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Frances Peard

"An Interloper"

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### Chapter One.

#### Monsieur Raoul.

Monsieur Raoul, in his carriage, was making the round of the estates. To a certain extent, this was a frequent custom, but there were times when it was attended by a more deliberate ceremony and purpose, and such was the case this morning. The carriage went slowly, as if on a tour of inspection. When it passed men, they gave a ready "Good-day." Where the white-capped women were not at work, they came smiling to their doorways on hearing the familiar noise of wheels, sometimes holding up their children that they, too, might look at M. Raoul. Evidently he was a great personage, although you might not have guessed it.

As for the estate, to the eye it was all that could be desired. The land, it was true, was flat, but so rich and so highly cultivated that, except the meadows, not a foot but appeared to grow crops. Vineyards caught the hot sun on ripening grapes; apple orchards surrounded cottages; the beauty was glowing, tranquil, a little substantial. Through the heart of the country flowed a broad river, offering excellent fishing, and in places bordered with orderly poplars; on one side was a high bank; the only hill was insignificant, and rose behind the château. It was possible to conceive an ugly air of desolation abroad in winter, but in autumn, and autumn as yet untouched by decay, there was a delightful fresh gaiety in the bounty of the land. At one spot where the carriage arrived in sight of the river, M. Raoul craned his neck forward, but made no remark.

The tour of the cottages accomplished, the carriage turned homeward. When it reached a point where a narrow path broke away, M. Raoul waved his hand in that direction.

"There!" he said, determinedly.

The carriage came to a stand-still. The driver turned doubtfully and scratched his head.

"But, monsieur—" he remonstrated.

M. Raoul interrupted him in a still more peremptory tone.

"There!"

"But monsieur remembers that Madame de Beaudrillart especially said—"

For the third time the one word shot out:

"There!"

Jean scratched his head again, looked round helplessly, and then stared at the sky. Finding no suggestion for extricating himself from the dilemma, he ended by submitting to M. Raoul's order, and, with a sigh of perplexity, turned in the direction indicated. He had lived long enough at Poissy to have learned that it was often difficult to reconcile opposing wills, and that, as they were strong, there was always the risk of being crushed by them. Moreover, he was not without hope. The way they had taken was scarcely wide enough for the carriage—branches whipped their faces, and they were bumped relentlessly over the rough ground. Jean groaned loudly, and glanced back at his master to see how he liked it. But M. Raoul showed no sign of discomfiture; he sat erect, smiling, and now and then flourishing something which he held tightly grasped in his hand. Presently they reached a grassy opening enclosed with trees. The carriage halted, and Jean advanced towards it, reins in hand.

"Monsieur sees for himself that we can go no farther."

M. Raoul did not give him time to reach him. Before Jean could realise what he was doing, he had slipped out of the carriage on the opposite side, and plunged into an undergrowth of bushes which clothed a steep bank, and crept down to the river. Jean made an ineffectual effort to follow and stop him, but the small pony, excited by M. Raoul's triumphant cry, began to back and kick and show signs of bolting, so that his driver was forced, to return to his head. Jean was a person slow to make up his mind, and with a strong objection to responsibilities. He had remarked that they generally brought one into trouble. If Mme. de Beaudrillart, or either of the young ladies, madame's daughters, happened to be walking in the grounds, as was too likely, and met the carriage and pony without a driver, it was impossible to say what might not happen; and as it was out of the question to keep both the carriage and M. Raoul in view, and he had unbounded confidence in M. Raoul's capabilities, Jean resolved to stick to the carriage. But though occasionally stupid, he was not a fool, and he recognised the need of letting some one know of M. Raoul's vagaries. He therefore pushed the pony as quickly as possible through the tangled path, and when he found himself again in a wider road, set off at a fast trot towards the château, hoping quickly to meet his father or another of the gardeners. Unfortunately, however, the first person he encountered was the last to whom he would have desired to tell his story.

Mlle. Claire de Beaudrillart was the younger of the two sisters who lived with their mother, her son and his wife, at the château. Both sisters were some years older than their brother, and Mlle. Claire would never again see her thirty-seventh birthday. Not so handsome as her mother, she was still a striking-looking woman, tall, thin, and carrying herself well. Like all the Beaudrillarts, she was dark; like them, too, her chin was strongly moulded, her nose straight. Once when there were tableaux at Poissy, and old dresses had been drawn from a great armoire, it might have been supposed that the very Claire of two centuries back had stepped out of her frame in the picture-gallery. She was invariably exquisitely neat even in the house, and if her temper was quick, it seldom placed her at a disadvantage. Yet, when Jean caught sight of her, he looked from side to side with helpless longing to escape, and finding it impossible, an ugly, sullen expression gathered in his face, which up to this point had only displayed embarrassment. Mlle. Claire detected the look in a moment, and stopped, him by a sign.

"Where have you been, Jean?"

She used the "you" contemptuously.

"Round the estate, mademoiselle."

"Alone?"

He brought out M. Raoul's name.

"You should have said so at once. And where is Monsieur Raoul?"

This was exactly the question which Jean would have been glad to answer to himself; but his face only became more stolid as he replied:

"Mademoiselle must know that he has gone down to the river."

"To the river! With Monsieur de Beaudrillart?"

He hung his head.

"With Madame Léon! No! With whom, then?" As he remained silent, she added, quickly, "You do not tell me that he is alone?"

Jean burst out with "Mademoiselle—" and stopped helplessly.

"Well?"

"Mademoiselle will comprehend that when monsieur says he *will* go—"

She looked at him from head to foot, and said in a low voice, perfectly modulated, yet which cut like a whip:

"I have always maintained that you, Jean Charpentier, were untrustworthy, and now I am absolutely convinced of it. It was your duty not to let Monsieur Raoul out of your sight, and you have suffered him to go alone to the river—to the river! It is a case of gross neglect, and I shall consult with Monsieur de Beaudrillart about your dismissal."

The boy stood staring at her, open-mouthed, water beginning to gather in his round eyes. He, whose family for generations past had lived and died at Poissy; he, whose pride was to continue in the service, and whom the other lads regarded with envy—he to be condemned as untrustworthy, and threatened with dismissal! And he had done his best. It was not his fault if he could not carry out the impossible. All this was slowly heaving in his mind, when a second unwelcome personage came along the path.

She was a young lady of some four or five and twenty, tall, fair, and almost childlike in the soft lines of her face. Her hair was reddish-brown, the colour which painters love; her eyes clear, hazel, frank, steady, and true; her mouth firm, but a little large; her throat delicately white. She looked healthy, and carried a hat in her hand, as if she courted sun and air, and she was walking quickly; but on seeing Mlle. Claire, hesitated, fearful of interrupting. The next moment another impulse brought her to her side, and she, too, cried eagerly to Jean:

"But where is Monsieur Raoul?"

He was silent, and Claire answered:

"I have told Jean that, since he is not to be trusted, I shall take care that he is not permitted to drive Monsieur Raoul

any more."

"Not to be trusted!" The new-comer had grown pale, her eyes wandered questioningly from one face to the other, and when she repeated her question it was in a faltering voice. "But where is he?"

"Apparently he has gone to the river."

"To the river! Not alone?"

Mlle. Claire said, frigidly:

"Yes, it is inexcusable; but you may leave me to arrange matters. Take the carriage to the stables, Jean, without loitering by the way, and wait there until you are sent for. Come, Nathalie, we will go and look for him."

Young Mme. de Beaudrillart, who had stood motionless for a moment, raised her hand and checked Jean as he was moving off.

"Pardon, Claire, that is not the best plan; for neither you nor I know anything. If you will be good enough to take charge of the carriage, the boy shall go with me and point out exactly where he lost sight of him. Come, Jean, at once." And before her sister-in-law had time to recover from the amazement into which this unusual self-assertion had thrown her, she had walked rapidly away, followed by the reluctant Jean. He, too, was bewildered. In the storm of difficulty and reproach which he foresaw, the last person by whom he wished to find himself was Mme. Léon. If she were even disposed to befriend him, she would be ineffective. He had always been tacitly encouraged to disregard her orders, and under other circumstances would not have hesitated to do so now. But something strangely imperative in her tone, something so unexpected that it had discomfited even Mlle. Claire, completed his degradation, and compelled him against his will to follow. He wept, as much for shame as fear, as he stumbled along behind the quick, firm steps of his young mistress, and more than once when she flung him a question as to M. Raoul's disappearance answered so helplessly that she turned upon him at last with sharp impatience.

"For Heaven's sake, Jean, don't be a fool! Show me the path, and cry when there is nothing else to be done. Was it here?"

"No, madame," murmured Jean, astonished into obedience; "the next."

She quickened her steps almost to a run.

"And how could you allow him to go alone? You knew, did you not, that he was put into your charge?"

He hesitated.

"Madame sees that when Monsieur Raoul jumped out there was the pony and the carriage to see to; and the pony began to be wicked, as he sometimes is. Madame de Beaudrillart would have been very much displeased if anything had happened to the pony, and I was going as fast as I could to fetch some one when I met Mademoiselle Claire, who stopped me to inquire, and would hear it all—"

"Yes, I understand," said Nathalie, curbing her anguish by an effort, though still hastening along. "I understand perfectly, and I do not think you were to blame." But under her breath Jean heard her cry, "Oh, Raoul, Raoul!"

The boy had a sudden impulse.

"If I were madame," he said, shyly, "I should have no fear. Monsieur Raoul is so clever, he will find his way."

He would not have ventured to offer consolation to any other of the family, but no one stood upon ceremony with Mme. Léon, and his momentary awe was subsiding. She was no longer angry, but she did not answer, and he made no further remark until he indicated a spot on their right.

"It was there that Monsieur Raoul went down."

Where he pointed, the shrubs, which all along grew wildly and untrimmed, presented a still more tangled mass of underwood, so thickly matted together that Mme. Léon had to thrust the branches aside with her strong young hands, pushing them to right and left, as she plunged into their midst, Jean clipping down after her. A soft rush of sound, which for some time had been in their ears, resolved itself now into the cool flow of running water, and the ground, still densely wooded, fell precipitously, evidently forming the high bank of the stream. Nathalie was active and light in movement; she scarcely hesitated, though often forced to swing by the help of flexible branches, or to scramble, as best she could, down sandy slopes. At the foot of the bank ran a narrow grassy strip, fringed with a thick growth of water-plants and broad burdock leave beyond which raced a broad river, broken here and there by pebbly shoals, but in other places flowing deep and strong. The first breath of autumn was carried in the air; it was all fresh, vigorous, and a little keen, but the beauty passed unnoticed by Mme. Léon. She stood still, and, shading her eyes with her hand, looked eagerly on either side. Jean clambered to a little height. "Do you see him?" she called, anxiously.

"No, madame. But madame will recollect that monsieur was going that way"—pointing to his right—"to fish. Possibly he may be there."

She thought for a moment.

"I will take that direction, and do you run towards the bridge. Only make haste, and if you find him, do not leave him again, but bring him back at once; and call as you go."

"If it were any one but Monsieur Raoul, now," the boy said to himself as he went off, "she would not have ventured to give an order. Mademoiselle Claire stared finely when she found herself told to take care of the carriage. It was good! Madame Léon is twenty times better than Mademoiselle Claire, who speaks as if one were a pig; but, then, Mademoiselle Claire is one of the old Beaudrillarts, and has the right, while Madame Léon is bourgeoisie. There's the difference. Nobody would mind if she *did* speak. Monsieur Raoul! Hi, Monsieur Raoul!"

Nathalie, meanwhile, was walking swiftly in the opposite direction, her eyes devouring the bank and the unfeeling river, which gave her at all times an unconquerable dread. The ground was rough and broken, and she often stumbled where the long grass hid cracks and dips. A small out-jutting promontory for some time hid a bend of the river from her sight. It was covered with thin straggling bushes, which had the appearance of hurrying helter-skelter to dip their green branches in the water. It was necessary to push her way through them, and her dress would have been torn had not an unconscious instinct led her, even at this absorbed moment, to wrap it carefully round her, and avoid the jagged wood-splinters. When she had crossed these obstacles, she called to a fisherman at work some couple of hundred feet away. "Léon, Léon!" she cried, breathlessly.

He turned, nodded, and began deliberately to reel his line. Before he had finished his wife was by his side.

"Léon—Raoul! Have you seen Raoul!"

"I? No. Why should I have seen him?"

"Because he got out of the carriage and made his way down to the river—to the river—alone! Oh, Léon!"

"He will be all right; he has sense enough," said her husband, easily. "What was that little imbecile Jean about?"

"Dear, I can't blame him. What was he to do? He has been ordered never to leave the carriage."

"Do? He might have done something. It is ridiculous to suppose that he could not have prevented it. Who gave him those orders?"

"Your mother."

"Oh, well, of course it wouldn't do for the pony to run wild. However, don't worry yourself; depend upon it, it's all right." He began to hum an air. "I believe, after all, I will go with you, if only to keep you quiet. And besides the pleasure of seeing you, I am not sorry that you have come. Fishing is horribly stupid work all by one's self. I was beginning to think I was sick of it, and from the relief I feel, I am sure. Stop! Where are you going?"

"Dear Léon, I am so uneasy! You can follow."

"Heartless woman! But I don't let you off so quietly. Haven't I told you that my own society fatigues me? haven't I welcomed your coming? and yet you have the unkindness to propose to leave me! Come, be reasonable. Help me with this detestable rod, which your fingers can manage twice as well as mine, and then we go together."

But to his amazement his wife only turned her head.

"I cannot stay, Léon; I am too anxious. Come as quickly as you can."

He stared after her as she hastened away, his face losing some of its easy expression. Dark, like the De Beaudrillarts, his features were small, and their lines rounded. He was of medium height, and broadly made about the shoulders; his eyes were brown, and the eyebrows straight. He laughed readily, yet occasionally a certain haggard look, curiously at variance with the roundness of his cheek, crept over his face and aged it. Now, after a momentary hesitation, he flung his rod and basket on the ground and ran after his wife.

"Women must always have their own way at once, of course," he said, with a touch of petulance like a child's. "You might have waited a minute."

"Ah, forgive me, Léon! If it had been any other time!"

The ruffle had already passed. He smiled gayly.

"Yes, yes, that is what you all say. However, I will own that it is not often you are so unreasonable."

She flung him a grateful look, and asked, with an effort:

"Have you caught many fish?"

"Only three, and those I gave to old Antoine as he went by. No one can be expected to fish with such a sun shining on the water. Just look at it!"

She looked and shuddered. By way of saying something, she remarked:

"Claire persists that old Antoine is a vaurien."

"Probably. From what my mother remembers, I suspect his family has been worthless for so many generations as to deserve a reward for consistency, if for nothing else. Claire is dreadfully down upon poor sinners. Must we walk as if a mad dog were at our heels! These bushes scratch. They might as well be trimmed. Do you agree? But you are not attending."

"Yes, indeed, Léon, I think with you. And with your rod—but where is your rod?"

"Left with my basket. Your fault—you would not wait."

She half paused.

"Oh, but I am sorry, very sorry! Your new rod! Will it not be hurt?"

"It is extremely probable that old Antoine will find an excellent opportunity for exercising his hereditary inclinations."

She slipped her hand in his and repeated, regretfully: "I am very sorry! It was so good of you to let everything go that you might come with me, for I am terribly frightened. Where can he have hidden himself?"

"My dear child, you are becoming fussy; and if you don't check yourself, you will develop lines in your pretty face which I should find unendurable. Raoul is perfectly safe."

"Do you think so! But—the river?"

"The river—bah!"

M. de Beaudrillart was too sweet-tempered to be annoyed with his wife for her fears, but he was conscious of a failure in the perfect sympathy to which he was accustomed. When his fishing happened to be unsuccessful, Nathalie was alert to discover the reasons for failure, and never by awkward slip set it down to want of skill. If such a thought knocked at his own mind, her tender touch managed to shut the door upon the unwelcome intruder. No matter what other affairs occupied her, they were laid aside to give him her undivided attention, and—what was more—to be grateful to him for asking it. Perhaps he chose to be unaware of the isolated position she occupied in the household, since it had this advantage for him, that with one other he absorbed the warm affections which were strong enough to flow far and wide, could they have found space. He liked the concentration. Now, however, he felt she had not so much as listened; for, when he had finished his relation of a trout which had been so ill-behaved as to get away, instead of her usual commiseration, Nathalie did not even utter a remark. Her eyes were fixed painfully upon the river, which raced along—iron-grey in colour, except where the shallows broke it into bubbles—with its fringe of broad-leaved grasses, burdocks, and flags, a vivid green line in the midst of a somewhat dried-up country. He would have preferred a more leisurely stroll, but his wife's impatience kept her a pace or two in advance, so that he was forced to exert himself in order to keep up with her light and swift steps. His annoyance took refuge in silence, which she in her anxious absorption did not notice.

Presently, however, she cried: "Oh, Léon, there is the bridge!"

"Did you expect to see it anywhere else?"

Generally she was quick to detect the smallest cloud of displeasure, but now she said only: "He might have been on it."

Léon shrugged his shoulders.

"We must cross," she said, decidedly. "I cannot help hoping that he has gone off to the village."

"I could have told you so much long ago. He has gone off to the village, and is as safe as if he were in the château."

"You don't know—you only think. And if he has found him, why has not Jean brought him back?"

"Jean is a fool. It is all his fault," grumbled the young master.

The bridge was a slight wooden structure, flung across the broad river for the convenience of the Beaudrillarts. On the other side lay the scattered cottages of a little hamlet, the apple orchards and vineyards already spoken of; while higher up a stone bridge spanned the river, available, as this was not, for carts and carriages. Beyond, you saw a white church. The people were poor, but could hardly be miserably so in a part of France where both soil and climate were gracious; ignorant and uneducated, but frugal and industrious. Most of the families had lived in their homes longer than the longest memories stretched back, and, with many, service with the Beaudrillarts still remained an hereditary custom.

Nathalie, when she reached the bridge, involuntarily slackened her steps. Any one who watched her closely would have seen that the hand which grasped the rail trembled, and that her eyes fastened themselves fearfully upon the swift-flowing river beneath. Once she cried out, and stopped. "Eh? What is it?" asked Léon, advancing, startled.

"That!" She pointed below.

"A white stone."

"Is it really a stone? I thought it moved."

"Foolish child! You are in a state in which you fancy anything. You would shock my mother."

She did not even hear him. She moved forward step by step, her questioning eyes still trying to pierce the secrets of the river. Suddenly she stopped again, lifted her head, and stood motionless, her whole face transformed by a radiant smile.

On the opposite side of the stream the path rose very slightly, and passed before a large walnut-tree until an angle hid it from view. Round this corner trooped a joyous procession of some eight or ten children of all sizes, singing and shouting, headed by a little boy of perhaps five years old, who marched in front, blowing a shrill trumpet with much

fire and precision. When he spied Mme. Léon he blew yet louder, and marched more triumphantly, but before he reached her forgot his dignity, and began to run, crying out, "Mamma, mamma!" She opened her arms, and he rushed into them.

For a moment she could not speak. The dim, shadowy terrors which the clasp of his little hands had driven out had been fuller of anguish than she knew. They were gone, but they left her, strong and healthy woman as she was, shaken and trembling. Raoul, recovering from his attack of sentiment, struggled to get free. The children hung shyly back, and Jean, who had been commanded to defend the rear, pushed forward to speak.

"Madame, he was outside Père Robert's, beating the rappel."

Then all the other boys and girls began to laugh and whisper.

"Tiens! he said we were his soldiers."

"We were to march I don't know where. Oh, out of France!" with a broad sweep of arms, expressive of immensity.

"Big Lonlon was corporal."

"And he made us call him general."

They saw regretfully that the game was over, since monsieur and madame had appeared, and scattered like a flock of sparrows, Raoul, finding struggling of no use, watching them gravely with a small air of dignity. His mother's heart began to beat more steadily.

"Raoul," she remonstrated, softly, "how could you run away?"

He turned his dark eyes upon her.

"Because Jean was so dull, and the river was much nicer."

"But you made poor father and mother so frightened!"

Léon interposed.

"Don't scold the child, m'amie. It was natural enough, and just what I used to do at his age. I believe he has my very same old trumpet. Yes, yes, here's the notch which I made one day when I banged Pierre's head."

He blew a blast, at which Raoul clapped his hands and struggled. But the mother held him fast.

"Raoul will not run away again?"

"It was all that dolt Jean's fault," Léon put in once more. "Jean, hasn't madame fifty times told you not to lose sight of Monsieur Raoul? Answer! Come, yes, or no? But she has, for I have heard her myself, and you are abominably careless."

"Ah, but—monsieur knows," stammered Jean, "that—that Madame de Beaudrillart—"

"My mother? Well?"

"Monsieur knows she said that if I let him cry I should be punished, and Mademoiselle Claire said I was never to leave the pony, and—"

The young man burst into a laugh.

"Conflicting orders, eh, Nathalie? Well, you should have managed somehow. And look here, understand from me that it is Madame Léon who is your mistress, and that you are always to do what she tells you. You comprehend?"

"Yes, monsieur," said Jean, in a doubtful tone.

"Good! then now take Monsieur Raoul to the house, and find his bonne or somebody. We have had quite enough of this. My fishing spoiled and all! Not that I was doing much good. Come, Nathalie, the least you can do to make up is to come back with me after my rod. Let that baby go; he is not the person to scold."

"Dear Léon, he is quite old enough; he must be made to understand."

He caught her arm, and pulled her playfully away.

"Understand? Bah! you are over-precise, chérie. Wait a year or two, and you shall preach at him as long as you will. Besides, I want you, and that is enough, or ought to be. Now, Raoul, run; I've begged you off this time."

She looked at her husband and hesitated; then, without another word, let go the child and went with Léon. Jean, looking back, saw them walking by the side of the river, and monsieur had his hand on madame's shoulder.

"For all that!" muttered Jean, thinking uncomfortably of Mlle. Claire.

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## Chapter Two.

## How Poissy was Saved.

It was true, as Jean had murmured to himself, that Mme. Léon was by birth *bourgeoise*. As for the De Beaudrillarts, all France knew that they belonged, not only to the noblesse, but to the oldest of the noblesse. Their name was ancient. The church at Nonceaux, which at one time stood on the estate, was full of monuments of armed and curled Barons de Beaudrillart, lying stiffly under fretted canopies; old documents in the library of Tours carried their names centuries back, and their beautiful *château* was an object of interest to all the strangers who come into the neighbourhood.

It is true that, six years ago, before Baron Léon was married, and when he was about three-and-twenty, these same strangers remarked upon the bad state of repair into which the *château* had fallen, pointing out that in many of the rooms, now disused and shut up, the plaster was peeling from the ceilings and exquisite cornices, and that other parts had reached a state of absolute ruin; but, whatever pain this decay may have caused to the owners, it only added to the tranquil picturesque charm which seemed to cling to the old place. There was a lovely pitch of roof, and the slate, worn out as it was, had gained a rich depth as beautiful as that of a rain-cloud, making a perfect setting for the delicate and fantastic chimneys which sprang lightly into the air. The *château* was of no great size, nor could it in any way compare with those grand historic houses of which Touraine is justly proud; but whatever architect imagined it had been imbued with the same spirit, and had indulged in the same grace of detail. There was no stiffness, apparently scarcely an attempt at symmetry; yet it would have been difficult to detect a flaw in the harmony of form and colour. A light lantern turret clung to one angle, a wilful little outer staircase ran up, quite unexpectedly, to a balcony, small ferns pierced the crevices of the grey stone, where lizards darted in and out, here and there in spring a rosy cyclamen appeared. The place was never without delight, whether seen under the warm radiance of the sun, which brought out the lizards and intensified into sharpness the rich shadow of each bit of carving, and every golden patch of lichen on the mellow stone, or clothed with a more restful and sympathetic charm under the soft cloudy half-lights of a grey day. Behind the *château* rose a low wooded hill, in front ran a long terrace, which separated it from the flower-beds and a broad stretch of turf. The kitchen-garden and the pond, where frogs kept up a turbulent croaking, were on one side.

But the decay which may add a charm to architecture becomes dreary and unlovely in a garden. Six years ago the turf was uncared for, the flowers grew untrimmed; it was evident that the fortunes of the family were at a low ebb. So with the interior. The greater number of rooms were closed, and only two or three servants remained of the many who had been there during the lifetime of the Baron Bernard. The Baron Bernard had been a man of sense and integrity, highly respected in the neighbourhood—unfortunately, he was drowned in the river at a comparatively early age, leaving a widow; one son, Léon; two daughters, Félicie and Claire; and a well-ordered estate.

For a few years this continued, but with Léon grown up came change. He was a young man with the easiest of tempers, a genuine charm of face and manner, and the most extravagant tastes. His mother and sisters adored, and did their best to spoil him. They succeeded admirably. He began to spend money at the earliest possible age at which a man masters that easiest of accomplishments, and he denied himself nothing. There had been savings during his boyhood; he fancied the sum inexhaustible, and looked upon it as loose cash intended to be flung away. It was not, it need hardly be remarked, at Poissy that the money was spent; Paris—Paris became the one place in the world where he cared to pass his days, with an occasional flying visit to Poissy, where his intendant was installed with the impossible task before him of meeting increased expenditure upon diminishing receipts. M. Georges seldom saw his employer, and then was put off by good-humoured banter. If he carried his tale to Mme. de Beaudrillart, she invariably treated him as the one to blame, and would only repeat that it was natural for a young man to enjoy himself during the early years of his life. Money must be raised somehow.

"In that case, madame," said little M. Georges, as firmly as he could, "portions of the property will have to be sold. Monsieur le baron will consent?"

She paused, struck with dismay.

"You mean that it is absolutely necessary?"

"I mean that no other course whatever remains—except to borrow."

"Oh, no borrowing!" returned Mme. de Beaudrillart, hastily, and M. Georges smiled covertly, aware of M. Léon's debts in Paris. She walked to the window, and came back. "If it must be," she said, reluctantly, "you had better dispose of some of the outlying property. But permit me to remark, Monsieur Georges, that it appears to me that perhaps greater experience might have prevented such a sacrifice."

Experience had, at any rate, taught poor M. Georges the undesirability of entering upon an argument with Mme. de Beaudrillart. He bowed low, and retired to write to M. Léon, who sent him an airy letter to the effect that in years to come it would be easy enough to buy back whatever their misfortunes required them to part with at the present moment. Mme. de Beaudrillart, whenever she encountered M. Georges, looked at him with displeasure; the only person from whom he received any sympathy was Mlle. Claire, and hers scarcely reached the point of blaming Léon.

The first piece of property sold soon carried another with it. Rich vineyards and mills found immediate purchasers, and changed hands easily. The worst of it was that Poissy was left with land which was not so profitable, and that the rentals became quickly reduced, while M. Léon's expend it are did not diminish in the same proportion, for if by fits and starts he practised a little economy, it was followed by a reaction, as if he imagined that what he had saved gave him something more to spend. Debts and mortgages, like venomous spiders, crept over poor Poissy, and, once having got it in their clutches, held it tight. They reached this point at last, that nothing remained with which to satisfy his creditors except the *château* itself; and when the fact forced itself upon his mind, the shock was sufficiently great to stun even M. Léon.

He hurried back, and sent for M. Georges. In the crash of disaster he felt as if he had been purposely kept in ignorance, forgetting the letters which had seemed to him only the tiresome forebodings of a timid man. His mother, who refused to blame her son, offered up the intendant as a scapegoat. If he were not in fault, how could matters have arrived at their present disastrous condition? For what was he placed there, if not to preserve the estates! M. Léon winced.

"What I complain of is that the state of affairs should not have been forced upon me," he said, running his hands through his hair. "Good heavens! if I had once understood, should I have been such a fool?"

Mlle. Claire, who was very pale, looked up.

"Did not Monsieur Georges entreat you to return, or to appoint to see him in Paris!"

"Entreat! He should have insisted," cried Mme. de Beaudrillart. "If Léon had but understood the gravity of the case, or if I had but known! But Monsieur Georges is a man who lays infinite stress on minute points, and fails altogether to impress you with what is important."

M. Georges was dismissed; and this was perhaps the only deliberate harshness Léon ever committed in his life. Then the young baron set himself to look into his debts, and get together the total sum; it amounted to more than two hundred thousand francs.

"There is but one thing," said Mme. de Beaudrillart; "you must marry."

But to this Léon, who had not shown himself very scrupulous, objected. He had no inclination, he said, to marry, and he disliked the idea of being indebted for Poissy itself to a wife. He would go to Paris, where it would be hard if he could not, among quick-witted advisers, find some means of redeeming his fortunes. He went, and, for the first time in his life, really worked, and with feverish energy. He ran here and there among his old companions, who were prodigal of sympathy, but offered little more substantial. It seemed impossible that he should be unable to raise money when, throughout his prosperous days, it had been pressed upon him. But his eyes were sufficiently opened to perceive that the only terms by which he could free himself from present disaster were ruinous, and would merely serve to postpone the evil day. As the value of his securities decreased, a more extortionate rate of interest was demanded. He cursed his own folly, but could see no way out of the quagmire into which it had plunged him. His friends reiterated Mme. de Beaudrillart's advice. For the sake of rank, many a girl with a large fortune would be ready to raise his fallen fortunes; one or two were even pointed out to him, and their dowries dangled before his eyes. But he remained obstinate.

When he came to Paris there had been an idea of his seeking some appointment, by means of which, and the strictest economy at Poissy, the interest on his debts might be scraped together. Unfortunately, Léon's ideas of money were large—so large that a little seemed to him as useless as none. If by one great coup he might gain a considerable sum—good! But to add franc to franc, and painfully lessen his obligations by scarcely perceptible payments, was economy from which his soul revolted, and which, therefore, he contrived to persuade himself was worthless. It might suit the sordid little nature of a bourgeois bonhomme, but not that of the owner of Poissy. Something larger must be attempted, and quickly.

Before Léon's eyes there had floated for some time the possibility of applying to an old cousin of the family, a certain M. de Cadanet. For various reasons, it appeared as if he were the very person to assist him. Rumour credited him with an immense fortune; and, at any rate, there could be no doubt that he had made more than one successful speculation, among them that of marrying a rich wife, who died childless. Rich and solitary, what better person could be found to come to the rescue of the De Beaudrillarts? And there was an even stronger reason for counting upon his good-will. In the days when he had not found prosperity, and was struggling to stand up against more than one hard buffet dealt by Fortune, Léon's father had given him a helping hand. Perhaps without him he would have been unable to keep his footing; certainly the support was of material service, and Léon had some excuse for thinking that now was the moment for him to return it.

But, unfortunately, the relations between the young man and the old were already strained. It was not only that Léon's frivolities, Léon's extravagances, were hateful to the cautious and clear-headed speculator, who had made his way to wealth by dint of industry and prudence, and set those virtues beyond all others—there was a third person whose influence was extremely damaging to the young baron, a certain Charles Lemaire, who had married a niece of M. de Cadanet's wife. His uncle credited him with the qualities he loved, and there could be no doubt that he was cautious, and, when it suited his interests, frugal. He had, however, as Léon knew very well to his own cost, a passion for gambling, and at the same time extraordinary luck. When first the two found themselves at the same table, they were unknown to each other, and Charles had never got over the disagreeable shock with which he realised that the handsome young man who lost his money so easily was cousin to the uncle to whose solitary habits he trusted for non-detection. From that moment he detested him, and worked to damage his character in the eyes of M. de Cadanet. His follies—and Heaven knows they were many—were repeated and exaggerated. Each idle rumour, whether well or ill founded, reached the old man's ears. Rash and youthful political utterances were spoken of with sorrowful gravity. One or two laughing comments upon M. de Cadanet's habits became cruel ridicule. And with all this M. Charles lost no opportunity of ingratiating himself. He understood the subtle flattery of asking advice, and of outwardly following it. He deferred to his uncle in every point. And he contrived, at last, to make himself so necessary to M. de Cadanet that if he stayed away he was missed and blamed.

Léon made no attempt to act as a rival. Kind-heartedness and general good-will inclined him to look in upon the solitary old man, and he went once or twice to his house. But he was received with coldness and marked displeasure, and had pleased himself too long to endure what he disliked. His visits ceased. M. de Cadanet, who claimed attention, became more incensed. Once or twice he asked Charles where the young fool kept himself.



"My dear uncle, how should I know? You do not expect me to frequent his haunts. And it would pain me too much to repeat to you all that I hear. It is more charitable to shut one's ears, and to hope that the world is mistaken."

And he pressed his hand on his pocket, where reposed the notes he had won the night before.

On his part, Léon suspected him of enmity, but would have scorned to retaliate; and Charles based his own assurance upon knowledge of his character, and upon the insidious manner in which he had poisoned his uncle's mind.

Now, however, when the waters were closing over the De Beaudrillarts, Léon felt that the moment had come for an appeal. Surely gratitude to the dead man who had helped him would induce M. de Cadanet to step forward and save his son from ruin. Léon, whose nature was buoyantly sanguine, made up his mind to a scolding, but saw himself coming away with the estates saved. As he walked along the streets, sparkling with crisp sunshine and gaiety, his spirits rose, and the fears and torments he had been going through fell away. He almost laughed when he thought of a despairing letter to his mother which he had written the night before and had with him, and he assured himself that the postscript which must undoubtedly be added would bring joy to Poissy.

In this hopeful frame of mind he reached M. de Cadanet's house in the Rue du Bac, a house quiet and somewhat gloomy in appearance. Léon entered the porte-cochère, and passed the small office of the concierge. He went quickly up to the first-floor, and, passing through an austere furnished suite of rooms, was finally ushered into one smaller than the others, where, surrounded by books and a few indifferent pictures, M. de Cadanet sat writing, an old man, short, bent, and with a skin like yellow ivory.

Léon came in smiling, almost radiant. He had succeeded in persuading his sanguine self that he had reached the end of his difficulties, and he had profound faith in the imperturbable good-humour which seldom failed to charm. He advanced with outstretched hand, coldly received by his cousin.

"I am ashamed, count, to recall how long it is since I have been to call on you. Do you forgive me?"

The old man drew himself up.

"I am not aware of having expected the honour of a visit from Monsieur de Beaudrillart."

"I accept the rebuke," said Léon, smiling frankly. "To tell the truth, you might have seen me oftener if I had been sure of a welcome. But I am afraid I have deserved my disgrace."

"Of that no one, monsieur, can judge better than yourself."

"Why monsieur?" said the young man, still smiling. "In old days you spoke to me as Léon; and you do not forget that we are cousins."

"One does not so easily forget one's misfortunes."

"Misfortunes!" repeated Léon, colouring. The next moment he recovered himself sufficiently to say good-humouredly, "Pardon me, but was it always a misfortune, count!"

The old man glanced at him with the first touch of wavering in his face.

"You need not remind me," he said. "I should not now be listening to you were it not for the remembrance of your father. But you did not come here merely to pay a visit of ceremony to a cantankerous old mummy?"

He emphasised the words bitterly, for, according to M. Charles, this title had been attached to him by Léon. Léon stared and shrugged his shoulders, unconscious of offence, and only anxious to propitiate his terrible relative.

"You are right," he said, looking down and speaking more hurriedly. "I am here because I am in great difficulties, and because I hoped that—that the remembrance of my father would dispose you to come to the help of his son."

"And may I ask what has plunged you into difficulties?"

"Oh, my own folly; I don't attempt to deny it—my own folly, helped on by a dolt of an intendant. If I had had any idea—However, I do not excuse myself. I have been confoundedly extravagant, and I mean to pull up short, I assure you. But, after all, other young men have been in the same position, and, with a helping hand, have managed to scramble out of it again. I have been up here for a week seeing what I could do—"

"At the gaming-tables!"

"No, no, I give you my word that is over. I have been trying to raise—"

"How much!"

"Two hundred thousand francs," said the young man, in a low voice.

"There are money-lenders enough in Paris," remarked M. de Cadanet, dryly.

"But with the securities I can offer, their terms are ruinous. If I were to accept them, Poissy would have to go. Judge for yourself whether this would not break my mother's heart."

"I have not the honour of the acquaintance of Madame de Beaudrillart."

Léon did not answer at once. He was framing a more direct appeal.

"The estate must right itself in time," he said, hopefully, "and if I could induce you to take the matter into consideration, and to advance me the money—"

He paused. M. de Cadanet turned towards his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and drew out a cheque-book.

"You said, I think, two hundred thousand!" he asked, beginning to fill it in.

"Two hundred thousand," repeated the young man, joyfully, without an attempt to conceal the exultation with which he watched the proceeding. All had gone more easily than his most sanguine expectations had ventured to suggest, and he was amazed at his own folly in having hesitated to apply to his rich cousin, whose bark, after all, was worse than his bite. M. de Cadanet's movements were deliberate in the extreme. He wrote a cheque, folded it, and sought for an envelope of the right size. This found, he proceeded to direct it. Léon smiled to himself. "An unnecessary formality," he thought; "but I had better hold my tongue, and let him please himself as to his way of doing." It seemed to him, however, that the moment had come when he might express his gratitude, and he was beginning to stammer a few words, when M. de Cadanet put up his hand.

"One moment, monsieur. Allow me to explain. Neither the honour of this visit nor the particulars with which you have favoured me have taken me by surprise. I have already given the affairs of Poissy my best consideration."

Léon nodded cheerfully. This explained.

"And I have arrived at the conclusion that since the Beaudrillart family has reached the point indicated by you, it must be decreed that it should pass the remainder of its existence without a château. Heaven forbid that I should attempt to fight against fate!"

The scorn of his words stung like a lash. Léon, bewildered and astonished, turned white. He murmured something which the old count interrupted with a sudden outburst of passion.

"What, monsieur! You squander your birthright on miserable follies, you drag the name you profess to honour into the lowest depths, and then come to beg—yes, monsieur, I repeat it, to beg—from those whose advice you have scorned, and whose character you have calumniated! No. I give you my word—a word which, however strange it may appear to you, has never yet been broken—that, in whatever straits you find yourself, I will not so much as lift my little finger to help you, nor fling a penny to keep you from starving. Understand that, if you had become poor by honest misfortunes, I would have set you again on your legs. You have had your chance. I would not trust mere report, though to those who were acquainted with your habits it appeared only too probable. Close and searching inquiries have been made, and it is possible that I know more of your affairs than you know yourself—certainly more than you have permitted me to hear from you to-day."

Léon sprang to his feet.

"Enough, monsieur!" he cried. "You have a right to refuse assistance, but none to insult me. If you have employed spies to search into my private affairs, you have taken an unwarrantable liberty, upon which you would not have ventured had you been of an age for me to retaliate. Much of what you say is incomprehensible to me; a little more might cause me to forget the respect due to your years."

"Spare me theatrical language, monsieur; and, as you have forced yourself upon me, be good enough to listen to what I have to tell you. This letter contains an order for two hundred thousand francs."

Against his will, the young man's eyes turned greedily towards it.

"Are you not inclined to add to your accomplishments by robbery and murder?" sneered M. de Cadanet.

"If I had the chance, I should be glad to get hold of the money," said the young man, lightly. His anger burned out as quickly as dry straw, and the other, who had not expected this frank answer, stared and went on:

"When I gave myself the annoyance of looking into your affairs, I resolved that, if you came out of the ordeal acquitted, I would apply the earn to their settlement; if you failed, it should go to—another person."

Léon laughed. The count, who had not the young man's command of temper, became furious.

"You laugh, monsieur! Let those laugh who win."

"Exactly," said M. de Beaudrillart, coolly. "And who wins? The admirable Charles?"

"Yes, monsieur!" thundered the count. "He whom you are pleased to sneer at as the admirable Charles, and who, if not a Beaudrillart, has shown himself to be what is better—an honourable man. You follow me?"

"Perfectly. You express yourself with unmistakable clearness. So Monsieur Charles is to have the money!"

"And will make a worthy use of it. He may find more follow."

"I comprehend," said Léon, still smiling. "Under the circumstances, you are doubtless anxious to despatch your letter to Monsieur Charles. Can I post it for you?"

It was M. de Cadanet's turn to laugh—gratingly.

"Permit me to prefer a safer messenger. My cheque is payable to bearer."

"Then I have the honour to wish you good-day."

“Go. And understand, once for all, that should you apply to me again, you will not be admitted.”

“Do not fear, monsieur. The impression I take with me is not so agreeable that I should wish to renew it.”

And with this last word M. de Beudrillart found himself outside the room.

He went slowly down-stairs, the smile still lingering mechanically on his lips, but something like despair in his heart. So far as he could see, but one way presented itself out of his troubles, and this would only affect himself, and leave his mother, whom he loved, with added misery in her heart. No misfortune would touch her, he knew, so nearly as his death, and if he had the cowardice to be ready to slip out of his troubles by self-murder, he had not the cruelty to inflict such anguish upon her. Besides, another reflection, not so amiable, restrained him. M. de Cadanet had hinted at coming gifts for M. Charles, and the thought had flashed upon him with the force of intuition that it was not improbable, should the mortgages be foreclosed, for the count to get hold of Poissy and present it to M. Charles. Now, without knowing all the mischief that he had worked, Léon hated M. Charles. His hate was not virulent, but it was impulsive; and although he had no proof, he strongly suspected who had brought an exaggerated report of his follies to M. de Cadanet’s ears. He might have retaliated, but that he would never stoop to such a course, and he reflected with a laugh that, if Charles was convicted of gambling, he would be ready with the excuse that he had gone there to watch himself. But Charles at Poissy! Charles a successor of the De Beudrillarts! Léon ground his teeth, and felt that he must remain alive while a hope of baffling such a disaster was left.

Again he passed the little room of the concierge. André, who was something of a gourmand, was within at work upon cooking a fish, and looked up to salute M. Léon. In another moment the high green gates had closed behind the young baron, and he was walking along the street.

The sun was shining. Paris—the Paris he loved, the Paris which had proved herself so fatal a rival to Poissy—had never looked more smiling; there was neither fog nor chill in the air; but everywhere bright keen colours, people chatting, shops brightly dressed, women in their white caps, carriages rolling along. Gay, yet with a touch of hardness. For the first time in his life Léon became conscious of the hardness.

He knew himself now to be absolutely without resource; turn which way he would, rack ready wits as he might, no road suggested itself except, perhaps, marriage. And, strangely enough, as has been said, this man, who, young as he was, had few ideals left, had this, that he shrank from mending his broken fortunes by a marriage for money. True, it was common, almost universal. True, in matters relating to his own ease and comfort, selfishness generally became paramount. True, this fancy contradicted other characteristics. The fact remained that he hated the idea, and refused to entertain it, even in this moment of despair, when he had entertained others which seemed worse, when he acknowledged that M. de Cadanet had been rash in letting him see the cheque, and that if it had been M. Charles who had stood there between it and him—

He took an open letter from his pocket, and groaned as he closed it, so that a woman who was passing looked round; but seeing only a handsome young man with a cheek as round as a child’s, she smiled and went on. The letter was addressed to Mme. de Beudrillart, at Poissy, and had been brought with him with the hope that an added postscript might have told of some happy turn of Fortune’s wheel. Now it must go as it stood, messenger of ill-tidings.

“Monsieur le baron has not got far.”

Léon looked hastily round; André the concierge was by his side. His first wild thought was that M. de Cadanet had relented and sent after him, the next moment his eye fell upon a packet of letters which the man carried, and he was seized with longing to know whether the letter addressed to M. Charles was among them. His genial manner made him a favourite with servants.

“Ah, André,” he said; “you have there monsieur le comte’s letters?”

“As monsieur le baron sees.”

“Permit me to glance at them. I wish to see whether one of which he spoke is there.”

They were in his hand even before he had finished speaking—four. Yes; the address to M. Charles Lemaire stared him in the face. The next moment the concierge had four letters again, but one of the four was addressed to Mme. de Beudrillart, at Poissy.

“Thanks, André.” M. Léon burst into a laugh, and tossed the man a piece of twenty sous. “Tell monsieur le comte—No; tell him nothing; I will write.”

That evening M. de Cadanet received a letter:

“My Cousin,—I have taken the liberty of borrowing the sum which you had so thoughtfully prepared for Monsieur Charles. It would have been better for him if you had accepted my offer to post your letter; as you declined to trust me, I had no scruple in exchanging it for another which found itself in my hand at the exact moment. Do not blame your messenger, who is quite unaware of the transaction. By my writing to you, you will perceive that I have no intention of denying what I have done. It is in your power to have me arrested. You know where to find me, and I will remain in Paris for two days, so as to avoid the pain to my family of a scandal at Poissy. Permit me, however, to point out that I have only taken the money as a loan, that it will be returned to you by instalments, and with interest, though, I fear, slowly, and that you may find it more advantageous to allow the matter to rest than to ruin one who, however unworthy, is the son of the man to whom you were certainly indebted for your prosperity.”

It must be owned that this was a strange letter to write and to receive. The answer that came back was brief:

“Monsieur,—You have confirmed me in my judgment. I preserve your letter. For the present I hold my hand; when the time arrives I shall know how to act.  
“Martin de Cadanet.”

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## Chapter Three.

### The Household at Poissy.

The letter which arrived at Poissy came with all the force of a shock to Mme. de Beaudrillart and her daughters. It was true that they were well aware that an evil menaced, but it appeared inconceivable that it should have arrived. Léon had assured them that something would turn up; he was confident that Paris must offer a means of evading the worst, and, indeed, in all that he had said had temporised, excused himself, and hinted at unforeseen misfortune. M. Georges, indeed, had spoken more plainly to Mlle. Claire, but his words had been indignantly scouted by Mme. de Beaudrillart. Even now, when Léon had taken refuge in a letter which might break the worst in his absence, and spare him the pain of seeing, not reproachful looks, but tears, they refused to face the crash as inevitable. That the De Beaudrillart home should pass from the De Beaudrillarts was absolutely out of the question. That Léon's extravagance had brought about even threat of such disaster immediately required extenuating words, and a laying of blame on any shoulders except his. Of the three, Claire was the only one who permitted a tinge of bitterness to creep, now and then, into her words.

“My poor boy!” cried Mme. de Beaudrillart, with tears in her eyes; “if this is hard for us, what must he not have suffered? Of course the affair will arrange itself somehow—Heaven forbid that I should be so faithless as to doubt it!—but the annoyance, the anxiety! Well, it is only another proof, if proof were wanted, of the incompetency of that Monsieur Georges. If Léon had not been so tender-hearted he would have sent him away long ago.”

“I wonder if it would have really made any difference?” remarked Félicie, her eldest daughter, looking up from the altar-linen she was embroidering. She was near-sighted, and had to stoop very much to bring her work within range of her eyes, but she would not be persuaded to wear spectacles.

“We should remember, however, that Monsieur Georges constantly implored Léon to pay a closer attention to his affairs. I must say, I think it is unjust to blame the poor man,” said Claire, sharply.

“Then you must blame your brother, which would be far more unjust,” said her mother, with decision. “For what is an intendant engaged? Until this moment, I have always been under the impression it was that he might look after the estates, and avert the possibility of such a humiliating position as that in which our poor Léon now finds himself.”

“It is certain that Léon must have been terribly extravagant,” persisted Mlle. Claire.

“Oh, extravagant, extravagant!—I dare say. How can you, a woman, with every want provided for, and with absolutely no temptation to spend money—how can you possibly judge of the difficulties of a young man in Paris? A young man, too, such as Léon, impulsive, generous, attractive.” Claire agreed. “Yes, he is very attractive.”

“And very generous,” added Félicie, looking up again, and holding her needle in the air. “When I spoke to him the other day about the pilgrimage, he told me we might count on him for fifty francs. Now Madame de Montbreuil assured me with tears that her husband would give no more than twenty.”

“Ah, and it is that generosity of his of which people take advantage,” said his mother. “If we knew all the truth, which you may be sure he will never permit us to learn, I am certain we should find some kind-hearted action at the bottom of this trouble. He has come to the rescue of a friend, or helped a poor struggling creature, and been dragged in himself, poor fellow! As for the old count, I shall never forgive him. He must have guessed how disagreeable it was to Léon to be forced to apply to him for assistance; and after his indebtedness to your father, the least, the very least he could do, was to have helped him liberally, and to have rejoiced at the opportunity.”

Mme. de Beaudrillart had a white face, an aquiline nose, and pinched lips—the features of a shrewd woman who would hold her own. She had little compassion for shortcomings, and never failed to point them out—perhaps to compensate for her blind adulation of her son. A large photograph of him stood on the table; she took it up, and carried it to the window, gazing at it fondly.

“I suppose it is difficult for such a boy as Léon to avoid spending money in a place with so many temptations as Paris,” Claire remarked, in a low tone. She was like her mother, but her face was more sallow and sharper.

“I don't like you to speak as if this trouble were poor Léon's fault,” said Félicie, in her thin, gentle voice.

Claire began to laugh.

“Whose, then? Yours or mine? I have not spent a penny for a month, so I cannot feel that I am responsible; and though you are disposed to be extravagant for the Church—”

“That is only one's duty.”

“As you like, ma chère. I was going to add that you had no money to give, so that we can hardly lay our ruin at your door. Who is there but Léon?”

“Our mother thinks he has met with some misfortune.”

“Bah!” said Claire, under her breath. “It is no misfortune. I love Léon as well as you love him, but I can see his faults.”

He is no saint. This is his doing, and his only. He has squandered his money, and in bad ways."

"What bad ways?" asked her sister, with wide-open eyes. "If I were to tell you, you would be shocked."

"You can't know!"

"Do I not? Léon is horribly careless, and if you were to see some of the photographs and letters he leaves scattered about his room, you would acknowledge that I know what I am talking about."

Félicie thrust her fingers into her ears, and a flush rose in her thin cheek.

"Hush, hush, Claire!" she cried. "It is a sin to speak of such things! It is a sin even to listen to you!"

"Oh, I mean to be *vielle fille*, and privileged," said Claire, with a laugh. "I could not go about the world with my eyes shut, as you do. Do you really believe it to be rose-coloured?"

Mme. de Beaudrillart crossed the room from the window, where she had been standing.

"What are you talking about, children?" she demanded.

"Claire says such things," murmured Félicie, resuming her work. "It is shocking!"

"Félicie is a baby," remarked the younger sister, contemptuously.

"Hush, hush! I have often desired you, Claire, to be more careful in what you repeat before your sister. And I am surprised you can think of anything but this anxiety of poor Léon's. I have been turning the matter over and over."

"Have you decided on anything?"

"I will tell you. Of course, what he appears to dread cannot happen. It is impossible to conceive the idea of Poissy passing from the family."

"Impossible!" Claire repeated the word with emphasis.

"But it is our duty to make all the sacrifices we can. We must economise more strictly."

"Oh, certainly, mamma," said Félicie, cheerfully. "If you remember, in the last address which we had from the abbé, he counselled us to cast away superfluous luxuries. And here is our opportunity. It seems quite a coincidence."

Mme. de Beaudrillart nodded, waiting for her other daughter to speak. Claire lifted her head and glanced round the room.

"I wish the coincidence had not arrived," she said. "I am ready to do anything that is suggested; but I own I hardly see what we have which can be called superfluous." Her mother folded her thin white hands in her lap.

"We must do with fewer servants," she said.

"I suppose so," Claire assented, doubtfully. "Which will you dismiss? François is the least necessary."

"To us, but not to Léon. No; I have been reflecting, and I believe we can dispense with Rose-Marie. You are both active, and I, I thank Heaven, not yet infirm, so that between us, with old Nanon and Jacques Charpentier to help, we shall very well be able to manage the house-work."

"Mamma," gasped Félicie, with anguish in her voice, "I have just remembered the most terrible thing!"

"What, then?"

"I told you just now that Léon promised me fifty francs for our pilgrimage."

"Well, he cannot give it," said Claire, hastily.

"But consider! The money is already consecrated—"

"How!"

"Oh, in his own mind; and they have even told his Grandeur. If he withdraws the offer, will it not be sacrilege?"

"Whatever it may be," her sister declared, "I am certain you will not see your fifty francs."

"Oh, Claire, don't say so! It is the most terrible position! A promise to the Church is as sacred as a vow—it must be kept, at whatever cost; and if Léon withdraws it, I shall never again have a moment's peace! I am ready to make any sacrifices, but this is too unendurable!"

It was quite true that she was shaken by the mere possibility—far more shaken than she had been by the news the post had brought. She began her lament again, almost in tears: "It would be a sin."

"If Léon has not the money, how can he give it?" demanded her sister, looking at her with pitying scorn. She accepted the fact that Félicie, being *dévôte*, must be allowed to go certain lengths; but she thought her eagerness childish, and turned to her mother. "What else can we think of? It is so difficult to economise when already we have cut down our expenses to their very lowest."

"Not quite to their lowest. We must counter-order my winter cloak and your dresses. Write to Tours at once, Claire."

"Your cloak!" repeated her daughter, depreciatingly. "Is that necessary? You suffer so much from the cold, and the old one is so thin!"

"It cannot be helped." Mme. de Beudrillart spoke with sharp impatience. "I am quite aware of what you say; but if Monsieur Georges and the other men have ruined Léon, we must take our share in his suffering."

"Poor Monsieur Georges! I really believe he did his utmost for the property."

"Do not talk of what you do not understand," said her mother, coldly. "What do you know about business matters? You might judge from the results."

Claire, however, persisted.

"I am certain he was not dishonest."

"If he was not dishonest, he was a fool, which is as dangerous."

"Shall you write to our poor Léon to-day, mamma?" asked Félicie, turning tear-laden eyes towards her.

"Certainly. He will expect it. Dear fellow, I shall tell him that we are ready to make every possible effort, every sacrifice, and implore him not to afflict himself, because there can be no doubt that something will be arranged."

"But you will not say anything against the pilgrimage?"

"Félicie, you are too foolish with your pilgrimages!" Claire was beginning, impatiently, when Mme. de Beudrillart stopped her.

"Do not vex your sister. It is very certain that we want all the prayers and the help we can have, and perhaps—" Suddenly she flung up her hands and clasped her head. "Oh, Léon, my poor Léon! To lose Poissy!"

This little action in one hitherto so confident gave her daughters a shock; they seemed for the first time to realise the full force of the disaster hanging over their family, and to comprehend that it was close at hand. Claire stood up right, her face hard and set; Félicie pushed away her embroidery-frame, and broke into sobs. But the next moment Mme. de Beudrillart's strong will reasserted itself, and she lifted her head rigidly.

"This is weak," she said. "Félicie, go on with your work. Claire, send Rose-Marie to my room, and see whether Pierre has called for the letters. Do not on any account allow him to leave without mine."

All that day the sisters talked together; if without much sympathy, yet with that certain amount which a close tie of relationship must bring in such a crisis. Their mother remained absolutely silent. She took up one thing after another, and laid each down with restless unquiet; more than once walked without apparent purpose to the window, and stood mutely looking out. Poissy had never been fuller of charm. Young spring was at work beautifying the old château; a sweet, clear sunlight fell upon the delicate turret, and flung light shadows along the open stone-work with which it was fretted. Over a doorway was carved the Beudrillart escutcheon, and a slender tuft of grass waved audaciously from a crevice above. If, as she looked, there was agony in Mme. de Beudrillart's heart, she made no sign. Only Claire noticed how tightly her hands were locked together and her lips compressed; but even Claire, whose feelings most resembled hers, dared not touch again upon the subject near all their hearts, although there was more than one question which she longed to have answered. Visitors came, and she received them as usual—even talking undauntedly of certain improvements which her son contemplated making about the château.

"Monsieur de Beudrillart does not, however, spend much time here?" asked one lady, curiously. Like others in the neighbourhood, she had heard rumours, and her visit was in a great measure due to a desire to know how much was true. "Apparently he finds it dull?"

"I hope we may see more of him in the future," returned the mother, looking at her without shrinking.

"I am glad of it; he is always so pleasant! What can we do to keep him? I said to my husband that his family should persuade him to marry, for nowadays there are always plenty of girls going about with really fine fortunes; and he need not be particular as to family," she added, with a laugh. "He, if any one, could afford a roturier for his father-in-law."

"I agree with you," said Mme. de Beudrillart, calmly; "but I am afraid that a fortune has no attraction for Léon. He is unlike other young men, for he was born with romantic ideas, and I, for one, cannot wish it to be otherwise."

"She could hardly have been so cool if all we have heard is true," said Mme. de la Ferraye to her husband, as they drove away. "She talked of his return, and even of improvements to the estate. I cannot believe the rumour. It is incredible!"

"She is a strong woman; but it is true, for all that."

"Then what *can* he do? He is not the man to be chosen for any public appointment."

"No. He is clever enough, but his education has taught him nothing beyond the classics, and he has no habits of industry."

Mme. de la Ferraye shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"As I told his mother, he must marry—there is nothing else for it. Let us find him a wife, Gaspard, though, Heaven knows, I pity the poor girl who has that will of iron for a mother-in-law!"

"Or Léon de Beudrillart for a husband."

"No, no; now you are too hard, and you will never get me to agree with you. There is something so fascinating and charming about him, that I am convinced he would make his wife very happy."

"If she were content to keep her eyes shut."

"Well, she would be. Trust me, Gaspard, Léon's wife, whoever she was, would believe nothing against him."

"In that case—"

While the La Ferrayes were taking leave, Mme. de Beudrillart stood rigidly unbending; but as soon as they were gone she hurriedly left the room.

"Poor mamma!" cried Félicie, her eyes filling with ready tears.

"That woman came from curiosity," Claire said, pacing up and down indignantly; "she has heard something, and meant to worm it out of us. It is too horrible that Léon's affairs should be the common gossip of the country!"

"Claire," faltered her sister.

"Well?"

"Do you—do you think it even possible that we might have to—to leave Poissy?"

"Monsieur Georges feared it long ago. But I cannot believe it," said Claire, clinching her hands. "Poissy without a Beudrillart! No—it will not be permitted!"

"Heaven will not interfere if Léon fails in his promises to the Church," sobbed Félicie. With her the family will, not so openly apparent, took refuge in a gentle obstinacy, which was perhaps more irritating. "I believe these misfortunes are sent as a chastisement for my having listened to you, and not left the world when Père Roget spoke to me about it. I am certain that I had a vocation, and then what might I not have gained for Léon! I wonder where we shall live? In Tours? Imagine losing the Abbé Nisard as one's director!"

"Oh, be quiet, Félicie, or you will drive me mad! How can you think, how can you talk, of these horrible possibilities? Something must be done. If only I were a man!"

"Why?" asked her sister, opening her eyes.

"Because I would work, fight, starve!"

She walked swiftly up and down the room like some caged creature.

"Léon is a man, and it doesn't seem that he can do anything."

"No, but / would!" cried Claire, flinging back her head. "If I could only be out in the world, you would see that I should not allow myself to be beaten!"

Félicie shuddered.

"That terrible world. I give constant thanks that I am not forced into it. It is wicked of you, Claire, even to wish to be there; for what would become of you in all its temptations?"

"I should get through them somehow, like other people, I suppose," said the younger sister, recklessly. "You and I are different, Félicie. I do not profess to be devote. All your good little fripperies would weary me—oh, weary me to death! I could not ask permission from the abbé as to every book I read, almost as to every word I spoke, nor, though there is time enough on one's hands, Heaven knows, spend it in collecting money from the peasants, or in working banners. I should hate a convent, unless—perhaps—I were Mother Superior."

"Yes, we are different," Félicie placidly agreed. "I am happy to be directed."

Claire looked at her with a short laugh.

"And yet, my dear, you like your own way, and generally get it."

Félicie took no notice of the criticism, merely remarking, with a sigh:

"Without Rose-Marie we shall have a great deal to do, and I only hope my other duties will not suffer. I shall draw up a little paper and arrange my time. Poor Rose-Marie! What a grief for her!"

"For her! A servant! Do you understand what lies before us—us Beudrillarts?"

Claire's tone was tense and sharp. Félicie sighed again and cried a little, taking care not to drop a tear upon her work. She had charge of the ecclesiastical vestments of the parish, and was almost as proud of them as of the Beudrillart blood.

The next day all was joy at Poissy. Léon wrote briefly, merely saying that he had managed to raise the full sum of money by a loan. He would thus be able to consolidate his debts, and have one creditor in place of many.

"It is true,"—this was what he wrote—"that the loan must be repaid, but for this purpose look forward, dear mother, to a change in all my habits. I am going to renounce wandering, and to spend my time at Poissy, cease to play the fool, farm, economise, reform—Heaven knows what admirable paths do not stretch themselves before me! You will make them so charming that I shall not regret Paris, and I shall be so changed that you will forget your troublesome son, and fall in love with a new, a whitewashed, Léon, at whom, if only the past is merciful, no one will dare fling a stone."

"Ah, my dear one!" cried Mme. de Beaudrillart, passionately kissing the letter.

"Tell Félicie I mean to redeem my promise, and she shall have a hundred francs instead of fifty for her do—" If he had been going to write dolls, he scratched out the irreverent word and substituted "decorations. I return to-morrow, or so I hope; but, come what may, rejoice, dear mother, that Poissy is spared to us."

If there were one or two slightly enigmatical expressions in his letter, the mother did not notice them; nor even to her daughters did she show outward signs of exultation. She announced the change to them by saying, calmly:

"It is as I expected: Léon has arranged matters; but we must still economise strictly."

Félicie went about with clasped hands and a radiant face, enchanted with her hundred francs. Claire's features seemed to have grown a little sharper, and her voice more haughty, that was all; and so the cloud rolled off.

Léon came home. He looked ill; but, then, as Mme. de Beaudrillart said, he had been sadly harassed. She was a little disappointed that he did not communicate more particulars of the interview with M. de Cadanet, for on this point, although he generally talked very freely, he was reticent.

After all, as she told herself, what did it matter?

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## Chapter Four.

### Nathalie.

Young M. de Beaudrillart was as good as his word. In her wildest dreams even his mother—whose hopes had undergone many deaths and many resurrections—had not ventured to picture him so content to remain in the quiet of the provinces as he proved himself. Whatever distaste he felt, very few outward signs betrayed it. An easy temper came to his help, and carried him lightly over rough places. He applied himself to looking into his affairs, a work which the unlucky M. Georges had long and vainly urged, and he showed a somewhat unexpected aptitude for business matters. He made no protests—beyond an occasionally wry face—against the strict economies of the household, and, to Félicie's unbounded delight, not only refrained from mocking her pious works, but more than once gave her unexpected assistance. To the women it appeared as if golden days had begun, only Claire felt that here was the fruit of M. Georges' prudent counsels, and thought it hard that M. Georges himself should remain under undeserved obloquy. Perhaps these few months were the happiest Mme. de Beaudrillart had ever known. Her belief in her son was justified—more than justified—and she looked the world proudly in the face.

Then Léon made another step in the path of surprises, and fell in love. As has been already remarked, a rich marriage had seemed the easiest way out of his difficulties, and again and again had been suggested to him, not only by his mother, but by his boon companions. Fortunes were dangled temptingly before his eyes, and he would none of them. Some strange scruple—strange, at least, in the man—some mastering sentiment, had rooted itself so deeply in his heart that it was not to be disposed of. It was the noblest thing there, and it was sighed over and laughed at, as first one, then another, tried their hand at eradication. Léon would not give it up. He declined to marry for anything short of love, and he had persuaded himself that he should never know what that meant, when he accidentally caught sight of a tall, fair, innocent-faced girl, with red-brown hair, and, once seen, would not rest until he had contrived to hear her speak and to learn her name. Then he went home and implored his mother to make the necessary advances.

Mme. de Beaudrillart yielded with scarcely a word, and yet the pang to her was great. She had been prepared for, had even urged upon her son, a sacrifice to mammon in the shape of a wife of inferior birth and large wealth. If such a one had been chosen in Paris she would hardly have sighed; but it was a different matter to be asked to accept a roturière at their very doors. The wrong to the De Beaudrillarts became infinitely more insulting, and though, as has been said, strong common-sense led her immediately to grasp the advantage and to yield, it was tolerably certain that she would never forgive the offender.

She spoke of it, however, to her daughters calmly one morning as they were walking home from mass.—Félicie anxiously inquired for her brother, who occasionally, though rarely, accompanied them, and was told that he had driven that morning into Tours.

"To Tours? And so early!"

"He finds himself very often in Tours of late," remarked Claire, significantly.

"He will have been at mass at the cathedral."

"There is some one, then, whom he wishes to see?" Claire continued. "Does he think of marrying?"



Félicie cried out: "Claire, how you talk!"

"Your brother has different notions from other young men," said Mme. de Beudrillart, speaking, as her younger daughter detected, with an effort. "You are correct in supposing that he has an idea of marriage, and I am sure he is right. Good-morning, Martine. I did not see your eldest son at mass."

"No, madame," said the old woman, sadly; "he has come back from his soldiering saying things which would have made his father's hair stand on end; and though I tell him that, even if matters are as his clever friends tell him, there's always a chance that he will find Monsieur Abbé right after all, and then he will wish he had taken the precaution of going to mass, he won't listen."

"That is very bad," said Mme. de Beudrillart, gravely. "You should not have him at home with the others, Martine."

"Ah, madame, he is my son, and the good God gave him to me!"

"That is true; but I am afraid you are weak with him. Well, I will speak to Monsieur Nisard, and he will talk to Jacques."

She moved on, and Claire cried, eagerly: "Mamma, I am dying of impatience! Of whom is Léon thinking?"

"The young lady is Mademoiselle Bourget."

"Mademoiselle Bourget!" exclaimed Claire, stupefied. "But—you do not mean the daughter of Monsieur Bourget, at Tours?"

"Precisely."

"Léon! A Beudrillart marry a Tours bourgeoise!"

"Is the idea so new to you?" demanded her mother, coldly. "For myself, I am satisfied. Poor Léon's misfortunes have brought him many trials. With this marriage he will be able to pay off debts which otherwise would have hung round his neck for years, and be relieved from some of the privations which he has borne so nobly. Reflect whether it is not so." Mlle. Claire marched towards the bridge, upright and frowning. It was Félicie who broke into gasping protestations.

"But you do not mean that terrible radical of a man who opposes all that is good and holy in the neighbourhood! Mamma, impossible! Say that it is impossible!"

"I believe that he is a radical."

"An enemy of the Church."

"That is not inconceivable. Hush, Félicie, and submit yourself to the inevitable. If Léon has resolved to marry the girl, he will do it."

"Oh," moaned her daughter, "why was any one so cruel as to mention her to him?"

Mme. de Beudrillart was silent. To have told Félicie that Nathalie was Léon's own choice would have shocked her further; and while detesting the proposed marriage more than either of her daughters, the task of reconciling them to it caused her sharp impatience. Nor were her prejudices without excuse.

M. Bourget was a retired builder, who, by dint of extreme sagacity and small economies, had contrived to amass a large fortune. It should be said at once that no suspicion of dishonesty had touched his name. It was popularly believed that he had never been known to forego an advantage or to condone a debt; but this reputation did him no harm in the eyes of those who had not felt his grasp, and the town was inclined to be proud of its shrewd citizen, the more so as he was never so happy as when he was in the thick of battle, where it is but doing him bare justice to allow that he seldom permitted himself to be beaten. He fought municipal authorities, he fought the arrondissement, he fought deputies and bishops, with equal delight and success, until his name had become in certain quarters a thing of terror. Radical and republican, it was considered extremely probable that he would put himself forward as a candidate for the Conseil-Général, and if he did, it was owned with a shudder that he would certainly carry his election. Perhaps, had Léon known from the first that the girl he one day noticed on her way from the cathedral was the daughter of old Bourget, he would have shut his heart to her image; but by the time he made the discovery it was installed.

The incident of their meeting was of the slightest. A little child had fallen down, and Nathalie, walking swiftly and firmly across the open space in front of the great church, an old woman for her companion, ran to pick him up. Struck by something frank and noble in her bearing, Léon pleased himself by stopping to assist her. At first Nathalie, whose thoughts were concentrated upon the child, scarcely glanced at him, but when the small victim was found to be practically unhurt, she looked full in his face with a smile and a frank directness which delighted him. He was not a bad judge of expression, and in hers he read certain qualities which he might not have been expected to appreciate, but which attracted him as much as if he had been a better man. He did not rest until he had found out all about her, and contriving more than once to get sight of her, commissioned a friend to make the necessary advances.

His suit was not so certain to be successful as he and Mme. de Beudrillart supposed. But for one point in the old builder's character, it might even have been violently rejected. The point was one which he shared with a large number of mercantile Frenchmen, republican or not, and it consisted in an inordinate craving to see his family become noble. He would not follow the example of many of his neighbours: adopt the *de*, and trust to time and custom riveting the distinction; but he desired it for his child with an intensity which became all the stronger because he was ashamed to admit it openly. When overtures reached him from Léon de Beudrillart, he hesitated, knowing

that rumour had been unpleasantly busy with his name. But—a De Beaudrillart! The temptation was irresistible. His affection for his daughter had woven itself into the strongest resolution of his life—a determination that she should be received into an aristocracy which he ran down in word and worshipped in heart. It was the strongest and the most difficult; the more reason for his stubborn will to carry it.

For many years it had been a bitter disappointment to him that he had no son, but by the time his wife died all his affections and all his ambitions had become centred in Nathalie, and he felt that if he could but see her married as he desired, the struggles and privations of his life would be amply repaid. For this end, as for his other ends, he worked shrewdly. From the first, and while still pinching himself in many ways, he had given her an excellent education at a convent. Nothing so much irritated him as extravagance, but he was almost displeased with Nathalie when she showed a shrinking from expenditure. He himself marched about Tours in the rustiest of coats, yet the girl's dress must be as dainty as the best milliner could produce. His neighbours were amazed at such inconsistencies; they did not understand that they were part of a carefully-thought-out, well-organised intention. In his treatment of his daughter he was influenced not so much, perhaps not at all, by the impulse to indulge her with which they credited him—for her tastes were, in truth, provokingly simple—as by a clearly-formed design to fit her for another class than that in which she was born.

Perhaps, however, his ambitions and his methods would have been equally in vain had it not been for the fact that Nathalie was charmingly pretty. She was tall, slender, with hazel eyes, and as unlike as possible to M. Bourget himself. Moreover, she had the grace of simplicity, and appeared to be indifferent to her own beauty. This simplicity it was which, joined to a certain sweet dignity, first attracted Léon.

And then began M. Bourget's struggle. He required no enlightenment. M. de Beaudrillart's extravagances, M. de Beaudrillart's follies, were well known in Tours and its neighbourhood. Over against them in the scale had to be placed Poissy and M. Bourget's ambition. He knew very well that he would have to give, not only his daughter, but a great deal of money, and, to do him justice, he thought more of his daughter than of his money. But Poissy, Poissy! Poissy for years had been the safety-valve of his imagination, a quality the stronger for being unsuspected. It appeared to him that nothing which could befall Nathalie could quench the glory of becoming merged in that ancient family. When, therefore, the question arose of her being mistress, it will be perceived what a strong advocate was presented for Léon.

Moreover, sops for his better judgment were not wanting. If Léon's conduct had exposed him to criticism, there always remained the strange change in his life, in his disposition, apparently in his fortunes. At a time when rumour had been most busy, and when misfortune appeared to hang most threateningly over the heads of the De Beaudrillarts, rumour had been checkmated. Money had been forthcoming, debts had been paid, and Léon, wrenching himself from life in Paris, had come back to work in a way which M. Bourget could appreciate and respect, and had saved Poissy. It is true that, during the time when talk had declared its fate to be imminent, M. Bourget had a hundred times turned over the possibility of stepping in himself and buying up the mortgages, but it is doubtful whether he would ever have been able to make up his mind to such an act; for while to his little world he delighted in breathing out all manner of ferociously republican sentiments, in heart he was an abject adorer of the ancien régime—at all events, so far as Poissy was concerned. It would have given him no real pleasure to become its owner; it is doubtful whether he would not have been the first to consider himself a sacrilegious dispossessor of the old family. It was not the bare possession which he coveted; for the De Beaudrillarts to go out and the Bourgets to come in was as unsuitable, as horrible in his eyes, as it could have been in their own. But for his family to become merged in theirs, his child to be actually one of them, that—that was indeed to satisfy the deeper subtleties of his ambition.

As he marched with short, determined steps through the streets of Tours, M. Bourget flung back his head, advanced an aggressive chest, swelled, and assumed what he felt to be the grand air. Passing in front of a photographer's shop, it seemed like a response to behold Poissy in all its delicate beauty looking serenely at him from out of a collection of Touraine châteaux.

"Aha, see there!" he cried, rubbing his hands in delighted apostrophe. "And to think that the day is come when Nathalie may, if I but say the word, step into its walls, and hold up her head with the proudest of them. She shall be painted, too, and by the best painter in France, so as to hang with the others in the picture-gallery—Nathalie de Beaudrillart, née Bourget, *my* child."

The man's whole figure was transformed, his round red face, garnished with thick iron-grey eyebrows, gleamed with pride and exultation, and at this moment, although it pleased him to profess that the overture he had received was still under consideration, worse sins than any which he had heard laid to the charge of Léon de Beaudrillart would assuredly have been condoned.

The matter, therefore, went on apace. To the elder people the preliminaries were the most important part, and Mme. de Beaudrillart, although she found it a bitter draught to swallow, had long desired that her son's romantic notions should give way to what she called reason. Here was reason, plain, bourgeois, moneyed reason, and there was no excuse for falling foul of it. Such a dowry as Nathalie would bring was sufficient to wipe off the debt to M. de Cadanet, and to replace the owner of Poissy in his old position. And, after all, when a man marries a woman, Mme. de Beaudrillart argued, it is she who is raised, not he who is dragged down. King Cophetua's beggar-girl became a queen, and the Bourget would be merged in the De Beaudrillarts.

She said this to her son, and he smiled.

"With all my heart, though you may find it difficult to efface my future father-in-law."

Mme. de Beaudrillart shuddered.

"I imagine that he can be made to understand the situation."

"He would tell you that he understood it perfectly. If you could look into his ledger, I am convinced that you would find on one page an entry of value received, title, position, what you like, and on the opposite the purchase-money, so many hundred thousand francs. But he will see that he gets what he pays for."

"You mean he will expect to come here!"

"Is that unreasonable?"

Mme. de Beaudrillart flung back her head.

"I think so. If he regards the matter in the light of a bargain, I do not see where he comes in."

"I imagine his daughter will think otherwise," said Léon, caressing a kitten which had sprung on his knee.

Mme. de Beaudrillart replied, with perhaps unintentional bitterness:

"She, at any rate, may be satisfied with what she has got."

"As to that," returned her son, a little less lazily than he had hitherto spoken, "she has not yet consented."

His mother folded her hands on the table before her, and looked steadily at him.

"Do me the favour, Léon, to explain."

"It is perfectly simple. I do not think that I am repugnant to her; but she says that she must know me better, and judge for herself before deciding."

Mme. de Beaudrillart shut her thin lips and remained silent. When she spoke at last, it was to say, in a hushed voice:

"Do not repeat this to your sisters, Léon, unless you wish to degrade your future wife in their eyes. It is all unspeakably bourgeoisie."

"It is charming, whatever it is," he replied, good-humouredly. "The world goes on, mother, even at Poissy. My great-great-grandfather stormed a castle and killed half a dozen gentlemen to gain a bride; I, his descendant, am—"

"Bidden to a builder's back parlour to see whether you are approved of! The first was infinitely the more respectable. The world goes fast, as you say, because it is easy enough to go downhill. Even the crimes of the present day are petty and sordid. In old times men smote and slew; now they cheat and steal."

With a sudden movement Léon turned on his chair and dislodged the kitten, which sprang to the ground and mewed protestingly. The change which every now and then altered his face, and robbed it of its youth, was there now, and it startled his mother.

"My Léon, what is it? You are ill!" she exclaimed, anxiously.

"It is past," he said, with an effort.

"But what was it!"

"A spasm."

"My poor boy! I know how it is. You work too hard, and fret yourself over that debt. As if Monsieur de Cadanet would not be happy enough to wait your convenience! Well, there is this to be said for Mademoiselle Bourget: although I know you are indifferent to her dowry, it will free you from worry on that score." While she spoke she went to a small cupboard, unlocked it, took out a glass and bottle, each of rare design and workmanship, and came back. "There," she said, pouring a few drops into a glass, and putting it to his lips, "drink. It is an old cordial, which agrees with the Beaudrillart blood. You are better!"

"Well," said Léon, smiling again. "I know that stuff of old. It is magical."

"For your family, yes."

"You think it would not cure Monsieur Bourget!"

"It will not have the chance," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, quietly. She was replacing the glass and bottle in the cupboard when a thought struck her. "By-the-way, Léon—"

"Yes."

"You have never given me Monsieur de Cadanet's acknowledgment of the five hundred francs you forwarded; and as I keep all the receipts together, I should be glad to have it." There was a short silence. Then Léon stretched himself, got up, and went to the window, the kitten in his arms.

"Ah," he said, "he has not sent any."

"Not sent any! But why?"

"Who can tell? Monsieur de Cadanet appeared to me to be an eccentric. Perhaps he thinks the sum too trifling. Perhaps he is conveniently forgetful—perhaps—oh, we need not worry. He has received it, without doubt."

"I do not like it," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, frowning.

"No, it is unbusinesslike, is it not? Console yourself, mother. When you pay anything to Monsieur Bourget, you will have your acknowledgment executed with every formality and the most scrupulous exactitude."

If he hoped by this counter-irritation to turn her thoughts, he apparently succeeded. The idea of M. Bourget's tradesmanlike qualities produced its desired effect as a foil to M. de Cadanet's carelessness. But that she was not absolutely satisfied was evident from her calling after Léon, as he left the room:

"All the same, would it not be well for me to write and ascertain whether the money has reached him safely? The post is not absolutely safe, and it would be extremely annoying to find there had been any failure in delivery."

Léon came back hurriedly.

"Mother, I must entreat you, leave the matter with me. Do not on any account, now or at a future time, interfere between me and Monsieur de Cadanet. You might do me incalculable harm."

He spoke with sharp excitement, altogether unlike himself, and Mme. de Beaudrillart stared amazedly. If either of her other children had addressed her in such a tone, the offence would have been grievous; as it was, it was Léon, and Léon, as she immediately reflected, not quite himself, so that she contented herself with saying, stiffly:

"Calm yourself, Léon; you should be well aware that I am not likely to act in a manner to endanger either your interests or your honour with Monsieur de Cadanet or any other person."

He turned from her, came back, and kissed her impulsively. But what he said had apparently nothing to do with what had passed.

"Poor mother! You are glad that we kept Poissy?"

"If we had lost it, I think it would have killed me."

She had never admitted so much.

"Come, courage, then!" he exclaimed; "it appears now as if it would be tolerably safe; and with you and Nathalie—if I can win her—by my side, one may defy even—"

"Who!" demanded his mother, anxiously.

"Oh, Monsieur Bourget, to be sure!" he cried, with a laugh, as he shut the door.

It was true, although Mme. de Beaudrillart would not believe it, and although M. de Bourget growled at the girl's whims, that Nathalie hesitated whether or not she should accept M. de Beaudrillart. For her neither Poissy nor alliance with an ancient family offered attractions; on the contrary, she thought of both with dread and shrinking, foreseeing trials which might prove almost unendurable. If the course of wooing had been such as Mme. de Beaudrillart's etiquette exacted, and all the advances had been made by deputy, it is very certain that Nathalie would have rejected her honours, in spite of her terrible father's displeasure. But a nameless something had attracted her to Léon on the day when they first met before the cathedral, and each of the two interviews which followed deepened the attraction. There was an open, easy charm about the young man difficult to resist. She knew that he had been extravagant, and the knowledge caused her some disquiet, but would not have shaken her determination; indeed, disgraceful as it would have seemed to Mme. de Beaudrillart, when they had seen each other but three times, she was hopelessly and irretrievably in love.

Then, one day, in an old carriage, as old as the hills, drawn by two borrowed horses, and driven by Jean Charpentier's brother, Mme. de Beaudrillart rolled into Tours, and solemnly demanded the hand of Mlle. Nathalie Bourget for her son, M. Léon de Beaudrillart.

To her son, even, his mother never related the details of that interview. M. Bourget, not so reticent, repeated over and over again with glee the speeches he had made, the answers he had received. While he took care to preserve to himself the honours of the encounter, he delighted in accentuating Mme. de Beaudrillart's pride, that those who listened to him might not fail to understand what sort of family this was into which Nathalie was about to marry. It was true that some of her fine sarcasms, her scarcely-veiled contempt, were as little felt by him as the sting of a gnat upon the hide of a rhinoceros; but he was acute enough to understand that she wished to humiliate him as a revenge for the humiliation she was enduring herself, and appreciated the desire as fitting on the part of the owners of Poissy. She had said to him:

"I cannot attempt to conceal from you, Monsieur Bourget, that my son's choice has caused me profound astonishment. With his person and his position, he might have married into any of the great families of France, and I am certain you are too sensible a man to take offence when I say that such a marriage would have appeared to me far more appropriate."

"Perhaps Monsieur de Beaudrillart reflects that when one marries one must live," remarked M. Bourget, dryly.

But so far was he from taking offence that he repeated the speech with real enjoyment to a small lawyer of his acquaintance, a red republican like himself.

"And you endured such insolence!" cried M. Leroux, bounding on his chair.

"Endured? I can tell you that I admired it. I did not let her see it, it is true, for one must keep such people in their

places; but, after all, she is right, for a De Beaudrillart may marry where he pleases." And M. Bourget, radiant with delight, brought his hand heavily down on the table, and leaned forward to give his words more effect: "He marries my daughter."

It was the crowning point of his life. No other moment in his career—and he had had his triumphs—had caused him such unmitigated satisfaction. Tours rang with the news, the very walls seemed to whisper it in his ears as he walked along the narrow streets, and he never failed to pass by the photographer's, and to fling a glance of recognition at Poissy—Poissy, with its delicate grace, its exquisite lines—as who should say, "Tiens, ma belle, thou and I are no longer strangers; we belong to each other."

With M. Bourget in this amiable mood, all went smoothly.

Léon, who was well aware of the accepted opinion of his father-in-law and his rigid economies, was amazed by the liberality of his proposals. He had expected carpings, opposition, cutting down, and he found, to his astonishment, that M. Bourget's principal care was that the estate should pass unencumbered to Nathalie's children. One day he said, frankly:

"See here, Monsieur de Beaudrillart,"—he never called his future son-in-law by any other name—"I am perfectly aware that you have committed innumerable follies, and that it has even been touch and go whether you could keep Poissy. At one time, unless rumour lies even more than is usual with her, I might have got possession of it myself. But that, I at once admit, would not have suited me. Poissy without the De Beaudrillarts would be like a body without a soul; you two have to keep together, if you are to hold your position in the world; and now that Nathalie is to become one of you, it is my business to see that you *do* keep together. You comprehend! For what is past I care nothing; I put no inquiries, it is over. It is what is to come which is my affair. There must be no more follies, no more extravagances. My part of the bargain is to see that when you start you stand on your legs. Well and good. I accept it. I will give my daughter a sum which should be sufficient to set you free from every entanglement—for hampered you must be, and heavily—and enable you with care to regain your proper position; and I tell you, without hesitation, that I do this because I have always resolved that Nathalie should marry above her station. What will you? It is perhaps a folly, a weakness, but—it pleases me. I wish to see her where I have no inclination to be myself, and, like other things in this world, what we want we must pay for. There, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, you have the situation, and my motive."

Léon had listened to this harangue with an inscrutable face. When M. Bourget paused—rather scant of breath—he looked up and said, pleasantly:

"Mine is simpler. I love Nathalie."

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## Chapter Five.

### A Whim.

Romance, which gives itself the airs of unfettered liberty, has nevertheless its laws, and it was contrary to these laws that Léon should have been in love with the girl who brought him such a fortune as put him at once beyond the reach of embarrassment. No one, not even his mother, believed it; if she had, it is doubtful whether she could have put up with Nathalie at all. She assured herself that the marriage belonged to the new developments of prudence in Léon, a praiseworthy continuation of his efforts to redeem the estate; and while she appreciated the sacrifice he had made, she never ceased to pity him for having been obliged to make it. Nothing which he could say or do succeeded in convincing her or his sisters as to what had been his real motive—perhaps no one in the world credited it except Nathalie herself.

It was true, however, that he really loved her, and with the easy carelessness of his nature managed to turn his back upon the past, to stop his ears when he heard it calling after him, and to forget that it has hands as well as voices. He had acknowledged to his father-in-law that there was a debt on the estate of two hundred thousand francs. M. Bourget closed his eyes and pursed his mouth.

"And this you propose to pay—how?"

"By instalments. My creditor does not press me."

"He must be a fool or a relation, then," announced the ex-builder, with a loud laugh. "Perhaps both. Well, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, pressed or not, we must get that stone off your neck, I suppose you have not sent much by way of repayment."

"Five hundred francs." Léon spoke in a low voice.

"Ta ta! It will take a good many five hundred francs to repay two hundred thousand," mocked M. Bourget.

The young man was silent.

"Well, I have said that it should be done, and I will be as good as my word. No one has ever been able to say that I was worse. This sum absolutely clears Poissy!"

"Absolutely."

"And there is but one debtor?"

"But one."

"Excuse me, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, but I am a man of business. Some sort of bond, I imagine, exists? I should be glad to have a sight of it."

To M. Bourget's stupefaction, Léon sprang to his feet in a rage.

"Monsieur, you doubt my word! You insult me! Do you suppose that I will submit to dictation from any man, least of all from you! I have told you the position of affairs, and if you do not choose to believe me, let there be an end of everything."

"Softly, softly," said M. Bourget—to tell the truth, as much alarmed as amazed—"it appears to me that if I am going to pay, the suggestion was not unreasonable. Since, however, it offends you so mortally, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, we will say no more about it." He added, with a great sigh, "I suppose you fine gentlemen do not carry out your affairs so methodically as we. The wonder to me is not that you so often come to grief as that you ever escape shipwreck. To object to the existence of a bond! However, as you will, as you will!"

Léon did not at once recover his usual good temper. He looked pale and sat staring moodily at the ground. But, strange to say, what in one of his own class would have excited M. Bourget's anger and suspicion, here rather afforded him satisfaction than otherwise. The De Beaudrillarts were of another race, these outbursts of pride belonged to their history, their traditions, and, though he would have died sooner than betray it, M. Bourget's feeling towards them comprised something of the abject loyalty with which the working bee regards his queen. He promised himself that Nathalie's money should be as safely secured as the law permitted, but he, to whom the outgoing of a piece of ten sous was a matter of consideration, by some curious contradiction gloried in the carelessness which would disperse a fortune with as little heed as if money were to be had for the picking up. Glancing at Léon he said, tentatively:

"One may not even ask the name of the creditor?"

"I cannot give it," Léon answered, shortly.

"At any rate, when the money is paid you will show me the receipt?"

"Impossible."

M. Bourget judged it necessary to make a show of displeasure. He frowned heavily.

"Allow me to say, Monsieur le baron, that you demand more confidence than you display."

"Yes, that is true," said Léon, lightly, once more. "But if I give you my word of honour that the money will be sent to the creditor, you will be satisfied, will you not?"

M. Bourget was satisfied, whether he suffered himself to appear so or not. The word of a De Beaudrillart had gained an enormous value in his eyes. Yet Léon's next remark was sufficiently startling.

"If you are so good as to clear Poissy of debt when Nathalie enters it as my wife, may I ask you to pay the sum into my banker's, so that I may take it out in the form most convenient."

"A cheque would tell tales," muttered M. Bourget to himself. "Decidedly, there is a mystery somewhere. However, when one is drawn into an old family such as the De Beaudrillarts, one must accept mysteries. The money will be paid. He gave me his word. For the rest, I shall see that Nathalie is safe."

It will be perceived that anxiety for the marriage had brought M. Bourget to the point of swallowing a great deal, but as regarded the payment of the debt, Mme. de Beaudrillart also had her anxieties. As soon as Léon and his wife were settled at Poissy, she sounded her son on the subject, one day, immediately after the late breakfast, when Nathalie had left the room to fetch her hat, and Félicie and Claire obeyed a hint from their mother and followed.

"Until now," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, "I have not spoken of the necessary business, but there is one point which should be settled at once."

He laughed, and kissed her on each cheek.

"Only one! What luck!"

"Well, only one that presses: your debt to Monsieur de Cadanet."

"Ah!" He made a step towards the window, but came back. "That is paid."

"Already!"

"The day after our wedding."

She looked at him admiringly. "Ah, you are a man of honour! Monsieur de Cadanet cannot say that you have lost so much as a day. He must have congratulated you?"

"He is not a man of words."

"Perhaps not; but a few on such an occasion would have done him no harm. Do you mean to say that no felicitations came with his acknowledgment?"

"Not one."

"The bear! I really think from what you have told me he must have changed very much—"

"Don't blame him, mother. His money saved Poissy," said Léon, quickly.

"Certainly. You need not tell me that. But what harm has it done him! Principal and interest have both been repaid in full, and I do not forget his indebtedness to your father. Say what you will, he has been very boorish. And, Léon, though you did not give me his former acknowledgment, it is quite necessary that this last should be placed in safe keeping."

He was silent, and she looked at him uneasily. His short, abrupt sentences, so different from his usual gay chatter, some change in his face, disturbed her. She felt it her duty to press the point.

"It should be put into the iron safe with the other deeds. Come, Léon, do not delay; let us see to it at once."

"I am going out with Nathalie."

Mme. de Beaudrillart frowned. "Nathalie! Surely Nathalie can wait! You jest."

"No, mother, but you don't understand that I am indisposed for business."

"If you have no better excuse, I must ask you to fetch the paper at once." His allusion to his wife had angered her.

"I have my own boxes."

"They are not sufficiently secure for the acknowledgment of such a sum. Consider. One day you may have to reckon with Monsieur de Cadanet's heirs, who may not be so obliging as Monsieur de Cadanet."

Consider! As if this knowledge had not weighed upon him ever since that autumn day. Not once had he ventured to Paris. Now at last he was safe, and why not satisfy his mother? He turned to her gaily.

"Study a woman if you want to learn persistence. Well, mother, wait for me, and if Nathalie comes, ask her to stroll towards the river, while you and I make a pilgrimage to the strong-box."

If Mme. de Beaudrillart hoped to have feasted her eyes upon the paper, she was mistaken. What her son brought and deposited in the safe was a long blank envelope, securely sealed. She suggested in vain that something on the cover should mark its contents.

"Unnecessary. You and I are both likely to remember."

"As to remembering, yes. But it seems foolish. What possible objection can you have?"

"A whim."

Mme. de Beaudrillart remarked that a whim was unmethodical.

"Oh, I admit it. But as Monsieur Bourget is not likely ever to rummage among these papers—"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Let us be unmethodical in peace. Besides, I have my reasons, and—Nathalie is waiting. Don't you find her enchanting?"

"I think she has good sense."

"And Claire and Félicie? She is so anxious, poor child, to love you all."

"In good time," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, coldly. "She has a great deal to learn, and we must expect some mistakes, but perhaps by-and-by she may take her position, and forget her little bourgeoisie ways and small economics."

He flushed. "We have had to adopt small economies ourselves, for that matter, mother."

"Yes. Because they were necessary. With her it is because they are natural. Still, as I said, she has good sense, and I do not despair."

"She is charming," murmured the young man, under his breath. He was fully aware that prejudices against his wife existed in the house, but troubled himself very little about them. In time, no doubt, they would all shake in together. Meanwhile, he was quite able to shut his eyes to disagreeables which did not actually affect him. Winter was over, and heaven and earth had leaped into the radiance of spring. Poissy, with its delicate colours, its fretted carvings, smiled at its owners through a veil of fairy-like green. The debt was paid, husband and wife wandered together by the river which ran full after heavy rains, care had vanished, and the sun shone out again.

Nathalie, too, was happy, in spite of having many things to endure for Léon's sake. It cannot be said that they came upon her unexpectedly, for she had always dreaded Poissy, and all the De Beaudrillarts, except Léon, as deeply as her father desired them. Weighed against Léon, she decided that they were as nothing, but this was before she had tried them, and with Love sitting heavily in one balance, it is next to impossible fairly to adjust the opposite weights.

She had a noble character, and this meant a strong will, but Mme. de Beaudrillart and her daughters—Claire, at any rate—had wills of iron. How much and how little to yield became a perpetually fretting problem. At first she carried her doubts to her husband, until she found that he could give her nothing more satisfying than a laugh and a shrug.

"Dear, I know it, I know it, but what will you! My mother has always been accustomed to rule. I often tell her she should have lived a century or two earlier than these degenerate days; and as for Claire and Félicie, they are exactly the same, only she has never allowed them the opportunity to develop, so they are obliged to try their hands on other people. Take my advice, and let them have their way. It will not hurt us, and it will teach you to bless Heaven for having bestowed upon you a husband whom you can twist round your little finger."

She shook her head.

"You know I don't want to twist you round my finger."

"But I am quite willing. Why not spend your energies that way, if my mother will not consent to leave you any other department in which to exercise them."

They were standing together in one of the deep windows of the château, looking out upon a stately terrace, and a garden brilliant, as the Poissy garden had not been for many years, with the rich colouring of summer flowers. Her hand was in his, and she was silent while he talked. But presently she gave a deep sigh, of which he demanded an explanation. She smiled, and said:

"It is only wonder."

"Wonder at what!"

"At myself, at you, that we should be here together, and that I should be your wife. I did not think so much about it at the time, but now it seems as if I should never understand how either your mother or my father consented. She has a horror of parvenues, and he—he—"

"Of the idle rich. But you are not so cruel as to call me idle!"

"No." She looked at him reflectively. "He said that once you were, but that you had changed. What changed you, Léon?"

"Years and necessity," he replied, after a momentary pause. "So my father told me. And I am sure that was what made him approve, for he thought it showed great strength of character. He did indeed, and it made me so proud." Léon winced. Naturally it was galling to M. de Beaudrillart to hear of the approval of M. Bourget. She went on, her head with its wealth of red-brown hair resting against his shoulder, her eyes fixed on the big scarlet pomegranate which flamed on the terrace.

"But—there is one thing I want to say."

"And while you stay like this I am perfectly content to listen all day long."

"Ah, but you must be serious."

"I am. Look at me."

She looked, and he kissed her. "Now, go on. That is only the preamble."

"It is rather distracting when one wants to collect one's ideas," said Nathalie, smiling, but shaking her head. "However, what I want to say is that I hope you will let me help you in what you have to do."

"You are helping me now—to perfection."

"You know that is not what I mean. For one thing, I am really an excellent house-keeper, for my father was very strict in his accounts, and never permitted waste."

"Poor little economist!" said the young man, lightly smoothing her head. "My Nathalie, are you aware that the colour of your hair is simply adorable?"

"Now you are not attending."

"I am, indeed I am. Let me see; where were we. Your father never permitted waste. No. I can imagine Monsieur Bourget rather a severe taskmaster."

"But it was exceedingly useful, and I was glad of it when I knew we were to marry, for I said to myself that if I were not a grand lady, at least I should know how to help you. No, no, Léon, listen! I can keep accounts—only try me, you will not find me ten sous out by the end of the month. And,"—she hesitated slightly—"if she would allow it, I am certain I could spare Madame de Beaudrillart a great deal of trouble. May I ask her?"

"Ask what you like and who you like, so long as you remember that you belong first of all to me," he said, gaily.

"I hope that they will grow to endure me in time," she went on. "Of course, I mustn't be unreasonable and expect everything to come all at once, but—by-and-by. Do you know that it is your sister, Mademoiselle Félicie—"

"Good heavens, Nathalie, don't call her mademoiselle, as if you were her maid!"

She corrected herself shyly. "Félicie, then. It is Félicie whom I dread the most."

"I should have fancied that Claire might have been especially alarming."



"Yes, only I understand her. It is what I expected. But Mad—Félicie is so good and so devout, no nun could be more so, always working for the Church, and she seemed so shocked when I said my father thought ladies—religious ladies, you know—often made the poor pay towards things which they did not understand."

"Did you actually tell Félicie that!"

"Yes, I did. Was I wrong?" she asked, anxiously. "But, Léon, it is true, it is indeed! I can recollect a number of cases in which the poor peasants fancied the most terrible things would happen unless they paid money to avert them. You see, they are so ignorant, there is nothing they will not believe if only you can frighten them. Of course, Félicie does not know this, and perhaps I should not have told her!"

"Oh, as to that, it doesn't matter; it may do her good," he said, amused. "Only of all things to say to Félicie! Did you also inform her you thought they should be educated! She will put you down as a heretic. I must tell Claire." Nathalie looked distressed.

"If you say that in such a tone, I am afraid that it was an impertinence. Léon, indeed I did not dream of such a thing, only when she asked me whether I had ever collected money for banners, and whether I did not think it a great privilege to help the Church, I could not answer in any other way, and yet tell the truth. Could I? No, don't smile, because it is serious, and there is no one here of whom I can venture to ask anything but you."

"Ah, don't make me your conscience, chérie! Or only do so when you think your own means to be hard upon you. Why trouble your pretty head in the matter! But if you must, I will let you into a very important secret: simply that if you fret yourself whenever you say something to displease my mother or my two sisters, you may just say good-bye at once to your peace of mind forever. It is impossible to avoid it, even for you, angel as you are! They and you will always regard things from a totally different point of view."

Her eyes turned gravely on his.

"For a time—don't say always, Léon. I am prepared for that at first, but certainly I can learn what they like if—"

"If?"

"If you will help me."

"Then you will be different, and I don't want you to be different. Let them go their way; you and I can be all in all to each other, if you remain your own dear self—the Nathalie I adore. I wish for nothing more."

How could she resist the sweet charm of such words! While he spoke life seemed easy, and happiness eternal. Full of good-will to all men, she never doubted that time would win her the hearts of the women who loved Léon. She had a strong and noble quality of justice in her character, which gave her the power of judging calmly, and even enabled her to look at herself from the unsympathetic point of view of another person. With a fine intellect and a courageous nature, she did not fear difficulties although she realised them. Before she had been a week at Poissy she had gathered enough to know that a hard task lay before her, and as time went on acknowledged that she must face them alone, except for the almost passionate prayers she sent up. She did not lose heart. But she was impulsive, and, worse, impatient of all that seemed to her small and petty. Bourgeoise though she might be, her education had been excellent, and had given her a far broader outlook than was possessed by either the Poissy demoiselles or their mother. She read English and German books, sometimes even thought she might find in them a safe subject for discussion. In spite of herself, Claire was not unwilling to listen, but Félicie was shocked out of measure.

"Why do you wish to read those unsafe writings?" she would ask. "Do you know, Nathalie, that if people hear of it they will imagine you to be a Protestant or an unbeliever."

"But I am neither. I read because it interests one to know what is thought in other countries."

"That cannot be right," said Félicie, decidedly. "It is flinging away safeguards."

"How?"

"Because here you can ask your priest whether a book is allowable."

Nathalie looked at her bending short-sightedly over her frame, wistful wonder in her own eyes.

"Do you mean that you always ask the priest before you read!"

"Always, always!" exclaimed Félicie. "If not, it is very certain that one might be led into a sin. Do not you?"

"I have never been accustomed to such restrictions," said Mme. Léon in a low voice. "Perhaps your priest is a great reader?"

"He reads his breviary," her sister-in-law answered, reproachfully.

Claire, who felt with anger that Félicie was making herself ridiculous, struck in sharply:

"I do not agree with Félicie, but I think there should be limits, and I cannot say I see the use of stuffing your head with all that foreign literature. It has never been our custom."

"But do you not like to know what others think?"

"That is of small consequence," said Claire, superbly.

"It is far better to do something useful," announced her sister, threading her needle.

"One may do more useful work than embroider vestments, however," Claire returned. She despised Félicie's narrow interests, and if Nathalie had been one of her own rank, Claire would have warmly taken her side in the matter of books. As it was, Nathalie was too shy to fight the battle of the uses of self-improvement, but a life without new books or newspapers, which appeared to rest under the same ban, looked so empty to her that she consulted her husband.

His advice, as usual, was to please herself. "Order what you want, and ask no one."

"But if it displeases your mother!" said Nathalie, timidly. "Then keep them in your own room. There they cannot be suspected of imperilling Félicie's soul."

She followed this counsel, though to her frank disposition even an appearance of concealment was hateful. And as it was known that newspapers and periodicals came to the house, she was constantly subject to remarks showing the disapproval in which such reading was held. Claire, it is true, looked at the parcels with envy, and would have given much to borrow them. It was not horror of them which withheld her, but dislike to be indebted even for so much to her sister-in-law, and invincible distrust of any one connected with M. Bourget of Tours.

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## Chapter Six.

### The Bliss of Monsieur Bourget.

M. Bourget of Tours, meanwhile, should have been a happy man, for he had all but reached the very summit of his desires. His daughter was installed at Poissy, and twenty times a day he turned in the direction of the château, as a fire-worshipper turns towards the sun, to offer a silent and rapturous homage, partly to past generations of Beaudrillarts, and partly to his own sagacious industry which had achieved this triumph. To his acquaintances he made no effort to conceal his elation. Conversation could not be carried on for five minutes without a dexterous twist bringing it round to Poissy. The very name in his mouth became larger and more substantial. To his cronies, those especially who had daughters, he grew insupportable, or only to be endured from fear of offending a man who was a powerful enemy, and had obtained great influence in town matters. His short, square, vigorous figure, attired in a light-coloured alpaca coat, and surmounted by a round grizzled head, red-faced and bull-necked, might be seen advancing towards the café where he daily took his coffee—just flavoured with absinthe—with an indescribable air of majesty, which excited the mockery of those who dared to laugh, but was not without its awe-inspiring influence upon others. Always his walk led him in the direction of the photographer's, and always he stood for a few moments to gaze upon Poissy, but by some singular hesitation, out of keeping, as it seemed, with the pride which he made no attempt to conceal, he had never allowed himself to buy a copy of the object of his worship.

Outside the café, woe betide the acquaintance whom M. Bourget signalled to sit with him at one of the small tables where he took his usual refreshment! It was necessary that he should hear everything connected with the past, present, or future history of Poissy; its rooms had to be described in detail, the great question of who was to be trusted with the necessary repairs must be discussed, and the point whether they should begin with the hall or the chapel. He invited opinions, but if the opinions differed from his own he grew heated, brought down his fist upon the little table, and declared that only a fool could hold such ridiculous theories. One of his first victims was the little lawyer, M. Leroux, who, being miserably poor, endured like a peppery martyr, with the hope that for the sake of a good listener M. Bourget would be moved to the unusual generosity of paying for both portions of coffee. For this end he promised himself that, let his temper incite him as it might, nothing should induce him to contradict the formidable new aristocrat. He manfully endured a double-dose of Poissy, and choked down certain strong expressions which rose to the tip of his tongue when he heard M. Bourget excusing his son-in-law's political opinions.

"After all, it is natural that if a man is born to such ideas, they should stick to him," he said, paternally. "You and I, Leroux, are shot into the world, and left to pick up what we can; we have no traditions to offend, and no rights to relinquish. With my son-in-law it is different. He arrives. Behind him stretch a long line of Beaudrillarts, crying out, 'Thou art of the race, thou; and the race must continue. We give thee Poissy for thy life; guard it, and pass it on.' That puts him in another position from us, hein?"

"Altogether," agreed the lawyer, sourly. He would have liked to have darted Léon's extravagances at M. Bourget, and inquired where then had been his duty to his ancestors; but he feared.

"Besides, one must remember," said the ex-builder, pouring an exactly measured spoonful of absinthe into his cup, and replacing the bottle before him, without apparently noticing M. Leroux's clink of his own spoon, "one must remember that the De Beaudrillarts have earned their repose. In their day, and when you and I did not exist, they gave and received a pretty number of hard knocks."

"Pray, did Monsieur de Beaudrillart then exist!" demanded the lawyer, with an irrepressible sneer; for he was stung by the distance of the absinthe bottle, and objected to such distinctions.

"His representatives. His former representatives," repeated M. Bourget, imperturbably, with a grand air which embraced the ancient family. "No, I do not blame the young man for thinking differently from you and me. If he had an inclination to stand for the Chamber, I should even give him my vote."

"Yes," said Leroux, eyeing his cup, and reflecting whether he could venture on a second with the hope that M. Bourget would pay. As the waiter passed at this moment he decided to risk the outlay, and to humour his neighbour. "Well, and I have no doubt you would be right."

"If I did it, certainly it would be right," M. Bourget returned, superbly; "for you know very well that I do not act without reason."

"No, no. Never to change one's opinions would be to pass through life like a machine."

"What!" cried M. Bourget, with a snort resembling that of an angry bull.

"I remarked merely that, from time to time, one must accommodate one's ideas," the lawyer hastened to explain. "I should do so myself."

"Accommodate one's ideas! Pray, monsieur, to what do you allude!"

"Peste!" cried M. Leroux, losing patience, "have you not just remarked that were Monsieur de Beaudrillart to stand for the Chamber you would vote for him! I presume that means a change of opinion."

"Then you are an imbecile!" thundered M. Bourget. "I have never changed my opinions by a jot, and I should despise myself if I did so. Because I consider that Monsieur de Beaudrillart, the owner of Poissy, and the descendant of a long line of ancestors, has a right to be heard in the councils of his country, no one who had not the most mediocre intelligence would conclude that I had embraced his politics. Go, monsieur," he continued, standing up, and leaning on the table with the points of his fingers. "You are ridiculous!"

If M. Leroux had dared, it would have given him extreme pleasure to have committed M. Bourget, his son-in-law, and Poissy, which by this time he detested, to the hottest place that could have been provided for them. But, although the coffee represented only a lost hope, M. Bourget was now and then able to throw him a few minor law cases which he could not afford to imperil, and he hastened to attempt to pacify his irritated sensibilities.

"Pardon, monsieur; certainly I should have understood you better. Now that you have explained, I see exactly what you meant to express, and what I might have known. Certainly that is a very different thing from changing your opinions."

("Devil take me if it is!" he muttered, under his breath.)

M. Bourget still glared at him.

"I am glad you have come to your senses," he said, surlily.

"Poissy is, of course, an ornament of our neighbourhood." The lawyer managed to get out the words without grimacing.

"*The* ornament, *the* ornament, monsieur."

"*The* ornament, I should say."

"And the De Beaudrillarts among our most ancient families."

"Oh, con—Certainly, Monsieur Bourget, certainly. The most ancient."

"Precisely. Are you aware that you have not paid for your coffee?"

The lawyer rummaged his pockets. "I am not certain that I have enough change with me."

"Ah, that is inconvenient," remarked M. Bourget, carelessly. "Never mind. Antoine will trust you. And I will give you a word of advice. Always take a little, a very little, absinthe with your coffee. It is more wholesome. What were we talking about? Oh, it was Poissy, was it not?"

But M. Leroux could endure no more.

"Excuse me, Monsieur Bourget, I am already late for an appointment. I must not lose time any longer, even over such an interesting subject."

"Well, look in, and I will show you my suggestions for the north wing," the ex-builder called after him. "Ah, ha, there is Fléchier; he might have an idea. Fléchier!"

The individual addressed, on the other side of the street, only quickened his steps, with a wave of his hand.

"Ah, my friend, it is you! Grieved that I can't stop. Business. Another day. Au revoir."

"What has come to the world, then, that every one is so confoundedly busy to-day?" grumbled M. Bourget. "I should have said I knew most of the affairs that are going on in Tours. I must go and inquire. The house is not so agreeable, now there is no one but old Fanchon to give one a word of welcome. However, Nathalie is a good girl, and deserves the good-fortune I have found for her. Madame Léon de Beaudrillart—or should it be Madame la baronne? No, certainly. There are baronesses in plenty, but not so many Beaudrillarts. Madame Léon de Beaudrillart, née Bourget. Ah, it is magnificent!"

So far—it was a month after the marriage—M. Bourget had abstained from going to Poissy. What withheld him is difficult to conjecture. Was it a certain shyness, strangely at variance with his brusque, sometimes brutal, bearing? This man, who had fought down opposition, and made himself terrible to his foes—this man, who cared little what he said himself, and laughed his great laugh when he heard what was said of him—was it possible that the bare idea of finding himself received on an equality at Poissy, which after all he had so largely benefited, made him tremble like

any young girl presented to royalty? Whatever it was, and he gave no hint of his sensations to a living soul, the fact remained that while Mme. de Beaudrillart shivered at the idea of an invasion in which he would march round Poissy as if he were its purchaser, he had not yet so much as set foot within its walls. His daughter and Léon had come in two or three times to see him, and it had given him exquisite pleasure to perceive them driving along the street in the charming carriage which had been his wedding present to Nathalie. The first time that he saw them he happened to be standing at his own door, and the blood rushed to his face so violently that, all unused to the sensation, he imagined himself ill, and put his hand out to support himself. His greeting, however, was as brusque as ever, and neither Nathalie nor Léon had the smallest suspicion of his emotion. The second time he found fault with Léon for putting up the ponies at a small inn instead of at the principal hotel.

"Not suitable," he grumbled.

"Decidedly, Nathalie, your father means you to spend your money," said her husband, laughingly, as they drove home again, "yet he does not afford himself too much luxury."

"He has never begrudged me anything," she said, with compunction, "and it made me feel more than ever ashamed to-day to see him in his bare, uncomfortable room, lonely and cold-looking, and to feel that I—I—"

She did not finish, for Léon put his head near hers and whispered:

"He should be satisfied to be your father."

She smiled, and let him murmur caressing nothings, but said, presently:

"Léon, I think my father would like to come to Poissy."

"Well, why not? Of course. Why didn't you ask him? Now that I think of it, I believe he has never been there since our engagement. Why, it is disgraceful! Certainly he must come. You should have fixed a day."

She laughed a little shyly. "Perhaps I should, but, to tell you the truth, I was afraid, until you had spoken to Madame de Beaudrillart and your sisters. Are you sure they would not object?"

He turned away his head with a momentary hesitation. Then, "My sisters have nothing to say to it," he said, impatiently. "As for my mother, certainly she will not object."

"But will she make it pleasant for him? You understand, Léon, that she thinks we—my father and I—are different—not of her class. With you near, it matters very little to me, but for my father I should feel it another matter, and I could not endure slights for him. That was why I said nothing to-day, though I am sure he expected it."

"We will drive in to-morrow, and carry him off."

To this she did not answer, perhaps aware that her husband had said a little more than he meant. She only remarked:

"Will you ask your mother?"

"Certainly, or—why not you?"

"I think you might explain rather more fully—what I have just said," she added, with difficulty. "Unless it is to be what he would like, I would rather he did not come—rather, even, that he thought me ungrateful."

"Oh, you will see! My mother has a good heart; all will go well," said Léon, confidently. He took an opportunity of saying to Mme. de Beaudrillart, "Mother, don't you think that Monsieur Bourget should be asked here one day?"

"Certainly, Léon, if you desire it. It is what I expected."

"Nathalie had a sort of notion that you might not like it, and that it would not be very agreeable for him?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The reverse, I imagine! But what would you have me do? I cannot transform Poissy into Monsieur Bourget's back parlour, or provide him with the sort of companions with whom he would feel at ease."

"All that I ask," said Léon, a little hotly, "is that he should be treated here as my wife's father."

"My dear Léon, you need not insist on the relationship. We are all aware of it, and, indeed, I think myself that it is only proper he should come."

"My sisters can show him the place. He is immensely proud of Poissy, and anxious that anything in the way of repair should be done at once."

Mme. de Beaudrillart bit her lip.

"I hope you do not attend to his suggestions."

"Oh, indeed I do," said Léon, with a laugh. "I think them extremely valuable."

"Ah, he was a builder, was he not?"

"Certainly," her son said, imperturbably, "and, luckily for us, a most successful builder. Why, mother, you must be aware of the name he has in Tours for shrewdness and good sense?"

"Yes, I know too well," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, impatiently, "and I am sorry to displease you, Léon, for I am certain you acted for the best; but I would rather, far rather, you had Monsieur de Cadanet for your creditor than this Monsieur Bourget for your father-in-law."

"Ah, mother, but I could not part with my Nathalie. However, it is settled, is it not? Monsieur Bourget will come, and you will be charming to him for my sake?"

And he departed, whistling, to assure his wife that everything was satisfactorily arranged, and that she might take the first opportunity of inviting her father.

Nathalie drove in for him one morning, in order to bring him out for the second breakfast, and though she was glad, it must be owned she rather dreaded the time they would spend together, lest he should ask questions which she might have difficulty in parrying. She need not have feared. M. Bourget rode on the crest of exultation. He sat upright in the carriage, looking round him, at Nathalie, at the pretty pair of grey ponies, at the rug laid across his knees, with pride like that of a child's. Every now and then he broke off what he was saying to remark in a tone of profound satisfaction, "Ah, ha, this goes well! This is something like!" To please him she called at one or two of the principal shops, and, drawn up there, when his acquaintances passed, he saluted them with the air of an emperor. All the way out to the château he plied her with questions about Poissy, more than once mentioning facts in its history which it displeased him to find she did not know.

"I thought you had had a proper education—certainly it cost me enough," he grumbled; "and here you don't even know what has happened in your own family."

"No, it is disgraceful!" she agreed, laughing. "I must set to work at once. There are sure to be books about it in the library. But, I assure you, father, I try to keep up a habit of reading."

"Ah, well, that's all very well, that's as your husband pleases; but certainly you're no business to be ignorant about what so nearly concerns you. I tell you what, Nathalie, it's the way of all others to vex madame. A fine woman, that! She looks a De Beaudrillart to her fingers' ends."

The meeting and the breakfast passed off fairly. Léon was there, and his good-humoured charm of manner succeeded in warding off one or two dangerous subjects. Claire studied M. Bourget as if he were a specimen of some strange species, with scarcely-veiled impertinences, which set his daughter's cheeks burning. Félicie, on the other hand, sat mute, her eyes on her plate. M. Bourget, who had for some time regarded her in silence, at last touched Mme. de Beaudrillart's arm.

"The poor young lady!" he said, sympathetically. "How long has it been so with her?"

"How?" demanded Mme. de Beaudrillart, amazed.

"That she has lost her hearing? I see she has cotton-wool in her ears. I once tried it myself, but I don't like it; it heats the ear. Can she talk on her fingers?"

"Félicie!" cried her mother, sharply. Claire interposed.

"It's a curious kind of intermittent deafness, monsieur, which only seizes her at times. By-and-by, probably, it will have departed as quickly as it came, but I am afraid you must resign yourself to her being stone-deaf while you are here."

"When you know us better, Monsieur Bourget, you will find that we have many peculiarities," said Léon, pleasantly.

"Do you like this wine? It has been brought out especially in your honour."

"Ah," said his father-in-law, eagerly; "it is old?"

"Very old."

M. Bourget looked at his glass with admiration. To tell the truth, he preferred the sourer vintage to which he was accustomed, but it gave him deep delight to be drinking ancient wine from the cellars of Poissy.

"Nathalie," said Léon again, "we must show your father your room—"

"And the north wing. That should be the first to be repaired," announced M. Bourget, loudly. Claire lifted her eyebrows.

"Is Poissy, then, to be taken in hand at once?"

"Certainly. I hope so," said the ex-builder, in the same strong voice. "As it is, I am afraid there will be difficulties; but if it had been left another winter—well, certainly, it would have been very bad. And the plaster-work in this room, how it has suffered! Still, there is a man I know very clever at such jobs, and if the baron will put it into his hands I can answer that he will make a good job of it, and not be unreasonable."

Mme. de Beaudrillart rose, abruptly.

"Monsieur Bourget will, I am sure, excuse me, if I leave him to the care of my son and Madame Léon. There will be

coffee later in the drawing-room. Come, Claire!"

"No, mamma, I remain." She added in a slightly lowered tone, "Some one must protect our poor Poissy."

Félicie, with downcast eyes, rose to follow her mother, when a shout in her ear made her start violently.

"Try syringing, mademoiselle. That did me a great deal of good." He added, to Nathalie, "You should look after your sister. I can see she wants rousing and fresh air, and eats no more than a fly. Now, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, I am at your service."

He was completely in his element when going over the château, with the eye of a lynx for whatever was wanting, and an absolute horror for the tiny plants which, thrusting their rootlets between the stones, added so much grace to the walls. Where they were within reach he dragged them ruthlessly out, in spite of Claire's remonstrances.

"Oh yes, mademoiselle, very pretty, and all the rest of it, no doubt; but do you know what they effect, these little mischief-makers? It is they that loosen the stones, and bring the walls of Poissy rattling about the ears of those that come after you. And it is those others of whom we have to think," he announced loudly, proceeding to demolish a small tuft of harts-tongue, by prodding it with the point of his stick. "For myself, I have no doubt that the whole building should be scraped. However, at any rate, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, you will set about what is necessary at once."

Léon, catching sight of his sister's face, felt his own momentary irritation subside. Besides, were not Nathalie's eyes imploring him?

"Certainly," he said, quietly. "You have, no doubt, the right, Monsieur Bourget, to speak."

"Ah, and I know what I am talking about, too. See here, monsieur, Poissy is as dear to me as to you."

"Really? You do us too much honour."

"Not at all. But I think of the future, which you young people are too apt to forget, and I want to see matters put straight. Now that you can afford it, that must be your business. Show me the land that was sold last year."

Somewhat to his dismay, Léon found that his father-in-law was perfectly acquainted with all his enforced sales, and the value of the property parted with. His remarks were shrewd. "You had no reason to blame Monsieur Georges, who was an honest man;" and at another time, "You set store on your wine. In your place I should have preferred to keep the vineyard," or "Ah, Paris ate up this farm. She swallows without difficulty, our fine Paris!" Léon, who was not easily abashed, felt as if there were something terrible in the square ungainly figure, marching from point to point, and seeing everything. Had Claire not been there, Nathalie would have attempted a diversion; as it was she remained silent, hoping, for her husband's sake, that the ordeal once over would not be repeated. At last M. Bourget stood still.

"Now for the château," he said.

Here, except where his sharp eyes espied falling plaster or a stain of wet, the awe of Poissy was upon him, and placed him at a disadvantage. It was soon evident, however, that the simplicity of the furniture shocked his sense of what was fitting, and in Nathalie's own room he gave this feeling a voice.

"Hum, ha, oh, very nice, very nice; but couldn't you have had a little more gold about?"

"You know I was never very fond of gold," she said, with a smile.

"If you didn't like it in our house, you couldn't have any objection here. It seems to me that you want cheering up a bit. Your curtains, now. Wouldn't tapestry be richer than chintz?"

"Oh, my curtains are charming!" she said, brightly. "Admit that nothing could be prettier than the whole effect! But you must come into the salon; that room will delight you."

In the salon sat Mme. de Beaudrillart, very upright, and with more state than was ordinary. The coffee was brought in an antique silver service. M. Bourget looked at his cup with admiration, and choked down his desire to ask for a teaspoonful of absinthe. Léon had vanished to avoid hearing possible sharp speeches, and nothing could have been more frigid and uncomfortable than the conversation when the guest again descanted upon the work of repair which should be speedily undertaken at Poissy.

"My son must do what he thinks best, monsieur," announced Mme. de Beaudrillart, with her grandest air; "at any rate, he is more likely to know what is needed than a stranger. For myself, I think the less done the better."

M. Bourget stared at her, set down his cup, jumped up, and marched to the window. There he stood, the delicate lines about him contrasting strangely with the sturdy squareness of his figure.

"Then, madame, permit me to say that you must be ignorant of the principles of building. You see that wall!" He waved a thick hand in its direction.

"Well, monsieur?" returned Mme. de Beaudrillart, glancing languidly.

"It already bulges, and in another twenty years it will be down, unless something is done. Perhaps you do not believe me."

"Oh, monsieur, on the contrary," put in Claire. "We know that you are an undisputed authority in such matters."

If he perceived the taunt, he disregarded it. He had made his point, and it appeared to him impossible that it should be ignored. "Well, then?" he said, inquiringly.

"All this takes money."

"True enough." He rubbed his hands. "But now that you have money?"

There was a sort of rustle in the room; no one answered. Nathalie flushed crimson. To her relief a servant entered with a message from Léon.

"Monsieur le baron regrets exceedingly that he has been called away on business, and cannot himself have the pleasure of driving Monsieur Bourget back to Tours, but the coachman awaits orders."

"I will drive my father myself," said Nathalie, quickly. "Shall we start at once, father?" It was too much for her strength; but pride, different from the pride of the Beaudrillarts, though quite as intense, insisted upon clinging to him at this juncture. When they were in the carriage, he looked at his hand.

"Damme!" he said; "so that is how great folks shake hands, is it?"

"How?" asked his daughter, trying to smile.

"With two fingers, to be sure. You must learn that trick, my girl."

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## Chapter Seven.

### Vine-Snails.

Nathalie trusted, and her husband took for granted, that friendlier relations would spring up between her and her mother and sisters in law; but as the months rolled on, there was little apparent change. As much as possible she was ignored, at the best was treated with the ceremony due to a stranger. The hope with which she had begun her married life faded, and she gave up some illusions, but kept the sweetest of all, faith in her husband, although she had dropped the idea that he could help her in her other relationships, and perhaps at last realised this weakness in him: that he hated to face or to share disagreeables. Gradually her life took a threefold character: that with the family, that with her husband, and that in which she was alone. What she had to bear she endured grandly and silently, never complaining to Léon, or even asking his advice. She loved him passionately, and—which was stranger—he still loved her.

M. Bourget's visit to Poissy had not been repeated. Fear lest his shrewd intelligence, once roused, should see too much, kept his daughter from suggesting his coming, although she felt with a pang that he expected an invitation. She often, however, drove to Tours, for she perceived that it gave him extreme pleasure to see the carriage appear, and sometimes to seat himself by her side while she invented errands which took them through the streets. On some pretext or another Léon always excused himself from accompanying her. If he were obliged to meet M. Bourget he showed perfect kindness and cordiality, but the common little figure and self-satisfied arrogance of the ex-builder was as distasteful to him as to the rest of his family, and he easily contented himself with the reflection that Nathalie would do all that was right and proper. M. Bourget never failed to ask for him, or to show a little disappointment that he had not accompanied his wife.

"Well, and Monsieur de Beaudrillart!" he would say.

"There were some trees which had to be marked for cutting, and he has gone off to see about it," Nathalie answered, in a low tone. Once her father scrutinised her sharply and unexpectedly.

"He does not tire of you, this fine gentleman, eh?"

"Father!" The blood rushed into her face; she turned upon him in blank amazement, which completely reassured him.

"Ah, all goes well, I see," he said—"with you, at any rate. And the north wing?"

"That, too," she answered eagerly. "Léon has done exactly what you told him, and they have put props where you thought it necessary."

"Ah, your little Monsieur de Beaudrillart, he has good sense, say what they will," said M. Bourget, gratified. "But I should like to see Fauvel's work. He can do well enough when he takes pains, and if he knows that I am at his heels; but you can't trust him altogether, and it would not in the least surprise me if he tried to take in Monsieur de Beaudrillart—not in the least. I shall show him that he has me to reckon with. I tell you what, Nathalie, you're on the upper shelf now, and I don't wish to push myself where I'm not wanted—"

She laid her hand on his reproachfully. "Léon and I were not sure you'd like to come out, but if only you would!"

"Ah, you've talked about it, have you? Well, I should; because, you see, I can't bear the notion that what is being done at Poissy shouldn't be the best. Peste, if you only knew how I lie awake at night and think of that wall! And Fauvel is very well, but they're all alike, for if you don't keep both eyes open, and have a third at the back of your head, they'll scamp their work, and that won't do for Poissy."

He went on, autocratically: "I'm not sure that anybody there thinks enough of the place."

The wonder what they would have said had they heard him made Nathalie laugh and answer, gayly:

"If you lived there you would be quite sure!"

He shook his head in doubt. "Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll walk out some day just when Fauvel isn't expecting me, and have a good look round. If he's put any bad work in, it will have to come out, I can tell him. Then if those fat ponies of yours have nothing else to do—" He broke off and looked scrutinisingly at her again. "They take you with them when they go and pay visits or that sort of thing, don't they!" She coloured.

"Oh, I can go wherever I like. I think most often it is Félicie who comes with me, because she so often has to arrange with other ladies or to call at farm-houses."

"Félicie? That's the poor deaf young lady, isn't it?"

"She is not always deaf," she said in a low voice, looking down.

"Well, it's an affliction, anyway. Why, what does she do at the houses?"

"She collects."

"Collects, eh?"

"For the Church."

M. Bourget gave a contemptuous grunt. "Oh, that nonsense! Better stay at home and look after the maids. Well, as I was saying, I'll walk out some day, and if they can spare you, you shall drive me back. Fauvel will learn that I am there."

"It will be very kind of you, dear father, and most useful to Léon."

"Useful, yes; I rather flatter myself I am useful if I ain't ornamental," said the ex-builder, standing up and sticking his thumbs into his waistcoat, and swelling. "Poissy without money and tumbling to pieces was a sorry sight, but Poissy with a good stock of francs at her back—ah, ha, there's a Poissy for you! That's hotter than the ornamental. Besides, you can do all that. And that reminds me that I've a little something to say to Madame de Beaudrillart about you."

"About me?" She looked at him nervously.

"Yes, yes, never mind. I know what I'm talking of. You leave me alone, and do what you're told. That's all. Whatever happens, nobody now can make you anything but a De Beaudrillart. Of Poissy." And by his action he added, unmistakably, the words, "*My daughter.*"

Told of M. Bourget's intentions, Léon laughed.

"Oh, he'll do well enough!" he exclaimed, "and you can smooth over anything that wants smoothing. I'll tell Félicie that if she carries on that absurd farce of stuffing her ears with wool, I'll refuse to subscribe to her next pilgrimage. That'll frighten her. I dare say Fauvel will be the better for not having everything his own way."

"And, Léon—"

"Well?"

"You'll be here yourself, won't you?"

"Oh, of course!" But though he spoke confidently, it was remarkable how frequently he was obliged during the next mornings to go off to some distant point. It was on one of these mornings that M. Bourget arrived.

The second breakfast was over, and he sturdily refused the offers of hospitality which Mme. de Beaudrillart pressed upon him with ceremonious care.

"No, no, madame," he said. "I'm here on business, and, with your leave, I'll go and see about it at once."

"But, unfortunately, monsieur, my son is not here to conduct you."

M. Bourget stared, the awe of his first visit having considerably lessened.

"Much obliged, madame, but I require no conducting. Fauvel and I have done a good deal of work together before now, and I don't think he'll try to palm off anything discreditable upon me. I mean to see, though, and perhaps one of the young ladies would like to come, too. Mademoiselle Félicie looks as if she wanted fresh air, poor thing! I dare say it's a trial to her to be so hard of hearing."

"Sometimes it's more a trial to hear at all, Monsieur Bourget," said Claire, gazing at the ceiling. She burst out when they were alone: "Heavens! are we to have that odious man inflicted upon us whenever he chooses to think that Poissy requires his superintendence? And Léon has no doubt gone away on purpose? If he presents us with a father-in-law in the shape of a builder—or a mason? Which was it?"—"Oh, a builder. Fauvel is the mason."

"—He might at least share the labours of entertaining him."

"One could endure the builder," said Félicie, creeping with her small steps towards the window, "if he were not such a terrible freethinker. Abbé Nisard says you can never be certain what he will not say."



"If he says anything to you it will be shouted," laughed Claire. "To have brought that great voice on your head is serious."

"The whole affair, the whole connection, is serious," said Mme. de Beaudrillart gravely. "Nathalie is not without good points, but such a father! What can one expect!"

"He talks as if Poissy belonged to him. By-and-by, you will see he will suggest something preposterous."

Mme. de Beaudrillart smiled.

"He may suggest," she said, calmly.

And, unfortunately, one of M. Bourget's chief objects in coming to Poissy was to make a suggestion.

His interview with Fauvel was less satisfactory than he would have desired. Both were men of vigorous ideas, and, although M. Bourget was the stronger, and usually had his way, there were times when Fauvel took refuge in argument, in which he developed an annoying aptitude. He was in favour of one way of securing the wall, and M. Bourget of another; each hammered at the other's reasons for a good half-hour, and what chiefly irritated M. Bourget was Fauvel's habit of referring to work which he had executed for a certain retired chemist at Tours. That any comparison should be made between this petty undertaking and that of restoring the stability of Poissy exasperated him almost beyond bounds, and would have driven him to condemn a better plan. He carried his point at last by dint of sheer browbeating; but it had heated his blood, and he marched away mopping his forehead, and inveighing against Fauvel's pigheadedness, until Nathalie had some difficulty in soothing him.

"I think I understand what you mean, father, and I will ask Léon to see that it is carried out." He faced round upon her angrily.

"You will do nothing of the sort. What! Aren't these women turning up their noses at you because you are a builder's daughter? You will forget that, if you please, and become a fine lady as quickly as possible: Now that I have made you a De Beaudrillart, I expect you to hold up your head with the best of them."

She was thunderstruck, the more so because she had not imagined that he had taken in her position in the house, or the petty thrusts with which Claire had attempted to wound both him and her. But she answered with spirit:

"You are mistaken. They will not respect me the more for pretending to be what I am not."

M. Bourget did not hear her; he had caught sight of a young girl with a merry face who was crossing the court-yard, singing, a dish covered with vine-leaves in her hand. The sun struck down on her bright hair escaping under her cap; she had a pretty blue skirt and a large apron.

"What has she got?" asked the ex-builder, quickening his steps. "Here, Toinette, Jeanne, what you will, I want you!"

"Stop, Rose-Marie," Nathalie called, wonderingly. The girl came towards them, smiling more broadly, and showing her white teeth.

"What have you got there?" demanded M. Bourget. "But I'll wager I know." He lifted a leaf. "Ah, ha, as I thought! Vine-snails, and fine ones, too; I never saw finer."

"Freshly picked, monsieur."

"Yes, yes, plain enough. Freshly picked, and beauties! There, there, that will do, my girl," he said with a sigh and a wave of dismissal.

"Would you not like some to take back with you?" asked his daughter, innocently.

"Ah, but it wouldn't do, it wouldn't do," M. Bourget declared, shaking his head. "As if every soul in the château would not know that Madame Léon's father had bought vine-snails!"

"And then!" Her voice was scornful. Her father looked at her.

"I begin to understand," he remarked, frowning. "It appears to me that you have already forgotten what, Heaven knows, I preached enough about before your marriage: that Madame Léon de Beaudrillart is not the same person as Mademoiselle Bourget, and that to effect the necessary change you must forget a great deal. For instance, you should forget that I ever ate vine-snails."

She sighed, and tears gathered in her eyes.

"It is unlucky, father, for I do not think I forget easily enough. And why should I? Léon is kinder than to ask it. Listen. I love him dearly, but I cannot live a life of pretence, for everything in me cries out against it, and they must take me as I am."

"And it was not a bad bargain," said M. Bourget, rubbing his hands with complacency. "You may be certain there was a very fair equivalent on either side. Monsieur de Beaudrillart does not complain?"

The young wife began to smile in spite of herself.

"No, no!"

"Good. But, see here, my girl, it is I you have to think of. I mean you to be a Beaudrillart, and a Beaudrillart you must

become. Keep your eyes open. You are sharp enough to pick up what is what, and to take your position with the best of them. I've heard nonsense enough from Fauvel to-day, so don't vex me by talking any more."

"But—"

"No buts," said M. Bourget, peremptorily. "The subject is finished—arranged; and I shall expect all to go as I desire. Now let me see the picture-gallery."

The picture-gallery at Poissy is short, though beautifully proportioned to the rest of the house; it is rather a long room consecrated to the past than a gallery at all. It has an exquisite ceiling, and delightful deep windows from which you look over the trees—of no great height—to the rich and smiling country beyond. The room is by no means crowded with portraits, and, except for the interest to their descendants, the pictures are of little value. The last is dated about eighty years ago, and is chiefly noticeable as the likeness of a Baron de Beaudrillart who escaped the horrors of the revolution.

Round this room M. Bourget marched, regarding each painting as thoughtfully as if he were studying for the reputation of a critic. Nathalie did not accompany him. She threw open one of the windows, and leaned out, amusing herself with dropping little pellets of moss upon the turf beneath, where a few pigeons had collected, and were sunning themselves with an air of great enjoyment. Every now and then her father called to her with a question as to the history of one of the portraits, and it displeased him when she was not able to give a full account of the personage's life and death. It mattered little if she assured him that no more was known in the family; he was always of opinion that such ignorance showed a blamable want of interest. He looked long at the last pictured baron. What he said was:

"If they had guillotined him, it might have been no such great matter; but imagine if those rascals had touched Poissy! Now I have finished. Are you going to drive me back to Tours?"

"At any time you like; but you will have some coffee first?"

"Yes, since one may as well save one's pocket," said M. Bourget with a sigh, thinking of the absinthe. "Besides, I have to see madame."

Nathalie wondered anxiously why this was said. She had not long to wait, for when he had gulped down the portion of black coffee, served in a tiny Sèvres cup of finest quality, and set it with an unsatisfied air upon the table to his left, he opened his subject.

"You may tell Monsieur de Beaudrillart, madame, that I have put Fauvel upon the right tack at last."

"I imagine, monsieur, that Fauvel will not venture to change any plan of which my son has already approved?"

"Ah, Monsieur de Beaudrillart knows nothing about it—how should he? I do," added M. Bourget, simply. "As for Fauvel, he understands a few things, but not all. However, that is settled, and I shall sleep better to-night for knowing that it has been seen to. There was something else, madame, I wished to speak about. I asked my daughter to take me to the picture-gallery."

"Are you thinking of insisting also upon the portraits being cleaned, monsieur!" asked Claire, with a laugh.

"Not my business," said M. Bourget imperturbably. "But it's a pity they should stop short as they do. Eighty years ago the last! One would not have it said that the De Beaudrillarts had come to an end."

"Of late years, monsieur, their fortunes have diminished."

"Precisely, madame, precisely. But now that matters have improved—in fact, madame, the long and short of the business is that I should wish to have Madame Léon painted, and placed in the gallery with the other De Beaudrillarts."

There was a pause such as follows a crash, an earthquake, or any other horrible and unexpected convulsion. Nathalie cried out, "Oh no!" but her father turned his back upon her, and hands on knees gazed squarely at Mme. de Beaudrillart. She stared back at him as if she had failed to comprehend his proposal.

"Madame Léon! In the picture-gallery!"

"Precisely, madame. Painted by the best artist in France."

"Monsieur, I do not think you understand what you suggest. Those are our ancestors, the old De Beaudrillarts."

"Exactly why I wish to see her among them."

He leaned back, and faced her, the image of dogged resolution.

"But—monsieur, it is impossible!"

"And why, madame!"

"Because—because it is altogether unsuitable." She would have liked to have said "preposterous."

M. Bourget frowned.

"Madame, when Fauvel objected to what I desired to see done, he had his reasons for objecting. They weren't worth

much, it is true, but—they existed. Perhaps you would also favour me with your reasons?"

Mme. de Beaudrillart folded her hands and looked at the floor. How was it possible to say to this man, "You yourself are the reason?" But he forestalled her.

"I understand, madame. You wish to express to me that Madame Léon cannot boast of Ancient birth, and that I made my money by trade. All that is perfectly true. At the same time, I wish to point out that, however it was made, the money has not been unacceptable. Moreover, whatever my daughter was born, she is now a Beaudrillart."

Mme. de Beaudrillart remained absolutely silent. It was Nathalie who spoke with an attempt at gaiety.

"It appears to me that I might be allowed a word, and I don't think anything would be so irksome to me as having my portrait painted. Besides—eighty years! The gap is too great. It is very kind of you, father, but do not think more about it."

M. Bourget rose.

"On the contrary, it will be carried out."

Mme. de Beaudrillart also rose.

"Not for the gallery, monsieur."

"For the gallery, and the gallery alone, madame."

He tried to speak quietly, but his face was very red, and he drew his breath in short gasps. His opponent, with her air of superb calm, and her dignified manner, impressed him in spite of himself. When poor Nathalie had got him away, and they were together in the carriage, he muttered:

"Was there ever such a ridiculous woman! For all that, there is what you must aim at. There's an air for you, a presence! You don't catch me here again in a hurry; but if I were you, my girl, I'd practise that way she has of looking as if you were the dust under her feet. It was just as much as I could do to hold my own against it, I can tell you. All looking. She hadn't a word to say. And she'll have to give in."

"As a particular favour, don't press it, dear father. You can see how disagreeable it would be for me."

"Aha, but you must learn to look, too, now you are one of them. No. I am resolved, and I shall write to Monsieur de Beaudrillart."

Nathalie promised herself to be first in the field with her husband, but how to keep the peace between these clashing wills? Léon only laughed when he heard of the dilemma.

"Oh, we will find a way out of it! Your father is absolutely right, my Nathalie; that face of yours is worthy of the best painter and the best place. But my mother, dear woman, has her little prejudices about the gallery."

"And I would not be there for worlds!" she cried, shuddering. "Without you, and to be left to the mercy of those old Beaudrillarts? No, Léon, do not ask it!"

"Leave it to me. It would be so charming to have your portrait, and you would endure a little to please me, oh!"

"Ah, much!" she said, frankly, putting her hand on his. "But your mother is right, for if any one is to be there, it should be you—you who belong to them, and whom they would have nothing against."

He caught away his hand with a sharp movement, unlike himself.

"Against! What do you mean?"

"They would scout me as an interloper; that is all that I mean," she said, surprised. "Dear, I was not suggesting that I had committed a crime, or done anything to make them utterly ashamed of me."

"No," he returned, with an uneasy laugh. "And if we could know their histories, I dare say we should find that it was you who might be ashamed of their company."

"And it's well my father doesn't hear you!" Nathalie cried, merrily. "He would not put up with a word against the Beaudrillarts."

He did not, as usual, retort with a jest, and, indeed, for the rest of the day was silent and almost moody. His mother, always on the lookout for such signs, decided that his marriage began to bore him; and though the mood wore off, preserved the impression in her mind, and strengthened it, as soon as she could, with another of the same tendency. Nathalie, who had hoped that time would bring kinder feeling towards her, found that it only seemed to push them further apart; as much as possible her presence was ignored, the servants were tacitly shown that her wishes might be disregarded, and so far as any real authority in the house was concerned, she was a mere cipher. Yet she was not unhappy. She had come from a home where she had been thrown chiefly on her own resources, and this, if a harsh, is often a wholesome training. The hours she spent alone passed contentedly enough, sweetened, too, by those others when she and Léon were together, walking over the estate, seeing to planting, thinning, cutting down, settling which bits of the property he would buy back, watching the vintage, strolling by the side of the river. She never loved the river. An unconquerable dread had seized her ever since she heard the story of the death by drowning of Léon's father, the Baron Bernard; but as Léon had a fancy for fishing, she kept her repugnance out of his sight. Neither Mme.

de Beaudrillart nor her youngest daughter would consent to take advantage of the carriage. Félicie, however, was glad to be spared the long tramps which were formerly necessary before she could reach the outlying districts where her charitable errands carried her, and more than once had been driven in to some function in the cathedral at Tours, with the express understanding that she should not be called upon to encounter M. Bourget.

“Your father and I think so differently on all subjects!” she explained.

For the picture a compromise had been arrived at, owing to the fortunate circumstance that—to M. Bourget’s untold wrath—the painter whom Léon had chosen was too fully occupied to come to Poissy. M. Bourget, while storming at the artist’s stupidity, had suggested that her husband should take his wife to Paris, so that she might be painted there. Léon turned it off. He said he had a fancy that the picture should be done at Poissy, and the sentiment was too completely after M. Bourget’s own heart for him to resist. He only grumbled at the delay as a personal wrong done to him by the painter.

“Isn’t my money as good as another man’s, and better!” he demanded, wrathfully. “I’d like to know what the fellow means by declining to come?”

“Perhaps there are other Poissys in the world,” remarked Leroux, with malice, “and other families as important as the Beaudrillarts.”

M. Bourget stared at him.

“Now you are an ass, Leroux. Damme, if you don’t talk better sense when you have a case, it’s no wonder if you are unlucky. But you don’t understand.”

He put a bold face on it with his companions, and his nature was not sufficiently sensitive for him to suffer under slight; still, he was not pleased with Nathalie’s position. When she drove into the town, it was simply, and without a vestige of parade, when M. Bourget considered that a greater ceremony might have been observed. He would have liked rattle and cracking of whips, with every one looking round, and asking, “Who is that?” He questioned her closely, and found that she spent her time in her own room, or with her husband, and he got no hint of her sitting with her mother-in-law, or being admitted into pleasant companionship. He could not comprehend it. That the De Beaudrillarts should have no dealings with M. Bourget might be, and there was something really pathetic in the way in which he effaced himself, and kept away from Poissy when he was longing to be satisfied as to Fauvel’s work; but Nathalie was now a De Beaudrillart herself, and to humiliate her was, in his eyes, to humiliate the family. He still talked bigly, to be sure, to Leroux and his other companions, but in his heart there was a vexed dissatisfaction which poisoned his triumph until the late winter came. Then it broke out again, irrepressible and unbounded. For on a cold February day, when snow lay thick in the Place de l’Archevêché, and crumpled itself into the niches round the western porches, where no statues have replaced those broken effigies which once gazed down, M. Bourget was making his way sombrely back to his house, when he became aware of a messenger from Poissy standing at the door. The messenger brought good news—news which made M. Bourget come out again radiant, and present him with a whole piece of twenty sous.

“That,” he announced magnificently, so that the passers-by might hear—“that is for you to drink the health of the young Baron de Beaudrillart.”

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## Chapter Eight.

### In the Rue du Bac.

The years that came and went at Poissy after the birth of this baby son were slowly drawing away the life of M. de Cadanet in that little Paris hotel, which yet to his shrunk interests seemed large and hollow. Even when Léon saw him he was small and bent, with his skin colourless; by this time he had grown absolutely dwarfish, wizened, elfish-looking, the extraordinary brightness of his eyes, shining out of their hollow caves, giving him a strange and weird appearance. His body had become extremely frail, but his will showed no symptoms of weakening, and one or two valets who had presumed on his apparent feebleness found themselves speedily undeceived and dismissed. Old friends had dropped off, smitten by death or illness; newspapers and politics absorbed his chief attention, but the absorption was gloomy, for to the old—recalling what seem better days—hope is difficult, and pessimism natural.

M. Charles had succeeded in his determination to make himself necessary to the old count, and it must be admitted that the task was difficult. It required to be carried out with the greatest care and circumspection, since M. de Cadanet was suspicious of the smallest premonitory shadow of coercion. More than once, more than half a dozen times, Charles’s fate had trembled in the balance, and given him some bad half-hours of disquiet. If he could have made a confidante of his wife, things might have been easier for him; as it was, he cursed his stars that even with her it was necessary to play a part, for she was an honest dull woman, who would have blurted out to M. de Cadanet what her husband most wished to conceal.

It has been said that the furniture and surroundings were austere. They did not become less so when their owner grew older and weaker. He had always despised luxuries rather than begrudged them; he despised them still. Had he ever derived personal pleasure from them, he might have been more merciful towards Léon, and the fabulous sums M. Charles reported him to have paid for his cigars; but such expenditure, especially personal expenditure, appeared to him a miserable weakness.

Of Léon he never spoke, though M. Charles would have given a good deal to have known what had happened. Without being aware of the exact state of affairs, he was aware of this much: The Poissy estates were—if not hopelessly—deeply embarrassed. Probably in order to make a desperate appeal to his cousin, M. de Beaudrillart had

presented himself one day at the hotel, and had an interview. This much he had gathered from the servant. Since that day Léon had, to his knowledge, never reappeared in Paris; but from inquiries he had made, it seemed, was living quietly at Poissy, engaged in the ordinary life of a country gentleman. This, moreover, was five or six years ago.

There might, of course, be one simple explanation. M. de Cadanet might have relented under the pressure of a personal interview, and advanced the large necessary sum of money, extorting at the same time a promise from the young man to give up his Paris extravagances and betake himself to the provinces and economy. But Charles was tolerably certain that this had not happened. To begin with, he thought that his uncle, as he chose to call him, would have told him what he had done, for he was in the habit of speaking pretty frankly to him about Léon. And in the next place there was another point which might almost be taken as proof against the possibility of such an advance. Charles himself had received a gift of one hundred thousand francs, and some six months later another gift of the same sum, with the intimation that they represented an abandoned idea. What this idea might have been he never ventured to ask, but he made many shrewd guesses, and the guess which seemed the most probable pointed to Léon de Beaudrillart. Why there was that space of months between the gifts he could not think; putting that aside, he felt convinced that M. de Cadanet's generosity would not have carried him to the length of providing for two relatives in so lavish a fashion.

In spite of his conviction that he had benefited by Léon's disgrace, Charles did not hate him the less. Possibly it was because he knew that Léon was aware of his true character; and although he had not accused him to M. de Cadanet, there was an unpleasant feeling of insecurity in the knowledge. But that was not all, because as M. de Cadanet grew weaker, and the chances of M. de Beaudrillart ever seeing him again became infinitesimal, he lost nothing of his distrust and dislike. Perhaps from something the old count had once let drop, he had not been without hope of becoming master of Poissy—a hope which had ended in disappointment. Perhaps there still lurked in his mind a fear that when the will was read, Léon might be remembered. Whatever it was, one thing was certain—that his hate had not diminished.

It need not be said that he had grown extremely tired of dancing attendance at the house in the Rue du Bac. The hours spent in the severely-furnished room, reading to or writing for M. de Cadanet, who exacted all his attention, and never fell asleep, were irksome to the last degree. He received few thanks, but often a gift accompanied by a dozen cynical words. The cynicism did not affect him, the gift it was which enabled him to endure the attendance. As often as possible he sent his wife. She was a kindly unimaginative woman; luckily for her own happiness, of very slow perception; and attaching herself readily by little surface roots to those who came in her way. She had liked her aunt and she liked M. de Cadanet, although he treated her with scant civility; as he grew weaker, she was at the house a great deal, and applied herself diligently to feeding him with beef tea, which he detested, and with such small pieces of news as she considered sufficiently unexciting.

M. de Cadanet sat in a straight-backed chair, wrapped in a wadded dressing-gown, for, although the weather was hot, he was now always cold, and young Mme. Lemaire had for the last twenty minutes been engaged in presenting him with such scraps of news from *Le Temps* as she thought suitable. In the midst he said, with a sudden yawn which would have disconcerted a more sensitive person:

"Amélie, is one permitted to ask how old you are!"

Mme. Lemaire laid the newspaper calmly in her lap, and considered, before answering honestly:

"I was seven-and-twenty last April."

"Heavens! Only that I sometimes when I listen to you I think I hear my grandmother."

"Yes? I never saw her, of course, but I dare say she was an excellent woman," said Amélie, taking up her work, since her uncle now seemed disposed for a little conversation.

"Oh, excellent!" he muttered, with a little laugh. "She killed the count, my grandfather."

"Killed him! oh, impossible! You don't really mean it!"

"She bored him to death," returned M. de Cadanet, letting his chin sink feebly on his chest.

"Poor man! Now, do you know, I am afraid you are tired. If you were to let me ring for an egg beaten up with a little sherry? No? Then shall I go on reading?"

"No. Unless—"

"What, mon oncle?"

"Is there anything about—about Poissy in the paper?"

"Oh, let me see." She immediately busied herself. "Poissy—Poissy—"

"Do you know the name?"

"No, I think not. I cannot remember it."

"Your husband has not mentioned it?"

"Never. Has anything happened there? Perhaps you would like us to make inquiries?"

"No. Be quiet. Nothing has happened since—since—a child was born."

"Ah, there is a child." Her voice had changed; she looked down, and a sigh escaped her.

"Certainly. And a boy."

Silence followed. She said presently, wistfully, "I suppose, then, they are very happy?"

"Perhaps. I do not know, and I do not care, but—in old days I knew Poissy."

He spoke slowly and with difficulty, his voice dropping until it was scarcely audible, and after these last words he relapsed into silence. Amélie again laid down the paper, and took up her work—a little blouse for an orphan in whom she was interested; she was extremely charitable, and as Charles did not give her much money, and always talked of his poverty, she consoled herself by working for her poor. Her nature was singularly placid, and she was fairly happy; indeed, she would have declared she wanted nothing, except perhaps a little more money for her orphans. A really kind heart gave her an interest in the sick man, and she did not suffer from his sharp speeches because she did not discover their edge. Now she sat and thought tranquilly of fat little Marie, how fast she outgrew her frocks, and what was to be done for another when this was worn out. A thin white streak of sunshine, penetrating through the outer blinds, just struck her pale brown hair, wreathed in a large coil at the back of her head, and stole across the table to M. de Cadanet's hand, which lay upon a book. The hand was very thin and parchment-like; every now and then it twitched slightly, and his head sank lower. Amélie, who had more than once glanced in his direction, became at last uneasy at the profound stillness; she laid down her work, and half rose, resting her fingers on the table. It was possible that he might be asleep, but sleep was unusual with him, and the least movement generally enough to disturb him. As he did not stir she moved towards him noiselessly, until she was close, but his face was so sunk that she was obliged to drop on her knees to gain a sight of it. Then she uttered a cry, for it was drawn and distorted.

It did not require the verdict of the doctor, hurriedly sent for, to tell them that M. de Cadanet had had a stroke. He was carried to the adjoining bedroom, helpless and speechless. Mme. Lemaire despatched a messenger to her husband, and made her own arrangements to remain in the house and to obtain a nurse. Charles did not arrive until late, and fully approved her purpose. He had no affection for his wife, but was never wanting in civility.

"Certainly, my dear Amélie; and permit me to say you have shown your usual excellent sense. It would never do to leave the poor old man alone. What does the doctor say?"

"He says that it is impossible as yet to form an opinion, but he hopes that he will recover in a measure. Oh, I do trust so! It was so startlingly sudden."

"He does not suffer," said her husband, carelessly, "and if he revives, what sort of a life will it be? I am sure that if I were he I should prefer to die."

"I am not so sure," Amélie said, walking about the room and placing the chairs in order. "But certainly he is terribly lonely with no one but us. Is there really no one?"

"No one."

"Who lives at Poissy?"

Charles turned quickly upon her.

"Poissy! What do you know of Poissy?"

"Oh, nothing. Only, our uncle spoke of it just before his attack. I really think it was the last thing he said."

"Now, remember, Amélie, this may be of great importance, and I should be glad to know exactly what were his words." It enraged him that she still went on with her arranging, but he was afraid of displaying the anxiety he felt.

"Let me see. I think he began with asking whether there was anything about Poissy in the paper."

"In the paper!" The young man caught up *Le Temps* and devoured the columns. "But there is not, of course. Go on, Amélie. What next?"

"I believe he wanted to know if I knew the name—if you had ever mentioned it to me. You never have, my friend, and so I told him."

"Yes?"

"Then he remarked—I don't know why—that a boy had been born there. And that must have been all he said, except that he had known Poissy in old days."

"Confound it! what did he mean?" muttered her husband, standing chin in hand.

"Oh, I suppose it is some place where he was when he was young, and that it just came across his mind at that moment. Unless you think there is some one there whom he wishes to see? What a pity he did not say more!"

"If he does come to his senses, let me advise you not to make any suggestions of that sort," said Charles, controlling himself with difficulty. "The owner of Poissy is an extravagant good-for-nothing, who has mortally offended your uncle, and the probable result of mentioning his name would be to bring on a most dangerous excitement."

"Then I will not, of course, because nothing could be so bad for him. But I am very sorry. It would be so much happier for him, poor dear! if there were some one besides ourselves in whom he could take an interest, especially if there

was a child.”

To this her husband made no answer. His wife’s personal opinions were profoundly indifferent to him, and so long as she was impressed with the danger of exciting M. de Cadanet, she might utter as many futile aspirations as she pleased. But what she had told him gave him uneasiness—more from a vague dread of Léon de Beaudrillart than from a well-grounded fear. He had a fancy that M. de Cadanet’s thoughts turned sometimes with yearning in that direction, and he had with great care avoided ever mentioning the birth of a son at Poissy. How the old man had discovered this event he could not conceive. Most alarming of all was the fact that he had not only known but had kept silence, since it pointed to possible other reticences; and Charles had all the schemer’s distrust for the unknown. He believed, however, that if M. de Cadanet died in his present condition, he was certain to come into so much of his property as he could will away; if he recovered, and his brain still worked with painful ideas of this child at Poissy—grandson of the man who had befriended him—it was impossible to be sure that some foolish sentiment, some insane impulse of gratitude, might not prove strong enough to upset his former dispositions. The lust of gambling had increased upon the young man, debts had swollen, creditors pressed. Between him and things he loved best in the world a brazen gate was slowly shutting, and he knew that it wanted but the clink of M. de Cadanet’s money for the barrier to roll swiftly back, and fling open a garden of delight. Now, that, added to his other anxieties, there came this new doubt as to the disposition of the wealth which he had been, counting on as his own, he cursed fate freely, and went about the house with an injured air.

To watch life and death fighting is not a pretty sight. With M. de Cadanet, life slowly got the better; but its wounds and its weaknesses were many, and the old count, rent with the strife, and agonised with the pricks of returning circulation, was a sorry spectacle. He was well nursed, for Amélie was in her element, and gave him her whole attention, always more delightful to a patient than the intelligence which he may wish for in health. She made no demands upon his brain, and his medicine and food were ready at exactly the right hour. Moreover, she was really quick in understanding his imperfect speech. Every day she brought her husband a pleased report that there was a growing improvement. Charles had not the face to frown except behind her back. He said once, sharply:

“All this is very fine; say what you like, but he will never be himself again.”

“Oh, why not?” exclaimed his wife, appealingly. He controlled himself to answer.

“They never are after such an attack, which, of course, weakens the brain.”

“Well, he knows everything, I am sure,” she persisted. Charles was going out of the room, and returned, anxiety in his face.

“What does he talk about?”

“He likes to hear what the doctor has said.”

“He has never alluded to—to Poissy?”

She exclaimed at the idea.

“Oh, he has not come to thinking about things of that sort.”

“All the better,” said her husband, drawing a long breath. “Mind you turn him off from it if he begins; but let me hear what he says. You’re the only person that can understand the gibberish.”

(“That is one bit of luck,” he added, under his breath.)

“Oh, he is getting on,” she called after him, consolingly. Charles inquired daily, but M. de Cadanet never made allusion to Poissy. To lie and watch the flies on the ceiling, the sunshine travelling round from shadow to shadow; to frown with pain or impatience; to listen to the ticking of the gilt clock on the mantel-piece, or the muffled rattle of a carriage; stung by these new prickings to try to move the leg and arm to which force was slowly, slowly creeping back—this was M. de Cadanet’s daily life. No one could understand him except Mme. Lemaire; they pretended to sometimes, in order not to annoy him; but the pretence only irritated him the more. By little and little, however, words shaped themselves more rightly.

By—and—by he was lifted into a great chair, and wheeled from one part of the room to the other; and this move accomplished, Mme. Lemaire thought that she might return home. Charles had agreed to her remaining in the Rue du Bac with an amiability which she considered remarkable. He did not care for her enough to miss her, and preferred having some one on the spot to report upon anything out of the usual course. He would therefore willingly have consented to her absence, but the Orphanage had an outbreak of measles, and her placid good sense told her that she was no longer absolutely necessary to M. de Cadanet. The nurse, therefore, had full charge by night, and Mme. Lemaire and the concierge André, a quiet man, whom the count said he preferred to women about him, shared the day between them.

Unperceptive as she was, Amélie could not but allow that her husband was in a very bad temper. He showed it chiefly by silence, which she had the discretion not to break, and by absence from the house, which, he said, was owing to business. He had not the audacity to tell her, and she was the last woman to whom it would have occurred—simply, perhaps, because ideas did not seem ever to spring spontaneously in her unimaginative mind, but required to be planted there—that it was M. de Cadanet’s recovery, to which undoubtedly her excellent nursing had contributed, which had brought about the gloom. He took care to inform the world that the recovery was very partial, and that the seizure had seriously affected the old count’s mind; but, in point of fact, M. de Cadanet’s intellect was as keen as ever—painfully so, indeed, because it kept him perfectly conscious of his sad condition, and caused miserable fits of depression.

These fits of depression were treated indifferently by the nurse, but they always distressed Mme. Lemaire, who would not have realised a silent trouble, but felt great compassion for one of which she saw the outward signs. She did her best to produce a cheerful atmosphere, and when he complained of the desolation of old age, cast about for something comforting.

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"Is there not any one, now, dear uncle, that you would like to come and see you?"

"My friends are where I ought to be—in the grave."

"Oh, don't say that. Your time isn't come. Why, you're getting better every day. Next week we shall move into the other room—think of that for an event!"

The old man groaned, and Amélie, at her wits' end, ventured on the subject against which her husband had warned her.

"You want some one young and lively to cheer you up, that is what I think. The Poissy you were talking about—is there no one there?"

M. de Cadanet uttered a short "No!" but she persisted.

"If they were to bring the child? A little boy, is it not? A house always seems to grow happier when there is a child in it. You have never seen him!"

"Never. And never shall."

"What a pity!"

"His father," said M. de Cadanet, presently, "behaved abominably."

"Dear, dear, what a pity!" repeated Amélie, holding up her work that she might judge of the effect. "Perhaps he has grown better now that there is a child."

"One must see to believe that."

"That is what I thought."

"Monsieur de Beaudrillart will never come here!" exclaimed the old count, with all his usual sharpness. Something called her out of the room, and when she came back he had evidently been pondering on the subject, for he said, "You are right as to one thing; for the child is Baron Bernard's grandson."

"Oh!" said Amélie, opening her eyes. "And who is the Baron Bernard?"

M. de Cadanet uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Oh, you—you know nothing! Can you give your husband a message?"

"To be sure I can."

"Then tell him that next week—when I shall be stronger—I wish to speak to him about Léon de Beaudrillart. Do not forget."

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## **Chapter Nine.**

### **A Burned Paper.**

Mme. Lemaire stood in the window of M. de Cadanet's sitting-room, looking out. The day before he had been wheeled into it, and with the fretfulness of an invalid had declared it was very strange that those who could walk about and see so much had nothing entertaining to tell him. Amélie had accepted the reproach cheerfully, and betaken herself to one of the long windows, with its lace and ugly red moreen curtains, hoping to find materials for his distraction.

But the materials were few, or she did not know how to make the best of them. He did not in the least care to hear of a grey sister, with snowy collar and flapping cap, walking with her school; nor, though it made a pretty picture, of the balcony opposite, on which a girl in a black dress stood with her arm on a railing looking down at the busy street below. At last he desired her, irritably, to say no more, and was silent.

The room in which they were was not M. de Cadanet's study, for that looked into the court-yard, and this into the street. It had been chosen because it was sunnier and more cheerful. But the cheerfulness being a failure, he presently insisted upon being wheeled into the study. There, with the stove lit, though it was very warm, he seemed to revive, and Mme. Lemaire left him in charge of André, with many instructions as to food and rest. Charles was burning with impatience as to the conversation which lay before him, and of which the subject was to be Léon de Beaudrillart, but the doctor had forbidden any talk that threatened excitement, until a few more days had passed, and the count was stronger.

When Amélie arrived at the house the next morning, she found her uncle in bed and very much weaker. It seemed that he had insisted upon André fetching a tin box from the library, which, when it was unlocked, turned out to contain a bundle of papers. These M. de Cadanet had studied for a long time, afterwards replacing them with marked



agitation. He had evidently felt extreme fatigue in consequence, and the doctor spoke with gravity to Mme. Lemaire, declaring that the access of weakness was a very discouraging sign. The old count himself said very little, but towards evening remarked:

"Tell your husband I wish to speak to him to-morrow afternoon." And when Amélie attempted a remonstrance, he added, peremptorily: "I wish it;" and the doctor, to whom she appealed the next morning, only replied:

"It may, of course, be injurious—all emotion is likely to be injurious—but I cannot take it upon me to prevent Monsieur de Cadanet from giving what are, possibly, important directions. His condition is too critical."

Charles himself, who had been on thorns, disliked the prospect. If M. de Cadanet was at last dying, he was of opinion that matters had better remain as they were, without further allusions to Léon. André, closely cross-questioned, revealed nothing. His master had read the papers and replaced them, that was all. Certainly no notary had been sent for, and he himself had never once left the room. Charles, always suspicious, had an idea that the man was keeping back something, but as his questions could not find ground for the opinion, there was nothing to say or do. Nor, however much he might have preferred to avoid the coming interview, could he venture to do so, for, weak as he was, M. de Cadanet might no more be safely contradicted now than at any former time. He came accordingly at the hour appointed, and Amélie was waiting in the anteroom.

"He is terribly changed," she whispered. "The doctor thinks there must be another attack shortly."

"Does he know what he is about?" her husband asked, eagerly.

"Oh, perfectly. He is asking for you; and you can go in at once, only do be careful."

He went, though unwillingly. Sickness and death were repulsive to him, and he had a dread of some inconvenient request being made, with which he would rather not comply. Still, as he reflected, better he should be sent for than any other man, and he put on a cheerful air as he advanced to the bed in the alcove.

"Sorry to find you here again, dear uncle. I'm afraid you have been attempting a little too much. However, in a day or two—"

M. de Cadanet interrupted him.

"I have something for you to do, Charles."

"With all my heart."

"You know the low book-shelf in my study?"

"Perfectly."

"There is a small tin box by its side. Fetch it."

His voice was feeble and broken as well as indistinct. It took him some time to utter a sentence. Charles left the room with a feeling of congratulation that whatever had to be done, he would not have the inconvenience of another witness. If Amélie had been still in the anteroom he would have sent even her, on some excuse, out of the house. But she had vanished, and after all, as he reflected, the precaution would have been absurd. The tin box was where M. de Cadanet had said, where Charles himself had seen it a hundred times. He looked at it now curiously. Something of importance must be in it to cause it to lie so heavy on the mind of the dying man, and he would have given a good deal to have had a peep into its contents before he carried it back. All that he could judge was that it was light, and not closely filled, for he could feel papers slipping loosely inside. Perhaps, after all, the great affair meant no more than that there were letters to be destroyed, perhaps old love-letters—he laughed. If Mme. de Cadanet, Amélie's aunt, had resembled Amélie, it was not impossible. Another thought made him reflect that the joke might turn out to be awkward, and instead of laughing, he looked angrily at the box which might contain dangerous witnesses. M. de Cadanet received it without a sign, except one which notified that it should be placed on a chair by his bedside. Then he said to Charles:

"Sit down."

"Now for the confession," reflected the young man, drawing a chair near the dying man.

"I have a story to tell, and little breath with which to speak," said M. de Cadanet. "In that bottle is brandy; give me a spoonful."

Charles obeyed. He was silent, because he did not know what to say.

"And here are my keys. Unlock the box."

His hand trembling with anxiety, the young man did as he was told. A small packet of letters lay at the bottom, confirming his suspicions. But when he would have lifted it out, M. de Cadanet stopped him.

"Not yet. First hear my story. These letters relate to Monsieur Léon de Beaudrillart."

"I was a fool. I might have seen that they were not so old," thought the other.

Relief and curiosity began to struggle with him.

"You have not met him for some years."

"No. It has surprised me. Is it six years?"

"Between six and seven. He has been afraid to come."

"Yes?" Charles leaned eagerly forward.

"The day he was here he committed a crime, and I could have had him arrested."

"Ah!"

M. de Cadanet's voice had grown yet feebler, and Charles, on fire with mad desire to hear, was in terror lest it should fail altogether. He poured out more brandy, but the other pushed it away with an impatient gesture.

"When I ask. Not before. And don't interrupt me. Where was I?"

"You said you could have had him arrested."

"So I could. It was this way. You know what straits he was in; you had been clever enough to find out. Well, he had the effrontery to come to me—me, whom he had laughed at—and to invite me to pay his debts; I should say, rather, to lend him money enough to pay them himself."

"The same thing."

"Precisely. Then I had my opportunity. I told my gentleman that I had made inquiries and knew all about his affairs. That if he had come well out of them, I would, for his father's sake, have made over to him two hundred thousand francs; I even showed him the cheque."

M. Charles whistled.

"You think it was imprudent?" said M. de Cadanet, turning his dark eyes towards him.

"I think he was a desperate man."

"Well, I still looked upon him as his father's son. However, in his presence, I directed it to you—" His voice died away, and the next words were undistinguishable. Charles jumped up and poured out brandy.

"Drink this, sir, I implore you!"

"I must rest. Perhaps in ten minutes a little strength will have come back, but I am very ill—very, very ill."

He was; but his hearer was so burningly anxious to hear more that he almost forgot the sympathy it was incumbent upon him to show. He commanded himself, however, in time, and begged M. de Cadanet for their sakes not to over-excite himself. There was a long, almost interminable, silence. The room was hot, flies buzzed on the window-panes, and the clock ticked loudly, even triumphantly, as if it knew it were measuring out M. de Cadanet's moments, and that its work was nearly over. When the old man spoke again, Charles clinched his hands with disappointment.

"Your wife is a good woman."

"Oh, she is!" He added, "Apparently she takes after her aunt."

M. de Cadanet's answer was rather a grunt than an assent, but after another pause he remarked:

"Nevertheless, neither she nor any one must ever hear what I am telling you."

"Rest assured they will not. You know me, I think, my dear uncle, and that I am not a tattler. But I am deeply interested. You had, if I understood rightly, enclosed that sum of money most generously intended for me, and Monsieur de Beaudrillart was aware of it? What followed?"

"A quarrel."

"Did he attempt to wrest it from you?"

"I believe he thought of it, but gave up his idea for another."

"Ah, now I have it!" cried Lemaire, triumphantly. "He forged your name."

M. de Cadanet flung him a glance of contempt. "Apparently, monsieur, you are very little acquainted with the De Beaudrillarts."

The young man saw his mistake, and caught it back.

"Of course not, of course not! I spoke without thought, and forgetting the family. Pray excuse me, and tell me what really happened."

"We quarrelled, as I said, and I told him never to return. He never has come back. But on his way along the street he was overtaken by André, who, as you know, is an honest dolt, and who was taking my letters to the post Baron Léon, it appears, asked to look at them, and in that moment contrived to substitute a letter of his own for the one which contained the money. You follow me?"

"Perfectly, perfectly." Charles was leaning forward, and keeping his eyes fixed on the ground to conceal their exultation. "It is terribly sad."

"He must indeed have been desperate," said the old count, sadly.

"Quite desperate. You know I told you I was afraid that he had got his affairs into a hopeless mess. But how did you discover what had happened? Through André, I imagine?" There was another silence of exhaustion, and this lasted so long that, however unwillingly, Charles felt he must call in one of the women. For some reason or other he distrusted the nurse, and was not sure that his wife was still in the house. He found her, however, in the anteroom, and hurried her back, whispering that she must give a strong restorative, as it was of the greatest consequence that M. de Cadanet should finish what they were about. Her slow methodical movements enraged him, and as quickly as possible he got her out of the room, though she went reluctantly.

"Is it quite necessary, my friend?"

"Quite. He will never rest until it is told."

"If there is something on his mind, I would gladly fetch a priest."

"No, no, my dear Amélie; it is business—business, I assure you, which only I can arrange. Now, go." He went back to the bedside, and sat there impatiently before he ventured to remark: "André, of course, told you?"

"No," returned the old count, feebly. "You are quite wrong. It was Léon himself who told me."

"Ah! Repented," said Lemaire, with a sneer.

"Not at all." A weak smile flitted across the sick man's face. "If you will be good enough to extract the top letter from that bundle, you may read it. Read it. Read it aloud." Charles had it in his hand. He glanced at the bed. "Aloud?"

"Aloud. Though I know every word."

"My Cousin,—I have taken the liberty of borrowing the sum which you had so thoughtfully prepared for Monsieur Charles. It would have been better for him if you had accepted my offer to post your letter; as you declined to trust me, I had no scruple in exchanging it for another which found itself in my hand at the exact moment. Do not blame your messenger, who is quite unaware of the transaction. By my writing to you, you will perceive that I have no intention of denying what I have done. It is in your power to have me arrested. You know where to find me, and I will remain in Paris for two days, so as to avoid the pain to my family of a scandal at Poissy. Permit me, however, to point out that I have only taken the money as a loan, that it will be returned to you by instalments and with interest, though, I fear, slowly, and that you may find it more advantageous to allow the matter to rest than to ruin one who, however unworthy, is the son of the man to whom you are certainly indebted for your prosperity."

M. Charles silently refolded the letter, and the count lay watching him. "Well?" he asked, at last.

"The money has, of course, never been repaid?"

"Every penny."

This answer came upon the hearer as an extraordinary surprise. He stared amazedly at the old man.

"I received, first, an instalment of five hundred francs, afterwards all that remained of the debt. You are astonished!"

"I should not have expected it of—of the Baron Léon."

"Ah, I told you you did not understand the De Beaudrillarts. But now listen. I have never forgiven him. I have never sent him a line of acknowledgment. I have kept his confession and André's statement—"

"Oh," said Charles, pricking his ears.

"—Because I chose to feel that at any time I might crush him. Since then he has married, and has a boy. It seems to me that makes a difference. A boy—innocent, and the old baron's grandchild. Besides, I am dying. Anger becomes as useless as one's clothes. What do you feel, Charles?"

If at that moment M. de Cadanet had known what the younger man was really feeling, it might have startled him. But Lemaire's mind sprang quickly from point to point—weighing that, considering this. He saw that the old man was relenting, but that he had done nothing as yet. If he said what was in his heart, it might irritate him—would certainly raise his suspicions; it would be far wiser to appear to go with him, and, if possible, get matters—and proofs—into his own hands.

"I feel that you are generous, sir, and your generosity has converted me. Trust to me to help you in anything you wish done."

"Good." The word was rather sighed than spoken, but, by the relaxation of tense fingers, it was evident that Lemaire's speech had come as a relief. The young man spoke again:

"Do you wish me, perhaps, to write!"

"Write! No. Why should I write? I've nothing to say, and he would not thank me for saying it. No. The best thing I can do for him is to burn this letter."

Lemaire's fingers closed round it, and he asked, with an affectation of not understanding: "Burn it? But why!"

"Because, when I am gone, that letter will prove the very devil of a witness against him."

"Surely you don't suppose that any one would wish to rake up such a story?"

"I suspect he would give a good deal to see it destroyed. No receipts for the money paid, and this letting out everything, besides André's testimony, which I took down myself. The next paper. Yes. That. Give it me. Give them both to me."

Charles looked and decided.

"You are quite right, sir; it should be done at once. Will you trust them to me?"

"No," said M. de Cadanet, sharply, "to no one. Do it here by my bed. I would burn them myself, but that I am too— O God, this weakness!"

"You shall see your wishes carried out close to you," Charles promised, consolingly. "I am only going into the next room to get a candle, because those silver ones are so heavy." He dashed through the anteroom where his wife sat working, and into the study. When he came back he carried a short candle, and up his sleeve, which Amélie did not see, a couple of folded letters. He was pale, for he was not a brave man, and he was playing a dangerous game.

M. de Cadanet lay, a shrunk and ghastly figure, with all about him, except his will, exhausted. That still looked out of his eyes, and clutched the papers.

"Here it is," Charles said, cheerfully; "and now you shall see your letters burn. It is a pity the Baron Léon is not here to assist. May I have them?"

To his dismay, the old count made a sign of refusal, at the same time that he beckoned to him to bring the light close; and the feeble hand, by an almost superhuman effort, held a corner of the letter to the candle. But the strength was insufficient; and hardly had the flame caught the paper than it wavered and dropped. Charles hurriedly snatched it up, and cried out:

"Good Heaven, my dear uncle, what risks you run! Suppose the bed had been set on fire!"

"Is anything wrong?" asked Amélie's voice, anxiously, at the door.

Her husband turned round with scarcely subdued wrath. "No, no, nothing! Leave us for another five minutes. Now, sir, you shall see it burn, without danger to yourself."

And standing with light in one hand, and letters in the other, he allowed M. de Cadanet to watch them slowly consume. As the last scrap vanished, the old man uttered a low "Ah!"

"There!" said Lemaire. "This has been a good day's work for Monsieur de Beaudrillart."

"You will remember,"—M. de Cadanet's voice sounded strangely strong—"that Monsieur de Beaudrillart has paid everything, and that I have nothing against him."

"Hush, hush!" cried the other, glancing round uneasily; "you will fatigue yourself too much. You may be sure I shall always remember."

"And if ever you meet him, you may say it was for the sake of the child—the boy—Now, go, and send your wife."

Amélie, who was again at her post in the anteroom, hurried in, and called the nurse. The two women did what they could to restore the fast-ebbing strength, murmuring reproaches at the obstinacy of man. The doctor came and said that it could not be long. Nevertheless, for some days M. de Cadanet lay, and watched the flies on the ceiling, and the sunshine creep from shadow to shadow, and gradually ceased to watch, and lost all consciousness, until, when M. Lemaire came one morning, he heard that he was gone.

It must be owned that his only feeling was one of relief. The necessary visits to the old man had become a wearisome burden, endured for the sake of gifts, which were generous, and for the prospect of a substantial legacy. A certain part of the property would go to cousins of the count's, but the sum left to himself was too large to be trifled with; he was in considerable difficulties, and here lay the only road out of it. At the same time, the part of hypocrite, though he could play it with success, was irksome to him, and he raged at the fetters it imposed. He had a capacity for open rebellion, or thought he had, and believed that he would have enjoyed flinging his glove in the face of the world, and defying opinion. Hinderance lay in the fact that the moment never arrived for this more daring attitude, self-interest always clinging to his arm just when he might have hurled the challenge.

But with M. de Cadanet out of the way, he was free from his chief difficulty, and in the first frenzy of his dreams he felt himself sailing on a sea of liberty, restraining cords loosened, golden castles on the horizon before him. He thought of his wife as a humdrum nonentity, easy to shake off. He would give up his house, place her in lodgings, and spend his time as he chose. In the midst of these delightful imaginings he remembered Léon de Beaudrillart.

Those who talk most of liberty are generally the first to find themselves in bonds of their own making; and it did not take long to oblige Lemaire to own, with an oath, that if he affronted respectability, he would be placed at an immediate disadvantage with regard to what he had in his mind. It might have been supposed that as there was now no fear of M. de Cadanet's money finding its way to Poissy, his rancour would have taken flight—evil does not so

readily spread its wings, and he felt that before he could unrestrainedly take his pleasure, he must ruin the man he hated. To do this he must bring into court a specious semblance: remain outwardly respectable, point to an excellent wife, and the trust proved by M. de Cadanet's legacy—in fact, impress the world with all the solid weight of character added to substantial proof.

He often read the letters, and always with increased assurance. The one point which gave him uneasiness was the absence of the mention of any particular sum. Suppose that Léon chose to say that it was a matter only of some four or five thousand francs, how could the contrary be proved! Here lay the fret; here was the point for a clever counsel to extract an admission; here, unfortunately for Charles, who felt himself injured in consequence, was the necessity to have a *very* clever counsel, who would be proportionately more expensive, but might be trusted to make his points.

He questioned André, the concierge, without arriving at fresh discoveries. The man only repeated what we already know; he might not even have remembered that, if it had not been taken down by a notary in the presence of M. de Cadanet, and therefore indelibly fixed on his memory. He remarked that he had never seen M. de Beaudrillart since, and was sorry for it.

"Ah, you got a good *pourboire* with no more trouble than letting him look at your master's letters, eh?" said Charles, spitefully.

"As to that, the young baron often gave me a piece of twenty sous, when he could not afford it so well as other people," returned the concierge, imperturbably.

"Twenty sous? No more! If you had been sharp, that look should have been worth more than twenty sous."

"Ah, well, monsieur knows better than I. And as I asked for nothing, he might have given me nothing, and that's all about it," said André, retreating.

The cousins who hurried to the Rue du Bac knew nothing of the old count's acquaintances, or to whom should be sent notice of his death. They were very glad of Amélie's assistance, and the arrangement suited her methodical habits. She spent an afternoon with them, suggesting names, and directing envelopes. Charles hated anything which had to do with death, and pleaded the acuteness of his feelings to excuse his absence. When his wife came back he asked if it was finished.

"Yes, quite. The poor man, alas, had not many to mourn for him."

"Who has?" asked Charles, cynically. "People please their friends better by dying than by living."

"Oh, Charles!"

"Well, we need not discuss it. I, for one, should find it very inconvenient if Monsieur de Cadanet were to come to life again."

"I miss him dreadfully," said Amélie, simply. "And Charles—"

"Well?"

"I sent a notice of his death to Poissy."

"To Poissy! What the—" he checked himself. "What possessed you?"

"I think he would have liked it, for I am sure he thought of that child."

"What folly!"

"It can do no harm," said his wife, calmly.

On reflection, M. Lemaire thought the same—was even glad that she had suggested it. His great desire was to act suddenly, to give no hint to M. de Beaudrillart of the shock that was in store for him until with the thunder came the bolt. This letter would disarm suspicion, and probably relieve Léon's mind of a great fear. Charles desired, above all, to act prudently. He was racked by doubts of whether in spite of no acknowledgment having been sent, the young baron might not have provided himself with proof of its repayment. If he had grown really careful, he would have done so, and then, although it might be easy to deny that M. de Cadanet had received it, the case would bear, criminally, a very different complexion, and have a very different issue. As it was, all going well, if he could manage to prove that M. de Beaudrillart had stolen money which had been sent to him, he might extract compensation, if by no other way, as hush-money. He sometimes thought it would be the safest plan to work on the young baron's fears, and after having reduced him to abject misery, sell the compromising papers for something larger than the original sum. By such means his pocket would be very much the better, although his revenge would not have the joy of publicity. A degree of this, even, might be gained, for it is never difficult to let a little evil rumour sift out: a word here, and a word there, and M. de Beaudrillart would be a marked man.

Finally, he resolved to move quickly but cautiously at first. If he were imprudent he might find matters taken out of his keeping, and his hand forced. Léon should feel the net closing round him before he was prepared, but the net should be held by Charles Lemaire, and Charles Lemaire only, and the next step would depend upon what that gentleman judged to be of the most advantage to himself. That, and that only, should guide the course of events.

## Restraint.

And Poissy?

After the child's birth the years slipped swiftly, though not always smoothly, by. Léon, who easily forgot, had very nearly succeeded in forgetting that desperate act of his, and the old count's threat of the future. There were still, however, moments when it flashed upon him, and brought with it a sudden cloud of depression which he attributed to physical ailments. His wife, sure he was not ill, laughed at these fancies, but his mother, perhaps out of opposition, treated them seriously until they generally ended in his laughing at himself. He spent a great deal of time out of doors, rising early, and going all over the estate, which, bit by bit, was being brought together again; coming in to the eleven o'clock breakfast, and then out again, shooting or fishing or loitering about with Nathalie. If a new idea, a new invention, a new arrangement, attracted him, he was possessed by it, and could think and speak of nothing else. His neighbours smiled at his enthusiasms, but liked and excused him; those who had blamed him in old days were vanquished by the sweetness of temper with which he had accepted his new life, and by the unsuspected strength he had shown in renouncing the extravagances of Paris.

His mother was almost content Léon was all she had believed him, Poissy stood in its old position in the neighbourhood, and there was little Raoul, as dear, or dearer, than his father. As for Nathalie, as much as possible she contrived to ignore her, and though M. Bourget was a terrible man, he had the grace seldom to inflict himself upon them.

It was Nathalie herself who was the most changed by the years of her married life, or who gave that impression, for her character had not really changed, although it had developed. She had lost, early, a certain frank open-heartedness; she was reserved—with her mother and sisters in law extremely reserved. She never battled for her rights, and the household had almost ceased to remember that she possessed any. But, in avoiding retorts, she had fallen into a habit of grave silence which did not belong to her years, and of which Léon sometimes laughingly complained.

"It doesn't matter when we are alone," he would say, "but with others—I saw Madame de la Ferraye looking at you this afternoon and expecting you to take your part in the discussion."

She made a laughing excuse.

"Dear, how should I? It was better not to expose my ignorance."

"You cram that little head of yours with all kinds of learned stuff, and then talk of ignorance? What makes you read so much?"

"Because I will not have Raoul ashamed of me."

Every now and then—not often, and always suddenly—a gust of passion seemed to sweep through the mask under which she relentlessly hid her more spontaneous self. Such a gust had come now. Léon looked at her, amazed at the tone in which the words were spoken, concentrated will passionately pushing them forward, as if they carried a standard of rebellion. She never now complained to him, never invited a suggestion which should shape her conduct towards his mother and sisters, and though he was quite shrewd enough, if he had chosen, to perceive the slights which she had daily to endure, he preferred to shut his eyes, and tell himself that with him and the child she was so happy as to be indifferent. Such a passionate outcry as this shook his easy-going reflections, and annoyed him. But he marched on silently, aware that she would soon curb her rebel tongue with shame at its weakness.

They were walking towards Poissy; a fine rain had browned the road, and, falling on a sun-baked soil, sent up a pleasant smell of growing things. The sky was stormy, a sweet insistence of blue above changing in the west to pale, mysterious green. Low down lay a horizontal flame-coloured line of clouds, broken by nearer drifts of dark grey, tattered and vaporish at the edges and flecked with red. One small portion, rent from the rest, had drifted lightly across the blue above. Nathalie, fronting the sunset, with its level light on her face, looked a very noble woman. The lines had grown a little harder, but not one was mean or weak. It was a face to which poor sinners would look for help, and never look in vain. Léon, glancing at it, felt its force and began to speak, although he had resolved on silence.

"You can't say, I'm sure, that I've ever been ashamed of you."

She turned, and her gravity melted into a lovely smile.

"Ah, but Raoul is going to be much cleverer than you. If you doubt it, listen to my father. Besides, my friend, I spoke hastily; I did not really mean that he would ever be ashamed of his mother, but that it would be useful for him if I could help him in his work. For, wonderful as it seems, the monkey will have to work one day."

He had quickly forgotten the reproach he had made against her silence, for he was always more taken up with his own thoughts or actions than with those of others, and went on:

"They want me to go over to dine with them to-morrow. And sleep."

"The La Ferrayes?"

"Yes; the prefet is due there, and two or three others. Madame de la Ferraye made a hundred apologies for not asking you. I forget why it was—no room, I think."

"I hope you accepted, Léon. It is my turn now to scold you, for I don't think you are so sociable with your neighbours

as you might be. Here you have nothing but women, women! It will do you good to be away from us for a little; indeed, I often wish you would run up to Paris for a few days. You must have many friends there."

"None, now. And I hate Paris," said Léon, sharply.

"You puzzle me when you say that," she returned, looking at him with a smile. "And as for friends, at any rate there must be that old Monsieur de Cadanet, whose name your mother suggested as Raoul's second. Would it not please him if you were to pay him a visit!"

"Hardly."

"Well, go to the La Ferrayes, then, and Raoul and I, we will do something to amuse ourselves, perhaps drive to Tours and see my father. Happily, those two love each other."

To say that M. Bourget loved his grandson was not enough—he adored him. From the first moment when he had gazed, awe-struck, at a small red contorted face, lying in the capacious arms of the nurse, his joy, his pride, his self-satisfaction had been almost beyond control. If his acquaintances had avoided him before, they fled from him now. To know that this true, actual Beaudrillart—not Beaudrillart by grace of marriage, but by birth and actual right, was also his—Bourget's—grandson, proved sufficient to turn his head, and lead him into extravagant follies. He looked at his daughter with reverence; was she not the mother of this phoenix, this wonder? She was obliged to interfere to prevent him—he, M. Bourget, who called himself to account for every penny he spent—from making perpetual gifts to the nurse, and since she objected to the practice, he indulged himself by presenting his gifts by stealth, so delightful was it to him to sit down before his ledger and make an entry of moneys expended "on behalf of my grandson, the Baron Raoul de Beaudrillart." As for the photograph of Poissy, words cannot describe the look with which he regarded it. Planted squarely on the pavement, his coarse broad hands clasped behind him, his legs a little apart, his solid head advanced as far as a short neck would allow, he would stand in rapt contemplation, knowing already every line of the windows, every fret of the tracery, but devouring them with his eyes, and utterly indifferent to the smiles and nudges of the passers-by. This worship satisfied him as well as a visit to the actual Poissy. Nathalie, in spite of objections raised at the château against the baby being so constantly taken to the town, was absolutely firm in driving him at least once a week to see his grandfather. Once persuaded of the right of an action, she was tenacious of purpose, and weekly the grey ponies rattled merrily along the narrow street to M. Bourget's door. This quite contented him, and though, by Léon's desire, she now and then asked her father whether he would not drive back with her, she was always relieved when he declined. The little slights or sharp speeches to which he was subject there stung her almost beyond endurance, even when he appeared absolutely impervious. Nothing that could be said to herself hurt like these vicarious stings.

Oddly enough, he had grown either more indifferent or less suspicious of neglect on her behalf since the birth of the boy. Before this he had evidently resented the attitude of Mme. de Beaudrillart and her daughters, and at intervals shot out a question at Nathalie which she found it difficult to parry. But now, either he believed her position to be assured, or had concentrated his thoughts upon his grandson, for he asked nothing awkward, and seemed profoundly careless of what was done at Poissy by its older inhabitants. They were, after all, only women, and of little importance compared to Nathalie's child. It would have surprised them amazingly if they had realised the small account in which their *bête noir* held them.

The pitched battle of the portrait had, through Léon's skilful management, ended in a compromise. He became extremely full of the idea, and did not rest until the painter on whom he had fixed his mind came down to Poissy. M. Bourget had his way so far, though it displeased him that his daughter absolutely refused to be painted as he would have had her, resplendent in white satin. She insisted upon an every-day dress, the dress in which she generally walked with Léon, and she had her way, with the result that nothing could have been more charming. Compromise also effected her entrance into the gallery, for, although Mme. de Beaudrillart was as stubborn as M. Bourget, Léon suggested that, in place of hanging, the portrait might lean against the wall, a position less assured, and—his mother satisfied herself—more humble.

But, strangely enough, the boy's birth, which had reconciled his grandfather to anything anomalous in his daughter's position, produced a contrary effect upon Nathalie. Before the child arrived she had accepted the contemptuous treatment she received with philosophy, almost with indifference; Léon's love appeared sufficient to satisfy her, and she treated disagreeables lightly, as something of which she had already counted the cost. Now there was a change. The trivial galled. Mme. de Beaudrillart was jealous of any influence which the young wife might have upon her son, and hitherto she had drawn aside with a smile, and been content to efface herself; but she no longer did this with ease. She resented the necessity. It seemed that she had fallen into the position of a mere plaything; that her husband liked her to walk with him, to laugh with him; that he found her pleasant to look at; but that when a cloud came between him and the sun—such a cloud as flung a shadow on his face now and then without visible reason—it was to his mother that he turned. His wife was strong enough to face facts and to meet them without repining or fretfulness. She never complained to her husband or her father. But she suffered.

And she had lost illusions about Léon. She saw that he was weak, that his very sweetness of temper was often mere selfishness, and clinging to what was pleasant. She loved him as passionately as ever, but she wanted to keep her boy from the same faults, and it did not seem as if she would succeed. For she was sure that if ever man had been injured by his bringing up, Léon was that man, and here were all the same influences, and more, at work. Mme. de Beaudrillart spoiled her grandchild outrageously. His father laughed at his naughtiness, and even M. Bourget could see in them nothing but an added charm. All the thwarting, all the reasoning, was left to the mother, forced often into strictness by the indulgence of others. The boy had a fine nature, brave and true; but in him, too, the Beaudrillart will was already asserting itself, and Nathalie, looking at him, trembled and prayed.

On the morning after the young baron's departure for the La Ferrayes, there was a not infrequent scene in the breakfast-room. Raoul had been rude to his aunt Félicie, and his mother required him to say he was sorry. Mme. de

Beaodrillart at once remonstrated.

"It is absurd to expect repentance from a baby. You weaken your authority by making sins out of such trifling matters. Come here, Raoul, and I will give you some melon."

"No," said Nathalie, with a firm grasp of the delinquent, "you must pardon me, madame, but Raoul knows that he must do what I have told him."

"Ne veux pas," said the small rebel, standing stiff and resolute.

"Pray don't let us have a scene," said Félicie, nervously. "I assure you, Nathalie, that I am not in the least vexed with him."

"But I am," said her sister-in-law, trying to smile. "Raoul, your aunt Félicie is very kind; will you go and kiss her, and say you are sorry!"

He hesitated, made a step towards her, and caught sight of his grandmother, smiling and signing to him with her head to come for the melon. With a laugh of gleeful mischief he broke from his mother, rushed to Mme. de Beaodrillart, cried out again, "Ne veux pas," and buried his round black head in her lap.

"Let him alone, Nathalie," said his grandmother, delightedly. "He has found sanctuary."

From her! With a pang at her heart, Mme. Léon showed no trace of ill-temper. She followed, however, and lifted him, now kicking and crimson, in her strong young arms. Mme. de Beaodrillart looked much displeased.

"A storm about absolutely nothing!" she exclaimed. "The child would have been perfectly good if he had been let alone."

"When he is good, he shall come back," said his mother, calmly, carrying him out of the room.

"Ridiculous!" cried Mme. de Beaodrillart, as they vanished.

"It is just the way to spoil his temper," Claire remarked, adding seltzer-water to her white wine. "But Nathalie delights in a scene, and in insisting upon her own authority."

"Poor darling! And he will think I was the cause of it all," cried Félicie. "I must find something for him, to make up."

"A medal," suggested Claire. "I am sure you have a drawer full."

"Not for playthings," Félicie said, reproachfully. "If he might wear one always, now, it would make me really happy; but Nathalie is so unsympathetic in those matters that I could not trust to her seeing that it was firmly secured. And as likely as not that dreadful Monsieur Bourget might say something irreverent if he discovered that it hung round the dear child's neck."

"He will never believe that you are not deaf," her sister remarked, with a laugh.

"Thank Heaven, he does not come here often," acknowledged Mme. de Beaodrillart. "I must say, I feel grateful to him for his forbearance. By-the-way, I have received a letter this morning, and I see there is another for Léon, announcing the death of old Monsieur de Cadanet."

"Really? A cousin, is he not?"

"A distant cousin, and Léon once was under a certain obligation to him."

"Ah," said Claire, "at that time when there was such a panic as to Léon's affairs? I begin to understand. So it was Monsieur de Cadanet who came to the rescue? Félicie, will you kindly pass the fruit?"

"He had good reason for doing so," returned her mother. "You know, or perhaps you don't know, that he was under great obligations to your father, so that he could not very well have refused. And I do not fancy that he behaved very graciously, for Léon does not speak of him with warmth. However—he did his duty, and he is dead."

Félicie bent her head, and murmured a little prayer for the repose of the soul of M. de Cadanet. When she had finished, Claire said, as she peeled a pear:

"His death is not likely to make much difference to us—ah, here is Raoul! Come to me, treasure!"

"One moment," interposed Nathalie, firmly. She led the little boy to Félicie. "Now, dear Raoul."

"Ne veux pas," whispered Claire in his ear, with a laugh. He looked at her, and glanced at his mother.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not *very* sorry, Aunt Félicie." Then he threw his arms round Nathalie's neck. "Will that do? Shall we go to Tours, and may I have the reins?"

Mme. de Beaodrillart said, hastily:

"Not Tours again, I hope. It really is not at all good for the child to pass so much of his time in the close streets of a town. Pray, for once leave him with us. I know, too, that they have fever there."

"His grandfather expects to see him every week," replied Nathalie, in a quiet tone.



Mme. de Beaudrillart hated to hear M. Bourget called "his grandfather."

"That may be," she said, "but I think my wishes might also be respected. Raoul, would you not rather remain here and let Jean drive you?"

"No," said Raoul, sturdily. "And I shall go to Tours, because mother promised."

"Ah, it is a pity your mother spoils you," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, rising, and looking displeased. "May I ask when you start!"

"At once," Nathalie answered, "so as to be at home when Léon arrives."

"I shall want him to walk with me."

"Certainly, madame." As her mother-in-law left the room, Mme. Léon took up her husband's letters, which lay on the table. "Such a black border!" she remarked, looking at one of them. "These letters of announcement always give one a shiver."

"That need not, at any rate, for it does not concern you," said Claire, carelessly. "I suppose you have scarcely heard of old Monsieur de Cadanet, in Paris?"

"Léon and I were speaking of him only yesterday. Is he dead?"

"So it seems. By-the-way, if Léon had been at home, perhaps he would have run up for the funeral."

"It appears as if it would require a great deal to drag Léon to Paris," Nathalie remarked, smiling.

"Perhaps, my dear, he has never informed you of the reasons he has to avoid it."

Her sister-in-law coloured.

"No," she said, "he never speaks of his life there."

"And such a good wife asks no questions! Well, I have often wished to go there myself."

"Oh, you are quite extraordinary, Claire," said Félicie, shuddering. "When Paris is such a wicked place!"

"I believe I should like to see a little of the wickedness and judge for myself," Claire announced, as she followed her mother out of the room.

When Nathalie and her boy reached M. Bourget's house, he had already been more than once to the door to see if they were coming, although he would not have acknowledged it for worlds. He professed great surprise at their appearing, for, by an established fiction, they were never expected on the days when they arrived, and by another fiction it was supposed to be an extraordinary fact that Raoul should have been allowed to drive in with his mother.

M. Bourget would stand, thumbs in button-holes, and look him up and down with a pride which cannot be described.

"Ta, ta, ta, and this is our baby?" he would say, pursing his lips. "Only the other day he was tied into his chair, and here, if you please, he is driving with his mamma like a gentleman! The times march, upon my word!"

By this time Raoul would have plunged his hands into his grandfather's pocket.

"Softly, softly, what now!" And, aside to his daughter, "He grows more of a Beaudrillart every day. What he will have, he will, one can see it in everything. Now then, little robber, little brigand, what are you stealing from your poor grandfather!"

And with a shout of delight, his dark eyes sparkling with mischief, Raoul would extract a whip, or a top, or a packet of chocolates, and run round the room chased by M. Bourget with terrific show of indignation. Later on, another ceremony was observed, which Nathalie herself always suggested, having discovered the pleasure it afforded to her father. All three would set forth for a walk through the streets of Tours, M. Bourget with his grandson by his side. The ostensible reason for the promenade was that Raoul should see the shops, and to this end they walked up and down the streets for half an hour. M. Bourget did not, at these times, stop to converse with any of his friends, but he took care that they should see him, passed and repassed the café and his other most usual haunts, and would have been greatly disappointed had he not met Leroux, Docteur Mathurin, and at least one of the principal officials. If they went into the cathedral, where Raoul liked to look at the tomb of the little boy and girl princess with their watching angels, he would even make the concession of lifting him up to dip his small fingers into the stoup for holy-water. Then, while Nathalie knelt and prayed—little knowing, poor soul, how much at that very moment her prayers were needed!—the two would wander off into quiet corners, Raoul putting questions which his grandfather treasured jealously, to be repeated with shaking shoulders to the impatient Leroux.

"He must have an answer for everything," M. Bourget would declare, and Leroux, who, as a father, suffered under the not unusual infliction himself, was expected to express amazement.

After this, it was necessary to stand in front of the cathedral, and scatter crumbs, brought for the purpose, to the pigeons; returning by way of the Rue Royale, that M. Bourget might be certain Raoul had not forgotten how Balzac was born in Number 39. Raoul knew it as well as his grandfather, by this time, but he would sometimes pretend forgetfulness in order to have his memory jogged by chocolates.

On this day the round was shorter, as Mme. Léon wished to be at home early to meet her husband.

"He will hear of the death of an old cousin," she said, knowing her father's interest in all Beaudrillart affairs—"Monsieur de Cadanet. I believe he was very old, but I do not think there had been any news sent of his illness, so that I do not suppose it was expected."

"Ah," said M. Bourget, "Cadanet. Yes. A branch. His grandmother was a Beaudrillart. Have they said much about it at Poissy?"

"Not to me," she replied, briefly. "Léon, you know, is absent."

"It is too far off, probably, for Raoul to benefit," remarked his grandfather, gazing at him. "If he could have seen him now! Monsieur de Beaudrillart should have taken him there on a visit."

"It might have been only another to spoil him," she said, with a laugh, capturing her son as he was thumping upon the table with both lists.

"Pooh, you are a fidget! He gets no spoiling here. I dare say those women at Poissy don't know how a boy should be treated. Let him hammer. The table is solid. You lose your authority by always scolding. Come here, Raoul, and tell me how the pony goes. And Jean? Does he do what you tell him?"

Driving back that afternoon, Nathalie reflected, as she reflected often, on the difficulties which lay about the bringing up of her little son. Indulged on all sides, with the strong family will quite ready to develop itself, it seemed as if his path was to be strewn with rose-leaves. She had absolutely no one to help her, except Jacques Charpentier, Jean's father, an honest, sensible man, devoted to the family, and no less so to Mme. Léon. When Raoul was with him, his mother was at ease. With his grandmother and aunts, she was sure that they often indulged the boy out of opposition to her. His father hated disturbance of any sort, and found it easier to laugh than to rebuke. All the training was left to her. Her own father, usually sensible, here was weak, and, in fact, it was who should gain his love by yielding. Happily, as yet, Raoul adored his mother, and as she thought of this she blamed herself for her misgivings.

She told herself, with a sigh, that she was a very happy woman. And afterwards she stared back at that sigh with amazement at her ignorant discontent.

Léon received the news of M. de Cadanet's death in silence, which was unusual. He answered Claire's question whether he would have gone to the funeral briefly in the negative, and was leaving the room, when his mother detained him to say in a low voice:

"It will make no difference to you!"

"No. But it might have."

"Who will have his money?"

"I imagine he will leave all he can to one Monsieur Charles Lemaire, his wife's nephew."

"Ah, well! I am glad things were settled before there could be any complications."

Léon, who was pale, went out of the room without answering her.

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## Chapter Eleven.

### The First Blow.

It was two days after this that Mme. Léon came in from the garden by the outer stone staircase which led to her own room. Although it was only autumn, a chilly wind was blowing, and there was a threat of rain in the air. At the foot of the staircase she met Félicie, coming so much more quickly than usual round a corner that she was breathless.

"Ah, Nathalie," she cried, with a sudden access of cordiality, "at last! I have been searching everywhere for you."

"They sent up in a hurry because old Antoine has cut his hand. You wanted me?"

"Yes, indeed. I want you to talk to Léon, and to make him hear reason. Such an opportunity has not offered itself for years, and I am terribly anxious lest—unless we can persuade him that it is not only right and proper, but of the very greatest importance—he should suffer it to slip. If Madame Lemballe steps in before us—and I know she talks of it—it will be disgraceful, absolutely disgraceful! I hope that you will go to him at once, and, above all, impress upon him that it is not a matter to laugh about, and that he must take the precaution of acting without hesitation. Claire has said something to him, but not enough."

Such an appeal did not altogether surprise Nathalie, for when Félicie could not reach her brother by means of her mother or sister, she turned to his wife. And she guessed that the excitement in her manner was connected with some project for the parish, or perhaps a new biretta for the curé. She asked, smiling:

"What is it?"

"Why, of course, that he should come here; it is quite astonishing that Léon should not see the necessity of it for himself!" continued Félicie, too eager to offer explanation. "Every one in the neighbourhood knows that Poissy is the proper place, and if an invitation is not sent, no one will believe it possible that we can have shown such neglect; they will only suppose that for some reason or other we were not thought worthy of the honour. Figure to yourself

whether such an idea will be agreeable for us! And with the boy and all, and the importance to him, I should certainly have expected you to be the first to urge Léon to take a serious view of the matter.”

“But you have not told me what the matter is!”

Félicie stared.

“Do you mean to say you don’t know!”

“I have not even an idea.”

“Astonishing! Why didn’t you ask! I should have told you the first thing, if I had not gathered from your manner that you knew all about it already. I thought, of course, that every one had heard; only sometimes—excuse me, Nathalie—you do not seem to take in what we all talk about. Exactly what I want you to do is to see that Léon sends an invitation, and it would be better for me to write it, because then I should take care that it was worded properly. You understand!”

“I understand that you wish to write an invitation in Léon’s name; but to whom, to whom! Is it, for example, to the President of the republic?”

Félicie exclaimed, indignantly:

“The President! As if I should ever consent to Léon’s inviting him! We have had a queen at Poissy—”

“Not a very respectable one, was she!” inquired Nathalie, wickedly.

“Nathalie! I believe in your heart you are a radical. It all comes from your reading those dreadful books. And I am sure you will just speak to Léon as if it were a matter of no consequence, instead of pointing out to him seriously how much depends on it.”

She was almost crying, and Mme. Léon hastened to reassure her.

“Well, then,” she said, only half mollified, “there is to be a Home opened in about six weeks’ time at Douay, and our bishop has promised to attend. They will gather from all parts. It will be a magnificent function, and beyond a doubt his Grandeur should be invited to come here for it.”

“Ah,” said Nathalie, thoughtfully, “he is a good man, is he not?”

“A good man!” Félicie repeated, in amazement; “what extraordinary questions you ask! The very fact that he is monseigneur might tell you so much, I should think!”

“But it does not,” said Mme. Léon, in a quiet voice.

“My father did not like the Bishop of N, or the Bishop of X. But this one, our bishop, he said, had always tried to do his duty. I hope Léon may invite him. I should think he ought. Shall I go now and ask him?”

Dearly would Félicie have loved to have expatiated upon the sin of venturing to criticise a bishop, even perhaps of praising him in such measured terms, but her burning desire at the present moment was to insure an invitation being sent in time, and to obtain this she choked down her resentment.

“If you will be so good,” she said, stiffly, and Nathalie, glad of an opportunity of pleasing her sister-in-law, ran lightly up the stone staircase to the balcony which clung to an angle of the house. She pushed open the window, meaning to go in search of her husband, but to her surprise saw him standing in the room with his back towards her, his head bent, and his hand on the table. He did not even turn round as she came in, and she rallied him upon his preoccupation.

“Come back from your thoughts, for I am the bearer of a very important request from Félicie.”

He turned, with an attempt at a laugh, but the laugh was so forced that it frightened her.

“Léon! What is it? Has anything happened Raoul?”

“Happened! Foolish child, what should happen? Raoul is with his grandmother. I came here because—because it was the shortest way to the terrace, and then—well, then, I imagine I fell into a dream.”

She was standing in front of him, her hands on his shoulders, her steadfast eyes fastened upon his face. She was no longer frightened, but she was uneasy, though she smiled.

“No, my friend. You came here because it was the shortest way to your wife, and because you have something on your mind which you desire to share with her.”

A change swept over his face, and for an instant, written there, she saw misery, longing, and hunted fear. The next moment they had vanished, and he answered, with his usual lightness:

“Now it is you who dream. Do you not know that I avoid bringing worries to you, who represent my sunshine?”

“If there is any use in sunshine it is to disperse clouds,” she answered, gravely. He looked down, and said, impatiently:

"It is nothing. Merely an impertinent letter which arrived this morning, and annoyed me a good deal; but I have talked it over with my mother, and have written the necessary answer. So now, little fidget, you know everything."

She hesitated before she answered.

"Do you mean that the annoyance is at an end?"

"How can I tell? I hope so—certainly I hope so," he said, still hurriedly.

She dropped her hands and turned away, then came back with a heightened colour in her cheeks.

"Léon, I do not think I can bear it any longer."

"Bear it? Bear what?" There was genuine amazement in his tone.

"Being shut out of so much of your life. Oh, you are good to me, I am not denying that; there is nothing I asked for which I believe you would not try to give me, except this—the one thing for which I hunger. Do you not understand that I am not a child? I am your wife, the mother of your son. You tell me that you love me, yet only treat me as a plaything; when sorrow or anxiety comes you turn to your mother, and I—I, who should be the nearest and the dearest, am not so much as allowed to know what is troubling you. Dear, this should not be. Do you know that when you do this, out of your love—oh yes, out of your love, and wish to spare me—you are putting me to cruel dishonour? Are we not man and wife—one? Your sorrow is my sorrow, your lot is my lot; if there is anything you must suffer, I have the right to claim to suffer with you. Léon, up to this time I have been but half your wife, and what I say is true. I cannot bear it any longer. I claim my right."

She stood before him, her earnest eyes fixed upon his face, and her voice trembling a little as she spoke. He tried to look at her, but his eyes fell before the frank honesty which he found in hers, and he turned pale. When he spoke, his voice even sounded slightly sullen.

"Nathalie—I give you my word—you don't know what you are talking about."

"I know what I am asking for. Let me see the letter which has vexed you."

"Oh, woman, woman! And after having always assured my mother that you were free from the vice of curiosity!" he said, trying to recover his lightness.

"This is not curiosity," she replied, quietly.

He broke away, and came back.

"See, here, Nathalie, be reasonable! Remember that all these years we have been very happy—"

And then she interrupted him with her hand raised, with a strange, almost fierce, ring in her voice which he had never heard before.

"I have not."

He stared at her blankly.

"You have not! Great heavens, what are you saying?"

"I am saying the truth at last—the truth which you have never consented to hear!" she cried, passionately. "Has it been happiness to live here, do you suppose, looked down upon and scorned by your mother and sisters? Because I have held my tongue that you might not have your life marred, too, because I have gone my way silently, do you believe, do you know me so little as to believe, that I have not felt! What sort of position do I hold in this house, this great château of Poissy, of which my father thinks so much! They treat me as an inferior, you as if I were a child." Her voice changed, trembled again. "I could have borne it all—yes, all, if it had not been for *that*; but that—that has been almost insupportable. To have no part in your graver life; to be left, when anything fretting came to you, for your mother! I have tried to be just, I have indeed! I think of myself and Raoul. I do not begrudge her her rights, nor wish to shut her out from sharing whatever comes to you; but I—I, too, ought to be admitted, and until you take me as God meant you to take me, your wife for sorrow as well as for joy, your wife, and not only your playfellow, do not talk of me as happy, nor imagine that you can make me so."

Poor Nathalie! It was the outpouring of her heart. The words rushed swiftly with a force which told how long they had been held back, yet were quite free from any sting of bitterness. There lay, indeed, in the appeal a depth of sad tenderness, to which Léon's affectionate temper could not be insensible. His easy, shallow nature was as much moved as was possible, and he felt remorse, although he shrank from frank explanation of the reasons which had stood in the way of admitting her to his confidence, for they did not belong to a wish to spare his wife, but to a desire to remain in the position where she had placed him. He had no inclination to step down from his throne. He kissed her, and said, uneasily:

"I believe you are right. Well, where shall I begin! How far am I to go back!"

She made a sweeping movement with her hands. "The past is past. Begin to-day. The letter. I can see that you are really troubled about it, though you only called it impertinent."

"Well, it is true that it is more—it is threatening."

"Threatening!" slipping her hand into his arm.

"There is a certain Charles Lemaire, a very disagreeable fellow, whom I detest. Have I ever spoken of him!"

"Never."

"It appears that he has inherited a good deal of Monsieur de Cadanet's wealth, to which, as far as I am concerned, he is very welcome, if only—However, the letter is from him."

She was so anxious to understand, to avoid annoying him by questions, and, as it were, to take advantage of the confidence for which she had pleaded, that, breathing quickly, she only nodded in answer. But she kept her eyes fixed on his face, and he looked away.

"I suppose his head is turned by his good-fortune, or he has got bold of some mare's-nest or other, for he declares that a letter which was going to him from the old count—years ago—somehow miscarried, and—and he does me the honour to accuse me of having made away with it. Pleasant, isn't it!"

Her face changed. Its lines unstiffened, and she laughed gayly.

"And this has been troubling you? Oh, Léon!" Something in her absolute faith affected M. de Beaudrillart strangely. His voice shook as he answered:

"In spite of the hard things you have been saying, you would not then credit it of your poor Léon?"

"Take care, monsieur! It shows me that my hard things are well justified, for if you had told me at once, I should have made you see the absurdity of suffering yourself to be annoyed by such an insignificant matter. This Monsieur Charles Lemaire—has he, then, taken leave of his senses?"

"He hates me."

"Well, he must be at his wits' end for a way of venting his spite. My friend, you are not seriously vexed? I can only laugh. Pray, does he inform you what was in this fabulous letter?"

Léon hesitated.

"A large cheque."

"Better and better!" she cried, still laughing. "Robber! Ought I not to be terribly alarmed? How little I have known of your true character! Seriously, Léon, how have you answered this impertinent? Now that you have made me happy by admitting me to your confidence, I am never going to be shut out again. You will find that I must know all."

His fingers drummed on the table with an uneasiness which in her new contentment she did not realise.

"You don't show much sympathy with my annoyance."

"Oh!" she cried, suddenly grave. "But, dear Léon, no one who knew you could treat it as anything but a silly joke. You don't really expect us to take it seriously!"

Silent at first, he said at last:

"It was not intended for a joke, and I think any man who had such an accusation sprung upon him would naturally be a good deal disgusted."

"Oh yes," she said, readily, "disgusted at the folly. I can quite understand your anger at its insolence, but you can't really fret yourself over what is so obviously absurd."

He looked at her, and his face lightened. "You are right, you are right, chérie. I need not worry myself over a foolish piece of spite which no one in their senses would believe."

"Now you are reasonable," cried his wife, gayly.

"And you," he retorted, putting his arm round her, and drawing her to the window—"you are yourself again? What did all that talk mean about your not being happy? I assure you I did not know you, you looked so fierce!"

"It meant the truth," she acknowledged, in a low voice, "but it is going to be different, for from this day I am to share your troubles, and that is all I want I bore it at first, because—well, because I felt you did not know me very well; you might have loved me, yet thought I was foolish and untrustworthy. But, by-and-by, as years rolled on, and you treated me in the same manner, I became miserable, for I thought, 'If he does not know now, perhaps he will never know,' and it was a dreadful thing for me to reflect that you did not trust me. I felt it was very hard, and more so because it was so different with me. I trusted you entirely—" He made a sudden start from her side. "Oh, my God!" he exclaimed, sharply.

"What is it?" she said, distressed. "Do you dislike my telling you all this? But I want you to understand what made me so unhappy, and I assure you it was only the absence of confidence. Now all is going to be so different that I feel as if I should never be unhappy again. As for your sisters—oh, and that reminds me that I came the bearer of a very important message from Félicie." She made a solemn face.

"Does she want money? Let her have it," said Léon, very quickly. "I have never begrudged money for the Church or the poor, have I?"

"Never," returned his wife with surprise. "But this is an invitation to be given. The bishop is coming to open the new Home at Douay, and Félicie longs that you should ask him here. I think she is right, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, certainly ask him." He spoke with the same almost feverish haste. "When is it? I will write."

"Make Félicie happy by letting her write in your name. She is dreadfully afraid that you may omit some formality." She had expected more difficulty, for the young baron was averse to giving ceremonious invitations. The presence of strangers bored him, and he had sometimes almost vexed his mother by his dislike to exercising the hospitality which she considered due to his position. But it was quite true that he never refused and seldom laughed at Félicie's appeals for money, although Nathalie fancied they must often have seemed to him, as to her, to be rather fanciful than necessary. Now he was so desirous to carry out his sister's wishes that he begged her to go at once to set her mind at rest.

Félicie was sitting on a projecting step watching a lizard; she jumped up and came towards Nathalie, all her little features astir with anxiety.

"Well?" she called out.

"Léon is quite ready," said Mme. Léon, happily. "Write your letter, and he will copy it, or do anything you like."

"Thanks!" cried Félicie, clasping her hands rapturously. "You were so long that I trembled."

"Oh, he did not even hesitate, but there was something else which had to be discussed first."

"Yes, mamma said he was annoyed about a letter, but I forgot to tell you. Do you know you are a strange person? You look quite happy over monseigneur's coming."

"I am happy, very happy," said Nathalie, smiling at her, "though it has nothing to do with monseigneur. Félicie, I am afraid that poor Henri Leblanc is in a bad way. He looks terribly ill."

Her sister-in-law's face stiffened.

"I have a very poor opinion of Henri. The abbé says he can make nothing of him, and his politics are a disgrace to the village."

"But if he is ill?"

"It may bring him to a better mind."

"Whatever he is," cried Nathalie, warmly, "the poor man might certainly have something to help him back to health. Might I not ask for some soup?"

"It would displease my mother very much. You had better not interfere about the people, for naturally you don't know them as we do, and it is the most worthless who appeal to you. That old Antoine!"

Happily, Félicie's little narrownesses always ended by amusing her sister-in-law. The idea that a man's opinions should stand in the way of having his hurts dressed was so comical that she began to laugh; and as for Henri, she made up her mind that her father should get him into the hospital at Tours. She had always money enough, too, for anything on which she had set her heart, for she never spent on herself the allowance that was hers. It was part of the bourgeoisie nature, as Mme. de Beaudrillart often remarked, to find it almost impossible to spend money without fear of waste, and without regarding waste as sin. Mme. de Beaudrillart and her daughters had been economical from the good sense which adapts itself to circumstances, never from actual inclination. Nathalie really had the inclination, and was thrifty by nature. Even her father, personally so as much as any Frenchman of his class, was annoyed with her for not, as he said, adopting notions better suited to the Beaudrillarts, and finding pleasure in spending.

Besides, she was so happy this morning that small vexations could not touch her. There had been a sore struggle in her heart these last years, and aching sadness at which no one had ever guessed. It looked out of her honest eyes sometimes, but there was no one to read it, for even the man who loved her best had not given her the love which is unselfish enough to decipher signs, and it was the blank, hopeless wall which her heart had found in his which had caused her trouble. Now it was surely down. She had planted her first step on its ruins, she saw herself safely intrenched in the citadel within, which the greatness of her own love made her yet think of as a place infinitely more sacred and satisfying than it was.

She went away into the garden to dream of her new bliss by herself. The day was gloomy but quiet, and as she walked the rush of the river over its pebbly shoals came up to her ears. Down below, in the level, the vines hung, all but ready for the vintage, and women in great sabots and white caps clattered across the bridge. Behind, Poissy stood, grey and grave, in its nest of thick foliaged trees. But on Nathalie's face the light of love was shining, the light of faithful, tender love. There was not a hard line left round her mouth, though, before this, it had seemed as if suffering had begun to grave them. The sweet nobility of her eyes was undisturbed, the youth of her face had reappeared. She cared little enough about the women at the château, strong-willed yet petty, less for the slights which came from them through the household; the kingdom she wanted was her husband's love, that divine gift which, in spite of imperfection, in spite, alas, often, of the worthlessness of the giver, is the crown of a woman's life.

Yet, as she walked along in her new happiness, she gauged Léon very fairly. She did not expect him to rise to heroic heights. She knew as well as any one that he was self-pleasing, often morally weak, shirking what was displeasing to the extent of often shutting his eyes and ears. But she loved him. She had credited him at first with finer qualities; these had dropped from his figure, but she had not loved him less for loss of them. His carelessness had often hurt her, his reserve had nearly broken her heart, and through all her own love had never wavered; it held him, held him

up perforce.

She said no more to him about the letter, fearful of frightening away his new-born confidence, and Léon himself seemed to have forgotten it. He displeased his mother by his smiles, his looks, at Nathalie. And when night came, and restless Raoul had been disposed of, husband and wife strolled out together. They went down to the bridge, and stood facing the western sky. The river ran dark under their feet, overhead spread black night, with here and there a faint gleam of stars, and the slender crescent of a new moon. A wind rustled through the low trees, a red light flung itself from a cottage door, and somebody stumbled out and across the bridge.

“Old Antoine,” said Léon, when he had passed.

“Impossible! He had really a bad accident to-day—lost a good deal of blood, and was feverish.”

“And now he has been drinking in honour of the occasion. He it was, I assure you.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Nathalie. She added, with a laugh, “Don’t tell Félicie!”

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## Chapter Twelve.

### Blank!

Only Léon’s power of letting trouble slip from him as readily as water trickles from a duck’s back enabled him to go about the estate as if to-day were the same as yesterday. He had, however, bad moments when he was alone, or when the thought which dogged his footsteps caught him by the throat.

The letter, it need scarcely be said, had come from Charles Lemaire. It was not long, but every word fell like the lash of an avenging fate. During the last illness of M. de Cadanet, he said, it had come to his knowledge that a letter directed to and designed for him had been stopped on its way by M. Léon de Beaudrillart, and the contents—a large sum—abstracted. Reluctance to bring disgrace upon a family with whom he was connected had no doubt caused M. de Cadanet to abstain from taking proceedings; but the writer, not being bound by such considerations, did not consider himself at liberty to condone a felony, added to which he was the person who had been the direct loser. M. de Cadanet was aware of his intentions to commence proceedings. He had, however, implored him to give the Baron Léon one chance of restitution of the two hundred thousand francs, hence this letter. He awaited an answer before taking further steps, and had the honour to remain, etc, etc.

When it reached him, Léon was sitting smoking in a room leading out of the hall, where he was in the habit of transacting business with his tenants, for he had never either reinstated M. Georges or engaged another intendant. He had good business capabilities, and it rather pleased him to exercise them, to M. Bourget’s great satisfaction. He was in particularly good spirits, for with the death of M. de Cadanet the uneasiness which every now and then haunted him had passed away. He had not feared legal proceedings, he had never feared them after the first two or three days, and, if he had, his repayment would have relieved him of all dread. But he had had a fear lest some imprudent word of the old count might have betrayed him, and it was a great relief to him to be no more haunted with this anxiety. He opened his letters with a laughing remark to Jacques Charpentier, who brought them.

The man had put them down, and gone to the window to draw back the muslin curtains. When he returned he started at the grey pallor of his young master’s face. The baron was sitting where he had left him, his elbows on the table, and his eyes fixed with a look which could be only described as that of horror on the letter which he held with shaking hands. Jacques was an old servant, devoted to the Beaudrillarts, and absolutely trustworthy. He said at once:

“Monsieur has had bad news? Shall I call Madame Léon?”

He made a shuddering sign of refusal.

“Can I do anything? Monsieur knows he may depend on me.”

Léon stretched out his hand—even at this moment the little action was full of kindly grace.

“You are a good fellow, Jacques. Say nothing. I have had a blow.”

He sent him away, and sat thinking, trying to collect his senses, and to decide how to meet the attack, so unexpectedly terrible and beyond everything that he could have feared. It had never entered his head that his payment could be disputed; what did it mean? Even if the stroke had come from the old count it would not have been so menacing; but that Charles Lemaire, always, he was certain, his enemy, should be on the track, and should, apparently, be wielding such a terrible weapon, was at first sight overwhelming. Then he had to reflect how much he should tell his mother. The letter itself was too precise, too exact in its revelations for him to venture to show it, he must destroy it; and let it be supposed that in his first indignant rage he had torn it up. He suited the action to the thought, and as he raged at the morsels, wondered he had kept his fingers off them so long. It was almost as if by such action he had succeeded in strangling the monstrous accusation; he flung the last atoms from him with a groan of relief. Here the buoyancy of his nature came to his aid. Such a stroke could not fall; it would not be permitted, it would be a crime against the eternal justice. Its impossibility pacified him, its sinfulness made his own deed look innocent; he stood, the mark, the victim, of calumny, and the dignity of martyrdom soothed him into assurance.

In this more endurable mood he flung away his cigar and went to find his mother. She kept the reins of the house firmly in her own grasp, and had just been looking into the great presses with old Nanon to make sure that no moth was fretting the linen.

"Ah, Léon," she said, "I wanted to see you. The wood is getting low. And Nanon thinks it would not be a bad plan to get a few Cochins for the poultry-yard. What do you say?"

Her son stood reflecting.

"I don't believe that you much like Cochins? Still, they are useful, and we need not have too many."

"Clumsy creatures. But if Nanon has set her old heart on them—just as you think best, mother; I can't give my mind to it to-day; other things are too worrying."

"Has Pichot been making difficulties about his rent! Sometimes I think that if you could get a good intendant, and not an incapable like Monsieur Georges, you might be spared many annoyances."

Léon flung himself into a chair with a groan, and stretched his legs.

"I can do with them, but this—this is shameful! What do you say to a rascally relation of Monsieur de Cadanet writing to blackmail me about a letter of his which he avows I took?"

He spoke chokingly. It was difficult to put it into words. Mme. de Beaudrillart smiled.

"A little startling, certainly! But in these days it appears one must be prepared for anything. Does he pretend that the letter was worth anything to you?"

"Oh yes, money; a big sum, which he suggests I should hand over."

"Of course there would be that demand—there always is. I should like to see how he puts it."

"Ah," Léon exclaimed, hurriedly, "I tore the letter up. Its insolence enraged me so much!"

"Naturally. Well, I imagine you will not give him the satisfaction of taking any notice of his attempt. It is always better to say nothing about such a matter and simply to ignore it. I believe there are wretches who make a profession of trying to extort money by getting hold of some forgotten trifle, and magnifying it until they manage to frighten weak-spirited persons. Probably your correspondent is one of the tribe."

Mme. de Beaudrillart had a heap of linen before her; she lifted one piece after another, and laid it on one side, mechanically counting.

"I know the man," muttered Léon, his eyes on the heap.

"Yes?"

"And I shall answer him."

"Unwise."

"I must. The fellow passes for a gentleman. Why, he has inherited a great part of old De Cadanet's money."

His mother paused in her task.

"Then he must be under some strange delusion," she said, gravely, "and I begin to wish you had not destroyed the letter."

He assured her that he remembered what was in it, and repeated particulars, avoiding mention of the sum.

"It is scarcely credible that any one should have brought such a mad accusation," she remarked.

Léon allowed the strangeness of the fact.

"But I must answer the scoundrel, and what shall I say?"

"Refer him to your lawyer if he means to go further. There is nothing else to be done. Make him understand that, by persisting, he lays himself open to an action for libel."

Léon looked at her reflectively. Then he sprang to his feet.

"I believe you are right. It is best to advance a bold front with such fellows, and show them you don't mean to knock under."

"Knock under? But that would be impossible!" exclaimed Mme. de. Beaudrillart, astonished.

"Oh, well, I can quite conceive a man so much worried and bothered by the mere threat that he would pay just for peace and quietness."

Mme. de Beaudrillart flung up her head.

"I cannot," she said, proudly.

"You are going to have your way, at all events," said Léon. He had rapidly reviewed the possibilities of choking off Charles with something approaching the price he demanded, and, if he could not have found security thus, would have done it. But he read the man's malice, and was sure that he would not be satisfied without accomplishing his



social ruin as well as obtaining a large sum. His mother's suggestion was the best. Even though the fact had reached Charles Lemaire's ears, the burden of proof was quite another matter, and left him many loop-holes. "Yes," he declared, "I will write."

"Write here," advised his mother. She preferred her room to be used, since by that means his wife was effectually excluded. She pushed the materials towards him, and he sat down and wrote hurriedly, she leaning over his shoulder. "Good. But you have scarcely expressed your amazement at his insolence sufficiently."

"Oh, I'll put anything you like," cried Léon, recklessly. He added a few strong words of her dictating: "There! Will that do?"

"It is better." She waited while he folded and addressed his letter. "Monsieur Charles Lemaire. So that is his name! Now, my son, not a word of this to any one. The smallest hint, creeping out, might do incalculable harm, in spite of its folly."

He listened in silence; there was no need for her to utter warnings as to the seriousness of the affair. Going back to his own room, he walked furiously up and down, anathematising Lemaire with all the abuse he could think of. Then, as he was one of those who imperatively require sympathy, he betook himself to his wife, meaning to do no more than let her know he was in trouble. What happened there in spite of Mme. de Beudrillart's warnings gave him very considerable comfort. Nathalie displayed the absolute disbelief which he hoped would be the effect upon the world should this story ever be suffered to ooze out. More than that, he felt that he had made her happy, and he liked other people to be happy, although he might not be disposed to put himself out in order to attain that result. When the next morning came his spirits rose, by fits and starts, however, and depending upon nothing more tangible than the distraction of the moment. Nathalie wondered that such an absurd attack as he had confided to her should have power seriously to vex him, and, happy herself, tried her best to turn his thoughts. Mme. de Beudrillart thought she showed unfeeling want of comprehension by her unusual gaiety; Claire saw that something was wrong, and snubbed Nathalie; and Félicie was too much taken up with delight at the prospect of the bishop's visit, and with satisfaction at having certainly stepped in before Mme. Lemballe, to have thought for anything else. Already she had begun to plan extensive decoration by means of paper flowers for the church, and was bent upon driving to Tours to seek materials; in her small set voice one idea pattered after the other, the last being so much like what had gone before as to be scarcely distinguishable.

"I am sure that the nicest effect would be to have real bushes in pots covered with tinsel, and pink roses tied thickly on the twigs, unless—yes, certainly one might have pink for the pots, and tinsel flowers interspersed with streamers; perhaps that would be the best, after all. Nathalie, you never suggest anything; do tell me what you think. At any rate, garlands will be charming. I must begin upon them to-day. And then there are all the banners to be looked over, and the new cope to be finished. I really think that Raoul is big enough to walk in the procession, don't you, mamma? and that would make it perfectly charming!"

The day, outwardly the same as hundreds which had gone before, had, to Nathalie's mind, a curious restlessness running through its hours, Léon dreading his own society so much that he would scarcely suffer her to leave his side. She was obliged to commit Raoul altogether to the care of his grandmother, with the result that by the evening he was wildly unmanageable. Once or twice miserable depression seized Léon, which his wife could not understand; for to her it appeared absolutely unreasonable, even while she exerted all her powers to cheer him. Over and over again she repeated the same consolation: who would treat such a letter seriously? But the gladness in her heart that he should seek his consolation from her was so great that she felt no impatience. He said at last:

"After all, I have a great mind to go to Paris myself."

"Why not?" she returned, cheerfully. "Then you could put an end at once to this absurd folly. A few words would certainly bring him to reason, and you cannot say all you want in a letter."

"I believe I will!" Léon ejaculated. "But I can't be left alone. You must come."

Her heart leaped. To have him to herself!

"Only ask me!" she exclaimed, joyously.

"It mayn't be so pleasant!"

"The more reason that I should be with you."

He looked at her irresolutely. Should he tell her? Let free the horrid fear which gripped his heart? No, he could not. To have her think of him as he really was required too great a sacrifice.

"Well, then, you and I will go together."

She pressed his arm. "When?"

"To-morrow."

"And Raoul?"

"Oh, Raoul must stay behind. It would displease my mother very much if we took him. As it is—" He broke off and looked at her, and they both laughed. "We will make some excuse. You need not tell her that you know anything about that letter."

The excuse he made was that his wife had a great desire to go to Paris. "And," he said, privately to his mother, "I

may as well take the opportunity of settling with this Lemaire. The fellow thinks he can bully me.”

“You could do it better alone, in my opinion,” replied Mme. de Beudrillart, determinedly. “Nathalie ought to be very well content to stay here. At any rate, take my advice, and keep the matter to yourself. Your wife cannot be expected to look at the matter as we do; she would naturally think that money might set matters right—perhaps would want you to appeal to that terrible father. Imagine Monsieur Bourget as your adviser!”

Léon cleared his throat. “She need know nothing,” he said.

Mme. de Beudrillart was more uneasy than she allowed. Faith in her son could not obliterate the remembrance of past folly. She feared that something, some handle, existed to account for this vile accusation, and she dared not examine too closely into the when and where, lest fear should be confirmed. She came down the next morning with dark rings round heavy eyes to find Léon his old self—gay, careless. No letter had come, and he was able to think with exhilaration of Paris, its stifled charm reasserting itself, and old pleasures beckoning. The picture shone with a brilliancy which swept away clouds, and his wife’s delight at having gained her rightful position helped his cheerfulness. Claire looked at her with indignation, believing the happiness in her eyes to belong only to joy at getting what apparently had been her secret longing, a visit to Paris, and letting sharp words fly to show that she understood this depravity.

“And we are to be trusted with Raoul!” she said.

Nathalie’s face changed a little.

“If you will be so good,” she said. “I hope he will not be naughty.”

“I don’t see why he should be more so than usual; but of course since you persuaded Léon to overlook Jean Charpentier’s untrustworthiness, there is no knowing what he may not do.”

“Raoul has promised that he will not go to the river by himself.”

“Promised! That baby!”

“He will not break his word,” said Nathalie, quietly, and for once Mme. de Beudrillart nodded approval.

“No. He is a true Beudrillart,” she said, and Claire stopped sparring, content with this thrust.

When the two had gone, she reflected for some time as to what mystery had carried them off. Her life was emptier than that of Félicie—who, indeed, had a conviction that she was a most busy person—for Claire hated fancy-work, and despised the small fripperies which more than satisfied her sister. She had the appetite of intellect, with nothing to feed it on, and a love of power in a very contracted realm. Her single life left her harder than her mother, and she was more irritable, though this was perhaps owing to a penetrating knowledge of herself. A Frenchwoman in the provinces, with her tastes, and no means of satisfying them, may have a very dull time of it indeed. She meets with little sympathy from her friends, and it is still a reproach to speak of a woman as taking an independent line of her own, though that line may really be absolutely harmless. If Claire could have brought herself to make a companion of her sister-in-law, to borrow her books, or to discuss them with her, life would have had real interests for her; as it was, pride checked her, and she grew more rigid from bringing her will to bear upon petty and indifferent objects—such, for instance, as the thwarting of Nathalie. She detested M. Bourget, in whom she read possibilities of insolent opposition. She could not bring herself to drive in Nathalie’s pony-carriage, although she would have gladly hailed the variety of an hour or two in Tours, and for this reason Félicie went there alone, Mme. de Beudrillart refusing to allow Raoul to accompany her.

She came back in high spirits, with rolls of pink paper for the roses, and several small pieces of news which she was an adept in picking up, and which were very welcome at the château.

“Monsieur Darville is to be the new magistrate, and he is already engaged to Mademoiselle Silvestre. Imagine, that little creature! And who do you think I saw at the door of Lafon’s shop? Monsieur Georges. He came up to me, and inquired for Léon and for all.”

“He might have contented himself with a bow, I think,” said her mother, displeased.

“Oh, I assure you, mamma, he was quite respectful in his manner. I think he would very much like to see Poissy again.”

“Not improbably. He would find matters in a different train than when he left it.”

Claire put in, “But, after all, Léon has only done what Monsieur George’s always wished him to do. Léon is so changed!”

“And what has changed him! Realising what Monsieur Georges never had the energy to impress upon him. No. He is an incapable, as I have said from the first.”

“And did you see Monsieur Bourget!”

Félicie pursed her lips.

“Yes, there he was, the dreadful man, planted on the pavement and staring! I suppose he was surprised not to see Nathalie, for his eyes opened like round saucers. I told Francis to drive very quickly.”

It was true, as she divined, that M. Bourget was astonished to see the carriage without his daughter. But as the day for her weekly visit had not come round, he was not uneasy until this arrived and passed without tidings of her. Then, indeed, there was a wrangling match between indignation and anxiety. He vowed that she was neglecting him, as a means of keeping off the fretting fear that something had happened to Raoul. The photograph of Poissy, interrogated, looked gloomily suggestive; for the first time in his life he turned away from it angrily. At the café he browbeat the waiters, and sat so silent and sullen that his acquaintances did not venture to approach him, chafing him the more by holding aloof.

The slight cause he had for anxiety made him ashamed to admit it.

At last, one morning a letter from Nathalie gave an added fright, until he caught sight of the postmark Paris, and stared at it in grumbling bewilderment. What on earth had carried them there all of a sudden, and if the boy was gone, how came it that he had not been told? But opening the letter, its first sentences caught his breath away, and left him staring, a pallid image of himself. A rush of blood to the head followed. "What is the girl dreaming about?" Finally a laugh broke out, a hoarse foolish laugh, the sound of which amazed him. Was he mad? It was a more likely explanation than that the letter spoke truth.

But if he were mad, he was sane enough to perceive that he must come back to his senses, and that quickly. He took the letter and read it through, frowning. The same words stared at him. They were not the delusion of madness.

He stood up, uttering a sound like a choked roar. The passion which had rushed uppermost was rage. That such an accusation should be possible, that a man should dare to utter such—such blasphemy against the honour of the De Beaudrillarts was monstrous, a disgrace to the civilised world! It was the insult which inflamed him. M. de Beaudrillart could of course clear himself and punish the slanderer. But what could wipe out insult?

His first impulse was to fling himself into the train and go to Paris, with some unformed notion of shaking the truth out of the infamous accuser. Then he felt as if it were to Poissy that he must hasten. Vague thoughts, vague fears, floated in his brain, kept down by his resolve not to allow them to take shape. His breath came quickly, his chest heaved, he looked vainly round for something or some one on whom he could vent the storm which oppressed him; if Leroux had presented himself, he might have half-killed him, by way of relief. No one was in the house with him except old Fanchon, who was deaf, and occupied in preparing an omelette for his breakfast. Deaf as she was, she heard the door bang, for it shook the house, and running to look out, saw M. Bourget descending the street like a whirlwind.

On another occasion, if anything had taken him to Poissy, his legs would have carried him; but impatience drove him so fiercely that he hailed the first carriage he saw, to the amazement of the driven, who knew M. Bourget well enough to comprehend that such an event was unprecedented.

"To Poissy, monsieur!" he repeated, open-eyed.

"To Poissy, imbecile!" thundered his fare. "Have you, by chance, ever heard of Poissy? Does it perhaps not exist in the neighbourhood, or have I fallen upon a horse with three legs that cannot go beyond the street?"

"The horse can go well enough," muttered the man, climbing up on his seat. "But heard ever any one of the miserly old bourgeois taking a carriage for his pleasure!"

If he hoped that the rarity of the proceeding would induce M. Bourget to take his drive leisurely he was mistaken. He was stormed at, urged on, and arrived at Poissy almost as hot as his horse, not daring to grumble at the smallness of the pourboire, lest this terrible M. Bourget should have his licence revoked.

The ex-builder flung himself from the carriage, and pushed by Rose-Marie into the hall. Raoul, at work there, rushed at his grandfather with a welcoming shout. For the first time that day M. Bourget spoke gently.

"There, there, my boy, by-and-by, by-and-by. Now I am going to speak to madame your grandmother."

Already he breathed more freely. The sight of Poissy, standing as solidly and as fair as ever, reassured him. The hideous thing of which he had heard was whipped by scorn into the regions of the impossible. Raoul, fresh, mischievous, enchanting, Raoul alone, flung denial after it. Everything stood as he had seen it last. He went up the staircase half ashamed of the impulse which had brought him. But when Rose-Marie had opened the door, and he saw Mme. de Beaudrillart standing in the centre of the room, upright, rigid, a figure stiffened into stone, the panic seized him again. The door closed behind him, the two stood facing each other. It was she who spoke first.

"From your presence here, monsieur, I gather that you have heard from Madame Léon of the—the extraordinary attack which has been made upon my son."

Even at this moment M. Bourget was impressed by the haughty coolness of her bearing. Not a movement, not a look, showed fear. He said, briefly:

"She wrote to me this morning."

"Ah, so I imagined. It was natural, though I could have wished the affair had not been mentioned out of our own family."

M. Bourget's square figure seemed to gain unusual dignity. He said, respectfully:

"Pardon, madame. You forget that although I have no desire to force the fact upon you, we both belong to the same family. What concerns the husband of my daughter, concerns me. But it appears to me there are more important matters to discuss. I am not sure that I know all the facts. Would it displease you if I repeated what seems clear!"

She motioned him to a seat, and sat down herself abruptly.

"What I make out, then," said M. Bourget, leaning forward, and fixing his eyes on his own broad hands, "is that some Monsieur Lemaire, of whom I know nothing—" he paused, questioningly, but as she remained silent, went on—"the principal inheritor of the wealth of the defunct count, Monsieur de Cadanet, brings an accusation against Baron Léon of having opened a letter intended for him, Lemaire, by Monsieur de Cadanet, and of having extracted the sum of two hundred thousand francs. That is all I know, madame, and, on the face of it, it appears a most egregious accusation."

Her lips formed the word, "Disgraceful."

"But you can, perhaps, madame, give me further information. On what ground does he base his charge? Were there any money dealings between this Lemaire and Monsieur Léon?"

"I am certain there were none."

In spite of herself she was thankful to have this man, with his shrewd business habits, his straightforward common-sense, by her side. She felt his strength a support.

"And between Monsieur de Cadanet and the baron?"

"Ah, that is different." She hesitated, keeping her eyes fixed on M. Bourget; then went on: "You had better know all. You are probably aware that, owing to the incompetence of his intendant, Poissy became very seriously involved?"

"People said, madame, that Monsieur Léon had squandered his estates," replied M. Bourget, speaking brusquely for the first time; "but that is neither here nor there. I am aware that at one time the mortgages were very heavy—very heavy indeed; and that Monsieur Léon contrived by degrees to pay them off. To do so required money."

"Certainly," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, coldly, "he could not work miracles. The money came from Monsieur de Cadanet, who was under a debt of gratitude to my husband."

M. Bourget hardly heard these last words. "How much?" he said, quickly.

"Two hundred thousand francs."

He stared at her, and brought his hand down heavily on the table.

"The same sum!"

"A coincidence."

"More than improbable," said M. Bourget, shaking his head obstinately. "Depend upon it, this has to do with that loan of Monsieur de Cadanet's. It was a loan?"

"Of course."

"And repaid by my money," was on M. Bourget's lips. Something, however, withheld him, although he would have said it in all simplicity, and without thought of anything offensive. "Repaid on his marriage," he substituted. "I knew there was something of the sort. Depend upon it this rascal has got hold of the transaction, and is bent upon making capital out of it. I wish I had Monsieur Léon here, to put one or two questions."

"I believe, monsieur, I am perfectly acquainted with his affairs."

M. Bourget darted an ironical look at her, but refrained from expression of incredulity.

"Do you, at any rate, know, madame, whether Baron Léon was in Paris or at Poissy when he received this assistance from the defunct Monsieur de Cadanet?"

"In Paris."

"And had he, at that time, any communication with Monsieur Lemaire!"

"I am aware of none."

"No quarrel? Were they on friendly terms!"

"No. For my son thought ill of him, and once said that if Monsieur de Cadanet knew his real character it would be a bad day for Monsieur Lemaire; but that was all."

"You do not think he tried to open Monsieur de Cadanet's eyes?"

"Never," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, drawing herself up. "Do you imagine he would have stooped to the position of tale-bearer?"

"I should have," said M. Bourget, frankly. "And it would have been decidedly advantageous. However, depend upon it, madame, this accusation has something to do with Monsieur de Cadanet's loan. As for the theft from the letter, that is absurd. My theory is that Lemaire is perhaps executor—at all events, that by some means or other he has become possessed of papers which have suggested the attempt to coerce the baron. I hope Monsieur Léon will beware of yielding. Fortunately, Nathalie is there, and has a clear head for business."

"My son is not likely to require support," said his mother, still haughtily. M. Bourget did not hear her; he was considering, chin on chest.

"He has learned, somehow, that the money was lent to Monsieur Léon, and perhaps he means to deny that it was ever repaid. You will pardon me, madame, if I remark that in your class there are apparently strange reticences and scruples in business matters. I once offended Monsieur Léon, in what probably had to do with this very loan, by asking whether he held any note or agreement which I could look at. Two hundred thousand francs is a large sum to have been paid without so much as a receipt!"

Mme. de Beaudrillart stood up with a smile.

"We are not so foolish as you suppose us, Monsieur Bourget. My son had a receipt, and I can show it to you."

"In that case—" M. Bourget rubbed his hands exultantly—"I am convinced this will be of the greatest importance. Can you put your hand on it easily, madame?"

She answered by unlocking a cupboard. His face fell. A cupboard for papers of value! But when he saw an iron safe fitting into the recess, his wounded instincts recovered themselves. He could hardly restrain himself from looking over her shoulder.

"You know the paper, madame?" he cried, eagerly.

"I placed it here myself."

She extracted an envelope from a bundle of receipts, tore it open, and unfolded a paper.

It was a blank sheet.

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## Chapter Thirteen.

### "Here must be some mistake."

The two stood staring at the paper, which told so little and so much.

When M. Bourget glanced at last at Mme. de Beaudrillart, he pushed a chair towards her.

"Sit down, for Heaven's sake, madame," he said in a hoarse voice. "Here must be some mistake. Who gave you this?"

Insensibly and unintentionally his voice had become that of the accuser. She answered, mechanically:

"My son."

"Do you think—" he glanced at her again and was silent. Both were silent. They could hear the cooing of the pigeons in the yard; presently a child's shout of laughter rang out, and their eyes met. M. Bourget said, quickly: "There must be some explanation. Could it have been an accident? Monsieur Léon perhaps carelessly handed you the wrong paper!"

She shook her head; he pushed his question.

"Consider, madame. Such a mistake is not impossible. It was at a time when his thoughts were, perhaps, elsewhere. A young man just married hasn't got his head so clear for business as on ordinary occasions. Or are you certain this is the envelope he gave you? If you were to search a little further?"

"That is the envelope," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, firmly. "At the same time—"

"Yes, yes!" cried M. Bourget, leaning forward, impatiently.—"I think it not impossible that it was a—a little farce on his part, because I pressed him so much for the receipt. I believe," she went on, her voice and figure regaining strength, "that Monsieur de Cadanet sent him no receipt, and that he gave this to quiet me."

"Oh!" groaned M. Bourget. He stood gloomily regarding the safe. "How would it be possible that such a sum could be received without so much as an acknowledgment?"

She was silent. He put another question.

"Other letters must have passed; have you seen any of them?"

"No."

"Nothing, madame, from Monsieur de Cadanet?"

"Since my husband's death, nothing."

"Was anything paid before Monsieur Léon's marriage?"

"Five hundred francs."

M. Bourget had a perfect recollection of this sum having been mentioned by Léon; he only put the question to see how the accounts agreed.

"Is there, perhaps, a receipt for this?"

"No," returned Mme. de Beaudrillart. "I was vexed that Léon did not demand it, but he assured me it was impossible."

"Impossible or not, it is a great misfortune," murmured the ex-builder, in a gloomy tone.

She looked up with sudden fire in her eyes.

"You say so, monsieur, but you have no reason to link the two points together. This disgraceful attempt by Monsieur Lemaire may have nothing whatever to do with the repayment of Monsieur de Cadanet's loan."

M. Bourget rubbed his face with his hand, and glanced at her doubtfully.

"No, madame," he said, at last; "but with its non-payment."

Mme. de Beaudrillart rose with all the pride she could summon to the support of a trembling heart.

"No one, monsieur, shall insult Monsieur de Beaudrillart in his own house."

"Do you think I would?" he returned, hurriedly. "You forget, madame, that we are all in one boat. But something there is which has to be unravelled before things can be set right, and if I work I must have materials to go upon. If this money was the repayment of a loan from Monsieur de Cadanet, some sort of acknowledgment must exist. That,"—he pointed to the envelope—"you see what that is."

"It was my fault," she said, firmly.

"Perhaps. That is neither here nor there. It is not what you thought it. That makes it the more likely that Monsieur Lemaire's action has to do with it. But how? I've half a mind to go after them to Paris."

"No," said Mme. de Beaudrillart, shivering. "Do not. You mean well, I know, but you might make matters worse by interfering. The fewer who are mixed up in it the better."

"Maybe, madame; though that would not hinder me if only I had a lawyer's brains to ferret out things. But that's not my way. Give me a straight bit of work that requires no talking, and I'm your man; but as for hunting up and down in by-ways and back-stairs—well, if I attempted it, there would be blunders. There must be lots of the sort in Paris, though."

"If it comes to that!"

M. Bourget stood regarding her.

"What does Monsieur Léon say?" he demanded, abruptly.

"He has tried to see this Lemaire, but he refuses to communicate except through a lawyer. It looks as if he could not face him."

"Impossible to trust to that, madame," said M. Bourget, with gloom. "The worst liars I ever met looked me straight in the face when they lied. Is Baron Léon going to take action himself?"

"He speaks of having a case for libel. Apparently, Monsieur Lemaire merely reiterates his demand without offering proof."

"He is keeping his proof," interjected the ex-builder.

"And Léon thinks that when he finds the money is not forthcoming, he will revenge himself by talking, unless he is threatened with an action."

"Perhaps it is not a bad plan to see whether it is possible to shut his mouth. Monsieur Léon is the best judge."

M. Bourget said this reflectively. Mme. de Beaudrillart, looking here and there with the instinct of an animal whose young are attacked, quivered.

"Are you supposing, monsieur, that my son would stoop to bribe?"

"It would not answer. It never does," he answered, disregarding her indignation; "otherwise, get the fellow to accept a sum, and you have him. He could not move afterwards, because he would have put himself within reach of the law. He could not even blab, because he calls himself a gentleman." He glanced at Mme. de Beaudrillart, and stopped suddenly. She had drawn a step nearer to him; all her features were sharpened, her voice harsh.

"Do you know what you are saying?" she cried. "To do this would be to acknowledge himself guilty! And you suggest it to me—his mother!"

"Come come, madame," said M. Bourget, reasonably, "you forget that I also am his father-in-law, and anything which would put an extinguisher on the business without setting the world's tongues wagging is worth discussion. However, Monsieur Léon, who knows the ins and outs of it all, as you and I don't, may have some better plan in his head, and I

suppose there are honest lawyers to be met with, even in Paris. As I said, too, he has Nathalie at his elbow. Who is his lawyer? Monsieur Rodoin?"

"Yes. Oh, if only I were there!" exclaimed Mme. de Beudrillart, beginning to walk up and down the room.

M. Bourget conceived it prudent to take no notice of this desire; for privately he thought it as well that her rigid notions of honour, which he admired immensely but considered unpractical, should be replaced by Nathalie's excellent sense. The discovery of the blank envelope had affected him very disagreeably. If there had been nothing in the shape of a receipt he would have put down the want to carelessness, or some overstrained idea which was pardonable in a Beudrillart. But the empty enclosure pointed to deceit. For some reason or other Léon had hoodwinked his mother, and M. Bourget was convinced not only that the money had never been repaid, but that this movement on the part of Lemaire was but the sequel to a dark story. Rumours of the Baron Léon's proceedings in Paris, which he had chosen to ignore when he gave him his daughter, came back to him now with terrible insistence. If the present overhanging disgrace reached the ears of those intimates at Tours whom he had pelted with boasts, could he ever hold up his head again? He shuddered. Wrong or right, honour or dishonour, if a bribe could have stopped the accuser's mouth, M. Bourget would have urged its payment.

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As for Mme. de Beudrillart, she, too, was shaken. Passionately to proclaim her belief in her son was only the weapon caught up by a wounded heart with which to defend itself. She had covered them with tenderest excuses, but she knew, in that deeper consciousness where she dared not penetrate, that Léon had committed a thousand follies in those old days which she had hoped were buried. Alas, sin is an unquiet ghost. It walks.

In her heart she cried out against God's justice. What! Could not those changed years atone? Could not her prayers, Félicie's devotions, gain grace! Were the faults of his youth to meet him now—now when he was living a blameless life; now when he was the father of an innocent boy? Nathalie she passed over. To her it might be a grief, but she would not feel the pang of a dishonoured name, that, worse than death itself, would hang round Raoul's neck all his life long. She hated M. Bourget, blaming her own triumphant assurance which allowed him to assist in her search for the papers. If she had gone alone, if that incident of the empty envelope had not come to his knowledge, she could have braved it out by taking the blame on herself. She even distrusted him, not understanding that though differing in form, in degree her pride in Poissy was equalled by his. And yet, she was so terribly alone, and this man knew! Before she realised what she was about, she had faltered an entreaty to him for silence, and was met by an uncomprehending stare. She bowed her head.

"What I mean, monsieur, is that it may do mischief to speak of this affair before my son has stopped it."

"I speak of it!" cried M. Bourget, irritably. "You don't seem to understand that I would give ten years of my life to be certain that it would never set tongues wagging! /, madame! What do you take me for? /! Shall you gossip yourself?"

Fear had shaken her. She murmured that he was not one of the family. His wave of the hand had a dignity she had never seen in him before.

"Do I claim to be? But my daughter, madame, is as much a Beudrillart as yourself, and my grandson more than either. Our interests are identical."

Under the shock of these words Mme. de Beudrillart revived.

"Be it so, monsieur," she said. "It appears to me that for the present we must wait until we know more. If we move, we may only cause mischief, and I would beg of you to give up any idea of going to Paris. I believe that matters will arrange themselves. You have of course breakfasted?"

He had left his house at a moment's notice, and began to feel the need of food. Mme. de Beudrillart rang, and gave orders for it to be spread in the dining-room at once, requesting further that Mlle. Claire might be sent for. She felt the need of support, and yet dreaded lest Claire's sharp tongue might exasperate this man, who already began to represent her power. She need not have feared. M. Bourget felt little of, and cared for less, the prickly darts which Mlle. Claire let fly. He enraged her by his indifference, but in the middle of his hearty meal on red-legged partridges, he demanded Raoul, and though she would have made some excuse, her mother gave a peremptory order that he should be found. When he arrived, Mme. de Beudrillart wondered that she had not thought before of taking refuge in his chatter.

Still, it had its awkwardnesses. He was bent upon showing his grandfather everything. Had he seen this, had he seen that! Why was it that he did not come oftener to Poissy? Would he come to the river directly? Mamma had made him promise not to go there by himself; but she would not mind if bon père took him.

"Do not be tiresome, Raoul!" said his aunt, sharply. M. Bourget opened his eyes at the idea.

"Pardon, mademoiselle; you do not know, then, that we are very good friends, my grandson and I. With your permission, since he wishes it, I will go with him to the river—"

"And catch fish. Can you catch fish, bon père?" interrupted Raoul.

"Here and there, my prince. But as I was saying, madame, if you will allow Jean to go to bring this young gentleman home, I will return to Tours by the river."

"You will not walk, monsieur?" said Mme. de Beudrillart. "There is Nathalie's carriage doing nothing; pray allow me to order it."

"No, no, madame. I thank Heaven I am yet strong on my legs, and can walk as well as any of them. The mayor himself would be sorry to engage me in a match, although he prides himself on his powers. Raoul takes after me, as I have told his mother more than once."

Claire, who had expected her mother to make objections, especially after this insolent assumption that in any point Raoul could resemble the ex-builder, was amazed to find that his wishes were to be carried out. She said so when he had gone.

"Really, mamma, considering how much Raoul is allowed to be with him when Nathalie is at home, we might have kept the child out of his influence in the few days he is left to us!"

"Hush, Claire, you do not know!" exclaimed her mother, feverishly. "The man is terrible, but so far he means well, and it would never do to affront him at this moment."

Claire shrugged her thin shoulders.

"Léon has had difficulties before now, and has got through them," she remarked. "The whole affair seems to me so inconceivable that I am inclined to believe Nathalie is persuading Léon to exaggerate it, in order that she may gain a longer time in Paris. I should be capable of doing the same myself, I own."

She laughed, and an hour or two ago Mme. de Beaudrillart might have admitted the likelihood of such a motive. But M. Bourget's visit, and the dreadful possibilities suggested by the blank envelope, had left her ten times as uneasy as before. She shook her head and sighed.

"It is serious. More serious than I thought."

"You have been listening to that man. I shall never forgive Nathalie for inflicting him upon us. And to hear him talking to Raoul as if the child was his! Of course he has made the most of this affair, if only because it would be such delight to him to humble us."

"No," said her mother, firmly, "there you are wrong. He identifies himself with us."

Claire laughed again, this time contemptuously.

"How could you endure it? It seems to me that no misfortune could be so terrible. Really, Félicie's idea of the cotton-wool was brilliant, only I imagine it will not do for us all to be seized with deafness. Do you suppose that he employs his time with Raoul in teaching the boy how to economise with his pence? Rose-Marie says his driver was forced to come here like a whirlwind, and got six *sous* for his pains." But Mme. de Beaudrillart, to whom, great lady as she was, such details were intensely interesting, scarcely heard the words. Fear of something unknown, something overwhelming, because it had to do with Léon, and Léon's honour, was shaking her. Personal danger would have found her calm, and the crash of misfortune; this was different. Little fears, little uneasinesses, forgotten as soon as their light touch was removed, trooped forth again, and dared her to ignore them now. Haunting dread lay in the thought that truth might, after all, lie in this accusation, at first scouted with scorn. Léon had never confided in her as to the process by which he was disentangled from his difficulties six years ago, had never said much about M. de Cadanet; had suddenly buried himself at Poissy; had shunned Paris, had evaded her desire to assist in the repayment of the debt; had finally, when pressed, deceived her by passing off an empty envelope as the receipt which he wished her to believe he held in his possession. Each fact might be trifling in itself, but heralding, as they had done, the storm which had burst, they became terribly significant. It was the collapse of faith in her son, the sudden admittance of a frightful doubt, before which her proud spirit quailed. If Léon had done this thing! If the net closing round him were, after all, the strong net of justice, implacable and un pitying—before such a dread she became helpless. Then she recalled his evident uneasiness at the charge—nay, further behind, the fits of depression—so opposed to his light spirit, which had now and then seized him without apparent cause during past years. As she looked back, accusing fingers seemed to start and point, phantom voices cried, "He did it! he did it!" She even believed she heard his father's voice demanding an account from her of the honour of his son, more—the honour of Poissy, bound up as it was in this De Beaudrillart. It was only by a supreme effort that she forced herself into quietude. The horrible intuition in her heart might, after all, be false. Léon might be able to clear himself, the next letter might bring news to shame her for her want of confidence.

Rigid and white, Mme. de Beaudrillart went about the house through the day, and with steady fingers fashioned some of Félicie's staring pink roses. But any one who had looked into her room that night would have seen a heaped-up figure lying, still dressed, outside the bed, and heard the stifled cry of a sorely smitten woman, "Léon, Léon!"

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## Chapter Fourteen.

### What is Known!

The incident of the empty envelope had sent dreariest conviction home to M. Bourget. That he should have read black proof in it was not perhaps astonishing; yet he had so strong a sense of the code of honour which governed an ancient family like that of Beaudrillart, and so obstinate a belief in his own opinion, that the shock was staggering. Besides, it dealt a direct blow at his vanity. He felt with a shiver that his intimates at Tours would by their jeers revenge themselves for his boasting speeches which they had been forced to endure in silence. Already he saw the smiles, heard the gibes, and a cold sweat broke out as he pictured the secret glee with which Leroux, for instance, under pretence of sympathy, would hand him the local newspaper giving the fullest particulars of this extraordinary affair. Already the letters glared at him: "The Affair Beaudrillart—the Poissy Scandal." The humiliation sent him hurrying along the straight, flat road as if he felt Fate at his heels, shouting mockery.



Now and then he broke out into a rage of denial. A man working in a way-side field was so amazed at the hoarse sound that he ran to the hedge to behold, as he thought, a short, stout, red-faced mad bourgeois, hastening along with violent gestures and clinched fists. The man stared after him, scratching his head and reflecting. He was a madman, no doubt; but if he were to attempt to secure him, he might very well get some injuries for his pains. Besides, he would have to run to overtake him, and if he stayed where he was, the keepers, who would probably soon come along, might give him a few sous for his information. So M. Bourget went on his excited way unmolested.

He did not think of Nathalie so much as of Raoul. Nathalie was a woman; her father, moreover, had often been annoyed at her failing to show sufficient interest in the great family in which he flattered himself he had placed her. The toppling down of that edifice would not break her heart. But Raoul—the boy whose inheritance should have come to him as his father received it, and who now ran the risk of being branded for a thief's son—it was when he dwelt upon Raoul that the cry of rage escaped. The child's unconsciousness made the sin against him the worse. Such a child, such a boy! Manly, daring, wilful, truthful—that he should be weighted with a burden of dishonour!

"When he gets to understand it, if it doesn't kill him, it will ruin his life," muttered his grandfather with a groan.

There was a further trial to his practical mind in being forced to remain quiet. If he could have run about from office to office, set lawyers at work, felt himself to be moving events, things would have been more endurable. But Mme. de Beaudrillart's warning remained in his mind. She had said that by going to Paris he might very likely cause mischief, and he was sufficiently ignorant of the ways of the great city and the great world in it to accept her opinion as probable. At Tours, where he was known, he might browbeat his fellow-townsmen on any point wherein he and they differed; but in Paris, what was he? A unit in a position where his vanity did not care to picture himself.

He reached Tours weary and dusty, and felt the need for his usual cup of coffee at the café—perhaps greater need for the exercise of his usual self-assertion. On his way through the streets he met the doctor, who held up his hands.

"Are you off a journey, my good Monsieur Bourget? You have the air of a man who has been travelling all night."

"And why should I not, if it pleases me?" demanded M. Bourget, with his most combative air.

"Why not? Why not indeed? Heaven forbid that I should be the one to prevent you!" returned the doctor, laughing. "I merely venture to remark that your journey, wherever it was, has apparently had the effect of causing you fatigue."

"And you are quite wrong, monsieur, in both your suppositions. I have not had any journey at all, and I am not a bit more fatigued than ordinarily. I suppose I am not so infirm that a walk home from Poissy is likely to prove fatal?"

"Oh, Poissy, is it!" exclaimed the doctor, preparing to escape. "No, no, my good friend; on the contrary, you are quite right to keep up the habit of exercise. But I must not stay gossiping when I have a pressing case in the Rue Royale. Adieu, adieu!"

"Now what takes him off as if the devil himself were at his heels?" muttered M. Bourget, looking after him discontentedly. "A pressing case indeed! If anything serious were the matter in the Rue Royale, it is quite certain that I should have heard of it by this time. The man was fooling me. He didn't wish to talk about Poissy. And why?"

He marched on, his eyes on the ground, his under-lip thrust out. For the first time for six years he turned into another street to avoid passing the photographer's window. He reached the café in a bad humour, tired, moreover, in spite of his disclaimer to the doctor, and dropped into a solitary chair, where he sat frowning and facing the street. As he anticipated, before he had been there five minutes M. Leroux approached. M. Bourget thumped the table to draw his attention.

"If you are going to order this poisonous stuff," he said, "one table will do for us both. Sit there."

But Leroux, sharp enough to see that he was wanted, was also sharp enough to improve the opportunity. He shook his head.

"I can't afford to swallow coffee at a café, with all those mouths at home, and that's the truth," he said.

"You can sit, I suppose," growled M. Bourget.

"Oh, I can sit, certainly. But I find it makes me thirsty to look at others drinking, and, by your leave, I'll not stop to-day."

For answer M. Bourget rapped his cup with his spoon, and extracted two sous from his pocket.

"There!" He shot the word at the waiter. "If you call this stuff coffee, bring another cup. Now I suppose you're satisfied," he continued to Leroux.

"And I shall pay for it," ejaculated the lawyer to himself. "Poissy, Poissy, Poissy, he is only waiting to be set off. Confound Poissy!" Aloud he said, "You were not at the meeting about the crèche, Monsieur Bourget."

"Crèche? Absurdity! Why can't the women mind their own babies?" grumbled the ex-builder. "No, monsieur. If I had been in the town and had attended, it would only have been for the purpose of seeing my fellow-townsmen make fools of themselves. As it was, I went early to Poissy."

"Now it comes!" Leroux groaned, inwardly. "And what was going on at Poissy?"

"What should go on!" demanded M. Bourget, jealously. "What should go on?"

"Peste! how should I know? I suppose things happen there, as in other places?"

"No foolishness about crèches, at all events."

His retort pleased him so much that he chuckled, and Leroux, not to be behindhand in civility, chuckled in company. But M. Bourget was too anxious to know whether anything had leaked out to be put off even by his own jests. He flung an elaborate veil of carelessness over his next question, crossing his legs and leaning back in his chair.

"You know most of the talk of the place, Leroux, and I have often thought of asking you—merely out of curiosity, you will understand—what is said of my son-in-law, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, in Tours? People don't like to repeat anything to me, and naturally; but there must be opinions expressed, and it would amuse me to hear them."

"Something is up," reflected the little lawyer, rapidly. "He is uneasy. Has our fine son-in-law, perhaps, broken out again? What is said, Monsieur Bourget? Well, not so much now."

"But what, what?" persisted the other.

"Well, for one thing, they say he is wiser than was supposed, and knows which side his bread is buttered."

"And what may that mean?"

"That he has a solid father-in-law, whom it is just as well not to offend."

Leroux said this with some malice, and expected an explosion. It surprised him that M. Bourget showed no sign of wrath. He jerked his head sideways, and flung open his hands.

"No more?"

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"As to that," said Leroux, spitefully, "there were enough disagreeables said about the Baron Léon about the time he married Mademoiselle Nathalie to serve for an ordinary lifetime."

"Perhaps," returned M. Bourget, tranquilly, "more has also been said about others in past years than they would care to have brought up against them."

The lawyer darted an uneasy look, and his manner changed.

"Do not suppose that I am offering my own opinion. You wished to know what was said in the town, and I am trying to remember."

"I understand perfectly. I should like to know what were some of these disagreeables to which you allude?"

But Leroux was alarmed.

"Ah, for that you must ask some one else. There is plenty of gossip running about the town, but I have not the time or the inclination to listen to it. Besides, what does it matter now! It is no longer a question of marrying Mademoiselle Nathalie. There she is, safe at Poissy, and there are you, father-in-law to a baron. What would you have more?"

M. Bourget brought his hand down so heavily on the little marble table that the cups jumped.

"What have I to do with it?" he asked, angrily. "Did I pay for your coffee that you might inform me what I want or what I don't want? I ask a plain question, and you wander off to give an opinion on my concerns. Keep to your point. I suppose all you wiseacres had at least the sense to see that Monsieur de Beaudrillart had begun to economise before I gave him my daughter? But perhaps they could give him no credit even for that?"

"Oh, they saw he had raised money somehow," said Leroux, longing to thump the table himself, "and his credit was so low that they said he must have stolen it."

M. Bourget's face turned to a dull purple, his voice felt strangled, he leaned forward, and said, with difficulty:

"They are rascals, and you are a fool!"

Leroux jumped up, with a smile on his sharp face. He had merely spoken spitefully, and thought that his companion's anger was due to the fact that any one should have dared to utter anything disrespectful of the master of Poissy.

"Ah, I dare say, I dare say, my dear Monsieur Bourget; I only tell you what is said, and you know best how much it is worth. A thousand thanks for the coffee, and let me advise you to go home and rest, for you don't look yourself."

"He knows more than he will say," groaned M. Bourget, leaning forward with his elbows on the table, "otherwise he would never have ventured to repeat what he did. There is a report abroad; I know it, I feel it! It was evident enough that Dr Mathurin had heard something, for the very moment I mentioned Poissy, he looked embarrassed, and started away. Yes, yes, it has leaked out, it is in the air; and what wonder! A poor devil whom no one knows or cares anything about has twice the chance. But directly anything disgraceful happens to one of the noblesse, then every stone in the wall has a voice to cry it out. And to a Beaudrillart! No doubt all Paris has got hold of it I should not be surprised if it were in the papers already."

A *Figaro* was lying on the table near him; M. Bourget, with a gleam of satisfaction that he had not to pay for it, took it up and hastily scanned its columns. He had just satisfied himself that the thing he dreaded was not there when he caught sight of an advancing figure.

"Monsieur Georges!"

"At your service, Monsieur Bourget."

"You are the very man I want. I am going in your direction."

"À la bonne heure. Permit me to venture to remark that you look a little upset—fatigued, Monsieur Bourget."

"That is what every one finds it agreeable to say to me. Why should I be fatigued? I have only walked from Poissy."

"Ah!" Across M. Georges's small anxious face flitted a tremulous smile. Even he, politest of men, was aware of M. Bourget's weakness. "They are all well there, I trust!"

His companion made no answer to the question. He said, abruptly:

"The baron is in Paris."

"So I heard."

"So he heard? Of course! Everything is known," reflected M. Bourget, mopping his face with a red bandanna. "Have you heard anything else, monsieur?"

"No. Why should I!" returned the other, with surprise. "But to tell you the truth I have been a great deal taken up with my own affairs, for I have had the misfortune to lose my old grandfather at Nantes, monsieur; an excellent man, and an irreparable loss. As his only descendant I inherit a small estate, and I have had to come here on business connected with it. You will understand that this has occupied me."

"A small estate!" repeated M. Bourget, gazing at him with a new respect. "Things are then looking up for you, Monsieur Georges! That is better than being intendant, even at Poissy. And I never thought the Baron Léon behaved well in that matter."

M. Georges waved his hand gently.

"The baron was young, and his mother, if I might say so, a little masterful, although I admire her, I admire them all, immensely. People cannot be expected to feel very kindly towards those who are always prognosticating evil, still less when it comes true."

"But Monsieur de Beaudrillart has managed to pull himself together, and to set the estate upon its legs again. How did he raise the money to do it?"

M. Georges looked at his companion and smiled.

"People would say you could best answer that question, Monsieur Bourget."

"Not at all," said the ex-builder, impatiently. "When my money went into the concern, everything was already in train, as you know very well. The crisis was past, and the estate saved. How, how! That is what I ask."

"I believe," said M. Georges, with a little surprise, "that the baron received a loan from Monsieur de Cadanet—at least that is what Mademoiselle de Beaudrillart gave me to understand."

"Ah! Yes! Precisely." M. Bourget hesitated. "You know nothing, then, yourself! Had Monsieur de Cadanet shown any interest in the family before coming to the rescue at that moment!"

"To my knowledge, no. But Mademoiselle de Beaudrillart, who is an exceedingly capable person, spoke of his having been indebted to the defunct baron, her father. That, I imagine, explains it."

M. Bourget walked on without answering. His next remark appeared extremely irrelevant.

"Monsieur de Beaudrillart and my daughter are in Paris."

"Indeed? Your daughter, too?"

"You had not heard it?" He turned to him with unmistakable relief.

"No, I have heard very little."

"And yet of all the gossiping places—However, it is quite true there is nothing remarkable in a visit to Paris. Here we part, I imagine, Monsieur Georges. I begin to believe that what you have all insisted upon is correct, and that I am a little fatigued. You must go out to Poissy yourself. You have never seen the little baron? No? Then decidedly you must go."

This conversation to a certain degree comforted M. Bourget, since it proved to him that M. Georges, at any rate, had no suspicions, and had accepted the De Cadanet loan as a matter of history. He felt very tired, owing no doubt to the unusual emotions which had been at work ever since he received his daughter's letter, and he thought it advisable to report himself to Fanchon, who was naturally in a state of uneasiness at his sudden departure. He stopped her reproaches, however, abruptly, with an air of ill-temper which reduced her to silence, and sat down in his own room, desiring that he might be left in peace and not pestered with questions. Fanchon retired grumbling; but when M. Bourget was in this humour it was not safe to cross him, and she was obliged to satisfy her curiosity with such poor fare as could be supplied by her own imagination.

But, although M. Bourget lingered a little while with satisfaction on the thought that he had perhaps been mistaken in imagining that Tours was already greedily discussing the crime of M. de Beaudrillart, he soon came back to the conviction that M. de Beaudrillart was guilty. What M. Georges had said threw no fresh light upon the transaction. He believed what he had been told, and what no doubt the whole family at Poissy had believed. Only the young baron knew if any dark secret was connected with the money which had been procured so fortunately at the time of his greatest need. If it were so, circumstances had no doubt thrown the knowledge into the hands of a man—perhaps already an enemy—who had no scruple in using it for his own ends.

But what had Léon done with the money which he had ostensibly applied to the payment of the debt? M. Bourget groaned again over his own conviction, and wiped his forehead.

“It has gone as hush-money. This Lemaire has not waited six years without putting on the screw. No doubt Baron Léon kept it to hand over in instalments when matters grew desperate. Lemaire has had the last of it, and now advances more boldly. Yes, that is it. I understand perfectly. But what is to be done?”

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## Chapter Fifteen.

### In Paris.

Meanwhile, with father and mother torn by a hundred miserable fears at home, it may be supposed that, in Paris, the wife's trouble was greater. Nothing of the sort. Nathalie was worried, because Léon was so evidently uneasy; but not a shadow of doubt had touched her mind, and she was not really unhappy. Never before had she lived alone with her husband, or found herself in an atmosphere free from chilly slights. All that she saw and heard about her interested her. Her intellect, freed from vexing cramps, leaped to its kingdom. Léon looked, listened in wonder. If only Raoul had been there!

And in Léon's nature there was nothing of the moroseness which is angry because its own wretchedness is not shared. Sometimes, often even, he was miserably depressed, but at such times he really preferred that Nathalie should refuse to see reason for his low spirits, should indeed persist in ignoring them. She treated the whole affair as a malicious attempt to extort money, to which her husband should not yield for a moment.

“Dear Léon, the thing is so ludicrous, so impossible! Tell the man that he may do his worst; or, rather, threaten him with an action for defamation of character. I am sure that would be by far your best plan, and the only means by which you can protect yourself in future. Of course he will not venture even now to take further steps; but the point is that he will always be threatening and pretending to have proof, and by-and-by the thing may really get abroad. If you take no steps to punish him, people will begin to imagine you were afraid, and that there was something in it. I am quite certain that my father, who has excellent common-sense, would advise you to put a summary end to Monsieur Lemaire's attempts.”

They were driving together up the Champs-Élysées. Léon waited for a few moments before answering.

“That is all very well, but you do not understand.”

It was the argument he used most frequently, and it was not one which offered points for discussion. Nathalie accepted it, as usual, as to detail.

“I dare say I don't. But I understand the absurdity, and so will every one who hears. The man must really be quite foolish! While he was about it, why did he not design something more probable. A common theft!” She laughed gayly.

He bathed deliciously in her disbelief. It reanimated him.

“I do not really think any one will be found to credit it.”

She exclaimed at the bare notion. Impossible!

He gazed at her admiringly; the noble lines of her face made other women appear insignificant.

“I believe your own taste is right, if a little severe,” he said, at last. “Frills and furbelows would not suit your style.”

“Converted! A triumph!” she cried, merrily. “There is a charming toilette in that carriage, but if I were to wear it I should have the effect of a dancing monkey. But how brilliant it all is! How delightful!” She paused a moment. “The real enchantment is that you and I should be together and alone, and do you know that if it were not that you allow yourself to be vexed, I should be almost grateful to this Monsieur Lemaire for giving me such delightful days.”

He turned his head away, and the grip of his hand on the carriage door tightened.

“Don't let us talk of the rascal any more!” he cried. “Look, there is the President's carriage. What a pity Félicie is not here to turn her back! And there is the Marquise de Saurigny, in white and green. She sees you, and you are sure to have a card for her reception. Directly it is known we are in Paris, there will be invitations, although all the world is by the sea. Will you go?”

“If you like.”

“You are not frightened?”

“Why should I be?”

He smiled. The answer pleased him. Against his mother he had always maintained that Nathalie would take her place in the great world without awkwardness or *mauvaise honte*. For the moment he forgot the sword which hung over him; he enjoyed the exhilaration, the gaiety, the lightness of the air, and his wife smiled to herself to see his spirits rise.

"To think that you should have known none of this, little bourgeoisie!" he said, jestingly. "I must take you somewhere to-night. Where shall we go? To the theatre?"

"Charming!"

Then, looking at him, she saw his face suddenly change, whiten. She turned quickly; a victoria had just passed, but she was too late to catch a glimpse of its occupant.

"What is it, Léon?" she cried. "Are you ill? Have you seen any one?"

Evidently it cost him a great effort to recover himself—so great that he could not at first answer. Nathalie had got hold of the hand nearest herself, and held it firmly, as if to give him strength. He drew his breath deeply; she pressed no more questions upon him, but waited. When at last he spoke, it was in as low a tone as if he feared being overheard. "You saw?"

"A carriage—no more."

"Not the man in it?"

"No. Who was it?" She checked herself. "Don't tell me if you would rather not." For the paleness of his face startled her.

"It was Lemaire. He saw us."

She smiled. "And you let the sight of him disturb you? Dear Léon, I shall begin to think you are ill indeed! He might very well be shocked—not you. Let us turn and drive after him, for you know he persistently refuses an interview, and here is our opportunity."

She leaned forward to give the order, but her husband caught her arm.

"No, on no account; you might see for yourself, I think, that I am in no condition to meet him on such a subject, and that he would have me at a disadvantage."

"I believe if you got hold of him you would put an end to all this annoyance; but I suppose, even if you desired it, we should hardly have overtaken the carriage. Was he alone?"

Léon made a sign in the affirmative.

"I wish I had seen him," mused his wife. "If you see a person you can judge so much better what he is like. And his face, when he caught sight of you, must have been a study."

"He is a villain!" muttered the young baron, still pale.

"But so foolish a villain! Does he really suppose that any one will believe his story? Dear Léon, I do think you ought to put a stop to it at once, and as the man himself will not see you, send for Monsieur Rodoin, and desire him to take the necessary steps for bringing an action for libel, or for writing threatening letters to extort money, or whatever it is he has made himself subject to. You must feel that he deserves punishment, and you will be worried to death if this sort of annoyance goes on. Come, dear. You know that is Monsieur Rodoin's own opinion. Be firm, and the silly plot will collapse."

What burst from Léon was: "All that he says is a lie!"

"Who doubts it! But lies can't be left to grow unmolested."

"What proof can he have?"

"None, of course. I suppose he hopes some foolish trumped-up story will do instead; but you can't pass it by. M. Rodoin said it had gone too far. The man has dared to speak of it." Her voice dropped.

There was silence. Nathalie looked at him uneasily. She read weakness in the hesitation, and that dislike to facing what was painful which she knew to be part of his character. He said at last:

"It may cost a lot."

"Let it. We will economise." She pressed her eyes on his with a force under which he moved fretfully, and added: "For the sake of your family—most of all, for Raoul's sake—it is impossible to ignore the slander."

"Very well, very well!" he spoke with petulance; "you don't understand, but you shall have your way. Only don't blame me if things go wrong."

"Do I ever blame you?" she said, tenderly. "And they will not go wrong; how should they? Show a firm front, and you will see how the absurd attempt at extortion will melt away. I wrote to my father this morning, as you advised, in case rumours reached Tours, and I am sure we shall have a letter advising you to be very determined. How angry he will be! I believe he thinks more of the De Beaudrillarts and Poissy than you do."

Léon began to laugh.

"Perhaps he will go off to Poissy."

"And we not there to keep the peace! Oh, Léon!"—her face was tragic—"I ought to have thought of that, and to have warned him."

Léon's good-humour had come back; he teased his wife, compared her with the other women they met, and told her ridiculous tales. They laughed and chatted so gayly that, more than once, people with sad stories in their lives looked at them enviously, and wished for a little of the same happiness. Then they drove to a restaurant, dined, and afterwards went to the play. Seemingly, the young baron's anxieties had slipped from his shoulders. Even the next morning, when he sent off a special messenger to request Monsieur Rodoin to come to the hotel, it was done with a jest, and Nathalie looked at him with delight. To her the whole affair had seemed so trivial and impossible that only its strange effect on her husband had given her uneasiness. Now that had passed, and she made no doubt that threat of strong action would oblige M. Lemaire to offer ample reparation.

M. Rodoin arrived with speed—a grave, hatchet-faced man, with hair already slightly grizzled, although his fortieth birthday had only lately been passed. He bowed formally to Mme. Léon, whom he had not yet seen, and whose appearance, after what he had heard of her family, surprised him, and to the baron. Without waiting for him to speak, Léon said, abruptly:

"Well, Monsieur Rodoin, you find me decided. Threaten this Lemaire with as many penalties as you will."

The lawyer repeated the word—"Threaten."

"Take steps. Do what is necessary. Let him know that I refuse to pay anything, and that I consider him a scoundrel." A one-sided smile passed across M. Rodoin's thin face. "Well, well, monsieur le baron, I don't wonder at your anger, but—at any rate, he shall be met with an action."

"And let him hear something strong, since the rascal won't give me an opportunity of saying it to his own face," said Léon, lashing himself into rage.

"We will leave the law to do that with better effect," returned the lawyer, calmly. "Meanwhile, with your permission, I have to ask you a few questions."

Léon rested his elbows on the table, and, sitting with his back to the light, buried his face in his hands. He might have been trying to recall the past.

"Go on, monsieur," he said. "But remember that these events took place six years ago, and more."

"You were in difficulties, monsieur, at the time!"

"As you know very well. Suppose we even allow that I had been abominably extravagant. Worse than you can imagine, Nathalie; but as you insisted upon assisting at this interview, you must prepare for revelations. Poissy was heavily mortgaged, and I was threatened with foreclosure. Wherever I looked, I saw nothing but disaster; and I vow it came upon me all at once, in spite of what Monsieur Georges may say of having tried to tell me. He had a way of telling which would not have affected a fly. Where was I to turn! Naturally to Monsieur de Cadanet."

The lawyer had been noting these facts in his note-book. He looked up here.

"This was in August, 188-, I think, monsieur?"

"Precisely."

"And Monsieur de Cadanet?"

"After a long argument, I succeeded in obtaining from him the sum of two hundred thousand francs, as a loan."

"In what form, monsieur le baron?"

"In a cheque."

"Drawn in your favour?"

"To bearer, I think," said Léon, slowly. "I believe he expected my visit, and I may add further that I do not think he had made up his mind whether it should go to me or to Charles Lemaire."

M. Rodoin looked up quickly.

"That is new to me. And the doubt was decided in your favour?"

"Certainly I had the money. Only, you understand, as a loan. And the whole sum, with interest, was repaid within eight months of the date."

"Have you any acknowledgment?"

"None," said Léon briefly, "Monsieur de Cadanet was peculiar in his dealings, and perhaps disliked considering it in the light of a business transaction. What is certain is that it was repaid in two sums, one of five hundred, the other of two hundred and three thousand francs."

"You might have insisted upon having a receipt of some sort, monsieur," said the lawyer, testily. "There can be no doubt, I imagine, that Monsieur Lemaire's claim relates to the same sum, and to have proved that it was a loan on Monsieur de Cadanet's part would have been a sufficient answer. From what I have gathered, he asserts that you waylaid a messenger on his way to the post, and took from him a letter containing this sum, sent to him by Monsieur de Cadanet."

"In fact, a highway-robbery," interposed Nathalie, laughing.

"Yes, it proves Monsieur Lemaire to be the possessor of a lively imagination," remarked M. Rodoin; "but it is an encouragement to fraud when people persist in depriving themselves of their legal safeguards. However, I had better communicate with his lawyer, and it is not impossible that when he finds we are in earnest, and mean to push the matter home, he will grow alarmed and offer to publish an apology."

"Well, take it, take it!" said the young man, hastily. His wife leaned forward and put her hand on his arm.

"Ought he not to have a lesson, Léon? I am harder than you, I don't like him to get off so easily."

"We have not reached it yet," said M. Rodoin, dryly. "When it comes, we will see. But I think you do well, monsieur le baron, to take the initiative and forestall them. Depend upon it, I will lose no time. Shall you remain in Paris?"

"No," said Léon, still speaking quickly. "Nathalie, we shall go home to-morrow. You can let me know what has to be done there, Monsieur Rodoin."

"Certainly, certainly, monsieur. At the same time, there are certain instructions to be given to your counsel—I will try to secure Maître Barraud—and it would be more convenient if you were on the spot."

"Impossible," said the young baron, with the smile which disarmed opposition. "I give you to-morrow morning, and if I am wanted I will run up; but what more can I do or say than I have already told you? I know no more. There are the facts, and the law must worry them into shape as it best can."

"We must find some witnesses."

"Where? Not a soul knew of the affair, except my mother."

"That receipt!" said M. Rodoin, mournfully, as he rose. "However, it is they, fortunately, who have to prove their assertions. They will have to bring forward the man from whom they assert you took the letter, monsieur le baron."

"Oh, I can forewarn you what will be their line on that point," returned Léon, easily, "and I shall have to confess to an impulse of curiosity. The man was André, Monsieur de Cadanet's concierge. He overtook me as I left the house, carrying Monsieur de Cadanet's letters. Here comes the curiosity. Monsieur de Cadanet had talked of a letter which he meant to despatch to Monsieur Lemaire, and of which he told me the contents. I had an absurd desire to know whether it had gone, and asked André to let me look at the letters. I had them in my hand for moment, and returned them."

"Was the letter there?" asked M. Rodoin, startled.

"Certainly, and three others."

"And you gave them back?"

"Ask André. He will, I think, acquit me of having retained any," said Léon, with no change of manner. "But there lies their point."

"It was unfortunate," said M. Rodoin, thoughtfully.

"But hardly criminal," put in Nathalie.

He smiled.

"No, madame. One does not expect to find anything criminal. Well, monsieur le baron, permit me to take my leave. I will see Maître Barraud to-day, and he will probably request an interview with you before you go down to Poissy."

"Let me wish you good success, and prognosticate victory," said Nathalie, giving him her hand with a smile.

"I shall work for it, madame, were it only to justify your prophecy," returned M. Rodoin, bowing low.

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## Chapter Sixteen.

### Father and Daughter.

The country round Poissy, mellow with ripening grapes, sunned itself in broad luxuriance, and the river threaded it lazily, its silver length curving snake-like between green edges. Nathalie and her little son were by its side, she bareheaded, with only a white umbrella between her and the sun, which now and then caught the rich red-brown of hair and brightened it. Raoul, with his little closely-cropped head and dark dancing eyes, was engaged in plying a primitive fishing-line, formed of whip-cord fastened at one end to a long stick, and adorned at the other with a crooked pin and a small piece of meat. Every now and then a bit of weed caught the bait, and gave all the excitement of a bite, and this and the joy of getting his feet wet kept him perfectly content and happy. Occasionally a

peasant passed them, always with the same remark, "Fine weather, madame, for the grapes;" but otherwise the sleepy silence of the place was undisturbed, and Nathalie liked it better than she had ever liked it before.

She was happier, for one thing, though she blamed herself for the selfishness of her happiness, since evidently a cloud of uneasiness rested on Poissy. Mme. de Beaudrillart did not confide in her daughter-in-law; but a change had come over her since their departure for Paris; age seemed to have suddenly laid a grasping hand upon her; she was silent, grave, rigid. Léon's moods varied from gloom to gaiety. Claire indulged in taunts as to the delights of Paris. Only Félicie's small interests kept her busily occupied. Her own father's advice had amazed Nathalie. From him she expected fighting counsels, whereas he wrote with a hesitation new to him, and talked temporisingly, with suggestions of possible arrangements. Moreover, they had been at home three days, and he had not come out, as she had expected, to see Léon on the matter, while she disliked leaving her husband for as many hours as would be required for driving into Tours.

Yet she was happy. The bare shadow of doubt had not once fluttered across her mind. She could conceive that there were difficulties in the case, and that certain unfortunate circumstances might be difficult to get over; she had realised that M. Rodoin was not so sanguine at the end of his interview as at the beginning, and that Maître Barraud was taciturn; but her own conviction stood like a rock, and wanted no support, was troubled by no inconsistencies. And it was bliss to feel herself no longer shut out. Before, when Léon was in perplexity or trouble, he turned to his mother; now he turned to her. Perhaps he felt the influence of her implicit faith, a sun in which he might still plume himself. Presently he joined her.

"I saw your white flag from the bank. Many fish caught!" Raoul was too much absorbed to answer, and his father watched him with amusement. "Upon my word, the monkey has such a good idea of throwing his line that I must get him a proper rod. I have just been talking to Jacques, and he tells me they begin the vintage to-morrow."

"And the weather so superb! It will be a good year for us all," said Nathalie.

"Oh, excellent! If only I had not this confounded business hanging over my head!"

"Let us hope it will soon be ended." She slipped her hand into his. "I think Monsieur Rodoin quite understood that there should be no delay, but perhaps you will have to go up again soon and hurry them."

"Not without you," he said, quickly. Her heart bounded, and she sent him a smile for an answer. "The nuisance is, having to give evidence one's self."

"Oh, you will be glad to do that," she said, comfortingly. "No one can explain it all so well."

"That's very fine!"—he spoke with irritation. "Who can explain, when those fellows are at one all round with their questions!"

"What can they bring out but the truth!" said Nathalie. "And the more of that the better."

"It might go against me," he hazarded.

"You mean you may not establish the libel! I don't see how it is possible; because they don't deny having made the claim, and as they can't support it, it must surely upset them."

"I wish you'd find out what your father thinks about it. Drive in to-morrow."

One of his fits of uneasiness was on him, as she perceived, and, to soothe him, she made the promise.

"And get the boy a rod. Here, Raoul, tell your mother to go to Tours and buy you a proper fishing-rod."

Raoul came with a rush, and fell on his father. "As big as yours?"

"Big enough for a black-eyed imp like you."

A pommelling match followed, ending by Raoul snatching off his father's straw hat and flinging it into the river, where it sailed slowly down, Raoul shrieking with delight, and Léon running along the edge to rescue it at last with difficulty from a clump of flags. He came back threatening his son, who by this time was worked into wild unruliness, so that Nathalie was obliged to hold him fast in spite of his struggles. He grew quiet in time, and they went across the bridge to one or two of the nearest vineyards, where preparations had already begun, and where the finest bunch was gathered and offered to the master. The cloud had lifted again, and Léon was at his kindest, with a smile and a cheery word for everybody. Who could wonder that Nathalie was happy?

At the door of her father's house she met Fanchon, who immediately fell to making mysterious signs with hand and head, implying cautious communications of importance. Nathalie, vaguely uneasy, inquired whether her father was ill.

"Mademoiselle ought to know that he is not himself," whispered Fanchon. "He sits there,"—signalling with her thumb over her right shoulder—"thinking, thinking, though the saints only know what he has got to think about! Don't I make him his bouillon, and his salad, and his coffee, just as he likes them, and leave him to find fault as much as it pleases him, since that gives him an appetite? But there! ever since that morning when he left me in the midst of an omelette, and dashed off to Poissy, hiring a carriage and all—he that I never thought to see in a hired carriage, unless it was to be taken to his grave—he's never been the same man. And not once has he been out to the door to look for mademoiselle—for madame, I should say—and Monsieur Raoul, though on the days he expected them he was always popping in and out. Well, I dare say it will do him good to see mademoiselle, and I shall be back in five minutes to hear what she thinks, for I am only going to run round to Madame Boucher, and show her what sort of an egg she



sold me this morning.”

M. Bourget, indeed, was unlike his usual turbulent self. He greeted his daughter without effusion, and did not even ask for Raoul, or show any disappointment at not seeing him. He was sitting near the window, a newspaper in his hand, but she fancied he had only just unfolded it to avoid the charge of idleness. He did not look ill, or she might have felt less uneasy; if it were possible to apply such a word to M. Bourget’s square personality, he looked crushed. Mme. Léon went quickly up to him and kissed him.

“Have you been expecting us, dear father? I should have come at once on our return, but that Léon wanted some one to talk matters over with. I am afraid you have been anxious, and I wish now that I had written.”

“Have you anything good to tell?” inquired M. Bourget, brusquely.

He had fastened his eyes upon her determinedly, and bent forward.

“I think so. Léon has agreed to bring an action against this man.”

“What for? What for!”

“For slander,” said Nathalie, surprised that he should put the question.

“Then he’s got evidence to disprove it?”

“His own word,” replied the wife, proudly.

“Ah-h—!” M. Bourget’s ah-h—! was like a snarl; he fell into his original position, and fixed his eyes on the ground. She drew back a step, in her turn holding him with her eyes. “Father! You doubt him!”

He sat silent, gloomy, slowly nodding.

“Oh!” In the word was anger, scorn, incredulity. She had difficulty in commanding herself from uttering more; but the one exclamation was eloquent. Her father looked up at her.

“Hum! I see you don’t. Well, prove it; prove that he’s innocent. That can’t be such a hard matter. Do you think I want it the other way? Why, I can’t even go for my coffee but that little imbecile Leroux flings a taunt in my face. I tell you that I—I!—after all these years—walk about the town in dread of what I shall hear.”

He began almost inaudibly, ended loudly. There was no softening in her glance.

“Oh!” she reiterated. “The shame of hearing you say this! You, who know him!”

“Ask his mother,” he muttered. “She can’t deny it. She thinks the same. Do you know what he did! Gave her the receipt, as she supposed, to keep, and it was a blank sheet of paper.”

She burst in: “What of that? She fretted him into it. She can fret, I tell you! He had no receipt; he has said so throughout Oh!”—she laughed—“and this is what has persuaded you!”

“Well, I hope you are right.” But she could see he was not shaken.

“Léon sent me to know what you thought about it all.”

“Sit down, then, and let’s hear,” he said, gloomily. “There’s a chair.”

She drew it back, sat down, and said, coldly: “What do you wish to hear!”

“What line he takes—what he has to go upon.”

She looked at him unflinchingly.

“There is no line, as you call it, but the straight one of what happened. Monsieur de Cadanet lent the money to Léon, not very willingly, but after some persuasion. Léon thinks that perhaps when it got to this Lemaire’s ears, it enraged him, because he was so jealous; and that he caught hold of the trifling circumstance—that when Léon was in the street, he met Monsieur de Cadanet’s messenger, and glanced at the letters he carried—to make up his absurd story.”

He raised bloodshot eyes and stared restlessly at her, meeting her own untroubled by a shadow of doubt. Then he bent his head again—

“What does the lawyer say!”

He did not believe one word of the story. Now that his faith was gone, it had sunk utterly, crumbled into dry dust, and he was only possessed with a dull rage against the man who had shattered the dream and delight of his life, and left him a laughing-stock to Leroux and his fellows. She tightened the lock of her hands, recognising his antagonism.

“He urged Léon to take the initiative.”

“Yes, yes; they will get something out of it!” he cried, wrathfully, and then muttered to himself, “Collapse, collapse!” She started to her feet.

"Father, I cannot stay and listen to you! May God forgive you! Oh, my dear Léon, that it should be any one belonging to me that does you this dishonour! Father, one day you will be sorry—bitterly sorry. I think you must be mad—ill! Are you ill? Has anything happened to you! You have been sitting here alone, and letting yourself get confused. Look at me. I am his wife. Do you suppose I could stand and smile if I were not as sure—as sure of him as of my own life!"

Her words fell on his heart as if it had been made of flint, rolling off the surface. He did not feel them. He did not even pity her. He said, brutally:

"You had better ask what he was before you married him."

She did not shrink, as he expected. Her breath came quickly, but unshaken confidence was in her face.

"I know my husband."

"Then, go!" He waved his hand. "Go!"

"I am going, and I shall try not to be angry, because you are not yourself."

He looked up gloomily.

"No; I am not myself. I don't expect ever to be myself again. Before this, I have always held up my head; but now—" He drooped again into depression; and her heart smote her.

"Father, fling away this horrible, unjust suspicion!" she cried, coming close, and laying her hands on his shoulders. "It does Léon such cruel harm! Only reflect what it means. One would suppose you were his enemy." Then she knelt down by his side. "Father!"

"Let him disprove it."

"So he will."

"Not with that cock-and-bull story. There, there, you'd better go. What's the good of talking? I cannot pardon." He was implacable. Self-love refused to waste pity on others when he suffered so much himself. Her steadfastness merely incensed him. He was granite. But at his words she rose up quickly.

"Do not do him the wrong of supposing I am asking you to pardon him. May God forgive you!"

"You've said that twice. Now, go."

She went out of the room, looking back. A sign of compunction would have taken her again to his side, but none came. Fanchon marched out of the kitchen, wiping the flour from her hands with a cloth.

"But, Mademoiselle Nathalie, you are not going to leave monsieur so soon! As soon as ever I saw you, I said to myself, 'There, now, here comes the best medicine for monsieur,' and I made up my mind you'd stop a good bit, and that would cheer him up. Why, you've been here next to no time! And monsieur not even coming out to see you off! Well, that's droll! I never knew him not come out."

"I do not think he is quite himself to-day," said his daughter, catching at straws. "Has any one been here—any one to vex him?"

"Holy Virgin! no, who should come? And as for vexing, there's no one would dare. Something he's eaten or drunk, but not of my getting, has just set the world upside-down with him. Oh, he'll be better to-morrow, you'll see! And Monsieur Raoul, the treasure, how is it with him?"

Nathalie drove home, unshaken but thoughtful. The slander, then, was more serious in its effects than she had imagined, since her father, with all his pride in Poissy and the De Beaudrillarts, was affected by it. To her it had seemed only ludicrous; but she began to perceive that other people would expect absolute proof that the thing was not. By her own feelings she was sure this would be agony to Léon. She blamed herself for having treated his fits of depression too lightly, and promised herself to be more sympathetic. She would ask him, too, to explain the incident of the envelope.

As for Mme. de Beaudrillart, that she could really have any doubt, was impossible, and she smiled again at the bare idea. She could imagine how it had been struck into her father's mind by her mother-in-law's impassive manner. Secure, as she would have been, she probably did not attempt to express her security, and, especially with M. Bourget in the room, would have been so coldly indifferent that he had misjudged her. Nathalie understood that her father would have expected indignation and protestations, and not meeting them, thrust their absence upon conviction of guilt. She tried to think calmly, justly of him. "Some chance word has stung him," she thought, wondering that the clang of rumour had so soon reached the quiet town, and not understanding that it was M. Bourget's own fear which had given chance words their imaginary force. She was only thankful that Léon had not accompanied her. If he had read distrust in M. Bourget's manner, she could scarcely have borne it. They must be kept apart until the time when the force of the law obliged her father to admit the shamefulness of his distrust.

Reaching Poissy, she heard that all, even Mme. de Beaudrillart, had gone down to one of the nearest vineyards. She knew that her husband would not have expected her to return so soon, and impulse made her long to be by his side. She lost no time in hurrying after them, crossing the river by the bridge, and finding them without difficulty, guided, as she was, by the vibration of voices in the clear air. From out of her anxious thoughts she came into the gayest of scenes. The grapes were being picked into great baskets; from a sky of clearest blue, the sun, now a little low, shone ripeningly upon the mellow clusters, the women's white head-gear and bright dresses flitting here and there between

the green vines; light, warmth, colour, and gaiety were everywhere. Raoul was the masterful head of the troop of children whom he had constituted his regiment, Léon in his grey suit was chatting familiarly with one of the oldest of his tenants, Mme. de Beaudrillart and Claire stood graciously regarding the busy scene, and eating from the beautiful bunch of grapes which had just been presented to them, while Félicie, with her small steps, moved about from group to group. Almost every one from the château, down to Jean Charpentier, was there, and in all fair France it would have been difficult to have lit upon a spot more peaceful, more sunny, and more secure.

Nathalie drew a long breath as she stood for an instant watching it. This was her home, her peace, her security. Her husband caught sight of her, and came towards her with his easy smile upon his face.

“Back already, chérie? A thousand welcomes! They say the vintage is splendid—better than it had been for years. No phyloxera, and magnificently ripened. Look how the light shoots through those bunches. Old Félix is delighted.”

Surely, her security.

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## Chapter Seventeen.

### “I Love You!”

Léon’s mood changed like a weathercock on a gusty English day. Extreme wrath with Charles Lemaire alternated with the fancy that it was a foolish charge which no one in their senses would believe. Nathalie, by her sturdy faith, helped to keep him in this fools’ paradise; and in his indignation at the accusation that the money had not been repaid, he quite lost sight of what he had really done. He groaned with disgust at Lemaire’s falsity, and feeling himself a martyr to a false charge, looked at the matter from heights of virtuous probity.

His mother’s fears were in a measure quieted by the laughing explanation he gave of the envelope incident. There was no temptation to say anything but the truth, so that its probability impressed her, and only a latent uneasiness remained. M. de Cadanet had given no acknowledgment, and he was not the sort of man to worry on the subject. He did not want to press for it or to offend the old man. Mme. de Beaudrillart shook her head; but it was at the rashness, not its impossibility. Besides—and that there was a change in her was proved by this besides—if he had not felt secure he could not possibly have ventured himself on this action; nor would M. Rodoin have permitted it. She had a woman’s confidence in a lawyer’s far-sightedness.

M. Bourget remained sternly apart, making no sign. His daughter thought of him with trouble, but could not bring herself to face him again. His attitude cut her to the heart, for she felt as if, through her father’s distrust, she herself had done her husband wrong. As for changing his opinion, once it had gripped him, she knew she was powerless, and she remained undutifully pitiless, even when reflecting upon that changed desolate figure by the window, thinking only of him as one who had failed Léon at a time when he wanted support.

No one else had a thought to spare for anything except the vintage. There had been a threat of the fine weather breaking up, but the fear had passed, and the vines with their gnarled and twisted stems and transparent leaves, through which the sun struck golden, were gradually stripped, and the grapes carried off to the presses. There was a great deal of jollity and some drunkenness. All the talk was of the yield and condition of the vines. Bacchus reigned supreme.

Félicie, meanwhile, was in a bubble of small excitement, preparing for the bishop’s visit. Bushels of pink roses were stored in one of the deep cupboards in the old walls; ribbons were knotted, banners arranged for the procession, little framed coloured prints prepared; the cottas of the boys trimmed with fresh lace, the vestments all carefully shaken out and looked over for moth, the bishop’s room provided with a prie-dieu and crucifix. Nothing was wanting except the last stitches to the abbé’s new cope, at which Félicie was toiling from morning till night. Claire mocked at the abundance of detail, but was half envious of her preoccupation. Mme. de Beaudrillart encouraged it, perhaps with a feverish hope that so much piety might avert threatened disaster, and Nathalie was impatient that Félicie had no thought for any other subject. She was growing uneasy because no letter came from M. Rodoin. The tone of his last communication had not seemed to her satisfactory. He had said that, so far, the other side had made no sign, and he was evidently uneasy that their confidence appeared unshaken. If it was an attempt to extort money, a bold front and a threat set in action would have probably been enough to make them retreat. The lawyer begged M. de Beaudrillart to search his papers yet more carefully, on the chance of finding some mention of the loan in a letter from M. de Cadanet.

“But I have no letters from Monsieur de Cadanet!” cried Léon, pettishly tossing the letter to his wife.

He had got into the habit now of turning to her in perplexity, and more than once it had even crossed his mind whether it would not be the better plan to tell her exactly what had happened, and let her clear wits help him if difficulties thickened. But, as yet, the satisfaction of her entire belief in him being greater than his need, he clung to it and to silence.

She suggested that he should go to Paris, and see M. Rodoin.

“There is nothing more to say, and it is delightful here just now. No. Let them arrange it among themselves.”

Her strong convictions in the matter acquiesced in this, and then one morning he came to her, ghastly, an open letter in his hand, despair in his face.

“Rodoin throws it up!” he cried, flinging the letter on the table, and dropping into a chair.

“Léon!”

“Read for yourself. Don’t ask me to explain. Read, read!” He thrust his hands through his hair, and stared haggardly at the floor.

She took the letter. M. Rodoin wrote that he and Maître Barraud had been in daily consultation over M. de Beaudrillart’s case. He regretted exceedingly to inform him that they had arrived at the conclusion that it would be dishonest on their part to attempt to carry it on without more materials for the prosecution than were at their disposal. They had no evidence of any sort beyond the word of monsieur le baron, and satisfying as that would be to those who knew him, the courts would require further confirmation. The other side would plead that the libel was justified, and deeply as he lamented being obliged to point it out, if their plea could not be disproved the dismissal of the case would be followed by the immediate arrest of monsieur le baron, who would be placed in a worse position by the failure of his own case. M. Rodoin ventured to suggest that it might, under these circumstances, be advisable to attempt an amicable settlement with M. Lemaire, who undoubtedly had contrived to secure a strong position.

Read, Nathalie’s strong fingers closed vice-like round the letter, a slow fire mounting to her eyes threatened scorching. She raised her look with difficulty, letting it rest upon the crouching figure of her husband, and made an impatient step towards him.

“If one man has failed, we must find another. Let us go to Paris at once.”

He murmured an inarticulate sound.

“Do you hear, Léon? There is no time to lose. That Monsieur Rodoin has been half-hearted throughout; I saw it from the first. There are plenty of others—come.”

His murmur resolved itself into muttered despair. They would all be the same; he should give it up. She did not understand.

Curbing her impatience, she knelt down by his side, and brought her head on a level with his own.

“Dear, you are doing just what this Lemaire wishes you to do, when the only fatal thing would be to yield to him. Do not be disheartened. I am quite certain that we can easily find a more able lawyer. Look at me; I am smiling, I am not in the least alarmed, for I am quite certain that truth must be stronger than slander, and that we shall come out all right.”

He lifted a miserable face.

“How dare he say that it was not repaid?”

“Does he? I did not know that he said anything about the loan.”

“Oh, it is all mixed up,” said Léon, impatiently; “only there is no use in telling you, because you do not understand.”

“But, dear Léon, do you not think I could understand?” asked his wife, gently. “If I really do not, I think you would make me more useful by explaining it to me, and I would try very hard. Is there any point which might be more fully explained!”

He writhed uneasily in the chair, but the impulse to tell her was strong upon him, now that the lawyer’s letter had reduced him to helpless pulp. She waited, expectant of some detail, perhaps legal, which had been withheld from her.

“Well, you see,” he explained, running his hands again and again through his hair, “what was I to have done? Monsieur de Cadanet showed me the cheque done up, and then before my eyes directed it to that confounded villain. It was enough to make a man desperate—”

He stopped. Nathalie, all the blood out of her face, but fire in her eyes, had risen, and was staring down upon him.

“How can I explain to you if you look at me like that?” he said, pettishly. “You might guess what happened, and what ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done, if they had had the chance. I had no thought of it till the thing was over, and I did not make any mystery about it, for I wrote and told the old count that I had taken the money as a loan. He had it all back again, with interest, and as for telling me that this scoundrel lost a penny by it—”

If she could have taken in these last words, the awful numbness in her heart might have yielded, but the first blow had stunned her, and she stood like a dead woman—blind, dumb, deaf. Once having broken the barrier, Léon found relief in rambling on, accusing Lemaire, excusing himself. A sigh broke from her at last, the sigh of returning consciousness, her heart sending it forth as a cry. Then she shivered violently, and became aware that her husband was speaking.

“Don’t, don’t!” she cried, thrusting out her hands.

“Don’t what?” he said, irritably. “Do you think it is agreeable for me to talk about it? I haven’t even told my mother, but you spoke as if you could help one out of the scrape, and now can only stand and stare.”

The blood surged violently into her face; she tottered, and mechanically caught at the table for support.

“Good heavens, say something or other! Where am I to turn? What am I to do? Why, if nothing is done, I may be arrested as a thief!” he cried, with gathering excitement, springing up and pacing the room. “Nathalie, do you hear!”

Speak! I—Léon de Beaudrillart—arrested! Do you hear!” And with a sudden change he flung himself into a seat, arms and head on the table, and wept like a child.

Nathalie shuddered. Then he began to moan:

“Why did I tell her! She cares nothing for me; just because I am in trouble she has not a word to fling. And this is my wife, who talks of loving me—”

“Oh, Léon, Léon, I love you!”

It came like a cry from a distance, from death itself. She knelt down and flung her arm around him, and strained him passionately to her—“I love you, I love you, do you hear!” He clung to her as if he had been a child.

“Help me, then, chérie, help me!”

“Yes, yes,” she murmured, “courage. We will bear it together.”

He went on, recovering himself as he spoke, and as buoyant as a bubble. “You are so clever, my Nathalie, your wits will certainly be able to think of some way out of it, and you cannot tell what a comfort it is to me that you should know all at last. A hundred times I have been on the very point of telling you, but there is something so disagreeable in explanations that my heart failed. Now you see the difficulty of the position, do you not! What do you think! Is there any use in applying to another lawyer!”

She shook her head.

“Still, one must do something. It is impossible to sit still and let that rascal come down on one. Something must be done. What, what?”

He waited, wanting the suggestion to come from her. As she was silent, knowing that what she had to say would wound him to the quick, he rushed his words.

“Money is all he is after, and I suppose we had better pay!”

She repressed her inclination to cry out, and said, softly: “But it is a fact, is it not, that you repaid the sum!”

“Every penny.”

“To pay would be to acknowledge that you had not done so.”

“That is true,” he said, gloomily.

“A bribe would tell fearfully against you, you may be sure, for even if it stopped him from taking proceedings, he would contrive that it should all leak out.”

He gazed at her bewilderingly. “But what else!—what remains? You are a poor comforter, Nathalie!”

“If only I could bear it for you!” she cried, passionately, her hands closing on his with strong support.

“Bear what? Bear what? What do you want me to do!”

“To tell them the truth.” She flung her head back and fastened imploring eyes on his. “Let them know that you took it. Oh, Léon, it is true.”

“Tell them!” He started back as if he had touched hot iron. Then he laughed. “Certainly this affair has turned your head.”

She pressed her words.

“It is the only noble, straightforward way, and all that you can do to atone. Shelter yourself behind the truth; it will not fail you. Then you can face the worst.”

Muttering, “She is mad!” Léon pushed her from him. “Do you in the least understand what you are suggesting? It means that I should have to plead guilty. How could I ever prove that the money was repaid? You want to ruin me.”

“You will be clear to your own soul, dearest—to your own soul, and to God.”

“What, you mean it? You see where it leads, and yet mean it! You must suppose you are talking to some little bourgeois instead of to a De Beaudrillart!” he cried, scornfully. “We are not used to bear disgrace tamely. There are other ways of avoiding it.”

She clasped him in her arms, terror clutching her heart. “Léon, Léon, not that! Promise me!”

His moods, always variable, now ran up and down the scale of emotion.

“Poor child,” he said, touching her cheek softly, “you mean well; but you don’t know the world. Perhaps my mother will be able to suggest something.”

“Yes, go,” she said, releasing him, and letting her arms drop by her side.

There was a clatter of small steps outside, an impatient rattle of the handle, and Raoul rushed in.

“Father, there’s a monkey—a real monkey—in the court! I’ve given him a piece of melon, and he’s eaten that, and a bunch of nuts, and he’s cracked them; and now I want a sou, and his master says he’ll make a bow for it. Oh, I do wish I might have a monkey!”

Léon, on his way to the door, pointed to the boy. “You propose that I should ruin him,” he said, and was gone.

Poor mother! She caught her child in her arms, while he struggled impatiently.

“Two sous, two sous, please, quick! Oh, it is the dearest little monkey! Don’t you think we *could* buy it? Jean could take care of it, and it could sleep in my bed.”

He went off with his two sous, and Nathalie dropped into a chair, the anguish of the moment in her eyes. What future lay before the boy? A tarnished name, a dishonoured father? Her thoughts travelled wildly round; she was like a wounded creature, seeking escape from the hunters. How confident she had been, how blind! Now the flitting distrust she had refused to see in the lawyer’s eyes stood before her alive and menacing. Was there any other way but that terrible one to which she had been forced to point? Could Léon ever endure it? What was it? What was it? She pressed her fingers on her quivering eyelids; trial, confession, perhaps a prison—the words printed themselves on her brain, and hung there like leaden weights. And she—oh, cruel, cruel!—she was the one to urge them upon him. God, must it be so? She slipped off the chair on her knees, her lips forming no petitions, because her whole being became a living prayer.

How long she lay she never knew, but there Claire found her at last. Claire was white, rigid, fiercely wroth. She had been with her mother when Léon rushed in, so taken up with the burden of his misery that he poured it all out without hesitation. His first cry had been: “I am lost! Rodoin says he can do nothing, and that villain Lemaire is determined to ruin me. I ask you whether, after all my father did for Monsieur de Cadanet, I had not a right to the loan? He flourished it in my face. I believe he meant me to take it. And if I had not repaid it, then they might have the right to say something; but every farthing went back. What am I to do? Mother, unless you can suggest something, I shall go mad!”

He might have rambled on, striking out blindly, if Claire had not angrily stopped him.

“Do you wish to kill your mother?” For Mme. de Beaudrillart’s usual pallor had changed to a dull grey, and her eyes were vacant. The sight instantly recalled him; he put his arm round her neck and kissed her.

“Don’t, mother! Don’t look like that!”

She did not utter one word of disbelief, conviction had battered at her heart from the moment when she saw it written in M. Bourget’s eyes, and she did not reproach him; only sobs of helpless misery broke from her as she clung. Claire was different. Her eyes were dry and fierce, her voice bitter.

“Do you mean that you have really done this shameful thing and brought all this disgrace upon us?”

“Hush, Claire, hush!” moaned her mother.

“No, mother, I shall speak; I have a right to speak. He has ruined us all. We can never face the world again. Oh, where can we hide ourselves? What will come next?”

Anger, misery, choked her. She rushed from the room, and paced up and down the picture-gallery, darting lightning reproaches at Léon, at his wife, at herself. Her brain was in a whirl. Félicie, who was on her way down-stairs, trailing pink wreaths behind her, stopped and peeped in at the door, hearing sounds. She would have retired, but that Claire seized her.

“Oh, Claire, gently, gently!” she cried, trying to shelter her precious roses. And then, to her horror, her sister snatched the wreath, tore it into fragments, and stamped on them.

“You will drive me mad, I believe!” she said, in a terrible voice. “Do you care for nothing but this frippery? Will it disturb you at all to hear that it is likely Léon will be arrested—arrested, do you hear?—and tried for stealing two hundred thousand francs? Yes, I am not mad, I am telling you the truth.”

“Léon! But what do you mean? I do not understand,” stammered poor Félicie, pale with dismay.

“How should you? All this goes on while you make your paper wreaths, and think of nothing else.”

“Oh, Claire, how cruel you are!” sobbed her sister. “You know I care for dear Léon as much as you—”

“Then you hate him!” interjected Claire. “I have never before heard of a seigneur of Poissy who was a thief. Every one will point at us—at us!”

“I do not think it can be possible,” said Félicie, drying her eyes, and mechanically trying to smooth out her damaged roses. Claire stood and stared at her; then flung herself away, and betook herself again to her passionate pacing. “No, I do not believe it, because you are always so violent when anything puts you out. What does mamma say? There is sure to be a mistake, for Léon has been so kind about the bishop that I am certain he could not have done the dreadful things you talk about. I dare say if he consults his Grandeur that he will give him some—”

She stopped. Claire had caught her wrists.

"If you speak about it to a soul, I shall kill you, Félicie. Do you hear!"

"Pray, be quiet, Claire!" whimpered the other; "it is very wrong to be so violent, and whether we tell him or not, I am sure the bishop will bring us a blessing. You will see that things will come right."

"Oh, go away, go away!" cried her sister, pushing her. "Leave me in peace!"

"Perhaps it will be a lesson to Nathalie. I always felt afraid that some punishment would come to her for reading those books," said Félicie, gathering up the last remains of her wreath and departing.

As her paroxysm of anger burned out into duller ashes of misery, Claire, at war with her sister, turned shudderingly towards Nathalie. She found herself wondering how the dreadful story affected her—what her intellect counselled. Suddenly she admitted her strength, and thought it possible that by her help means of extrication might be contrived. It might be he had not told her, from some weak notion of sparing her; Claire set her face like a rock against such mercy. From her she should know everything. Like an indomitable fate she walked towards her sister-in-law's room, and there, as has been seen, found her unconscious on the floor. Nature forced her to go to her help, but as she knelt down she was full of contempt; for her own constitution was iron, and she held a collapse such as this a proof of miserable weakness. She read in it that Nathalie would never rise to the occasion, would suffer and make others suffer, and her own thoughts flew to plans for shielding Léon, or, at worst, of helping him to avoid the scandal.

Meanwhile, when Nathalie opened her eyes she saw no one at first, for Claire was kneeling behind. She had one minute of wondering reprieve before intolerable pain, rushed into possession. Words, looks, confronted her again; she moaned once, and then called upon her ebbing strength to meet its foes gallantly. Raising herself on an elbow, and pushing the hair back from her forehead with her other hand, a sound made her glance round, and she met Claire's gaze. The two women eyed each other silently. Claire was the first to say, briefly:

"You know?"

"Yes, I know."

They were mute again, each reflecting.

"And you fainted?" Mlle. de Beudrillart uttered the words like a judge. Nathalie simply answered:

"I shall not do it again."

Their words were few, like the first feints of fencers. Both rose and stood upright, and Claire felt a momentary vexation that Nathalie was the taller. She said, presently:

"There is no use in our talking. I shall never forgive Léon; but perhaps something can be arranged to hush it up, and prevent the disgrace becoming public. Whatever that costs, it must be done. I suppose money is always a strong weapon, and I imagine, under these circumstances, you cannot object to its being paid?"

To the tone Nathalie was indifferent to the point of unconsciousness. But to the suggestion she replied: "I should object with all my might. Forgive me if I oppose you."

Claire flung out the taunt: "The sacrifice is too great?"

"What sacrifice? What I feel is that to sin, and then to bribe to escape its consequences, is to sin twice."

The other stared at her.

"What will you do, then?"

Nathalie's voice carried anguish. "I shall urge him to meet it."

Claire made a step towards her. "Meet it? Do you mean own that he has done it?"

Nathalie encountered her eye, her voice, without quailing. She was vaguely sorry for these others who were suffering; but all her emotions fastened themselves upon her husband, and remembering some words he had let drop, she started. "Where is Léon?" she cried.

"With his mother. You need not be afraid for him," said Claire, scornfully; "he has always taken care of himself, and he will do so to his dying day. I don't know why I was such a fool as to be alarmed at hearing the advice you are going to bestow upon him, for Léon will never face a disagreeable so long as he can find a means of slipping round it. You may do your worst. Of course, you can't be expected to feel what we feel: the disgrace—the horrible shame—the —" She stopped, choked. Nathalie looked at her, neither assenting nor denying, and, after a moment's pause, the other began again:

"It must be crushed down, even if Poissy has to go. The name comes first. This man—it is true, is it not, that he will accept money!"

"Do you know what you are saying!" said her sister-in-law, speaking in a low, even voice. "If Léon did what you demand, he would be owning himself the thief they call him. He took the money, but it was not to keep; he wrote to Monsieur de Cadanet and told him what he had done, and promised to pay it back, and did it. He owes nothing."

"You believe this!"

"Yes. He has told me all, now," she answered, in the same tone. There was something in it which for the moment

impressed Claire; but she presently returned to her conviction.

"If it is true, it is only a matter of degree," she said, her eyes dilating.

"It is everything," rejoined Nathalie, firmly.

"Take what comfort you can from it, then. What I think is that, true or not, unless Léon can prove it, it will be of no use in warding off the blow. That is the only thing which remains to us. It must not fall. Do you hear! It must not fall."

"God knows!" She turned away with a sigh, but there was no irresolution in her face. The sun still shone outside; above the grey stone the clear blue was beginning to whiten; so high as to be mere specks, the swallows circled. Suddenly Claire broke into a laugh—a high-pitched laugh, not good to hear.

"A De Beudrillart tried for theft!" she exclaimed. "In a common dock, I imagine! What a fine event for the world! Tours, too. Why, Tours would have something to talk about for quite a year." Her voice changed again to something harsh, fierce. "You are not to tell your father, do you hear! Do you mean to say that you have done so already?"

Nathalie looked at her gravely.

"Hush!" she said. "There is no use in saying these things. My father has guessed it, and I think it is breaking his heart."

"Oh," cried Claire, wildly, "it only wanted this! Monsieur Bourget knows, and it is breaking Monsieur Bourget's heart! We Beudrillarts can bear it, but Monsieur Bourget's heart is breaking! Do you suppose that we are going to endure this degrading pity? I tell you that anything—death itself—would be better!"

Her white face was distorted, changed; yet if any one had been there to make the comparison, they might have detected a deeper suffering behind Mme. Léon's silence. She stood mute, her sad young eyes looking into the unknown, her delicate lips compressed. Claire suddenly felt the unconquerable power of calmness. Her taunts were useless. She turned and rushed from the room. Outside on the stairs were two men, and her first impression was that perhaps they were officers of justice come to seize Léon, until she saw that one was her brother himself and the other M. Georges.

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## Chapter Eighteen.

### A Different Standpoint.

In his present mood Léon would have avoided any visitor, and M. Georges perhaps most of all; for to go over the estates, point out improvements and changes, and listen to the cautious encouraging admiration of his guest was almost unendurable. He had fallen upon him by chance, running down the stairs from his mother's room just as a parley with M. Georges was being held at the door, and the kindness of his nature prevented him from shaking him off, as he longed to do. But he hailed his sister as a means of escape, and though it was contrary to all etiquette to leave her to entertain him unassisted, this was an hour of anguish, in which everything not immediately connected with the matter in hand sank to insignificance. To Claire, too, under the exhaustion of her passion and her fears, the sight of M. Georges's quiet, every-day respectful face gave an immediate and pleasurable sense of repose; and she was not sorry to second her brother when he explained that Mme. de Beudrillart was ailing, that he himself had a pressing engagement, and that therefore he would ask his sister to go over the place, and show M. Georges anything that he would like to see.

"Mademoiselle will indeed do me too much honour," murmured M. Georges, blushing, and clasping his straw hat and bowing to the ground. "If it is an inconvenience, permit me to choose some other time."

"No, no!" cried Léon, hastily but kindly, for his heart had always reproached him with his treatment of his intendant, "you have had a long walk, and must certainly see what you came to see. Claire, be sure to show Monsieur Georges the new presses and the rick-yard."

He waved his hand and went away. M. Georges, who was gazing after him, ventured to remark that monsieur le baron did not look so well as he had hoped to find him.

"No," said Claire, abruptly; "he has his troubles. Who has not?"

"Ah, mademoiselle," said M. Georges, simply, "I hoped that the troubles of Poissy were over."

Mlle. de Beudrillart, too, was altered. To him, she had been less dignified than to others, finding some sort of expansion in speaking to a man who, with all his indecision, was intelligent and had ideas. To-day she struck him as sharper and more angular; but he had always nursed a respectful admiration for Mlle. de Beudrillart, who had often protected him from her mother's criticisms. In the course of their walk round the estate he more than once suggested that he feared he was taking her from other occupations, to which she merely shook her head. Once he made an unfortunate allusion.

"Ah, here is the wall which has been strengthened, of which Monsieur Bourget was telling me the other day. He is a marvellous man, Monsieur Bourget!"

"Oh, do not talk of him!" said Claire, impatiently.

"No?" Little M. Georges glanced at her with nervousness. "Possibly one may admit that occasionally he expresses



himself with too much force; but he is solid, and knows what he is speaking about." He added, conscience demanding the tribute: "And he is devoted to his family." They were advancing towards the château when he stopped, and said, supplicatingly, "Would mademoiselle permit me to beg for one favour? I have never had the honour of seeing Monsieur Raoul."

The homage in his tone soothed poor Claire's wounded spirit. She exclaimed, impulsively:

"Ah, Monsieur Georges, you served my brother very faithfully! I wish he still had such a good friend by his side!"

"You do me too much honour, mademoiselle," he said, much touched; "the more so, because I have always been painfully aware of my own deficiencies at a critical time, and I have seen for myself to-day that Monsieur de Beudrillart has done better without me. And I do not doubt that he has an excellent adviser in his wife."

"In his wife? Oh no; she does not understand the exigencies of the family, and how should she? She looks at everything from a totally different standpoint to ours. But there she is, and Raoul with her."

They were standing on the small stone balcony which clung to the wall outside Nathalie's room, feeding the pigeons in the court, and, at Claire's call, came down the steps and across the sun-smitten court. M. Georges, who had never seen her since her marriage, stared amazedly at this pale, noble-looking woman, with dark circles round her eyes, and the shadow of a great trouble resting upon her. He swept the ground with his hat, as Raoul marched up, put his hand into that of the visitor, and said, with sturdy precision: "How do you do, Monsieur Georges?" Mme. Léon also put out her hand.

"Léon desired me to tell you," she said, turning to her sister-in-law, "that Félicie has coffee ready, and he hopes that Monsieur Georges will have that or anything else he may prefer."

"Of course," said Claire, shortly. "Are you coming?"

"No, Léon wants me. Good-bye, Monsieur Georges. If you see my father, will you beg him to come and see us?" She moved away, and he stared, open-mouthed, after her. There was a tender dignity in her face, a composure in her manner, which, after all he had heard, left him amazed. And, though his perceptions were slow, he read in her eyes that she was a very sorrowful woman. What could threaten Poissy? What had humbled Mlle. Claire? Even Félicie, whom they found with the coffee, had red and swollen eyes, although she brightened and became enthusiastic in her descriptions of the preparations for monseigneur, and of all that she and the Abbé Nisard had to organise. She even ran to fetch some of her cherished decorations, and when it appeared that a yard or two of coloured calico was wanting, and M. Georges offered to procure it in Tours, her little inexpressive face became radiant.

"Would you really be so kind? We should be most grateful, for I did not know where to turn, and to have failed in the effect just on account of two or three yards of stuff would have been too dreadful! Is it possible that you have never heard monseigneur preach! How much you would be edified! Instead of going to those terrible clubs where the Church is shut out, and the most dreadful doctrines are taught, you must come here and listen to him. You must indeed!"

M. Georges, whose talk at clubs had been always most innocent, was highly gratified.

"Mademoiselle is only too good," he reiterated. "If I might be permitted—"

"But certainly," cried Félicie, enchanted at a possible convert. "Monseigneur arrives on Monday—the day after tomorrow—and the function will be on Tuesday."

"Félicie," said her sister, warningly, "it is possible that we may not be able to receive monseigneur."

Félicie nodded her head in full confidence.

"Ah, but I have spoken to Léon, and he wishes no change to be made; but everything to go on as was settled."

"Perhaps—" hesitated M. Georges, "if Madame Léon wishes to see her father, Monsieur Bourget and I might come out together?"

"Monsieur Bourget!" Félicie was aghast. "Oh, for pity's sake, do not bring him here! I am convinced that he is both a republican and a freethinker. He is really too dreadful! I believe he would be capable of shocking the bishop, and saying something insulting to the Church. Pray, pray, Monsieur Georges!"

"For all our sakes, I think you may forget that message," said Claire, significantly.

But M. Georges could not so soon put aside his recollection of Mme. Léon's earnest face and the sad sorrow in her eyes. After he got back to Tours, he was going in pursuit of M. Bourget, when he met him in the street, and uttered some little jest about the reversal of their positions.

"It is I who have now returned from Poissy," he said, smiling.

"Well?"

The word shot out so sharply that it startled the hearer.

"The visit was exceedingly gratifying to me," he returned, "although Monsieur de Beudrillart was unfortunately a good deal occupied. But his sister kindly showed me the improvements, and it afforded me immense pleasure to see your grandson—and Madame Léon," he added.

M. Bourget's face softened.

"Did—did she say anything?" he demanded.

"She desired me to beg you to come out."

"She wants me—eh?" Her father's chin drooped on his chest, but he straightened himself by an effort, and inquired if she were well. M. Georges hesitated.

"To tell you the truth, I am afraid some bad news had reached the family. Nothing was said, but you know how an impression fixes itself upon the mind. Still, I may be mistaken. Mademoiselle Félicie, who is very amiable, appeared much interested in a visit which the bishop is to pay them on Monday. It is astonishing how much she contrives to do for the Church!"

M. Bourget paid no attention to his words, and when they had parted, M. Georges reflected that there had been a good deal of exaggeration in what Leroux and others had told him about the ex-builder's mania on the subject of Poissy. Instead of descanting on the theme by the hour, as his victims represented, he had been as curt and silent as if the very name of the place were repugnant, and M. Georges, whose honest fealty had all come back that afternoon, made up his mind that jealousy probably lay at the bottom of the reports which had come to his ears. He walked away extremely well satisfied with himself, recalling Mlle. de Beaudrillart's unusual condescension, and giving himself immense pains to match the coloured calico and despatch it.

On Sunday afternoon M. Bourget, in his Sunday clothes, with a stick. And very conspicuous watch-chain festooned with seals in front, presented himself at the château and demanded his daughter. He was shown to her room, and there had to wait for some time, as Mme. Léon was in the grounds with her husband. When she came at last, she advanced quickly to meet him, but stopped, checked by the gloom in his face.

"You see," he said, briefly.

She moved forward then; her eyes softened with a divine pity.

"Yes," she said, quietly.

"And what is he going to do, this rascal of a husband of yours?"

Her face flushed swiftly. "You must not speak of him like that."

"Why, what else is he? Didn't he take the money?"

"Yes, he took it. There he sinned. But he wrote to Monsieur de Cadanet by that day's post, and told him what he had done, and promised to repay it—as he did."

M. Bourget groaned. "And you believe this story! I've been thinking, Nathalie, as I came along, and there's nothing for it but money, money. The amount must be raised, the saints know how! but somehow, and the black business hushed up. It's the only thing to be done for the boy—for all of us; and the quicker the better. Look here, I must see your husband. I'll keep my hands off him, if I can, but that letter will have to be written to-day." He groaned again. "It will leave me a beggar. Oh, the villain, to have brought his good name to this!"

Nathalie's face was white; but her eyes shone, and she confronted her father bravely.

"And you would drag it in the dust! You would make him own to what he never did! Raoul's father! Oh, shame, father, shame! I sent for you because I knew you were an honest man, and I believed you would counsel my poor Léon honestly. This is not honesty, and you shall not see him—you shall not disgrace yourself and me."

He flung angry glances at her.

"Mighty fine!" he said, ironically. "Pray, what better plan have you for keeping him out of prison?"

The light faded from her eyes, she locked her hands tightly one in the other, and was silent. He repeated, tauntingly, —

"Come, now, what?"

Thus cruelly pressed, her lips parted, she gasped rather than spoke the one word: "None."

M. Bourget was too angry for pity. "Perhaps you would like to put him there?"

Silence.

"Don't deceive yourself, my girl. If you don't pay, that is where he goes."

Her voice had come back to her.

"I cannot help it. He must tell the truth."

He started to his feet with a violent exclamation of rage.

"So you have no consideration for me? How can I ever show my face again in Tours? And Raoul! You mean him to grow up to be pointed at as the son of a man who has been in prison, all for the sake of a story which is only another

lie! Yes, a lie! Do you tell me you believe it?"

"I know it."

"Then you are a fool!" he cried, fiercely. "You will be telling me next that you still care for him."

"Ah, do I not!" she cried, her steadfast eyes shining.

"Will you let me see him?" he exclaimed, imperiously.

"No; I will not. He wants help, and you will not help him."

He marched to the door in a rage, but came back again, and stood with his great hands resting on the table, palms downward.

"You are a woman, a foolish woman, and talk of things you don't understand. You suppose that no one will have the heart to hurt your dear Léon; and that when they hear that fine story of his, judge and jury will be so much impressed that it will require no more to make them acquit him. A baron, the Baron de Beaudrillart, the master of Poissy, one of the oldest names in the country—you flatter yourself, no doubt, that all this will prepossess them in his favour, to say nothing of a weeping wife, clasping her hands and crying, 'Gentlemen, gentlemen, for the love of Heaven!' You know nothing at all, my girl. Baron, and Beaudrillart, and Poissy, and descent—all this grandeur—is exactly what will tell against him. In these days it is a fine thing for a miserable little tallow-chandler, or a creature like Leroux, to sit in the jury-box, and feel, 'Now it is my turn. Down with these seigneurs and their accursed pride!' If he were an upstart of a washer-woman's son, picked out of the gutter, he would have a chance, but as it is,"—he stopped and blew out a whiff of air—"there! That is what his is worth! And as for the love of Heaven—peste! few of them will think twice of that."

Till these last words, Nathalie had bent her head before the pitiless storm. Now she raised it confidently.

"Yet it will not fail us," she said. "If Léon does what is right, I do not fear."

His anger was on the point of overpowering him, but he mastered it by a great effort so far as to mutter:

"Perhaps it is as well I should not see your husband, lest I should lose patience. But you had better let him hear my opinion. He can send in and let me know, if it isn't too late."

"Will you not have the carriage?"

He refused curtly, and, without listening to the words with which she tried to thank him, took himself out of the room, down the stairs, and out into the broad sweep. Poissy had never looked more beautiful. It was one of those grey, languorous days in which thunder threatens, and the dark, rich tones of a cloudy sky threw the mellow stone-work and its delicate ornamentation into high relief. The court side was the more picturesque and broken, but the noble simplicity of the lines of the front had always powerfully affected M. Bourget, and he was ready to vow that nothing could exceed the grace of the chimneys or the fine proportion of the windows. And now, as he looked, the pride with which he had dwelt upon it broke forth in an angry snort, which was really a groan. Unfortunately for himself, Jean Charpentier was on his way round the house. It was very well known in the household how the father of Mme. Léon was regarded by Mme. de Beaudrillart and her daughters, and Jean held, if possible, yet stouter aristocratic opinions. The sight, therefore, of M. Bourget's square and sturdy figure, planted on the drive, and tragically gesticulating, stretched his face into a broad grin, which he took no pains to hide. In a moment he found himself in the clutch of the avenger. M. Bourget, gripping his collar, rained down blows upon him with his cane until he roared for mercy, and the ex-builder, wrathfully sending him staggering, expressed a hope that the castigation would have a good and much-needed effect upon his manners.

At any rate, this little incident had a soothing influence upon M. Bourget. It made him hot, but it restored his sense of power, and he went on his way home with a feeling that his visit had not been all in vain. Jean ran into the house, smarting for revenge, but it was an unlucky day for him, as the first person he fell upon was his father. Jacques listened to the tale, spluttered out between threats of vengeance, and when it was ended took his son by the ear.

"I'll wager you've had no more than you earned; and see here, if you talk about it, you'll come in for another dose. Ay, you'd best look out. Let me catch you venturing to be insolent to Madame Léon or her father!" And as Jean went off in wholesome dread of threats which he knew his father too well to doubt would be carried out, Jacques remained looking doubtfully at the ground and scratching his head. "There's trouble in the air, and I'm fearful it has to do with Monsieur Léon," he reflected. "Madame has eaten next to nothing these two days, and as for Madame Léon, she is a ghost. It must be serious, for I've seen nothing like it since Monsieur Léon married; and if it's an old story waking up, why, all the worse! Monsieur Bourget, too; he will have been put out about something to give Jean a thrashing, and to go without so much as seeing Monsieur Raoul. A bad sign—a very bad sign."

And Jacques went off mournfully to the gardens.

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## Chapter Nineteen.

### The Bishop's Visit.

Félicie's untiring energy had really provided a very pretty welcome for the bishop. She had collected all the children far and near, given them flags and garlands of vine to carry, and grouped them at the entrance of the château. Raoul was there, kept quiet by the fond belief that he was acting as colonel, and, much to his aunt's distress, steadily

persistent in refusing to carry anything except his sword. The sight, with the old grey château behind, and the gayly coloured swarm of little creatures in front, was charming, and so the bishop said to his chaplain as he drove up, and set all the aprons and hats waving. Then Léon with the abbé and two neighbouring vicaires advanced to the door of the carriage to welcome him, and, smiling and blessing his little flock with uplifted hand, monseigneur passed into the house to be received by the ladies of the family.

To Nathalie the prospect of a guest, in a time of such perplexity and trouble, had seemed a terrible ordeal, but Mme. de Beaudrillart thought that to put off the bishop's visit would be at once to excite surprise in the neighbourhood, and Léon had taken the same view. They had curtailed their intended hospitalities, however, and only some half a dozen of the principal people of the neighbourhood, with the clergy already at the château, were invited to dinner.

Nathalie had once beheld the bishop in the cathedral at Tours, immediately after he was installed, but it was at a distance, and she had only been aware of a large man, who wore his gorgeous vestments with a magnificent air. Now that she saw him close at hand, she was immediately attracted by the strength and charm of his expression, and by a breadth of kindness which she had not anticipated. He, on his part, was a sympathetic reader of faces, and he had not been five minutes in the house before he had convinced himself that the shadow of sorrow rested upon the family. Mme. de Beaudrillart's usual rigid dignity was shaken by an emotion which looked like that of fear, and the sadness of sleepless nights hung heavy on Nathalie's eyes, while Léon was white and nervous, talking hastily and restlessly, and unable to keep still for many consecutive minutes. Félicie was the only one who had forgotten their troubles in delight at the achievement of her purpose, and it must be owned that her respectful colourless chatter bored the bishop frightfully, the more so because he took himself to task for his impatience. He was much more interested in the others with their evident impending trouble, even in Mlle. Claire's sharp, bitter speeches. Raoul attracted his notice at once, and he praised him warmly to his grandmother, but Mme. de Beaudrillart's face did not lighten; he even fancied that he had unconsciously touched the wound, whatever it was. With the young wife he had no opportunity of speaking, and, indeed, she had learned silence when strangers were present; he noticed, however, that her eyes rested constantly on her husband, and that when he left the room she immediately slipped out after him. The evening was not gay, though Mme. Lemballe vied with Félicie in devoted homage, and M. and Mme. de la Ferraye did their best in a languishing conversation.

That night a tremendous thunder-storm broke over the province, and torrents of rain fell to the north of Poissy. That only the fringe of the storm reached Poissy, Félicie always ascribed to a miraculous interposition on behalf of her cherished decorations, but the proof of its violence elsewhere was to be found in the swift rising of the river. It ran with wintry force, and from its darkened colour, and the vegetation it brought down, had evidently overflowed its banks higher up, and caused considerable damage. This, however, was the only grave result of the storm at Poissy. There the rain had merely been sufficient to freshen everything, and to give an indescribable brilliancy to the foliage. The great walnut-tree to the left of the château glistened in the morning sun, a fresh little breeze fluttered the poplars, and the lizards stole out again, and darted here and there in the crannies of the old stones.

All Félicie's dreams were carried out. The bishop officiated at high-mass, the white church was crowded with worshippers—M. Georges among the number—and the procession which conducted him afterwards to the little hospital which was to be opened for the very old people of the neighbourhood was thick with banners, and did credit to her training. Only one terrible disappointment came to her—the bishop, although he did not say much, managing to express his dislike to her paper flowers, and the gewgaws which decked the altar. She could scarcely keep back her tears, for there was no mistaking the few words he uttered, and to her own thinking the effect had been unequalled.

Setting this aside, however, all had gone admirably; there was nothing, she felt sure, in which even Mme. Lemballe could pick a hole. And when they were all back at the château again, she was feverishly anxious for her reward in the shape of a private interview with, and a special blessing from, the bishop, together with instructions as to how the money for the next pilgrimage should be raised. But Claire, who was moodily wandering from room to room, gave her unwelcome intelligence.

"Monseigneur is in the grounds talking to Nathalie, and his carriage is ordered in half an hour."

"To Nathalie! How has Nathalie got hold of him? What has she to do with him!"

"As much as any of us, I suppose. And it is he who has got hold of her, for he asked to speak to her."

"Oh!" cried Félicie discomfited. The next moment she exclaimed: "I should not wonder in the least if he has heard of the books she reads. I shall be obliged to see him about the pilgrimage, and I dare say he will tell me."

Her sister looked at her in displeasure.

"For pity's sake, do not talk any more about those trifles! Do you never think of what is hanging over us?"

Félicie took refuge in tears.

"How unkind you are, Claire! Of course I think of it a great deal in my prayers. But I believe his Grandeur's visit will bring a blessing, and this morning Léon seems quite himself again."

Claire flung back her head. "Sometimes I think," she said, "that Léon has no soul, though of course you do not understand what I mean."

"No soul!" Félicie stared amazedly. Claire turned and hurried away.

It was quite true, as Mlle. de Beaudrillart said, that the bishop had asked for young Mme. Léon, and that they were at that moment walking together in the kitchen-garden, between strawberry beds, of which the leaves were turning

brown and bronze. More than ever, in the church, had her face, with its strength and sadness, interested him. He felt as if he could not leave that face behind without trying to bring a little comfort; and if there was a pinch of curiosity mixed with his never-failing sympathy, who will blame him? With womanlike tact he went straight to his point.

"My daughter," he said, "you are in trouble."

She answered him as directly. "Yes, monseigneur, in great trouble."

"Can you tell it to me!"

This time she hesitated. "I do not know. It is not my own."

"No. It is your husband's. Does it belong to his past or present!"

"Oh, his past, poor Léon!"

"One other question. Are you in doubt?"

"Yes, monseigneur. For I urge him one way and all the others another—even my own father," she sighed.

"Whatever it is, I am certain she is in the right," reflected the bishop. Aloud, he said, quietly: "If you like to tell me, you may safely do so."

She made a swift resolution, and she told him. He listened in amazement to the end.

"Before I speak, will you let me hear what is your own counsel!"

"I want him to meet the charge with the truth," she said, "and to hide nothing."

"That is a difficult task for a man in your husband's position," said the bishop, walking along the path with his head bent and his hands clasped behind him, wondering.

She sighed. "Very. And they are all against it. They think this Monsieur Lemaire may find it impossible to bring proofs, and they think also that from my birth I am no judge of the terrible indignity there would be if—if—"

She paused and covered her face. The bishop said, very gently—"Yet you are ready to face this ordeal!"

"Oh, I—I! I am no judge. If he were a beggar, it seems to me I should feel the same. But, oh, monseigneur, no wonder he shrinks. For him it is terrible!"

They walked silently. The bishop, who had expected to have to give advice, noticed that she had not asked for it. "My daughter," he said, "when I invited your confidence, it was because you said you were in doubt. But you do not speak doubtfully."

She turned to him quickly. "Whenever I put it into words, all doubt flies."

"So that if I were to say I thought you wrong, you would not change your opinion!"

She was silent. He pressed her. "Tell me."

"No, monseigneur, I could not," she said, scarcely audibly.

"Well, then, let me tell you that you are right, splendidly right," he said, his face brightened by his appreciation. "Do not let any one persuade you to the contrary. For your husband's soul as well as for his honour, yours is the only saving course, and at whatever cost of suffering—for you will both suffer—hold fast to it. If ever, in any way, I can help you, send for me. I shall remember you in my prayers, and thank God that He has made you braver than most women—yet I ought not to say that, for you women put us to shame."

If Nathalie were womanlike in courage, she was womanlike in this also: that the moment she had got his approval, she began to doubt.

"There is our boy," she said. "When I remember him, I am ready to shrink."

"Will it do him good to have a father who sheltered himself behind a lie? Think only of that. My daughter, I do not fear for you. I believe that God will give you strength to prevail, but I wish I were permitted to help you."

"Monseigneur, you have helped me. Until now I have been alone, and to know that you are on my side—But I have kept you too long, and here comes Félicie."

"Ah," said the bishop, smiling, "and she will have a great deal to say."

As the carriage with the bishop and his chaplain rolled out of the white gates, a man on horseback passed it, who had the appearance of having ridden hard. Léon, his wife, and his sisters were still standing by the entrance as he clattered up.

"The Baron de Beudrillart?" he said taking off his hat.

"Here." Léon stepped forward with a white face.

"Monsieur Rodoin sent me down with this for monsieur," he said, handing a letter.

He tore it open.

"I think it well to inform you that Monsieur Lemaire intends proceeding to extremes; that he has instructed the Procureur de la République, and that in all probability you will be arrested to-morrow or the next day. I have learned this from a sure source."

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## Chapter Twenty.

### The River.

There was a minute of dumb horror; then Félicie would have broken into lamentation before the messenger if Claire had not hastily signed to him to go round to the offices. Léon stood, ghastly white; his wife clasped his arm with both hands, and Félicie's sobs, the only sound, came to her ears as distant as the rush of the river. Léon did not hear them at all. For the moment he was turned into stone, and his heart stood still. He had talked of it, dreaded it, but until this instant the horror of the thing had never really touched him. Arrested! He, Léon de Beaudrillart!

He looked round at his wife, and her eyes met his with brave tenderness. But he wanted words, and he held the letter to her with piteously trembling hands. Every word had already burned itself into her brain. His lips faltered the words: "What does it mean?"

If she could only have told him that it was a dreadful nightmare from which they would presently wake! The clasp on his arm tightened. She whispered:

"Dear, we will meet it together."

Claire, who in spite of her anger against him, was listening breathlessly for some suggestion, turned away with a groan and rushed up-stairs to her mother's room. She panted out:

"We must think of a way of saving Léon. Nathalie is helpless, and if something is not done he will be arrested." In the immediate face of danger Mme. de Beaudrillart's iron will exerted itself. She was deadly pale, and she clutched the back of a chair; but her voice was unshaken as she put the quick question: "When? To-day?"

"To-morrow."

"Then we must act. Bring them here."

They were already on the stairs. Léon came in first, his round face absolutely colourless, his limbs dragging. He tried to smile, but the effort only seemed to contort his features, and, stumbling forward, he sank into a chair, and stretched out the hand which held the letter to his mother. She read it with staring eyes, and when she spoke her voice sounded as if one metal struck another.

"This is no time for crying out, or for tears," she said. "Monsieur Rodoin has done very well in giving us warning, and he no doubt understands that you must not be arrested. What remains is to decide how to act, and then to act quickly. There has been too much delay already. I suppose the time for money is past—"

"Owing to Nathalie," murmured Claire.

"—And only flight remains."

Léon lifted his head and looked at her with feverish eyes.

"You must fly, my son. Apparently there are countries where you will be safe; I do not know which they are, but that can be ascertained. You must start at once, telling no one and going alone, until your wife can safely join you. This is the only way of escaping the worst degradation. Claire, you have a good head; do you not think with me?"

"It is the one thing he can do for us," said Claire, rigidly.

"Félicie?"

Félicie nodded, but was weeping too much to speak. Léon had buried his head in his hands, and his wife knelt by him, her eyes fixed on Mme. de Beaudrillart's face.

"You see we are all agreed, Léon," his mother went on, vanquishing a catch in her voice. "My son, remember what you owe to your name, and act. Where will you go? to Bordeaux or Marseilles? If you could reach America—" Her voice failed, she stood trembling, while her lips formed the words she had not strength to utter. As for Léon, with a mute gesture of despair he turned and hid his face against his wife's arm. The little dependent action gave her words. She started to her feet, her tall figure swaying, her whole frame one passionate protest.

"You forget me, madame! I am not agreed. I say that he did not do this shameful thing, and that he shall not fly from it as if he were a coward. A De Beaudrillart a coward! Because there is one act of which he is ashamed, you want him to own to what is a hundred times worse! Léon, do not listen to them! For Raoul's sake, do not listen to them! Dear love, be brave, live it down!" She dropped again by his side, gathering him to her heart, and with quivering lips kissing his hair, his hands. Claire would have answered angrily, but her mother stopped her.

"You have a right to be heard," she said to the young wife, "and we have, perhaps, all too much forgotten that you

suffer too. But let us clearly understand each other. What is it that you suggest? That—that he submits to arrest?" Her voice dropped miserably.

Nathalie made a mute sign of assent.

"Then you think," Mme. de Beaudrillart went on, in the same dry and mechanical tones, "that it will be found they have not sufficient evidence to prove what they—have to prove!"

"I do not know," said the wife, breathing hard. "I do not know. I only know that he must tell the truth."

His mother's hands gripped her chair.

"Acknowledge that—that he took the money?"

"Yes. Because it is true."

A groan burst from Claire's lips.

"Impossible!" cried Mme. de Beaudrillart, with an agitation she had not yet shown. "Plead guilty!"

Nathalie drove back anguish, recognising that all her strength was needed.

"What would flight plead, madame? That would mean that he was guilty of everything."

"Yes," the mother moaned. "His honour is lost. But he would escape the dreadful disgrace of punishment."

"All his life would be one miserable punishment—too heavy, because unjust. If he comes forward now, and tells the truth when it goes against him, has he not a much better chance of being believed when it is in his favour? There is the letter he wrote to Monsieur de Cadanet. May that not still be found among his papers?"

Her heart was throbbing, and, holding him in her clasp, it was almost beyond her powers to speak calmly. Mme. de Beaudrillart's self-control began to forsake her, and all unconsciously the sight of her son clinging to his wife impelled her into opposition. She cried out:

"But suppose they will not believe! Suppose he is—" She choked at the word "convicted."

Nathalie felt her husband shiver, and pressed her lips on his hair.

"He will bear it," she breathed.

"No, no," cried his mother, starting up, "this is asking too much! You are no judge. You cannot tell what he, what we all, would suffer. Léon, speak! Flight is your only hope. Do not listen to your wife."

At this appeal he raised himself, and stared vacantly round the room. His eyes lit on Félicie, and a haggard smile crossed his face.

"You had better not weep so much, Félicie; you will have no eyes left for your embroideries."

She broke into more poignant sobs, and cried out:

"Mamma, must he go? Could we not hide him here somewhere?"

"In perpetuity," he muttered. "Nathalie is right, mother, in one thing, for flight would only condemn me, and I could not bear it. I should not be spared a single humiliation. Besides, in these days one must be unknown to hide successfully, and all that I should gain would be the being dragged back in ignominy."

Nathalie's eyes were fixed anxiously upon him, her lips trembled, her shoulders contracted; it was as if she were trying to send strength from her soul to his, in his weak striving against fate.

"I believe I know what I shall do," he went on, in a mechanically dull voice; then suddenly starting up, clasped his hands across his burning eyes, his face ghastly pale. His words came out slowly, shortly. "Yes, do not fear, mother. I know what to do. Have a little patience. I shall think of our honour, believe me." Then he reeled, and his wife caught his arm. She was as white as he, but all her trembling had gone.

"Hush, Léon," she said, firmly; "the shock has unnerved you so much that you do not know what you think or say. Whatever is done, even if you do go away as your mother wishes you, it could not be yet, for you could not reach the railway until dark; and you must have food. And if you stay, there is no use acting as though all were lost. Let him go to our room, madame, and come again to you later on. Come, dear love."

Mme. de Beaudrillart made no opposition, for her strength had failed her. With a face of anguish she watched them out of the door, and fell back in her chair, scarcely conscious. Félicie, still sobbing, busied herself about her mother, and ran to fetch a handful of leaves from her stores, with which to make a tisane. Claire, dry-eyed and tense, stood with her eyes fixed on the photograph of her father, which always rested on a small easel near her mother's chair.

"How unhappy we were when he died!" she said in a low voice, "and how much better it would have been if we had all died with him! I can never forgive Léon!"

Mme. de Beaudrillart did not speak—she could not. With her not only pride but love was smitten low—so low that her usual emotions had lost their leaders, and wandered objectless. Despair seized her whichever way she looked, and,

like Claire, she, too, wished for death.

Léon submitted without resistance to his wife's leading, clinging to her, indeed, as they passed along the passages to her room. The window leading into the stone balcony was open, and the whole air seemed to vibrate with the hoarse croaking of frogs from the pond beyond the kitchen-garden. Nathalie quietly closed it, and rang the bell. She stood at the door, and gave the astonished Rose-Marie directions to bring coffee at once, and, when it came, took it from her without allowing the girl to enter. Then she knelt by her husband, and coaxed him as if he were a child. He shuddered: "I cannot!"

"Dear, only to please me. It will do your head so much good."

"There is a millwheel in my head. You see they are all falling away from me, so that even my mother will never be able to forgive."

"Do you know," she said, trying to speak cheerfully, "I believe we are all making too much of it. What will you say if it comes to nothing, and the jury are clever enough to take the sensible view of the case? Why should this man make the charge when Monsieur de Cadanet is dead? You will see that will tell against him."

He groaned.

"And if worst comes to the worst, your friends will know that you have told the truth, dear; they will not think evil of you. And you will have us—your mother and sisters, and Raoul, and me. Do not we count for anything? Do not—"

He lifted his face and looked at her, and all her loving words stopped midway in her throat, and made a lump there. If she could have thought of herself she would have cried out to him to take away his eyes and their anguish, for if Léon's soul had been wanting before, it had come to him now, and gazed at her; and it needs an angel or a devil to bear the sight of a human soul wrung with misery. Curiously enough, she felt all the time that if she had known about the world and its ways, her husband would have listened to her more readily. What she said to comfort him he set down to ignorance. One of his old companions with a jest and a laugh might have had a stronger influence than she with a bleeding heart. But this only made her try the more. She knew enough of Léon to be assured that silence would not soothe; she must talk, argue, entreat, go over the same ground again and again, appeal to his sentiment for them all, and this with a horrid fear deep within her to which she dared not allude, and scarcely dared to think of. He was not going to attempt to fly; so much she gathered. But that there was some rising purpose in his mind which was colouring his broken words and looks at her she was certain, and the certainty drove her almost mad with hidden fear. She made him drink a little coffee, which was something, and she wanted to bring Raoul to the rescue. But Raoul had gone off with the pony and Jacques Charpentier to see the last of the vintage at a distant farm, and would not be home until late—perhaps not till after dark.

By this time all the household was aware that there was something wrong, though they had different opinions as to the what, but, with a feeble sort of pretence, dinner was gone through as usual. Mme. de Beaudrillart, however, went away before it was ended, and Nathalie detained Claire, to ask her if she would come to her room as soon as Raoul returned. She grew more and more uneasy.

The lamp had been brought in before Claire appeared with the news that she had heard the pony pass the window a few minutes before. His wife glanced at Léon, but he sat, as he had sat for the last hour, his head buried on his arm, and she hoped that, worn out, he might be sleeping. She signed to Claire to speak to her outside the door.

"Please don't leave him, even for a minute," she whispered, and flew down the stairs.

Rain was falling at last, and though Jacques had sheltered Raoul with his own coat, the boy was wet. His mother hurried him up the stairs, his laugh ringing out so strangely in the sorrow-stilled house that she almost hushed it. But she did not, because she thought within herself that a child's laugh is a healthy thing, and that the sound might drive away other things not so healthy. She left the door of his room open, however, and kept her ears on the alert, while she hustled him into dry clothes, and then, holding his hand, ran along the passages to the room where she had left her husband and Claire. Claire met her at the door.

"He is gone," she said, in a frightened whisper.

"You left him?"

"Only for a minute. He asked me to get him a newspaper from down-stairs, and when I came back the window was open—"

Nathalie rocked as she stood, caught at the wall, and said, with a gasp: "Take the boy to your mother, and don't frighten her." Then she ran—how she ran!—though to this hour she thinks her feet were tied together.

In three minutes she had found Jacques in the stable. He thought a ghost was upon him till she spoke.

"Your master is out somewhere, and I think he is going to kill himself. You and I must find him."

Jacques understood at once. He had known that some calamity was at hand. He snatched up the stable-lantern, went outside, locked the door, and put his question:

"Had he his pistols, madame?"

"No."

"Then I believe he will have gone to the river."



"I know it, I know it!" she cried, wildly. "But where!" Jacques muttered to himself, "He would go to the bridge, because it is at its deepest, but there is no use in following him there; one must strike it lower down." He caught up a long rake which stood against the wall. "Come, madame." The rain had been swept off by a strong breeze, and the moon made the leaves glisten like diamonds, and flung deep shadows under the trees. The two hurried round in front of the château, and plunged into the heavy wet gloom which brooded round the garden. Nathalie's cry, "Léon, Léon!" at first timid, rose sharper as they left the house behind them; then she remembered the whistle which she used as a call for her husband, and blew shrilly.

"That is better," said the gardener, encouragingly. He had kicked off his shoes and stockings before Mme. Léon came out, and ran all the easier, his steps falling with a soft thud. That, the croaking of frogs, the soft hoot of owls, and the rush of the river were the only sounds, and to the wife's strained ears the silence seemed full of strange significance.

Suddenly Jacques stopped.

"Go round by the bridge, madame. I shall take the bank."

"I am coming with you," she said, determinedly.

He raised no further objection, and they went where she and Jean had followed Raoul not so long ago, down a dark abyss of underwood which snatched at them as they pushed through it, slipping and sliding on the wet ground, her dress torn by briars and sharp twigs. Here and there, as they parted the branches, they caught a gleam of the river running, fiercely swollen, below, the moon striking the swift current, and leaving the darkness on either side more impenetrable. Several times Nathalie fell, but she repelled her companion's help almost angrily, catching at the branches, and trying to add her feeble voice to the gardener's shouts. When they reached the river it was like coming out into the day, the freakish moonlight falling in a flood of light on the grass, and bringing into clear distinctness the broad burdocks and mulleins which spread themselves near the water, while it left a fringe of poplars lower down on the other side in misty shadow. Jacques knew the river well, and had hastily made up his mind. Close to the spot where they were was a shallow into which he could wade, a spot where, when the river was in flood, things brought down by the current were often recoverable, caught as they were by a few stakes driven in at that point. It might be —But how the river ran, how it ran! What a slender hope was here! Their thoughts, though they had sprung together to this point, might be all unfounded; they might already be too late, or Léon might be lying, stiff and ghastly, in some gloomy shadow close to which they had passed unknowing. Jacques stood for a moment considering, and with the foolish inconsequence of misery Nathalie found herself noticing how white his bare feet looked in the moonlight, sunk as they were in the wet grass.

"I will stay here with the pole, madame," he said. "Will you go up towards the bridge, and whistle for me if there is need?"

She was gone before he had finished, stumbling along, her staring eyes devouring the waters as they rushed by her; and she had not gone twenty yards before Jacques heard a scream, a splash, and, running to the spot, found her up to her knees in the water among the flags, clutching something which rose and fell, and, when it rose, turned a white face to the moonlight.

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## Chapter Twenty One.

### Out of the Depths.

There was no sign of life as with difficulty they dragged him out of the water. His hands were tied together by a handkerchief, drawn to a knot, as Jacques guessed, by his teeth. His saturated clothes were pulling him down, and it was the catch of his sleeve in a protruding stake which had held him for a few minutes, and shown him to his wife's searching eyes. In the river she had fancied he moved, mistaking the movements with which it mocked its plaything for life, but on the grass he lay motionless. Still she kept her presence of mind, and gave directions, telling the gardener to run to the nearest house across the bridge for help. It was nearer than the château.

"I know what to do," she said, kneeling down. "I have done it before."

"But alone, madame?"

"Go, go, and bring blankets with you."

He went reluctantly, running along the bank without any hope in his heart. "First his father, and now Monsieur Léon," he reflected. "Poor madame, it will be the death of her! And what lies behind? I must make it out to have been an accident, if it comes to breaking down a rail of the bridge." Help was not at first to be found, and it was old Antoine who at last started at a run for the spot, while Jacques got blankets at another cottage. When he reached the spot again, Mme. Léon was so stiff and numbed that she could scarcely move her husband's arms up and down, and she made him a sign to watch her and take her place.

"Ah, madame!" said the gardener, sorrowfully.

She did not hear him. She was bending over the motionless body, laying her hand on his chest, listening. Old Antoine was reflecting that she had certainly gone mad, and that if monsieur le baron was not drowned beyond hope of recovery, there would be more sense in rubbing him with blankets, and pouring brandy down his throat, when suddenly Nathalie lifted her head. "Keep on, keep on!" she cried to the gardener, "I am sure that he breathes!"

Twenty minutes later Claire, wretchedly flitting across the terrace, cried out with terror at seeing a figure swathed in

blankets carried towards the house. A woman ran in front, drenched, ghastly, who cried out as she came near:

"He is alive! Get his bed and hot things ready!"

Yes, he lived; and when the first moment of relief was over, Claire felt as if it might have been better had Nathalie not been there to call him back to dishonour. She did as she was told, but with no eagerness of love, feeling, indeed, as if all love for her brother had been killed in her heart. It was not so, for, thank God, love does not die so easily, but it gave her a fierce sense of satisfaction to believe it.

They did not tell Mme. de Beaudrillart that night how near he had been to death; though perhaps, poor woman, when she heard that monsieur le baron, in going to look at the river in its turbulence, had leaned upon a rotten rail, and had slipped into the stream, she guessed. Jacques went back at once that night, under pretence of its being unsafe for chance passers-by, and managed to break down and roughly mend again a piece of the railing. Old Antoine came by as he was at his work, and chuckled.

"So you are acting up to your name, Monsieur Charpentier, he, he, he! Strange that I should never have seen the hole as I passed, he, he, he!"

"Your eyes are not so good as they were, Antoine," said the gardener, coolly.

"No, that's true; and it's natural the glass of good beer I got up there should have improved their sight. Well, I'm not a talker."

"I'd keep to that if I were you," said Jacques, whistling, "for we all know you're a good deal besides. If you don't see all you might, the saints know whether monsieur le baron has not looked at you with his eyes shut! There, that will do till the morning. Good-night, Antoine. You can tell your neighbours that monsieur le baron was leaning over to see if it was all right, when the rail gave way, and gave him a bad wetting. And when the next storm blows down a few branches up by the château you may have them for your store in the winter. I'll see about it. Old fox!" he muttered, as he turned away. "But I think that will muzzle him. If all else could be as easily put right! Or if one only knew what Monsieur Léon did it for! But perhaps now he will take it quieter, whatever it was."

Through the night Nathalie watched her husband, sore misery in her heart, and her young limbs aching. The latter part of it he slept well, and when he woke in the morning he was himself again—something more than himself, she thought, indeed, after he had called to her.

"Nathalie!"

"Dear."

"Is it true? Did you save me?"

"Jacques and I."

He said no more, but lay watching her. Presently he exclaimed: "How you have suffered!"

She shuddered. She knew that the hours had written on her face with lines which, come what would, would never be erased. She took his hand in both hers. "Léon, I want you to promise me something."

"That I won't do it again? Well, I promise. I did not think any one could care so much. It seemed the best way for myself; but when I was in the water—" He stopped, and went on in a minute: "It struck me as rather a sneaky way of getting out of it."

She sank down by his side, and buried her face in her arms. "It was cruel, cruel to those who love you!"

He put out his hand and touched her gently.

"You really love me so much! Still!"

"Still? Oh, Léon, more than ever!"

She heard him murmuring to himself as if wondering. "More than ever! Well," he went on, raising himself on his elbow, "I owe you something for sticking to me. You shall have your way."

With a sudden cry of tenderness and pity, Nathalie flung her arms round him and sobbed. At that moment what a way it seemed! Was she right? Could she give him up? She was speechless, thankful, miserable, all at once, and, seeing it, he tried to jest a little.

"Suggest what I shall put on for the occasion—my best or my oldest coat! One has no precedent to go by—"

She interrupted him, eagerly: "Léon, let us go to Paris."

"Thrust my head into the lion's mouth?"

"Whatever—whatever happens, it will not be so terrible for you there as here—at Poissy. Telegraph to Monsieur Rodoin, and he will let them know that you are coming up by the morning express—if you are strong enough to travel."

"Yes, yes!" he cried, with sudden energy, "you are right. Then my mother—Poissy—will be spared something of humiliation. Send off a messenger at once with the telegram, and order the carriage in an hour. And—and, Nathalie,

let them know, keep them away; I cannot bear my mother's reproaches."

They fell on her; Claire's with stinging sharpness, but the conflict in her own heart had this effect that words did not succeed in wounding. Mme. de Beaudrillart was more passive; it struck Nathalie that the blow had stunned her, and that physically her stately height had shrunk. She kept in her own room, sending only a message to her son that she could not wish him good-bye. Félicie wandered miserably about, suggesting impossible plans, though unable to realise that anything so terrible as Claire suggested could fall on Poissy. "If only Monsieur Georges were here, I am sure he would think of something, or if only I might go and ask the abbé! If Nathalie had attended more to his advice, and less to those dreadful books of hers, this would never have been permitted to come upon us. There they are in her room still, in spite of all that monseigneur said."

Claire stared. "How do you know he said anything!"

"What else can he have had to say? He asked me whether it was not a great pleasure to have my sister-in-law with us, and I said I was afraid she held very strange opinions, so of course he spoke."

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't talk!" cried Claire, irritably. "Have they gone?"

"They would not go so unceremoniously,"—Félicie was strong in etiquette. "Besides,"—she broke again into sobs—"dear, dear Léon could not leave us without a single word!"

It was a strange farewell when the carriage drove round: Léon kissing his sisters; Félicie clinging to him; Claire white, cold, and impassive as she presented her cheek. At the gates stood Jacques, hat off, sadness on his face. When they had gone a short distance, Léon turned impulsively and looked back. The gardener was in the road, gazing after them; behind him rose a frowning Poissy, for the day was sunless, the stone had lost its mellow tint, and the roof was dark and unbeautiful. Léon shivered.

"Are you cold?" asked Nathalie, anxiously. She was afraid that the night might have left a chill, and wrapped the rug round him.

"I do not think that will warm me," he said, with a smile which she felt to be piteous.

They had driven a mile before he asked whether she would like to leave word at her father's. "We have time."

But Nathalie refused. She did not tell him that she did not dare face the possibility of an outburst from M. Bourget, but she owned that she knew he would disapprove of the course they had taken.

"It seems to me that every one disapproves," he muttered, restlessly.

Then Nathalie took a resolution.

"I am afraid you will be angry with me," she said, timidly, "but when the bishop was at Poissy he saw that something was wrong, and spoke to me. I was sure he was to be trusted, and I told him."

"Ah, you are a woman," said Léon, who told everything. But he said it with a smile.

"He was very kind, and helped me," she went on, more freely. "And he—he did not disapprove. I believe he thought it was the most noble act that you could do."

Léon turned his face to her, pleased as a child at praise, though he only said, "Ah?"

His spirits rose almost to their old level when they were in the train. He had a power which she envied, of letting himself be distracted by the events of the moment; and while, as the train neared Paris, a painful tension held her limbs in a vice, he might have been on an errand differing in no degree from one of every-day importance.

The train ran smoothly into the station as he laid down a newspaper with a remark on a scene in the Chambers. Standing on the platform, Nathalie recognised M. Rodoin. He came hastily towards them, and at the same moment she saw two men approach. M. Rodoin said, in a low tone: "There will be no open scandal. They know that you have come voluntarily, and we can all go together as far as the carriage. You have acted courageously, Monsieur de Beaudrillart, and I honour you. Trust to me to see to madame."

Nathalie's throat was parched, her head swam; but now, more than ever, she must call her fortitude to her aid. At the door of the carriage she kissed her husband, even smiled at him, though with quivering lips.

"God bless you, Léon; I shall be near."

White, mute, confused, he stepped into the carriage; one man followed him, the other clambered to the box, and they rolled away.

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## Chapter Twenty Two.

### Before the Trial.

When Nathalie, by a strong effort of will, succeeded in calling back her thoughts from following her husband, her eyes fell upon M. Rodoin, who sat respectfully opposite to her in his own carriage. The change in the lawyer's manner was indeed remarkable. When Léon had consulted him before, in spite of his outward politeness her keen intuition had detected a certain veiled distrust which had annoyed her, while it was too impalpable to be openly noticed. She had

been convinced that he disbelieved his client's story; and twenty times had wished that her husband's case had been in other hands. She had looked at him with disfavour, taking exception to the coldness of his expression and the eccentricity of his nose, which, starting on a straight line, suddenly towards the end developed an upward turned knob, on which the eye fastened itself to the exclusion of his other features, and which seemed to accentuate the air of incredulity which displeased her. The knob, it need hardly be said, remained, but it had acquired so different an expression that although she read anxiety in the look with which he regarded her, its general tenor was that of unmistakable pity and good-will.

When he saw that she was giving him her attention, he leaned forward and said, abruptly:

"Yes, my dear lady, I congratulate you. Your husband is acting with extreme courage, but you should not be alone."

"Servants talk," she said, quietly.

"There are his sisters?"

"Ah, but they were strongly opposed to his coming. So was my father, and you yourself, Monsieur Rodoin, permit me to say, did not suggest it."

He put up his hand. "Your reproach is quite justified. Honestly, I did not believe that Monsieur de Beudrillart would ever run so counter to the traditions of his family as to take so sensible a course. No, madame, do not suppose I am speaking offensively. No Beudrillart would be deficient in courage; but this required another form of courage—one which they would be slow to recognise as such; it surprised me beyond words when your telegram was put into my hands. If it was your doing, madame—"

He bowed respectfully, his knowledge of men recognising in the new lines in Nathalie's beautiful face what the struggle had cost her; but she scarcely heard his words. She put her head out of the window as they rattled over the stones, trying to catch a last glimpse of the carriage which contained her husband. It was but of sight, and her next question was almost a sob:

"Where do they take him, monsieur?"

"To the Palais de Justice." And as she shuddered, he added: "You will have ample opportunities of seeing him. Do not fear."

"To-night?"

"To-morrow, I hope."

"Meanwhile we must think, we must act for him," she said, driving back her own anguish. "Who do you suggest for his counsel!"

"Madame, there can be no better than Maître Barraud, and I went to him on receipt of your telegram. He was so touched by the baron's action that he at last consented. The Procureur de la République is Maître Miron."

"He is terribly formidable!" cried Nathalie.

"It is impossible to deny it; both are of the first rank, and I own frankly that I do not think there is a sou to choose between them. But I am quite content to have secured my man. One thing is necessary, and I should like you to impress it strongly upon monsieur le baron: that he must be absolutely frank with Maître Barraud, place the matter clearly in his hands, and permit himself no reservations."

She smiled faintly.

"Reservations are at an end, Monsieur Rodoin."

"All the better. Our one chance lies in perfect openness. We tell our story as it happened; it is for the jury to judge of the probabilities. Unfortunately, we must bear in mind that it is not always truth which carries the most innocent face. This Lemaire has a lie tucked away somewhere, and he will naturally take more pains with it than with any other part of his case. But if once Maître Barraud gets his finger on it he will have it out."

"The lie," said Nathalie, calmly, "says that my husband never repaid the money."

M. Rodoin waited for the rattle of passing cabs to subside before he replied.

"I do not know."

She started, flushing crimson. "Monsieur! you do not know!"

"Ah, madame, hear me patiently! I am sure that Monsieur de Beudrillart repaid it—though I wish to Heaven he had insisted upon proper forms and claimed a receipt—but we must allow that it is quite possible that Monsieur Lemaire never heard of the repayment. He says he was told of the affair by the count; that I take leave to doubt, for it seems to me an extraordinary revengeful act for a dying man, after he had kept silence for six years, to put the reputation of his cousin at the mercy of another. I prefer to believe that Monsieur Lemaire contrived to ferret out some of the facts, and to jump at other conclusions. And I base my opinion a good deal upon what I have found out of the man's life."

"Yes! Pray go on," said Nathalie, leaning forward, her eyes fixed upon him.

"He is a gambler, extravagant, worthless. His debts amount to a sum which his inheritance from Monsieur de Cadanet will hardly liquidate, and here you have a motive for the action. He is a neglectful husband—said by some to be absolutely unkind. Certainly his wife does not present the appearance of a very happy woman."

"Might there not be something among Monsieur de Cadanet's papers?"

"Monsieur Lemaire is executor," returned the lawyer, significantly. "However, we shall not neglect any possibility." She fell into a long silence, which he did not attempt to break. Among all the De Beaudrillarts, past and present, who had ever consulted him, he had met with none in whom he felt so deep an interest as in this young baroness. He had liked the honesty of her hazel eyes before, but the divine sympathy he read in them as she looked after her husband appealed more directly to his heart. Not for years had he felt sentiment so near gaining the upper hand.

"Madame," he exclaimed at last, "surely your father would be an excellent person to have with you! Permit me to telegraph for him."

She made a sign in the negative.

"It would not do, monsieur. My poor father is bitterly disappointed. He was so proud of my position, of the future of his little grandson, that he cannot forgive us for failing him. It is difficult to explain, and it may seem only laughable to you, but I think he was more Beaudrillart than the De Beaudrillarts. He would reproach my husband, he would think of nothing but the disgrace—no, he must not come."

"I am wondering—"

"What?"

"You must have had a heavy task among so many opposing forces, madame—I am wondering what you had on your side!"

"My husband's better self," she said, turning her eyes on his. "But you may conceive that it was difficult for him to fly in the face of a hundred prejudices."

"Difficult for you, too," reflected the lawyer. Aloud he said: "Well, madame, courage. Whatever happens we are on the right road, and it is evident that you know best how to guard the honour of the De Beaudrillarts. But I wish I could persuade you to make my house your home. Madame Rodoin would be only too much gratified." He uttered his last sentence with a gulp, truth presenting itself in forcible contradiction, and it must be owned that Nathalie's immediate negative relieved him.

"I pass many hours alone, monsieur," she said, with a flitting smile, "so do not waste your thoughts on me when there is so much besides to arrange. If you can find me some task I cannot tell you how grateful I should be. Is there any possible point on which I could be of assistance?"

"We shall find something," declared M. Rodoin, mendaciously.

"And I shall see Maître Barraud?"

They were in the Avenue de l'Opéra; Paris, brilliant, indifferent Paris, spread its gay attractions on either side.

"Oddly enough, there he goes," said the lawyer. She bent forward eagerly.

"That man? With the face of a boy?"

"Ah, madame, never mind his face. It makes a good mask. But you will certainly see him. He will have an interview with your husband to-morrow, and I will arrange for your own as soon as possible. Here we are in the Rue Neuve Saint Augustin, and here is your hotel. Will you make me one promise?"

"Let me hear."

"To eat and to sleep."

"That is two," she said, trying to smile, "but I will try."

"Ill, you will only be an added anxiety to Monsieur de Beaudrillart."

"Yes. I shall not be ill. I am stronger than you can conceive. It frightens me, sometimes, to find how much I can bear."

M. Rodoin saw her ensconced in her rooms at the hotel, and gave his address to the landlord, in case madame wanted anything. He bade her farewell with the words, "We shall triumph!" but his solitary reflections, as he drove towards his own house, were far from cheerful. "Unless some miracle happens, it is a lost case already," he muttered, "and so Barraud thinks, and chafes. Yet there's roguery somewhere, I'll stake my head. If one only knew what proof Lemaire means to bring forward, or what one has to fight against! It matters nothing; we must fight somehow. After she has achieved the miracle of endowing my young baron with a backbone, what other miracles may not follow! And meanwhile—" He plunged his head in his hands and sat revolving, considering, rejecting. He hurried in the evening to Maître Barraud, and brought upon himself the imprecations of his friend, who was just issuing from his door, cigar in hand, on his way to the Opéra.

"Plague me more about this confounded Beaudrillart case, and I swear I'll fling the whole thing up. Man, there's a time for all things."

“But, my dear Albert—”

The other waved his cigar.

“Not a word. If you had not unfortunately known me from my cradle, and basely traded upon that privilege, I should never have been saddled with a preposterously hopeless muddle, out of which there is nothing to be got but discomfiture.”

“When you have seen Madame Léon—”

“Madame Léon!” The young man uttered a smothered roar. “Out upon you! It is a few well-applied tears, is it, which has set you to pester your friends?”

“No, mocker! Madame Léon is a woman who acts, and does not weep. But you must see her, if only to give her confidence; for, unluckily, I pointed you out to her as she drove to the hotel to-day, and she took you for a boy.”

Maître Barraud was an excellent fellow, but his weakness was vanity.

“A boy!” he repeated, in a nettled voice. “A boy! I should like her to know—Well, what is all this about? Of course I must see the woman in order to scrape together a few materials upon which to string as many words as there are onions on the stick a Breton carries over his shoulder. And I know what I shall get out of the interview: protestations, and exclamations, and maunderings about false accusations, and an ill-used angel of a husband, and all the lot of it. Peste! a woman at the back of a case is the very devil!”

“Some day, my dear friend, Madame Barraud will have her revenge.”

“Heaven forbid! At any rate, her charming figure has not yet presented itself upon the horizon. Here is the Opéra, and now I presume I shall be left in peace. Take with you my assurance that your client will be condemned to a fine and a year’s imprisonment. He will get off with that because it was six years ago, and our juries, bless them! have a sneaking sympathy for the follies of youth.”

He waved his hand, and ran lightly up the steps, while M. Rodoin proceeded thoughtfully on his way, resisting the impulse to turn into the Rue Neuve Saint Augustin, and learn whether Mme. Léon had obeyed his injunction to dine.

She had forced herself to this, but the sleeping was a different matter. Exhausted as she was by the emotions of the previous night, she flung herself on her bed, hoping to lose the too vivid consciousness with which her mind busied itself round her husband’s cruel position. For an hour she slept. But in that time a storm of wind and rain had risen, and the rattling of the window and the lashing torrent which beat against the outer shutters aroused her with the startled fancy that the fierce gurgle of the river was again in her ears. Alas! the remembrance of where her husband was spending this night was scarcely less painful. She slipped out of bed, and fell on her knees by its side. The tears at which Maître Barraud had mocked, and which she had so long restrained, now broke from her with a violence almost suffocating. She pictured his forlorn misery, the horror of mind which would seize him afresh whenever he realised where and what he was; she imagined she even heard him cursing her for having forced this fate upon him. Other wives of whom she had read had risked everything to save their husbands from prison; she had made it her task to persuade him to yield himself deliberately to its disgrace. A profound pity moved her. She knew that she was stronger than he with his light, butterfly nature. If only she could have sinned and suffered for him! She could think of herself in a cell without shrinking, while to picture him there was agony; and her sobs and prayers redoubled at the sad figure which rose before her eyes.

The tears which exhausted relieved her, but she slept no more. She lay turning in her heart what she could do for Léon, and conscious of her own weakness. She had not yet forgotten her former discontent with M. Rodoin—although she was forced to allow that this time he had presented himself as a different man—and the sight of Maître Barraud had caused her extreme dismay. In his round, chubby face she had seen nothing to inspire confidence; she distrusted the lawyer’s assurances, and the idea of Léon’s fate having been committed to a mere boy added intolerably to her anxiety, and flung more responsibility upon her own shoulders. If, as M. Rodoin appeared to think, the trial would be brought on very shortly, there could scarcely be time to change counsel, but she promised herself to consult the lawyer as to the possibility of engaging another of more experience.

She had not the opportunity for this, however, as soon as she desired; for after waiting in extreme impatience for M. Rodoin’s appearance, and for the permission to see her husband, which she trusted he might bring, he came at about twelve o’clock, and Maître Barraud with him.

The young counsel had, it must be owned, the air of a dog dragged with extreme unwillingness by his chain, or, as it rather appeared to Nathalie, that of a school-boy in the sulks. Although she could never lose the nobility of her expression, the sorrow and sleeplessness through which she had passed had robbed the young wife of much of her beauty, and left her pale, with dark rings round her eyes, and he was obstinately determined not to behold the charm of which M. Rodoin raved. He was enraged with her, too, for her allusion to a sore subject—his boyish appearance—while as this forced itself upon her again, she found it difficult to conceal her dismay. But her first question was as to the interview.

“There is no difficulty,” M. Rodoin assured her. “You can see your husband between two and three. Maître Barraud has just come from him.”

“Oh, monsieur!” She turned to him eagerly. “You have seen him! How is he? How does he look? Has he slept?”

The young man flung a glance at his friend, which said, “Did I not tell you? See what you have brought upon me!” and answered aloud, with a certain brusqueness, “Apparently, madame, monsieur le baron is in his usual health, but

my inquiries did not take that direction.”

She coloured.

“Pardon, monsieur; I should have remembered that the situation is not so novel to you as to us. Did—did your other inquiries give you the information you require?”

Deaf to the tremor in her voice, Maître Barraud shrugged his shoulders, and looked more like a naughty boy than ever.

“No, madame,” he said, “I cannot say that I have got much, and I shall be obliged if you will give me your own account of the case—as shortly as possible,” he added, in alarm.

Nathalie felt no temptation to discursiveness; there was too much pain in the recital. When she had finished, he hastily got up.

“You do not want anything more, I imagine, madame?” he asked, looking at his watch.

“One word, monsieur. If—if you find yourself in want of any assistance—I scarcely know how to express it—you will, I trust, not spare expense—we should wish my husband to have the best, the very best advice and experience—”

“Oh, thanks, madame,” returned M. Barraud carelessly. “I shall have the usual juniors; M. Rodoin will take care of that. You are coming?” he added, severely to his friend.

“I will return, madame, and drive you to the Palais de Justice,” said the lawyer, bowing respectfully over her hand. The next moment she was alone.

“His juniors!” The words sounded like a mockery, and Nathalie gazed despairingly at the door out of which this mannerless boy had betaken himself. The idea that Léon’s interests should be in his hands was so terrible that when M. Rodoin appeared, punctual to his hour, she met him with reproaches.

“But, madame, madame,” cried the amazed lawyer, “you are under some extraordinary misapprehension! Maître Barraud’s reputation is world-wide; France has no greater pleader; we are only too fortunate—owing, I may say, to my friendship with his father—to have secured him!”

“At his age!” exclaimed Nathalie, incredulously. “Monsieur, it is impossible! And he does not give one the idea of a man of power.”

“Oh, if that is all, I assure you, madame, that you may console yourself. He has his eccentricities, and one is a dislike to being taken seriously in private. As to his youth, certainly he is young for his position, though older than he looks. But that is only a proof of his amazing talents. No, no, madame, you may be perfectly at your ease as to Maître Barraud. If any one can right this unhappy business, he is the man. Shall we start?”

The poor wife scarcely knew how the interval between leaving the hotel and arriving at the Palais de Justice was passed. She had a confused impression of streets, of walls, of eyes which she felt to be full of curiosity, however much reason assured her that there was nothing in the carriage to attract attention. Like a sleep-walker, she got out of the carriage when it stopped, and followed M. Rodoin along passages and up stairs which to him were long familiar. She noticed nothing; when he stopped, she stopped; when he went on, she followed. Details were lost upon her, and the first thing which seemed to bring back her benumbed senses was the finding herself in her husband’s arms.

That roused her, and she had a momentary rapture before she flung back her head to let her eyes devour his face. It was white, and, in spite of its roundness, haggard, but not more so than when she left him. She had lost the proportion of the past days, and her feeling was that they had been parted for weeks.

“How do they treat you?” she whispered, glancing round. “Not so badly.” He tried to speak cheerfully. “Beyond having to put up with a lot of questions intended to make me own myself a rascal, I have not much to complain of. Have you written home!”

“This morning.”

“And so have I; but with the conviction that one’s letters are read, it is not possible to be very effusive.”

“And, oh, Léon, Maître Barraud!”

“What of him?” He spoke quickly, and M. Rodoin, who had kept discreetly in the background, advanced, smiling.

“Madame would be more happy if she could have your assurances, monsieur le baron, that he is really an eminent man. His appearance affronts her.”

“He is so ridiculously young!” persisted Nathalie.

“Oh, he is all right. But I do not think he is hopeful. Who can be?” muttered Léon, running his hands through his hair, and losing his momentary elation. “Now that you have made me give myself away, what is there to say?”

Her only answer was a mute caress, and a cautious cough from M. Rodoin was intended to point out that in prisons, at any rate, walls may have ears. The lawyer remarked, in an undertone:

“If any one can turn this Lemaire inside out and destroy his credit, it will be Albert Barraud.”

“Oh, the scoundrel will have got his story pat.”

“We shall demand to examine Monsieur de Cadanet’s banking accounts,” went on the other. “If there is an entry of two hundred thousand francs about the date of your repayment, it will be to a certain extent a corroboration. Had the count absolutely no confidential servant in the house?”

Léon shook his head. “To my knowledge, none.”

“Madame Lemaire was married at the time?”

Nathalie raised her head from her husband’s shoulder.

“Has he a wife?”

“Poor woman, yes. At any rate, monsieur le baron has drawn the teeth of their principal witness, the concierge who was carrying the letters. If it were only as a matter of expediency,” he went on, addressing Léon, “your admission has, beyond a doubt, weakened their case. Somehow or other they had proof up to a certain point; Maître Barraud was convinced of it. Beyond this they can have none, and the rope lies slack in their hands.”

“Ah, yes, listen, my friend!” cried Nathalie, joyfully.

Léon had made an effort, strange to his nature, to control himself and spare his wife in their interview. He had been inexpressibly touched by the swiftness of rescue she had brought to his aid on that terrible night. He knew that at this moment she was wearing gloves, lest his eyes should be offended by the cuts and scratches on her hands. He had strung himself heroically to the point of concealing his misery, and of letting her suppose that the worst was past. But, as is often the case, he resented a cheerful view on her part, and could not allow her, even for an instant, to lighten the weight of the situation. In a moment he was plunged into black gloom, and assuring her that whatever happened he could never survive the humiliation of the trial. M. Rodoin discreetly withdrew to the farthest limits, and stood regarding a black spot on the wall. He turned a deaf ear as well as a back, but he could not help hearing a confused murmur of pleading words, sighs, groans, and muttered exclamations of misery. The lawyer fidgeted, looked at his watch, and took a sudden resolution. He turned round sharply.

“Monsieur le baron,” he said, brusquely, “permit me to point out that if you kill madame before the trial, there will be one good head the less on our side. That is all.”

“Monsieur!” cried Nathalie, reproachfully.

“Yes, yes, madame, I am perfectly aware that most women’s hearts are as tough as leather, and yours may be among them, but there are exceptions. It will be awkward if yours should turn out an exception. Monsieur Léon would do well to recollect this, and, also, that the complication is one of his own making.”

The young man straightened himself.

“You hit—hard, Monsieur Rodoin,” he said, breathing heavily.

“Because I never in my life esteemed you half so much as I do now, monsieur,” said the lawyer, in a low voice, “or pitied you less. You committed a wrong act, so have many of us. You have the courage to expiate it, as many of us have not. You will gain the respect of honest men, and you have your wife’s devoted love. Allons, monsieur, whatever happens, you are not so much to be pitied. The time is up; here comes the warder. Madame will never forgive me for what I have had the presumption to say; nevertheless, she and I will go and cogitate over the best line of defence.”

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## Chapter Twenty Three.

### M. Georges to the Rescue.

Nathalie had written a hasty line to her father before leaving Poissy. He received it with an outbreak of temper, such as of late had become frequent with him. He had almost given up going to the café, or frequenting the streets; mostly he sat in his own room, gloomy, unapproachable. His appetite was unaffected, but to Fanchon’s mortification he was indifferent what he ate, and his favourite dish of cold beef en vinaigrette, however carefully prepared, failed to elicit so much as a grunt of satisfaction. His fellow-townsmen found his conduct inexplicable, not a word of Poissy crossing his lips; and as for the photographer’s window, he would have walked a mile to avoid passing it. One or two of his intimates declared that they breathed more freely; but, on the whole, Tours had been proud of his indomitable energy, his weaknesses, his blunt manners, and his great fortune, and regarded his depression with uneasiness.

“For at his age, when a man suddenly loses interest in what he most cares about, it is a bad sign,” said Dr Mathorin, taking off his hat, and rubbing his bald head with a large coloured handkerchief. He was walking across the long bridge with M. Georges. “Poor old fellow!”

“He has not called you in!”

“Not he. But if this talk of making him mayor comes to anything, I’ll go and sound him on the matter, and perhaps get a chance of a word, and of having my head snapped off.”

“Quite between ourselves,” remarked M. Georges, cautiously, “I understand that the opposition is led by Leroux.”



"Little wasp! Though with such a liver, one ought not to be hard on him, and by all that is yellow, here he comes! Good-day, Monsieur Leroux. Where are you off to?"

"Have you seen the paper? Have you heard the news?"

"Not we."

"Ah, this explains it all! Now we know why old Bourget has sulked like a bear with a sore head! A fine end for Poissy and its grandeur indeed! Shameful! Absolutely disgraceful!"

"Monsieur Leroux," interrupted M. Georges, gravely, "be good enough to explain yourself."

For the little lawyer was positively dancing with excitement.

"Not a son-in-law to be so proud of, and to fling at all our heads, after all!" he cried. "And to have kept it so secret! When I opened the paper, I thought I must be dreaming. Monsieur de Beaudrillart is in prison for stealing."

The doctor ejaculated an amazed oath. M. Georges turned crimson and then white, and made a threatening step towards Leroux. He had never fought with any one in his peaceable life, but at this moment he felt as if he must kill the miserable little slanderer. Leroux hastily stepped back, and with triumphant fingers unfolded the newspaper and pointed to a paragraph.

"See for yourselves, then, if you do not believe; it is no invention of mine. There. Read the sentence aloud, Monsieur Georges. 'Yesterday the Baron de Beaudrillart was arrested in Paris on a charge of stealing the sum of two hundred thousand francs, the property of Monsieur Lemaire, nephew by marriage to the defunct Comte de Cadanet.' Oh, I know it by heart already. Read, read, doctor. This explains, eh? Was there ever anything so disgraceful? This comes of your barons, your old families, your blue blood! A thief—the owner of Poissy a thief! Why, it disgraces us all, the whole arrondissement!" And M. Leroux spat on the ground to express his sense of personal pollution.

Meanwhile, with a heart wrung with distress, M. Georges read the terrible words, and the doctor, spectacles on the point of his nose, devoured them over his shoulder. When he had gone twice through them, M. Georges dropped his hand and the newspaper by his side, and stared at the ground, speechless.

"Well, what do you say now?" said Leroux, sidling up. "A pretty black business, isn't it? A common thief!"

"The poor women!" muttered the doctor.

"Oh, come, they've had their day, and it's our turn now. This will bring down their starch a bit. And as for old Bourget, with his eternal Poissy this and Poissy that, as if the whole world had been made on purpose to carry Poissy, we sha'n't be choked with his talk any more. This puts an end to a good deal, for I should like to know why he should be picked out to be mayor, except because he was father-in-law to this fine gentleman at Poissy? Not such a desirable connection now, not one to—Sacré! help! murder!"

For, to his infinite amazement, the little lawyer found himself swung off the pavement by the collar of his coat, and, after a shake which seemed to loosen all the teeth in his head, left staggering in the middle of the road, his newspaper flying after him. So unexpected and so prompt had been the action of M. Georges that the doctor had not had time to interfere, nor, indeed, had he much desire to do so. No one else was very near at the time, and Leroux pulled himself together, vowing vengeance and actions as he sullenly edged away.

"Be off," said M. Georges, calmly, "for if I hear any more of this vile talk you may find yourself with something worse than a shake. Doctor, this news has completely upset me."

"So it appears," said Dr Mathurin, chuckling. "I should rather say it had led to the upsetting of other people. Monsieur Georges, you are a man of force, but I am afraid you have laid yourself open to an action for assault."

The other waved his hand indifferently.

"Let him bring it. My little patrimony can defray the expense, and his malice is a matter of no consequence. But this sad, this terrible affair! My friend, I must go at once to Poissy. If there is anything in which I can serve them, it will be my greatest privilege to be allowed to be useful. I shudder to think of the effect of such a blow upon madame and the poor young ladies. I imagine—but it is not possible for you to imagine—what it must be for those so bound up in Poissy, and in monsieur le baron, when it shocks even us! It is horrible, impossible, villainous! He must be the victim of some cursed plot. I could almost believe that miserable little Leroux had invented and inserted it for the mere purpose of giving pain, had such a thing been possible; but I presume—"

"No, no, my friend," said the doctor, wringing his hand, "the thing did not grow in his brain, and, indeed, there was a whisper yesterday, although I did not repeat it. This explains Monsieur Bourget's attitude, poor man! A crushing humiliation for him, a very heavy blow for all. And the poor wife! Yes, I think you are right to go there, though it will be a terribly trying visit. Pray present them with my most respectful sympathy."

M. Georges was informed that Mme. de Beaudrillart was receiving no one, but that the young ladies would see him presently, if he would kindly go into the salon. He fancied that the servant admitting him had a frightened air, and glanced at him as if in hopes of his speaking; but he dared not trust himself on so delicate a subject. He waited for some time before the sisters, both dressed in black, came in together.

The alteration in Mlle. Claire shocked him. She had aged ten years; her face, bloodless and sallow, had grown sharper, her eyes were tearless, and she carried herself more stiffly upright than ever. Félicie's grief, on the contrary, was less restrained; her eyes were scarlet, her face swollen with crying, and as she came in at the door she stretched

out her hand, and exclaimed in a voice of despair:

"Oh, Monsieur Georges, then you at least do not desert us!" He was so touched by this appeal that he hurried forward and bowed low over her hand.

"Desert you, mademoiselle, because Monsieur Léon is the victim of a shameful accusation! No one would be capable of such baseness, least of all an old servant of your family. I have hurried here to assure you of my profound sympathy, and to say that no one who knew monsieur le baron could for a moment believe him capable of such an act. It is a miserable calumny which will easily be disproved."

"Ah, that is exactly what I say to my sister," said Félicie, cheering up. "I assure her that if she only will have faith, things *must* come right, and our dear Léon be cleared. Claire, do you hear what Monsieur Georges thinks?"

"Monsieur Georges is very good," said Claire, with quivering voice. "I am sure he has always wished us well. But whether he is cleared or not, the disgrace, the dreadful blot on our family remains, for nothing can remove the fact that a Baron de Beaudrillart has been arrested for—for stealing." Her voice grew hoarse, and the last words almost choked her. M. Georges, simple soul as he was, knew enough of the world to be startled by such an assertion.

"Oh, mademoiselle," he exclaimed, sitting on the edge of his chair, his hat clasped in front of him, "you are not serious! The best and noblest person who ever lived might meet with such a misfortune as has overtaken monsieur le baron, and far from being a blot, it would be no more than an added reason for our respect. If I might—might presume to say so, I think you exaggerate the misfortune."

Félicie expected her sister's anger to be raised by this unusual plain-speaking, but she only sighed.

"Unfortunately, you do not know all; but we are, I assure you, very grateful for your kindness. I believe you are aware that I have always been convinced that you were my brother's best adviser."

Monsieur Georges felt his face glow. He had suffered a good deal of humiliation from Mme. de Beaudrillart, and had never expected to have his services acknowledged with gratitude by any member of the family. He hesitated, stammered, and broke into an almost incoherent reply, staring hard at his hat.

"Oh, mademoiselle—if I could think so! such kindness—impossible to forget!" Then recovering himself, he added, with more self-composure, "You will at least permit me to ask whether there is no way in which I could have the privilege of being of use! Through the kindness of a grandparent I have succeeded to a small inheritance, which places me in an independent position. I only venture to trouble you with this information because it—it might remove any generous scruples from your mind. Nothing, mesdemoiselles,"—he bowed first to one and then to the other—"would gratify me so much as to be permitted to serve you and monsieur le baron. Shall I fly to Paris! Can I take anything off your hands here? Command me. I am absolutely at your disposal."

On Mlle. Claire's heart, hot and sore, this respectful homage, unchanged by the circumstances which to her had changed the world, fell like the very dew of heaven. If her sister had not been there, she would have offered him her hand to kiss; but as it was, she spoke with a strangely softened voice.

"Do not think us ungrateful. Believe me, your kindness will be always remembered. There is nothing to be done at present. Monsieur Rodoin,"—M. Georges bowed—"and Maître Barraud,"—he bowed still lower—"are in charge of the case. I trust they may be successful, but as I have already said, such a blow cannot be wiped out even by an acquittal. It has shattered my mother, so that her state causes us the greatest uneasiness. Will you allow me to offer you some refreshment!"

He stood up, held his hat to his chest, and bowed profoundly.

"On no account, mademoiselle. I am deeply sensible of your goodness, and with your permission shall venture to walk out another day from Tours, unless—unless, mademoiselle, you would allow me the great happiness of once more occupying my old room—for a few days, I should explain, merely until this unfortunate affair is arranged, and monsieur le baron returns. Under your directions it is possible I could be of some trifling use, and leave you more free to console Madame de Beaudrillart. At all events, I might serve as a companion for Monsieur Raoul."

Claire was looking at him uncertainly, when, to her amazement, before she could speak, Félicie interposed with dignity.

"You are very good, monsieur, and we accept your offer gratefully. Yes, Claire, I am Mademoiselle de Beaudrillart, and I take it upon myself in Léon's absence. Raoul is terribly in the way; only this morning he has cut a whole skein of silk into little bits, and if Monsieur Georges can come to-morrow we will send in for him at twelve o'clock."

M. Georges was frightened, amazed, delighted. Never before had he seen Mlle. Félicie so assert herself, and he could hardly believe that her younger sister would admit the intrusion. But whatever Claire felt, she said nothing in opposition; she even smiled at him for the first time in the interview. "We have no right to ask it," she said, "but if you will—" If he would! He walked home on air. Such urbanity! Such graciousness! Such appreciation! Without proof, the interview had more than ever convinced him of M. de Beaudrillart's innocence, and of the fact of a conspiracy against him. So enthusiastic were his feelings that he felt himself capable of rushing upon anything, even death itself, in defence of the honour of Poissy; and when the remembrance of his assault upon Leroux came to him he laughed aloud, and was conscious of a ferocious desire that he had gone to the extreme length of kicking him, or even of dropping him into the river. He wished with all his heart that he might meet M. Bourget, and pour some of his feelings into his ear; but, if he had known it, there was small chance of this encounter, since the ex-builder avoided the road to Poissy as if it were infected with the plague.

His gloom had in no degree lightened, and, although he had returned to the café and to his usual routine of action, he remained unsociable and morose. Far from fastening upon unwilling listeners, and obliging them to give ear to his laying down the law upon whatever subject happened to be uppermost in his mind, he offered no sign of acquaintanceship, beyond a surly nod. At the café he sat with his broad back turned to its other frequenters, and on one or two minor points of municipal government, when he was expected to have thundered against the opposition, he had remained mute and apparently uninterested. This change of nature had caused much perplexity among his friends—for, in spite of his feelings and irascibility, M. Bourget had friends—until the riddle was solved by the extraordinary news respecting M. de Beaudrillart. That, it was felt, explained everything, and a very kindly feeling of pity shot up on every side. Nathalie had been universally liked, although such an advancement as hers could not but create jealousy; now that downfall had followed, her charms were frankly acknowledged, and if M. Bourget would have accepted them, condolences would have reached him from every side.

But he was not the man to whom condolences were acceptable. On the afternoon of the day in which the startling intelligence had been read in the *Tours Independent*, he marched along the streets, head erect, chain and seals dangling, and stick grasped with a vigour which boded ill for impertinent comments. The account of M. Leroux's punishment on the bridge had reached him through Fanchon, who rushed into his room to announce that M. Georges had sprung upon the lawyer, thrashed him black and blue, and left him for dead in the middle of the road. M. Bourget had no difficulty in guessing what had been the little lawyer's offence. He broke into a hoarse laugh, the first he had been heard to utter since his memorable visit to Poissy, and scandalised Fanchon by rubbing his hands, and declaring that it served the little reptile right. He added an ardent wish that he had been there to kick him.

"The saints forbid!" cried Fanchon, piously. "You have always quarrels enough of your own on your shoulders without taking up other people's. And a pretty fanfara Monsieur Leroux will make about this business!"

"Hold your tongue, imbecile!" growled her master, still chuckling. "That little Georges is an honest fellow after all!"

It is possible that this event it was which took M. Bourget to the café. It was not likely that Leroux would venture to show himself, with the fear of encountering M. Georges before his eyes. Besides, one excitement would balance another; tongues would not wag so persistently on the Poissy topic; at any rate, the ex-builder was resolved that they should not wag in his hearing, and when he sat down at his solitary table, with his stick reposing on a chair by his side, his figure did not present an inviting object of attack. Nevertheless, to the astonishment of the lookers-on, one individual walked deliberately up to the table, drawing a chair after him, and sat down opposite M. Bourget as soon as he had effected an elaborate sweep of his hat. This was M. Georges himself, and certain it is that M. Bourget would have tolerated no other companion. As it was, at the sight of him he broke out again into the grim chuckle which had amazed Fanchon, and which now amazed M. Georges.

"While you were about it, you should have given him a ducking," he grunted. "He would have been the better for it, and it would not have cost you more."

M. Georges opened his eyes.

"Oh, it is Leroux you speak of? Yes, I confess I lost my temper, and when that is the case I become terrible. Bah, he is nothing; let him do his worst. But, Monsieur Bourget, what is of consequence is this frightful affair at Poissy—all, of course, either a mistake or a vile conspiracy. The idea that Monsieur de Beaudrillart—Monsieur de Beaudrillart!—should be accused of such an act is simply impossible! I could not credit it until I had been out there."

M. Bourget made no response to this outburst. He frowned, drew in his lips, and stared stolidly at the ground.

"Your daughter, too, poor young lady, what she must be enduring! And as for the baron, it is enough to have led him to kill himself."

Still gloomy silence.

"Monsieur Bourget, is there nothing you can suggest? You are a man of resource. If there was anything I could assist in carrying out, I cannot tell you what infinite gratification it would be to me." He stopped, for M. Bourget had risen, struck his stick on the ground, and broken out in a thunderous undertone:

"Nothing, monsieur, nothing. I renounce Poissy, the baron, and my daughter. If by lifting my little finger I could save Monsieur de Beaudrillart from prison, I would not lift it, and I request you to be good enough not to mention their names to me again."

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## Chapter Twenty Four.

### The Growth of an Idea.

In spite of M. Bourget's assumption of indifference, he was secretly tormented by anxiety as to what was going on in Paris. Nathalie wrote to him every day, though seldom more than a few lines. He never answered her letters, but he devoured every word, and hungered for more. It was the same with the newspapers. He would not have missed a line, notwithstanding the pang their comments, especially those of the radical press, caused him. If his self-consciousness could have permitted it he would have gone to Paris, not to have joined his daughter, but, unknown and in secret, to have haunted the courts, especially after the trial had begun; his restlessness longing to hear the evidence with his own ears, and to listen to the remarks with which he did not doubt all Paris rang. If France had been at this moment in the throes of a revolution, M. Bourget would have expected to find its interest second to that excited by seeing Baron Léon de Beaudrillart, of Poissy, on his trial for theft. But if all France were occupied in watching M. de Beaudrillart, Tours, he was equally persuaded, watched M. Bourget. For him to show himself at the

railway station would be immediately to excite curiosity, for before an hour was over it would be known that his indifference had been only simulated, and that he was in his heart as anxious as Leroux represented him.

M. Georges, meanwhile, whose faithfulness was only strengthened by what he heard and saw, had gone to Poissy, and, established there, was bravely engaged in fighting the dreary hopelessness which weighed upon the château. His disbelief in anything which could touch the young baron's honour was so sincere and enthusiastic that, had it been possible, it might have persuaded Claire. As it was, it soothed her. With M. Georges she was less sharp, less angular, more forgiving. He was the only person, except her mother and sister, to whom she would speak, for, strangely enough, the trouble produced the same effect of gloomy reticence in her and in the man with whom she would have vowed she had least in common—M. Bourget. Like him, she shrank from a touch on the wound; like him, she read pitying contempt in the faces she looked at; like him, she exaggerated trifles. But it was impossible to misjudge M. Georges. He was so confident that M. Léon was the victim of some monstrous fraud, so undoubting in his belief that it must, somehow, be cleared up, so unchanged in his respect, so unflinching in his hopefulness, that his talk was incapable of inflicting the smallest wound. Mme. de Beudrillart he saw but seldom. Once or twice he fancied that she must have had some sort of seizure to account for the great alteration in her person and manner. She was thinner than ever, but no longer upright. Her speech was hesitating, and she looked at Claire before uttering an opinion. From the redness of her eyes it was evident that she wept a good deal, yet at times he fancied that she imagined her son to be in the house or out in the grounds, and that she listened anxiously.

As for Félicie, there was no doubt that his confidence had given her courage. Unlike her sister, she was always anxious to talk about her brother, and the prospects of his trial; and M. Georges's fixed opinion ended in implanting in her the idea that Léon, suffering unjustly, might be regarded as a martyr, and therefore as a credit to the house. If the Abbé Nisard did not share her idea, he took care not to contradict what proved a fervent source of consolation. Félicie returned to her daily tasks, to her embroideries and reparations, and though she cried, her tears were not bitter, and perhaps were caused as often by her sister's impatience as by Léon's imprisonment.

Raoul attached himself, tyrannically, to M. Georges. The boy felt, without understanding, the cloud on the family; he missed his father, his mother, his lessons, his drives. M. Georges at once undertook his education, to the great relief of the others, for whom Raoul had succeeded in making it almost unendurable. But here, in his new tutor, he found a patience which it was so impossible to tire out that he gave up the task, and, in order to gain a fishing expedition, learned his lessons to perfection.

There came a day, however, when all M. Georges's cheerfulness could not lighten the gloom. Nathalie's letters had been intended to prepare them; but until the newspaper arrived, full of details, and commenting upon the attitude of the accused, they had tacitly refused to realise that the trial was to begin that very week. As it happened, Félicie had been the first to see it, or it would never have met her eyes, for when Claire came she seized the paper, carried it to her room, and when she had devoured every word, tore it into shreds. M. Georges, to his despair, had not a glimpse of it; but that afternoon, as he was going off with Raoul to the river, he met Mlle. Félicie on her way back from the church, armed with a feather brush, with which she had been dusting the altar ornaments. She greeted him with eagerness.

"Oh, Monsieur Georges, you did not see that dreadful newspaper?"

"No, mademoiselle, to my great regret, for I gathered that there was something fresh. But no doubt Mademoiselle Claire exercised a wise discretion in not allowing it to lie about. Perhaps—"

He lifted his eyebrows interrogatively, and she nodded.

"Yes, I can tell you every word, and I long for your opinion."

"Raoul, my friend," said M. Georges, diplomatically, "old Antoine says there is a superb trout which lies always close under the bridge. Shall we try to ensnare him?"

The temptation was irresistible to a born fisherman, although the boy had a feeling that he would like to hear what was to be talked about. He kept M. Georges by his side as long as he could, but at last became absorbed, and Félicie and her companion, standing on the bridge, talked in low tones. He murmured:

"Now, permit me to hear."

"They say," she began, tremulously, "that Léon does not deny it. Oh, monsieur, that cannot be possible, can it?"

"I, for one, should not believe it, whatever he said," announced M. Georges, stoutly.

"You would not? You would think there was a mistake?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"Ah, what a comfort it is to speak to you!"

"Mademoiselle, you are goodness itself," answered the delighted M. Georges. "But can you recall more particulars?"

"Oh, there was a whole column!" cried Félicie, with a shudder. "So far as I could make out, what they said was that they understood that Monsieur de Beudrillart admitted having taken the money, but said that he immediately informed Monsieur de Cadanet of what he had done, and that he looked upon it as a loan."

"Exactly, exactly!" exclaimed M. Georges, triumphantly. "That is what I thought."

"That he took it!"

"As a jest, no doubt, and as a loan. The difference is immense. Immense!" he repeated, opening his arms. "And how noble of Monsieur Léon to admit it!"

"Ah," said Félicie, relieved.

M. Georges was here called off by Raoul to superintend an imaginary bite. He returned eagerly to Félicie, whose shortsighted eyes appeared to him quite charming in their pathos.

"What you have said has given me the greatest satisfaction," he said, "because it explains everything so admirably. That there must be an explanation I knew, but one puzzled one's head with thinking what it could be."

Félicie smiled delightedly. To hear that her explanation was admirable seemed to give her the credit of having offered it, and the many snubs she had received of late from Claire made this appreciation the more valuable.

"And no doubt," pursued her companion, "Monsieur de Beudrillart either has repaid or was intending to repay all?"

"Yes, the paper said that would be his defence—you must excuse me if I do not use the right terms, for I had scarcely time to glance at it."

"Mademoiselle, you are clearness itself."

Her small features took an expression of beatitude, but of beatitude that suffers unjustly. She said:

"I do not often complain, but indeed, Monsieur Georges, you cannot fail to see that Claire is so—so determined that one does not dare to oppose her. If I say anything of which she does not approve, there is really such a storm that I prefer to be silent."

"Mademoiselle Claire is suffering acutely, I am sure," he returned, with a loyal impulse of defence.

"We all suffer," said Félicie, uttering a sound between a gasp and a sob; "but I have always learned that our own sufferings should not either absorb us or render us harsh to others. No one can have felt this affliction more than I, but I try to rouse myself and to draw good out of a terrible dispensation, as the abbé advised. I assure you, monsieur, that I have much, very much, to endure from Claire."

He murmured sympathy.

"If it were not for the relief of having you here to talk things over with, I do not think I could bear it at all. Figure to yourself, monsieur, that she prophesies all manner of terrible humiliations for us in the future! She says we can never again hold up our heads, and she has quite made up her mind that no visitors shall be ever admitted. I do not know myself that I could bear to see Mme. Lemballe; she has a small mind, and it is quite possible that she might permit herself to say something disagreeable. And just at present, of course, I am ready to sacrifice myself for our poor dear Léon. But—never! Never! Conceive how terribly doll to be cut off from all society, and to be unable to go to the houses of our friends when I have any church collection on hand. Oh, monsieur, the thought is unendurable. I would rather die!"

Into the quiet current of M. Georges's thoughts at this instant there dashed an idea so wild and unwarrantable that he blushed violently, and was seized with a sudden tremor lest it might be read in his face. Could such a thing be possible? Oh, never, never! He chased it out, and to hide his embarrassment murmured something to the effect that Raoul's line was caught in the weeds, and hurried to the boy.

"Go away," said Raoul immovably, his whole being concentrated upon the trout as to which M. Georges had so basely deceived him.

"I think now it must have been higher up that Antoine meant," said that gentleman, meekly. Raoul was on his feet in a moment.

"Then why did you say he was here?" he demanded, dragging at his tutor's hand. "Come along. Aunt Félicie, you mustn't come; you keep Monsieur Georges from attending."

On the whole, M. Georges escaped thankfully, his brain in a whirl. Fly from such dangerous fascinations he might, but the presumptuous idea having once found entrance was already battering again at the doors. Refused admittance, it demanded a parley, and set itself at once to prove that it was not preposterous.

M. Georges owned with simple vanity that his position had changed for the better since the days when he had been intendant at Poissy. Now he was the owner of a small house, of grounds which to him at least looked spacious, and of a certain solid little sum in rentes. Modest ambition pointed to becoming mayor, and if he even dreamed of being conseiller-général, the thing was not beyond the bounds of possibility. But—Mlle. de Beudrillart! That, indeed, was preposterous, incredible! He heaved a sigh of renunciation, and flung it from him, only permitting a meek hope to remain that when the real Mme. Georges made her appearance she might have eyes resembling those of Mlle. Félicie. But it was astonishing how persistent this ludicrous idea became! Even when the landing of a small fish had been accomplished, Raoul pale and serious with excitement, his first exclamation, after drawing a deep breath of relief, was: "How I wish you lived here always, Monsieur Georges!" M. Georges became crimson. And somehow or other, at this time, Félicie seemed always to be kept before his consciousness. The flutter of a dress was sure to belong to her, he heard her voice where he had never heard it before, he met her in the grounds, he listened to her praises from the abbé; presently it might be said that, in spite of heroic resistance, her image was enshrined in his heart, although the hope of gaining her had not yet ventured to intrude.

What further weakened his powers of resistance was Claire's kindness. Sometimes he really fancied that she was

encouraging his folly. With him her sharpness was softened, and she deferred quite strangely to his advice about the farm, with which Félicie never meddled. She was really capable of managing everything without consultation, and M. Georges was so well aware of this that he would have been more than man not to have been flattered by her evident desire to gain his help and to yield to his opinion. He reflected, however, humbly, that it was probably owing to the absorption of her thoughts as to the trial, and this seemed the more likely since on the morning when the trial was to begin Claire shut herself in her room, and refused to see a soul.

Had it not been for M. Georges, the whole household would have been disorganised. Despair had seized it, and if the walls of Poissy had crumbled into ruin, the dismay could hardly have been greater. The maids darted across the court like frightened birds. Jacques, tearful and miserable, came to M. Georges to implore him to let him hear the latest news, and M. Georges thumped his own chest with the effort to impose self-control on his emotions, and begged him to be calm.

"What I fear," he added, "is Monsieur Raoul's gaining any idea of what is happening. He has just asked me why every one was crying, and why Rose-Marie called his father 'poor monsieur le baron'? Jacques, my friend, we men must show these kind souls an example of courage. If I could trust you not to break down I would carry out an idea, and take Monsieur Raoul into Tours to see his grandfather."

"Do, monsieur."

"But, to tell you the truth," said M. Georges, fidgeting, "I cannot take the coachman, for he will be wanted to support you here, and I—I am not in the habit of driving."

"We will put the quietest of the ponies in the little cart. I feel certain he will take monsieur safely, and Monsieur Bourget—he is so shrewd!—he may have something comforting to send back."

With many perturbations M. Georges carried out his idea. There was no one to ask, for Claire was barricaded in her own room, and Félicie had flown to the church. To tell the truth, the sight of M. Bourget's bitter misery had so painfully impressed M. Georges that he had dwelt upon it ever since, and longed to break it down; and it was for this that he faced the terrors of the pony. They had many narrow escapes, for when they met anything in the road M. Georges persistently tugged at the left-hand rein; but fortunately the road was wide, and the pony knew much better than his driver. Thanks to his sagacity, they avoided any serious damage, and pulled up at M. Bourget's door. The door was open, Raoul tumbled anyhow out of the cart, scrambled up the steps, and rushed in upon his grandfather before M. Bourget had time to rouse himself from the gloomy reverie which had seized him after reading his newspaper for at least the tenth time.

"Grandpapa, I have caught a fish my very own self! Monsieur Georges didn't touch it—he didn't, truly!—and I have brought it in for Fanchon to cook for your dinner!"

M. Bourget stood up, grew purple, half turned away, came back, and opened his arms. It was a happy inspiration of M. Georges to remain in the street, although he took advantage of the stoppage to get out of the cart, and stand at the pony's head. Fanchon bustled forth, beaming.

"Well, I declare, if it isn't Monsieur Georges! Drive round to the hotel, monsieur, and put up the pony, and make haste back."

M. Georges assented, but remarking that it was hardly worth while to get in for such a short distance, proceeded to lead the pony through two streets and a half, to the astonishment of such of his acquaintances as he met. When he got back, he found Raoul, by the aid of some impromptu reins, driving his grandfather round the room and in and out of the chairs, with shouts of delight. He took care to make no remark, and presently M. Bourget sat down by him, wiping his forehead.

"As to that other," he said, significantly, "I haven't changed, but it is no fault of the boy's. Leroux intends to summon you."

"Let him!" exclaimed M. Georges, valiantly.

"Ay, let him!" chuckled the ex-builder. "And when it comes to the point, it would not surprise me if he thought better of it. You have seen the paper? It is all up with that miserable. The defence is a sham. Run out to Fanchon, my brave, and tell her to cook your fish for my dinner, and see what jam she can find in her cupboard for you. Yes. Monsieur Georges, what do you think now of your fine monsieur!"

"That I respect him with all my heart!" cried the other.

"Respect? So, ho! And for what?"

"For having the courage to speak out, monsieur. Which of us might not have been tempted to deny it altogether?"

"And you still believe him when he says he repaid it?"

"Implicitly. If you believe him when he acknowledges what tells against him, the least you can do is to take his word for the rest. You doubt the father of your grandson? Fie, Monsieur Bourget, fie!"

M. Georges swelled with enthusiasm for his cause. M. Bourget got up and paced up and down the room. He muttered at last:

"Whether he did or not, the result is the same. The Poissy honour is gone. Not a scoundrel in Tours but will have his say against it."

"The Poissy honour has weathered worse storms," said M. Georges, quietly. "What does it matter if a few curs bark? And I believe you are wrong. I believe honest men will respect him for his avowal."

M. Bourget grumbled "Absurd!" under his breath, but said no more. He called Raoul and marched him out to the toyshop, and when they were just starting for Poissy shook M. Georges's hand with a warmth which surprised him. Raoul, in the intervals of opening all the parcels with which he was charged, remarked that grandpapa was going to see mamma, perhaps, "and I asked him if he couldn't take me, but he couldn't, he said," he added, extracting a magnificent whip, which he proceeded to smack, to the great disquiet of M. Georges and the pony.

M. Georges pulled the wrong rein more than ever, and their escapes were hair-breadth. They ran in and out of ditches, they shaved carts; finally they dashed wildly through the gates of Poissy, and pulled up at the entrance so suddenly that M. Georges was shot forward, and only just saved himself from landing on the pony's back. But, on the whole, he was satisfied with the result of his expedition, and so was Raoul, who announced that he liked M. Georges's driving better than anybody's.

The little clatter of arrival sounded unfeeling to poor Claire, who sat nursing her misery in the room adjoining that of Mme. de Beaudrillart. How could any one move, think, speak, at such a time! And yet it was a comfort to feel that M. Georges was again in the house. He was unaltered, though her conviction of the disgrace which hung over them all was so strong that she read change in the look and manner of all the servants. As for friends, she had resolved never again to face them. It seemed to her that the only possible alleviation of her wretchedness would be a change of name, and a flight to some far-away place where no one would recognise her as a Beaudrillart. But to gain this object she was helpless, and the thought of living on at Poissy, pointed at as the sister of a man in prison, was absolutely terrible. More than once that day Félicie, whose room was on the other side, and whose troubles were always comforted by talking about them, had knocked at the door and begged to be admitted, only to hear a sharp "Go away!" in answer. She went to her mother, but Mme. de Beaudrillart's state bordered on apathy. How much or how little she understood, it was impossible to say. To Félicie, at any rate, it was a real relief to hear M. Georges's cheery voice. She ran down the stairs to welcome him with a pleasure which in a moment brought back all those wild dreams which he had been trying to forget. In the whirl of his brain he even went so far as to murmur "Dear mademoiselle!" and Félicie merely blushed a little, and cast down her eyes. They saw each other constantly that day and the next, for Claire, silent and rigid, only came down for meals, and retreated immediately to her own room. M. Georges was very good, and most delicately respectful to her; but it was impossible to say much in her presence, and both felt secretly relieved when she had gone. All the customs of the house seemed to be in abeyance. Félicie would never at other times have allowed herself the long conversations which now had the most natural air in the world. She babbled to M. Georges in her small, precise voice of all the little interests which filled her life, while she imagined that her talk was only of Léon; and he listened with the most profound admiration. What could be more estimable than the good works which occupied her morning, noon, and night! What more beautiful than her devotion! She showed him with pride the embroideries and vestments which were under her charge, and he helped her to refold them, as she said, with far more neatness than Rose-Marie. By the time this labour was ended, M. Georges's presumptuous little idea which at first sight had so alarmed him was enthroned triumphantly in his heart.

The third day of the trial had been reached. Nathalie, all day in court, could only scribble disjointed letters, noting as far as possible the principal points, and infinitely pathetic in their anguish and their trust. The newspapers gave minute reports, up to this point occupied by the opening speech for the prosecution and the interrogation of the prisoner. The third day would produce Charles Lemaire's evidence, and on the morning of that day Félicie, pale and agitated, rushed down the stairs to the small study where M. Georges transacted his business in old days, and which he now again occupied.

"Oh, Monsieur Georges, come, I beg of you, come at once! Claire has said something to my mother, and she is most terribly upset. We cannot soothe her."

Poor Mme. de Beaudrillart was, indeed, in a distressing state. The tidings which for some days she had not seemed to realise had suddenly reached her comprehension and produced a painful anguish. She was sitting at the table, her hands clinched and her eyes wide-open, Claire kneeling by her side in terror. The instant she saw M. Georges she cried, in a hoarse voice:

"It is not true, monsieur, say it is not true! Oh, Léon, my son, my son!"

"Madame," cried M. Georges, hastening to her side, "it is not true that Monsieur Léon is what they say! There has been a terrible mistake, but it will come right—it must."

She leaned forward, and said in a whisper which he never forgot:

"But he took it."

"And repaid it, madame. I would stake my life on it." Mme. de Beaudrillart pointed out Claire by a gesture:

"She says we are disgraced forever—we!" she shuddered. "That we may hide our heads, for no respectable person will have anything to do with us. She would like to go away."

"Oh, mademoiselle!" cried M. Georges, turning on her a look of reproach. "Madame," he said, standing upright, and stiffening with resolution, "permit me to convince you that it is not so. Mademoiselle Félicie, Mademoiselle Claire, will you allow me a few minutes alone with madame?"

Félicie went out demurely, Claire rose up and flung him a questioning glance. He murmured:

"Mademoiselle, I venture to think you have perhaps divined. Have I the inestimable encouragement of your approval?"

Poor Claire! She pressed her hands upon her eyes, and said, brokenly, "Yes, monsieur, yes!"

When they were gone, M. Georges still stood respectfully before Mme. de Beaudrillart.

"Madame," he said, solemnly, "I am aware that what I have to say will sound presumptuous, and I could not have ventured upon it but for your daughter's fancy that you would all suffer from this misfortune of Monsieur Léon's. My position has improved; I have a small estate, a yearly income, and perhaps a reasonable hope of advancement. Such as it is, madame, may I dare to lay it at Mademoiselle de Beaudrillart's feet?"

Mme. de Beaudrillart turned her dull eyes upon him. She had lost her sense of wonder.

"You wish to marry Claire?"

"Oh, no, madame!" cried M. Georges, in alarm. "I speak of Mademoiselle Félicie. At least I would promise her a life's devotion, and a most earnest endeavour to make up to her for what she would renounce."

"Félicie!" exclaimed her mother. "But she has consecrated her life to good works."

"Believe me, madame, I should rejoice in aiding her."

"I do not know—it is all like a mist in my brain. Claire—what does Claire say?"

"She gave me her approval, madame," returned M. Georges in eager good faith.

Mme. de Beaudrillart sighed, and passed her hand across her forehead.

"She vowed we were all disgraced. As you say, it may be better for one of them to go away. Félicie and you—it seems strange, but—I think—everything is strange. If Claire agreed, I cannot oppose her, only—oh, monsieur, my poor Léon!"

She broke into a fit of incontrollable weeping. M. Georges hurried out to seek for Félicie, but he had only time for a whisper as he seized and kissed her hand.

"Grant me an interview presently, mademoiselle. Your mother permits it, and I am the happiest of men!"

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## Chapter Twenty Five.

### The Trial.

(The author has given the cross-examination in the shape best known to English readers, since it is a mere question of form. French counsel *do* examine, though they may not directly address the accused, and have to ask the judge to ask, etc, a formality which becomes tedious in report, and which has therefore been omitted.—*Code d'Instruction Criminelle*, art. 310.)

The trial, which was creating so much excitement, not only in Paris, but throughout the length and breadth of France, had reached its third day. The indictment against the prisoner had been powerfully presented; it alluded to distinct evidence of the theft, and to the astonishment of the public who were not already in the secret Maître Barraud had remarked, with an air of indifference, that his side admitted all the facts which had been brought forward. This acknowledgment still further stimulated curiosity, the public imagining that the famous advocate had some counter-evidence in his pocket, since he so readily allowed what appeared damaging to pass unquestioned. As M. Rodoin had foreseen, however, the move was disliked by the prosecution, because they had counted upon the prisoner's denial, and upon at once proving his falsehood and creating a prejudice against him.

Maître Barraud, while still vowing vengeance against M. Rodoin for having dragged him into the affair, was allowing his professional instincts to get the upper hand. The fact of Maître Miron being opposed to him and having a strong case was enough to excite his fighting powers. Moreover, he had become convinced that Léon's story was true. It was unfortunately weak and unsupported, but he was certain that no attempt was made to deceive him. Added to this he read in Mme. Léon's eyes that she distrusted his age and his energy, in spite of all M. Rodoin's assurances, and her want of confidence piqued him. She thought him indifferent, while in reality he was bringing all his wits and his resources to bear upon the case, without, it must be conceded, much hope of success. He had directed the prisoner to be perfectly frank and straightforward in his own replies both to the juge d'instruction and in court.

"There lies your one chance."

"And you think that if I had not admitted the fact of exchange, it would have been proved against me?"

"Certainly, baron. Since you recalled writing a letter to Monsieur de Cadanet, I can see how Lemaire got upon your track. If you had denied, the letter would have been produced. Now they will keep it back because, as you admit the fact, it would tell in your favour. I shall call for it."

"It was my wife who urged speaking out."

"And she showed her sense. Women's intuitions are generally to be trusted when they don't go too far," said Maître Barraud, carelessly.

In spite of his opinion, he expressed extreme impatience when M. Rodoin, on the morning of the third day, asked whether he could give a few minutes to Mme. de Beaudrillart.



"Certainly not. I know exactly the sort, of questions I should have to answer: Is the trial going for or against? Have the jury made up their minds? Might she not stand up and bear witness to the perfect probity of her beloved husband? Console Madame de Beaudrillard yourself; the task of defending monsieur is quite as much as I desire to undertake."

"Please yourself, my dear Albert," said M. Rodoin, quietly. "You know very well that Madame Léon is not the silly woman you pretend. If you will not listen to her, you must listen to me; but the idea was her own. She wondered whether it would be possible for her to make a personal appeal to Madame Lemaire?"

"On what ground?" Maître Barraud shot out the words after a moment's consideration.

"All our investigations point to the fact that it is an unhappy marriage, and that Lemaire neglects, if he does not ill-use, his wife."

"Bah! That will only make her stick to him the closer."

"Possibly. But she is, by every account, a woman of strong religious principle. If she knew of a wrong being committed her conscience might lead her—"

"To denounce it?" Maître Barraud pushed out his lips, and passed his hand over his chin. "She will not know. That sort of woman, if she has to live with that sort of man, shuts her eyes, and refuses to open them. It is her only chance."

"Possibly, again, if you or I went to her. But another woman?"

"If we could hit on her line of sentiment—she is sure to have a sentiment," murmured the other, reflectively. "But no, no, no. It can't be done. It would be a confession of weakness. Miron would get hold of it, and we should have a triumphant peroration of the straits to which the other side are driven. I can only reach that scoundrel through the court, but I will make him feel."

"If the wife is in court?"

"She will not be. Either she will know nothing, or will keep out of it."

M. Rodoin had to carry back this refusal to Nathalie, for whom his admiration daily strengthened. She was so courageous and so cheerful, so sensible, and so full of resource that instead of hindering the lawyers, her suggestions had more than once proved valuable; and as for poor Léon, the sight of her brave and earnest face, and the smile with which she never failed to meet his eye, gave him his best support in the terrible hours which he spent in the court. It created also, as Maître Barraud was swift to note, an unexpressed and subtle feeling of sympathy with the accused. The fine and noble lines of her face, the breathless interest with which she followed every point as it was mooted, offered evidence as powerful as it was unconscious in his favour. He dared not count upon its being strong enough to weigh against the testimony of facts, but he knew that any point he could succeed in making would be strengthened by its presence.

Léon, too, bore himself well. Those who knew him before remarked how greatly he had aged, and his face was colourless. His manner, however, was what it should have been—simple and unexaggerated. Evidently he felt his position profoundly, but he answered the questions addressed to him by the Court with a dignity which to M. Rodoin was unexpected and quite frankly. On the whole, the impression he gave was favourable. But this, again, however desirable, was not worth one grain of actual proof.

And for proof M. Rodoin had ransacked Paris in vain. The notes had been sent in a registered packet, but it was too long ago to obtain a record from the post-office. An examination of M. de Cadanet's papers had been made, naturally without success. One point and one only had been established in Léon's favour. The banker's book showed that about the time he claimed to have repaid the debt a sum of one hundred thousand francs had been entered in M. de Cadanet's account, and the clerk believed remembering that they were mostly notes issued by the provincial bank of Tours. But there had been a change of clerks since; the one who had that impression was then a junior, and could not swear to it. Two had died of influenza.

The prisoner himself was first interrogated. He was very white, and his hand grasped the nearest wood-work convulsively; but he answered well, and without hesitation. He acknowledged that M. de Cadanet showed great displeasure towards him, and reproached him even violently for the extravagances with which he showed himself well acquainted. The judge inquired how he considered they had reached his ears, to which he replied that he never doubted they were conveyed by M. Lemaire, as he was, he understood, the only person who constantly saw M. de Cadanet—excepting his lawyer, who had told them in his evidence that he only received instructions from the count, and was never permitted so much as to offer advice. Asked whether he himself had not done his utmost to vilify M. Lemaire to M. de Cadanet, he replied indignantly that he had avoided mentioning him or the places in which he had met him—an answer which was received with a show of incredulity.

He had to give a close account of the interview, and the replies were pumped from him; for by this time he was angry, and stood upright, touching nothing. He admitted having gone to ask for help in his difficulties.

"You had, in fact, squandered your fortune, and Poissy must inevitably have been sold if money was not forthcoming?"

"I have never denied it."

"Had Monsieur de Cadanet given you reason to expect assistance from him?"

"None, except that he was under obligations to my father."

"He may not have considered that affording you the means of running into further extravagances was the best means of showing gratitude to the late baron?"

The prisoner remained silent.

Asked what drew his attention to the cheque, he replied that M. de Cadanet enclosed it before his eyes, and that he believed it to be coming to him until the count informed him that the reports he had received of his conduct had made him resolve against assisting him, and that the money he had prepared would be given to another.

"Did he mention the name of this other!"

"I remarked that I presumed the other was Monsieur Charles Lemaire."

"Why did you arrive at this conclusion?"

"Because I was certain that Monsieur Lemaire was the person through whom the reports had reached him."

"They were, however, correct?"

M. de Beaudrillart was again silent.

Further questions extracted what had passed in the remainder of the interview and in the street. He was asked if he had ever mentioned the circumstance to any one?

"Until this action was threatened, never."

"And then?"

"To my wife."

"You must speak louder. How did you account for the change in your circumstances?"

"My family believed I had received a loan from Monsieur de Cadanet."

He declared that he had sent, first, an instalment of five hundred francs, and, on his marriage, a further sum of two hundred and three thousand, part of his wife's dowry. On this point he was closely interrogated by the judge, who professed utter incredulity.

"You drew and sent a cheque?"

"No. I returned the sum in notes by a registered letter."

"And your wife's father consented to paying so large a sum in notes without making inquiries as to its destination? That is a most improbable story!"

Léon replied that he had explained to his father-in-law that it was in order to pay a debt of honour of which he could give no account. Then came the crucial question.

"And you wish the Court to believe that you returned the money without receiving the smallest acknowledgment from Monsieur de Cadanet."

"That is the case."

"You persist in such a ridiculous assertion?"

"Yes."

"And mentioned it to no one?"

"To my mother."

"She also was content to have no receipt?"

"No. She was very uneasy."

"How did you quiet her?"

"I am afraid I allowed her to believe I had received one." The prisoner gave this answer in evident distress, and Maître Barraud clasped his chin with his hand. The fact evidently told against the accused.

"You never heard again from Monsieur de Cadanet?"

"I heard no more of him until I received the announcement of his death."

As the examination ended there was a movement round Nathalie. The Assize Court of the Seine was densely crowded, and the pushing and squeezing caused by the new arrival would have roused any one less deeply interested. Nathalie, however, had eyes only for her husband, and it was not until a square, thick-set figure had forced himself into a seat by her side that she recognised her father. No greeting but a nod passed between them, each being too anxious to hear the next evidence. It was, however, of no great importance, the principal witnesses being André, the concierge, and the doctor, who testified to M. de Cadanet's clearness of mind throughout his illness.

M. Charles Lemaire was next duly called, sworn, and interrogated by the Procureur. People noticed that on his appearance M. de Beaudrillart lifted his head, looked coolly at him, and allowed a smile of contemptuous scorn to pass across his face. On the other hand, Lemaire had the appearance of being quite at his ease. He glanced round the court, bowed to the judge, and turned to the Procureur with an air of extreme readiness. In answer to the interrogations, he replied with perfect smoothness. His evidence, in fact, might be considered irreproachable, saying neither too much nor too little. The six years which had passed had not improved his appearance—for he had grown much stouter, and his face was puffy—but they had taught him to conceal his feelings. He was careful to speak with perfect moderation of the prisoner. Asked whether at the time of the theft he and M. de Beaudrillart were on good terms, he said they had little to say to each other. Further pressed, he allowed that he had seen him lose very considerable sums at play, and it was the common talk in Paris that he had so greatly impoverished himself that Poissy might have to be sold. M. de Cadanet put a great many questions to him on the matter. He had no wish to prejudice him against the young man, and evaded his questions when he could; on the other hand, he did not profess any regard for him, and did not conceal the fact of his extravagance. Asked whether M. de Cadanet had ever expressed his intention of assisting the accused, he replied most emphatically no. He had, on the contrary, spoken of him with great indignation. But of course he could not profess to judge of M. de Cadanet's private intentions.

Did M. de Cadanet inform him of the abstraction of the notes?

Never, until just before his death.

Desired to relate the circumstances of M. de Cadanet's disclosure, he gave an account of his illness. It was not until he was apparently in extremis that the count informed him of what had taken place, and advised him to recover his money from M. de Beaudrillart.

Here the examination in chief was interrupted by Maître Barraud inquiring through the judge why M. de Cadanet had not brought the action himself. M. Lemaire could not say with certainty, but thought he had abstained owing to a sentiment of affection towards the defunct baron, M. de Beaudrillart's father. The question was then put why in a matter of so much importance he had not caused M. de Cadanet's deposition to be formally taken before witnesses. For the first time Lemaire very slightly hesitated. He then said that it had not seemed absolutely necessary, as M. de Cadanet showed him a letter from de Beaudrillart admitting the theft.

The Procureur remarked that the theft was admitted by the defence, and at once Maître Barraud demanded the production of the letter.

The judge agreed, and meanwhile the examination proceeded.

M. de Cadanet, speaking with great difficulty, had informed the witness that he had answered this insolent letter by another, in which he told M. de Beaudrillart that he would hear more of the transaction at a later date.

Here the judge again interposed, but it was to ask the prisoner whether he had received this letter.

Léon replied that he had, and that the contents were such as had been described, but that he had destroyed it at the time—an answer which created a decidedly unfavourable impression.

Lemaire, proceeding, said that M. de Cadanet was a man of few friends, who had lived altogether alone the last years of his life. During his last illness he had no one to care for and nurse him except he Lemaire himself, and his wife, M. de Cadanet's niece by marriage.

In answer to an inquiry whether his wife had heard M. de Cadanet's statement, he said she had not; the count had wished to speak to him alone.

"And this wish you scrupulously carried out?"

"Certainly. Monsieur de Cadanet was a man who would be obeyed."

"You are, I think, the principal legatee under the will?"

"I am."

"Will you state why you decided upon asking for this prosecution?"

"In compliance with Monsieur de Cadanet's express desire, he said he had often reproached himself with having taken no steps himself, but that age and illness had weakened his energy. It was in order that I might undertake the task that he confided the papers to me."

The examination continued for some time longer on these lines. The effect it produced was decidedly adverse to the accused. It had nearly concluded when the called-for letter arrived, and was read:

"Mr Cousin,—I have taken the liberty of borrowing the sum which you had so thoughtfully prepared for Monsieur Charles. It would have been better for him if you had accepted my offer to post your letter; as you declined to trust me, I had no scruple in exchanging it for another, which found itself in my hand at the exact moment. Do not blame your messenger, who is quite unaware of the transaction. By my writing to you, you will perceive that I have no intention of denying what I have done. It is in your power to have me arrested. You know where to find me, and I will remain in Paris for two days, so as to avoid the pain to my family of a scandal at Poissy. Permit me, however, to point out that I have only taken the money as a loan, that it will be returned to you by instalments and with interest, though, I fear, slowly, and that you may find it more advantageous to allow the matter to rest than to ruin one who, however unworthy, is the son of the man to whom you are certainly indebted for your prosperity, and who begs to subscribe himself.

"Yours faithfully,—  
"Léon de Beaudrillart."

As the last word of the letter died away, a movement passed through the court. The judge addressed himself to Léon.

"That is your letter?"

"It is."

Maître Miron put another question to M. Lemaire.

"When Monsieur de Cadanet presented you with this letter, did he make any allusion to its concluding sentence?"

"Certainly," replied the witness, coolly. "He said that Monsieur de Beaudrillart had very much exaggerated the services rendered to him by the defunct baron."

The prisoner burst out with the word "Liar!" and was sharply rebuked for the interruption.

Further examined as to whether he was certain that the money had never been repaid, the witness said that his only knowledge was derived from M. de Cadanet himself, who assured him that he had not received a sou. "If it were otherwise," he remarked, "receipts would certainly exist, the count being a man of excellent business habits."

After a few more unimportant questions, it was felt that Lemaire had given his evidence clearly, and, except in two answers, had been very careful in both tone and wording to preserve an appearance of perfect fairness towards the prisoner. The two exceptions were those in which he alluded to the absence of a receipt, and to M. de Cadanet having disclaimed receiving any considerable help from M. de Beaudrillart's father.

Nathalie looked at Maître Barraud with a yet more sinking heart. The Procureur de la République had appeared to her an ideal counsel—shrewd-faced, energetic, keen. His opponent, with his round, boyish face, his almost indifferent manner, and a certain air of hesitation, which she had not noticed so much before, did not give the impression of being in any way his equal. The questions he suggested appeared to her to be little to the point, and though she carefully kept discouragement from her face, so that Léon, when he glanced at her, might take comfort, she had never felt more discouraged.

With an air of extreme innocence, as of one only seeking for enlightenment, Maître Barraud pursued through the court his inquiries as to Lemaire's first acquaintance with M. de Beaudrillart. He had seen him play. "You played yourself, of course?"

Charles shrugged his shoulders. "Occasionally. Why else should I have been there?"

"Oh, precisely! Why else!" repeated his questioner, deprecatingly. "And doubtless, Monsieur de Cadanet, as a man of the world, took an interest in your fortune at the tables!" Lemaire, suspecting a trap, replied that they were not in the habit of talking over it.

"Ah! Only of Monsieur de Beaudrillart's!"

"Nor of Monsieur de Beaudrillart's."

"No! I gathered that the fact of his large gambling losses displeased Monsieur de Cadanet!"

"Possibly."

"But they were not learned from you!"

"Not in the first place. When he asked questions I could only tell the truth."

"Unquestionably. Truth is an inestimable virtue. You were not the first to speak of them. Who, then? The concierge has given evidence that the count received no visitors."

"It is impossible to say. Rumour filters everywhere. Possibly the servants talked."

"We will hear that from them by-and-by. You were naturally anxious to keep on good terms with Monsieur de Cadanet, and that you did so has been amply proved. The only other person in whom he seems to have shown an interest was Monsieur de Beaudrillart!"

"I do not know that he took much interest."

"You said he asked many questions on the subject. That looks like it."

"I cannot say. It may have been so."

"It looks like it," repeated Maître Barraud, equably. "The situation, then, appears to have been that you and the accused both played, and that Monsieur de Cadanet was displeased with him only. Was it owing to the fact that he lost and you won?"

Up to this point the questions had dropped out in an almost sleepily courteous tone. The last had the effect of a sharp, sudden, and unexpected thrust. M. Bourget muttered, "That drew blood." Nathalie listened, breathless. Lemaire answered, sulkily, "I do not know," and Maître Barraud, after a momentary pause by which he succeeded in emphasising his inquiry, dropped the subject.

Lemaire held himself very determinedly on guard after this episode, which he was conscious had told against him, and little was elicited. The counsel passed on to the account of what took place at the time of the count's death. He made particular inquiries as to who was in the house, and then put another question through the judge.

"You were married, I think, at the time of the alleged theft?"

"I was."

"But your wife was not much at the house?"

"No. Monsieur de Cadanet saw her at intervals, but it was not until his health failed that he liked to have her about him."

"Did she undertake all the nursing?"

"When he was seriously ill there was a nurse as well."

"And at the time when he made this—this extraordinary revelation, Madame Lemaire was not in the room?"

"Certainly not!" said Lemaire, hastily.

"You have told the judge that you thought it unnecessary to have his words taken down as a formal deposition; did it not occur to you it would have been very desirable to have called in witnesses to hear what now rests upon your own unsupported word?"

"Monsieur de Beaudrillart's own letter gave the necessary evidence."

"As to his borrowing the sum—"

The judge here interpolated, "It was stealing. It cannot be called borrowing."

"Unauthorised borrowing, monsieur le president, I acknowledge. But if repaid, as we maintain, the jury will not consider it a theft. And the witness, who is the person most interested, can bring no evidence to prove that it was not repaid beyond his own report of what I will venture to call an imaginary conversation!"

The Procureur remarked:

"The absence of a receipt."

"Well, we will say no more at present on this subject. Monsieur de Cadanet, having kept silence for many years, at a time when most men are anxious to be in charity with their fellow-sinners, carried out, we will suppose, a determined act of revenge against this unfortunate young man. Did he advise or enjoin you to bring this action! Can you repeat what passed?"

"Not in exact words. He gave me to understand that he had warned Monsieur de Beaudrillart in the letter which was destroyed that proceedings would be taken."

"And your wife heard nothing!"

"Nothing."

"Although she was in constant attendance?"

"He only spoke once on the subject."

"Did not even allude to her about this family, which must have been much in his mind?"

"No."

"That was a lie," reflected Maître Barraud, quickly. "When he tells a lie his eyebrows twitch slightly." At this point the court adjourned for an hour, and he hastily scrawled something on a piece of paper, and had it passed to M. Rodoin. The words were, "Madame Lemaire is not in court; let Madame de Beaudrillart go to her at once and alone."

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## Chapter Twenty Six.

### Amélie.

M. Bourget would have been indignant at hearing that he might not accompany his daughter if the mandate had come from a less person than Maître Barraud. But he had a profound respect for any advocate with whose name he was acquainted, as well as for all the machinery of a great trial, and M. Rodoin took him in hand, and carried him off for the interval, as soon as Nathalie had been placed in M. Rodoin's carriage and despatched to Passy. She had intended to employ her time during the drive in arranging how best to open the subject with Mme. Lemaire, but, to her dismay, found it impossible to concentrate her thoughts. Whatever effort she made to fasten them upon the coming interview, they flitted back to the crowded court. She saw always her husband's pale face, the look towards her in which she read so piteous an appeal; she heard the jesting remarks whispered around, the questions and answers to which she listened breathlessly, feeling that they held Léon's doom; she saw the president, who was slightly deaf, hold his hand to his ear, the clerks taking down the evidence, Charles Lemaire's broad figure, and the

white flower in his button-hole; she heard Maître Barraud's voice, now listless, then suddenly rising to the tone of a trumpet, a voice of which she was beginning to understand the power. One after another figures surged before her eyes, sounds rang in her ears, and before she had collected her thoughts for her errand she found herself driving to the door of a substantially built house, which stood a little back from the road.

Madame was at home, but did not receive. Nathalie had got hastily out of the carriage, and, afraid to send in her name lest it might bring a refusal, she merely desired the man to say that her business was of the greatest consequence, and was almost immediately admitted to an ugly room, all gilt and brocade, where stood Amélie ready to go out.

At sight of this tall and beautiful woman advancing hastily towards her, Mme. Lemaire showed a little astonishment. She thought it was some one interested in an orphan, for whom she had come to plead the cause; but the visitors who had this end in view generally belonged to a different class. She moved awkwardly forward.

"You desire, madame, to speak to me!"

"To appeal to your goodness," faltered Nathalie.

"Ah, madame," said Amélie, with a smile which made her plain face at once attractive, "I am so grieved! It is for some poor little one, is it not, whom you wish to place in our Home! And, alas, we are more than full!"

"No, no!" cried Mme. Léon, "it is much more serious. It is on account of this trial that I come. I am the unhappy wife of Monsieur de Beudrillart."

The other stared at her without comprehending. "A trial?" she repeated, pushing forward a chair. Nathalie sank into it, and leaned forward earnestly:

"Your husband—you know that your husband has made a terrible charge against my husband!"

"No. I do not know—I do not understand—" returned Mme. Lemaire, speaking with difficulty. "Stop, madame, let me explain. My husband and I do not interest ourselves in the same pursuits. We each follow that which we prefer, leaving the other free. My interest is my Orphanage, and consequently I do not hear much of what goes on in the outside world."

"And you do not know that all Paris rings with this trial?"

"No," returned Amélie, flushing. "I do not read the newspapers, and—and I presume the servants have not liked to speak of it."

Nathalie buried her face in her hands. How could this woman, in everything but name cut off from the world, help her! But the sight of suffering touched Amélie at once.

"I am so sorry for your grief!" she said, simply; "pray tell me if there is anything in which I can assist you."

Hard task! But Nathalie began: "It has to do with Monsieur de Cadanet," she faltered. "Some money which he designed for your husband, my husband took—stay, do not judge him too harshly. He was in great straits at the time; he took it, but he told Monsieur de Cadanet at once—the letter exists—and he only took it as a loan. Every penny was repaid, and Monsieur de Cadanet made no sign; but now, now that he is dead, your husband says that the money was never returned, and that your uncle left it to him to prosecute. He is being tried now—my Léon!"

Amélie had turned very white, and drawn involuntarily back. She said, in a suffocated voice:

"Why do you come to me?"

Nathalie lifted her heavy eyes.

"People say you are a good woman," she said. "If you know anything, you cannot let an innocent man suffer."

"And your name is De Beudrillart, and you live at—"

"At Poissy."

"Ah!" The exclamation ended sharply, like a cry of anguish. In a moment all came back to her—M. de Cadanet's veiled interest in Poissy; the evident relenting of his heart; most of all those dying words, accidentally heard, but never really forgotten: "You will remember that Monsieur de Beudrillart has paid everything, and that I have nothing against him." And now—She rose up with a shudder. "Madame, you are mistaken. I am incapable of helping you."

Nathalie rose, too, and stood looking at her. Then she clasped her hands, feeling her last chance slipping.

"Ah, madame, think!" she cried, impulsively. "You nursed Monsieur de Cadanet, you were with him continually—think, I implore you, whether you never heard him speak of my husband, and if you did, whether he did not speak of him indulgently? So much might depend on that! If you do not pity me, pity our little child, our little Raoul!"

"Is that his name?" Mme. Lemaire asked quickly, a sudden yearning in her face.

"Yes. Imagine what it will be for him to grow up under a cloud of disgrace! You have no children madame; you do not know what that seems to a mother."

Nathalie was wrong. This woman, no mother, but to whom God had given a mother's heart, could realise it, and much

more, with an aching strength, which some mothers cannot feel. She had thought so often and strangely of the little boy at Poissy, of whose existence she was barely aware, that now she could hardly prevent herself from crying out that she would save him. But—there was her husband. In spite of his neglect, his unkindness, his scarcely-veiled contempt, she still loved him. Ignorance of his movements, shutting of eyes and ears to what went on in the world, was her defensive armour. She did not wish to hear or see. She had at one time lived in terror lest something might come to her knowledge which would thrust him out of her heart, and it was dread of this which had turned her virtually into a recluse. And here it was at her doors! She beat against it with all her force. Her look hardened, her voice chilled. She said, coldly:

"I am sorry for you, madame, but I cannot help you. Monsieur de Cadanet gave my husband his last directions." Nathalie stood mute, then turned from her with a look of reproach.

"They were not these, and you know it. A dying man does not wreak such a terrible revenge. You are thrusting a sin upon him which he never committed. I dare not stay longer, but ah, madame, take care, for some day it will come back again, more terrible for you than my poor Léon's has been for him!"

Mme. Lemaire stood long where she was left, staring at the empty doorway. Once she made a few staggering steps, as if she would follow her visitor, but caught herself back, and again remained motionless. Her conscience was tender, and Nathalie's words fell on it like the sting of a lash. It had been the scarcely acknowledged effort of her life to prevent it and her love from meeting in opposition, but the day had come, and she could no longer remain blind and deaf. Still, she resisted. This man had sinned—by his own wife's confession had sinned. Probably he deserved what had come to him. And she had not absolutely understood all that was happening. She resolved to go to the Orphanage, and think no more about Mme. de Beaudrillart. There she had hitherto found peace, and there she might now find forgetfulness.

She was always warmly greeted, this childless woman with the mother's heart, the children running to her with cries of delight which were the music of her life, one showing a doll, another a cut finger; the sisters came smiling, kind souls with homely faces, who looked on her as their chief benefactress, and poured out their daily chat of all the events which touched their peaceful lives and the lives of these little ones, snatched, some of them, from terrible experiences. One sister walked up and down the babies' nursery, hushing a wan little fellow to unwilling sleep.

"He has been so fretful all night!" she said, smiling.

"You look quite worn out, sister," said Mme. Lemaire.

"Ah, madame, but when one remembers that his father died in prison, one's heart bleeds for the poor little mite," said the kind nurse, recommencing her hushing. Amélie turned abruptly away.

But in every child that day the little boy at Poissy seemed to appeal to her. Far from forgetting, she found him looking at her, clinging, kissing her. A new orphan had been admitted that morning. She dared not ask his name, so convinced was she that the answer would be Raoul. He haunted her; do what she would, she could not shake him off. She left the Orphanage at last, flying, as she had never flown before, from the innocent children. On her way home she bought a newspaper, and there read a fuller account of the trial than she had gathered from Nathalie.

She had not seen her husband for several days, but this was not unusual, for he had his rooms in Paris, and only came out to Passy at intervals. She accepted her loveless lot, clinging to the Orphanage, and finding in that consolation for almost all trials. Happily for her her nature was the reverse of sensitive, so that she was able to love him without fretting hopelessly over the poor returns her affection brought back. She felt at this moment a turmoil such as she had never yet experienced, a conflict between conscience and love. Could it be her terrible duty to say the words which must denounce her husband? Impossible. She thrust the thought from her.

Then she determined on a medium course. She would see him, appeal to him. Alas, what influence had she ever had that she could fall back upon it now? Recall past years as she might, not once could she remember anything she had said moving her husband when he had made a resolution, or even making him swerve in a contrary direction. She could imagine his anger becoming deadly. She did not think he would shrink from locking her up, or from almost any violence by which he could prevent her from speaking; but she could not imagine his yielding to what must be his ruin. She cried out with the pain of these gathering thoughts, which seemed to press upon her, stop her breathing, hurt her almost to death. She reproached herself for giving them room, but all the while knew with fear that it was her conscience which held the open door and let them in. When she got home she stumbled up-stairs like a fainting woman, and fell down on the floor, crying out piteously for help for her soul, although she knew that every moment of delay was a sin.

Nathalie drove back to the court, sick with failure. Her strength and will upheld her when there was anything to be done; but when not even that remained, her very limbs seemed paralysed, and she wondered to find other senses still at her command. M. Rodoin's clerk was looking out for her, and went hastily to fetch his master, who came into a small room which had been set apart for them, and where she tottered towards him with outspread hands and a haggard face.

"I could not move her."

"She refused?"

"Utterly. But she knew nothing."

"Well, well, dear madame, do not take it so much to heart. If any one can save your husband it will be Maître Barraud. You will go home now?"

She flung him a look of reproach.

"I am counting the moments until I can be where he will see me," she said, resolutely.

M. Rodoin moved to the door, and she followed him, impelling herself by sheer determination. Once he looked round and said, half to himself: "Whatever happens, there are many who might envy Monsieur de Beaudrillart!" but she took no notice, and did not even hear him, any more than she saw the curious looks turned towards her as she stood at the door of the court. Her eyes were waiting for her husband's, and the moment that his glance fell upon her a sudden light irradiated them. Now that she had to strengthen him, she was strong again.

The court, however, was near adjournment, and there was no doubt that M. de Beaudrillart's prospects were bad. If his wife could only have gone to him, it seemed to her that half the anguish would have been lightened; but to think of him desolate and despairing was agony. Her father's presence gave her a certain comfort, although at first she had been seized with the dread that she might have to listen to reproaches of her husband, which she would have found unendurable. But M. Bourget was stolidly silent. By slow degrees he was coming round to believe in Léon's innocence of the greater charge, and he was extraordinarily impressed with the powers of Maître Barraud. He was kind to Nathalie, telling her of M. Georges's persistent confidence, and of his bringing Raoul to Tours; and to the poor mother, parted from her child by what seemed years, even a lifetime, it was comfort to have every word repeated, and to know that he was well and happy. She feasted upon it, then was smitten with remorse for letting her thoughts leave Léon, even for a minute. Was there nothing for her to do? They said that Maître Barraud wished to speak to her, and she breathlessly pushed her father out of the room, and waited, holding the door. She tried to speak, but her voice sounded strangely far away, and her eyes dumbly questioned the young advocate. To her surprise he looked as usual, and his voice was as indifferent as ever.

"I need only detain you one moment, madame. You saw the wife, and she refused to speak. Do you imagine she had anything to say!"

"Once I thought she had."

"What were you speaking of at that moment?"

"Of our child."

He nodded. "I knew she had a sentiment. Her husband neglects her, and she spends her days at the Orphanage. I do not despair. The child and her conscience will work upon her."

"She knew nothing of the trial."

"Good! She will think the more. A thousand thanks, madame!" He was gone.

Unconscious tact had stifled the question of how he thought the trial was going, and, although she did not know it, she had her reward. He joined M. Rodoin in the court-yard of the hotel, and said:

"Crow, man of discernment! Your hazel-eyed Madame de Beaudrillart is a phoenix. She answered my questions, and did not pester me with one of her own. I should like to win the case, partly on that account, and partly because Miron is so confoundedly cocksure."

"Win it, then."

"Any good in the father?"

"A typical bourgeois, accustomed to hector his neighbours, and not altogether convinced in his own mind."

Maître Barraud swept his hat to a charming lady who drove by in a victoria.

"The Marquise de Pontharmin," he explained. "I dine with her to-night."

"While poor Madame de Beaudrillart imagines you preparing your defence with a wet towel round your head?"

"The world's remarks are worth a dozen wet towels. Do you know, the world is sometimes extraordinarily shrewd, and you can go and tell your phoenix so. Here we part—till to-morrow!"

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## Chapter Twenty Seven.

### The Last Witness.

Maître Barraud had, by little and little, built up a theory for his defence which, thanks to his keen observation and brilliant intuition, was not far from the truth. He was satisfied that the young baron had repaid the money, and that M. de Cadanet, though he punished him with silence, had no intention of making the matter public. What the advocate thought probable was, however, that by one of those unlucky forgetfulnesses to which all men are liable, the old count had never destroyed the letter of confession, and that Charles Lemaire had found it among his other papers after his death. He believed that it was highly probable M. de Cadanet had given some hint beforehand which was sufficient to enable a sharp and unscrupulous man to put two and two together, and arrive at his accusation. The world with whom he dined was of no more use to him than the wet towel might have been. Mme. de Pontharmin, it is true, said: "Do not disappoint us. I do not know whether he is guilty, but I shall break my heart if you do not prove him innocent,"—but this was a command and not a suggestion, which would have been a hundred times more



valuable. When the time arrived for his speech he wore so confident an air that the Procureur rubbed his hands.

"We are safe," he said. "Barraud is hopeless."

One thing was certain—he had never taken more pains. Eloquence and masterly appeals to sentiment held the court breathless. Lemaire dug his nails into his palms and turned livid as he heard his own life presented in the most ignoble colours, his gambling, his follies, and side by side with them the mask he wore before M. de Cadanet. He was scourged with scorn as Maître Barraud's magnificent voice described him—not content with winning M. de Beaudrillart's money, also calumniating his victim to the old man who, bound to the Poissy family by ties of gratitude to the father, might have come to the rescue of the son had his mind not been poisoned against him. Lemaire, listening, felt that his cause was lost, but Maître Miron's face wore its most contented air.

It was an unusually long speech, going into very minute details. He insisted upon the absolute probability of the young man's story, and the readiness with which he had admitted the points which told against himself. He touched pathetically on the life at Poissy—the happy family life, mother and sisters, child, and wife—the heroic wife who was present, suffering the pangs of suspense, and refusing to desert her husband. At another time Nathalie would have crimsoned under the curious looks turned in her direction by those who knew where she eat; but now she was absolutely unconscious of them, her eyes being fixed upon Léon, and her one thought to meet his with hopefulness. He entered fully into the particulars of Léon's interview with M. de Cadanet. What could be more probable than the description given by the accused; what more tantalising than to have the means of extrication from his difficulties dangled before his eyes, and to hear that though they might have been his, they were now to go to the man who had slandered him? He was not defending the action of the prisoner in the street, but he left it to the jury to say whether the sudden temptation was not almost irresistible! And what could have been more straightforward than his action immediately afterwards? They had heard his letter, avowing everything, placing himself at the disposal of M. de Cadanet. Surely, if ever the count thought of taking action, he would have taken it then. Was it probable that a man—a man, especially, who was under so great obligations to the De Beaudrillart family as M. de Cadanet—would have nursed such a terrible, such a savage revenge, as to keep silence for years in order that the bolt might fall when it was least expected, and when his own death might have relieved them from the last vestige of uneasiness? Supposing, even, that the debt had remained unpaid, he refused to think so meanly of human nature.

Charles Lemaire moistened his dry lips, the Procureur's face expressed nothing but contented indifference.

After a momentary pause, Maître Barraud proceeded. But, he said, what made it actually impossible was that the debt had been wholly repaid, first by an instalment of five hundred francs, a small sum certainly, but one which in the then condition of the estate, represented the most honourable economies, and, directly his marriage gave him the means of discharging it in full, by the entire sum of principal and interest. M. Bourget, the father-in-law of M. de Beaudrillart, had proved that at the time of the marriage, he, being desirous to clear off all debts on the estate, was told by M. de Beaudrillart that the sum of two hundred thousand francs was necessary for this object, and agreed to its being thus used. What suggestion, even, had been offered by the prosecution as to any other destination for this large sum? Had they brought forward a single creditor who could account for so much as a part of it? The explanation given by the accused was perfectly simple and straightforward. He had redeemed the promise in his letter and had despatched it at once to M. de Cadanet, who, owing to a natural indignation at what, no doubt, had been a forced loan, took no notice of the repayment and left M. de Beaudrillart to draw his own conclusions.

Here he paused for an instant again, and glanced at the spot where sat Charles Lemaire, from whose face he drew what small encouragement he felt. To his astonishment it was empty. Maître Miron, however, had not moved, so that it did not seem as if he were connected with the disappearance. Maître Barraud went on, his voice more slow and impressive as he reached the point of M. de Cadanet's last illness, his mind busily engaged in revolving why Lemaire had gone. He spoke of the influence which, by his own showing, Lemaire must have exercised upon the old count, who saw no one except the prosecutor and his wife. Only connected with him by marriage, he said, he had become his chief heir, his executor, apparently the receiver of his secrets. You were asked to believe that this dying old man, grasping revenge with palsied hands, had put into his possession an instrument powerful enough to ruin a noble family, and bidden him use it. Was it likely? The heart of every man and woman in that building he believed would cry out against such a shameful possibility. What really happened it was not difficult to conceive—

At this point a piece of paper with a few lines scrawled upon it was handed up to the counsel. He read it mechanically without pausing in his speech, and the only thing the closest observer could have noticed was a slight change of manner. His voice became slower, almost drawling, and it might have been thought that at this moment he had yielded to the hopelessness of the case, and given up his efforts. The change surprised the listeners, and one person was affected by it, for all the Procureur's keen attention revived, his eyelids contracting, and his mouth tightening. Maître Barraud went so languidly on that Nathalie, for a moment, covered her eyes with her hand in despair. He touched upon the old man's death-bed, but with an entire absence of emotion. He could imagine, he said, that M. Lemaire would receive instructions for the future, perhaps be called upon to destroy certain documents, which M. de Cadanet never intended should survive him.

"And in this softened moment," he proceeded, "the first thing to be put out of the way would be Monsieur de Beaudrillart's frank confession. You ask me what really happened. I am now in a position to tell you. The document was given to Monsieur Lemaire to destroy on the spot. For it he substituted another paper, kept back this, and allowed Monsieur de Cadanet to die in the belief that Monsieur de Beaudrillart's safety was assured."

With one of those sudden changes of tone which he knew how to use so effectively, he allowed his last sentences to ring out like a trumpet. The next moment the Procureur was on his feet, protesting against such a charge being made; the crowd, stirred to its depths, broke into an inarticulate murmur, promptly hushed; Nathalie, the tears raining down her cheeks, kissed her hand impulsively to her husband; Maître Barraud, remarking quietly that an important though late witness had arrived who would prove what was said, merely appealed to the Court to hear her, and sat down without troubling himself to carry his speech any further; presently, and before the agitation had

subsided, and after a consultation with the judges, it was seen that a plain woman, dressed in black, her eyes fixed on the ground, was in the witness-box, and a whisper went round the court that this was M. Lemaire's wife.

Her answers were at first mechanical, and throughout scarcely audible. As she was sworn, those who were near saw a tremor pass over her, and compassion made the judge cease to request her to speak more plainly, as soon as he discovered that to do so was beyond her powers. Maître Barraud, in place of his junior, examined her himself, and very briefly. After the necessary particulars as to who she was, he went direct to M. de Cadanet's last illness, and inquired whether the name of De Beaudrillart had been mentioned to her by him.

She replied that it had, more than once.

In what manner?

He gave her the impression of having a yearning towards them; particularly, here her voice shook, towards the boy.

Did she suggest his sending for them?

Yes.

He refused?

Yes.

Did he speak of the prisoner? She looked uncomprehending, and he added, "Of Monsieur de Beaudrillart?"

"He said he had behaved very ill."

"And you tried to soften your uncle?"

"I thought he was very desolate, and that it was a pity some one should not come."

"Did your husband approve of this attempt of yours?"

She hesitated, and then said that her husband feared it might excite M. de Cadanet.

"Do you remember the 12th of August, 188-?"

"Yes."

"Give an account of what happened."

She lifted her face, and looked imploringly round the court. Meeting only the gaze of countless eyes riveted upon hers, she looked on the floor again quickly, locking her hands together. Her voice trembled so exceedingly that the writers taking down the evidence could scarcely hear, and more than once she stopped altogether, and Maître Barraud had to ask a question or two to induce her to go on. But the gist of the evidence was to the effect that M. de Cadanet was very ill, and she watched anxiously for an opportunity to send for a priest. He was desirous to speak alone to her husband; she hoped when that interview was over to succeed in persuading him.

"Where were you during the interview?"

"In the anteroom. It was necessary that some one should be at hand in case of need."

"Were you needed?"

"Not actually—I heard my husband's voice raised once as if in alarm."

"Not anger?"

"Oh, no, no! I ran to the door and found I was not wanted."

"Was all as usual?"

"A candle was lighted."

"Did you go away!"

"Not instantly. I wish now I had!" she cried, involuntarily.

"Repeat what you heard," said the judge, gently, "and saw."

"Something was burnt. I had half closed the door, and could not hear what my husband said, but Monsieur de Cadanet—"

"Yes?"

"He said: 'You will remember that Monsieur de Beaudrillart has paid everything, and that I have nothing against him.'"

The words died away. The silence in the court had become profound. Poor Mme. Lemaire buried her face in her hands.

"Have you," said the judge at last, "ever mentioned what you overheard to your husband!"

"No. I was afraid it would vex him."

"But when you heard that he was bringing this trial!"

"I never heard it. I live very much out of the world—too much, perhaps."

"And what induced you to come forward to-day!"

"Madame de Beaudrillart came and implored me. They have a child who would have been disgraced. I—am more fortunate," she murmured.

Maître Barraud had meanwhile been examining the letter written by Léon, of which one corner had been torn off—no doubt where the old man's attempt to burn it had left a blackened edge. He had relapsed into his most tranquil and uninterested air, and sat down.

The Procureur attempted to cross-examine Mme. Lemaire, but it was useless. He asked how it was that she could hear so clearly the words of a dying and feeble old man, when by her own account the door was half closed, and she had failed to catch her husband's words.

She replied simply that she could not tell.

Was it not possible that she had been mistaken.

"I heard what I have repeated."

"And you have come here to give evidence against your husband without so much as telling him what you were going to do!"

"I—I tried—I sent—" She looked wildly round, and, before any one could reach her, dropped unconscious on the floor.

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## **Chapter Twenty Eight.**

### **The Awakening of a Soul.**

The famous trial was at an end, and talk rapidly subsiding. After Mme. Lemaire's evidence it was felt that the prosecution fell to the ground, and the jury brought in an acquittal at once. When Léon and Nathalie met they could not speak. The woman in both was uppermost but voiceless until they found themselves alone. He was aged, and there were lines in his face which would never leave it, for although his nature was not deep enough to suffer deeply, its easy lightness had offered no sort of resistance when shaken by despair. Yet it seemed as if something had come to him—perhaps the soul, which was wanting before, or lay undeveloped, waiting for the touch of a great love. Love and suffering. Their union is divine, and divine their mission and their strength.

A warrant was issued for the arrest of Charles Lemaire on the charge of perjury, but he had taken advantage of the warning which at last reached him from his wife to escape—it is believed—to America. For a long time after that testimony to which her conscience forced her she was very ill. She recovered at last, and found consolation in her Orphanage. She would never see Nathalie again, but once Raoul was taken to the Home, and stared amazedly at rows of little white beds, and at a lady in black who looked at him and cried.

Perhaps of the actors in the little drama, M. Bourget, who seemed the most square and solid figure of all, showed the roost change, or shared that feature beyond the others with Mme. de Beaudrillart. He had gone through a collapse. Hopes, opinions, ambitions, affections had tumbled down together in one vast ruin, and although he managed to build some of them up again, the feeling of insecurity which follows an earthquake could not be easily got rid of. Until then he had scarcely believed that there was any possible contingency in which money would not carry the day. Certain it is that he bullies less, and on more than one occasion has been known to abstain from laying down the law. Leroux has never been forgiven, but the person for whom he displays the most sincere respect, and to whose opinions he attaches a quite disproportionate value is M. Georges. Meanwhile, although he has once declined the honour, it is pretty certain that he will be chosen for the next mayor.

As for M. Georges himself, it is the incredible which comes to pass, and his wife—to his own utter amazement—is no other than a Demoiselle De Beaudrillart. Had Mme. de Beaudrillart been herself, it could never have happened, but the poor woman was struck down and shattered by the storm which had shaken the very foundations of Poissy, and all her old landmarks were swept away. And M. Georges had been such a stay, such a support in the hour of trouble! Everybody turned to him. His unflinching helpfulness, his good sense, his courageous loyalty attracted them to the little man. Poor Claire! She had been attracted first of all, and it was hard that having stood up for him when others blamed, she should be obliged to look on and see Félicie chosen. As for Léon, what could he say? It shocked him; but had he not been the cause of what might have proved a really overwhelming disgrace? After all was said and done, the fact remained that he had taken the notes, and there were people who would throw it up at him when they heard his name all his life long. And Nathalie was on M. Georges's side.

"Dear, if you married me, why should not Félicie marry Monsieur Georges?"

It was one of those differences which seem infinite to the person who has to decide, but which cannot be explained to the world. As for Félicie herself, bliss smiled in her face. M. Georges had behaved admirably. After welcoming M. and Mme. Léon, he had sought an interview with Léon, laid himself and his small prospects most humbly at Mlle. Félicie's

feet, and taken himself off at once to Tours. Léon had gone so far as to argue with his sister, and to ask her whether she had fully considered what the change in position meant.

"Oh, it will be delightful!" exclaimed Félicie. "We shall be within reach of Nantes, and every summer we shall take sea-baths, and see something of the world."

"Of the world!" repeated Léon, petrified. "I thought you dreaded it!"

"As a girl, yes; but with my husband what should I dread?" said Félicie, calmly. "Here it is certainly not gay, and lately, I can assure you, Léon, with poor mamma so crushed, and Claire walking about with a face of stone, and you in prison, if it had not been for Michel I don't know what one would have done! Is it not delightful that he should have such a beautiful name? Saint Michel's has always been a special day for me, and I had all the new embroideries ready for it."

How could Léon answer this speech? Félicie's obstinacy was well known in the family. He persisted so far as to ask whether she was prepared to live in a very small way, and probably have no money for pilgrimages—

"Michel has not quite made up his mind that pilgrimages do all the good we suppose," interrupted Félicie, with the air of a discoverer.

"—And find yourself Madame Georges, instead of Mademoiselle de Beaudrillart?"

"Claire said that no one would recognise us again," she remarked, in answer; "and though it has all turned out so much better than we expected, I do think that Michel was the only person who really believed in you. Even the abbé was doubtful. I am sure you must be very grateful to Michel always, dear Léon."

She carried the day. Claire would say nothing. Claire's misery seemed scarcely lessened. It was as if the very possibility of such a disaster as had threatened had turned her to marble, and that she could not come to life again. She spent her time either with her mother, who was now always in her own room, or wandering about the grounds by herself, especially avoiding Félicie. All that Nathalie could do was to leave books about in the salon, books such as she knew would interest her sister-in-law, and to avoid comment when they disappeared. She hoped by this means to offer a little food to her active mind without giving her the annoyance of feeling herself under an obligation.

Two others who were perfectly happy at the château were Jacques Charpentier and Raoul, and perhaps it was Raoul's talk which most reconciled his father to Félicie's marriage. He was never tired of vaunting M. Georges, or of bringing forward the small surprises which had been prepared for this happy moment. Spurred by their motive, he had submitted to learn to read, to print his own name, and to sing a funny little song about a drummer in a shrill childish voice. He was not content until he had dragged his father and mother down to the river, that he might show them how he could throw his line like a grown-up man.

It was a day in late autumn, one of those days which come laden with the sweetness of the past. A ripe golden glow was abroad, shining on the yellow leaves of the poplars, and reaching the hearts of husband and wife as they stood by the river and watched it flowing by strong and swift. There was enough wind to stir the long grasses by its side, always moist and green; to drive a few white clouds softly across the sky, and to give a delicious exhilaration to the light air. Gnats danced in the sun, a distant sound of children's voices reached the ear, and old Antoine, in his sabots, clattered across the bridge. On this bridge there was a patch of new wood, still out of tone with the old railing and its soft, rich grey, and a few bits of useless stuff which the river had flung on one side on a certain wild night not so very long ago had been turned over by the thrifty villagers, and left as of no value. Antoine was looking forward to a good storm when he would go up to the château and come back unmolested with a fine supply of fuel. He glanced at the two figures as they stood by the water-side, and chuckled. "It's as easy to hold one's tongue as to talk," he muttered, "and pays better."

For a time the two were silent. Now first had they seen the river since that terrible night, and their hearts were too full for speech. Suddenly Nathalie was in her husband's arms, strained there passionately. "My dear one!" he whispered, again and again; nothing more, and perhaps it was a good sign that his old flow of words was wanting.

She had closed her eyes in the dizziness of her bliss, and when she opened them again he rained kisses on them, those eyes which held in the brown clearness the fresh healthiness of a mountain stream.

After a time they could speak, both trembling.

"You saved me," he said, "three times over. Here—"

"Don't talk of that," she shuddered.

"—Then by making me tell the truth, then by going to that poor woman. Body and soul, three times over."

He had let her go, and they walked, step by step, through the long green grass. She sighed softly: "I am so happy that I am afraid."

She felt as if she had reached heaven, and, as she had said, it frightened her until she had breathed a prayer. That calmed her swelling heart, and she could bear to hear him whisper again:

"Three times over."

"Dear," she said, "what of that? When one loves—"

"They all loved me. But only your love was strong enough to stand by me."

She gave a quick, happy laugh.

“We have gained friends,” she said. “Monsieur Rodoin.”

“And Maître Barraud.”

“Not he. He only thought of his case, and of triumphing over Maître Miron. When they were all congratulating you afterwards, do you know what I saw?”

“What?”

Her voice sank. “He yawned.”

Léon’s vanity felt a momentary mortification. Then he laughed.

“Forgive him,” he said. “The situation was not so novel to him as to us.”

They were sitting together by this time, within easy reach of Raoul, on a small, thick bough of a tree which jutted out from the bank. The river ran by, swift and silvery, though Nathalie kept her eyes persistently turned from it; the poplars rustled, above them were fathomless depths of white and blue. The château itself lay behind and out of sight, yet at this moment both were thinking of it; of its grey stones, which somehow seemed to be built into the very lives of the De Beaudrillarts; of those who had fought for it, sinned for it. Not one of them had shielded it to more purpose from dishonour than the young wife who had met so much contempt within its walls, whose picture had been refused a place among the old ancestors.

Nathalie broke the silence.

“Have you read the bishop’s letter!”

“To you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, poor Félicie!” Nathalie laughed.

“She does not care. All the vestments are going off to Madame Lemballe to-morrow morning, and she intends to embroider herself an evening dress. But the letter is delightful. So hearty! And he means to come again.”

“He will be more welcome than he was before. Nathalie, dearest,” his voice sank, “Monsieur Georges wants us to have rejoicings—something to mark my home-coming. How can one have a merrymaking over what grew out of misery and weakness? If it had not been for you the weakness would have cost me my life; and as it is, my poor mother is left a wreck. There is nothing to be proud of, though I hope I am thankful. What do you say?”

She clung to him. “Dear love, no! Not merrymaking. One can show one’s thankfulness in some other way.”

“Raoul will be a better man than I have been.”

“Never dearer to those who love him.”

“Even after all you heard in Paris?”

“Always, and forever.” There was not a shadow of hesitation in her voice, and when he put her from him and looked into her eyes, they met his without shrinking. She repeated the word “Always.”

“I believe you,” he said, letting his head fall; “but you are different from most women—and most men. I could not have done for you all that you have done for me, or half of it.”

She was looking at him with an infinite love, though she knew the truth of what he said. The roots of love did not run deep enough with him; he could not have done it—perhaps never would have force enough to do it. What of that? It is better to give than to receive. When life has gone so far, characters do not change suddenly, even when an earthquake has shaken them. They grow a little stronger, a little weaker; they fall and rise, or, alas, sometimes slip farther down the hill. We see the slips and hear the clatter of falling stones more quickly than we notice the gradual gain, inch by inch, which to clearer eyes than ours means all the difference.

And so, though some of her dreams had flown forever, and there were lines written on her face which no coming springs or summers could efface, Nathalie was happy. When Claire had talked of Léon having no soul, she was not far out, for something which he had not shown before had been born in him by the strength of his wife’s love. Life looked different to him; the rose-leaves with which he tried to cover it up had been swept away by the storm, scars were left, ugly chasms, rough stones. But, side by side, hand in hand, walked his wife.

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The End.

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