucette, who tried in vain to check them. They rose at once to inquire the cause of their servant's grief.

VII

A SALE BY AUTHORITY OF LAW

Little Claudine, Poucette's cousin, had just arrived; her eyes were red, and she too was crying; evidently it was something that she had told Poucette which caused the young peasant to sob so bitterly.

"What is the matter, my child; what makes you so unhappy?" Madame Dalmont asked her servant.

But she, according to the custom of country people, continued to sob and made no reply.

"And you, my girl," said Agathe to Claudine, "you are crying too; is it something you have told your cousin that

is making her cry?”

“Yes—yes—mamzelle.”

“What misfortune has come upon you? Come, speak.”

“Ye—Ye—yes, madame!”

“Come, Poucette, tell us about it; this child will never be able to, you see.”

The young peasant succeeded at last in forcing back her sobs.

“Madame, Claudine has just told me that they’re very unhappy at home. My poor uncle—poor aunt! what is going to become of them! They’re going to sell everything in their home to-day, furniture and everything! Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! and turn them out of their cottage, which won’t belong to them any more! What is going to become of them! Here, Claudine, I’ve got three francs left out of my wages, and I’ll give ‘em to you. Oh! if I had more!”

“You can’t have any more, when you give us all you earn!”

“Poor people! why this is frightful!” cried Honorine. “Who on earth is so hard-hearted as to despoil those unfortunate creatures, who have hardly enough to provide their children with food and shelter?”

“Who? Alas! madame, it’s Monsieur Jarnouillard; he has lent small sums to Uncle Guillot at different times. Well! it was a hard winter, and he had four children to take care of, and me too with the rest. It seems that Monsieur Jarnouillard made my uncle sign some bits of paper, so, if he wasn’t paid just on the minute, he could take everything my poor uncle owned!”

“And as papa couldn’t pay him, although he had given him some money on account,” added Claudine, “a man all dressed in black came to-day and told mamma that all she could do was to leave the house with the children, but she didn’t have any right to take anything away.”

“Oh! what a wretch that Monsieur Jarnouillard is!” cried Agathe, “he does well not to show his face here, for we would put him out of doors, we wouldn’t have him in the house. And these are the people that say unkind things about us, who would be so distressed to cause pain to anyone! Madame Droguet’s society contains some most estimable people!”

While Agathe made these reflections, Honorine had gone up hastily to her room; she returned with her bonnet on her head, and said to Agathe:

“Come with me.”

“Where are we going, my dear?”

“Mon Dieu! to Guillot’s cottage, to see if there is any way of assisting those poor people, and at the very least to save some of their furniture. I have a hundred francs I can give them; it’s very little, but still it will help them.”

“Oh! my good Honorine, if it were possible, I would love you even more.”

The two friends left the house, followed by Poucette and Claudine, who had ceased to weep because they hoped and divined that the ladies proposed to assist their dear ones.

In due time they reached the farmer’s cottage, where a number of people had already collected. For the announcement of a sale on execution always brings together a multitude of bargain-hunters and idlers.

A melancholy spectacle was presented to that assemblage, which would have touched their hearts, had there been any persons susceptible to emotion among those who were disputing over the purchase of an old chair.

Guillot’s wife sat at the foot of a tree, about forty yards from the house, holding her last-born child at her breast, while the two others stood at her side, hiding their faces against their mother’s skirts as if terrified by the sight of all those people. The peasant gazed with tear-dimmed eyes at her hovel and at all the poor furniture that was brought from it, to be offered for sale; then she turned her eyes on her children, and her glance said plainly:

“We have no roof to shelter us; where will they sleep to-night?”

A short distance away, the farmer himself, in despair but striving to retain his courage, watched the officers of the law who had taken their places at a table, and were preparing to begin the sale.

Monsieur Jarnouillard walked about, examining the different articles as they were brought from the house, and muttering with a shrug:

“Mon Dieu! what wretched stuff! I shall never get my money back. The wood is rotten; it will crumble to powder!”

Meanwhile Guillot approached his creditor, hat in hand, and said to him in a suppliant tone:

“Oh! monsieur, are you going to sell my house, too?”

“His house! that’s a pretty name for it! He calls this a house—a miserable hovel that will hardly hold together!”

“Such as it is, monsieur, it has sheltered me and my family; it came to me from my father, too, and I was fond of it.”

“What difference does all that make to me? It would have been better for me if it had come from the devil and had been built of hewn stone. Nobody’ll give anything for your hut.”

“If you don’t think anybody’ll give anything for it, monsieur, why do you have it sold?”

“Why? and what about the money you owe me? do you imagine I shall get it back from the sale of your furniture? Nice stuff, that is! You have taken me in, my good man; I am sold, trapped is the word.”

On hearing this accusation from the mouth of the man who was robbing him, the farmer proudly raised his head and replied in a firm voice:

“I have never deceived anybody, monsieur! I am an honest man, and everybody in the neighborhood knows it; and if either of us has cheated the other I am not the one, do you understand?”

The usurer lowered his crest and his tone, as such men always do when they are afraid of being unmasked.

“Bless my soul! Guillot,” he rejoined; “don’t lose your temper; I may have said one word when I meant another; my tongue must have taken a twist. I never intended to attack your honesty; but of course you understand that I must get back what I have advanced.”

“I only owe you four hundred and eighty francs, monsieur.”

“Of principal, yes; but the interest, which never stops running—and interest on interest—all that counts up; so

that you owe me to-day eight hundred and seventy-five francs, besides the costs of the execution and sale; it will amount to a thousand francs."

"My God!"

"That's why I am obliged to sell your cottage, as well as your furniture."

"But suppose it should bring more, monsieur?"

"Oh! if it should bring more than your debt and the costs, the surplus would go to you—that's your right; but unluckily, instead of going above a thousand francs, I'm afraid it will fall far short of it."

"But, monsieur, if you're going to sell a house you must have buyers; and to bring them together it is necessary for them to know beforehand that it's to be sold."

"Don't be afraid, all the formalities have been attended to; the notices were posted."

"I didn't see them."

"That isn't my fault."

"Among all these people that I see here, there isn't one who will buy my house."

"Pshaw! there's sure to be someone; at a pinch, I'll buy it myself."

"You, monsieur!"

"Bless me! if no other purchaser comes forward, I shall have to take it; it will embarrass me a good deal, but I shall be driven to it!"

As he said this, Monsieur Jarnouillard rubbed his hands, thinking:

"There won't be any other purchaser and I shall get the house for almost nothing. Then I can let it to Guillot, and it will add just so much to my income."

The farmer moved away from his creditor, with death in his heart and despair on his face. But, before joining his family, he tried to dissemble his suffering to some extent in order not to increase his wife's grief. Luckily for the poor people, little Claudine came running toward them, followed by her cousin Poucette. And the child, pointing to Honorine and Agathe, who had stopped a short distance away, said:

"Don't cry any more, mamma; there's Poucette's two mistresses; they've come with us and they're very kind; they're sorry for us."

"Yes," chimed in Poucette. "Don't cry, aunt. My mistress told me to tell you that everything she bought would be for you; and she'll buy all she can!"

The farmer's wife felt as if she were coming to life again; she started to rise, to go with her husband to thank the lady who was so kindly disposed to them; but Poucette detained her.

"Madame don't want you to say anything to her now," she said; "for if anyone should guess she was doing it for you, the dealers are so mean, they're quite capable of bidding against her and making her pay more for everything; you mustn't look as if you knew anything about it; you can thank her afterward."

Meanwhile the notables of the neighborhood, those who are commonly called the *bourgeois* in the country, began to arrive for the sale. The slightest novelty is an event which one is careful not to miss when one lives in a small village.

Moreover, Monsieur Jarnouillard, being interested in the success of the sale, had not failed to say to all his acquaintances:

"It's always well to go to a sale; you often find something you need and that you had forgotten about; there are sure to be good opportunities; and you should seize opportunities; they don't come twice."

The Droguet family soon appeared on the scene, in the person of its tall, bulky mistress, who leaned familiarly on the arm of friend Luminot, the jovial dealer in wines. Little Monsieur Droguet walked behind his wife, taking measured steps, almost in rhythm.

Madame Jarnouillard came next, arm-in-arm with Madame Remplumé, a tall, machine-like person, as long and thin as a bean-pole, who, you would have sworn, was a man dressed as a woman. Behind them came a little man with a limp, Monsieur Remplumé, who never spoke, but who coughed, spat, took snuff, sneezed and blew his nose incessantly, which made him a very unpleasant neighbor; so that there was soon a vacant space about him. Lastly, Doctor Antoine Beaubichon appeared, some little distance behind this party.

When Agathe saw them in the distance, she squeezed her friend's arm, saying:

"Look, my dear; here come all the people who speak ill of us. Really they are all so hideous that I am no longer surprised that they are spiteful!"

"Don't seem to be looking toward them."

"Why not, pray? Do you suppose I am going to give myself a crick in the neck because of Madame Droguet? I am very sorry that Monsieur Edmond is in Paris to-day; for he would have come with us, and that would have made all those people all the more frantic.—Ah! my dear, the doctor bows to us! Good for him! he is still polite, at all events."

Honorine turned and bowed pleasantly to the doctor, thereby placing the former wine merchant in a painfully embarrassing position; for he too was facing the young woman and would have been glad to salute her; but Madame Droguet held his arm and glared at him fixedly and with such a determined expression that, in order to extricate himself adroitly from his predicament, Monsieur Luminot simulated five or six sneezes in quick succession; and everyone knows that in sneezing one usually makes a movement of the head which resembles a bow.

"Well! what does this mean?" demanded Madame Droguet, with an angry glance at her cavalier. "Why do you sneeze like that?"

"Why—I sneeze—Mon Dieu! because I had to sneeze. It takes you suddenly, you know; I suppose I have a cold in my head."

"This is the first I have heard of it."

"Or I; but you never know you have one until it appears."

"Really, one would have thought that you were bowing to those women."

"Well, upon my word! I never thought of such a thing."

"Why did you sneeze toward them?"

“Faith! I sneezed when it caught me. I didn’t do it purposely.”

“All right!”

“The doctor bowed to those ladies.”

“I saw him; he’ll pay me for that; he was to apply leeches to Droguet to-morrow, but he shan’t do it.”

“Oh! but, consider—if your husband needs the leeches!”

“I tell you that not a leech shall be put on him. I propose to show the doctor how much I care for his prescriptions.”

“But if your husband complains of pains in his head——”

“Let me alone; I am beginning to believe that Doctor Beaubichon is just fit to take care of hens. Droguet is dancing on my dress at this moment; does he look sick?”

“There are the people from the Courtivaux house,” said Madame Remplumé, approaching Madame Droguet.

“Oh! we have seen them! they are noticeable enough. What rigs!”

“Their dresses are in wretched taste!”

“The materials are the very cheapest!”

“They look so to me.”

“Regular lorettes, aren’t they, Monsieur Luminot?”

“Dear me! mesdames, allow me first to ask you what you mean by lorettes?”

“Oh! the little innocent! who doesn’t know the ladies who live in the Bréda quarter in Paris!”

“I assure you that I don’t know that quarter! When I lived in Paris, I never went out of Bercy.”

“Hush, you wicked monster!”

Madame Jarnouillard interrupted this dialogue.

“Come, mesdames, and look over the furniture and other things to be sold,” she said; “sometimes one finds just the utensils one needs. Look at what is on exhibition.”

“Mon Dieu! madame, what do you expect us to buy in all that wretched trash?” cried Madame Droguet, with a disdainful glance at the farmer’s furniture. “I see nothing but rubbish—dirty stuff! and I have no doubt it’s all full of bugs!”

“That is what I was thinking!” muttered Madame Remplumé, while her husband spat at random.

“But there’s a pair of candlesticks that might do to use in the kitchen, eh, Droguet?—Bah! he doesn’t hear me; he’s whistling a polka.”

“Your husband is a zephyr!”

“He’s a wind, but not a zephyr!”

“Ah! that’s very good; I’ll remember that.—Did you hear that, Remplumé?”

“Ahtchi! crraho! furssscht!”

“That isn’t a wind!” muttered Luminot; “it’s a continuous fusillade.”

“There are some very decent kettles.”

“Oh! oh! I wouldn’t want to boil artichokes in them!”

“And that bellows?”

“It’s a huge thing—like the bellows of a forge; but it’s the only thing here that one could use.”

“Jarnouillard is signalling that the sale is about to begin. Let us go nearer, mesdames.”

“Ah! look; the occupants of the Courtivaux house are approaching also.”

“Probably they mean to buy something.”

“Yes, yes; they intend to furnish their house with the peasant’s furniture; it will be good enough for them!”

The sale began.

The first object offered for sale was a table, still in good condition.

“Three francs for the table!” cried the auctioneer; “three fifty—fifty-five—sixty!”

The peasants bid five or ten centimes at a time. Honorine offered five francs. The bystanders stared at her in amazement, the peasants were stupefied, the second-hand dealers made wry faces.

The table was knocked down to Madame Dalmont.

“What did I tell you!” muttered Madame Droguet. “These lovely Parisians come here for their furniture!”

After the table came a walnut buffet, very old and in bad condition; the upset price was twelve francs, and there was no purchaser. Honorine took it at that figure. Then there came a lot of dishes, glass and earthenware, which also were knocked down to her.

The Droguet party laughed sneeringly, and the ladies said to one another:

“What! do they want broken bowls and chipped plates, too! The commonest sort of china, and old sauce-pans!”

“Really those ladies will have a pretty lot of housekeeping utensils!”

“For my part, I think it’s disgraceful—disgraceful is the word—to buy such miserable stuff!”

“Oh! how glad I am that I came to see this! it will furnish us with amusement for a long time to come.”

“Do you know, I propose to cheat her out of that big bellows.”

“You must force the bidding.”

“Oh! I am bound to have it! you shall see.”

While Madame Droguet’s party amused themselves by making sport of the two young women, they exchanged pleasant smiles with the farmer’s family; the poor creatures felt a thrill of joy at each article that was adjudged to Honorine, for Poucette, who was standing near them, said:

“That’s for you; that will come back to you; madame is buying all these things to give them to you.”

“How much for this great bellows?” suddenly cried Madame Droguet, with an authoritative air; “it’s the only thing here worthy to go into my house—into my kitchen.”

While Jarnouillard, who saw that the bellows was in demand, consulted with the auctioneer as to the price they should set on it, Poucette ran to her mistress and whispered:

“Don’t buy the bellows, madame; it ain’t good for anything; the clack’s gone, and uncle always meant to burn it up.”

“Very well,” replied Honorine; “but, as Madame Droguet wants it, we must try to make her pay a good price for it.”

“Three francs for the bellows!” cried the auctioneer; and Madame Droguet said at once:

“Three francs ten sous!”

“Four francs!” said Honorine.

“Four francs ten sous!” rejoined the stout dame, who did not choose to bid by centimes.

“Five francs!” said Honorine.

“Well! six francs, sacrebleu!” cried Madame Droguet, her voice trembling with anger.

Honorine made no further bid; but she turned away to laugh with Agathe; for the wretched bellows was not worth fifty centimes.

“I knew well enough that I should get what I wanted, and that I would force that hussy to give way to me!” cried Madame Droguet, as she returned to her friends armed with the bellows, which she handed to her husband, saying:

“Put that under your arm, monsieur, and don’t hold it pointed at my back, or you’ll blow on me.”

Several other pieces of furniture and some mattresses were purchased by Honorine. But the bedding brought better prices, and the young widow was nearing the end of her hundred francs, when a new arrival appeared on the scene, walking among the dishes, leaping over the furniture, heedless of the objurgations of Monsieur Jarnouillard, who exclaimed again and again: “What in the devil is that dog doing here? For heaven’s sake, drive the beast away; he’s disarranging the whole sale; he’ll break something and the stuff is poor enough already!”

Ami, for it was he who had arrived, carried his lack of respect so far as to jump over the heads of Monsieur Jarnouillard and the auctioneer, who were seated at the table which served them for a desk.

The latter started back in alarm when the huge dog executed that gymnastic feat; the former hurriedly put his hand to his head to ensure the safety of his wig which came near being carried away by one of the dog’s paws.

Ami had performed this spring-board leap in order to join Agathe and to lavish tokens of affection upon her. The girl patted him on the neck; she spoke softly and caressingly to him. Meanwhile Honorine looked all about, for Ami’s presence ordinarily announced his master’s coming.

But was it to be presumed that that strange man, who shunned all companionship, would come to a place where a large part of the village had assembled?

Meanwhile Monsieur Jarnouillard, who had had barely time to catch his wig, but had not been able to prevent its turning half round on his head, was obliged to readjust it before the whole assemblage. That made him very angry, and he shouted like a deaf man:

“Whose cursed dog is this that nearly put my eyes out, to say nothing of jumping over the auctioneer’s head and knocking over two candlesticks and a jug? I want to know to whom he belongs; I shall have a word to say to his master!”

“And what will you say to his master, monsieur? Speak—he is before you.”

The owner of the Tower had made his way through the crowd almost as unceremoniously as his dog, and he stood in the midst of the sale before anyone had even observed his approach.

Monsieur Jarnouillard was thunderstruck at the abrupt appearance of that singular personage, whose aspect was stern and imposing.

Paul was dressed as simply as usual, but he carried neither gun nor stick; his long-vizored cap was pulled down over his eyes, so that the upper part of his face was in shadow.

“Ah! monsieur is the owner of this great dog, is he?” faltered the usurer, resuming his sycophantic air. “Oh, yes—true—I think I recognize monsieur and his dog.”

“Tell me if Ami has broken anything here?”

“No, monsieur, no; he just frightened us, and he disarranged my wig—that’s all.”

Meanwhile Madame Jarnouillard was making innumerable signs to her husband, and calling to him:

“To the right—that’s all wrong! turn it to the right! it’s on crooked!”

But the implacable creditor, engrossed by the sale, paid no heed to his wife’s signs. He was about to put up an old walnut commode, the peasant’s most valuable piece of furniture, when Paul caught him by the arm, saying:

“One moment, monsieur! You are selling out this poor family’s house and furniture, I believe? The grief of the poor mother sitting over yonder, with her four children about her, does not touch you!”

“Monsieur, business is—business! they are in debt to me, I need my money——”

“Enough, monsieur! How much does your claim amount to?”

“Nearly nine hundred francs; it will amount to a thousand with the costs.”

“Very good; offer the house for sale at once.”

“The house? I beg pardon, but we haven’t finished with the furniture yet, and I would like——”

“I tell you that I propose to buy the house; if it brings enough to pay your debt, then you won’t need to sell the furniture.”

“Of course not; but I doubt very much whether this hovel——”

“Do you understand me, monsieur? I tell you that I mean to buy this house; let us make an end of the business, I beg.”

These words were uttered in a tone which made Jarnouillard as flexible as a glove. He leaned toward the auctioneer and said in a low tone:

“This man is very anxious to have the house; we must make him pay for it! Suppose we should fix the upset price at—at five hundred francs?”

“It’s twice as much as it’s worth.”

“No matter, let’s try it!”

“Jarnouillard! Jarnouillard! turn it to the right! You’ve got it on crooked!”

“For God’s sake, Madame Jarnouillard, let me alone! you tire me! no matter about my wig now!”

The usurer’s wife had thrown away her efforts. She decided to return to her friends, who had been so taken aback by the arrival of the owner of the Tower that Madame Droguet had fallen against Monsieur Luminot, who fell against Madame Remplumé, who fell against her husband, who fell against Monsieur Droguet, who, having no one to fall against, contented himself with dropping on the ground the big bellows that he had been told to hold under his arm.

“What does this mean? that bear here!”

“And with his dog!”

“He never goes out without him!”

“I beg your pardon! I’ve seen him without his dog!”

“What has he come to this sale for? a man who avoids society as he does!”

“It isn’t natural!”

“You might say that it’s most extraordinary!”

“What! you don’t understand why he has come here? It’s evident enough however!” said Madame Droguet, smiling maliciously; “aren’t the sirens from the Courtivaux house here?”

“Oh! to be sure! they are here, so he comes here! What penetration Madame Droguet has!”

“Why, yes, rather, I venture to flatter myself.”

While the notables indulged in these commentaries upon the presence of the owner of the Tower, the peasants, for their part, gazed with interest at the man of whom they had heard so many things. They were, for the most part, surprised to find that he was a man like other men, who had the appearance neither of a wild beast nor of an ogre.

The farmer’s family did not know whether the appearance of Paul and his dog was a subject of fear or hope to them; but the way in which the huge animal fawned upon Agathe and her friend gave them some little hope. And Ami, as if he realized that it was his duty to encourage them, ran to the spot where Guillot and his family were assembled, and gambolled about the mother and children, wagging his tail in such a meaning way that the poor creatures soon ceased to be afraid of him.

Monsieur Jarnouillard, having finished his conference with the auctioneer, shouted:

“We offer for sale this house, with the little enclosure of about fifteen rods that goes with it—the whole for five hundred francs.—Who will give five hundred francs?”

A murmur ran through his audience:

“Five hundred francs for that hovel! why, that’s ridiculous! no one will buy it.”

“If there was any land with it! but fifteen rods! what does that amount to?”

“Evidently Monsieur Jarnouillard means to keep it himself! but he might have got it for less!”

While the bystanders made these reflections aloud, the auctioneer repeated:

“Five hundred! Come, messieurs, who bids more?”

“Who bids less, you mean!” cried Monsieur Luminot, laughing heartily. “Ha! ha! that’s a great joke, that upset price! I’ll give three hundred francs for the house—on condition that it’s torn down at once!”

“And I,” said Paul, in a loud voice, “I will give two thousand francs—on condition that when the creditor and the costs are paid, whatever remains shall be immediately turned over to this poor family.”

A fairy’s wand could not have produced a more magical effect than was produced by the words of the owner of the Tower.

“Two thousand francs!”

“Two thousand francs!”

The words were echoed on all sides.

Agathe and Honorine alone did not seem surprised by the action of Ami’s master; but, on the other hand, it was plain that they were made very happy by it, and that they shared to the full the joy which the farmer and his family manifested.

Paul walked to the desk and threw upon it two thousand-franc notes, to which Monsieur Jarnouillard made a reverence that nearly caused him to lose his wig altogether.

“To whom have we the honor of selling this house?” inquired the auctioneer; “will you kindly give us your name?”

“It is unnecessary, monsieur, for the house has not changed owners. I bought it simply to restore it to this poor farmer and his unfortunate family, whom this gentleman proposed to drive into the fields to sleep.”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than Guillot’s whole family threw themselves at their benefactor’s feet, and, unable to find words to express their gratitude, confined themselves to looking up into his face and kissing his hand and the hem of his jacket.

The tableau was touching enough to move every feeling heart. Honorine and Agathe did not try to conceal their tears.

But Madame Droguet’s party, sorely vexed at the turn affairs had taken, still tried to sneer at what was taking place.

“Bless my soul! this is superb!” said one.

“It is truly magnificent!”

“This scene was all arranged beforehand, doubtless, with the two ladies—that man’s friends. They wanted to produce a great effect.”

But these ebullitions of spite found no echo. Even Doctor Antoine exclaimed:

“I don’t know whether the gentleman from the Tower intended to produce an effect, but I regard as very noble

what he has just done; it reconciles me to him and his dog."

To add to Madame Droguet's ill humor, her husband persisted in holding the big bellows under her nose, saying:

"No wind! I assure you, *bobonne*, that it doesn't blow, it won't work at all."

"Hold your tongue, Droguet!" she replied; "I will find a way to make it work, I tell you."

The sale came to an end with the purchase of the house for two thousand francs. The auctioneer soon had the account made up; Monsieur Jarnouillard being paid and the legal costs deducted, he called Guillot, to whom he handed one thousand and fifteen francs, the residue.

The farmer exclaimed aloud in his amazement:

"What! that gentleman lets me keep my house and gives me all this money too! Oh! this is too much! I don't deserve all this!"

"Yes, for you have four children to bring up, and you took your niece into your family too," said Paul. "I know whom I am helping, you see. Now you can afford to take a few moments' rest, and spare yourself the time to caress your children."

Honorine meanwhile had told Poucette that her aunt could replace in the house all the things that she had bought with the purpose of giving them back to her.

But the peasant, who deemed herself rich now, ran after Madame Dalmont and said:

"You too are very kind to us, madame, but now we're not poor any more, thanks to the kindness of the gentleman from the Tower, so please let us pay back what you gave for all those things."

"No, indeed," said Honorine, "I too wish to have some share in your happiness; and if I had not the power to do as much as monsieur, surely you know that I had the inclination."

Paul was within a few yards of Honorine, and the peasants speedily informed him what that lady had done for them at the sale. Thereupon he turned and bowed very low to her, saying:

"I am fortunate, madame, to have been able to imitate you in something!"

"You have done much more than I, monsieur," Honorine replied, lowering her eyes.

"The merit of a good deed, madame, consists not in its money value, but in the way of doing it."

And, after gazing earnestly for several seconds at the young woman, Paul bowed again to her and Agathe, and walked away, calling his dog, who was loath to leave Agathe and the farmer's family, whom he seemed to look upon as old acquaintances.

Then Honorine took her friend's arm, saying to her in a voice trembling with emotion:

"Let us return home; I am well satisfied with my day's work!"

"And I trust that you will not think ill of Monsieur Paul any more now?"

"Hush! what are you talking about?"

"For my part, I am awfully sorry that Monsieur Edmond did not see all that took place here; I am sure that he would have been pleased with the happiness of that poor family. But we will tell him all about it."

Madame Droguet also left the spot with her party.

"I didn't expect to be paid in full!" said Monsieur Jarnouillard, who was annoyed because the farmer's house had not fallen to him.

"Madame Dalmont gave Guillot's wife everything that she bought!" said the doctor. "That was a very pretty idea!"

"Pray don't tire us out with your pretty ideas, doctor! Those people were acting a comedy—nothing else; they were all in concert, like thieves at a fair! Don't you think so, Monsieur Luminot?"

"I do; and I will say more; I am entirely of your opinion!"

"*Bobonne*, this bellows won't work; I can't get any wind!"

"Very good, monsieur, that will do; you say that just to annoy me! Beware! there are other bellows than that!"[A]

[A] *Soufflet*—a bellows—means also a box on the ear.

VIII

HOW CHAMOUREAU HONORS HIS NEW PROPERTY

A short time after the sale on execution, the result of which was so favorable to the Guillot family, an exciting piece of news gained currency in the little village of Chelles, and set the tongues of all the gossips of the locality in motion once more. For, you know, the smaller a place is, the more pleasure the people take in meddling with other people's business.

It was the former dealer in wines, the facetious Luminot, who appeared at Madame Droguet's one morning, crying:

"Have you heard the news—the great news?"

"Dear me! no, we haven't heard anything; how do you expect me to hear anything, with Monsieur Droguet thinking of nothing but his horrid Lancers quadrille, which he will never learn.—Tell me, Monsieur Luminot, what is it about?"

"You know that delightful estate, located in the pleasantest spot in the whole neighborhood—that lovely villa which was built for a former artiste from the Vaudeville, who sold it to a Parisian confectioner, who became insolvent?"

"The Goldfish Villa, you mean? so called because there's a pond full of them there."

"I didn't know that; that's an additional advantage of the property."

"Well, what about the house?"

“It was sold a few days ago—to some very distinguished people, so it seems, and necessarily very rich, for nobody else could indulge in such a country house.”

“Mon Dieu! it’s no château; I believe they wanted sixty thousand francs for it; they probably sold it for fifty.”

“Well, fifty thousand francs for a country house, where you don’t live all the time, is no trifle; and think of all you have to spend when you buy a place! There’s a park of ten acres——”

“It isn’t a park, it’s a garden with a clump of trees.”

“I beg pardon—a garden of ten acres! that’s too big for a garden.”

“If you insist on calling it a park, I’ve no objection. Well, who are these distinguished people who have bought the Goldfish Villa?”

“They have a carriage.”

“They have a carriage!—with horses?”

“Yes, indeed, with real horses! There are just the husband and wife—no children. They live in great style, and they say the lady’s extremely pretty—and so stylish!”

“All right; we shall see how that is. I doubt whether this person dresses any better than I do. Did you see the dress I had on last Tuesday, Luminot?”

“I must have seen it!”

“The man didn’t so much as notice it! a gray damask with green stripes.”

“Oh, yes! it was magnificent; you were at least twelve feet round.”

“I am not talking about how large round I was; I am talking about the material of my dress, which cost twenty francs a yard; and it’s so stiff that it stands alone! it’s superb!”

“You were simply gorgeous!”

“Bah! you men think of nothing but novelty; you go into ecstasies beforehand over a woman you don’t know.”

“I am not going into ecstasies over her; I am simply repeating what I have been told; and I am very glad to see nice people flocking to our part of the country.”

“What are the names of these nice people?”

“Wait a moment—they told me the person’s name—it’s an odd name—that of a place in the outskirts of Paris—a well-known place.”

“What! these distinguished people bear the name of a place?”

“Why not?—It isn’t Saint-Cloud.”

“Ha! ha! Monsieur and Madame Saint-Cloud! that would be amusing!”

“It isn’t Vaugirard—the devil! I did know the name. It isn’t La Villette!”

Luminot was interrupted by the arrival of Madame Remplumé, who rushed into the room as eagerly as he had done.

“Madame Droguet, I’ve heard some news——”

“My dear woman, I fancy that your news isn’t news to me. The Goldfish Villa is sold, isn’t it?”

“Ah! you know it! but it’s just out.”

“I have only known it a minute; neighbor Luminot came to tell us.”

“How in the world does he make out to get all the news first?”

“Oh! I walk about here and there and everywhere, mesdames.”

“The new owners are to come to-day to take possession of their property, where they mean to pass the whole summer.”

“Ah! that is something we didn’t know. And what is the name of these people? Monsieur Luminot can’t remember.”

“Their name—wait a minute; I heard what it was; it’s near La Courtille.”

“Their name is near La Courtille! Really, I don’t understand.—Well, Droguet, have you finished your pirouetting? I have zigzags before my eyes, it makes me see stars to watch him whirl round like that; when I married him I didn’t get a husband, but a teetotum—nothing else!”

Madame Jarnouillard soon increased this amiable party by her presence.

“My compliments to the company,” she said; “I came to inform you that the confectioner’s estate is sold at last; but I’ll wager that you all know it.”

“Yes, yes—we know it.”

“But no one can remember the purchaser’s name.”

“Monsieur de Belleville.”

“That’s it, yes, that’s it; didn’t I tell you it was in the outskirts of Paris?”

“Why, you didn’t tell us so at all; Monsieur Belleville; that’s a real name.”

“*De* Belleville!”

“Is there a *de*?”

“Yes, they are nobles.”

“It’s to be hoped that they will be decently polite; that they will call on us, and not act like those minxes at the Courtivaux house.”

“Oh! there’s no danger! On the contrary, it seems that the lady intends to give some gorgeous fêtes, and invite the whole neighborhood!”

“Really! How do you know that so soon, Madame Jarnouillard?”

“Oh! because the last time the purchasers came in their carriage to inspect the property—that is to say, the lady came alone; no one has seen the husband yet—Jarnouillard, who happened to be passing, led their coachman into conversation, in order to get some information.”

“That was an excellent idea, very prudent; in that way one finds out who people are. Did the coachman say

anything more?”

“His masters are very rich; they live in the Chaussée d’Antin in Paris.”

“Oh, well! if they live in the Chaussée d’Antin, I have the very highest opinion of their morality!”

“And they are to take possession to-day?”

“So it is said.”

“Jarnouillard will take occasion to walk by the Goldfish Villa, and he will find out whether the new owners are there.”

“Really, Monsieur Jarnouillard is a most invaluable man for obtaining information!”

That same day, about two o’clock in the afternoon, a fine open calèche rumbled noisily through the little village of Chelles. The coachman had received orders to crack his whip constantly, and he acquitted himself of that duty so zealously that the children shrieked and fled as he passed, the hens had barely time to reach their dung-heaps, the dogs barked, and everybody ran to see what was happening.

On the back seat of the calèche sat Monsieur and Madame de Belleville.

Thélénie, in a fascinating morning costume, assumed the careless air, accompanied by disdainful movements of the head, which the belles of the demi-monde always have at their command, to throw dust in the eyes of fools. Chamoureau sat very straight and stiff; he might readily have been taken for a man of wood placed there to do escort duty.

The front seat was occupied by the lady’s maid, Mademoiselle Mélie; and the cook sat on the box beside the coachman.

Then there was a multitude of boxes, packages and trunks; Chamoureau held four boxes on his knees, the maid three, and madame none.

Thélénie had wasted no time after the conversation with her husband, in which he had told her that Edmond had a love-affair at Chelles and had hired a house there; she had started at once for that quarter, and on arriving had inquired concerning houses for sale or for rent in the village. There was nothing for rent except some small apartments unsuited to her new position. But the confectioner’s house was for sale, and was pointed out to her as the most desirable estate in the place.

Thélénie went at once to inspect the Goldfish Villa. It had been built for one of our fashionable actresses, so that it was certain to please Thélénie, and on leaving it she went at once to the person in whose hands the estate had been placed for sale; the bargain was soon struck and an appointment made for the next day, at a notary’s in Paris.

Thélénie, who carried the key to the cash-box, paid cash for her purchase; so that Chamoureau, when he brought the *Petites-Affiches* to his wife the next day, that she might make a selection among the estates offered for sale in the suburbs, was greatly surprised to learn that everything had been done, and that he was the owner of a fine country house at Chelles.

“I say! at Chelles!” cried Chamoureau; “that’s funny enough.”

“What is there funny about it, monsieur?”

“Why, Chelles is the very place where Edmond Didier has hired a house, in order to be near Madame Dalmont and her young friend.”

“Well, monsieur, what difference does that make to us? is it any of our business? Because Monsieur Edmond is carrying on an intrigue in that neighborhood, should that prevent me from buying a charming estate in a lovely country which I like immensely?”

“Certainly not, my dear love; I didn’t mean anything of the kind; I simply made the remark.”

“Another time keep your remarks to yourself; but make all your purchases and preparations; in five days we will go down to take possession of our new estate. I require that length of time to have the dresses made and the bonnets that I want to take with me.”

The five days having passed, Chamoureau came to take possession of a country house which he had never seen. When they drove through the village, where many of the streets were narrow, dirty and ill-paved, he did not fail to exclaim:

“Charming country! delightful country! It reminds me of Switzerland.”

“Have you been in Switzerland, monsieur?”

“No, but I had a client who used often to talk to me about it. How delicious the country air is! what a pleasure to breathe it!”

At that moment Thélénie was holding her handkerchief to her face because they were passing a heap of offal and muddy water which emitted a most offensive odor.

“You are not happy in your observations, monsieur; there is a horrible smell here.”

“That’s nothing, madame; a pond stirred up by the ducks—that’s all; it’s gone already.—There are some very pretty houses. Ah! this one is built in imitation of a chalet; that’s an original idea.”

“Have you ever seen any real chalets, monsieur?”

“No; but one of my clients drew a sketch of one for me.”

“Monsieur de Belleville, I trust that you will soon stop talking about your clients; you must try not to say such things before company. Why need you let people know that you were once in business? You are stupid!”

“Why, madame, I might have been an advocate; that’s a fine profession!”

“Ha! ha! an advocate! you an advocate! Great heaven! who would believe it?”

“Everybody is running to their doors and windows to see us pass, madame.”

“Good! they are quite right!”

“Shall I bow, my dear?”

“I should say not! Why should you bow? Do you imagine yourself somebody of importance—a prefect—a general?”

“I am not, but I might be! Well, then, I will content myself with smiling at the people.”

“No, no, monsieur; don’t smile either, I beg you; it’s not necessary.”

“But I must do something.”

“Look out for what you have on your knees; that’s the best thing you can do.”

“Ah! the landscape becomes positively enchanting. Are we approaching our property?”

“Yes, monsieur; look—on the right—you can see it from here.”

“What! that magnificent house, with a terrace and jars of flowers?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“And that beautiful avenue of lindens in front is ours too?”

“To be sure; it goes with the house.”

“And we are going to drive through that avenue?”

“Of course; would you prefer to fly over it?”

“Madame, I am dazzled—enchanted.”

“Don’t look so enchanted, monsieur; one would think that you never had seen anything before.”

“But there’s a gate at the end of the avenue; ah! it’s open; is there somebody at the house?”

“There is the gardener, who acts as concierge too, and whom I have retained.”

“Very good. Yes, I see a man by the gate; he expects us, no doubt.”

“I sent him word that we should come to-day.”

The calèche arrived at the gate, at which stood an old peasant with a rake over his shoulder, who bowed humbly to his new masters when their carriage turned into the avenue.

Chamoureau, bewildered by all that he saw, exclaimed:

“Why didn’t he fire?”

“Fire what, monsieur?”

“His gun.”

“In order to do that, he would have to have one.”

“Wasn’t that a gun over his shoulder?”

“No, monsieur, it was a rake.”

“Oh! I thought it was a gun; a gun would have been better, for he could have fired it on our arrival.”

“Once more, monsieur, remember that you are not the lord of the manor, that you should be received with a salvo of musketry!”

“That makes no difference, madame; a servant always has the right to discharge his gun when his masters come home.”

“If all servants did that every time that their masters came home there would be an incessant fusillade everywhere.”

At last the carriage drew up in front of a pretty stoop. The maid alighted; Chamoureau, who was in a hurry to inspect his property, attempted to do the same and dropped on the ground all the boxes and packages that he had on his knees.

Thereupon Thélénie made a great outcry and applied some far from complimentary epithets to her husband. To escape that deluge of abuse, the new proprietor darted up the steps, through the vestibule, up a flight of stairs, and disappeared.

Thélénie bade the maid pick up the boxes, which contained elaborately trimmed bonnets and caps—hence her wrath against her husband. They were all taken up to the apartment which madame had chosen for her own.

Mademoiselle Mélie went into ecstasies over the elegance and convenient arrangement of the rooms, and the beauty of the view, while she dressed her mistress, who began operations by changing her costume; then the maid went to her own room.

Thélénie, alone in a dainty boudoir adjoining her bedroom, opened a window from which several of the houses in the village were visible, and glanced at them a moment, saying to herself:

“I shall soon know where Edmond lives, and those women whom he goes to see. Why should I not find out now? —Mélie!”

The maid answered the call at once.

“Go and bring the concierge to me; if he is not downstairs, you will find him in the garden.”

The concierge speedily obeyed his new mistress’s summons.

“First of all, what is your name? I have forgotten it.”

“Thomasseau, madame, at your service.”

“Tell me, Thomasseau, do you know this country well?”

“Like my pocket, madame.”

“There was a house, belonging to one Monsieur Courtivaux, which was purchased by a lady a few months ago?”

“Yes, yes—by Madame Dalmont; she took Poucette, Guillot’s niece, into her service.”

“That’s the very one; and she has a young woman with her——”

“Mamzelle Agathe—a fine slip of a girl!”

“Well, tell me, Thomasseau, in which direction is that lady’s house?”

“Oh! it’s at the other side of the village, in sight of the railroad.”

“And I can’t see it from this window?”

“No, madame, there’s too many houses in between.”

“Do you know also where a young man from Paris lives—a very fashionable young man, who has hired a large house just for himself alone?”

“A nice-looking, dandified young gentleman? that must be the one who’s hired Monsieur Durand’s house.”

“His name is Edmond Didier.”

“That’s it, Monsieur Edmond; well, he lives not far from Madame Droguet’s, on the main street.”

“Can I see his house from here?”

“No better than the other; it’s on the other side, where the land slopes off a little; the village ain’t as even as a mirror.”

“Very well; thanks.—I cannot see their houses,” thought the beautiful brunette, “but that won’t prevent my knowing what they do on the other side of the village. I will go out and walk about my garden; it’s quite extensive and there must be other points of view.”

Thélénie wandered through the garden and through the little wood, which might have passed muster as a park. She ascended several low hills on which were built pretty summer-houses, whence one could overlook the surrounding country; but as she was not familiar with it, she made no progress.

After a long stroll the lady with the great black eyes returned to her apartment, which she examined more in detail; then she gave orders for the dinner to be hurried forward, the change of air having sharpened her appetite.

All this had taken time, and Thélénie suddenly remembered that she had not seen her husband since their arrival. She concluded that he was sulky because she had abused him so on the subject of her bandboxes, and she gave no further thought to him.

Meanwhile time passed, and madame was informed that dinner was served.

“Very well,” said Thélénie; “tell monsieur that I am going to dine.”

“But where shall I find monsieur, madame?”

“Where will you find him? why, in his apartment, I presume.”

“Where is his apartment, madame?”

“Just opposite mine—in the right wing, on the first floor.”

Mademoiselle went in search of her master; but she soon returned and said:

“I have been to all the rooms you mentioned, madame, and I haven’t been able to find monsieur.”

“Then he must be in the garden; that man is intolerable—to make us hunt for him like this! he must know that it’s dinner-time. Tell Thomasseau to look for monsieur in the park, and let Lapierre help him; I am dying of hunger, and I am going to dine.”

Madame seated herself at the table and ate her soup. She came to the *hors d’œuvre* and still Chamoureau did not appear; but the gardener and the coachman reported that they had looked everywhere and that monsieur was certainly not in the garden or in the wood.

“This is very strange! Where has he hidden himself? Can he have fallen into some hole?”

“Oh! madame, there ain’t a single hole on your whole estate just now.”

“But the pond?”

“The pond’s only two feet and a half deep; you’d have to work pretty hard to drown yourself in it!—Besides, Monsieur de Belleville ain’t a child.”

“Madame,” said the maid, “monsieur was the first one to enter the house, and we haven’t seen or heard him since. It’s a very strange thing! He didn’t know the house, for it’s the first time he ever came here; he must have got lost in the cellar.”

“It is hardly probable that Monsieur de Belleville began by rushing down to inspect the cellar as soon as he got here. But no matter, let someone go and look.”

The servants went down into the cellars, which were quite extensive; they went through every part of them, calling their master, but they found no one.

“Now let’s go up under the eaves,” said Mademoiselle Mélie; “for I am convinced monsieur is in the house.”

They visited the attics, then the loft, but they did not find Chamoureau.

“It must be that monsieur’s fallen into one of the wells,” cried the gardener; “there’s two in the garden!”

And they were going down to inspect the wells, when, as they reached the second floor, Mademoiselle Mélie thought that she heard a voice coming from the end of a corridor which led to the toilet rooms.

“Wait a minute!” she said; “I heard something that sounded like a voice calling; it came from this direction.”

They walked along the corridor, and soon they heard Chamoureau’s voice distinctly, crying:

“Holà! help! this way! come and let me out! Sapristi! I’ve been shut up here since morning, and I can’t get out!”

“Oh! mon Dieu! monsieur is shut up there! let’s hurry!”

The little *cabinet* was at the very end of the corridor, and was lighted from above only; to open the door, one had simply to push it, then it closed automatically. But there was nothing inside to take hold of—neither knob nor latch—so that the person who entered the place, if he allowed the door to close, could not get out until someone came to set him free.

The new proprietor, on entering his house, with which he was entirely unacquainted, had begun by going over the first floor, then had gone up to the second, and, unluckily for him, had noticed the corridor first of all, and walked to the end of it to find out where it led. He had opened the door and found himself in the little toilet-room, and, as owner of the house, had deemed it proper to see if it was comfortably arranged. But the infernal door had closed, and, in his struggles to get out, Chamoureau had tried in vain to open it with his fingers and even with his nails. Then he had begun to call and shout, thinking that they would notice that he was missing and would search for him.

But Thélénie had something else in her head, and not until the dinner hour arrived did she remember her husband. So that the new owner of the house had passed more than six hours in the little toilet-room—from half-past twelve until a quarter to seven; for his voice, stifled by the thick door, was not strong enough to reach the end of the long corridor, upon which several rooms opened, but all were unoccupied.

“*Credié*; this is very lucky!” cried Chamoureau, as yellow as a quince after his prolonged stay in the little room; and he rushed out into the corridor so quickly that Mademoiselle Mélie fell back on the coachman, who fell back on the gardener, who, having no one to support him, fell on his centre of gravity, saying:

“What! the bourgeois has been in that closet since morning! He must be feeling pretty bad!”

“What animal, what ass, what brute, ever had the idea of putting on a door that closes of itself, without a knob or a latch to open it on the inside?” cried Chamoureau. “Sapristi! I shan’t forget that sitting very soon! To-morrow I will have three knobs put on that door and have it fixed so that it can’t close itself.—Didn’t you people hear me shout?”

“No, monsieur, of course not; if we had heard you, we shouldn’t have had to look for you very long.”

“Well! this has been rather an unpleasant apprenticeship; it’s been a terribly long day to me. If I have got to pass my time in the country this way, I’ll go back to Paris at once!”

“Dinner was served long ago, and madame is waiting for monsieur at table.”

“She’s waiting for me at table! She doesn’t seem to have been very anxious about me! Well, I’ll go to dinner; I need refreshment.”

“Poor dear man!” muttered the gardener; “I should think so!”

“Here you are at last, monsieur! Where on earth were you hiding? what pretty behavior now! to make us scour the whole place for you!” said Thélénie when her husband appeared in the dining-room.

“I did not hide for my own amusement, madame. I have been a prisoner in a place which I certainly should not have selected for a prison.”

“A prisoner! what do you mean by that?”

Chamoureau explained to his wife what had happened to him. When she learned where her husband had passed the day, she laughed so loud and long that it seemed as if she would never stop. This outburst of hilarity seemed decidedly unseasonable to Chamoureau; but he wreaked his vengeance on the dinner; he ate enough for four, so that Thélénie said to him:

“For heaven’s sake, monsieur, do you want to give yourself an attack of indigestion?”

“I have a right to, madame! When a man has passed six hours in that place, he owes himself some compensation.”

IX

THE GOLDFISH

On the following day Thélénie said to her husband:

“Monsieur, you will be dressed at two o’clock, when we will have the horses put in the calèche and go to pay some visits.”

“Visits! to whom, pray, madame? we don’t know anyone here.”

“That is the very reason why we must make acquaintances. We do not propose to live like bears, I presume?”

“My dear love, I never pretended to pass for a bear; in the first place, I haven’t that animal’s hairy coat.—We will go then; and where shall we go?”

“Don’t worry about that; I have obtained through Mélie a list of the principal people of the village.”

“Does your maid know them?”

“You don’t understand, monsieur, that servants go to the fruit-shops and the butchers, and in ten minutes learn all they want to know.”

“That is true; I am a donkey.—Shall I dress in black?”

“Why not?”

“White cravat?”

“To be sure; don’t you know that it is the dress which commands consideration, before all else?”

“I shall be most imposing, madame.”

“Do your utmost, monsieur.”

At two o’clock, Thélénie was arrayed in a lovely gown, made in the best possible taste; the carriage was ready and waiting in the courtyard. Madame came down and looked about for her husband.

“Where is monsieur, pray?”

“We do not know, madame.”

“What on earth does this mean? I told him to be ready at two o’clock, and it’s after two. Probably he hasn’t finished dressing. Go and tell him to hurry. I am waiting.”

The maid went up to monsieur’s apartment. In a moment she returned and said:

“Monsieur is not in his room, madame, but he must be dressed, for I saw on the chairs the clothes he had on this morning.”

“He is dressed, and yet he is not here! Really Monsieur de Belleville is becoming insufferable; always having to be hunted for! Can it be that he is a prisoner again in—you know, the place where he was yesterday? Let someone visit all the toilet-rooms in the house; then, if monsieur is there again, we shall find him.”

The servants executed their mistress’s orders; meanwhile Thélénie stepped into the calèche, murmuring impatiently:

“Mon Dieu! what an idiot I have married! but after all, he is just what I needed.”

The servants returned, having visited all the most secret corners of the house and failed to find their master. This time it was certain that he was not in the house. They were about to look for him in the garden, when he suddenly appeared in the distance, drenched to the skin, with his hair glued to his face, and covered with mud from head to foot.

“Oh! monsieur! what a sight you are!” cried Thélénie; “where have you been, then? Don’t come near me; you

are disgusting."

"I am dripping wet, it's true. I fell into the pond, my dear love. You know, we have a fine pond on our place."

"Yes, monsieur, I do know it; but I should say that it was visible to the naked eye, and that it can hardly be mistaken for a lawn in broad daylight."

"And so, madame, I saw perfectly well that it was a pond.—I was dressed before the time, for I did not want to keep you waiting; and, seeing that I had a few minutes to spare, I walked about our magnificent gardens. I spied the pond—I didn't see it yesterday; I went close to it and looked in. What did I see? red, cherry-colored, orange fishes! It was a fascinating sight; I was dazzled. I saw one that gleamed so that its scales seemed to be gold! Faith, in my curiosity to see him nearer, I leaned over to catch him; he slipped through my fingers; I leaned over farther, and *pouf!* I fell in among the fish and came near drowning; there's a lot of water there!"

"Oh, no! monsieur—only two feet and a half."

"Three feet, madame; and then, the fish blinded me; I couldn't find the bank. However, I succeeded in getting out."

"And in a pretty state! You don't expect to come with me in that condition, I take it?"

"No, madame; I am going to change."

"Make haste. What an idea, to try to catch one of those fish! Really, monsieur, you are worse than a child!"

"Ah! I have no luck in this place."

"Go, quickly, and change your clothes."

Chamoureau went up to his room. He was obliged to make an entire change. However, as he had but one black coat and his wife had told him to dress in black, he had no choice but to put that one on again; but he wiped it so carefully and rubbed it with so many towels, that it was soon in condition to be worn, and indeed was as glossy and shining as a new one.

Chamoureau entered the calèche, but, although he was well cleansed, madame required him to sit opposite her, not by her side. She found that he retained from his bath an odor of goldfish which made her sick.

They drove first to Madame Droguet's; she was at the head of the list which Thélénie consulted.

When the calèche stopped at Madame Droguet's door, it caused a general turmoil in the house. Everybody ran upstairs or downstairs, crying:

"A carriage for us!"

"The new owners of Goldfish Villa!"

"Monsieur and Madame de Belleville coming here!"

"Joséphine, my cap with bunches of jasmine."

"Yes, madame."

"Monsieur Droguet, run and put on a black coat."

"Yes, wife. Must I change my waistcoat too?"

"Yes, if you have time. Mon Dieu! here they are! and I haven't my jasmine cap! Joséphine, let them wait a moment in the salon. Say that I—that I——"

"I will say that madame is washing her hands."

"No, indeed! that would be nice! You will say that I am taking a foot bath; that is much more *comme il faut*."

Meanwhile Monsieur and Madame de Belleville had entered the house and given their names to the concierge, who performed the duties of footman as well.

Joséphine came to say that her mistress was taking a foot bath, and requested them to have the kindness to wait a moment in the salon into which she ushered them.

Thélénie proceeded at once to take a survey of the room, while Chamoureau gazed at the two full-length portraits, life size, representing the master and the mistress of the house.

"It's very fine here," he murmured; "handsome furniture, rich paper, and a superb clock!"

"Hush, monsieur! all this is in execrable taste, and the portraits alone are enough to tell us what sort of people they represent—rich grocers, I fancy. Never mind; let us be very agreeable; we must dazzle all these people, and it ought not to be very difficult."

Madame Droguet soon arrived, with her cap a little too much over one ear; but that gave the ex-vivandière a martial look which was not unbecoming to her.

Monsieur Droguet came at his wife's heels, in a very short coat and a too long waistcoat, which lacked several buttons; but he had not had time to notice it.

They bestowed a most affable welcome on their new neighbors; it was easy to see that Thélénie's genuine refinement produced a deep impression on Madame Droguet, who confounded herself in compliments and courtesies, at the same time saying to her husband in an undertone:

"Button yourself up!"

And he, thinking that his wife referred to his waistcoat, murmured with a contrite expression:

"The buttons are missing."

Thélénie informed Madame Droguet that she proposed to give dinners, receptions, festivities of all sorts, and that she should hope for her company as well as her husband's.

The corpulent dame was beside herself with joy, and Monsieur Droguet wrenched off one of the two remaining buttons of his waistcoat.

They then proceeded to discuss the question of the other persons to be invited. Madame Droguet named her own particular friends, and Thélénie asked with an indifferent air:

"Haven't you a certain Madame Dalmont here—a so-called widow, who has a young woman living with her?"

"Yes, we have," replied Madame Droguet with a sneering smile. "But, between us, dear Madame de Belleville, I don't think that they are people worthy to be received at your house. In the first place, they are not polite. When they came here to live they did not call upon us as is customary."

“That indicates at once a lack of *savoir-vivre*.”

“Does it not, madame? Then they have struck up a friendship with a very low-lived person, a sort of wolf, whom nobody in the neighborhood cared to know, and who seems to be on the best of terms with them already. He walks home with them at night. And then——”

“What! isn’t that all?”

“A young man from Paris, named Edmond Didier, hired a house here in Chelles, soon after those strangers came here. And since he’s been here, he passes almost all his time at their house, until it’s got to be a perfect scandal. I am not evil-minded certainly, but there are things one can’t help seeing.—Let your waistcoat alone, Droguet, and button yourself up!”

“What you tell me on the subject of these women, madame, does not surprise me in the least,” cried Thélénie, delighted by what she had heard. “We have known Monsieur Edmond Didier a long while; my husband was once very intimate with him——”

At this point, Chamoureau, who had not been able as yet to put in a word and had confined himself to watching Monsieur Droguet as he felt for the missing buttons or wrenched off the others,—Chamoureau thought that he saw an opportunity to speak.

“Yes,” he said, “I used to know Monsieur Edmond Didier—that is to say, through Freluchon, who used—at the time when——”

Thélénie made haste to cut him short:

“In fact, madame, we heard in Paris that Monsieur Edmond had formed a liaison unworthy of him, which distressed his family; for what you have told me of this Dalmont woman corresponds perfectly with what people think of her in Paris, where she is looked upon as a scheming adventuress; and doubtless her young friend is little better; birds of a feather flock together.”

Madame de Belleville, who was doing her best to play the *grande dame*, forgot that it was not good form to quote proverbs; but it was as right as possible in the eyes of Madame Droguet, who was radiant with delight and exclaimed:

“You hear, Droguet; they’re adventuresses, nobodies! I was sure of it, myself; I am never mistaken in my conjectures; didn’t I say so, only last night, to Doctor Antoine, who undertook to stand up for them!—Just be sick, Droguet, be sick, my dear man; I tell you beforehand that I won’t send for the doctor.”

Monsieur Droguet, who had finally found one button of his waistcoat firmly attached, had just buttoned it with an air of proud satisfaction, and seemed to pay little heed to what his wife said.

At that moment Chamoureau was seized with a paroxysm of sneezing, which ended in a shower and spattered his neighbors; he hurriedly drew his handkerchief, to make his nose presentable; but in his haste to unfold it, he threw into Madame Droguet’s face an object which slid down that lady’s cheek into her bosom, where it disappeared. She uttered a shriek, her husband jumped backward, and Thélénie glared sternly at Chamoureau, as she demanded:

“What was that you threw at madame?”

“I, threw something at madame! why I had nothing to throw.”

Meanwhile Madame Droguet had thrown herself back in her chair, shrieking frantically:

“Oh! take it away! oh! the horrid beast! what kind of a creature is it? It’s still there; it’s slipped down inside my corsets! Take it away! take it away! or I’ll scratch someone!”

Chamoureau stared at her with a terrified expression, but he did not move. Monsieur Droguet let his wife shriek, while he tried obstinately to put another button through its buttonhole.

“Well! does neither of you propose to assist madame?” Thélénie asked them.

“It seems to me,” muttered Chamoureau, “that it isn’t for me to go fumbling in that lady’s corsets; that’s her husband’s business.”

Madame Droguet, seeing that no one came to her assistance, concluded to put her right hand inside her dress. She brought to light a small goldfish which its enforced sojourn in a warm pocket had deprived of a great part of its activity.

“A goldfish!” murmured Madame Droguet in amazement. “What! monsieur,” she added, somewhat reassured when she found that it was not a frog which she had been warming in her bosom, “do you carry goldfish in your handkerchief?”

Chamoureau, as the explanation of the incident began to dawn upon him, turned as red as his fish, and did not know what to say. But Thélénie at once spoke up and told the story of the accident which had happened to her husband, and which explained the presence of an inhabitant of the pond in his coat pocket, unsuspected by him. Thereupon they ended by laughing at the episode, and to obtain full forgiveness for the fish, Thélénie invited the Droguet family to dinner on the Thursday following.

The invitation was accepted with profuse thanks and compliments, and Monsieur and Madame de Belleville took their leave; the Droguets escorted them to their calèche, and they parted well pleased with one another.

“Please examine your pockets, monsieur,” said Thélénie, “and make sure that there are no more goldfish in them, for I have no desire that you should throw any more of them in the faces of the people we are going to call upon.”

“I have no more in my pockets, madame.”

“I am not surprised that you have such a horrible smell of fish about you; why didn’t you change your coat?”

“Because I haven’t any other black one that fits me, madame.”

“Then you must have another one made, monsieur; I believe that you are rich enough to have more than one coat.”

On leaving Madame Droguet’s, Thélénie drove to the Remplumés, then to the Jarnouillards, then to the mayor’s, and to all the leading people of the place, who were extremely flattered by the courtesies and the invitations they received from Monsieur and Madame de Belleville. Thélénie overlooked neither Monsieur Luminot nor the doctor; she left at their houses invitations to dine with her on the Thursday following.

Then they returned to Goldfish Villa, and Chamoureau said to himself:

“I propose to stay quietly in my room, for fear some other unpleasant accident may happen to me.”

Thélénie, for her part, was well content with her day. She had begun a campaign of calumny against the persons whom Edmond visited, and she was persuaded that her spiteful words would soon be repeated and exaggerated, for calumny is the most agreeable pastime of fools. They would be of so little account in the world, if they did not speak ill of their neighbors.

X

AMI BRINGS CERTAIN PERSONS TOGETHER

When the lovelorn Edmond returned from Paris, his first thought always was to go to Madame Dalmont’s to pay his respects to the two friends and to indulge himself in the pleasure of reading Agathe’s thoughts in her eyes.

They did not fail to tell him the story of the sale, although Honorine attempted to pass over in silence the circumstances that redounded to her credit; but Agathe told everything.

“Why shouldn’t you tell of your own good deeds?” she said; “as they say so much ill of us in the neighborhood, that will be some little compensation.”

“Say ill of you! who has the presumption to do anything of the sort, when you deserve nothing but praise?” exclaimed Edmond with great heat. “I have known you only a short time, mesdames, but, thank heaven! I soon learned to appreciate you! You are not of those persons whose hearts are a mystery; yours are so kind, so humane!—What Madame Dalmont did for those people doesn’t surprise me in the least; if she were wealthy, I am sure that there would be no unfortunates in her neighborhood! I confess, too, that I feel strongly drawn toward that strange man, the owner of the Tower, concerning whom the people hereabout spread such absurd reports. When calumny is rife concerning a person whom I do not know, it always serves to commend that person to me. What he did for the farmer’s family was grand, noble, touching! it was like a gust of wind which swept away in an instant all the petty slanders that were current concerning him!—But I beg you to answer my question: who has spoken ill of you?”

The two friends were silent for some time; Agathe blushed and looked at the floor. At last Honorine decided to speak.

“Agathe thinks that we ought to tell you everything, bad as well as good; so we will speak frankly, once and for all; I believe, in truth, that that is the best course to follow.

“First of all, Monsieur Edmond, I must begin by reassuring you, by begging you to believe that the remarks which are made about us do not affect us in the least. You have heard of a certain Madame Droguet——”

“That inquisitive woman, who hid a whole day in the bushes, watching for Monsieur Paul to pass,” added Agathe.

“And who received Freluchon so ill because he called at her house to ask for me?”

“That is the woman; the specimens of her social circle who came to see us gave us no desire to know it in its entirety, so we have not called on Madame Droguet, or her friends Mesdames Jarnouillard and Remplumé. That was our first offence, but it was a very grave one! to fail to show to those ladies the consideration that was their due, and thereby to announce that we did not care for their society—that was an insult which they could not forgive. They began thereupon to discover that we were suspicious characters. Then, as you know, chance willed that we should, on two occasions, accept the escort of the proprietor of the Tower; he walked home with us one evening when a cow had frightened me almost to death, and another time when we were surprised by a violent storm in the country. In a small place like this, it rarely happens that one returns home without being seen by someone. We were noticed in the company of that gentleman, who has shown no desire for their company,—indeed, I believe that I was leaning on his arm, which necessarily intensified the wrath of those ladies,—and he who, during the nine years, more or less, that he has lived in this part of the country, has steadfastly refused all relations with the local notabilities, actually offers his arm to us—the newest of newcomers! That incident was the source of a thousand and one absurd remarks. I come now to another fact which has furnished a subject of calumny to all these people: you hired a house at Chelles shortly after we came here to live; you hired a whole house for your single self.”

“What business is that of theirs? I paid six months’ rent in advance.”

“What business is it of theirs? why, monsieur, everything is the business of those who have nothing to do but to try to find out what is going on among their neighbors. Well, you come to see us—often; you call upon no one else in the place; therefore people are bound to think that you—that you take pleasure in our society.”

“Ah! madame, do you tell me this to make me come less often? Would you forbid my coming to see you?”

“I do not say that; but——”

Honorine seemed embarrassed; Agathe was trembling from head to foot; and Edmond hesitated no longer.

“Madame!” he said, “I like to believe that, seeing me come to your house so persistently, you have never supposed that I was led to come by a blameworthy desire, a frivolous sentiment. But I realize, nevertheless, that it is better that I should explain myself, that I should speak to you frankly, that I should follow your example in everything. I must not leave any basis for hateful suspicions. Madame, if I tell you that I love, that I adore Mademoiselle Agathe, I shall tell you nothing that you do not know; for you must have divined that love, which it would have been very difficult for me to conceal! But, when I avow my passion for her, is not that equivalent to saying that my sole desire is to call her my wife, and that that will be my greatest joy? If I have not told you earlier, it was because I wanted to know—I wanted to be sure if Mademoiselle——”

“He wanted to be sure that I loved him, you see, my dear!” cried Agathe, unable longer to restrain her joy. “And now he is very sure of it; that is what he was waiting for before speaking.”

“Why, Agathe! what are you saying?” exclaimed Honorine; while the girl, confused by what had escaped her lips, relapsed into speechless agitation.

But Edmond impetuously threw himself at Honorine’s feet, saying:

“In pity’s name, madame, do not reprove her, and do not force her to unsay those words which have made me so

happy!”

Honorine gazed at the lovers for a few moments, then smiled and took a hand of each.

“Be calm, my children!” said she; “I do not look very stern, I imagine. Come, sit here beside me, and let us talk. —You love Agathe—yes, I do not doubt it; I had guessed as much; and it is because I have faith in your honor that I have allowed your visits. She loves you, too; why should I blame her for it, if this exchange of sentiments is to result in your happiness? You wish to be her husband, but first of all it is essential that you should know the whole story of her to whom you wish to give your name.

“Agathe bears only her mother’s name—Montoni. Julia, her unfortunate mother, was loved by a young man of noble birth, Comte Adhémar de Hautmont. He did not abandon the woman who had given herself to him; he loved her dearly and intended to make her his wife; but, in order to avoid a rupture with his family, he was waiting until circumstances should favor his projected marriage. Alas! the young man suddenly disappeared; Julia never saw him again, never heard from him in any way; and when he left her, it was with a promise to see her soon, and he covered his daughter, then six years old, with kisses.”

“Why, that is most extraordinary! Did he not return to his family?”

“No; Julia caused inquiries to be made; she was unable to learn anything concerning her child’s father, and six years later the poor mother placed her daughter in my care, saying:

“‘I am dying; take care of my Agathe, who has no one but you to love her.’

“That, monsieur, is all that there is to tell concerning her whom you desire to call your wife; and that it was absolutely necessary to tell you.”

“Oh! madame, you do not think, I trust, that that can in any degree lessen my love for her or my desire to make her the companion of my life.”

“You see, my dear, it doesn’t change his sentiments at all; I was sure that it would not!”

“Dear Agathe, your mother’s misfortunes can but make you the more interesting in my eyes. But your father’s sudden disappearance seems to me most extraordinary; it must be connected with some mysterious occurrence—with some crime, perhaps; who knows?”

“Ah! we have very often thought that.”

“And there has never been any clue, any circumstance to put you on the track of what happened to him?”

“Nothing; so long as my poor mother lived, she never ceased to seek information and make inquiries; but she could never discover a trace of the man who had sworn to love her forever! When she died, I was twelve years old; I could do nothing but weep for my dear mother, and love her who consented to take charge of the unfortunate orphan.”

Agathe threw herself into Honorine’s arms; the latter hastily wiped away the tears that were gathering in her eyes and said:

“Now, my young fiancés, for from this day I regard you as such, let us talk of serious matters. Let us for a moment forget love, which is a very pleasant thing, but insufficient to keep house upon. I am talking now like an aged guardian, am I not? But the old people are almost always right, for they have experience on their side—experience, that unexcelled source of knowledge for which one pays so dear that it ought to be of some use. My young friend Agathe has nothing—no dowry! Alas! I can give her none! And you, Monsieur Edmond—what is your position?—Remember that we have been entirely frank with you.”

“Oh! I do not propose to lie to you, madame, or to make myself out any better than I am. I received sixty thousand francs from an uncle; I invested the money and for some time I was content to live on the income. But soon, acquaintances—circumstances—follies——”

“Enough! we can guess the rest. You have spent the whole?”

“No, madame; I still have about twenty thousand francs. But I have hopes, I will obtain employment, a lucrative place—it has been promised me.”

“Well, Monsieur Edmond, don’t you think that it would be more sensible to wait until you have this place, before marrying? In the first place, you are very young, and Agathe will not be seventeen for two months! It seems to me that you can afford to wait a little while.”

“You are always right, madame. When I take mademoiselle for my wife, I wish to assure her a comfortable position in life, at least; I do not wish to have to tremble for the future. Now that I know that you consent to our union, now that we are engaged, I shall have the courage to wait; but I shall so arrange matters that the time will soon come when I shall be able to offer her a husband worthy of her.”

“Oh! I am not ambitious!” cried Agathe; “I don’t care about wealth!”

“Hush, mademoiselle!” said Honorine; “I really believe that you have less sense than Monsieur Edmond. Luckily, I have enough for you. Here you are engaged! you are to be pitied, are you not? And now the slanderous tongues of the neighborhood can wag all they choose! Poucette will be justified in saying to them:

“‘If Monsieur Edmond Didier does come to my mistress’s house often, it’s because he’s engaged to Mademoiselle Agathe.’”

The young lovers were beside themselves with joy, and Edmond left the house with the assurance that he was beloved, and that his dearest wish would be fulfilled some day.

Honorine left Agathe to enjoy that delicious reverie which always follows the certainty of being united to the object of one’s choice, and went down alone to the garden.

It was a superb day, and it was a joy to breathe the pure air of the country.

Honorine was pensive too, and sighed without asking herself why.

When she reached the end of the garden, she opened the little gate which gave access to an unfrequented road from which one had an extensive view of the surrounding country.

Honorine glanced instinctively in the direction of the Tower. She walked, unconsciously, a few steps along the road and seated herself at the foot of a huge walnut tree, on another uprooted tree which formed a natural bench.

She had been sitting there for some time, happy in Agathe’s happiness, and thinking that it must be very sweet to inspire love in a person to whom one is attracted, when she felt, all of a sudden, something rub against her hand;

her first feeling was one of alarm, but it speedily vanished when she saw beside her Ami, the beautiful dog belonging to the owner of the Tower.

Ami was not backward in manifesting his pleasure at the meeting; he licked her hands and played about her; he even carried his familiarity so far as to put his paws on the young woman's lap now and then. But she received these tokens of affection with pleasure, and while she patted Ami's head and neck, she glanced about her, for the dog's presence always announced his master's. But she looked in vain—she could see no one.

Ami left her for a moment; he too seemed to be looking in all directions; then he returned to Honorine, and barked as if he wished to ask a question.

"I see plainly what you are looking for, good dog; you are asking me where Agathe is—Agathe, whom you are used to seeing with me always. I am alone to-day; you must be content with my company. But you too are alone, Ami; how is it that you come here without your master? You are far from home. Did you leave the Tower to come to see us? Did your master send you here? Have you some message? Are you going back soon?"

The dog, after listening a moment, lay down at Honorine's feet and stretched himself out there with that unrestraint, that unfeigned laziness which dogs exhibit when they have found a spot which they like.

"He doesn't act as if he intended to go away," thought Honorine; "it's singular; I wonder if his master is anywhere about?"

At that moment Ami turned his head quickly, but did not leave his place. The young woman looked in the direction to which the dog seemed to call her attention, and she saw the owner of the Tower climbing a little path which led from the village to the road by which she was then sitting.

Paul had not seen her, but he could not fail to pass her in a moment. Honorine lowered her eyes, but she let her arm rest on the dog, as if to ask him not to leave her. A few seconds later Paul had halted in front of the young woman; and his dog gazed at him earnestly, without moving from his place, as if to say: "I am very comfortable here!"

"Really, madame, I am afraid that Ami presumes too far upon your kindness to him," said Paul, as he bowed to Honorine; "he is altogether too unceremonious; you should send him away."

"Oh! monsieur, why should I send the good dog away, when he shows such a friendly feeling for me? it is not such a common thing; and one can depend upon it in his case, I fancy?"

"Oh! yes, yes! and in no other!"

"Do you really mean that you make no other exception, monsieur? It must be very melancholy to think that no one can ever have a friendly feeling for one!"

Paul made no reply; he remained standing in front of the young woman; but he gazed fixedly at his dog and seemed to be studying the contented expression that he read in his eyes.

"Monsieur," said Honorine after a moment, "if you care to rest a while, this tree trunk on which I am sitting is quite large enough for two. I do not ask you to come into the house, although it is within a few steps; for, as you have never deigned to accept our invitations, I am bound to presume that they do not please you."

Ami's master made no reply, but he seated himself on the tree trunk, beside the young woman; and his dog, who had followed him with his eyes, stretched out one of his paws and rested it on his master, looking at him with an expression of the greatest satisfaction.

Honorine waited expecting that her neighbor would speak to her, but he maintained silence and seemed absorbed in his reflections.

The young woman, who was very desirous to talk, decided to begin.

"Have you lived in this part of the country long, monsieur?"

"A little more than nine years, madame."

"And you live alone on your estate?"

"Practically alone."

"You abandoned the world very young."

"One finds it easy to leave what one despises!"

"Oh! pray let me believe, monsieur, that that contempt does not include the whole world."

"Doubtless there are exceptions, madame; but I have been so cruelly tried, that I am quite justified in entertaining a bad opinion of men."

"And of women too, perhaps?"

"Of women even more!"

"Really? And because one woman deceived you, you despise them all! Allow me to tell you, monsieur, that all women are not alike!"

"They have all been alike to me, however!"

"Ah! you have been deceived by several?"

"So long as it is only a matter of pleasure—of follies, if you will—one can always make excuses, forgive; but there is a kind of treachery that reaches the heart, that has deplorable, heartrending consequences, and that leads to irreparable disasters! Ah! that sort of treachery one never forgives!"

"No; but one pours out his grief upon the bosom of a friend, who comforts one, who strives to make one forget one's suffering, or at least to alleviate it."

"I have never met one of those friends!"

"How could you have met them, since you shun all society, all companionship?"

"I have the companionship of my dog. He loves me; he won't betray me, will you, Ami?"

In reply to this question, Ami, whose left paw was still resting on his master, pricked up his ears, lifted his right paw and laid it on Honorine's lap.

"On my word, Ami, you are getting to be too familiar," said Paul, putting out his hand to remove the paw; but Honorine stopped him.

“Do let the dog alone. He loves me too, you see. Does that displease you?”

“No—no—madame; but——”

“Does it surprise you?”

“I confess that—knowing you such a short time——”

“You do not understand the friendship that your dog displays for me. But the very first time that he saw Agathe, he fawned upon her and caressed her; that was much more singular!”

“It was indeed; and I have often wondered, but in vain, what could be the source of Ami’s affection for a person he had never seen.”

“I should suppose, monsieur, that you would divine more readily this honest and faithful servant’s instincts; at least, after what I have heard.”

“What have you heard, madame?”

“That your dog had the gift of divining at once the sentiments with which a person regarded his master; and that, as a result of that instinct, he greeted your enemies far from cordially, that he growled and barked at people whom you had reason to distrust; while, on the contrary, he showed much affection for those who were disposed to feel a—a sincere affection for you.”

Honorine almost stammered in her utterance of these last words.

Paul fixed his eyes on the young woman’s sweet and sympathetic features, and his brow, ordinarily clouded, seemed to clear; one would have said that for the first time during a long period his heart beat fast under the impulse of a pleasurable sensation.

“It is true, madame,” he said after a moment’s silence, “that my dog has often afforded proofs of that peculiar instinct; but had I not the right to doubt the accuracy of his second sight in this instance? How could I suppose that you could entertain the slightest affection for me? I have done nothing to deserve it.”

“You forget, monsieur, that you have twice established a claim to our gratitude—on the two evenings of the cow and the storm. What would have become of us but for you?”

“Anyone would have done as much as I did.”

“I see, monsieur, that you have made up your mind that you will see only evil-minded, false, treacherous people in all who surround you.”

“Oh! madame!”

“But your efforts are vain; your dog, who knows what to believe, will always look upon us as his friends. Look; see how he gazes at me; he seems to express approval of my words; if he continues to show such friendliness to me, you will distrust him too, will you not, monsieur?”

“Ah! madame, far from it; on the contrary, I shall think that I have at last found what I believed it to be impossible to find—a true friend!”

At that moment Agathe appeared at the little gate.

“Honorine!” she called; “Honorine! are you there?”

“Here I am,” said the young woman, rising; “I was not far away.”

“I have been looking for you everywhere; I was worried about you. Ah! here’s Ami; good-day, brave dog!”

Ami had left his place to run to meet Agathe, who then spied the owner of the Tower.

She bowed affably to him, saying:

“Had I known that monsieur was with you, I shouldn’t have been alarmed, as he is always our protector.”

“I have done nothing yet to earn that title,” said Paul, returning Agathe’s bow. “But I should esteem myself very fortunate, mademoiselle, if I could ever be of any real service to you.”

As he finished speaking, he bowed to the two friends and left them, motioning to his dog to follow him, which he did not make up his mind to do until he had trotted back several times to the young women, to fawn upon them and wag his tail.

XI

AN AMAZON

Two days later, Père Ledrux was working in Madame Dalmont’s little garden. Humming as usual, he approached the two friends, who were sitting amid a clump of trees.

“Well!” he said, “here’s more fine folks in the place; ah! but these are regular bigwigs, so it seems; even bigger than Madame Droguet!”

“Whom are you talking about, Père Ledrux?” asked Honorine.

“The folks who’ve bought the house with the goldfish.”

“What!” cried Agathe, “is there a house with goldfish in this village—and we didn’t know it?”

“Bless me! mamzelle, when it was for sale, nobody thought much about it; it was too dear for the natives here. It’s a splendid place, with a park and an English garden and a kitchen garden.”

“And goldfish apparently?”

“Yes, mamzelle; a big pond full of ‘em.”

“And you know who has bought the place?”

“Pardi! everybody in Chelles knows.”

“You see that that isn’t so, Père Ledrux, for we don’t know a word about it.”

“The buyers are Monsieur and Madame de Belleville—man and wife; both young. The lady’s a fine woman, and she’s always dressed up—my word!—as if she was going to a wedding.”

“Really? then they are living here?”

“Oh, yes! they’ve been here for the last ten or twelve days——”

“Oh! I’ve seen the lady, I have,” said Poucette, coming forward; “I’ve seen her several times—for the last three days you don’t see anything but her riding by here on horseback. Anyone would think it was our house she wanted to see; she rides in front of it and behind it, and she looks over the garden wall; that’s easy, on horseback!—She’s got a fine blue cloth habit, with a long skirt that hides her horse’s tail, and a man’s round hat. You ought to see how well she sits on her horse! Oh! she ain’t afraid, that lady ain’t! you can see that right off.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Faith, mamzelle, you can’t say that she ain’t good-looking; but with her great black eyes, when she looks at you, you’d think she wanted to frighten everybody. She’s got a bold, haughty way! for my part, I don’t like such ways.”

“When you see this beautiful amazon again, Poucette, call me; I am curious to see her.”

“All right, mamzelle; I’ll bet she’ll ride by again to-day; for I tell you she always rides round the house and then comes back this way.”

“That’s rather strange, don’t you think so, Honorine?”

“For my part, I see nothing extraordinary about it, my dear girl; this lady comes to live in a part of the country that she isn’t familiar with, and she goes out in the saddle; that’s the best way of becoming acquainted with the neighborhood. If she looks at the houses, it’s because she wants to know the people who live in them.”

“But why does she pass our house so often? why does she ride round it?”

“She passes it, no doubt, because it’s on her road when she goes out to ride. Poucette thinks that she rides round it; probably that is because it’s her shortest way home.”

“You always think that everything’s all right. Still, I am very curious to see this beautiful equestrian.”

“And I am not in the least, I assure you.—By the way, you don’t mention the husband; doesn’t he ride too?”

“Oh, no!” said the gardener; “the husband don’t know how to sit a horse very well, it seems; the first day Madame de Belleville went out to ride, her husband thought he’d go with her. So he took a horse, but he didn’t look as if he was very comfortable on him. ‘My dear love,’ he sings out to his wife, ‘please don’t go so fast! I’ve got out of the habit of galloping.’—But whether his wife didn’t hear him, or whether her horse wouldn’t stop, she was off like a flash in an instant. Monsieur de Belleville tried to overtake her, but *patatras*!—off he went, head over heels. He got up and went home, limping a little and swearing he’d never get on a horse again; but that don’t prevent madame’s going every day.”

“She has a servant follow her, of course?”

“No, she always goes alone. As Poucette says, she ain’t afraid. It seems there’s to be a dinner-party to-morrow, given by the owner of Goldfish Villa; all the bigwigs of the place are invited—the Droguets and Remplumés and Jarnouillards; you don’t hear anybody talking about anything else. Perhaps it’s to invite you that Madame de Belleville rides round your house the way she does.”

“Oh! no, Père Ledrux; it can’t be for that. In the first place, one doesn’t go on horseback to pay a ceremonious visit; and in the second place, we are not bigwigs, and as this lady chooses to make friends of all the people who talk ill of us, it is probable that we shall never make friends with her. But if you hear any more gossip, Père Ledrux, about Monsieur Edmond Didier’s frequent visits to us, I authorize you to say that there is nothing surprising in the fact of a young man’s paying court to the person he is to marry; for Monsieur Edmond and Agathe are engaged.”

“Well, well! I had a suspicion of that!” cried the gardener; “I says to myself: ‘That young man and that girl—hum! it might well be—they’re both very good-looking!’—But, you understand, I just said that to myself, by way of reflection; for it don’t concern me, it’s none of my business.—I’ll just go and take a look at your hens; it’s as sure as can be that the black one fights with the others; if you don’t eat her, I’ll have to take her away; she makes the others too miserable.”

“We don’t eat the hens whose eggs we have eaten; take her away, Père Ledrux.”

“Well! you understand, it’s in your interest; she’d spoil all the others.”

Père Ledrux went off to the hencoop, and Honorine had returned to the house, when Poucette came running to Agathe, crying out:

“Mamzelle, here she is, she’s coming this way.”

“Who? the amazon?”

“Yes, she’s on the narrow road, at the end of the garden; you can see her nicely from the summer-house.”

“Let us go there then!”

Agathe was soon at the window of the summer-house, and Poucette, who had followed her, pointed to a lady on horseback, coming from Gournay, and riding her horse at a gallop, with a poise and boldness worthy of a circus rider.

Thélénie was dressed in a beautiful habit of light blue broadcloth; on her head was a man’s hat, with a very broad brim, set a little on one side, and adorned with a waving mass of black ribbons. Her lovely black hair fell in corkscrew curls on each side of her face, and her great gleaming eyes shone with wonderful brilliancy beneath her hat-brim. She held in her right hand a dainty riding-crop, with which she lashed her horse vigorously when he showed signs of relaxing his pace.

Agathe gazed with unwearying admiration at the beautiful equestrian; she leaned from the window in order to see her better, saying to Poucette:

“Oh! how splendidly she rides! what grace! what fearlessness! She is a very pretty woman too!”

“Yes, at a distance! but wait till you see her near to.”

As Thélénie drew near Honorine’s house, she saw that there was someone at the window of the summer-house; instantly she changed her horse’s gait and brought him down to a walk.

“I can see her much better now,” said Agathe; “she has stopped galloping and is coming very slowly.”

“I guess she’s walking her horse so that she can see you better. Just see how she stares at you, mamzelle!

wouldn't you think she wanted to bury her eyes in your face?"

"That is true; she is looking at me so attentively!—I don't think her so pretty now."

"There! I knew it! She has a very wicked look, that fine lady has!"

"See; she is turning round to look at me."

"If I was you, mamzelle, I'd stick out my tongue at her."

"She is going on at last; I'm glad of that!"

"Never mind; she'll know you another time!"

"Really, I can't understand how a person can stare at one in that way!"

"And with such a look! anyone would think she'd have liked to beat you! I say, mamzelle, I'm sure that if Monsieur Edmond had seen that woman stare at you like that, he'd have gone out and said to her: 'What business have you to look at my intended like that? Do you know her? Do you want anything of her?'"

"That is very likely; but I shan't mention that woman to Edmond! After all, if she doesn't find me to her taste, so much the worse for her! it's all the same to me."

"She must be pretty hard to suit! For my part, I think she finds you too good-looking, and that's what vexed her."

"How foolish you are, Poucette! what difference can it make to her whether I am good-looking or not?"

"Look you, mamzelle! that handsome amazon probably says to herself when she comes here to live: 'I shall be the prettiest woman in the place; everybody will admire me!' Especially as she's mighty particular about her dress.—Well, you understand, so long as she don't see anybody but the Droguets and Remplumés and Jarnouillards, she might well think herself the handsomest woman in the place; but now that she's seen you, it's another story."

Agathe went to Honorine and told her what had happened, and described the impertinent way in which the new owner of Goldfish Villa had stared at her. Whereat Madame Dalmont began to laugh, saying:

"That serves you right! You were so curious to see this woman and now you are well paid for your curiosity."

"Never mind, my dear; if I meet this Madame de Belleville again, and she stares at me as she did just now, I shall ask her what she wants of me."

"You will be very foolish, Agathe; when people behave impertinently, the best way to mortify them is to pay no attention."

Since her conversation with the owner of the Tower, Honorine had gone out quite frequently to sit on the tree trunk under the walnut. She declared that from there the view was very extensive, while Agathe maintained that it was quite as fine from the window of the summer-house. So that Madame Dalmont almost always selected the hours when her young friend was practising on the piano, to open the little gate and go out into the road. Did she hope to meet there again the excellent dog, who had shown her so much affection? or was it his master whom she hoped to see? But there was no sign of Paul or of his dog.

By way of compensation, the one engrossing subject of conversation in the neighborhood was the dinner given at Goldfish Villa. Père Ledrux and Poucette repeated to the two friends what was said in Chelles on that subject.

"It was a magnificent affair."

"Besides the notable people from this region, there were lots of people from Paris, men especially, all of the best tone and of the most perfect refinement! Some smoked at dessert, but it was only to change the air."

"They had things to eat that no one knew the names of, and wines to drink that looked like liqueurs."

"There was a most beautiful porcelain service. A servant broke a plate on Monsieur Jarnouillard's head; but it did nothing but spoil his coat, which was spoiled already."

"The master of the house nearly strangled eating fish."

"Monsieur Luminot got a little tipsy."

"Madame de Belleville changed her dress after the second course."

"Madame Remplumé was sick."

"Monsieur Jarnouillard counted the different dishes of dessert—there were thirty-three."

"They played cards and danced in the evening."

"Monsieur Droguet fell while waltzing."

"They played for infernally high stakes. Madame Droguet lost four francs at lansquenet. But Monsieur Antoine Beaubichon won three at écarté."

"Everybody went away overflowing with admiration for Monsieur and Madame de Belleville."

Such were the remarks which circulated through the village after the grand banquet. The names of the new owners of the villa were mentioned in Chelles only with the most profound respect. Monsieur Remplumé even went so far as to remove his hat when he passed their house. And when Thélénie pranced through the village on horseback, people ran to their doors and windows to see her pass, crying:

"There she goes! there she goes! she rides like a dragoon!"

To be sure, there were some urchins who yelled: "*A la chienlit!*" But those unseemly words were drowned by the applause and cheers.

Thélénie continued to gallop by Madame Dalmont's house; but Agathe, instead of watching her, left the window if she were sitting at it, determined that that lady should not have the satisfaction of scrutinizing her as she did before.

One afternoon, when Honorine was sitting alone under the great walnut tree by the roadside, she suddenly heard piercing shrieks not far away. They evidently proceeded from a child's lips, and the young woman, thinking that someone might be in need of assistance, hastened down the hill, and saw, some two hundred yards away, a woman on horseback striking with her crop a small boy in whom Honorine instantly recognized the one who had stolen her cherries.

The appearance of a lady on the scene did not calm Thélénie's wrath; she continued to belabor the lost child, exclaiming: "Ah! you won't stand aside when I tell you to look out, won't you? You make signs to show that you aren't

afraid of me, and you make faces at me! You little blackguard, I'll teach you to know me and respect me!"

When he caught sight of Madame Dalmont, little Emile ran to her for protection, still making a great outcry, in which there was at least as much anger as pain.

The amazon would have ridden after him, but Honorine barred her way.

"Mon Dieu!" she said, "what has this child done to you, madame, that you should punish him so severely?"

Thélénie eyed Honorine insolently as she retorted:

"What has he done to me? what business is it of yours? If I horsewhip him, it's because I choose to do it, and because he deserves it. What are you meddling for?"

"Meddling—when I defend a child who is being beaten! Evidently, madame, you would see a child overwhelmed with blows without thinking of defending him!"

"What does this mean? that madame is pleased to give me a lesson, perhaps?"

"I might well give you a lesson in politeness, I fancy; for you adopt a tone which is very little in harmony with your costume."

Thélénie bit her lips angrily; then she cried abruptly:

"Ah! you are Madame Dalmont, no doubt?"

"I am Madame Dalmont."

"I might have guessed as much. Ha! ha! ha! I have frequently heard of madame and her little friend, Mademoiselle Agathe! Ha! ha! You ladies are very well known in Chelles."

"I think not, madame, as we see very few people."

"But you are much talked about all the same!"

"It is quite possible, madame; there are people whose sole occupation is gossip, slander, calumny. But what comes from the mouths of those people is not worth thinking about, really!"

"Do you mean that for me, madame?"

"How could I mean it for you? I do not know you!"

"I am Madame de Belleville, and I am not in the habit of putting up with an insult from anybody, no matter who it may be."

"And I am Madame Dalmont, and I am not in the habit of fighting because I am not a man."

Thélénie was irritated beyond measure by the young widow's imperturbable calmness.

But while this dialogue was taking place between the two ladies, little Emile, thirsting for revenge for the blows he had received, picked up a large lump of earth and threw it with all his strength at the person who had beaten him. The clod did not reach her, but it struck one of the ears of her horse, and as it broke, spattered and soiled the beautiful blue skirt.

The horse, not expecting the assault, made a leap side-wise which might well have unseated his rider; but Thélénie, unshaken in her saddle, simply cried out in rage:

"Ah! you little villain!" she shrieked; "this time you shall feel my crop, and you'll keep the marks of it!"

The lost child hid behind Honorine; but that obstacle did not seem to deter Thélénie.

"Stand aside, madame," she cried; "move from in front of that rascal, or I won't be answerable for my horse."

"For heaven's sake, madame, forgive the child!"

"No! no! and if you don't move—So much the worse for you, if you get a taste of the crop too!"

With that the amazon urged her horse upon Honorine and the little boy; but, like the great majority of those noble-hearted creatures, the horse hesitated, stopped and tried to make a détour in order to avoid running down a woman and a child. The amazon persisted in her attempts to ride him upon them, when suddenly an unexpected defender changed the whole aspect of affairs. Ami rushed down the hill, and without pause or hesitation jumped at the rider, barking in a tone which indicated that he was not in a good humor.

At sight of that magnificent beast, who was doing his utmost to jump upon her, Thélénie, forced to defend herself, tried to strike Ami with her crop. But he cleverly avoided the blows, springing from side to side, but biting the horse at the same time.

"Madame! madame! call off your dog!" shouted the amazon; "he is biting my horse! you will be responsible for what may happen!"

"The dog is not mine, madame; but I am thankful for his arrival at this moment, for it has prevented you from doing a cowardly thing."

"Oh! you haven't heard the last of this, madame! The cursed dog! And I shall find this little wretch again, too. We shall see! we shall see! I will find that dog's master!"

But harassed by Ami, who tried to bite her legs, and obliged to attend to her horse, whom the constant attacks of the dog were driving to frenzy, Thélénie had no choice but to abandon the field of battle. She plunged her spurs into the beast's sides, and gave him the rein; he instantly galloped away at the top of his speed, and horse and rider soon disappeared altogether.

Ami started to pursue them, but Honorine called him back so vehemently that he returned to her side at last, still excited by the battle he had fought.

The young woman looked about in every direction, but to no purpose; the dog's master did not appear. She was about to return to the house, when she noticed that little Emile was still by her side.

"Why did you throw a stone at that horse just now?" she asked.

"It wasn't a stone, it was a lump of dirt."

"No matter; you hoped to hit that lady, I suppose?"

"Yes, I aimed it at her."

"That was a very naughty thing for you to do. Just think of all that might have happened: the lady galloped her horse at you——"

"And at you too."

“And if it had not been for this good dog that arrived just in time, you might be badly hurt.”

“And you too.”

“None of those things would have happened if you had not thrown that lump of dirt.”

“What made that dragoon strike me with her whip?”

“Why didn’t you stand aside to let her pass?”

“She could pass well enough; there was plenty of room. Does she need the whole road for her and her horse?”

“My child, do you mean always to be naughty? You have already forgotten what I told you the other day; make people love you instead of making them fear you, and you will be much happier.”

The boy looked at the ground and muttered in a low voice:

“No one wants to love me!”

Honorine took a small coin from her purse and gave it to Emile.

“See, I will give you this,” she said, “but only on condition that you won’t throw any more stones or dirt at anybody. If I learn that you have done it again, I will never give you anything more.”

“Not cherries?”

“Neither cherries nor anything else; now go.”

Ami listened to this conversation, seated on his haunches, with the gravity of an examining magistrate. Then he followed Honorine to the garden gate, where she turned and said to him:

“Are you coming in with me, good dog? No; you won’t. Your master isn’t with you, so you came all by yourself to pay me a visit; that was very nice of you. When you choose to come again, just scratch at this gate, and you will always be welcome.”

Ami, who seemed to understand her words perfectly, yelped once or twice, then bounded away toward the Tower, barking loudly and joyously.

XII

THE BARON VON SCHTAPELMERG

Thélénie galloped to her house, without once drawing rein. As she rode into the courtyard, she almost overturned her husband, who was just starting out for a walk, and had barely time to jump into the stable. Then she dropped the reins, jumped to the ground, tossed her crop in the face of the servant who stepped forward, and, still in a rage at having been forced to retreat, cried:

“Where is monsieur? where is he hiding? tell him to come to me instantly.”

Chamoureau made bold to put his head out of the stable.

“Here I am, my love,” he said; “I am here. Your infernal horse came near upsetting me! Is it possible you didn’t see that? Your horses are too restive, they’ll play you some bad trick one of these days. You look annoyed; have you had a fall?”

“Hold your tongue, monsieur! It’s natural for you to fall; you know nothing about bodily exercise!”

“What’s that? I know nothing about bodily exercise! Why, it seems to me that there are some kinds in which I ——”

“I am furious, monsieur; I am exasperated!”

“The deuce!”

“Yes; for I have been insulted, outraged, laughed at! But it shall not pass off so! I must have reparation; and I look to you for that!”

Chamoureau, scenting a duel in what his wife had said, and feeling no vocation for that sort of amusement, was strongly tempted to return to the stable. He walked about the courtyard, muttering:

“I had something in hand; what in the devil did I have in hand?”

“Be kind enough to listen to me, monsieur. I tell you that your wife has been insulted!”

“Insulted! you! Madame de Belleville! That strikes me as most extraordinary, for everybody in the neighborhood bows to the ground before us. They don’t talk about anything else but the dinner we gave them. They think that you ride a horse like Madame Saqui, like the late Franconi, I should say; they shout ‘hurrah!’ when you pass, and they are constantly throwing bouquets to us.”

“That’s just the reason, monsieur, why it’s an outrage that a woman, a child and a dog should have formed a league against me!”

“What! it was a dog, and a woman, and a child, who had the audacity to insult you?” cried Chamoureau, recovering all his courage when he found that there was no man concerned in the affair. “*Fichtre*! bless my soul! *vive Dieu*! where are the rascals, pray, that I may punish them! I will whip the woman, I mean the child—no, I mean the dog; in fact, I will castigate all three of them.”

“When it comes to administering punishment, I shall not need you, monsieur; what I want of you is that you should make inquiries and find out, first, whom the child belongs to—a little boy of seven or eight, I should think, who looks like a little villain, and who threw stones at my horse.”

“Ah! I’ll chastise that little scamp. What! he dared! Really, there aren’t any children nowadays!”

“He was dressed in a short brown jacket, worn out at the elbows, and torn everywhere, dirty green breeches covered with patches, no stockings, shoes full of holes, and nothing on his head except a forest of black hair which gives him the look of an imp.”

“Is the little fellow a beggar?”

“He looks like it, but I don’t say that he begged of me. You are to find out whom he belongs to—what his parents do; then I will take it on myself to go to speak to them.”

“Very good; I understand perfectly. You don’t want me to whip the child?”

“Do nothing more than I tell you. Then there’s a dog, a monstrous dog.”

“Describe him, if you please.”

“Mon Dieu! monsieur, I can’t do it very well. I was on horseback and the dog tried to jump at me; I had to keep twisting and turning to avoid him. I think he was of the bull-dog breed; he was very large, and seemed very savage.”

“Peste! what a savage beast! Wasn’t he muzzled?”

“Of course not, as he bit my horse.”

“He is unlawfully at large; I will complain to the authorities and have him impounded.”

“Just find out whom he belongs to; I will attend to the rest.”

“That may be rather difficult; didn’t you notice any particular marks?”

“Oh! how you irritate me, monsieur!”

“I mean, didn’t he have any blanket on him? They put blankets on some dogs, just as they do on horses.”

“No, monsieur, he had nothing on him; he’s white with black spots. I presume that he belongs to the little boy’s parents, as he instantly undertook to defend him.”

“True; your conjecture is very just; if he belongs to the boy’s parents, the boy is his little master, and it was as such that he defended him.—Now let us come to the woman: some wretched peasant, I suppose?”

“No, monsieur, a lady; but I know who she is!”

“Ah! you know her, do you?”

“I don’t know her, but I divined who she was: that Madame Dalmont, for whom you bought a miserable shanty down here!”

“Indeed! Madame Dalmont, the protectress of young Agathe, with whom our friend Edmond Didier is in love.”

“Exactly. Did you hear how they talked about those two women at our party?”

“I heard—that is to say, no, I didn’t hear. What did they say about those two ladies?”

“That they were creatures unfit to be received in society; that they led a scandalous life here, receiving no one but men, and, it is believed, lodging them at night;—do you understand?”

“What! they let lodgings?—furnished?”

Thélénie shrugged her shoulders impatiently and left her husband, saying:

“Don’t forget what I have told you to do, monsieur!”

Chamoureau left the house by the fine avenue of lindens of which he was so proud. Reflecting on the instructions his wife had given him, he said to himself:

“I shall find the child; that ought not to be difficult. But as for the dog—it seems that he’s very savage; I’ll inquire about him, but I won’t try to come to close quarters with him. What’s the use; he’ll never admit his culpability toward my wife.”

Communing thus with himself, the new landed proprietor made slow progress, because he halted at every tree on the avenue, examined it and walked around it admiringly, murmuring:

“This fellow must be at least fifty years old—what do I say? eighty years! perhaps more! How in the devil can one tell the age of a tree? That’s something the geologists have never thought of—the *arborists*, I should say, or, better still, the wood-cutters. And yet it’s a very important matter. When a man can say: ‘I have on my estate several centuries of trees,’ that should add immensely to its value. Let us see, let us see; that is something worth finding out—how to tell the age of a tree! Suppose I should find it out! I should think that I might then offer myself as a candidate for the Academy; I should be justified!”

Engrossed by his study of the trees, Chamoureau had not noticed a man who had entered his avenue and was walking toward him, looking to right and left, like one who is determined to observe everything.

This individual, whose dress was modest and suggested poverty rather than elegance, had nevertheless an arrogant manner and a self-assured bearing; his dirty round hat was perched on the right side of his head in true swaggering style, and the thick stick which he held in his hand was made to perform evolutions and revolutions which might have led one to think that he had been a drum-major. Adding to all this the face of a bird of prey, you will at once recognize Croque, Thélénie’s brother, less dilapidated than at the time of his visit to his sister some months before, but not apparently in the most prosperous circumstances.

Croque approached Chamoureau, who, on raising his eyes, was vastly surprised to see within a few feet of him that gallows-bird, who tried to salute him gracefully, as he said:

“A thousand pardons, monsieur; but am I not on the estate of Monsieur and Madame de Belleville?”

“You are indeed, monsieur, for this avenue, with these superb lindens, also belongs to us; it forms a part of the domain which my wife and I recently purchased.”

“Ah! monsieur, from what I hear, it must be to Monsieur de Belleville himself, in his own person, that I have the great honor of presenting at this moment my most sincere respects and compliments.”

Chamoureau, highly flattered by the respectful tone in which the stranger addressed him, began to think that he was not so ugly after all; and, striking an attitude as if he were on a pedestal, he bowed and replied:

“Yes, monsieur, I am Cha—I am Monsieur de Belleville.”

“Who married Madame Sainte-Suzanne—a charming woman, of the utmost refinement, distinguished to her finger-tips, and with a most superior mind.”

“Well, well!” thought Chamoureau, “he speaks well of my wife! He’s the first one to do that!”

“However, monsieur,” continued Croque, “I do not need to praise your excellent wife to you; for since you have taken her for your cherished companion in life, you must have learned to appreciate her numerous good qualities and her admirable perfections.”

“Certainly, monsieur, I am acquainted with my wife’s perfections; she has superb eyes, jet-black hair———”

“Oh! monsieur, physically she is incomparably beautiful, beyond doubt, but the physique is nothing compared with the heart, the mind and the virtues! There are many beautiful women in the world, but such virtues as those of

your good wife are less common—if I dared, I would say very rare!”

“Thélénie must have rendered this man some great service!” thought Chamoureau; “he discovers too many virtues in her; I am not acquainted with so many as that.—May I know with whom I have the honor of talking?” he said, turning to Croque.

Croque drew himself up, twirled his cane so rapidly that Chamoureau for a moment feared for his nose, and replied:

“I am the Baron von Schtapelmerg. I imagine that that name is not unknown to you, and that your wife must often have spoken to you of me?”

“Baron von—I beg your pardon?”

“Schtapelmerg.”

“Oh, yes! Schtapel—Yes, I have it.”

“You know me, do you not?”

“Faith! no; this is the first time I ever heard your name; otherwise I should have remembered it, as it’s rather uncommon!”

“You surprise me very much. What! Madame Sainte-Suzanne—I beg your pardon; I always think of her by that name.”

“There’s no harm done.”

“Has she forgotten her old friend, her devoted Schtapelmerg?”

“Were you a friend of hers?”

“Ah! monsieur!—a friend—in life and death! Twenty times I have fought for that charming woman!”

“You have fought for her?”

“I did little else at one time, monsieur; if anyone looked at her too closely, if anyone trod on her foot or tore her dress—instantly my sword was unsheathed. Ah! I am not given to jesting! I am very sensitive on the point of honor.—One! two! parry that thrust! pif! spitted!”

“Sapristi!” muttered Chamoureau, while Croque went through the motions of spitting a linden. “Here’s a man that I’ll never quarrel with! But he seems to be a friend to be relied on.”

“Lately, monsieur, after travelling in Bavaria, my native land, and visiting some of my numerous domains——”

As he said this, Croque pushed back under his coat sleeve a bit of ragged shirt which persisted in showing itself.

“I was saying that, on returning from one of my principalities, my first thought, on reaching Paris, was to call upon my noble and respected friend, Madame Sainte-Suzanne. There I learned that that most gracious woman had recently espoused a young, noble and fashionable gentleman, blessed with an immense fortune and with amiable qualities in proportion; I was told your name—Monsieur de Belleville!”

Chamoureau, who had appeared at first somewhat surprised to hear this individual in threadbare coat and rusty tile speak of his domains, forgot that seedy costume as soon as the words gentleman, fashionable, and amiable fell upon his ear. He was radiant, his face fairly beamed, and he extended his hand to the pretended baron, exclaiming:

“Monsieur de Schtapel—what’s your name——”

“Merg.”

“Yes, that’s it; I was afraid of pronouncing it wrong. My dear baron, as you are my wife’s friend, I venture to hope that you will consent to be mine also from this moment. It will be an honor and—the keenest satisfaction to me to offer you my friendship. Shake hands!”

“Ah! *tarteiff*! you are what I call a man! I judged you at the first glance; I said to myself: ‘Ten thousand cabbages! there’s a man who is worthy to be hitched up with Madame Sainte-Suzanne; they were born for each other!’—And you offer me your friendship! *Sapreman*! here’s my hand. Bah! these damned musketeer sleeves are intolerable; they get torn and soiled in an hour; no matter—here’s my hand. Now, if you have an enemy, if anyone has the misfortune to look askance at you—why, it no longer concerns you—it’s my affair—mine!”

“Oh! really, baron, I should not want you to go so far as that.”

“Nonsense! I tell you that it no longer concerns you; that’s the way I deal with my real friends! But I beg your pardon—you must realize my impatience; I would be glad to present my respects to Madame de Belleville.”

“That is quite natural; we will go to her. She has just come in from her ride, which she takes every morning. Do you know how well she rides?”

“Do I know? why, it was I who held her stirrup at the riding-school of—at the circus, in fact!”

“I shall have the pleasure of taking you to my wife.”

“Bless my soul! don’t put yourself out. You were going somewhere, and you mustn’t change your plans on my account. Madame is at the château; that’s enough for me; I will go alone.”

“No indeed! I shall be very glad to witness the joy which my wife cannot fail to feel when she sees you.—Come, baron, come.”

Croque would have preferred that Monsieur de Belleville should not be present at his first interview with his sister, but it was impossible to object. Moreover, after the conversation he had just had with his brother-in-law, he was justified in concluding that it was very easy to make him believe whatever one chose.

Thélénie had just changed her dress and was half reclining on a couch, when her husband entered her apartment, exclaiming from the outer room:

“My dear love, I am bringing someone whom you will be delighted to see, a visitor whom you did not expect, but who will give you great pleasure.”

Thélénie did not deign to turn her face toward the door, but contented herself with asking:

“Who is it? what’s the matter? whom have you brought?”

“Monsieur de Schtapelmerg.”

“Who’s he? Schtapelmerg! Where does he come from? I don’t know any such person.”

“She has forgotten your name, baron.”

“When madame hears my voice, I am quite sure that she will recognize me at once and will not ask again who I am.”

There was a shrill, strident tone in Croque’s voice which, in truth, made it easy to recognize; so that, as soon as he began to speak, Thélénie faced about abruptly, and, after examining him, exclaimed:

“What! is it you?”

“Yes, dear and noble lady; it is I, the Baron von Schtapelmerg, your old friend, who was always the most sincere and devoted of your servants. I have just had the honor of informing your highly honored husband, Monsieur de Belleville, of that fact, madame, having had the pleasure of meeting him on my way here; and I already entertain for him the most sincere esteem, having, at the first glance, seen that he is endowed with capacities of all sorts.”

Croque finished his harangue by bowing low to Monsieur and Madame de Belleville.

Thélénie had much difficulty in refraining from laughing in the faces of her husband and the pretended baron, especially when she saw Chamoureau press Croque’s hand warmly, saying:

“Faith, my dear baron, if I suit you, I can say without flattery that you are altogether to my taste, and that my wife could not have an acquaintance who would be more agreeable to me.”

“You hear, charming lady; now I am your husband’s friend too; and I like to believe that you have kept a little place warm for me in your heart. *Tarteiff!*”

“Certainly, Monsieur de—I cannot possibly remember your name.”

“Schtapelmerg—descended, I venture to say, from one of the most venerable families of Bavaria.”

“Yes, yes! I know it. But, my dear baron, allow me to tell you that you are really rather careless in the matter of dress! I know that a man pays little attention to such details when travelling; but upon my word, if I didn’t know you as I do, seeing you appear in this garb I should never have detected in you the true aristocrat.”

“I deserve the rebuke. Yes, I deserve it. I am dressed like a ragamuffin, that is true! You see, in the train, while I was dozing, a fellow traveller took my hat, which was quite new, and left me with this one. I didn’t notice it till I left the train.”

“There’s some very clever stealing done on railway trains,” said Chamoureau; “I myself, one day—that is to say, one evening—or rather it was just between daylight and dark; but there was a man——”

“I believe that we will postpone your story, monsieur,” said Thélénie, interrupting her husband. “But how about the things I gave you to do—have you attended to them?”

“Not yet, my sweet love; I was going out for that purpose, when I met the dear baron in the avenue of lindens. At that moment I was thinking of something very important—how old those magnificent trees probably are.”

“It seems to me, monsieur, that you will do better to think of my commissions—while I talk with this old friend, who has many things to tell me, no doubt.”

“Oh! yes, *belle dame*; I have to tell you about a lot of people, whom I met on my travels.”

“In that case, dear love, I will leave you to talk with the baron, to whom I will not say adieu, for I am sure that he will do us the honor to dine with us, and even to pass a few days with us.”

“I ask nothing better, ten thousand cabbages! I will stay as long as you choose; this must be a good place to loaf!”

Thélénie flashed an angry glance at her brother; the words *loaf* and *ten thousand cabbages* seemed sadly out of place in the mouth of a Bavarian baron.

But, at a gesture from her, Chamoureau made haste to leave the room, after pressing Herr Schtapelmerg’s hand once more.

“Faith, my dear girl,” said Croque, when his brother-in-law had disappeared, “there’s nobody like you for picking up men of this bake! if you had ‘em made expressly, they wouldn’t be any better! And rich, very rich, with it all—so I understand. My compliments, madame; a most excellent marriage!”

“There is no doubt that my dear husband must be a great simpleton to believe the fable you told him. You must have plenty of cheek to present yourself as a baron, dressed as you are!”

“I never lack cheek, you know!”

“How did you learn that I was here?”

“We idlers always know everything that’s going on. I am sufficiently interested in you not to lose sight of you. I was told that you had made a rich marriage, and I soon learned that you called yourself Madame de Belleville! Very pretty! very coquettish! It was not hard to find out the rest!”

“What is your object in coming here?”

“In the first place to inquire for your health and congratulate you on your marriage; secondly——”

“To ask me for more money?”

“What the devil do you expect? Living’s so dear!”

“Have you spent already the thousand francs I gave you some time ago?”

“Oh! they’re a long way off. In the first place, I paid debts, settled with tradesmen; that ruined me. I can’t bear to have debts! In that respect I carry delicacy to the point of absurdity, perhaps. However, a man can’t make himself over, so I never borrow; especially as no one would lend me.”

Having satisfied herself that they were quite alone, Thélénie went back to Croque, who had thrown himself into an easy-chair and stretched himself out as if he proposed to go to sleep.

“Listen, Croque,” she said; “I am willing to give you money again,—to come to your assistance, but you must do something for me.”

“Whatever you choose, I will do! I am at your service, and you know my talents.”

“There are two women whom I hate and detest; one of them is my rival, the other has insulted me; and they live together.”

“Very good. Where do they live?”

“Here, in this very village; they occupy a small house—quite isolated; I will show it to you.”

“You let me know what you want, and things will move; express train, no stops!”

“Oh! we must act prudently; I don’t know yet what I shall do; the main point now is for you to establish yourself in this place.”

“Am I not all right here in your house?”

“No; you may come here, but it will be better for our plans that you should have lodgings elsewhere. First of all, to act up to the character you have assumed, you must begin by dressing differently. I receive a great many people here, and everybody isn’t as stupid——”

“As your husband?”

“Exactly. Here are five hundred francs to replenish your wardrobe. Return to Paris and get yourself suitable clothes.”

“Never fear; I shall be superb!”

“And when you speak, don’t drop into slang, as you did just now.”

“There are some people in the best society who talk slang—as a joke. It’s admissible.”

“Don’t swear by ten thousand cabbages! that’s horribly vulgar!”

“I should say that it was extremely German.”

“And then, don’t be forever playing the windmill with your cane; you look like a merry-andrew.”

“Enough, beautiful princess; I will be perfumed, curled and corseted; in fact, I will be very *comme il faut* in my dress as in my speech.”

“Very good; go back to Paris and come here to-morrow with a proper wardrobe.”

“I will be very *chic*. So I don’t dine here to-day?”

“No; you will need time to make your purchases, and you must come back to-morrow.”

“But what about that dear De Belleville, who counts on finding me here?”

“Oh! don’t let that disturb you; I will tell him that you absolutely insisted on going to Paris to change your clothes.”

“’Tis well; I go then, and I return to-morrow.”

“Yes; and I will set about finding you a little place near by.”

“Au revoir then. To-morrow the Baron von Schtapelmerg will do credit to Madame de Belleville.”

Croque took leave of Thélénie, went away by the avenue of lindens, and, overjoyed to have five hundred francs in his pocket, could not resist the temptation to play the windmill with his cane.

XIII

THE WARNING

Edmond had been in Paris several days, because he had been led to hope that he would be appointed to a place to which a handsome salary was attached; he had gone through all the manoeuvring that is indispensable when one is seeking employment. And then the place had finally been given to another, who had taken very little pains to obtain it, but who had the patronage of a petticoat.

Edmond returned to Chelles, to Agathe, who saw by the expression of his eyes that he had been disappointed.

“You have failed to obtain the place that you expected, haven’t you, Monsieur Edmond? Well, you must not be cast down on that account; we can afford to wait, it seems to me. I am so happy, now that my dear good friend has said that I shall be your wife, that I feel as if I could not be any happier.”

Edmond did not feel the same way, and he could not restrain a sigh; but he kissed Agathe’s hand and promised to be patient.

The girl lost no time in telling her friend what there was new at Chelles since he went away.

“You must know, Monsieur Edmond, that a fine estate on the other side of the town, known as Goldfish Villa, has recently been sold. The people who have bought it are very rich, so they say; they have carriages and saddle horses. They have already given a great dinner, to which all the principal land owners of the neighborhood were invited; so that nobody speaks of them now without a reverence.”

“I presume they called on you to invite you?”

“No indeed!” cried Honorine; “we have only a tiny house! We are not worthy to be admitted to such dazzling heights!”

“What you tell me gives me a very low opinion of these people to begin with. Are they young?”

“Yes!—that is to say, we have seen only the wife; but it seems that the husband is young too. As for the lady, she is very good-looking, a brunette with black eyes and an elegant figure; and she rides superbly.”

“She rides, you say?”

“She does nothing else, and she passes our house every day.”

“Yes, and one day when I was at the window of the little summer-house at the end of the garden, she stared at me so persistently! Oh! I am quite sure that she will know me again.”

“Probably she didn’t expect to find such a sweet face in this part of the country.”

“I don’t know what she expected, but her manner of staring at me was not at all agreeable.”

“And I,” added Honorine with a laugh, “nearly had a duel with her.”

“A duel! this is worse and worse! How came you to quarrel with this woman?”

“I was out on the road and I heard shrieks; it was that little boy we have told you about—the lost child, as he is called by the peasants—whom the beautiful amazon was thrashing with her hunting crop because he didn’t get out of her way quickly enough. Naturally I took the child’s part, which made the lady very angry with me. I must confess

that the boy put himself in the wrong by throwing a lump of earth which struck the horse in the head; he reared, and his rider was furious. I don't know what she would not have done to little Emile if a defender had not arrived in the person of Ami, Monsieur Paul's dog, who bravely championed the cause of the weaker, and forced the amazon to beat a retreat. Since that day Ami comes very often to see us; he has no difficulty in making us hear, for he scratches, or rather knocks, at the small garden gate, until it is opened; he passes a quarter of an hour with us, then goes back to the little gate and gives us to understand that he wants it opened; he looks at us both, sitting down in front of us, and offering us his paw like an old friend. That is by way of bidding us adieu, and then he trots off without further delay."

"And his master?"

"His master doesn't come himself, but he allows his dog to come; that is a good deal for him."

"I should be very glad to see that man; what you have told me about him has aroused my curiosity."

"We very rarely meet him; but it is probable that you will soon see Madame de Belleville."

"Madame de Belleville, did you say?"

"Yes, that's the name of the newcomers who have made so much stir. Do you know them?"

Freluchon had once told Edmond that Chamoureau called himself Monsieur de Belleville; but Thélénie's former lover had paid no attention. And yet the name sounded familiar to him; he tried to recall where and when he had heard it.

"Well," continued Agathe, "you don't answer me. I asked you if you knew Monsieur and Madame de Belleville?"

"I am trying to think, mademoiselle; the name is not unfamiliar to me."

"Try hard; something tells me that you do know that lady."

"What can make you think that, dear Agathe?" asked Honorine.

"The extraordinary way in which she stared at me."

"Really?—Then I hope to see her soon, in order to be able to tell you that you are mistaken."

"Tutu—turlututu."

"Ah! here's Père Ledrux," said Honorine. "Well! did you carry off the black hen?"

"Yes, madame; and not a minute too soon! She was making the others as bad as herself. We shall have to watch now and see if the rooster hasn't taken a spite against another one. Because, you see, when the rooster is down on a hen, he thrashes her till she dies—and that makes the others feel bad."

"Really, Père Ledrux, I wouldn't have believed that there were so many crimes committed in a hencoop."

"Oh, yes! and everywhere else. Animals, you see, they ain't any better or worse than us humans; they hate each other and they fight!"

Agathe had become pensive; Edmond meanwhile was wondering if Madame de Belleville could possibly be Thélénie.

The gardener, who loved to gossip, continued:

"This little place of ours is getting well filled up; and more swells, too—a baron! nothing less."

"What do you say, Père Ledrux? there's a baron in the village?"

"Just that—a real baron, who's hired a little belvedere within a couple of days; it's about the size of a dovecote, but Monsieur Remplumé calls it a belvedere. It's right at one end of his land, and he's let it to this German baron, who's an intimate friend, so they say, of the owners of the confectioner's place, or Goldfish Villa; he's dined there twice already."

"Why, you know everything, Père Ledrux."

"I tell you! I've seen the baron walking arm-in-arm with Monsieur de Belleville. So then I says to myself: 'It seems that they know each other and are good friends.'"

"What sort of looking man is this German?"

"Well! he's neither young nor old; he ain't much to look at; in fact, he's terrible homely; but he's got rings on his fingers, gold fal-lals on his watch chain, and a fine cane with a gold head too. Oh! he looks as if he was well fixed. Monsieur Remplumé says he's a nobleman from the Bavarian country."

"And his name?"

"Wait a minute; it's a hard name to pronounce; Baron *j'tape*—and then a *merg*! I could never get the name right. But look, I see him now on the road—yes, here comes this newly-arrived baron, walking with Madame de Belleville. If you want to get a look at them, all you've got to do is to go up to your little summer-house."

"Really, it's too good an opportunity to lose. Come, Monsieur Edmond," said Honorine; "you shall see Madame de Belleville and this newcomer who, we are told, is a German baron."

The party entered the little summer-house and went to the window. Thélénie, who was on foot this time, was walking very slowly, talking with her brother, but she had not taken his arm.

Croque was dressed in a brand-new black *redingote* and trousers; his boots were polished, his hat, although cocked over his ear, was new and glossy; he wore kid gloves, on which he kept his eyes fixed, and well-starched shirt-cuffs, which he made haste to pull down when they disappeared under his sleeves.

They were walking quite slowly and Thélénie seemed to be speaking with much earnestness. Croque, as he listened to her, strutted proudly along in his new clothes, and twirled his cane.

Although they were still at some distance from the window at which he was standing, Edmond instantly recognized Thélénie. Noticing his momentary embarrassment, Agathe said to him:

"I guessed right, did I not? You know that lady?"

"Yes, I think that I have met her and her husband; I knew her husband the better of the two."

"Ah! her husband. Well, why do you leave the window? are you afraid to have her see you with us?"

"Oh! mademoiselle, everywhere, before the whole world, I should be proud and happy to be seen with you."

"Very well! then stay at the window. She is coming near now; we shall see whether she will stare at you as she stared at me."

“Bless my soul!” cried Honorine; “I don’t know whether that man is a great German nobleman, but he certainly is very ugly! and he cuts a most curious figure!”

Thélénie, although she pretended not to look in the direction of the summer-house, saw that there were people at the window; she touched Croque’s arm and whispered:

“Look carefully; there are those women.”

“I see; but there’s a young man with them.”

“A young man!”

Thélénie looked up and saw Edmond. Her face became ghastly pale. But, making a mighty effort to conceal her emotion, she stopped in front of the summer-house, bowed to the young man and said with a gracious smile:

“Why! it’s Monsieur Edmond Didier! I am delighted to meet you here. I hope that we shall have the pleasure of seeing you occasionally. We have bought a place here and mean to stay all summer.”

Edmond bowed very coldly, but made no reply.

Thereupon the beautiful brunette nodded her head to him very familiarly, and, as if she had not noticed the two ladies who were present, turned to Croque and said:

“Come, my dear baron, we must walk faster; my husband will not know what has become of us; he must be worried.—Au revoir, Monsieur Edmond!”

The pretended baron raised his hat and bowed very respectfully as he passed the window, muttering:

“*Bigre*! a pretty morsel, that young blonde! I wouldn’t object at all to that game!”

“Very well! take her, I give her to you,” said Thélénie, contracting her heavy eyebrows.

“You give her to me? that’s all right, so far as it goes. But unfortunately she isn’t at your disposal.”

“Can it be that Croque has lost all his imagination, ingenuity, audacity? Make a conquest of that girl, I tell you, and on the day that you furnish me with proof that you have succeeded,—that she has yielded,—I’ll give you three thousand francs!”

“Three thousand francs and such a sweet little phiz to win! I’ll do it or forfeit my name; not Schtapelmerg, but my real name.”

“What a brazen air that woman has!” said Agathe, when the brother and sister had disappeared. “She spoke to you just as if you were alone; she didn’t condescend even to bow to us. Shall you go to her house?”

“Oh no! no, indeed! I assure you that I haven’t the slightest intention of doing so.”

“Why, you are unreasonable, Agathe,” said Honorine; “if Monsieur Edmond is intimate with this lady’s husband, why do you wish him not to go to their house?”

“I knew Chamoureau before he married that woman, madame; now——”

“Chamoureau? why, that is the name of the real estate agent to whom we went to buy this house, and who would never have done anything about it, I fancy, but for you.”

“Just so, madame; he is the very man, who, after inheriting twenty thousand francs a year, married Madame Sainte-Suzanne.”

“What! he is the husband of that magnificent amazon? But in that case her name is Madame Chamoureau.”

“To be sure.”

“And why does she call herself De Belleville?”

“Because the name of Chamoureau did not seem to her sufficiently distinguished.”

“Ha! ha! ha! this is delicious! What a discovery! Just let her stare at me so obstinately again, and I’ll say: ‘Has Madame Chamoureau anything to say to me?’”

“That would be the best way to put her to flight, I assure you! But you must excuse her; she is bewildered by the position she occupies; and the high and mighty airs she assumes prove how unused she is to her newly-acquired wealth.”

Night had come, and Edmond remained at Madame Dalmont’s to dinner. In the bottom of his heart he was displeased to find Thélénie in the same place with the girl he loved; something whispered to him that his love for Agathe was one of the motives which had brought his former mistress to Chelles. He was conscious of a vague uneasiness; for that woman had sworn to be revenged upon him, and he knew that she was capable of defying heaven and earth to keep her oath.

However, Edmond did his utmost to conceal his pre-occupation, but it is difficult to dissemble successfully before the eyes of those who love us. Agathe’s eyes often rested on the young man, and she sighed as she said to herself:

“How that woman smiled at him! how she looked at him!”

Suddenly Honorine’s attention was attracted by a scratching as of claws, and blows on the small garden gate.

“I will wager that Ami has come to see us!” she cried.

“He doesn’t usually come in the evening,” said Agathe.

“No matter; it is he, I am sure.”

And the young woman hastened to the gate which opened into the fields.

It was in fact Ami who had knocked; he rushed into the garden, then ran back to Honorine and gambolled about her. She put her hand on the dog’s head, saying:

“What, Ami! is it you? so late? How does it happen that you come to Chelles in the evening? Is your master in the neighborhood?”

Ami listened attentively, then ran into the living-room on the ground floor, where Agathe and Edmond were.

“Honorine was right,” said the girl, as she went to pat Ami, “it is Monsieur Paul’s dog—the owner of the Tower. Make his acquaintance, my dear; he is very fond of me, and I am sure that he will love you too.—Come, Ami, look at Monsieur Edmond. Do you see, I put my hand in his, to show you that you must love him as you do me. Come, give me your paw; that’s right; and let monsieur shake hands with you.”

Ami looked earnestly at Edmond, but his eyes were full of kindliness, and he did exactly what Agathe told him.

“Now I am happy,” she cried; “for you may be sure, Monsieur Edmond, that you have now a new friend, who will be perfectly well able to defend you, if he should see that you were in danger.”

“It is very strange, however, that the dog should come so late to call upon us,” said Honorine; “it makes me feel uncomfortable. Do you suppose that his master is sick—that he has come to ask for help?”

“Oh! my dear, you are very foolish to be alarmed; just see how lively and contented Ami is! If he were the bearer of bad news, he wouldn’t play about us like this.”

“I agree with mademoiselle,” said Edmond. A moment later, he added: “It’s a very dismal thing to call one’s fiancée ‘mademoiselle.’ Don’t you think so, madame?”

Honorine smiled, while Agathe hastily rejoined:

“And I think it’s horrible to say ‘monsieur’!—It’s so ceremonious, monsieur!”

“Well! what prevents you from calling each other Agathe and Edmond simply?”

“Oh! madame! have we your permission?”

“I see no harm in it, when you are engaged.”

“Oh! what joy, my dear good friend! How sweet it will be, Edmond!—Do you hear, Monsieur Edmond?”

“No more ‘monsieur,’ dear Agathe!”

“True; but one dares not begin all at once. Never mind; I shall soon get used to calling you Edmond—just Edmond.”

“And I—Agathe, my beloved Agathe!”

“Oh! monsieur, my dear friend didn’t sanction the ‘beloved’!”

“But she didn’t forbid it, mademoiselle!”

“Well, well! now he’s calling me ‘mademoiselle’ again!”

“You called me ‘monsieur.’”

“Hush, child!” cried Honorine; “someone knocked at the garden gate.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Agathe.

“I am certain that there’s someone there; and see, Ami is running in that direction, and he doesn’t make mistakes.”

“Who can come so late?”

“Late! why, it isn’t nine o’clock.”

“That is late for the country; we will go with you and see who it is. Poucette is singing upstairs and did not hear.”

“Stay here; I’m not afraid; besides, Ami is with me.”

Honorine soon reached the end of the little garden. The dog was jumping against the gate, wagging his tail and uttering short, joyous little yelps. There was no possibility of mistake as to the person who was outside, and Honorine soon found herself face to face with the owner of the Tower.

“Excuse me, madame,” said Paul, as he raised his hat to the young woman. “It is rather late for me to call upon you; but I have been to see Guillot’s family and the good people kept me longer than I thought; time passes so quickly with those who are glad to see one! When I left them I discovered that Monsieur Ami had deserted me. I thought that there was no other house but yours in this part of the country, to which he could have come, and I see that I was not mistaken.—Really, madame, I am afraid that the dog is a nuisance to you; his visits are becoming too frequent; you must send him away when he is unwelcome.”

“No, monsieur, we shall not send him away, because we are fond of him and his visits give us pleasure.—But will not you, monsieur, pass through this gate? shall we never have a visit from anybody but your dog?”

Ami’s master replied by entering the garden, and Honorine was conscious of a feeling of gratification which she did not try to conceal.

She escorted her guest to the living-room, where Agathe and Edmond had remained. The former sprang to her feet when she saw Paul, exclaiming:

“Oh! this is a pleasant surprise, monsieur!”

“You must not thank monsieur too much,” said Honorine; “if Ami had not come to see us, I fancy that monsieur would never have honored us with a visit.”

“Madame——”

“But it is wrong of me to say that.—You do not like society, and you lay aside your habits to-day, in our favor; we should be very grateful to you for it.”

Paul had remained in the doorway, looking at Edmond, whom he had not previously met.

“Allow me,” said Honorine, “to present Monsieur Edmond Didier; he is the only person who comes now and then to enliven our solitude; but he is entitled to do so, for he loves Agathe, and I have promised to let them marry when they are a little more sensible.”

Paul’s brow seemed to brighten; he bowed to Edmond and took the seat that Honorine offered him.

The conversation was a little cold and intermittent at first; but before long Switzerland was mentioned, and Italy; the owner of the Tower had travelled extensively, he described vividly the different countries he had visited, interspersing his narrative with curious anecdotes, incidents that had happened to him on the road and in public houses. And he told it all without ostentation, simply and with a facility that fascinated his hearers. The moments passed and no one thought of the time.

Suddenly Paul stopped, as if ashamed of having monopolized the general attention so long.

“I am afraid that I have abused your patience and bored you,” he said. “Forgive me; you see how dangerous it is to receive one who has been a long while without talking.”

“We should be very happy,” replied Honorine, “if you would come sometimes and bore us in this same way. It must be very sad to live alone all the time, to see no one. Are you a misanthrope?”

“I have abundant reason to be.”

“And you are determined to see only evil-minded persons about you?”

“Ah! I no longer say that, madame!”

“And will it always be necessary for your dog to come here in order to induce you to honor us with a visit?”

Paul was about to reply, when the dog, who up to that time had lain quietly at his feet, suddenly raised his head, pricked up his ears and gave a low, prolonged growl.

“Well, well! what is it, Ami?” said Agathe; “are you tired of staying with us? do you want to go?”

The dog seemed to be listening, and in a moment began to growl again.

“This is strange!” said Paul, “there must be a cause for this exhibition of temper on Ami’s part; his eyes are blazing and his hair is standing on end.”

Ami left the room abruptly and rushed into the garden, barking violently.

“There certainly is something wrong,” said Edmond; “perhaps some nocturnal prowler is passing the house.”

They had all followed the dog, which continued to bark, rushing against the wall, as if he wished to scale it.

“Mon Dieu! are we surrounded by robbers?” exclaimed Honorine.

“This is very extraordinary!” said Paul; “I have never seen him in such a fit of anger; he is ordinarily content to bark at people whom he doesn’t like or doesn’t know. But see what a frenzy he is in now; it is impossible to pacify him—he won’t listen to me.”

Ami ascended the steps leading to the summer-house, and from there he leaped over the wall, and darted along the road. Paul hurried to the gate and started in pursuit of his dog. Edmond would have followed him, but the two ladies held him back, for they were afraid and unwilling to be left without a protector.

XIV

THE PATH

“Well, monsieur,” said Thélénie to her husband, as he entered her chamber, “I gave you several commissions two or three days ago; I asked you to find out who that small boy was who threw stones at me, and who was the owner of an enormous dog that jumped at me; what have you found out?”

Chamoureau began by looking at himself in a mirror which happened to be in front of him—a habit common to many people, who, while they are talking to you, do not cease to ogle themselves; and those who do it are not the most comely!

“My dear love,” replied Chamoureau, after smiling at his image, “as for the small boy, I know nothing as yet. The peasants are not always inclined to give you information when you question them; they imagine that you’re making fun of them.—As for the dog, that’s a different matter; I haven’t found him yet—those that I’ve seen don’t correspond with the description you gave me.”

“I might have known that you wouldn’t be capable of discovering anything. Luckily, my friend the baron is here; I will place the matter in his hands, and he will be more skilful than you.”

“I don’t know whether Monsieur de Schtapelmerg will be more skilful than I—in fact, I doubt it. Still, it’s no wonder that I am preoccupied,—I have such an interesting question in my head.”

“For heaven’s sake, what have you in your head, monsieur?”

“The age of trees, madame, the age of trees, which I mean to succeed in determining exactly.”

“What good will it do, monsieur? what’s the use of knowing the exact age of a tree?”

“Why, madame, it will be a wonderful discovery, of the very greatest utility—for wood-choppers and dealers in wood! To be able to say the instant you see a tree: ‘It is so old—it was born under such a reign;’—why, it will be magnificent! and I shall succeed in doing it!—Ah! here’s our dear friend the Baron von Schtapelmerg.”

Croque entered the room; he was pale and haggard, and he did not walk with his usual swagger. He nodded to the husband and wife.

“Good-morning, noble baron,” said Chamoureau, offering him his hand. “You’re not ill, are you? You have rather a tired look this morning.”

“I slept badly; it doesn’t amount to anything; it will disappear after a few puffs of smoke.”

“What a fellow! he prefers a pipe to a cigar!”

“We old soldiers are used to a pipe.”

“Have you served, baron?”

“Yes, I made the campaign of—of—the war against the Turks.”

“Ah! you have fought against the Turks; no doubt that was when you received that wound on the left cheek, which left you that noble scar?”

“Exactly; it was a lance thrust.”

“Do the Turks fight with lances?”

“Always—unless they use some other weapon.”

“Give me your arm, baron,” said Thélénie, “and let us go for a walk while monsieur reflects concerning the age of trees.”

“I am at your service, *belle dame*.”

“What is there new?” inquired Thélénie, when she and Croque had left the room. “Your appearance is quite agitated.”

“*Sacredié!* there’s reason enough! I had a scare last night, and I’m all of a tremble still.”

“What was the cause of this scare?”

“About ten o’clock I walked in the direction of our ladies’ house. I wanted to examine the locality, take a look at

the walls, in short, find out where there was a good chance to get inside; because, of course, I don't expect to fascinate the girl—I'm not good-looking enough, I do myself justice; if I want to arrive at my end, I've got to do it by surprise—by force."

"Well—what then? what then?"

"I was prowling round the garden wall, and before long I heard a dog growling. I didn't pay any attention to it at first, but as I was running my hands over a place where the wall is rather rickety, the barking got louder and fiercer; I discovered that the dog was close to me, that there was nothing but the wall between us. They called him from the house and tried to quiet him; time thrown away. I says to myself: 'That's a dangerous beast; let's stand off shore!'—So I turned tail. In another minute what did I have at my heels but the infernal dog, who had leaped the wall, no doubt, and started after me. Fear gave me wings; I flew—and so did the damned dog! However, he only succeeded in getting hold of the tail of my coat, and it remained in his jaws; I managed to escape. But, *bigre!* it was high time! Look, see this big piece gone out of my coat—the cloth was very stout and new, so the beast must have pulled hard."

"Upon my word! I didn't expect to hear anything like this; I thought you were brave and strong, one of those men, in short, whom nothing terrifies, who recoil before no danger! And here you are all upset and cowed because a dog ran after you! You make me blush! Didn't you have your cane to beat the dog off with?"

"Oh! my girl! one minute! let's not put on airs; let's not act as if we wanted to make Bibi angry!—To be sure, I am bold; with men I don't retreat, and I am not afraid; but with a dog—that's another matter!—Besides, I have a good reason to be afraid of them; didn't I come near being strangled by Monsieur Duronceray's dog? Didn't he make this wound on my face, that I've still got the scar of? And it's deep, too! I don't know why, but it seemed to me last night as if it was that same dog that chased me."

"What nonsense! he must be dead long ago!"

"Why dead? he was very young then—not more than a year and a half; so he'd be ten or eleven now; dogs live much longer than that."

"Well, after what you have told me, I see that it's of no use to rely on you to undertake anything against the girl."

"If those women always have that dog to guard them, it will be rather hard."

"They have no dog in the house; their gardener, whom I took care to employ a few days ago, told me so. It was a mere chance that there was one in their house last night.—But this young man coming this way—it is Edmond! At last I have an opportunity to speak to him. Leave me, Croque—go away."

"All right; I will join your estimable husband and breakfast with him."

"Be careful not to get tipsy as you did the other day; for, when you do, you entirely forget your rôle."

"Don't worry, *belle dame*, I will retain my self-respect."

Edmond was walking slowly along the road; he was thinking of Agathe, whose husband he ardently desired to be; but he was thinking also of the future.

On his last trip to Paris, he had made up his accounts and tried to bring some semblance of order out of the chaos of his affairs; he had paid all his creditors and had found that he possessed only sixteen thousand francs. With that amount a tradesman may start in business on a small scale; but that was not the lot in life which Edmond desired to offer to Agathe.

"To have a pleasant voice and be able to sing decently—that isn't enough to marry on," he was saying to himself; "I should have done better to think of getting rich."

Absorbed in his thoughts as he was, the young man had not seen Thélénie, who was close beside him when he raised his eyes. He started back as if to retrace his steps; but it was too late, the young woman with the great black eyes had already taken his arm, saying:

"What! you propose to turn back because you find me here? Am I so very odious to you then? Does the sight of me produce such an intensely disagreeable effect on you?"

"Not at all, madame; but it occurred to me that we had nothing to say to each other, and in that case——"

"You are mistaken, monsieur—I have many things to say to you; I am not like you! Oh! don't be alarmed; look in all directions—we are alone, quite alone; no one will see you talking with me, and your mistress will not make a scene!"

"I have no mistress, madame; I love an honorable, virtuous young lady, and I expect to make her my wife when I am in a position to assure her a happy and tranquil future at least, if not a brilliant one. So you see that there is no question of a mistress."

Thélénie seemed to reflect for a few moments; then she replied, assuming an air of good-fellowship:

"Oh! that makes a difference; in that case, forgive me, Edmond; people have spoken about these ladies to me in rather a sneering way; I know that the world is very cruel, that slander is its sweetest recreation. But if you propose to marry this young lady, I have no doubt that she deserves all your love; and I will not venture to criticise your choice."

This was said with an air of sincerity which instantly changed Edmond's sentiments; his expression became trustful once more, and he offered his hand to Thélénie.

"Good!" he said; "I like to hear you talk so; I have never been willing to believe, myself, in the spitefulness of women; I am not like Freluchon, who always thinks that he is being deceived."

"Oh! but Freluchon always deserves to be."

"Then you are no longer angry with me?"

"Angry with you? of course not. Why should I bear you a grudge? our liaison came to an end, because everything must come to an end. Besides, I am married; I have married thirty thousand francs a year; do you suppose that I am not content with my lot?"

"I am overjoyed to find you like this."

"Frankly, you must have a large supply of self-esteem, to think that you would find me otherwise, and that I still sighed for you!"

"I did not think that; but you made so many threats——"

“Ha! ha! ha! I thought that you were better acquainted with the human heart. But you are reassured now, aren’t you? You are no longer afraid of my stabbing you?”

“It never went so far as that!”

“You will no longer avoid me as soon as you see me?”

“Of course not!”

“Because one is no longer a lover is no reason for not being a friend, is it? I have always thought not. You will come to see me; I insist upon it; otherwise I shall think that you still hate me.”

“I do not go into society here; I go only to Madame Dalmont’s.”

“But we are not new acquaintances; was not my husband your friend? If you should refuse to come to see us, it might suggest strange ideas to him, knowing—and he does know it—that you are living in this neighborhood.”

“I thought that Chamoureau had no ideas that were not agreeable to you.”

“Mon Dieu! that man loves me; it is his greatest pleasure to gratify my wishes; don’t charge that to him as a crime! And because a woman has led rather an agitated life, do you suppose that when she is once married, she can’t behave herself and make her husband happy?”

“I think that one can always behave oneself when one has firmly determined to do so, and that it is never too late to atone for one’s errors.”

“Ah! it’s very lucky that you are willing to admit that. When will you dine with us?”

“I tell you again, I don’t go into society; I give all my time to the person to whom I am paying court; that is natural certainly.”

“I fancy that she does not demand that you should break with all your acquaintances.”

“She demands nothing; in this matter I simply follow my own inclinations; but I will call to see you—I promise.”

“I told my husband to write to Freluchon. I am going to give very soon a grand dinner party and ball; I propose to dazzle all the good people of this region, which, by the way, is not very difficult. I love to believe that Monsieur Freluchon will be one of us; I shall have also a few devotees of lansquenet and baccarat—fine players. They will come from Paris, by the way; for here they don’t play to lose or win more than fifteen sous!—it’s pitiful! I, you know, have always liked to play for high stakes, and thank heaven! I am able now to gratify all my tastes. Adieu, monsieur l’amoureux, monsieur l’ermite. I shall send you an invitation to my ball, and if you will condescend to spare us an hour, we shall be most grateful.”

And Thélénie, with a friendly nod to Edmond, walked away.

“Decidedly, I was foolish to be alarmed,” he said to himself, as he bent his steps toward Agathe’s abode; “Thélénie no longer thinks of me; she is rich, she has reached the position to which she aspired—what more can she want?—Besides, do such women ever know real love? She thinks of nothing but making a sensation and playing the *grande dame*. She kept her eyes fixed on Agathe a long while; but that was because she did not expect to find such perfect beauty here. That she may have felt some vexation, I can understand. Thélénie is not accustomed to having anyone dispute the sceptre of beauty with her; and I’ll wager that that was her only reason for not including those two ladies among her guests. She doesn’t propose to have a woman at her parties who is prettier than herself.”

On her side Madame de Belleville went away from the interview well pleased with herself, and thinking that she would attain her object much more surely by banishing all suspicion from Edmond’s mind.

She had taken a path that skirted a thinly settled part of the village, to shorten the distance to her house. This path was quite narrow and lined with wild blackberry bushes. A small boy was busily engaged looking for blackberries where the bushes were densest, heedless of the risk of tearing his clothes, which were already in a wretched state. When he caught sight of Thélénie, he cried:

“Aha! she ain’t on horseback to-day! that woman won’t ride me down again!”

Thélénie heard these words and recognized the urchin to whom she had administered divers blows with her crop. She stopped in front of him, gazing at him with a stern expression; but little Emile sustained her glance without lowering his eyes for an instant.

“Ah! it’s you, is it, little good-for-nothing! Are you going to throw stones at me to-day?”

“I say! you ain’t on horseback!”

“And if I were, would you throw stones at my horse again, to frighten him and make him rear? You would have been very glad if I had fallen, wouldn’t you?”

“It would have made me laugh.”

“What a little rascal! What is your name?”

“I dunno.”

“You don’t know your name?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“And your parents—what are their names? what is their business? where do they live?”

“Catch me telling you, so you can go and complain and get me a scolding! I ain’t such a fool!”

Thélénie examined the little fellow and could not help admiring the beauty of his eyes, whose bold and mocking expression gave strong indications of an extremely self-willed nature.

“You won’t tell me your name?”

“I ain’t got any.”

“And the dog that came to your assistance the other day—he is yours, of course?”

“No, he ain’t mine.”

“But you know him, don’t you?”

“Oh! I guess I do.”

“Whom does he belong to?”

“To the man that owns the Tower.”

“Who is the man that owns the Tower?”

“Why, he’s the bear, as they call him round here; but for all that he ain’t so ugly as folks thought, the bear ain’t, for he bought Guillot’s house and gave him money too. Would you do that?”

“I don’t know what you mean.—Is the dog with you often? does he know you—as he came to your defence?”

“Oh! he don’t like me much; it wasn’t me that he wanted to help; he wanted to bite you!”

“Oho! do you think so? Then I must find out why the beast should show so much bad feeling against me. You say his master lives at the Tower? Where is that?”

“A fine big place over on the other side of the Marne, near Gournay. I say! there’s a great old park there—bigger’n yours.”

“Really! I must see that; and the owner of the dog is probably that boor whom no one about here will receive except Madame Dalmont.”

“Ah! she’s a kind lady, she is! she gives me cherries and sous; she wouldn’t beat me with her whip—I’ve still got the marks of it!”

“If you had been beaten more, you wouldn’t be such a little vagabond. But I’ll find out your name and your parents’ in spite of you.”

“You’ll be smarter’n other folks then! Good-day, madame!”

The little boy ran away with a mocking expression and Thélénie walked on, saying to herself:

“How can it be that a peasant’s child has such lovely eyes?”

XV

TWO GENTLEMEN AFTER DINNER

Several days had passed. Paul had paid frequent visits to the two friends in the evening, and his sombre humor was beginning to disappear. His face no longer wore that forbidding look which intimidated the country people; as he talked with Honorine his voice became less harsh, his eyes softer.

The young widow, on her side, experienced an entirely unfamiliar sensation when the master of the Tower seated himself at her side. That sensation afforded pleasant occupation for her heart; she felt happier than ever before, and did not attempt to conceal her happiness, because she saw no harm in the interest which she felt in a man who had hitherto always been betrayed in his affections.

More than once Agathe had said to her:

“You ought to ask Monsieur Paul to tell us his adventures; then we should finally learn the story of the ravine. We should learn why he went at night to the cross that marks the place where someone was killed.”

But Honorine would reply:

“I do not like to invite confidences; it would seem to indicate curiosity, suspicion even. So long as a person does not tell us his griefs, it means that he does not think us likely to be interested in them. Let us wait. It is a good deal gained that Monsieur Paul should have abandoned for our sakes his uncivilized, solitary habits; he comes to see us, and that is a great compliment on the part of a man who never speaks to anyone. But we can’t expect him to treat us at once like old friends.”

“Why not? his dog made friends with us at once, and since he divines a person’s feeling toward his master, it seems to me that the master might well follow his dog’s example.”

The owners of the Goldfish Villa had issued their invitations for the gorgeous fête which they proposed to give in their new abode. Nothing was talked about in Chelles but the preparations that were in progress at Monsieur and Madame de Belleville’s. Workmen had been brought from Paris; there was to be an illumination and fireworks in the garden. The courtyard and avenue were encumbered with shrubs, and boxes filled with rare flowers; upholsterers had come to renew the hangings, and painters to touch up the stairs and stair-rails. Everything was in commotion, and in the midst of it all Chamoureau, bewildered by the crowds of people coming and going and by the noise that arose on all sides, often took refuge in the depths of his park, saying to himself:

“Those people drive me crazy; they will prevent me from finding what I seek—that discovery which may throw open the doors of the Academy to me. I feel sure that I am on the point of putting my finger on it. I will go and reflect upon it, while I contemplate the trees in my park.”

On the eve of the day appointed for this grand function, which had thrown the whole village of Chelles into commotion, Freluchon arrived at nightfall, and not finding Edmond at home, was on his way to Madame Dalmont’s, where he was certain of finding him, when he collided with somebody at a street corner.

“Hallo! it’s Chamoureau!” cried Freluchon; “delighted to meet you, my dear fellow. But why did you hurl yourself at me in that way? Are you getting short-sighted?”

“No, not at all; but I wasn’t looking to see where I was going; I was absorbed in my ideas.”

“Sapristi! you must have some very profound ideas then, since you became Monsieur de Belleville.”

On that day Chamoureau had, as usual, dined with his new friend the baron, and the two gentlemen had indulged somewhat too freely in the pomard with which one of the cellars of the villa was stored. So that, after dinner, they had felt the need of a short walk in the country.

“Dear Freluchon,” said Chamoureau; “so you received our invitation for to-morrow?”

“To be sure I did; and that is why I came to-night, so as to be on hand to-morrow.”

“You’ll pass the night with us; that’s very nice; we’ll give you a splendid room. Oh! we have plenty of them; we have bought an enchanting place here—so dainty and elegant! It’s a little Parc-aux-Cerfs.”

“Ah! do you have stags—*cerfs*—here?”

“No; that’s a figure of speech; I allude to a royal pleasure-house.”

“If you did have stags[B] in your house, it wouldn’t surprise me.—I am much obliged to you for your proffered

hospitality, but I do not need to incommode you; I have my room here in Edmond's house."

[B] Another covert allusion to "wearing the horns," or being a cuckold.

"Ah! you stay with Edmond, do you? You would be much better off with us; it's more elegant there and more comfortable."

"My dear Chamoureau, I don't doubt that everything is magnificent in your house, but I am very comfortable at Edmond's, and I shall sleep there. Moreover, as you may readily imagine, I have accepted your invitation for to-morrow from curiosity. When I learned that you had bought a country house at Chelles——"

"An estate!"

"Well! isn't a country house an estate?"

"Yes, but when you say a country-house, it seems to mean just a place to sleep, a little box to loaf in over Sunday; whereas an 'estate'! that instantly denotes something of value, of importance—something vast."

"*Bigre!* how we do effervesce since we became Chamoureau de Belleville! But don't you want me to say a château—a palace? I'll call it whatever you please!"

"I want—I want above all things that you shouldn't call me Chamoureau again!"

"Oh! as for that, I can't promise."

"If you call me that at our party to-morrow, it will be infinitely disagreeable to me."

"Why did you invite me then?"

"It wasn't I who invited you, it was my wife."

"Ah! thanks! I recognize you there. Well, my amiable friend, as you were not the one who invited me, I am perfectly justified in telling you that I am going to your fête to-morrow solely from curiosity, to laugh a little; because I am persuaded that there will be some amusing sights there—not counting you—and lastly because I am curious to see how you receive your old friends now that you are rich and noble and have a palace!—There! are you content with me? Ha! ha! you must tell your wife not to invite me another time."

Chamoureau bit his lips.

"We will receive our old friends very cordially," he muttered, "when they don't make fun of us.—Look you, a few days ago, a German baron arrived here, a former friend of my wife; and a man of the highest extraction, and he paid me the most flattering compliments on my marriage."

"The deuce! he must have a fine German accent, must this baron!"

"Why, no, not very much; he swears in German, that's all. Well, since he has been here, he dines and breakfasts with us almost every day; he dined with us to-day again, and we drank a certain pomard—ah! such pomard!—he drinks straight, does the baron—and I held my own with him."

"Ah! I am not surprised that you didn't see where you were going just now."

"Nonsense! I never get drunk myself."

"What are you looking for now?"

"I am looking for Monsieur de Schtapelmerg."

"Good God! what did you say?"

"I said I was looking for Monsieur de Schtapelmerg; that's the baron's name."

"He has a name that requires study to be pronounced in a becoming manner.—So he was with you, was he?"

"Yes, we came out together after dinner—to take a look at the country. He probably left me, at the call of nature; and I was so absorbed in my search that I didn't notice that I was alone."

"Have you lost anything, pray, that you were engaged in such an absorbing search?"

"Oh, no! I am seeking a method of ascertaining the age of trees simply by looking at the trunk."

"I should never have suspected that that was what you were seeking. You are getting to be beyond me; I am no longer on your level. Was it your wife who commissioned you to ascertain that?"

"As if women ever meddled in science! It's an idea that came into my head as I contemplated the magnificent lindens in our avenue. You haven't seen our avenue yet, have you?"

"I have seen nothing, as I have just arrived; but when you have found out the age of a tree, what will you do with it?"

"Oh! you distress me, Freluchon! When one makes a scientific discovery, one endows one's country with it, and the country rewards one. It may lead to anything!"

At that moment a vinous voice arose in the distance, calling:

"Hallo there! Belleville! damnation! Belleville! What in the deuce has become of our friend? Ho there! you fellows!"

"Hark! it seems to me that I hear the baron's voice!" said Chamoureau; "he is looking for me.—This way, baron, this way! It's getting dark, and this village isn't lighted with gas as yet."

Croque was tipsy; but as he was accustomed to being in that condition, he was quite firm on his legs, and even essayed to twirl his cane from time to time. However, as he walked toward Chamoureau, he failed to notice rather a deep rut, and he fell at full length in the road.

Thereupon he emitted a string of oaths calculated to appall a carter.

"Bless my soul!" cried Chamoureau, "I believe that Monsieur de Schtapelmerg has made a false step!"

"I am inclined to think that he has fallen altogether," observed Freluchon.

And the two gentlemen went to assist Croque, who could not succeed in extricating himself from the rut.

"Ah! *cré nom, tarteiff!* a thousand million colored pipes! What in the devil's the sense of roads like this! this is a vile hole of a place, this village of yours. When you dig holes, you ought to put lamps by 'em. Isn't there any mayor here—*cré coquin*?"

"I hope you're not hurt, my dear baron?"

"*Ouiche!* do I ever hurt myself? I've fallen farther than that—when I jumped from a first-floor, yes, and a second-

floor window!”

“Take hold of me, monsieur; there, that’s right.”

“Hallo! there’s somebody else! is it neighbor Luminot?”

“No, dear baron, it isn’t our neighbor Luminot; it’s one of my friends from Paris, Freluchon, who has come down this evening so as to come to our fête to-morrow.”

“Oh! it seems he was afraid of missing the coach, was friend Tirebouchon!”

“I didn’t say Tirebouchon, baron, but Freluchon.”

“And if I should choose to murder your name, monsieur,” retorted the diminutive youth, “I might call you something extremely vulgar!”

Croque, who was once more on his feet, rubbed his nose and strove to recover his self-possession, muttering:

“Monsieur, I had no intention—I didn’t mean—however, a name’s a name, and after all, if I’ve offended you—ten thousand sauerkrauts! I am all here; I don’t retreat, at cards or at table.”

“Monsieur le baron, I am persuaded that you do not retreat anywhere; but you have not offended me; call me Tirebouchon if it amuses you, and I will join in the laughter.”

“A thousand kirschwassers! if you’re not satisfied——”

“But I tell you, on the contrary, that I am perfectly satisfied. I am not like Chamoureau, who doesn’t want to be called by his own name.”

“Cha—Cha—Chamou—what’s that you say? De Belleville’s name is Chamou?”

“Formerly—before my marriage,” stammered Chamoureau, “I may have had another name, but the moment I dropped it, I ceased to have it!”

“I say, that’s a good one! My sister didn’t tell me that, the hussy!”

“Who’s your sister?” cried Chamoureau.

Croque saw that he had been imprudent. To make his interlocutors forget it, he began to pretend to be in a quarrelsome mood once more.

“Never mind about that!” he said; “I’m an old soldier, I am, triple sauerkraut! I’m a bully boy who has shown his mettle, I am—in all sorts of ways, do you hear, Monsieur—Cornichon?”

“Ha! ha! very good! very pretty! we are pleased to make puns on my name, are we? Go on! The pomard makes you clever—*spirituel*.”

“What! the pomard makes me spirituous—*spiritueux*! What business is it of yours? If I have been drinking pomard, it didn’t belong to you; you haven’t got the like of it in your cellars, you miserable Chonchon—Torchon!”

“Oh! Monsieur de—excuse me if I don’t finish your name; I’m afraid you’re a bit quarrelsome in your cups. Come, let’s not get excited; I helped you out of your wheel-rut, and to reward me, you propose a duel. There! there! let’s be good friends.”

But the more mildness Freluchon displayed, the uglier Croque became, because he thought that the other was afraid of him. He advanced upon the young man, twirling his cane and talking in a tone that seemed to proceed from the depths of his chest.

“I tell you, you’re a shrimp. Yes, I have been drinking pomard—what business is it of yours, ten thousand smoked hams! I have a right to drink at Belleville’s, and you haven’t. I’ll drink as much as I please, and I’ll smash your jaw!”

“Oh! baron, baron, this is disgusting talk! surely you are anxious to return to your rut.”

“What’s that about a rut? I’ll chuck you into it!”

But, as Croque raised his cane over Freluchon’s head, the latter dealt him such a well-directed blow with his fist, that the self-styled baron fell back into the hole from which they had lifted him and lay there for some moments before he recovered his breath.

“Mon Dieu! you have killed him!” cried Chamoureau.

“If I did kill him, it would be no great loss to mankind, for this baron of yours, who swears by sauerkraut and kirschwasser, gives me rather a poor idea of the company I shall meet to-morrow at your house.”

“Why, he’s a very *comme il faut* man; he’s rather hot-headed, that’s all.”

“Oh! I have an idea that this baron is brummagem; and furthermore——”

“Mon Dieu! what am I going to do?”

“Don’t be alarmed, Chamoureau, such fellows are hard to kill. Look, what did I say? he’s moving a paw already.”

“Let’s help him to get up.”

“Oh, no! not I. I don’t help ingrates twice over!”

Croque raised his head, opened one eye, looked all about him, and stammered:

“*Credié!* what a crack! It was magnificent! I’ve been hit before, but never anything like that; it sobered me off in an instant!”

“Well, baron, if you say so, I’ll begin again.”

“Thanks! oh! no, I thank you! I’ve had enough; I’ve had my reckoning.—De Belleville, give me your hand, old fellow.”

When he was on his feet once more, Croque walked toward Freluchon and offered him his hand, saying:

“Young man, you’re a fine fellow; you have my esteem; let’s be friends.”

“Ah! you’re satisfied now, are you, monsieur le baron? You don’t want to fight any more?”

“I am perfectly satisfied. Shake! I am very glad to have made your acquaintance.”

“And I was certain that it would end like this. Bonsoir, messieurs; I am going to hunt up Edmond.”

“Until to-morrow, Freluchon; we rely on you. Try to bring Monsieur Edmond; my wife has invited him too.”

“Parbleu! I don’t doubt it; but I don’t know what he means to do. Until to-morrow.”

“No ill-will, Monsieur—Merluchon?”

“Oh! not the slightest, baron.”

Croque and Chamoureau walked away arm-in-arm, leaning on each other. Freluchon soon arrived at Madame Dalmont’s. Edmond was at the piano with Agathe, but Honorine was thoughtful and melancholy, for her new friend, Paul, had not come to see them.

Freluchon enlivened the company by describing what had taken place between himself and the Baron von Schtapelmerg.

“Is that the gentleman whom you thought so ugly?” Agathe asked her friend.

“Yes, and I haven’t changed my opinion.”

“Frankly,” said Freluchon, “I have rather a poor opinion of that man, who talks about nothing but sauerkraut and kirschwasser; I never heard a genuine baron swear as he does. And then he let fall some words which—impressed me. I propose to study this baron.—Are you going to Madame de Belleville’s ball to-morrow, Edmond?”

“I have no desire to.”

“You make a mistake; I have an idea that it will be very interesting.”

“Go there for a moment,” said Honorine; “otherwise they will say that we kept you from going.”

“What do I care?”

“Go,” said Agathe, “if for nothing more than to satisfy yourself whether those people do say unkind things about us.”

“That reason persuades me, dear Agathe, although I do not believe that anyone dares to speak ill of you. No matter; I will go to Madame de Belleville’s ball.”

“And I,” said Freluchon, “shall go first to the dinner, yes, and to the breakfast—to everything, and try to sit next the Baron von What’s-his-name at table. I will ply him with drink, and then I fancy that I shall hear some curious things.”

The two young men left the ladies, and as they passed Poucette, Freluchon, who attempted to ascertain whether the young peasant wore a hoop-skirt, received a kick on the shins from her clogs.

XVI

THE BLACK HEN

A gentleman, dressed in the height of fashion, alighted from the railway train and walked slowly up the steep hill leading to Chelles. As he walked along, this gentleman looked all about, pausing sometimes to admire the landscape.

“The suburbs of Paris are charming,” he said to himself; “how many people go a long distance in search of sites and points of view which are far inferior to these! But one never does justice to what is close at hand—to what one can enjoy without trouble and expense! We must needs go to Italy, where it is too hot, where most of the inns are detestable, where the living is wretched, and where there is still danger of being attacked by brigands; for it is good form to go to Italy!—Or we must needs go to Switzerland, where we freeze to death, where we destroy our respiration climbing mountains, where we walk on the edge of precipices of which the mere sight gives one vertigo, where we drink a lot without ever being hilarious, where everybody goes to bed with the hens, where the cooking doesn’t approach the French cooking. But it’s good form to go to Switzerland!—We go to England, where there is always a fog, blended with a dense smoke which makes the eyes ache; where one is expressly forbidden to indulge in any form of amusement on Sunday; where a shilling goes little farther than a sou does here; where the cooking is even worse than in Switzerland and Italy. But a trip to England cannot be dispensed with.

“And people laugh at me, forsooth, because I have always preferred Montfermeil, Ville d’Avray, Meudon, Montmorency, Enghien, Saint-Cloud, Champrosay, Saint-Germain, Vincennes, L’Isle-Adam, yes, even poor little Romainville, to England, Switzerland and Italy!

“But what do I care for their sneers? I have always had common sense enough to do what I pleased, instead of feeling compelled to do as others do, when it would have displeased or bored me to do it. The man is a great fool who, instead of following his inclinations, his tastes, his desires, says to himself: ‘But if I do this, people will laugh at me!’ especially when you consider how grateful the world is for what you do for it! Will it prevent the world from crying you down, from slandering you, from turning you to ridicule at the first opportunity? No, indeed! on the contrary, it will grasp the occasion in hot haste. Then, why incommode yourself for the world?

“O ye charming hillsides that surround Paris! I have never wearied of visiting and admiring you. I have left it to chronic tourists to fatigue themselves with long and difficult journeys, while I, at Asnières or Neuilly, feasted my eyes on the verdant islets that embellish the Seine; and at Romainville, so sneered at by people who do not know it, I have found, while walking near the fort, or on the low hills overlooking Pantin, views of an immense expanse of country, of which a native of Zurich or Lucerne would not have been ashamed.

“I have been to Villemomble, to Gagny, and many times to Couberon—too many times, indeed! for that was where that fatal episode happened. But I have never before been to Chelles. One has never seen everything! Even if you confine yourself to a radius of ten or twelve leagues around Paris, some village always escapes you.

“And it is at Chelles that Madame de Belleville has bought a country estate—a very pretty, very elegant place, they say. But why at Chelles, so near Couberon—a region which must recall painful memories, to say the least? It seems very strange to me; that woman never does anything without some motive, some object. And I determined upon this little excursion in order to discover her motive.

“O my superb Thélénie! it’s of no use for you to change your name and residence and style of living; I have sworn not to lose sight of you, and you shall not escape me.

“She refuses to tell me what she did with my son; and I am certain that that child is in existence. If he were dead, she would have furnished me with proofs of his death, in order to avoid my importunities. But let some chance circumstance place her at my mercy, and then she will be forced to speak.”

While pursuing these reflections, Beauregard had reached the first houses of the village. Desiring to ascertain the location of Thélénie's estate, he stopped and looked about, proposing to question the first peasant who should pass. Soon he saw an old fellow, with a shrewd, cunning air, approaching him, holding against his breast an object for whose safety he seemed most solicitous.

As Beauregard was about to step forward to meet this peasant, the latter was accosted by a bourgeois who came from another direction.

Our fine gentleman from Paris, who was in no hurry at all, leaned against a tree, saying to himself:

"Let us wait a bit; perhaps I may learn something about the people of this region."

"Come, come, Père Ledrux; I was getting impatient, so I came to meet you," said the bourgeois to the peasant.

"Here I am, Monsieur Jarnouillard, here I am; I was just going to your house; I couldn't finish my work before."

"Have you been working for Madame de Belleville, too?"

"I should say so! I've been working there these three days; fixing borders and flowers, raking paths, and trimming bushes!"

"Haven't they a gardener of their own?"

"Yes; but that man can't do everything. Bless me! there's so many preparations for the party to-night! Oh! it's going to be splendid! no one ever saw anything finer in a king's palace. Colored lamps hung in garlands; and rare flowers—flowers that I myself don't know! They've sent for big boxes of 'em—like Madame Droguet; and they've had lots of new baskets made."

"Those people seem to like to throw their money out of the window!"

"Well! they spend a lot; but they seem able to afford it. You're going to the party, I suppose, Monsieur Jarnouillard—you and madame?"

"Parbleu! I should say so! I've had to have my coat turned, and my wife has bought an embroidered collar. It's ruinous, you see; but let's come to our business, Père Ledrux: I asked you if you happened to have a hen to sell me—cheap—second-hand."

"Tutu—turlututu.—That's good, Monsieur Jarnouillard! a second-hand hen! You says: 'I want a good layer'; and I've brought you a famous one.—Here, look at this hen!"

"Ah! she is black."

"Well, why not? they're the best, because it's been noticed, as a general rule—Black hens are the best, you see."

"Is there any reason for that?"

"There must be a reason; I don't know what it is, but there is one, for sure.—But yes, I do know it—it's because the roosters like hens of that color best."

Monsieur Jarnouillard had taken the hen and was examining it in every part; he even lifted up her feathers, so that the peasant cried:

"I say! do you propose to pluck her?"

"No; but I want to know what I am buying. She's very thin."

"Thin! You call that a thin hen! Why, she's in fine case; and then, good layers are never fat; they're just like women: when they get very plump—no more children, no more little ones; the fun's all over."

"Ah! you know that, do you—and you a gardener?"

"I have heard Doctor Antoine Beaubichon say so often enough."

"Well! what price do you want for your hen? Madame Jarnouillard's the one who has taken a whim for having fresh eggs; for, as for me, I don't care anything about them."

"If you don't want a hen, what made you ask me for one?"

"How much do you want for your hen?"

"Well! if I sell her to you for four francs, it's none too much—if she gives you three eggs a day."

"Do you take me for a child just out of a crib?"

"Oh, no! deuce take it! if children was born like you, all shrivelled and shrunk, then there wouldn't be any young folks."

"Name me a reasonable price."

"You call four francs too much—for a black hen—and one like this!"

"Sell me one that isn't black; I don't care."

"Just now, this is all I've got. Come, I don't want to be hard with you; give me three francs, and take her."

"Not if I know it!"

"Well then, how much will you give me for her?"

"Thirty sous—that's quite enough!"

"Thirty sous, for a black hen of this breed! A splendid hen! Come, give me fifty sous."

"No!"

"What a skinflint this Monsieur Jarnouillard is!—Come, forty sous, and call it a bargain."

"I won't give a sou more than thirty!"

"Oh well! if that's so, give me back my hen this minute. Bless me! you want all for nothing, and even then you must make a profit; I ought to have known that I couldn't do business with you."

"Because I don't allow myself to be taken in!"

"No, but you take other folks in!"

"Père Ledrux!"

"Monsieur Jarnouillard!"

"No harsh words, I beg."

"Give me back my hen!"

"Here she is. It isn't too late; thirty sous."

“I’d rather eat her!”

Monsieur Jarnouillard walked away, leaving Père Ledrux with his hen, which he looked at with an ill-humored air, then abruptly replaced under his jacket. Whereupon Beauregard, who had been much amused by the conversation that he had overheard, walked up to the peasant and said:

“I’ll buy your hen!”

“You, monsieur,” ejaculated the gardener, surprised by the offer of this fine gentleman, whom he had not previously observed.

“Yes, I; won’t you sell her to me?”

“Oh, yes! indeed I will; but it seems sort of strange that you should buy her, because you don’t look like a dealer in hens, or eggs.”

“In truth, that is not my business; but there must be a beginning to everything. I’ll give you a hundred sous for your hen; does that suit you?”

“A hundred sous! pardi! I should think it did suit me! She’s yours, monsieur.”

And the peasant made haste to offer the hen to Beauregard. But he, taking a five-franc piece from his pocket, handed it to Père Ledrux, saying:

“Yes, a hundred sous, cash, and here it is; but on one condition.”

“What is it, monsieur?”

“That you will keep the hen at your place and take care of her.”

“Ah! monsieur leaves her with me as a boarder?” rejoined Ledrux, pocketing the five francs.

“Yes; does that displease you?”

“Not at all—just the opposite; I don’t ask anything better. Monsieur can flatter himself that he’s bought a splendid hen.”

“Does she lay often?”

“Well! that depends on the sun; there’s times when she does. Shall I keep the eggs for monsieur, too?”

“No, no! I’ll give them to you.”

“You see, she eats a good deal, this hen does; why, she’s always hungry; and what I get for the eggs won’t buy enough grain for her.”

Beauregard began to laugh as he watched the peasant’s weasel face.

“Does it make monsieur laugh because I say this hen needs a lot of grain?”

“No; I was simply thinking that you understand business perfectly; but never fear, I’ll reimburse you in full for all this fowl costs you.”

“Oh! I ain’t afraid, monsieur; I said that just to warn you, because I rather think monsieur don’t belong round here?”

“No, I have never been to Chelles until to-day.”

“And I can guess why monsieur has come to-day!”

“You can guess?”

“I see by monsieur’s looks that he must be one of Monsieur and Madame de Belleville’s guests, and that he’s come for the party they’re going to give at their place to-day.”

“I am, as you say, acquainted with the persons you mention.”

“Very fine folks!”

“I fancy that you haven’t known them long?”

“No, they’ve only been here about two months.”

“And you know already that they are fine folks?”

“Oh! that’s the way folks talk, you know. When a person spends a lot of money and pays, we say: ‘They’re fine folks.’”

“And when they are poor creatures who live on little or nothing and undergo innumerable privations, you don’t say that of them, eh?”

“Ha! ha! what you say’s true all the same, monsieur.”

“Do you belong here?”

“Yes, monsieur; florist and gardener by trade; Père Ledrux. Everybody knows me!”

“And I’ll wager that you know everybody?”

“Well! it’s sure enough that I go about everywhere in the way of my trade; and then a body talks a bit, you know; it sort of rests you.”

“In that case, as I require some information, as I wish to know something about the society of this neighborhood, I think that you are just the man I want.”

“Monsieur couldn’t apply in a better quarter. As for the hen’s board——”

“Here’s five francs more for the first outlay; for, from what you tell me, I see that it costs a great deal to feed her.”

The old peasant put the second five-franc piece in his pocket, saying:

“But I’ll take such good care of her! You won’t know her after a little while. If monsieur would like to come to our house to see where I live——”

“Yes, but first, you must show me Madame de Belleville’s place.”

“That’s easy; we get there by turning to the right.”

“And on the way, you will tell me what houses are to let here.”

“I say! is monsieur coming to live at Chelles, too?”

“Perhaps—for a short time.”

“Our village is getting to be mighty fashionable; we’ve got lots of fine folks from Paris. But I can’t think of any houses to let.”

“If I cannot get a house, I will be content with a room—at some farmer’s; I am not hard to suit, I simply want to be in the country air.”

“If monsieur ain’t hard to suit, we can find that, I guess. Pardi! a room—why I’ve got one myself I could let you have. I could sleep in my loft—it’s all one to me.”

“Well, Père Ledrux, we will look at your room; but show me first the house of these ‘fine folks,’ who give a party this evening.”

“In a minute, monsieur; we go this way.”

As Beauregard and the old peasant were starting, Monsieur Jarnouillard appeared at a bend in the road, shouting:

“Five sous more, Père Ledrux; come, I’ll give you thirty-five sous for your hen.”

“Not likely!” retorted the gardener with a shrug. “You wouldn’t take her for four francs just now! I’m glad you didn’t! it will teach you to haggle.”

XVII

RECOGNITION

On that same morning preceding the fête she was to give, Thélénie, desirous to escape for a moment the turmoil that reigned in her house, and still anxious to learn whom the dog belonged to who had defended the little boy when she attempted to chastise him, had ordered her horse saddled, and, leaping upon him with the fearless grace of a circus rider, galloped away in the direction of the Tower.

In a very short time the intrepid equestrian reached her destination. She skirted the park walls, then slackened her horse’s pace in order to examine the house, of which she could see the turret.

“How old and gloomy the place looks!” she said to herself. “The man who lives here must, in fact, be nothing better than a bear, a person who has no friends to entertain—for no one would ever come to see him. He is probably some old miser, or some newly-rich tradesman who knows nothing of society. But whoever he may be, I propose to inform the owner of this place that he has a very badly bred dog, that bites horses; and that, if he doesn’t muzzle him, I will have him shot the first time I fall in with him. I am curious to see what answer this man will make, who, they say, is such a savage. Such manners don’t frighten me.—Mon Dieu! is there no end to this park? Ah! there’s a gate, at last!”

Thélénie dismounted and rang a loud peal at the gate. An old, decrepit peasant woman answered the bell and asked her what she wanted.

“Is the owner of this place at home?”

“Monsieur Paul?”

“Paul or Pierre; I don’t know his name, but I presume he has some other than that. But no matter, is this gentleman at home?”

“Yes, madame; he has just come back from a visit to Paris.”

“I wish to speak with him; take me to him.”

“Bless me! you see, I don’t know whether monsieur will want to see you; he doesn’t like visits.”

“You’re a fool! I tell you that I have something to say to your master, that I want to see him. I am not a person to be kept waiting. Come, off you go!”

Old Mère Lucas was hesitating when Ami suddenly appeared in the courtyard and planted himself, growling, in front of Thélénie, as if to bar her passage.

“That dog again, that infernal dog! It’s he that I came to complain about. Call him away, old woman; you see that he prevents me from passing.”

“Come, good Loulou, come, my boy; come with me and don’t stand in front of madame like that.”

But Ami paid no heed to what Mère Lucas said. He continued to block the amazon’s path, and began to bark at her.

“Look you, servant, I advise you to call your dog away; if he doesn’t get out of the way I’ll curry him with my crop, after a fashion he won’t like!”

“Don’t do that, madame, or you’ll be sorry for it; the dog isn’t ugly, but if anybody besides his master should strike him—and his master never strikes him—why, then he’d bite you, he’d throw himself on you.”

“But you see that he won’t let me pass; that he stands in front of me all the time.”

The master’s arrival put an end to this scene.

Paul had come from the house, surprised to hear his dog bark so persistently.

“What’s the matter?” he said, coming forward; “what’s going on here? whom are you barking at, Ami?”

Thélénie had taken two or three steps toward Paul; when she heard his voice, she looked at him a moment, then stopped; she seemed like one stupefied; she turned deathly pale and fixed her eyes on the ground.

Paul meanwhile had scanned the features of the woman before him, and started back as if he had seen a serpent. The dog became somewhat calmer at sight of his master, but he took his stand between him and the visitor, and fixed his intelligent eyes upon her, as if to say:

“You shall not come near him!”

Thélénie soon recovered from the first paroxysm of dismay, and faltered:

“What! is it you, Monsieur Duronceray? here, in this solitude, living like a hermit! I confess that I hardly expected this meeting.”

“I can well believe, madame, that you would not have come here if you had expected to find me. For my part, I hoped that this spot would not be sullied by your presence.”

“Monsieur! this insult——”

“I do not insult you; indeed, you are well aware that there are people whom it is impossible to insult. But you know also that I am justified in speaking to you as I am doing.”

“Take care, monsieur! I am married now!”

“You are married! Who, then, is the unhappy wretch who has given you his name? an idiot or a knave—it must be one or the other!”

Thélénie bit savagely at the head of her crop, but she tried in vain to recover her usual self-possession.

“Come, madame,” continued Paul, “tell me why you came here. Tell me at once and let us hasten to put an end to an interview which, I trust, will never be repeated.”

“Monsieur, I came—your infernal dog is the cause of my coming. If he hadn’t thrown himself at me—at my horse—not long ago, to defend a little boy who was throwing stones at me, I shouldn’t have tried to find out to whom he belonged.”

“Doubtless Ami recognized you, madame; he has a better memory than you; he always recognizes my friends, and my enemies as well.”

“What! is this that great gaunt creature that you used to have? He has grown so big and strong! I confess that I didn’t recognize him; I thought at first that he belonged to a lady who foolishly took sides with the little good-for-nothing.”

“So you are Madame de Belleville, are you?” cried Paul, to whom Honorine had described her adventure with the handsome equestrian.

“To be sure! does that surprise you?”

“Nothing could astonish me on your part.”

“Yes, monsieur, I have married Monsieur de Belleville, a very worthy man, a young man—in good society. I have nearly forty thousand francs a year, I have my own carriage, and not long ago we bought a beautiful estate in Chelles.”

“What! you were not afraid to buy a house in this neighborhood?”

“Pray, monsieur, why should I be afraid of this neighborhood? Please tell me what I have to dread here?”

“Oh! nothing! such a woman as you never feels remorse.”

“Remorse! because I left you when I had ceased to love you! Ha! ha! Really, monsieur, anyone can see that you no longer go into society, that you live like a wolf! You seem to have forgotten entirely what is a daily occurrence in society. Two people form a liaison, they adore each other for a while; but there comes a day when one of them ceases to love the other, and then——”

“And then, madame, that one says so frankly, and does not continue to feign love for the man she is deceiving.”

“Mon Dieu! messieurs, if we were always perfectly frank with you, you would cut a sorry figure too often! I believe that most men would rather be deceived than know what there is in the bottom of our hearts; and they are wise! for they would make such painful discoveries!”

“A truce to your jests, madame! If you had done nothing more than deceive me, than feign a love which you no longer felt, when no sacrifice was too great for me to give you pleasure, when I balked at nothing to prove my love for you, I should have no reproaches for you! Indeed, I should be very foolish to complain, for your conduct would have differed in no respect from that of those women who pride themselves on paying for every benefaction by an infidelity.—Don’t be alarmed; that was not my reason for becoming a hermit!—But you were more than unfaithful to me—you were cowardly, inhuman. In order to conceal from me the identity of your real lover, you had the cunning to make me suspect, accuse, insult a young man who was not thinking of you, but whom, by some fatality, or rather by means of some perfidious scheme prepared beforehand, I found alone with you when I was seeking your lover. When you heard me, in my blind jealousy, accuse and challenge Comte Adhémar de Hautmont, you could with a word have put an end to my error. You had only to say to me: ‘It is not this gentleman who is your rival, but Beauregard, your dear friend Beauregard, your intimate, inseparable friend!’ Far from that, you did your utmost to make my misunderstanding complete! Nor did Comte Adhémar, when I insulted him, try to undeceive me; he had received one of those affronts which a gallant man does not forgive; he demanded prompt, immediate satisfaction, and I, for my part, wanted nothing better than to fight. You saw us go out together, without seconds, without attendants, from that fatal house at Couberon, where I found the count with you. You saw us both, frantic with rage, armed with pistols; you knew that we were going to fight, and you did not try to prevent that fatal duel; yes, fatal, in very truth, for I was unfortunate enough to be the victor. The ill-fated Adhémar, mortally wounded, told me the whole truth.

“He had received an urgent invitation from you to come to your country house at Couberon; but it had never occurred to him to make love to you, for he loved another woman, he had a child, a daughter whom he adored; his death was certain to drive to despair a young woman to whom he expected soon to be married! Those two beloved beings had no one but him to depend upon; he was on the point of naming them to me, of telling me his last wishes, when death closed his lips; and he left no paper, no sign to enable me to discover those unfortunate creatures whose lives I had wrecked! Thanks to you, to your atrocious treachery, I had killed a young man who had done me no wrong; and with the same shot I deprived a child of its father, a mother of her husband!—That, madame, that is what I have never forgiven myself: that I became a criminal for you—for a Thélénie!”

“Monsieur!”

“Hush, wretched creature! and since you have had the audacity to return to this neighborhood to live, go to a spot close by, in the ravine near the Noisy road; it was there that Adhémar and I fought on leaving your house. It was there that the unfortunate man fell, dying, at my feet. Poor fellow! with his last breath he forgave me; he gave me his hand; but those two poor creatures whom he loved so dearly, and with whom he begged me to replace him—that woman and that child; he was on the point of telling me their names, and where I could find them; but he could not! To no purpose did I resort to the most minute and painful search; I discovered nothing; I could never learn the whereabouts of those two, to whom I would gladly have offered my whole fortune, in compensation for the injury I had done them.

“Then I was overwhelmed with shame; I conceived a horror of that society, where, under the mask of love and friendship, I had found nothing but falseness and perfidy. But I wished to be able to weep over my victim’s grave, to be where I could go every day to beg his forgiveness for that terrible mistake which has left me a prey to everlasting remorse. That is why I bought this estate. I returned to this part of the country, not to cut a dash and give great parties, but to be near the unfortunate Adhémar’s grave.”

Thélénie listened to these last words without wincing, without the least trace of emotion. Her contracted eyebrows and the disdainful expression of her mouth alone disclosed the secret wrath which agitated her heart.

But when his master ceased to speak, Ami stepped nearer to the visitor and showed his teeth.

“My dog recognized you,” continued Paul; “he is able to distinguish unerringly between my friends and my enemies; he was always hostile to you, and I might have learned from him your real sentiments toward me. He is just the same to-day to you. Dogs do not change; they set a useful example to men; and that is the reason, I presume, why the latter beat them so often; they are humiliated to find in a beast virtues which they do not possess.—Now, madame, I fancy that you have nothing more to say to me, and I am glad to believe that you have no further business here.”

With that, Paul turned his back on Thélénie and walked away, motioning to his dog to follow him, which he did not do until he had walked around the amazon several times, growling most significantly.

Thélénie was furious; her pride was irritated by Monsieur Duronceray’s outspoken contempt. She had been so long accustomed to be flattered and adulated, that she longed to crush the man who had treated her so disdainfully.

Finding that she was alone in the courtyard, for Mère Lucas had retired long before, the magnificent creature struck with her crop everything within her reach; but her wrath expended itself on a few boxes of flowers and empty pots.

At last she left the place, returned to her horse which was tied to the gate, sprang to the saddle, gave him the rein and galloped away along the first road that she spied. That road was broad and smooth at first, but soon narrowed and became stony. On both sides rose hills in which the road was boxed, as it were; on these hills were trees whose shade imparted a gloomier and more melancholy aspect to the road.

“What a horrible path I chose!” said Thélénie to herself, with an indefinable feeling of alarm. “No one seems to be passing; I have lost my way; I certainly did not come this way. Come, Brillant! let us make haste to get out of here.—Well! what’s the matter with the beast? he won’t go forward a step! What are you afraid of, coward? Oh! I tell you that you’ve got to go on.”

As she spoke, she dealt the horse a violent blow on the side with her crop. But he, instead of going forward, jumped like a sheep, then shied so violently that, an excellent rider though she was, Thélénie lost her balance, fell backward and rolled on the ground at the foot of a cross standing by the roadside. It was that cross that had frightened her horse.

Although slightly bruised by her fall, Thélénie rose and looked about her, and her eyes fell on the wooden cross on its little mound of earth. She realized that she had fallen on a grave, and after examining the place more carefully, she faltered:

“Mon Dieu! this solitary path, this ravine—this is where they fought, and beneath this cross lies the body of Comte Adhémar! What fatality brought me here? If he had seen me, he would say that it was Providence!”

Summoning all her strength, Thélénie hurried away from the scene of her fall. Her horse was waiting for her some thirty yards away. She mounted again, much less proudly than before; the accident which had happened to her had calmed her rage very sensibly.

XVIII

THE BEGINNING OF A FÊTE

As she approached the village, Thélénie’s terror rapidly vanished and her schemes of vengeance acquired new force in her mind.

“How that man treated me!” she thought; “how contemptuously he drove me from his presence! Ah! if I ever have an opportunity to show him how I hate him, I will not let it slip.—Shall I mention this meeting to Croque? No! He would be afraid of dog and master alike, and would be quite capable of flying the country on the instant; I must, on the contrary, conceal from him the fact that Duronceray lives in the neighborhood.”

Many people from Paris, who had been invited for the whole day, had already arrived at Goldfish Villa. Mademoiselle Héloïse was of the number, as well as several others of Thélénie’s old friends, before whom she was very glad to parade her new splendor.

Chamoureau, who was unacquainted with most of his wife’s guests, was greatly embarrassed in doing the honors of his house to so many people, and was impatiently awaiting Thélénie’s return.

At last the majestic equestrian appeared and her husband ran to meet her, crying:

“Hurry, hurry, my dear love! More than twenty people have come already, and I don’t know any of them, except Mademoiselle Héloïse, whom I know a little. I have no idea how to entertain so many people.”

“Why, monsieur, you must tell everyone to do what he pleases; no sort of restraint; that’s how people amuse themselves in the country. Isn’t the baron here, to help you to do the honors?”

“Monsieur de Schtapelmerg is playing, madame; he’s an indefatigable gambler, you know. Whenever he can get hold of anybody to play with him, he goes at it. At this moment he is at a game of billiards with Monsieur Luminot, who has just arrived; and the baron is making some magnificent shots.”

“I hope, monsieur, that you won’t both drink too much to-day as you did yesterday; I understand that the baron fell into a mud-hole.”

“Not at all; he slipped, made a misstep; that may happen to anybody.”

“For shame, monsieur! the idea of a man who has a fine house, and horses and carriages, getting tipsy like any

porter!”

“I swear, madame——”

“If the baron doesn’t behave better, I’ll turn him out of doors.”

“Turn Monsieur de Schtapelmerg, your old friend, out of doors!”

“Well, well! I must go and dress. Send Héloïse to me.”

“What! my dear love, aren’t you coming to the salon to receive your guests?”

“The idea of my appearing in this costume! that would be very nice.”

“Ah, yes! that’s true; you are in your riding habit. Why, your back’s all covered with dirt! did you fall?”

“I never fall from my horse; I leave that for you to do! Have Monsieur Edmond and Monsieur Freluchon arrived?”

“Not yet; I imagine that they won’t come till evening. By the way, my dear love, I have something to tell you that will please you.”

“Later, monsieur; I haven’t time to listen to you at this moment.”

And Thélénie went up to her apartment, while Chamoureau said to himself:

“I’ll tell her that by-and-by, at table; at the same time that I tell her of my invention, my marvellous invention for ascertaining the age of trees.—Ah! that will confer honor on me, and will cause my name to be handed down to posterity!”

Chamoureau returned to the salon rubbing his hands, and with such a self-satisfied air, that Doctor Antoine, who had just arrived, and who had his share of curiosity, at once went up to him and asked him the reason.

“You have received some pleasant news, I’ll be bound, Monsieur de Belleville,” he said; “rubbing one’s hands is always a sign of satisfaction, unless it means that one is cold. But as this is August and the weather is fine, it can hardly be the last reason that makes you rub yours.—Some little surprise you are arranging for the fête, eh? Tell me what it is; I won’t breathe a word to anyone.”

“My dear doctor, I am in truth rather well pleased with myself; but my satisfaction has nothing to do with our fête; I have two reasons for it, in fact, I may say three. In the first place, after long and fatiguing studies, I have succeeded in making a discovery which will be of great benefit to science.”

“What! are you interested in science, Monsieur de Belleville?”

“I am interested in everything, doctor; I am always meditating, although I may not have that appearance.”

“Really! And this scientific discovery has a bearing upon hygiene?”

“What did you say?”

“I asked you if it related to hygiene, to therapeutics—in short, if it is a discovery of interest to the medical profession?”

“Oh! not at all, doctor; there’s not the least bit of medicine in my discovery. It is—you won’t mention it to anybody yet?”

“I will be dumb.”

“It’s a method of ascertaining, the moment you look at a tree, how old it is.”

“Oho! one can tell pretty nearly now, by observing the size of the trunk and the lines of the bark; but one can never be quite sure; it is only probable.”

“Well, thanks to me, doctor, there will be no more doubt, no more guessing; we can be absolutely sure of not making a mistake of a month, or even of a day!”

“This strikes me as a very interesting thing; how in the devil do you go to work to determine it with such certainty?”

“Ah! that is my secret, but I will disclose it at dinner; I am keeping it for dessert, as well as a pleasant surprise I am arranging for my wife.”

“You might tell me now.”

“No; I want the effect I produce to be universal.—But excuse me; I see Monsieur and Madame Droguet, I must go to receive them.—Ah! there’s Freluchon too. This is very good of him; he didn’t promise to come to dinner. When I say that it’s good of him, I mean, if he doesn’t call me Chamoureau!”

Freluchon had arrived among the first, because he was very curious to see the company that assembled at his old friend’s house since he had married the fair Thélénie. The specimen that he had met the preceding evening, in the person of the Baron von Schtapelmerg, had simply redoubled his curiosity; moreover, he had determined to keep an eye upon that gentleman, of whose titles of nobility he was exceedingly suspicious.

As for Croque, he had been severely reprimanded by his sister for getting drunk the night before, and had promised to be abstemious, to watch himself closely, to refrain from swearing and to let his cane alone. On these conditions, plus an irreproachable costume, she gave him permission to play; she even gave him carte blanche if he should happen to play with Edmond. But he was expressly forbidden to cheat with any other of the guests.

All the large landowners and all the leading inhabitants of the neighborhood were assembled in the salons of Goldfish Villa. They awaited impatiently the appearance of Madame de Belleville, who had not yet completed her toilet. To pass the time they talked and criticised their neighbors, according to immemorial usage. The guests who had come from Paris made sport of the figures, the costumes and the bonnets of the local celebrities; the latter whispered together and agreed that the tone and manners and language of the ladies from Paris were decidedly free.

However, as almost all of these last had inserted a *de* in their names, and as their dresses were in the extreme of fashion, these remarks were made in very low tones and did not prevent a profusion of curtsies and profound reverences on both sides.

“How are you, my dear fellow!” cried Freluchon, shaking Chamoureau’s hand; “the devil! but this is simply gorgeous! These salons are magnificent, and the furniture in the best taste! To be sure, I see some amusing faces. Oh I what a queer lot! I think we shall have some sport!”

“Freluchon, I beg you, don’t make fun of anyone!”

“You are delightful, really! What difference does it make to you, if I have a little fun at the expense of that

yellow, wizened-up old fellow in the corner, or of that bulky dame yonder, provided that they don't detect it? Don't you know that one-half of the world makes sport of the other half?"

"I have never made sport of anybody."

"Yes, you have; you made sport of us when you pretended to weep for Eléonore."

"It seems to me, Freluchon, that the time is ill chosen to remind me of the past!"

"Then let me laugh at the present. By the way, I recognize the stout party yonder; it was she who shut her door in my face one night when I went there to ask for Edmond."

"That is Madame Droguet, a person in very comfortable circumstances."

"She doesn't look as if she were comfortable in her corsets! Poor soul! she has tried to make her waist small! Who's that little fellow behind her, standing on one leg the way canaries do when they sleep?"

"That is her husband; he is crazy over dancing."

"It will give me pleasure to see him dance.—But where's your wife?"

"She is dressing; she spends a long time at her toilet; she keeps people waiting a good while."

"Because she wants to produce a great effect when she finally appears.—And the baron of last evening, Monsieur de Schtapelmerg?"

"He is playing billiards."

"Is he drunk again as he was yesterday?—You were both pretty bad."

"Oh! Freluchon, don't go back to that, I beg you!"

"If you refuse to let me laugh, I'll call you Chamoureau.—Come, come, be calm, my friend; I don't mean to make you wretched—I will leave that to your stunning spouse.—I am going to join Monsieur Thousand Sauerkrauts; that is a man I am most desirous to know more intimately."

While Freluchon betook himself to the billiard room, Doctor Antoine went from one to another of the persons whom he knew, and whispered:

"Monsieur de Belleville has a surprise in store for the dinner."

"What is it, doctor?"

"I can't tell; he has discovered a method of telling the exact age of a tree simply by examining the trunk."

"Really! how on earth does he do it?"

"Ah! that is what he is going to tell us at dinner."

"Why at dinner, pray? are we going to have trees for dessert?"

"I have told you all I know."

"I would never have believed that Monsieur de Belleville would discover anything."

"It seems that he isn't such a fool as he looks."

These last reflections came from the groups formed by the guests from Paris. Meanwhile the report that the master of the house had made an interesting discovery quickly spread through all the rooms, and reached the ears of Freluchon, who had renewed his acquaintance with the Baron von Schtapelmerg.

It was Monsieur Jarnouillard who said to them:

"It seems that Monsieur de Belleville is a man of great talent—a profound student, deeply versed in the abstract sciences!"

"Whom are you talking about?" cried Freluchon.

"Of our host, Monsieur de Belleville."

"You call Chamoureau a learned man?"

"Who is Chamoureau? where do you find a Chamoureau?"

"I find him here; that is Monsieur de Belleville's former name."

"Ah! I didn't know that circumstance."

"It makes no difference.—Why do you say that he's a profound student?"

"Because he has discovered the secret of telling the age of a tree simply by looking at the trunk."

"So! he has discovered that, has he? But look you; when he says to a tree: 'Your age is thus and so,' the tree can't contradict him."

"True! I hadn't thought of that."

"So you see that there's no great merit in that; but you are mistaken—it's not the age of trees, but the age of women that the master of this house has the knack of guessing at first sight."

"By examining the trunk?"

"Oh! I don't say what he examines; but if by the trunk you mean the torso, it may be that."

"Oh! that is much more amusing! And he never gets a year out of the way?"

"Not a week!"

"Pardieu! that is likely to lead to some very amusing revelations! What in the devil did Doctor Antoine mean by telling us that it was a matter of trees?"

"He must have heard wrong."

"I must go at once to the ladies and correct his mistake."

Monsieur Jarnouillard instantly sought his wife, who was talking with Mesdames Remplumé and Droguet, and said to them:

"It isn't trees that Monsieur de Belleville tells the age of without ever making a mistake, just by examining the trunk; it's women.—So beware, mesdames! I felt I ought to warn you; he is never a week wrong!"

"What is Monsieur Jarnouillard talking about?" exclaimed Madame Droguet; "Monsieur de Belleville tells our age by examining what?"

"He says the trunk."

“What is the meaning of such indecency? Just let him try examining anything of mine and telling me how old I am—he’ll get a warm welcome!”

“If I was certain that that’s what we were invited here for,” said Madame Remplumé, “I would go away this minute!”

“Tell us our ages! the impertinent fellow! It would be very smart of him, for I don’t know my own age.”

“Nor I either, my dear friend! As if a woman ever needed to know her age! Nobody but a concierge ever does, and that depends on the neighborhood.”

The arrival of the mistress of the house put an end to all this tittle-tattle.

Thélénie was superb; her dress was gorgeous; her novel, original method of arranging her beautiful black hair was voted admirable, especially as some beautiful pearls and diamonds were scattered through it and produced a marvellously brilliant effect.

Never had her lovely black eyes shone with a brighter gleam, never had her smile embodied more seduction; and so, when she appeared in the salon, a concert of eulogistic remarks arose on all sides, and even Freluchon himself could not help thinking:

“She is a magnificent creature, and no mistake: fine figure, fine costume, fine face! What a pity that her heart doesn’t correspond! I know that that is of no consequence in the eyes of many people, who care for nothing in a woman except what excites their senses and flatters their self-esteem. But when one has studied them a little, one knows all the harm that a woman can do to whom nature has given everything except a heart! Their power is immense! To be sure it lasts but one season; but that season is long enough for them to do much harm—and sometimes, from caprice, a little good.”

Thélénie had a smile for all, an affable glance for this one, a compliment for that one; upon her arrival in the midst of her guests, her salons were transformed, and gayety and animation superseded the ennui which had begun to make headway. One bright woman is enough to effect such a miracle.

Madame de Belleville proposed a walk in the garden, where divers games had been arranged for the amusement of the company; and she set the example by leading the ladies thither. The ex-vivandière seized the opportunity to say to her hostess in an undertone:

“My dear and lovely Madame de Belleville, is it true that your husband has discovered the secret of divining a woman’s age and telling it at once, simply by examining her corsets?”

“Oh! madame, who can have told you such a thing?” said Thélénie, laughing heartily; “and how could you believe it? Who has been telling you this fairy tale?”

“Monsieur Jarnouillard told it to us as a positive fact; Monsieur de Belleville is to make his experiments during dinner.”

“Ha! ha! what an excellent joke!”

“Jarnouillard!—Come here a moment. From whom did you get this story concerning Monsieur de Belleville’s secret relative to women’s ages?”

The lank, yellow, ugly miser looked around and pointed to Freluchon, crying:

“From that young man from Paris over there.”

“Oh! then I am not surprised,” said Thélénie; “that is Monsieur Freluchon; his one delight is to laugh and make jokes.”

“I call it very ridiculous!” said Madame Droguet.

Thélénie went up to the diminutive young man and bestowed a gracious smile on him.

“You caused those ladies a terrible fright, Monsieur Freluchon!” she said.

“I, madame? how so?”

“By making them believe that my husband has a secret method of telling all their ages.”

“Isn’t it true? Isn’t that what Cha—that your husband guesses?”

“No; it’s the age of trees, not of women.”

“Frankly, I thought that it was much more agreeable to investigate the age of the fair sex! I should never have imagined that my friend Cha—de Belleville would have taken an interest in any other study. Excuse the mistake—it is quite natural.”

“Did Monsieur Edmond Didier come with you?”

“No, madame.”

“Shall we see him this evening?”

“I think so—unless he cannot make up his mind to quit his love-making; for he is passionately in love, you know—the dear fellow!”

Thélénie with difficulty repressed a nervous gesture; but she found it more difficult to mask the threatening expression which passed over her face and which Freluchon did not fail to observe, although she affected to smile as she murmured:

“Yes, so I have been told. But Monsieur Edmond has been in love so often! it is never a serious matter with him.”

“It is true,” said Freluchon, playing with his switch, “that I have known him to have love-affairs which lasted only a short time. But this time it is a genuine passion, a sincere attachment, for he expects to marry his love very soon.”

“Oh! he says that, but he will think twice before doing it.”

“Why so? Mademoiselle Agathe is a charming girl; she is bright and talented; she has an equable, sweet disposition, and much charm.”

“Ha! ha! ha! what an eloquent portrait! Look out! One would think that you too were in love with the young lady.”

“Isn’t she the girl who lives with that other woman in the Courtivaux house?” said Madame Droguet.

“As you very elegantly express it, madame,” Freluchon replied, “she is that girl. By the way, I haven’t as yet seen any other girl in the neighborhood.”

“But they say that those women——”

Thélénie hastily interrupted the giantess, whispering:

“Hush! not now! You can talk about her this evening—when the lover is here!”

Then she hurried the ladies toward a part of the garden where a small Théâtre de Guignol[C] had been set up, calling:

[C] A sort of Punch and Judy show.

“Come, mesdames, come; we have a marionette theatre here, and I believe the performance is going to begin.”

Freluchon remained where he stood, looking after Thélénie and saying to himself:

“I can’t get it out of my head that that woman is meditating some dirty, spiteful trick, which she means to play on Edmond. I am sorry I urged him to come to this affair. But still a man should never be afraid of such women; if this one should become too impertinent I will Chamoureau her till her head swims. This Baron von Schtapelmerg has the look of a genuine recruiting officer.—Ah! I see yonder, among those young men from Paris, a former travelling salesman, who, if I remember aright, used to speak German perfectly. I must put him in communication with Monsieur Thousand Sauerkrauts!”

And Freluchon walked toward the young man in question and shook hands with him. Then he passed his arm through his, and, as if by accident, took up a position with him beside Croque, who, in common with a large majority of the guests, had stopped in front of the canvas theatre commonly called: *Théâtre de Guignol*.

XIX

THÉÂTRE DE GUIGNOL.—A SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY.

There was quite a large gathering in front of the little canvas structure. The ladies were seated on chairs and most of the men stood behind them.

Mademoiselle Héloïse was one of the audience; when she caught sight of Croque, whom she recognized at once, she nudged Thélénie and whispered:

“Why, that man is the one——”

“He’s a German baron; don’t forget that!” was the beautiful brunette’s reply; and the words were accompanied by such a meaning glance that Héloïse instantly understood that she was not to recognize the gentleman.

The scene between Polichinelle and the devil had just begun; the theme was about the same as usual; the men who work the marionettes follow too closely in the beaten track.

The devil tries to tempt Polichinelle, who thrashes the devil. The company considered that the devil was entirely too good a fellow and submitted to his thrashing altogether too readily.

“This Guignol isn’t very good, is he?” said Freluchon to his neighbor, Croque.

“No, he don’t say enough funny things, ten thousand kirschwassers! if I was inside there, I’d give you something a little better seasoned!”

“Well, baron, why don’t you go under the canvas and play a few scenes for us; I am sure that you would be much more amusing.”

“Oh, no! I wouldn’t dare; I might let out something altogether too free. I don’t know French well enough.”

“Pardieu! here’s a gentleman whom you will be glad to meet; he will talk German with you. Monsieur Courty, you speak German readily, do you not?”

“Ja! ja!” replied the young salesman, “as readily as French.”

“Very good; pray talk a little with the Baron von Schtapelmerg; he will be overjoyed to have an opportunity to converse in his native tongue.”

Far from being overjoyed at the prospect of speaking German, Croque made a wry face, twisted his moustache and tried to go away; but Monsieur Courty was already by his side and was addressing him in German.

“*Gut! gut! tarteiff!* certainly I agree with you,” muttered the pretended baron, shaking his head.

The young man stared at him in amazement and repeated his remark. Croque, seeing that he had made an inconsequent reply, exclaimed:

“What devilish jargon is this you’re talking? I don’t understand a word of it!”

“Why, it’s the purest German, monsieur—the most ordinary words.”

“I beg pardon! I’m from Bavaria and I only speak Bavarian.”

“I have stayed a long while in Bavaria, monsieur, and the people there speak exactly as I just spoke to you.”

“Then, monsieur, the language must have changed since I have been in France.”

“This fellow is no more a Bavarian than you are,” said Monsieur Courty to Freluchon; “and, more than that, he doesn’t know a single word of German.”

“I suspected as much! that’s why I asked you to speak to him in that language.”

At that moment the company began to laugh and applaud, because a young man from among the guests had taken charge of the marionettes. The idea was heartily welcomed; everyone was anxious to pass judgment on the talent of the gentlemen present, and each one in turn was requested to manipulate Guignol’s characters.

When Freluchon’s turn came, he passed under the canvas, and began by exhibiting Polichinelle.

Polichinelle.—Sapristi! I am the happiest of men; I have made my fortune! I have inherited wealth! I have my pile! When I hadn’t a sou, I was as stupid as a goose, and no one looked at me. I could not make a conquest! No one

would give me credit! I had holes in my breeches, the girls all thought me hideous, and my doctor always said to me: "You're not sick; go to the devil!"

To-day, what a difference! I am witty; I can't open my mouth without being applauded; people often laugh at my jokes even before I've made them. All the women ogle me; they think me as handsome as Apollo; if I tear a hole in my breeches, all the girls offer to patch it, and my doctor pays me two or three visits a day, assuring me every time that there's something wrong with my insides.

But that is not all! I am married! I have married a magnificent woman, and all my friends are overjoyed, because they already knew my wife intimately, the result being that they're perfectly at home in our house; it's filled with them all the time. To be sure, there are some of them who look like pickpockets, knaves, swindlers, skinflints. But if one never entertained any but honest folk, one would see so little company!——

But here is monsieur le commissaire, I think; what has he come here for?

The Magistrate.—Have I the honor of speaking to Monsieur Polichinelle?

Polichinelle.—No, monsieur le commissaire, my name is no longer Polichinelle; that name was good enough when I had no money, when I was a poor pedestrian, a nobody, in fact. But now that I have a carriage, I call myself Monsieur de la Carrossière. That's a name worthy to ride in a fine turn-out.

The Magistrate.—I beg pardon, Monsieur Polichinelle——

Polichinelle.—De la Carrossière, I told you.

The Magistrate.—You can't change your name as you do your trousers. First of all, you must have the right to.

Polichinelle—*aside*.—Where in the devil do they raise magistrates of this sort! Ah! I know; I must grease his paw.—*Aloud.*—Monsieur le commissaire, if I should offer you this gold five-franc piece to call me De la Carrossière ——

The Magistrate.—What's this! You try to corrupt an officer of the law! You are a rascal! a scoundrel! an impertinent fellow!

Polichinelle.—I won't do it again, monsieur le commissaire.

The Magistrate.—Your wife and a ci and a ça!

Polichinelle.—A *scie*[D]; that may be, monsieur le commissaire; but as to a ça—I don't believe a word of it.

[D] Slang for *wife*; pronounced like *ci*.

The Magistrate.—I have come to warn you concerning her disorderly life.

Polichinelle.—You needn't have put yourself out for that, monsieur le commissaire.

The Magistrate.—Every night she comes home with two lovers.

Polichinelle.—Impossible, monsieur le commissaire! I always wait for her in the concierge's lodge; she comes home alone.

The Magistrate.—She conceals her lovers under her hoop-skirt, monsieur.

Polichinelle.—Oh! mon Dieu! what do you tell me, monsieur le commissaire! and she talks of wearing a steel skirt now in addition! Does the woman propose to smuggle a whole regiment into my house?

Thélénie, not finding the scene to her taste, rose hurriedly, saying:

"It seems to me, mesdames, that we have had enough of the marionettes; there are other amusements awaiting us in the garden, and it will not be long before dinner."

Everybody followed the hostess with alacrity. The Théâtre de Guignol was deserted, and Monsieur Courty said to Freluchon when he put his head out over the canvas:

"There's no one here, my dear fellow; you have emptied the house—*fait four*."

"On the contrary, I have fired my shot—*fait feu*."

The wooden horses, the Egyptian bird, the swings, the little Russian mountains and other diversions engaged the attention of the company until dinner was announced.

The table was laid in an enormous tent which had been pitched for that purpose in the garden, and which was large enough to contain all the guests.

Croque had sedulously avoided Freluchon since the latter had introduced him to the man who spoke German. But when they repaired to the table, the little man succeeded in obtaining a seat next the *soi-disant* baron. The latter made a slight grimace when he saw who his neighbor was; but Freluchon at once said to him:

"I fixed it so as to sit by you at table; that was rather agreeable on my part, eh, baron?"

"It was exceedingly amiable of you!"

"I know that you're a jolly buck; we'll drink hard and straight."

"I've promised not to drink to-day."

"What's that? what did you do that for? Suppose you should get a little tight! in the country one can let himself go."

"At supper, I don't say no, we will see; but I propose to keep my senses now."

"Do you think there'll be a supper?"

"I am sure of it."

"Do you know that this is a magnificent affair—this fête of Monsieur and Madame de Belleville's?"

"Yes, it will cost them a pile."

"What did you say?"

"I say that this is famous madeira, ten thousand *bouffardes*!"

"As I am not afraid of getting a little started, I am going to fill up again."

"Cristi! damn the odds! I'll take another glass, too."

"It's no use for you to try to hold back, my buck," thought Freluchon, as he refilled Croque's glass; "I mean for you to be as agreeable to-night as you were last night."

Seizing an opportunity when the conversation flagged a little, Doctor Antoine took the floor.

“This charming banquet,” he began, “which recalls the famous feasts of Lucullus, so often cited for their sumptuousness, this superb banquet, I say, is to be made still more memorable by the announcement of a scientific discovery—a most interesting discovery—which our host has made, and which he has promised to communicate to us.”

“Hear! hear!” cried Freluchon, “we call for the discovery; it concerns the age of trees, I understand.”

“Is it really the age of trees?” inquired Madame Droguet with an anxious glance at the doctor.

“Why, yes, my dear lady; pray be calm! there has never been a question of anything else.”

Everybody united in begging Chamoureau to keep his promise by making known his discovery. Even Thélénie said to him:

“Come, speak up, monsieur; you see that everybody is waiting for you.”

Chamoureau felt it incumbent upon him to rise, so that he might be heard more distinctly; and having bowed to right and left, as if he were going to propose a toast, he began:

“Long ago I noticed——”

“I say! I know that song,” muttered Freluchon, as Chamoureau paused to cough; “is that his discovery?”

Having succeeded in clearing his throat, Chamoureau continued:

“Long ago I noticed that a person, as he looked at a tree, would say: ‘I wonder how old it is!’ Then he would proceed to make figures according to its girth and the wrinkles of its bark, and make an approximate estimate; but no one was ever certain. It occurred to me that it would be no less useful than agreeable to be able to tell the age of a tree instantly, simply by looking at it.”

“It would be admirable!” said the doctor.

“Very interesting,” said Monsieur Remplumé.

“Very valuable for dealers in wood,” said Monsieur Jarnouillard.

“At last, messieurs, after long consideration and profound study, I have found a method to put an end to all uncertainty in that respect.”

“Ah! let us hear the method.”

“Hush, messieurs! silence! let us listen.”

“Let us not lose a word.”

“Messieurs, this is what must be done: whenever anyone plants a tree, he must have ready a small piece of wood or zinc—perhaps zinc would be preferable—and on this sheet of zinc, which is to be nailed to the tree, will be carved the year, month and day of the planting; then it seems to me, it will be very easy to tell the age of a tree at a glance.”

Applause, intermingled with much stifled laughter, arose on all sides.

“Bravo! bravo!”

“Honor to Monsieur de Belleville!”

“This discovery does him great credit!”

“It’s as simple as good-day; and no one ever thought of it!”

“Here’s to Monsieur de Belleville’s scientific discovery!”

Freluchon rose and said:

“I propose to add hereafter to the name of Monsieur de Belleville that of Silvestre, derived from *Sylvestris*, which means woods, trees, forests. Let us drink then to the health of Monsieur de Belleville-Silvestre! the grateful stumps!”

“What do you mean by stumps?”

“I mean, in the name of the grateful stumps.”

Chamoureau was radiant; he had no suspicion that he was being laughed at, and received in all seriousness the compliments that were paid him.

But Thélénie, who was less entertained by this comedy, soon said to him:

“I believe, monsieur, that you informed me that you had something else in store—something that would be agreeable to me. I trust that it has nothing to do with trees?”

“No, my dear love, it relates to a matter in which you alone are interested. You gave me two commissions a few days ago: first, to find out whom a dog belonged to that had had the effrontery to bark at you. I have at last discovered his owner; that savage beast, which, by the way, is unlawfully at large, as he isn’t muzzled, belongs to a man who lives on an estate called the Tower, near Gournay. This man, who is looked upon as——”

“Enough, monsieur; you tell me nothing new; I know perfectly well who owns that dog.”

“Nevertheless, I propose to go and tell him he must muzzle his Newfoundland—they say it’s a Newfoundland—and to-morrow——”

“No, monsieur, it is quite unnecessary for you to take that step. I have already seen that gentleman, and he has apologized to me.”

“Oh! if he has apologized to you, that makes a difference.”

“What! my dear madame, have you seen the bear of the Tower?” Madame Droguet asked Thélénie.

“Yes, I met him and spoke to him.”

“It seems that the man is becoming less uncivilized; probably since he has been in love with that Dalmont woman.”

“What do you say?”

“I say that this Monsieur Paul passes every evening now with that creature; everybody knows it, it is getting to be a public scandal. Isn’t that so, Monsieur Luminot?”

Luminot, who was sitting between the two ladies and was the only person who had heard this little *aside*, was

busily stuffing himself with truffles, and contented himself with mumbling:

"It's perfectly scandalous.—They're from Périgord! what a perfume!"

"Hush! hush!" said Thélénie; "we will return to this subject this evening. My husband has something else to tell me."

Chamoureau was in fact waiting until his wife should be ready to listen to him.

"Now, my dear love, as the dog is out of the way, we will go on to the case of the small boy.—You must know, ladies and gentlemen, that there is a small boy, a little vagabond, a very bad boy, so it seems, who had the audacity to throw stones at my wife."

"I'll bet that it was the lost child!" said Doctor Antoine.

"Just so, doctor; it was the lost child. But I did not know it; madame had instructed me to find out whom the little rascal belonged to—he is about eight years old—in order to warn his parents to look after him a little better. I succeeded at last in finding out whom the rascal belonged to—that is to say, whom he lives with,—for nobody knows whom he belongs to, and that is why he is called the lost child.—It's rather an interesting story; the nurse told me everything—for I have seen the nurse. I will tell it to you; it would be a good subject for a melodrama."

As this promised to be more interesting than the age of trees, everybody listened attentively to Chamoureau; even Thélénie herself was secretly impatient to hear what he had to say.

XX

THE NURSE.—THE QUARREL

"First of all, ladies and gentlemen, you must know that this nurse does not belong to this part of the country; she used to live with her husband at Morfontaine, a charming village near Ermenonville."

"Morfontaine!" cried Thélénie, turning pale.

"Yes, my dear love, she lived at Morfontaine; her husband was a laboring man—I forgot to ask her in what trade; but they weren't rich, so that the woman, having become a mother, conceived the idea of going to Paris to get a nursling. Her husband approved of the idea, so Jacqueline Treillard—that is the woman's name—arrived in Paris one fine morning."

"The woman's name is Jacqueline, you say?"

"Yes, my dear love, Jacqueline Treillard; but you will see how dramatic and romantic the story grows."

Thélénie's brow grew dark, when she acquired the certainty that it was her own story that was to be told; but she strove to conceal her emotion and swallowed a glass of champagne frappé, saying:

"Well, monsieur, go on; your story has a romantic beginning."

"It bears much resemblance to a romance.—Well, there was Jacqueline in Paris; she had no sooner left the stage than she met a woman, who said to her: 'You are looking for a child to nurse; I have just what you want—the child of a baroness, who will pay you handsomely.' Jacqueline was delighted and accepted the proposal; the woman took her to a house where she found a lady—a very beautiful lady, it seems,—and a cradle with a new-born child in it. They agreed on a price—thirty francs a month. This Baronne de Mortagne—I forgot to tell you that this lady called herself the Baronne de Mortagne. Does anyone here know a baroness of that name?"

Everyone answered negatively, and Freluchon said:

"That baroness probably was a joke, after the manner of certain barons, whom we frequently meet in society.—Go on, Silvestre de Belleville."

"The Baronne de Mortagne paid the nurse for five months in advance, also the cost of her journey, and ordered her to go straight back to Morfontaine with little Emile—I forgot to tell you that the child's name was Emile. She told Jacqueline not to bring him to Paris, adding that she would go to see him when she had time. The nurse, however, took pains to ask the lady for her address; as she didn't know Paris at all, she had no idea where she had been taken. They gave her a written address, packed her into the stage, and sent her back to Morfontaine with her foster-child, delighted with her day's work!

"But two months passed and three months, and Jacqueline did not hear a word from little Emile's mother. She said to herself, that when the five months had passed, the lady would undoubtedly come to see her son and bring her more money. But no! the five months passed, and no one came. Meanwhile the poor nurse had become a widow and had lost her own child. As she needed money, she decided to go to Paris. She got somebody to read to her the address the baroness had given her—I forgot to tell you that Jacqueline didn't know how to read; that is an unimportant detail. What was written on the paper was: 'La Baronne de Mortagne, at her hôtel on Rue de Grenelle, Faubourg Saint-Germain.'—On her arrival in Paris, Jacqueline inquired the way to Rue de Grenelle. I forgot to tell you that she didn't know Paris."

"Yes! yes! you did tell us; go on, Silvestre."

"Well! arrived in Paris, and on Rue de Grenelle, the nurse couldn't find the house from which she had taken her nursling. She inquired, she asked on both sides of the street for Madame la Baronne de Mortagne; no one knew that lady—it was a false address!"

"And a false baroness; we guessed that at the very beginning of your story."

"Finding that all her inquiries were useless, Jacqueline returned to Morfontaine with the child; she was entitled to turn him over to the magistrate and not keep him any longer, but, poor as she was, the good woman would not abandon her foster-child."

"Ah! that was very well done!"

"There was a nurse with more heart than a mother!"

"But how does it happen," asked Thélénie in a hesitating tone, "that this nurse who lived at Morfontaine is now at Chelles?"

“Because she has a sister who lives here, the widow Tourniquoi. This sister, being in comfortable circumstances, learned that Jacqueline was almost destitute since her husband’s death, so she proposed to her to come here to live with her. Jacqueline asked nothing better; she came with the little boy, who unfortunately has grown up to be a very tough subject!”

“He probably takes after his mother,” said Freluchon.

“I learned all these details by talking with Jacqueline, when I went there to complain of the boy. The poor woman still loves him, she begged me with tears in her eyes to forgive him, and she said:

“‘Oh! if you knew how lovely his mother was, monsieur! I never saw her but once, and that was eight years ago, but if I should see her I should know her in a minute, her beauty made such an impression on me!’”

Thélénie could not control a nervous tremor; but she struggled to overcome it, saying:

“It seems to me that we have had quite enough of this nurse.”

“I beg pardon,” said Freluchon; “I propose that, before we leave the subject, we take up a collection for this excellent woman, who, although poor, would not abandon the child that was placed in her care.”

“Yes! yes! a collection for the nurse!”

“An excellent idea!”

“Do you agree with me, Baron Schtapelmerg?”

“Count me in; count me generous! Here’s the nurse’s health!”

“It isn’t a question of drinking only; everybody’s feeling in his pocket, you see.”

“Ah! that’s so. Pardieu! I’ll give ten sous.”

“That isn’t much for a baron! but perhaps it’s enough for you. I will collect the offerings in this preserve dish.”

“Faith! the money can go to its address at once,” said Chamoureau; “for, as I wanted little Emile to make a public apology to my wife, I told Jacqueline to bring him to us while we were at dinner.”

Thélénie glared at her husband with a savage gleam in her eyes.

“What, monsieur? what did you say? this nurse——”

“Is coming here, my dear love, with the little vagabond, to apologize to you. It’s a little surprise I arranged for you. Then we will give the good woman the money we have collected for her. I can see her joy now; it will make a charming picture!”

“Why, monsieur, you have no common sense! What need have we of that peasant woman’s presence, to bore us with her chatter?”

At that moment a servant came forward and said:

“There’s a country woman outside with a little boy; she wishes to pay her respects to madame.”

Thélénie rose abruptly.

“This is very strange!” she said; “I am terribly dizzy; I do not feel at all well. Receive this woman, monsieur, and send her away. Come with me, Héloïse. Pray don’t be alarmed, my friends, it will not be anything serious.”

And Thélénie took her friend’s arm and left the tent with a rapidity most surprising in a person who feels indisposed.

But the guests did not notice this circumstance; they were awaiting with interest the nurse and the little boy, who soon presented themselves, the former with repeated curtsies, the latter staring at the whole company with an impertinent expression.

“That little fellow has very fine eyes!” said Freluchon; “they are almost as large as Madame de Belleville’s. Don’t you think so, Baron von Schtapelmerg?”

The baron, who was beginning to be a little tipsy, replied:

“My sister has the finest eyes in Paris!”

“Your sister! who’s your sister?”

Croque saw that he had made a false step.

“Yes, I’ve got a sister,” he rejoined, “who has a pair of eyes like portes cochères.”

And he poured out a glass of water and swallowed it at a draught, muttering:

“I’ve had enough wine for to-day; I must look out for myself.”

Meanwhile Chamoureau, thinking that the moment had come to put in a little *speech*, took the preserve dish which contained the proceeds of the collection, and said to the peasant:

“My good woman, it is with renewed pleasure—no; I noticed long ago—wait; no, never mind that.—You will not see Madame de Belleville, for, notwithstanding her earnest desire to know you, a sudden indisposition, which I attribute to—what on earth can have made my wife ill? perhaps it was the melon; and yet it was delicious; but there is much difference in digestions—What were we saying?—Ah! there’s the little rascal who dared to throw stones at my wife. He looks promising. I say, my buck—my lost child!—he’s the lost child, isn’t he?”

“Alas! yes, monsieur.”

“Well, little gallows-bird [*petit pendu*]—lost child [*petit perdu*], I mean,—though, after all, if he keeps on, I shouldn’t be surprised if he got hanged some day!”

“Oh, monsieur! on my word——”

“Do not be alarmed, Widow Jacqueline Treillard, that is simply a supposition.—Well, you little rascal, will you ever throw stones at my wife again?”

“You’re the one I’ll throw ‘em at, to teach you to say I’m going to be hung!” retorted the boy, glaring angrily at Chamoureau, who was completely disconcerted, for he did not expect that retort.

Freluchon, observing the widow’s distress, rose hastily, took the preserve dish from Chamoureau’s hands, and poured the contents into Jacqueline’s apron.

“There, my good woman,” he said, “it was my idea to take up this collection for your benefit; so it is my place to hand you the proceeds, especially as Monsieur de Belleville keeps you waiting too long. Now, go away with your foster-child; for he might say things which would put him out of favor in this house.”

The peasant opened her eyes at sight of the money in her apron; she tried to express her thanks, but Chamoureau motioned to the servants to take her away, and in a moment Jacqueline and the boy disappeared.

As Madame de Belleville did not return, they soon left the table, to take coffee in the salons.

“I am greatly distressed,” said Chamoureau, “that my wife should have been taken ill, for she has lost the pleasure of seeing the nurse, and hearing the little boy.”

“Especially,” said Freluchon, “as she seemed very anxious to see them, and as the little boy said things that were very pleasant to hear.”

At last Thélénie reappeared in the salons. She had changed her dress, which fact satisfactorily accounted for her long absence. Admiring exclamations greeted her striking beauty and her new costume.

“Evidently,” cried Monsieur Luminot, “Madame de Belleville intends to turn all our heads!”

This compliment was warmly applauded; there was a concert of praise which became almost frenzied; it was easy to see that they had all dined sumptuously.

Thélénie, while smiling affably in response to the compliments with which she was bombarded, found a way to approach Croque and whisper to him:

“You must not go away to-night until I have spoken to you; don’t forget; it is very important!”

Ere long a rocket gave the signal for the fireworks, which were displayed in front of the house. Chamoureau had insisted on having his own monogram and his wife’s on a transparency. But the pyrotechnist, having misunderstood his instructions, had supplied an E instead of a C; so that the transparency presented the combination E B T.

It was applauded none the less heartily. Thélénie alone shrugged her shoulders, as she said to her husband:

“Let’s hope, monsieur, this will be your last surprise!”

Many people came for the ball only; among them was Edmond, who entered the gorgeous salons of the villa about eleven o’clock.

Chamoureau ran to meet him and grasped his hand.

“My dear Monsieur Edmond Didier,” he said, “how delighted I am to have you as my guest.”

“My congratulations, Chamoureau—I beg pardon! Monsieur de Belleville; your house is magnificent!”

“Isn’t it? It is truly regal. My wife will be very glad to see you; shall I present you to her?”

“Oh! it’s not worth while. I have the honor of her acquaintance, you know.”

“Yes, to be sure! I had quite forgotten that you used to—know her! But excuse me; they are going to dance, and my wife has given me a list of seventeen people that I must dance with.”

“Go; don’t stand on ceremony.”

Thélénie caught sight of Edmond, and a gleam of satisfaction lighted up her face, which had been very dark ever since she had learned that Jacqueline Treillard was at Chelles. She went forward at once to meet the young man, thanked him for coming to her party and gave him a most cordial welcome. Then she pointed to the card tables, saying:

“If you don’t wish to dance, there is a way of passing the time; do whatever you choose.”

Edmond sought out Freluchon and asked in a low tone:

“How has the affair gone off?”

“My dear fellow, first of all I must do justice to the dinner; it was magnificent, nothing was lacking. Chamoureau was adorably idiotic and told us about a scientific discovery that was enough to make one burst with laughter. But after that there was a very peculiar story of a nurse. I have strange suspicions; I’ll tell you about it later. Look you, if you take my advice, you won’t stay here. Let’s go right away, I’ll go with you.”

“Why so, pray?”

“I have an idea that Thélénie is concocting some villainy against you; I have surprised a number of hints and treacherous smiles. That woman has never forgiven you for leaving her first!”

“Nonsense! you are mad! Thélénie has a lot of money, and she thinks of nothing but making a show with it; she doesn’t give me a thought. What should I look like—to come here and run right away again? I mean to play cards. Gad! if I could only win!”

“Then you won’t go away?”

“No, certainly not.”

“In that case, do at least be on your guard.”

“Really, Freluchon, I have never seen you as you are to-night.”

“Distrust especially that villainous looking fellow who is watching the dancing, there at the left; he’s a German baron, who is no more a German than he is a baron, and whom I suspect of being——”

“Well, what?”

“Thélénie’s brother!”

“What an idea! I never heard of her having a brother.”

“An additional reason that! it was probably because he was not a subject that she deemed good enough to put on exhibition.”

“What kind of wine have you been drinking, to have such gloomy ideas?”

“Oh! I haven’t drunk too much; I have been very careful. It isn’t possible that that woman invited us for our good looks; let’s go away.”

“Freluchon, if I am really in any danger here, go away if you choose; I am going to stay.”

“Enough! let’s say no more about it. I am going to dance a polka.”

The ball-room and card-rooms were soon full of animation. The servants went constantly to and fro with salvers laden with punch, hot or cold. They also passed madeira, champagne and claret; it seemed that the master, or rather the mistress of the house had no other object than to make the guests tipsy.

Thanks to this species of refreshment, the hilarity soon became uproarious, the dances assumed a decidedly Spanish character, and the ladies plunged into them with an *abandon* that was at times decidedly eccentric.

Monsieur Droguet, who insisted on taking part in all the dances, even those that he did not know, had already been thrown to the floor three times; which did not deter him from beginning again as soon as he was on his feet.

Madame Droguet waltzed with the aplomb of a tower; she did not fall, but woe to those who collided with her! She and Monsieur Luminot, her partner, bumped into and overthrew everyone who came in their path. The ex-dealer in wines had not allowed a salver of punch or champagne to pass him by without saying a word to it. The result was that he was purple; his eyes were starting from his head, and he seemed inclined to defy the whole world.

Edmond, after playing a few rubbers of whist, had taken his place at a lansquenet table, where he was not lucky. Croque did not lose sight of him, and when he left the lansquenet table, he accosted him, saying:

"I don't care for that game; you lose your money at it without a chance to defend yourself, without having even the pleasure of playing. I prefer écarté, that's a game full of fine points. Does monsieur play it?"

"To be sure."

"Would you like to play a few games? here's an unoccupied table."

"I should be glad to; let us see if I shall be more fortunate at this game than the others."

"You probably will, monsieur, for I lose at it all the time, which does not prevent my being very fond of it; but we always become attached to ingrates!"

Edmond seated himself at a card-table opposite Croque, who continued:

"I like to play rather high."

"So do I."

"Then we have the same tastes. Twenty francs—does that frighten you? these little gold pieces are so convenient!"

"Twenty francs it is."

The game began, and although the *soi-disant* baron declared that he always lost at it, he won the first game and the next and all the rest, and the yellow boys flowed in his direction.

Edmond had lost more than a hundred francs; but he tried to recoup by increasing his stake, which suited his opponent perfectly.

"Monsieur," he replied to every such suggestion, "I am a bold player! I never refuse a man his revenge, and I cover whatever stake is proposed."

Thélénie passed through the card-room several times to see what was going on; finally she came again, but with several ladies. She had Madame Droguet on her arm; Mesdames Remplumé and Jarnouillard, with others, came behind. They all seated themselves near the table at which Croque and Edmond were playing écarté.

"I am not sorry to rest a little," said the corpulent Droguet, sinking on a couch; "we danced that whole waltz without stopping, didn't we, Beau Luminot?"

Beau Luminot, puffing noisily, had taken his stand behind the ladies. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead as he replied:

"I'm as wet as a dish-rag; but we waltzed like Flora and Zephyr."

"Your husband is on edge, Madame de Belleville; he hasn't missed a dance yet."

"He is simply doing his duty; a host should set the example; he has got to exhaust his list."

"He may well be exhausted himself first. Are you ladies going to play cards?"

"Perhaps, neighbor, perhaps; we want to vary our pleasures."

"I'll bet two sous, if anybody will cover them."

"Oh! Monsieur Luminot! do you dare to mention two sous? Don't you see that these gentlemen are playing for gold?"

"Gold! real gold?"

"As real as can be!" replied Croque; "and if you want to bet a few napoleons on my opponent, I'll take all bets."

"I! I think not! I'll bet two sous and no more!"

"Well, mesdames, have you enjoyed yourselves?" inquired Thélénie.

"Oh! your party is simply enchanting, Madame de Belleville; it is magnificent!"

"Admirable!"

"What a charming company you have brought together!"

"I tried to have the best people in the neighborhood."

"And you have succeeded."

"I did think for a moment of inviting those two ladies who bought Monsieur Courtivaux's house, but——"

"Fie! fie! my dear love! What were you thinking of? why those women are not received anywhere!"

"But I thought——"

"La Dalmont and Demoiselle Agathe; does anybody know who they are?"

The names of Madame Dalmont and Agathe reached Edmond's ears, and he listened, continuing his game.

"On the contrary," cried Madame Remplumé, "we know much too well who they are!"

"Yes, you are right; we know some fine things about those flaunting hussies."

"Of whom are you speaking, madame?" said Edmond, turning abruptly toward Madame Droguet.

"Of whom am I speaking, monsieur!" rejoined the giantess, slightly taken aback by this sudden question. "Why, in the first place, it seems to me that I am not accountable to you."

"Madame was speaking of the persons with whom you pass your evenings," observed Thélénie with a sneering smile.

"And madame, in speaking of those ladies, presumed to make use of expressions which I cannot and will not endure."

"I have the vole and the king," said Croque, marking three points.

"What does that mean, monsieur?" demanded the ex-vivandière, rolling her eyes furiously. "You don't wish me

to say what everyone in this neighborhood thinks about those ladies; why should I hesitate, I pray to know?”

“What do people in the neighborhood say of those ladies?”

“I mark the king.”

“They say, monsieur, that they are—not of much account; and no one will receive them!”

“Those who say that, madame, do so either from evil-mindedness or from stupidity; and none but the most despicable people can possibly make such remarks!”

“Despicable! Monsieur, it seems to me that you insult me!”

“It is you, madame, who insult two persons who deserve all your respect.”

“I have won!”

“My respect! Ha! ha! that is too much! Luminot, do you hear what monsieur says?”

“What is it? what’s the matter? what are you talking about?”

“The two women who live in the Courtivaux house.”

“Ah! hussies! wantons!”

Edmond sprang to his feet and grasped Luminot’s arm, crying:

“Monsieur, admit that you have lied, that your words are false; take them back at once, or I won’t answer for my wrath!”

The Droguets, Remplumés and Jarnouillards shrieked in unison:

“He has told the truth; he won’t say anything different; he has simply expressed our opinion.”

“Take it back, monsieur, take it back instantly!”

“No, I won’t take it back,” said the former wine merchant, whose brain was excited by all he had drunk, and who was inflamed by the harpies who surrounded him. “On the contrary, I repeat it: those two women are——”

A violent blow on the cheek prevented him from finishing his sentence.

Bewildered a moment by the blow he had received, Luminot stared vacantly about; but when he saw Edmond still glaring at him with a threatening expression, the stout man prepared to rush at him.

All the ladies present, instead of trying to hold him back, were rather inclined to lend him their assistance; but at that moment Freluchon appeared on the scene, attracted by the noise; he forced his way through the crowd to Luminot’s side, and just as he extended his arm to strike Edmond, the diminutive fellow’s muscular arms took him by the waist, lifted him like a feather and tossed him upon whoever happened to be behind him. The wine merchant fell upon Monsieur Droguet, whom he flattened out beneath him.

Thereupon lamentable cries arose.

“Oh! mon Dieu! they have crushed my husband!” shrieked Madame Droguet.

“This is the scene which I expected,” said Freluchon, “and which Madame Chamoureau had carefully arranged! Now, Edmond, I trust that you will consent to go away with me.—Chamoureau, my boy, your little fête was delightful; and your wife, Madame Chamoureau, whose name is no more De Belleville than mine is Abd-el-Kader, arranged some very charming surprises for us.”

“Monsieur,” said Edmond, walking up to Luminot, who had struggled to his feet, but was very sore about the loins, “men of breeding do not settle their quarrels like street porters. I am ready to give you satisfaction. I live in this village, as you are well aware; to-morrow I shall expect your seconds.—Let us be off, Freluchon.”

“Off we go, my dear fellow.—I present my respects to Monsieur and Madame Chamoureau.—Ah! and the German baron who doesn’t know German; I was forgetting him. Good-night, my dear Schtapelmerg! a thousand sauerkrauts in my name to your acquaintances.”

“Don’t you mean to chastise such insolence?” murmured Thélénie, touching Croque’s arm. But he replied simply:

“Not such an ass! He lifted that enormous man as if he was a feather! Peste! he’s too strong!”

XXI

CONSPIRACY

The scene that had taken place in the card-room brought Thélénie’s fête to an end. Monsieur Droguet’s nose was crushed and three of his teeth were broken; and his wife persistently exclaimed:

“They were the last he had!”

Chamoureau, who had seen only the end of the episode, and who was excessively annoyed to be called by his true name before his guests, ran from one to another, saying:

“Why, what has happened here? How did all this come about? Has there been a quarrel?”

“Better than that! The stout gentleman yonder was struck.”

“Struck! by whom? Freluchon?”

“No, by his friend—the young man who was playing écarté with the baron.”

Chamoureau thereupon bustled up to the former wine merchant, who was feeling his ribs.

“What’s this I hear? Edmond Didier struck you?”

“Yes, monsieur! but he shall pay me dear for it; that blow will cost him his life!”

“What! you mean to fight with him?”

“Is it possible to doubt it?” cried Thélénie; “show me the man who would not fight after receiving a blow—unless he chose to be disgraced forever.”

“Oh! I will fight, madame; you may be perfectly sure that I will fight.”

“And I trust that you will kill that scoundrel who broke my husband’s teeth!—Come, Droguet, let us go. What in

the world are you looking for, on the floor and under the tables?”

“I am looking for my teeth.”

“Mon Dieu! what’s the use? you don’t imagine you can glue them in again, do you?—Oh! what a scene!”

“Monsieur de Belleville, you will be one of my witnesses[E], of course.”

[E] Luminot uses the word *témoin* which means either a second (in a duel) or a witness.

“A witness—what for?”

“For my duel.”

“But I can’t be a witness, for I was not here; I didn’t hear the quarrel.”

“That makes no difference; it doesn’t prevent your being a witness.”

“Rely upon him, monsieur,” said Thélénie; “he will be too happy to assist you in this affair.”

Chamoureau made a pitiful face, which indicated that he was not at all happy to serve as second in a duel.

All the guests soon took their leave.

“What a pity that such a beautiful party should end like this!” was the general sentiment. But many persons added under their breath: “For all that, it appears that their real name is Chamoureau, and not Belleville.”

Thélénie was not sorry to see the close of the festivities and the departure of all her guests. When they were going away, she whispered to Croque:

“Wait for me in the garden, in the left-hand path.”

When everybody had gone, and Chamoureau and his wife were left alone in one of the salons, she said:

“Well, monsieur, what are you doing here?”

“Why, I was waiting for you, my dear love.”

“Waiting for me; why, I should like to know?”

“Why, so that we may retire together.”

“Since when, monsieur, have you needed my company to go to your apartment?”

Chamoureau simpered and balanced himself on one leg as he replied:

“To my apartment—of course not; but to-night, it would be very pleasant to me—it seems to me that after dancing so much—the natural sequence of a party—in short, my dear and loving heart, I would like to go with you to your room—you understand——”

And the amorous husband put out his hand to take his wife’s. But she abruptly withdrew her hand and exclaimed, with an angry glance at Chamoureau:

“It’s very becoming of you, monsieur, to presume to ask to pass the night with me, after all the idiotic things you have done to-day! for you have done nothing else.”

“What! I have been doing idiotic things! What were they, pray?”

“It is useless for me to tell you, monsieur; you wouldn’t understand me.”

“Was it my fault if Monsieur Luminot and Monsieur Edmond had a quarrel? After all, madame, it was you who insisted on inviting the two friends; I wouldn’t have asked them to come here myself. I was sure that Freluchon would call me Chamoureau, and he didn’t fail to do it; you heard him, didn’t you?”

“That’s all right, monsieur; that’s not what I refer to. Go to bed.”

Chamoureau drew himself up, assumed a dignified air, and replied:

“You tell me to go to bed. But allow me, madame, to remind you, that since we have occupied this house, where you consigned me to an apartment a long way from yours, you have not once allowed me to enter your apartment at night! Sometimes it’s one excuse, sometimes another; you always have a pretext for refusing to admit me.—But it seems to me, madame, that I have some rights—some glorious rights in fact! Am I your husband, or am I not? ‘That is the question,’ as the English would say.”

“Oh! how you bore me, monsieur!”

“Madame, I didn’t bring you twenty-two thousand five hundred francs a year for the privilege of sleeping alone. Deuce take it! I married for another purpose—otherwise it wasn’t worth while for me to marry!—Why——”

“Have you finished, monsieur?”

“Madame, you made me dance seventeen times with different women. Some of them were very ugly. I do whatever you want me to; and it seems to me that you, in your turn——”

“How dare you talk to me of such matters, monsieur, when you have a duel on hand for to-morrow—a serious duel? If Monsieur Luminot should fall, it would be your duty, as his second, to avenge him.”

The memory of the duel instantly put to flight the amorous thoughts which were agitating Chamoureau. He turned pale and stammered:

“I don’t know, madame, why you mixed me up in that affair, which did not concern me at all. There was your old friend, Baron von Schtapelmerg—a man who has fought against the Turks; he would have asked nothing better than to be Monsieur Luminot’s second. However, two seconds are required; I will see the baron to-morrow, and——”

“You will not see him; the baron has gone to Paris.”

“What! Monsieur de Schtapelmerg has left Chelles like this—without shaking hands with me—without bidding me adieu?”

“You will see him later; urgent business compelled him to start at once. The other second can be found to-morrow. Now I feel the need of rest. This day has tired me terribly. Good-night, monsieur.”

Chamoureau took a candle, blew it out because he saw that day was breaking, and made up his mind at last to go to his room, saying to himself:

“I am beginning to think that I should have done as well to remain a widower. O Eléonore! you would not refuse to admit me to your bedroom! To be sure, we had only one between us.”

Thélénie hastened into the garden. Croque was awaiting her in a clump of trees. Having satisfied herself that they were quite alone, she said:

“Listen attentively to what I expect you to do. This time I trust that you will not hesitate to obey me; the commission that I am going to intrust to you is not dangerous.”

“Sacrebleu! I am no coward, but only a blasted fool puts himself in the way of being thrashed when there’s no need of it. That young Freluchon’s as strong as Hercules; I saw that at a glance. He would have thrown me down as he did Luminot. How would that have helped us?”

“Listen: you saw that nurse, that Jacqueline, who came here during dinner, with a little boy?”

“Yes; and you didn’t want to see her, for you skipped out in a hurry!—I’d like to bet something that you’re the Baronne de Mortagne, and that that little chap is your son.”

“Hush! hold your tongue!”

“Oh! after all, it’s your business! It’s all one to me, you understand!”

“What I want you to understand is that this nurse must leave this part of the country to-morrow; for if chance should bring us face to face——”

“True; she would recognize you, and that would have a bad effect, the world is so unfeeling!—And the little boy?”

“She must take him with her. In two or three hours, you will go to this woman——”

“Where does she live?”

“With her sister, the widow Tourniquoi; any peasant will show you the way.”

“Widow Tourniquoi; all right! I’ll find her.”

“You will ask for this Jacqueline.”

“Oh! I shall recognize her; I examined her closely, and the little fellow too; he’s not bad-looking—he’ll be a tough one!”

“You will take the woman aside and tell her that you come from the Baronne de Mortagne, who has the most ardent desire to see her son.”

“She has taken plenty of time about it; but never mind that.”

“You may invent whatever fable you choose to account for the baroness’s conduct.”

“Oh! as to inventing fables, that’s my particular forte; I am never at a loss; I’ll give ‘em to her of all colors.”

“You must tell her that Madame de Mortagne, being unable to come here, expects her and the child to come to Dieppe, and that she must go there instantly; that when she gets there the baroness will pay her all the arrears she owes her, and will reward her handsomely for the care she has taken of her child.”

“Very good; but why do you send her to Dieppe rather than somewhere else?”

“Because there are vessels there which sail for distant countries; and I know someone there to whom I will send this Jacqueline; and that person will find a way to ship her and the little boy to America or some other part of the globe; and when they are once there, as the woman will have no money to pay her return passage, she will be obliged to stay there.”

“Perfectly thought out; there is only one difficulty: how am I to persuade this Jacqueline to go to Dieppe? Suppose she doesn’t believe what I tell her?”

“Haven’t we the great means to which all obstacles yield? Here are three hundred francs in gold, which you will hand to the woman, and tell her that it’s to pay the cost of the journey, and that at Dieppe the baroness will pay her all that she owes her.—Do you think that Jacqueline will hesitate an instant on receiving that money?”

“Oh no! that will smooth away all difficulties; the peasant won’t doubt for an instant the truth of everything I tell her; she will be too well pleased, first, by the feeling of these fifteen yellow boys, and secondly, by the hope of receiving a still larger sum at Dieppe.”

“Tell her that the Baronne de Mortagne awaits her impatiently, and hand her this address; it is that of the person to whom I propose to commend her.”

“In order to ship her away from France?—Very good. I will say: ‘That is the place where you will find little Emile’s mother.’”

“She must start for Paris with the child to-day; there she will take the train for Dieppe.”

“Do you want me to go with them?”

“No; for I need you for something else.”

“For the duel? That suits me; I will be Luminot’s other second. I’ll load the pistols, for I know a neat little way of assuring myself the advantage.”

“No, no, that isn’t what I want of you; I have other plans. On the contrary, you must not show yourself; I have said that you have gone to Paris.”

“The deuce! then I shan’t dine with you! that’s a pity!”

“You must take off those clothes and obtain others—a boatman’s, for instance—and make yourself unrecognizable.”

“Oh! as for disguising myself, that’s easy enough. I have a pretty knack at that. You might pass me on the street and you wouldn’t know me.—What else?”

“I will tell you. In the first place, I must find out when this duel is to take place.—Oh! those women! those women! they are the ones I want to be revenged on most of all! One is adored by Edmond, the other has won the heart of that——”

“Of that what?”

“It is enough for you to know that on the day when you announce to me the ruin of those two women, I will cover you with gold, I will give you as much of it as you can carry.”

“*Bigre!* I’ll be strong that day, I promise you!”

“It is broad daylight; don’t stay here. By-and-by, about six o’clock this afternoon, be at the end of my park—on the lonely road that skirts the wall.”

“Agreed; I will be there.”

Croque left the villa, and Thélénie hastened to her apartment.

XXII

REVELATION

While all these events were taking place at Goldfish Villa, let us see what was happening in the modest abode of Honorine and Agathe.

Edmond's young betrothed was secretly unhappy at the thought that her beloved was going to Madame de Belleville's fête. She remembered how that lady had stared at her the first time that she saw her at the summer-house window, and the familiar tone in which she had spoken to Edmond.

The woman who is most innocent of intrigue has nevertheless a secret instinct which enables her to detect the sentiments which people try to conceal from her; and that instinct never deceives her in the matter of a rival.

Agathe, however, did not doubt the love or the fidelity of the man she loved; that was why, dreading to appear ridiculous if she allowed the apprehensions caused by Madame de Belleville's invitation to appear, she had been the first to urge him to attend the fête.

But that evening, as soon as Edmond had left them, to go home to dress, Agathe had gone up to her room, in order to conceal from Honorine the anxiety she felt.

Honorine had divined what was taking place in Agathe's heart; but she did not share her apprehensions. She thought that a woman ought never to abuse her influence over the man who loves her, by obliging him to do only what she wished. She imagined too that Edmond's presence at Madame de Belleville's would prevent the slanderous tongues of the village from making any unseemly remarks about herself and her young friend.

Honorine therefore was alone that evening in the small salon which opened into the garden; it was the first time that that had happened since she had lived at Chelles. At that moment solitude was not irksome to her; when the heart has much to think about, it loves silence and repose. Honorine reflected that for several days their neighbor Paul had not called upon them. She wondered if it was possible that anything that she had said had displeased him; she could think of nothing to account for his absence, and the result of her cogitations was a deep sigh, and the reflection that she was thinking of someone who did not waste a thought on her.

The young woman, absorbed in her reverie, had long since let her embroidery fall from her hands, without being conscious that she had ceased to work, when of a sudden she felt something cold against her hand, then a heavy paw was laid on her lap; that was the way in which the dog from the Tower always said good-morning or good-evening. When she saw Ami fawning upon her, Honorine's heart beat fast with pleasure, and she patted the dog gently.

"Why, is that you, Ami? So you have found the road to this house again? I was beginning to think that you had forgotten us altogether, and that we should not see you again!"

These words were addressed no less to the master than to the dog; and Paul, who appeared in the doorway, would have been very ungrateful if he had not taken them home to himself.

He bowed low to the young woman, saying:

"Is it not presumptuous in me, madame, to present myself here so late?"

"Why, no, monsieur; it is little more than nine o'clock, I think; and if you find me alone—which I very rarely am—it is because Agathe felt tired and sleepy. As for Monsieur Edmond, he is at a party, which fact accounts in some measure for Agathe's headache.—Now, monsieur, consider whether you have the courage to remain with one poor woman—who has nothing but her conversation to offer you."

Paul took a chair and seated himself at some distance from Honorine. On learning that he was to be alone with her, he seemed embarrassed. Luckily, Ami was there to enliven the interview; Honorine continued to caress him and said to him:

"How glad you seem to see me, Ami! But if it gives you so much pleasure to be with me, why don't you come oftener? You don't need to wait until it happens to occur to your master to come. If he doesn't enjoy himself here, he is right not to come; but you know the way, and I don't think that he objects to your coming here to show us that you haven't forgotten us."

"Surely you cannot think, madame, that I do not enjoy myself in your house; only in your pleasant company have I found at last some distraction from the sorrows which have made me shun society for many years."

"If that is so, how does it happen that we have not seen you for several days? You had accustomed us to your company of late; we made up our minds—too soon—that it would continue. There are habits which give one so much pleasure!"

Honorine's voice began to quiver, and she abruptly ceased speaking, in order to conceal the emotion she felt.

But Paul had drawn his chair nearer to hers; he gazed at the young woman with an expression which was not calculated to calm her agitation, and replied:

"I went to Paris several days ago. I had received some information which led me to believe that I had found the traces of a person whom I have sought in vain for nine years! But the information was misleading; my investigations were of no avail, and I have learned nothing."

"I shall be very presumptuous, I fear, if I ask you who this person is whom you have been seeking so long."

"It is a young girl; she must be about sixteen years old now."

"Ah! and this girl is your kinswoman, or perhaps even more than that? Why shrink from admitting it? Men do many foolish things in their youth; they should never be ashamed to try to atone for them."

"You are mistaken, madame; this girl is no connection of mine; and yet, it is my duty to stand in a father's place to her, for I had the misfortune to deprive her of her father—in a duel."

"In a duel! Ah! I guessed as much; I understand it all now!"

"What? what did you guess?"

“This duel took place in the ravine yonder, by your estate of the Tower.”

“That is true, madame. But who can have told you?”

“We had heard the story of a young man being found dead on that spot; no one knew whether he had been attacked there, but he had not been robbed; so that it was presumable that he was killed in a duel.”

“Yes, madame, yes. Ah! that is the deed for which I can never forgive myself; for that unfortunate man had never offended me—he was the victim of an execrable plot. A woman—but I am not sure that one should give that name to such a monster of wickedness!—I loved her, I loved her madly! Our liaison had lasted three years. I was young, rich, independent; my father, Monsieur Duronceray, had left me more than thirty thousand francs a year, so that I could afford to make every sacrifice for that woman; I would have gone so far as to give her my hand and my name. But that woman deceived me. A man whom I believed to be my friend was secretly her lover; but in order to turn aside my suspicions more effectually, she played the flirt with other men; with one, among others, of whom I was jealous—for he was well adapted to seduce! he was young and rich and had every quality likely to attract and charm a woman. Ah! if he had chosen to respond to that woman’s allurements, I am sure that she would have asked nothing better than to number him among her lovers. And it was to revenge herself for his indifference that she made him her victim.—But I ought to have been enlightened as to the real sentiments of those who surrounded me. My faithful Ami, my brave companion, had never been willing to bestow the slightest caress on the woman who betrayed me; far from it! he always manifested such an aversion for her, that I had ceased to take him with me when I went to see her. Whereas, whenever I was with that young man whom I believed to be my rival, Ami would run to him and display as much friendly feeling as he displayed just now for you. But at that time I did not know that the dog was so skilful in divining the sentiments that people entertained for his master; I attributed his behavior to caprice, and drew no other inference from it.

“At last, on a certain day—a fatal day, which I cannot recall without a shudder!—this woman, by the way, had hired a small country house near the village of Couberon—I went to her house in Paris; not finding her there, I suspected that she was in the country, and I hastened thither, torn in advance by a thousand suspicions, for she was not in the habit of going to Couberon without me.—I arrived. A lady’s maid, who was doing sentry duty, saw me in the distance and hastened to warn her mistress. She instantly dismissed her lover, and learning that Comte Adhémar had just arrived——”

“Comte Adhémar! was that the name you said, monsieur?” cried Honorine, in the most intense excitement.

“Yes, madame, Comte Adhémar de Hautmont.”

“Ah! that is the name! the very name!”

“Did you know him, madame?”

“Yes—that is to say, not I—But finish, monsieur! for heaven’s sake, finish your story!”

“Well! on entering my mistress’s room, I found her alone with the count, and apparently in the utmost confusion. Thereupon, blinded by jealousy, I overwhelmed her with reproaches. And she, instead of telling me that the man who was then with her was not her lover, had the perfidy to confirm my suspicions by some words which seemed to escape her involuntarily. I instantly insulted the count and demanded satisfaction for his conduct. He, utterly amazed by what he had seen and heard, could not comprehend my jealousy, and tried to make me understand that I was wrong to think him my rival. But I could no longer restrain my fury, jealousy drove me mad. I thought that the count declined to fight with me, and, to force him to do it, I raised my hand against him.

“Adhémar’s temperament was as fiery as mine. I had offered him an insult which could only be washed out in blood; and after that, it was on his own account, to avenge his outraged honor, that he fought.

“I succeeded in obtaining pistols, and we both went out from that house to which that woman had lured the count, solely in the hope—too fully realized—that if I should surprise her, he would serve to lead my jealousy astray. —Adhémar and I walked a long distance through the fields. It was mid-day, and we constantly met villagers and farm-hands at work in the fields, in whose presence we could not fight. At last we reached the sunken road that leads from the road to Noisy-le-Grand. It was a deserted spot, no one could see us in that ravine, and there our duel took place.

“Adhémar was the insulted party; he fired first, but did not hit me; whereas I—poor, poor fellow! shot through the breast, he had barely time to say:

“‘I was not your rival; I have never made love to that woman in whose house you found me. I love devotedly a young girl who has made me a father. She is poor; my relations are opposed to the connection; but before long I should have been able to marry my love. What will become of my poor little girl and her mother without me?—Go to them and take care of them.’

“‘Their name, their address?’ I cried; ‘on my honor I swear to take your place with them.’

“Alas! poor Adhémar tried to speak, but he had not the strength; he died without naming the woman whom he adored. I looked through his wallet, hoping to find the name and address there. Nothing—no paper, no scrap of information to put me on the track of those unfortunate creatures from whom I had taken their only support. I rushed away from the spot, beside myself with grief, like a madman. I had seen people coming; I was afraid of being arrested; for I said to myself: ‘If they deprive me of my liberty, how shall I find this woman whom I have deprived of her husband, this child whom I have deprived of her father?’”

“That child is here, monsieur, very near you—in this house.”

“Mon Dieu! what do you say, madame?”

“I say that Agathe is the daughter of Comte Adhémar de Hautmont!”

“Is it possible? are you not mistaken?”

“No, monsieur, and you shall have proofs of it—letters from the count which her poor mother possessed and kept religiously; they were all she had of his.”

“Agathe, Adhémar’s daughter! I have found her at last! O my God! hast Thou forgiven me?—But her mother?”

“Julia Montoni, Agathe’s mother, is no longer living. Poor woman! she died five years after the disappearance of the man she adored, and whom she never ceased to expect, for no one knew how the count had died. And when she went to his hotel to inquire what had become of him, they could give her no information. She caused inquiries to be made of his family, but obtained no reply; and when she was on her deathbed, when she commended her daughter to

my care, poor Julia still hoped that Agathe's father would be restored to her some day."

"Ah! madame, from this day half of my fortune belongs to her. But do you think that she will forgive me for having deprived her of her father?"

"Your long repentance, your remorse for the duel, the seclusion and isolation to which you condemned yourself—all these surely entitle you to forgiveness."

"Yes; after fruitless endeavors to find the two persons whom the count had so earnestly recommended to me, I returned to this region, to the stage upon which those events took place. The woman who was the cause of everything had left her Couberon estate long before. I found, in the ravine, the modest memorial of the unfortunate Adhémar; an estate near by was for sale; I bought it and went into retirement there. Far from the world which I hated, and near the last resting-place of the victim of my blind jealousy, I was enabled to visit the ravine every day, to visit the spot where that fatal duel took place, and to weep by the cross which has been set up where Adhémar lies.—Ah! if his daughter had seen me there, she would forgive me!"

"She has seen you there; that evening, after the storm, Agathe and I heard you praying by the cross."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes; and Agathe herself said: 'That gentleman cannot be guilty; he regrets too sincerely the person who lies there.'"

"Dear child! poor girl!—But that is not all, madame. Still hoping that I might sooner or later find the count's natural daughter, I went to his family. There I asked if anyone knew the name of the young woman whom Adhémar loved. His people did not know, or at all events they would give me no information. But one old uncle, who was more kind-hearted and indulgent than the rest, said to me: 'They are concealing from me too the name of the young woman whom my nephew wanted to marry. But if you ever succeed in finding her, tell her that her daughter, Adhémar's daughter, shall have the whole of my fortune; that I will leave everything I possess to her.'

"That old man is still alive, I know. And Agathe, you say, has letters from Adhémar to her mother. Those letters will suffice to prove that she is his daughter, and to give her the fortune that is destined for her; for I am certain that this uncle, by recognizing her as his niece, will give her the right to bear her father's name."

"Mon Dieu! this seems like a dream. My poor Agathe rich and happy! Suppose I wake her?"

"No, no! Let me prepare myself to see her. If you knew all that I feel! Ah! madame, you have made me very happy; and yet I tremble—it seems to me that I shall not dare to face this girl whom I have wronged so terribly!"

"Calm yourself, monsieur; your duel was the result of a mistake, of an act of perfidy; the sole culprit was that woman who so ill requited your love for her."

"But I am no longer surprised by this dog's affection for Agathe. As I have told you, he always showed the greatest friendliness for her father. On that fatal day, when I went to Couberon, I left Ami at Paris. When he saw me again after the duel, instead of coming to meet me as he usually did, he retreated, making a plaintive sort of groaning noise; one would have said that he meant to reproach me for what I had done. It took a long time to recover his affection, and he never fawned upon me again until he had seen me weeping over Adhémar's grave."

"Good dog! See, he is looking at us and listening to us; one would think that he knows what we are talking about.—Dear Agathe! so I shall see her happy at last! she will be able to marry him she loves! You will oppose no obstacles to her marrying Edmond Didier, will you?"

"I, madame, oppose obstacles to her happiness, when it is my duty, on the contrary, to do everything to ensure it! Is it not my duty?—Whether her father's uncle leaves her his fortune or not, I have thirty thousand francs a year, and I will give half of it to Mademoiselle Agathe on her wedding day."

"Oh! that is too much, monsieur! you mustn't do so much for the young couple.—How delighted poor Edmond will be."

"How does it happen that he is not here to-night?"

"He could not refuse to attend a grand fête given to-night by some people who have been living here a short time. His friend Freluchon and he are old acquaintances of Monsieur and Madame de Belleville."

"Monsieur Edmond at Madame de Belleville's?"

"Yes.—That lady's name seems to excite you strangely. Do you know her?"

"Do I know her! Why, this pretended Madame de Belleville is no other than Thélénie—the woman whose treachery caused Comte Adhémar's death."

"What do you tell me? Can it be true?"

"Yes. Only to-day, this morning, did I learn it. I had just returned from Paris when a woman on horseback appeared at my house, made a great outcry in my courtyard, and demanded to speak to me, in order to complain of my dog, which had presumed to jump at her and her horse. Fancy my amazement on recognizing in that person the woman who no longer inspires me with any other sentiments than horror and disgust! Ah! I believe that, when she recognized me, she was very sorry that she had come to the Tower.—But I am sorry that Edmond has gone to Thélénie's house; I am sorry that he knows her; for if there has ever been a liaison between them, and she knows that he is in love now with the lovely Agathe, we must expect anything from that creature; she is capable of anything, if her self-esteem is humbled."

"Mon Dieu! you make me shudder! Your words remind me of the strange way in which she stared at Agathe, and of Agathe's melancholy mood to-night!—But what could that woman do to Edmond?"

"I trust that our apprehensions are without foundation; however, to-morrow Monsieur Edmond shall know this Thélénie as she is, and I am quite sure that he will never darken her doors again.—Mon Dieu! it is very late, and I am keeping you from retiring."

"Do you think that I regret seeing you this evening?"

"No, you are so good—you are so attached to your young companion!"

"You give me permission, do you not, to tell her to-morrow all that you have revealed to me to-night?"

"Yes, let her know all; and to-morrow, when I come, you will tell me, before I enter the presence of Comte Adhémar's daughter, whether she is willing to receive me and give me her hand."

"I have already told you that Agathe saw you on your knees by the cross in the ravine; that sight has remained

engraved on her memory, she has often mentioned it to me; that fact is enough to assure you that you will be forgiven.—Mon Dieu! it is twelve o'clock, and you have to return to the Tower alone!"

"Alone! no, isn't Ami with me? He would be a valiant defender; but this neighborhood is not dangerous, there are no evildoers hereabout."

"You will come to-morrow—during the day?"

"Oh! I shall not fail; I long to see her."

"Of course, you will not fail to come," murmured Honorine with a faint sigh; "for it is for Agathe!"

The young woman uttered these last words in a trembling voice. Paul suddenly seized her hand, covered it with kisses, pressed it to his heart, and then hurried away, unable to speak.

But what words could have been more eloquent than his acts? Honorine understood their significance, for her face lighted up with pleasure, and she whispered to herself as she went up to her room:

"Ah! I am very happy too!"

XXIII

THE SECONDS

On leaving the ball at Goldfish Villa, Freluchon and Edmond returned to the house occupied by the latter.

"You will need another second for to-morrow," said Freluchon; "where can you find one in this place?"

"He is all found: the owner of the Tower, a gentleman of the best tone, who comes to Madame Dalmont's sometimes in the evening. I am sure that he won't refuse to do me this favor. We will go to see him early to-morrow."

"Very good."

"But the most important thing of all is to keep all knowledge of this duel, and of the quarrel of this evening as well, from the two ladies."

"We won't tell them; but everything becomes known so quickly in small places like this!"

"They never go out or receive any visits; from whom then can they learn what happened at that infernal fête?"

"So much the better; I trust you are right. But it's daybreak already, and we have only a short time to sleep. Let us make haste. Luckily, I fall asleep very quickly myself."

At eight o'clock in the morning, Edmond was out of bed and woke his friend.

"What! already?" muttered Freluchon; "why, we've hardly got to bed!"

"That may be; but it's a long distance from here to the Tower; then we must come back, and I don't want Monsieur Luminot's seconds to come and not find us."

"Oh! never you fear; those fellows won't be in such a hurry as you are; especially if Chamoureau's one of them."

"I should say that he must be, as the affair took place in his house."

"Then it will be more amusing; I will tell him that the seconds have to fight also."

Freluchon consented to rise at last, and the two friends were soon en route for the Tower.

"I recognize this part of the country," said Freluchon as they crossed Gournay bridge. "This is where I came for that famous *matelote*, which you left me to eat all alone."

"Yes, the estate we are going to is a little beyond Gournay."

"Ah, yes! Gournay! a little village that I could put in my pocket. Suppose we should stop and eat a *matelote* when we come back?"

"Can you think of such a thing? What about my duel, and the seconds I expect?"

"If Chamoureau is one of them, they won't come till next week.—I am very hungry myself. Will your high-toned gentleman invite us to breakfast? It seems to me that that is the most high-toned thing he could do."

Edmond's only reply was to quicken his pace.

Freluchon trotted along behind him, saying:

"If I had known it was so far, I'd have hired an ass for us both; we should have resembled half of the *Four Sons of Aymon*. Do you know, I have always liked that story of the Four Sons of Aymon! particularly on account of their horse. Horses of that build aren't made to-day! Think of putting four people on one of our ponies of the present day! even the third one would be on his tail—where would the fourth one be, I would like to know?"

The young men reached the Tower in due time. Edmond was about to ask to speak with the proprietor, when he, having seen them coming, hastened forward to meet the two friends.

Paul was no longer the same man; a complete change had taken place in his whole aspect since the preceding night. In place of the gloomy, careworn expression which was habitual to him, he presented himself to Edmond with a smiling, expansive countenance. His dress too had undergone a change; he was dressed with more care and had shaved part of his beard; he was no longer the man who shuns society.

"You at my house, Monsieur Didier, and at such an early hour! This is very kind of you. Come in, messieurs; the proprietor of the Tower is happy to welcome you to his manor house."

"Thanks for your cordial welcome, monsieur," replied Edmond, taking the hand that Paul offered him. "But we have only a few moments, and I have come to ask you to do me a favor."

"A favor! I am entirely at your service. But I supposed that another motive brought you here, I thought—Have you not seen Mademoiselle Agathe since yesterday?"

"Oh, no! and it is most important that she and Madame Dalmont should not know of our visit to you."

"Pardon me, monsieur," said Freluchon, throwing himself upon a chair, "but although he is in such a hurry, I will ask your permission to rest a bit. He has made me run almost all the way, and it's a long distance from Chelles; I am used up."

“Make yourselves at home, messieurs.—But speak, Monsieur Edmond; what you have just said makes me anxious.”

“Monsieur, Freluchon and myself both went last night to a party given by Monsieur and Madame de Belleville.”

“I know it.”

“I didn’t go until quite late in the evening.”

“But I dined there—which doesn’t mean that I am not very hungry this morning.”

“You shall have breakfast here.”

“Oh! Monsieur Paul, for heaven’s sake, pay no attention to what Freluchon says; you will see that we must go away again immediately.—At that party I had a scene, a quarrel, with a certain Monsieur Luminot, who lives at Chelles.”

“The ground of your quarrel—what was it?”

“The most serious imaginable, for a man of honor; he insulted the lady whom I love, he presumed to speak in contemptuous terms of Mademoiselle Agathe and her protectress, Madame Dalmont.—At first some ladies, intimate friends of Madame de Belleville, began to make those slanderous remarks which women are so adroit at flinging at people whom they detest; but luckily a man mingled in the conversation and chose to affirm what the women had said. I ordered him to take back his words; he refused and I struck him!”

“Ah! you did well!” cried Paul, grasping Edmond’s arm. “Insult Agathe! insult that good, honorable woman who has been like a mother to her! the wretches! But those remarks, those dastardly slanders, all were certainly prepared, concerted beforehand by Thélénie.”

“By Thélénie! Do you too know Madame de Belleville?”

“How nicely it comes about!” said Freluchon. “Parbleu! who doesn’t know that lady?—Oh, yes! there’s her husband, Chamoureau—he has no suspicion what she is.”

“Yes, messieurs, ten years ago that woman was my mistress, and she is the cause of my having passed my life since then in sadness and remorse. You shall know the whole story later; let us return to your duel.”

“When this Monsieur Luminot received my blow, he attempted to throw himself upon me.”

“And no one tried to prevent him,” said Freluchon. “Observe that the worthy man is a giant and could have crushed Edmond simply by falling on him. Luckily I arrived at that moment; I am not a giant—on the contrary, I am rather slender and fragile to look at! But beneath this feeble exterior, I carry a pair of small steel wrists which are equal to the best made at Birmingham. I grabbed Luminot by the waist, lifted him up, and tossed him at hazard. I believe that when he fell he damaged the husband of one of the harpies who began the scene; there was no harm done; I am only sorry that I didn’t pulverize those women at the same time. What horrid-tasting salt they would have made! It would have been excellent rat poison.”

“I will be your second, and I thank you for thinking of me. Monsieur is your other second, no doubt?”

“Yes, monsieur; if I don’t die of hunger first.”

“When does your duel take place?”

“I have no idea as yet; I told the fellow that I should expect his seconds; that is why I am in a hurry to return home.”

“I will be at your house in an hour.”

“Oh! monsieur, you have plenty of time, I assure you!” said Freluchon. “I know Chamoureau, *alias* de Belleville; he’ll drag the thing out.”

“I don’t know what those gentlemen may do, Freluchon, but I propose to be there when they come. Let us go.”

“Have a glass of madeira, messieurs, to restore your strength.”

“Ah, yes! one, two, several glasses of madeira!”

“Freluchon, you are getting to be a genuine glutton!”

“My son, you are getting to be an anchorite! I shall cease to consort with you.”

The madeira was brought, and Edmond drank a glass in haste. Freluchon drank several in quick succession, and they took leave of their host, agreeing to meet again soon.

That same day, but not until about noon, for they slept late at Madame de Belleville’s, Chamoureau, having breakfasted, received orders from his wife to go to Monsieur Luminot’s and take his instructions concerning the duel.

Chamoureau hesitated for some time, seeking pretexts for keeping his skirts clear of the affair; but Thélénie said to him imperatively:

“You cannot break your promise, and you promised Monsieur Luminot to be his second. After all, monsieur, what are you afraid of? seconds don’t fight.”

That assurance emboldened Chamoureau, who took his hat and cane, then considered a moment whether he should not put on a leather chest protector, lest, as a second, he might receive some splashes. But his wife urged him and pushed him out of the door; so he bent his steps toward the former wine merchant’s house, saying to himself:

“After all, the day of the duel isn’t fixed yet; I have time ahead of me.”

Monsieur Luminot was pacing his floor in dressing gown and slippers, holding a foil in one hand and the sabre of a national guardsman in the other. He stopped every moment to lunge at the wall with his foil, or to make a cut at a wardrobe with his sabre. He thrust and parried with a triumphant air, but at the bottom of his heart, he was by no means overjoyed to fight; and since he had recovered his self-possession, since the fumes of the wine and the punch had disappeared, he kept asking himself:

“What in the devil did I meddle for? I slandered those ladies, whom I don’t know, and who may be perfectly respectable, simply to please that fat Droguet woman, who had said to me: ‘You will be careful to agree with us when we attack the women in the Courtivaux house.’—I ought not to have listened to her, I was very foolish; but I’ve got to fight because I have been struck.”

When Chamoureau entered the room, Monsieur Luminot was just in the act of executing a thrust with his foil, and the visitor stepped back in dismay, crying:

“Mon Dieu! the duel has begun. In that case they don’t need me, and I am going home!”

But the former wine merchant recalled his second.

“Well! where are you going?”

“Why, I am going home; as you’ve begun to fight, you don’t need seconds.”

“But I am not fighting; I am just practising, to get my hand in. Pray come in, my dear Monsieur de Belleville. Do you know, I am terribly distressed to have had that scene in your house!”

“And what about me? Do you think it is pleasant for me?”

“I may have been wrong to speak so slightingly of those two ladies.”

“If you admit that you were wrong, then the affair is arranged, and it isn’t worth while to fight.”

“Yes, but I received a blow!”

“If you were in the wrong——”

“Oh! I beg pardon—a blow calls for a sword-thrust. If I hadn’t received a blow, I would say: ‘I withdraw my insulting remarks about those ladies.’”

“Well! and if he should withdraw his blow——”

“That can hardly be done; unless he should let me give him one; then we should be quits!”

“He won’t do that.”

“In that case, you see, I must fight.—By the way, I need another second; two are none too many.”

“No, no! they’re none too many; perhaps you might have three or four—that would make more people.”

“No, it’s the custom to have only two. Who in the devil can I get for the other? I thought that you would bring one.”

“My wife didn’t tell me to.”

“Let us see—some hearty blade like you and me. Suppose I should take Jarnouillard?”

“I have just met him; he was going to Paris.”

“The doctor? No, he would refuse; he reprobates duels!”

“He is quite right! so do I!”

“But, my dear Monsieur de Belleville, when one can do nothing else!—Ah! Monsieur Droguet.”

“You wounded him when you fell on him last night.”

“Monsieur Remplumé then.”

“He is lame!”

“What difference does that make? he’s a tough old fellow, he used to be a corporal in the National Guard.”

“Do you think so?”

“He has often told me so. Yes, yes, Remplumé must be my second second. Let us go and ask him; will you be good enough to come with me? your presence will keep him from refusing.”

“If you think that my presence will be of any service, let us go.”

“Just give me time to put on a coat and waistcoat and a cravat.”

“Go on! go on! I am in no hurry.”

“One, two!—what say you to that sword-thrust, eh?”

“Superb! you have made a hole in your partition!”

“And this sabre cut—pan! paf!”

“Magnificent! Your wardrobe is all covered with gashes; it has seen some cruel work! Are you going to fight with sword and sabre?”

“I am tempted to choose pistols.”

“In that case, what’s the use of making holes in your partition and hacking your wardrobe?”

“I don’t know; I will see, I will reflect.—Monsieur de Belleville, your party was grand! and what a dinner you gave us!”

“There were some good things to eat!”

“In other words, there were dishes prepared with consummate art! I enjoyed among other things, a salmi of partridge, *aux truffes*——”

“With snipe!”

“Ah! there were snipe! that explains it; I said to myself that it had been kept just long enough!”

“And the mayonnaise of lobster?”

“And those white puddings *à la purée* of chestnuts!”

The two worthies passed the whole dinner in review, pausing to descant upon the dishes they had enjoyed most. This had lasted some time, when Monsieur Luminot exclaimed:

“Mon Dieu! and my duel!”

“I hoped he had forgotten it,” thought Chamoureau.

But it was after two o’clock when they went to Monsieur Remplumé’s house. The little lame man received them, coughing, spitting and sneezing as usual.

“You know about the scene that took place last evening at Monsieur de Belleville’s ball, do you not?” asked Luminot, laying his hand on the lame man’s shoulder.

“Yes, yes! I know all about it, it has made noise enough; no one is talking about anything else all over the country. Besides, I arrived just as you fell on top of poor Droguet; you knocked out three of his teeth!”

“Two!”

“Three! he found there was another one missing when he got home.”

“It isn’t my fault; why did he happen to be under me when I fell?”

“That’s so; hum! hum! hum! When I go to bed so late, it makes my cough worse.”

“You know that I am to fight with Monsieur Edmond Didier, neighbor?”

“I know that he struck you, but I didn’t know whether you were going to fight or not.”

“Do you think that I will swallow that blow? Wouldn’t you fight if you were in my place, you who have been a corporal in the National Guard?”

“I? hum! hum! *Sapredié!* hum! hum! Oh! but I’m a swordsman, I am! It isn’t safe to look askance at me!—Hum! hum! I’ve got a horrid lump in my throat!”

“Do you think that I’ll let anyone tread on my toes?”

“I never said so. Hum! hum!”

“As you’re such a swordsman, you will be my second witness; you will enjoy it.”

“Your witness! to what?”

“Parbleu! to my duel with that popinjay who insulted me. Monsieur de Belleville is kind enough to be my principal second, and you must be the other.”

“Oh! but—I’ve got a very bad cold!”

“It won’t interfere with your coughing; I hope that I may count on you?”

“Let’s see—first, let’s see why you are going to fight?”

“Because I have received a blow.”

“Very good; but why did he strike you?”

“Why? because I said that this Madame Dalmont and her friend were hussies—didn’t amount to much.”

“But you were in the wrong. Why did you say that? are you sure of it?”

“Sure! not at all; but it was your ladies who did nothing but say it over and over again, and worked me up to it; besides, I was full of punch.”

“You should never make statements that you’re not sure of; isn’t that so, Monsieur de Belleville?”

Chamoureau scratched his nose, trying to think of a reply; but stout Luminot exclaimed:

“Enough of this! Sacrebleu! Monsieur Remplumé, you can’t refuse to be my second in an affair in which your wife urged me on to the quarrel, with the other ladies.”

“Monsieur, if my wife urged you on, I will be—hum! hum!—your second; I will put some licorice in my pocket—When do you fight?”

“That is for you two to arrange with this Monsieur Edmond’s seconds.—After all, I’d rather fight with him than with the fellow who grabbed me and tossed me in the air. Ah! the rascal! what muscle! what a biceps!”

“That was Freluchon—formerly my intimate friend, in the time of Eléonore, my first wife.”

“I congratulate you!—Go now, messieurs, and settle upon the place and hour of the combat.”

“I say! I hope it won’t be to-day!” cried Chamoureau; “what do you say to a week from Sunday?”

“My dear Monsieur de Belleville, a duel is never postponed so long as that. It is already three o’clock; it is too late for a meeting to-day. Fix it for to-morrow morning—at eight o’clock. We can meet in the little wood on your left as you go down toward Raincy—just behind the old keeper’s house.”

“Very good; and what weapons do you propose to fight with? You are the insulted party, and you have the right to choose.”

“Yes, I know that well enough! I have the choice of weapons, and that is what embarrasses me; that is the difficulty.”

“Which are you strongest with?”

“I am strong at all; that is to say, I can defend myself. Ah! if we could fight with the quarter-staff—that’s the thing I can handle!”

“Well, choose the quarter-staff,” said Chamoureau; “it isn’t so dangerous.”

“It isn’t accepted in fashionable society! I am reflecting; as the insulted party, I shall fire first.”

“I know nothing about it.”

“Yes, yes! hum! hum! you will fire first.”

“Then I choose pistols.”

“That’s right,” said Chamoureau; “then, if you miss your opponent, you can pass at once to the sword.”

“Messieurs, will you please go to this Monsieur Edmond’s house, you know where he lives?”

“Perfectly well.”

“Remember what we have agreed upon—eight o’clock to-morrow.”

“And if it can’t be to-morrow,” said Chamoureau, “why, so much the better! we won’t go there again.”

XXIV

THE BOATMAN

Paul Duronceray was true to his promise and appeared at Edmond Didier’s not long after the latter and Freluchon had left the Tower.

“No one has come yet,” said Edmond.

“Pardieu! I was certain that no one would have come,” said Freluchon; “we have time to breakfast at our leisure.”

“And while you are breakfasting,” said Paul, after bidding his dog lie at his feet, “I will tell you something which will be of great interest to you; for it concerns this Thélénie, this woman who, I doubt not, is the original instigator of

your duel to-day. And what I have to tell you also assures the happiness and the future welfare of that lovely girl, Agathe, who is to be your wife, Monsieur Edmond."

"What! it concerns Agathe, monsieur? Oh! speak! pray, speak!"

Paul thereupon told the two young men what he had told Honorine the night before. The reader may imagine the surprise and joy of Edmond when he learned that the girl whom he loved would be recognized at last by her father's family.

But suddenly his face clouded.

"Agathe is wealthy now," he said, "and I am no longer a suitable match for her!"

"Now you're beginning to talk nonsense!" exclaimed Freluchon. "When you determined to marry her, she had nothing, neither money nor a name; so she will know well enough now that it isn't her money you marry her for.—But, look you, the story monsieur has just told us proves this: that when women set about being wicked, they are ten times wickeder than men, because they put a refinement in it of which we are not capable. In my opinion, Madame Sainte-Suzanne has played her rôle very prettily in all this business."

"But Agathe must have learned all before this, from Madame Dalmont."

"I think so," said Paul, "but I have not yet dared to face her.—You must go with me, Monsieur Edmond; your presence will dispose her to indulgence, to forgiveness."

"Oh! don't be afraid, monsieur; there cannot be any resentment in her heart. Besides, you have told us that she saw you weep over her father's grave, and it must be that she still remembers that."

Twelve o'clock had struck, and no one had appeared on behalf of Monsieur Luminot. One hour, two hours more passed. Edmond was beside himself with impatience, for that business kept him from going to Agathe. Paul Duronceray was no less impatient than he.

At last, Messieurs Chamoureau and Remplumé appeared and announced themselves as Monsieur Luminot's seconds.

At sight of the little, lame man, who tried to give an imposing expression to his sour face, Freluchon could not restrain a burst of laughter, which greatly disconcerted the two gentlemen. Chamoureau did not know which way to turn, and Remplumé began to cough as if he proposed to tear his throat to tatters. Edmond stood aside, and Paul waited for the visitors to speak.

At last the little, lame man stopped coughing and began thus:

"Messieurs! we come here as Monsieur Luminot's seconds, entrusted with full powers by him. It is a serious matter—very serious; nothing less than——"

"It's entirely useless to tell us what it's all about, for we know," said Freluchon; "I was present, I believe, and we have fully informed Monsieur Duronceray here."

"Yes," said Paul, "we know that Monsieur Luminot gratuitously slandered and insulted two ladies who deserve the respect and esteem of the whole world.—We assume that he was urged on to utter those abominable calumnies by certain persons, who desired to cause this quarrel."

"That is my opinion also!" said Chamoureau.

"It is mine—hum! hum!—mine also—hum! hum!—I will say more: I agree with you."

"In that case, messieurs, we are all agreed."

"That being so, we can go away!" observed Chamoureau.

"Oh, no! Wait a moment, Chamoureau.—Your Monsieur Luminot has received a blow; he richly deserved it, but he wants to fight and he is entitled to.—So you are his second, are you, Chamoureau?"

"They insisted on it. I didn't want to be. I hope you don't take it ill of me."

"Oh! not at all."

"It was my wife who insisted on it."

"She's a very nice person, is your wife; she does things well. But how does it happen that the other second isn't your intimate friend, the famous Baron von Schtapelmerg, who fought against the Turks?"

"And who won two hundred francs from me last night at écarté!"

"He cheated you, my dear boy; I would stake my head on it!"

"Oh! messieurs!" cried Chamoureau, "can it be that you suspect that worthy Bavarian of being a Greek?"

"I suspect it because I am certain that that unprepossessing person, who claims to be a German baron and can't speak German, is simply your wife's brother!"

"What! the brother of—then my wife is a baroness——"

"No more than he's a baron; he gave himself away several times when he had drunk too much. However, I hope to see him again, and to find out just what to think. Where is he now?"

"Gone to Paris, on urgent business, so my wife said."

"Messieurs," interposed Edmond, "it seems to me that you are forgetting what brings you together; be good enough to complete your arrangements for the duel."

"Well, messieurs, what do you propose? we are waiting to hear from you."

"To-morrow morning, at eight o'clock——"

"Why not finish it up to-day?"

"Presumably because that would not suit Monsieur Luminot. If you interrupt us so soon—hum! hum!—we shall never finish."

"True; go on, monsieur."

"To-morrow morning, at eight o'clock, in the little wood behind what used to be the keeper's house, as you go down the hill toward Raincy."

"Very good," said Paul, "I know the place."

"Monsieur Luminot chooses pistols."

"Agreed."

“And he will fire first.”

“That may be open to discussion,” said Freluchon; “for your man began the attack by his slurring remarks.”

“No, no discussion!” exclaimed Edmond; “let him fire first—I agree.”

“Then, messieurs, as everything is arranged,—hum! hum!—we have only to salute you.”

“I beg pardon, monsieur,” said Paul, addressing himself to Monsieur Remplumé, who strove to maintain a surly expression; “if your opinion concerning the ladies insulted by Monsieur Luminot agrees with his, you too will have to deal with us; for you understand, messieurs, that *no one* may hereafter repeat those slanders, under pain of being chastised by us!”

The little, lame man turned green; Chamoureau sank upon a chair and put his handkerchief to his eyes, stammering:

“How can you believe me capable of speaking unkindly of those ladies, for whom I bought Monsieur Courtivaux’s house! I carry their images in my heart. I give no thought now to anything except the age of trees——”

“Enough! enough! we believe you!” said Freluchon.

Monsieur Remplumé made the same protestations as Chamoureau.

“That is all very well, messieurs,” said Paul; “but you will simply have the kindness to repeat this profession of faith in public, when we request you to do so.”

Luminot’s two seconds promised all that they were asked to promise, and hastened to take their leave.

“Now,” said Edmond, “as the rest of the day is ours, let us go at once to those ladies, who, I am sure, are surprised not to have seen us yet. But not a syllable concerning the duel!”

“Very good,” said Freluchon; “provided that some infernal gossip hasn’t told them of it already.”

“Let us go; look, messieurs, see how Ami gazes at us and runs to the door! Ah! he divines that we are going to see the persons to whom he is so attached; he is showing us the way.”

After her conversation with Paul, Honorine had hardly been able to sleep at all. Happiness frequently causes insomnia; it often keeps us wider awake than grief.

As soon as day broke, Honorine watched for Agathe to wake; it seemed to her that she slept much longer than usual. At last the girl opened her eyes; and she instantly read on her friend’s face that something extraordinary had happened. Having nothing in her head but her love, her first impulse was to cry:

“What has happened to Edmond?”

“To Edmond? Why, nothing new, I imagine. He went to that party, and probably passed the night there. As you may imagine, I haven’t seen him to-day; it isn’t seven o’clock.”

“Then why do you look at me so, my dear love? You certainly have something to tell me!”

“Yes, my dear child, I have to speak to you of your father—to tell you at last why your poor mother never saw him again.”

“Mon Dieu! can it be possible? You know that? Who can have told you?”

“Monsieur Paul Duronceray.”

“He knew my father?”

“Yes.”

“He has seen him, and spoken to him?”

“Yes.”

“My poor father! he is dead, of course; otherwise he would not have abandoned us.”

“He is dead!”

“Oh! my dear love, tell me quickly everything that happened to him!—Speak! speak! I long to hear!”

“I shall have to say much of Monsieur Paul.”

“Speak—I will not lose a word!”

Honorine seated herself on Agathe’s bed and told her the story of the fatal liaison between Paul and Thélénie, which resulted in the duel and in her father’s death. She concluded thus:

“You have witnessed the regret, the remorse of the man who was the victor in that duel. From that day to this he has never ceased to try to find out what had become of you.—Will not you forgive him, as your father did?”

Agathe wept bitterly.

“My heart has no hatred,” she murmured; “it has nothing but regret.—So that cross in the ravine—that is the place.—Ah! that explains the inexplicable emotion that I felt. Poor father!—Oh! my dear, come, come quickly! You know where, don’t you?”

In a very few minutes, the two young women were ready to go out. Agathe went into the garden and gathered a bunch of flowers; then, with the bouquet in her hand, she took Honorine’s arm and they walked hastily, in silence and meditation, toward the ravine near the park of the Tower.

They reached the cross erected in that solitary place. Agathe knelt in front of it and prayed a long while; then, as she laid her nosegay on the grave, she spied, at the foot of the cross, some faded flowers, the remains of other bouquets laid there before her own. She picked up some of those flowers and placed them in her bosom. Then, leaning on Honorine’s arm, she took, more slowly now, the road leading back to Chelles.

The two friends had returned from that pious pilgrimage when Paul, Edmond and Freluchon made their appearance. Edmond ran forward and kissed the girl’s hands, crying:

“I know all! I am very happy in your happiness!”

Paul remained in the background; he dared not go forward. But Agathe went to meet him. He bent his knee before her; whereupon she held out the flowers she had taken from her father’s grave and said:

“These have told me that you too mourn for him; is it not equivalent to telling me to forgive you?”

The time passes very quickly with those who love one another, and who are engaged in forming the most delicious plans of happiness for the future.

Freluchon passed his time caressing the noble dog, of whom he too had made a friend.

For one moment, however, Agathe's felicity was disturbed; it was when a chance remark informed her that Madame de Belleville was the very woman who had caused her father's death.

The color fled from her cheeks and she murmured:

"Ah! now I understand the feeling of repulsion that that woman aroused in me. You won't go to her house any more, Edmond, will you?"

"I will not, indeed; I give you my word, dear Agathe; and if I had known this distressing story sooner, I certainly would not have gone to her party last night."

"Nor would I," said Freluchon.

"And nothing unpleasant happened to you there?"

The three men exchanged rapid glances, and Edmond replied:

"What could have happened to us?"

"Mon Dieu! I don't know—but I was terribly depressed last night, knowing that you were there."

"A single word from you, and I would not have gone!"

"But I should not have dared to say it."

"That is a pity!" thought Freluchon.

While the hours seemed so short in Honorine's modest abode, the wealthy proprietress of Goldfish Villa waited impatiently, with her eyes fastened on a clock, for the moment when she was to meet her brother.

At last the clock struck six, and Thélénie, hastening across the garden and the little park, opened a gate leading into a lonely path, where she had arranged to meet Croque.

She soon saw approaching her a man in a canvas jacket and full duck trousers, with his face half-hidden by a sort of coal-burner's hat, and blackened and reddened in spots. But she recognized Croque by the scar on his cheek.

"This is excellent; you are unrecognizable," said Thélénie; "besides, there is no one hereabout who knows you very well. But how did you manage to obtain these clothes?"

"Parbleu! with plenty of blunt you can get whatever you want; the peasants are as fond of money as city folk! I should say, more so."

"Tell me what you have done."

"I easily found the widow Tourniquoi's house; and there I recognized the Jacqueline I saw yesterday; the little boy was playing in the yard."

"Well?"

"I presented myself in my best clothes; a fine outside inspires more confidence."

"You did well."

"And yet, when I told that woman that I came from the Baronne de Mortagne, who wanted her to bring her son to her, she wouldn't believe me; she was suspicious. But the three hundred francs in gold soon scattered all her doubts. When I told her further that the baroness would pay her in full for all the time she had kept the child, and that at three hundred and sixty francs a year for eight years she'd get near three thousand francs—Gad! then it was not joy, it was delirium!—I told her that she must go to Dieppe right away with young Emile. She would have started for China to get her three thousand francs! I gave her the address that you gave me, and she began to pack up at once."

"When does she start?"

"To-night, on the eight o'clock train. She goes to Paris, and from there to Dieppe at the double quick; she'll be there to-morrow."

"That is good—very good! Now my mind is at rest in that direction."

"It seems to me that I managed the affair rather well."

"Yes; but there's another affair, which you must manage as well."

"Tell us about it; while my hand is in, it won't cost any more!"

"Monsieur Luminot and Edmond are to fight at eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Ah! the famous duel is to come off! Well?"

"It is to be in a little wood, some distance from here, at the other side of the village. I am confident that Edmond will not have mentioned the duel to the two women at the little house yonder."

"Probably not; he wouldn't want to frighten them."

"Now listen: can you swim?"

"Like a gudgeon. Why?"

"To-morrow morning, at eight o'clock—or a little before eight—you will be on the shore of the Marne, near the bridge that crosses to Gournay."

"I know the place, for I have gone in that direction on my promenades."

"Then you know how deserted that neighborhood is. One often walks there a whole day without meeting a living soul."

"Well? let us come to the point!"

"You will have a small boat in readiness; you say yourself that with money one can obtain whatever one wants."

"You give me money enough and I will have a boat; that doesn't embarrass me."

"No one with you, you understand."

"No one but the boat."

"You will stay on the bank of the river, like a boatman taking a rest. You will see two women coming."

"The ladies from the little house! Do you think that they'll come?"

"I tell you that they will come, in the utmost distress, looking for a boat to take them to one of the little islands that lie just above the mill."

"Where the obstructions are, and the rapids. *Fichtre!* it's no sport handling a boat there! The Marne is

dangerous enough anyway; but in that place, it wouldn't take long to upset a boat!"

"They will see yours and they will beg you to take them to the nearest island."

"I begin to understand."

"You will accept; you will row them as near as possible to the obstructions you speak of; then you will lose your oars in the river, and in order to recover them you will jump into the water."

"*Fichtre!* that's rather dangerous!"

"Not for you, who know how to swim; you can select a spot where you can jump in without danger. Then you will swim ashore, paying no attention to the shrieks of those women, who will be left in the boat without oars to guide it, and who, I am glad to believe——"

"Will turn upside down with their boat! Oh! as to that, there isn't the slightest doubt of it; especially if no one comes to their help."

"Who do you suppose will risk his life for them? In the first place, the banks are always deserted just there, and it often happens that not a boat of any sort passes along that part of the river for half a day at a time."

"But what about the fellows who fight those women's battles? I shouldn't like to meet that young Freluchon, who played ball with Luminot. *Bigre!* he'd play something else with me!"

"Don't be afraid; the duel will be fought in the opposite direction, and those men will not be in that neighborhood."

"All right!"

"Well! is it agreed? will you do exactly as I have told you? do you understand me perfectly?"

"Unless I am an idiot, I should say that you have made it plain enough. You want to drown those two——"

"Hush! hold your tongue! there are things one must never say."

"To be sure, it's quite enough to do them."

"Can I rely on you?"

"Hum! it will cost a great deal. I take a big risk."

"Here, this roll contains a thousand francs in gold."

"Ah! that's very pretty! But it's only a payment on account, eh?"

"To-morrow, here, at this same hour, I will give you twice as much more, if all has gone as I desire."

"In that case, it's a bargain."

"You swear?"

"Is there any need of swearing between us? Get your yellow boys ready for to-morrow."

"Until then avoid showing yourself in the village."

"Never fear; I will keep out of sight in some wine-shop, at a little distance. It will soon be dark; to-morrow morning will soon be here."

"I may rely on you?"

"Of course, as it's a bargain. Adieu!"

XXV

THE DOG

It was seven o'clock in the morning; the sky was clear and the weather superb. In the country it is a keen delight to enjoy a lovely morning; nature has more attractions, more charms; the grass is fresher, the foliage a deeper green; the flowers exhale a sweeter perfume; although one may justifiably be lazy in the city, it is a great fault when one lives amid the fields.

Honorine and Agathe loved to enjoy the awakening of nature; they were always in their garden at seven o'clock. And now that so great a change had taken place in their position, now that the future appeared so sunny and happy, they had too many things to say to each other to pass their time in sleep.

The gentlemen had left them rather late the night before; but when they went away, they had said: "Until to-morrow."

"And come earlier than you did to-day!" Agathe had said to Edmond.

He had answered yes, but his voice had not its usual distinctness. One cannot always control one's voice; that organ almost always betrays the sentiments that agitate us.

Honorine had shown to Paul the letters of Adhémar to Julia Montoni, and Paul had no doubt that, when he should send them to the count's uncle, the old man would recognize Agathe as his grand-niece.

Meanwhile, Monsieur Duronceray insisted that half of his fortune should constitute the girl's dowry; then, in an undertone, almost in a whisper, he had offered the other half to Honorine, with the title of his wife.

She had listened to that proposal without uttering a word, but her eyes had answered for her; it seemed to her so sweet to love and to be loved, that she could hardly believe in her happiness.

"Don't you think," Agathe asked her friend, "that Edmond seemed very distraught last evening when he bade us good-night?"

"Why, no; I didn't notice it."

"Oh! because you didn't look at anybody but Monsieur Paul."

"Well! are you displeased because someone loves me?"

"Ah! my dearest dear, on the contrary, I am very happy. But I divined that love of his a long while ago!"

"Really?"

"And yours too!"

“Ah! but I thought that I concealed very carefully, in the depths of my heart, what I felt for him!”

“You will be happy, dear Honorine. And my happiness would be complete, if——”

“If what?”

“Why, I don’t know what the matter is with me! it still seems to me as if Edmond had something on his mind last night.”

“Don’t, for heaven’s sake, create imaginary torments for yourself. What! can it be that it is I who am called upon now to restore mademoiselle’s good spirits! What can you be afraid of?”

“I keep thinking of that wicked woman. She has already caused my poor father’s death, and something, I don’t know what, tells me that she means to injure me still more!”

“Agathe, you are not reasonable. Luckily Edmond’s presence will drive away these black ideas.—Poucette! doesn’t Père Ledrux come to work in the garden to-day?”

“Yes, madame, it’s his day; he’s a little late, for it’s after half-past seven.—But wait! I think I hear him now.”

The old peasant entered the garden with the basket on his arm in which he always carried his gardening tools.

“Tutu—tutu—turlututu! I’m a trifle late; a tenant of mine is the cause of it.”

“Have you a tenant, Père Ledrux?”

“Yes, only since a couple of days. I don’t think he’ll stay here long; I don’t know what he’s up to, but he goes in and out all the time. He’s a fine gentleman. Oh! yes, he’s one of the swells! I thought at first he’d come down for the fête at the Bellevilles; but no, he didn’t go to it; and yet it seems he knows ‘em.”

“Ah! do you think so?”

“Yes, yes, he knows ‘em well.—I think I’ll water these beds a little; they’re dry as can be!”

“Do so, Père Ledrux.”

In a few moments the gardener returned to the two friends with his watering pot.

“Tutu—turlututu.—After all, my tenant did just as well not to go to that party—at the goldfish place.”

“Why so, Père Ledrux?”

“Well! it was mighty fine, they say; but when things end in a fight—why, that ain’t so amusing! I don’t like that, myself!”

“What’s that? What do you mean by a fight?”

“Why, yes, a fight, quarrelling, blows. And it seems they went at it in good shape, for Monsieur Droguet lost six or seven teeth, and Monsieur Luminot got a crack that echoed like a blow on a drum!”

The young women gazed at each other in surprise.

“Are you quite sure of what you say, Père Ledrux?”

“What’s that? am I sure? Why the whole village knows it as well as I do.”

“How is it that Monsieur Edmond and Freluchon, who were at that party, haven’t told us a word of this?”

“Faith! it’s all the more surprising because it was them as did the hitting.”

“Oh! that is impossible.”

“It’s true, mamzelle! it’s true! It was Monsieur Edmond who hit Monsieur Luminot, and it was his friend, the little man—what do you call him? Monsieur Cornichon—who threw somebody onto Monsieur Droguet and dislocated his jaw.”

“Mon Dieu! what was the cause of the quarrel?”

“Faith! I don’t know; they say so many things; one has it one way and one another!”

“Can’t you guess, Honorine? Somebody insulted us at that woman’s house, and Edmond couldn’t stand it!”

“It is likely; and they have concealed it all from us, in order not to distress us.”

“But it’s all over now, isn’t it, Père Ledrux?”

“Over! oh! no, mamzelle! You see, Monsieur Luminot, who’s quite a buck, can’t take a blow like that without drawing his sword. So they’re going to fight; Monsieur Luminot told everybody so yesterday. He walked all round the neighborhood on purpose, and sung out to everybody he met:

“‘I say! Here’s something. I’m going to fight, I’ve got a duel with pistols on hand!’”

“To fight! Do you hear, Honorine? they are going to fight!—Ah! that is what my heart divined! Tell us, Père Ledrux, when this duel is to take place?”

“It seems it’s this morning that they’re all to meet with their seconds—I believe there’s six seconds.”

“Where are they to meet?”

“Faith! I didn’t think to ask; but perhaps they haven’t told, if they don’t want to be disturbed.”

“Honorine, I don’t want him to fight. Oh! I entreat you, let us go to him.”

“Wait—someone is knocking at the gate; it’s Edmond or his friend, no doubt, and we shall learn the truth.”

Poucette appeared with a letter in her hand.

“A little boy just brought this letter for madame,” she said; “he said there wasn’t any answer and ran right away again.”

Honorine opened the letter and glanced first at the foot of the page.

“No signature!”

“Never mind! read it quickly, my dear!” cried Agathe; “it must be from one of those gentlemen; read it!”

“‘Madame, at eight o’clock this morning, Monsieur Edmond Didier and Monsieur Luminot are to fight a duel with pistols on the first island above the mill, below Gournay bridge. Your presence and Mademoiselle Agathe’s would doubtless prevent this duel, which may have deplorable results. Consider what you will do.’”

“What we will do!” cried Agathe. “Oh! my dear love, let us go, let us run as fast as we can. Look! in ten minutes it will be eight o’clock!”

“Yes, yes; we will go at once! Gournay bridge—that isn’t very far.—And on an island above the mill—yes, I have noticed some islands there, on which it seems impossible to land. Mon Dieu! if only we can find a boat—somebody to

row us!”

“Yes, we shall find someone; heaven will help us, it will take pity on us! you see, somebody has warned us. This note comes from Monsieur Paul, of course—or from Monsieur Freluchon.”

“Yes; and they won’t let them fight before we arrive. Let us go!”

The young women hastily seized shawls and bonnets, and rushed from the garden, calling to Poucette, who asked them where they were going so, without breakfast:

“We are going to prevent them from fighting!”

While Honorine and Agathe hastened at the top of their speed toward the bank of the Marne, Edmond, accompanied by Freluchon and Paul, betook himself to the appointed place.

It was a pretty bit of woodland, a short quarter of a league from Chelles. But it was not far from some houses, and a cabaret, established in what was once a keeper’s house, was within two hundred yards.

“It is very pleasant here,” said Freluchon; “this little clump of trees seems to invite one to a picnic rather than to a duel!”

“But for Monsieur Duronceray,” said Edmond, “I should never have been able to find the place.”

“Perhaps that is what your opponent hoped. But I noticed a little eating-house yonder, on the walls of which was the sign: *Lapins, sautez;*[F] the *sauté* is spelled with a z, which would seem to invite passers-by to leap, because rabbit is served there. I believe that Chamoureau hopes that the meeting will end in a *gibelotte*—rabbit-stew.—And you, my good dog, good old Ami, why do you keep running so to the right and left?”

[F] Literally: Rabbits, leap; for *lapins sauté,* stewed rabbit.

“He wants to see if our men are coming, no doubt.”

“No,” said Paul, “Ami has something on his mind; he is restless, he is not comfortable here, he wants to go away; I can see that by his eyes.—Patience, good dog!—Ah! I see our adversaries; there’s not a word to be said, they haven’t kept us waiting.”

Monsieur Luminot had adopted a military costume: he wore a long blue redingote, which fell nearly to his heels and was buttoned to the chin; black trousers and cravat, and a hat cocked over one ear.

“Pardieu!” said Freluchon, “that fellow doesn’t intend that any part of his costume shall offer a mark to his adversary; not even the slightest bit of a white collar to be seen! That is very prudent.”

Monsieur Remplumé wore his everyday clothes. Chamoureau was dressed all in black, and walked as if he were going to a funeral.

They exchanged salutations.

“Mon Dieu! Chamoureau! whom are you wearing mourning for so soon?” asked Freluchon, with a laugh. “I should say that you were in rather a hurry.”

“I thought—it seemed to me—as it was a serious matter—However, Freluchon, I hope that you don’t bear me any ill-will, and that you are convinced that I had no part in all this.”

“Don’t be alarmed; we are perfectly well aware that you don’t count.”

“Messieurs,” said the little, lame man, approaching Edmond’s seconds, “if Monsieur Edmond Didier chooses to apologize to Monsieur Luminot, he will agree to acknowledge satisfaction.”

“We shall not communicate that proposition to Monsieur Edmond,” replied Paul, “because we know that he would reject it with scorn!”

“Still, you might——”

“Enough of this! You have pistols, and we accept them. Allow me to examine them.”

While Paul examined the weapons, Chamoureau drew his handkerchief, wiped his brow and held out his arms toward Freluchon, saying:

“Try to adjust this business, in heaven’s name!”

“Let us alone, and go farther away.”

“How many paces?” Paul asked the lame man.

“Twenty-five.”

“That isn’t enough! Forty paces!” cried Chamoureau.

“It is for Monsieur Luminot to decide.”

“Call it thirty paces!” said Monsieur Luminot, with a dignified air.

“Bah!” muttered Freluchon with a smile; “I shall be glad to believe that they won’t do each other much harm; and I will proceed to measure the paces accordingly.”

The adversaries took their places; Freluchon had measured thirty paces which were fully equal to forty.

“Why, this duel is a joke!” said Edmond to his seconds.

“I suppose you are anxious to be killed in order to give Madame Chamoureau pleasure, eh? How clever that would be!—Come, Monsieur Luminot, you are to fire first, the third time that I clap my hands—that is the signal.”

While Freluchon clapped his hands three times, Chamoureau cowered behind a tree. Monsieur Luminot fired, and his bullet lost itself in space.

When he saw that his opponent was not hit, and that it was his turn to face the fire, he took a white handkerchief from his pocket and waved it in the air, to signify that he wished to parley.

“Monsieur,” said Edmond, walking toward the former wine merchant, “are you willing to admit now that what you said with regard to Madame Dalmont and Mademoiselle Agathe was calumny pure and simple, and that those ladies deserve the esteem and respect of everybody?”

“Yes, monsieur, yes, with the greatest pleasure!” cried Luminot. “I admit it the more readily, as it is my individual opinion.”

“We all admit it—hum! hum!—all!” added Monsieur Remplumé.

“All!” shouted Chamoureau from behind his tree.

“In that case, messieurs,” said Paul, “we consider ourselves fully satisfied, but on one condition; and that is that at five o’clock this afternoon you will be at Monsieur de Belleville’s, and will there repeat what you have just said to us. You will be careful to be accompanied by all those ladies, who were the first to dare to make hateful remarks concerning Madame Dalmont and her young friend. The insult was public, and the reparation must be public as well! I deem it my duty to warn you that, in case you and your ladies should not keep this appointment, we shall renew this battle with all of you, messieurs; and that, in that event, it will be a duel to the death!”

“We will be there! we will be there, messieurs!” stammered Luminot and Remplumé.

“I am going there now,” said Chamoureau in a strangling voice.

“Until this evening then, messieurs, at five o’clock, at Monsieur de Belleville’s!”

“You ought to know the age of that tree, Chamoureau!”

“Now, messieurs, let us go,” said Paul. “Let us hasten to the ladies, for my dog’s behavior troubles me, I am afraid that something has gone wrong.”

“Perhaps they have been informed of the duel,” said Edmond; “and in that case they must be terribly anxious; let us make haste to set their minds at rest.—See, Ami is going on ahead!”

The dog had already taken the road leading to Chelles. His master and the two young men soon reached the village and went in the direction of Madame Dalmont’s house. But just before they reached it, at a place where three roads met, Ami, instead of taking the road that ran by Honorine’s house, darted along a different road.

“Ami! Ami! where are you going? Don’t you recognize the road that leads to the ladies you are so fond of? How strange! he won’t listen to me!”

“Stay here! Wait for me!” cried Edmond; “we are within two minutes’ walk of their house. I will run there and inquire.”

The young man disappeared on one road, the dog continued along the other. Paul and Freluchon anxiously awaited Edmond’s return, for Ami’s behavior seemed to indicate that something had happened.

In a moment Edmond came running back to his friends.

“They’re not there!” he shouted; “they were told about my duel. They received a letter this morning, and they left the house in a great hurry, saying to Poucette: ‘We are going to prevent them from fighting.’—But what road can they have taken? The one by which we came is the only one leading to the place of meeting.”

“Do you hear Ami, messieurs? He is barking to call us!”

“Believe me, he is the one to help us find the ladies. Come along!”

“Yes, yes, here we are, Ami! here we are!”

The three men followed the path that the dog had taken. Ami’s barking guided them, for it was incessant. They soon reached the main road leading to Gournay; but it also led to Paul’s house, and Freluchon said:

“The dog acts as if he wanted to go home!”

“In that case,” said Edmond, “that is where the ladies have gone, hoping to find us there.”

“No, there must be something else,” said Paul; “that note that they received—who could have written it, as no one of us did? Ami’s barking means anger, yes, frantic passion. Something tells me that that infernal woman has had a hand in this business too.”

The dog, which was still far in advance, turned to the left toward the river; when he reached the bridge, his barking became fiercer than ever; but in a minute he leaped upon the bridge and darted across.

“He certainly is going to your house,” said Edmond.

“No,—see! on leaving the bridge he turned—he is running along the bank of the river; he no longer hesitates, he is on the scent.”

“Mon Dieu! what can have happened?—Agathe! Honorine!—Poor women! Can it be that you came in this direction to look for us?”

“If they came here, they must have been lured by wilfully false information. Let us go on! Ami won’t deceive us!”

“Ah! look! Ami has gone down to the brink of the stream; he is helping someone to save himself.”

“Why, no, he isn’t; on the contrary, he is preventing a man from coming ashore; see! he rushes at him, snaps at him, bites him whenever he tries to leave the water.”

“I know that man!” cried Freluchon: “It’s the *soi-disant* Baron von Schtapelmerg; it’s Madame de Belleville’s brother!”

“And it’s the same man whom she once induced me to engage as secretary, and who would have robbed me in the night if Ami had not attacked him. His face is easily recognizable.”

“But Agathe—Honorine!”

Suddenly Paul uttered an exclamation. He had caught sight of a boat in the distance, quite near the obstructions in the river—a boat containing two frantic women, who, unable to manage it for lack of oars, were looking wildly about in every direction and shrieking for help, in vain. The roar of the cascades prevented their voices from making themselves heard. And they saw that they were in danger of death at any moment; indeed, they would have perished long before if Croque had followed his sister’s instructions to the letter. But as he did not care to run the risk of drowning himself by jumping into the water too near the rapids, he had not rowed the boat close up to the obstructions, but had jumped overboard farther up stream, in order to reach the shore more easily.

The little skiff, left to its own resources, had remained for some time in the same spot; and that delay enabled Paul and his companions to arrive before it foundered. But it was high time that assistance should reach the two persons afloat in that fragile vessel; a fresh breeze was driving it toward the most dangerous spot.

Paul and Edmond, throwing off their coats, plunged into the stream and swam with powerful strokes toward the boat. But they were forced to contend against the current and against the eddies that are concealed beneath the surface of the Marne. Despite their utmost efforts, they made but slow progress, and it was clear that they could not arrive in time to save the two women—when suddenly a boat appeared in their wake. Freluchon was seated in it, rowing with all his strength.

“This way,” he cried; “jump into my skiff—we shall get there sooner.—Gad! what luck! there are more oars

floating on the water! I have one of them; push the other this way, Edmond; that's it!"

Edmond and Paul climbed into the boat; having two pairs of oars they overhauled the little boat much more rapidly and reached it at last, as it was on the point of foundering.

Agathe and Honorine leaped on board; they were with their friends—they were saved! They embraced and shook hands; they looked up toward heaven; but for some minutes no one could utter a word.

But the danger past, their emotion finally subsided.

"What were you doing here?" cried Edmond. "Why did you come here?"

Honorine showed the letter they had received. Edmond instantly recognized Thélénie's handwriting; she had not even tried to disguise it, feeling sure that her victims would carry the letter with them to the bottom of the river.

"Oh! that woman is a monster!" said Paul. "But for my good Ami, we should never have looked for you in this direction."

"We had no sooner received the note," continued Honorine, "than Agathe and I left the house in haste. When we reached the bank of the river, we saw a man sitting beside a boat; we thanked heaven for the chance, we ran to the man and offered him whatever he chose, to take us to the first island above the mill. He agreed. We got into the boat and he rowed for some time in the direction we had indicated; then, all of a sudden, we saw him take his oars out of the rowlocks, throw them overboard, and jump over after them. We were utterly unable to understand such behavior, but we soon saw that we had stepped into a trap. The man swam ashore; but we, abandoned in our boat, without oars, and driven constantly nearer and nearer to a place where the danger was extreme, were at the point of death when you came to our assistance."

"But without Freluchon all our efforts would have gone for nothing.—By what miracle did you find this boat?"

"The miracle is easily explained: while you were swimming, I searched the bank, saying to myself that it wasn't possible that there was not a boat to be found on the banks of a river; that it would be like finding no cabs at a cabstand. At last I saw one; there was no driver, but I didn't care for that. It was fastened to a stake by a chain and padlock, but I said to myself: 'We'll see about this; now's the time to be strong!'—Faith, I broke everything, chain and padlock and stake—but I got the boat!"

Edmond and Paul embraced Freluchon. The young women kissed him, whereupon he exclaimed:

"My word! it's very pleasant to be strong!—But I no longer hear Ami's voice. Look, there he is on the other bank; he is pointing at something in front of him."

"Yes, something that doesn't move. It is your pretended boatman, mesdames, whom Ami has compelled to drown himself; then I presume he went into the water for him and took him ashore. Let us spare the ladies that shocking sight; let us put them ashore on this side; then I will go across and identify the fellow."

The boat grounded near the bridge.

Honorine and Agathe stepped ashore and started for home under the escort of Edmond, Paul advising him to take them by the least frequented roads, so that they might not be seen, and to enter by the small gate at the foot of the garden.

Then, with Freluchon, he rowed to the other bank, where honest Ami awaited them, still holding his enemy under his feet.

Croque was quite dead. After trying vainly to reach the shore, which Ami prevented him from doing by throwing himself upon him at every attempt, Thélénie's brother had felt his strength abandon him. Afraid to give battle to the dog, whom he recognized perfectly as the one which long before had inflicted the wound of which he still bore the mark, Croque lost courage; he tried to call for help, but his voice failed him, and he soon disappeared under the surface. Then Ami plunged in after him and dragged him to land, as a trophy of his victory, which he desired to exhibit to his master.

"It is the Baron von Schtapelmerg and no mistake!" said Freluchon.

"Yes," said Paul, "it is Thélénie's brother, the man who robbed me long ago."

"The villain won't rob anybody else; he has well earned what has happened to him. Bravo, Ami! embrace me, good dog! Ah! but for you, many disasters would have happened!"

While Freluchon embraced Ami, who made no resistance, like one who receives what is his due, Paul searched Croque's pockets, in which he hoped to find some new proof of the crime Thélénie had plotted.

But he found nothing on the drowned man save the roll of gold, containing a thousand francs, which he had carefully bestowed in his belt.

"A thousand francs on a boatman! the fellow was in comfortable case!" said Freluchon.

"This gold was to pay for his crime!" cried Paul; "this gold condemned to death Honorine and Agathe—two women who have never injured that Thélénie!—I will take it from him to give it back to her.—And now, come, my dear Monsieur Freluchon; let us leave this wretch's body here, and join those who love us."

"Even so; and we will think of nothing but breakfast; it makes one hollow to row, and I put all my strength into it."

"Yes, and after that, I have still another duty to perform, and I shall not fail to perform it."

"Come; see, Ami will be there before us."

When Chamoureau reached home after the duel, he found Thélénie pacing the floor of her apartment in great agitation. She was counting the hours and minutes. It was not the result of the duel that preoccupied her so, but the result of the plan she had formed to destroy Honorine and Agathe.

Her messenger, after delivering the note with which she had entrusted him, had, in accordance with her orders, lain in ambush a short distance from the house, and had seen the two ladies rush out and hasten in the direction indicated by the note; then he had returned to Madame de Belleville and made his report.

She therefore had no doubt as to the result of her villainy, and yet she felt some inquietude, a vague terror which increased with every moment. The slightest noise, the approach of some person, the sound of a voice, made her start, and stop abruptly to look about her. Despite her perversity, she found that a crime so detestable as that which she had committed, brings in its train,—if not remorse, when the criminal is too hardened,—at least a terror which is an incessant, never-ending torment.

And so, when her husband appeared before her, Thélénie glared at him in dismay, crying:

“What is it? What do you want of me, monsieur? What have you learned?”

“Be calm, my dear love, pull yourself together. You are very anxious, I see; you are very pale. I thank you for your deep interest in me, but there are as many killed as wounded, and no one is dead.”

“No one dead? What are you talking about, monsieur? Explain yourself, pray.”

“Why, I should think that you might guess. Don’t you know, madame, that I have just had a duel—that is to say, I have been a second in a duel—in fact, I have had a duel all the same——”

“Oh, yes! to be sure, it was this morning. Well?”

“Well, we fought with pistols, and we fired first; that was our right. But we missed our adversary; thereupon he agreed not to fire if we would admit that we did wrong to speak ill of his fiancée and her friend; and we admitted it.”

“Cowards! I recognize you there.”

“That is to say, it was not I, it was Luminot, who——”

“All right! I know enough! leave me.”

And Thélénie turned on her heel, leaving Chamoureau alone.

“That woman is never satisfied,” he said to himself; “for heaven’s sake, was she anxious for the death of one of us? O Eléonore! you never longed for anybody’s death!—All the same, I won’t say anything to my wife about the appointment those men made to meet us here at five o’clock. She would be capable of giving orders not to let them in. And those men, especially the owner of the dog, didn’t seem inclined to joke. He threatened us with a duel to the death; so that I am determined that he shall be satisfied; and if madame doesn’t like it, why, *fichtre*! I’ll show my teeth!”

The day seemed endless to Thélénie, who longed for six o’clock to come. She shut herself up in her bedroom, and kept her eyes fixed upon a clock, waiting impatiently for the moment when she was to see Croque.

But, a few minutes before five, a servant informed her that several callers had arrived, and that her husband desired her to come down to the salon.

“Callers at this time of day!” thought Thélénie; “why, we have invited nobody to dinner to-day, unless monsieur has taken the liberty; but that is not probable.—Can it be that people know already of the accident that must have happened to those two women?—But no matter; I must not act as if I were afraid of anybody!—Let us find out what all these people want.”

Messieurs Luminot and Remplumé, who were no more anxious than Chamoureau for a duel to the death, had carried out Paul Duronceray’s wishes to the letter.

On leaving him, they went first to Madame Droguet, whom they found bathing her husband’s jaw. To her they said:

“You are requested to be at Madame de Belleville’s at five o’clock to-day.”

“Are we invited to dinner again?”

“No, it is not a matter of dinner, but of an important meeting; something very interesting is going to happen; we don’t know yet what it is, but it’s something of very grave importance. Be sure to come; you are expected.”

With such words they could have made the ex-vivandière travel a hundred leagues.

In a small village, curiosity would make the very stones walk. With the same harangue Monsieur Luminot and his second set the whole neighborhood in a ferment.

That is why the salon of Goldfish Villa, at five o’clock that afternoon, contained almost as many people as on the day of the fête; only the guests from Paris were lacking.

Thélénie could not overcome a secret feeling of uneasiness when she saw all those people assembled under her roof. She observed, moreover, a certain embarrassment and constraint on those faces which were accustomed to smile upon her; for Luminot had already said to his intimate friends:

“Madame de Belleville involved me in a wretched piece of business. I extricated myself from my duel with honor, but I must admit that I was in the wrong. The ladies at the Courtivaux house are as white as milk; I consider them most honorable persons.”

The little, lame man had spoken in the same strain. As for Chamoureau, he wandered about his salon with a dismayed expression, answering at random the remarks that were addressed to him.

“May I know to what I am indebted for the presence of such a delightful assemblage in my salon this afternoon?” said Thélénie, as she saluted the company.

“Why, did not you invite us, *belle dame*?” said Madame Droguet.

“I! indeed, no; although I congratulate myself upon your presence. I confess that I did not expect this pleasure to-day.—So it was you, Monsieur de Belleville, who chose to give me this delightful surprise?”

Chamoureau tried to assume an impressive manner, and stammered:

“No, madame.”

“What! neither you, nor I! This is strange, to say the least.—I believe, monsieur, that you are concealing something from me.”

“Well, madame, we had a duel this morning.”

“I had a duel!” exclaimed Luminot.

“Well, yes, it was you who fought, that is true; but we were told that we would all have to fight if we did not to-day, and here, publicly retract the remarks that were made concerning Madame Dalmont and her young friend.”

“And who dared to demand that?” cried Thélénie, pale with wrath.

“Paul and his dog—that is, the dog didn’t say anything, but he looked at us pretty hard. However, madame, those gentlemen are coming here, and they will explain themselves more fully.”

“Who are coming here, monsieur?”

“The owner of the Tower, with——”

“I don’t propose that that man shall put his foot inside my door. Ah! this is carrying his contempt too far, and I

am going to forbid——”

Thélénie had not had time to finish her sentence, when Paul Duronceray entered the salon, attended by Edmond and Freluchon.

No longer in the guise of the hunter who shuns the world, no longer with an untrimmed beard and with his head covered by an otter cap the vizor of which concealed his eyes, did the owner of the Tower present himself; he appeared before the notables of Chelles in the costume of a man of the world, which he wore with as much ease as distinction of manner.

Paul walked straight to Thélénie; his glance was terrifying to behold, and despite her usual audacity, despite all her efforts to overcome her terror, Thélénie shuddered, trembled and lowered her eyes before him.

“You propose to forbid my entering this house, madame,” exclaimed Paul in a powerful voice; “I can well believe it; you divine, doubtless, that I know your crimes, and you are afraid that I might reveal them to your numerous acquaintances.”

“My crimes, monsieur! You dare——”

“To accuse you of an infamous plot! It was not enough to have tried by calumny to ruin two honorable women, one of whom, Madame Dalmont, does me the honor to accept my hand; while the other, Mademoiselle Agathe, daughter of Comte Adhémar de Hautmont—for I am very glad to inform you that that young lady is the daughter of a man for whose death you are responsible. Yes, Mademoiselle Agathe de Hautmont is to marry Monsieur Edmond Didier, who stands beside me;—it was not enough, I say, to have uttered calumny against those ladies, which always finds echoes among fools and evil-minded persons——”

At this point all of Madame Droguet’s social circle made wry faces.

“No,” continued Paul, “this woman, impelled by the most criminal passions, determined to contrive the death by drowning in the Marne of those two persons, whom she detests because they possess virtues which she never understood.”

A low murmur bore witness to the impression produced by these words.

Thélénie summoned all her energy and cried:

“You lie, monsieur; your accusations are false.”

“Very well, madame; deny this letter, sent by you to those ladies. It is in your handwriting; there are several of us here who are perfectly familiar with it. In this letter you announce that Monsieur Edmond is to fight at eight o’clock—on an island above the mill; which was equivalent to telling them to go to that place. And in fact, immediately on receipt of your letter, they started and hurried to the bank of the Marne, where a miserable villain, in your pay, was waiting for them with a boat. They entered the boat unsuspectingly; and when they were near the obstructions in the river, the pretended boatman threw his oars overboard, jumped after them and swam ashore, abandoning to almost certain death the two victims you had sent him!”

“Monsieur!”

“You did that—see, here is the gold found on your accomplice, your brother, who played the rôle here of a German baron, and who met death on the river bank, thanks to my good dog who was determined that the robber, the assassin, should not escape him again. He put us upon the track of the persons whom you meant to destroy, and whom we saved! Ah! that is what must distress you above all else—that your scheme did not succeed, despite the gold lavished on your brother—See, here it is, madame—the gold of which you make such a diabolical use!”

And Paul threw at Thélénie’s feet the roll of a thousand francs which he had found upon Croque.

The accusation he had made and the tone of conviction in which he spoke made a profound impression upon all the people assembled there. They looked at one another in terror, they turned their eyes away from that woman to whom they had burned incense two days before. Thélénie observed the effect produced by Duronceray’s speech; she reflected that, her accomplice being dead, she could safely deny everything, and, collecting all her resources, she exclaimed:

“I have long known, monsieur, that I was the object of your hatred; to-day you prove that I was right. You turn against me a service that I tried to render, and you invent a series of crimes, of plots, which are utterly ridiculous.—Yes, I did write that letter—why should I deny it, when it proves simply that I wished to prevent a duel which might have deplorable results? I had been told, I had heard—some persons about me say on the night of the fête, after that quarrel—which I deeply regretted—those persons assured me that a meeting had been arranged to take place on the island I described. I believed it, and I conveyed that information to those ladies. As for your fable of the boatman who jumped into the water purposely, and who proves to be my brother—oh! that is too much! I never read anything more improbable in a novel! I never had a brother.”

“But you had a son, madame!” said a voice at the door of the salon, where Beauregard suddenly appeared, leading little Emile by the hand and followed by Jacqueline, his nurse.

Thélénie was terror-stricken by that apparition; all her audacity deserted her. She fell back in her chair, while Beauregard, motioning to the peasant woman to go before him, pointed to the mistress of the house, saying:

“Look, my good woman; you will find the Baronne de Mortagne not at Dieppe, but here!”

“Eh! bless my soul, yes! that’s her for sure; that’s madame; I know her all right! she ain’t changed; she’s still got those big eyes of hers!”

At these words of Jacqueline directed at Thélénie, everybody looked at that mother who had abandoned her child, and whose story Chamoureau had told them two days before.

Overwhelmed, crushed by these successive revelations, which made her known at last for what she was, she could find no word to say; she hid her face in her hands.

“You see, my good woman,” Beauregard continued, “that I was quite right to prevent your going to Dieppe; for she hoped to ship you off with the child to some distant country from which you would never have returned. Oh! madame had laid her plan shrewdly; your presence here embarrassed her! But unluckily for her, her brother—for it was her brother again whom she employed to get rid of you—her brother was very fond of drinking and he was rather loquacious in his cups; so that it was not hard for me to learn from him all that it was important for me to know.”

“For all that,” said the peasant, “madame is little Emile’s mother; there’s your mamma, my boy!”

“Her!” cried the child, gazing at Thélénie in dismay. “I don’t want her for my mother; she’d beat me!”

“Still, I suppose madame will take back her son.”

“No, she will not take him back,” said Beauregard, “for, as you see, she never had the sentiments of a mother. But I will keep him, as I have the right to do, for I am his father!”

“His father!” was heard on all sides.

“What’s that! his father?” cried Chamoureau. “I say! what does all this mean? my wife has children, monsieur is their father, and——”

“Shut up, Chamoureau!” said Freluchon. “Don’t you see that all this doesn’t concern you? I advise you to pretend to be dead!”

“Now,” continued Beauregard, “I have nothing more to say to madame, whom I have been asking for a long time what she had done with this child.—Come, nurse, I will settle your account.—Monsieur Duronceray, chance brings me into your presence to-day. I no longer deserve to take your hand, I know, since I betrayed long ago the friendship that united us. But perhaps you will forgive me to-day, when you reflect that at all events I served to enlighten you concerning madame’s sentiments.”

As he concluded, Beauregard bowed low to Paul, who coldly returned his bow, but was obliged to hold Ami, who growled savagely and seemed determined to attack that gentleman.

Beauregard departed, with his son and Jacqueline. Paul then said to the people of Chelles who were present:

“I think that no one now among you ladies and gentlemen retains any doubt concerning the honor of Madame Dalmont and Mademoiselle Agathe de Hautmont?”

“No one! no one!” they hastened to reply on all sides.

“As for myself,” said Doctor Antoine, going up to Paul, “I may say that I never doubted it, and that I have always defended those ladies when anyone presumed to speak ill of them.”

“Very good, doctor; give me your hand then, and come to see us at the Tower; I trust that your welcome will make you forget your first visit.”

The doctor shook the hand that Paul offered him, and the three friends took their leave.

Ere long, the rest of the company followed their example, and Chamoureau was left alone with his wife, to whom he proposed to address a severe lecture. But before he had determined what to say, Thélénie abruptly left the room.

“Ah! she suspects that I have some unpleasant things to say to her,” said Chamoureau to himself; “she fled from my wrath; I will say it all to her at dinner.”

But Chamoureau dined alone; his wife did not come down; and in the evening, when he tried to find her, he learned that she had sent her trunks to the railway station, and had left the house long before.

Thereupon he wondered whether he should go after her; but upon mature reflection, he concluded that he would do better to wait until it should please her to return to him.

A month after these occurrences, a double marriage united Paul Duronceray to Honorine, and Edmond Didier to Agathe, to whom her aged uncle bequeathed his whole fortune.

Freluchon, witnessing the happiness of his friends, declares that he shall end by following their example, but he is in no hurry. Père Ledrux is still employed as gardener by the two new households, although he still carries on a somewhat dangerous traffic, by slandering their hens; but they forgive him in consideration of his tutu—turlututu.

Chamoureau, having abandoned the name of Belleville, continued to expect his wife, who did not return to him.

After six months he learned that she had been killed at London, riding in a steeple chase. Thereupon he put on mourning and went to see Freluchon, to whom he imparted the news, with tears in his eyes.

“What! you idiot! you weep for that woman!” said Freluchon.

“Ah! my friend, I assure you that she had some good qualities.”

“Hold your tongue, for heaven’s sake! don’t imitate the idiocy or dishonesty of those people, who, as soon as a person is dead, give her credit for virtues that she never had in her lifetime! For my part, when a villain leaves this world, I content myself with saying: ‘There are enough left behind!’”

“And Monsieur Duronceray and Edmond Didier—are they still happy?”

“How can they help it? they both have sweet, pretty, loving wives! Ah! if I could find one like them!”

“And the famous Ami, their big dog?”

“He is growing old peacefully among them; when *he* dies, I give you leave to weep for him; for he is a pattern of loyalty, devotion and attachment!—Find all those qualities in your friends!”

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